

Shoot the Messenger

Sherilyn Connelly

2005

Wicked Messenger: A 21st Century Variant Kabaret.

Isn't that a wonderfully evocative name? I wish I could say it was my idea, but all credit is due to my co-conspirator Frankie Tenderloin. We were both big Patti Smith and Bob Dylan fans, and the fact that "The Wicked Messenger" was a Dylan song which Patti had covered made it all the better.

The word "variant" was an important detail. Though Frankie and I were both trannies, we made the conscious decision not to emphasize it. This logic can only apply in San Francisco: we didn't want to be yet *another* show with the word "gender" in the title. (As things turned out, it probably wouldn't have hurt.) We felt "variant" was more inclusive. Anyone who doesn't quite fit into the dominant social paradigm is a variant, and this show was for them.

Wicked Messenger was intended to be a monthly event with a little bit of everything: spoken word, music, poetry, drag (mostly kings), burlesque, you name it, all the variety San Francisco has to offer. Frankie was known in the music and drag scene, whereas the literary stuff was my department.

Our venue was the El Rio, a bar in the Mission which was home to a number of other clubs. The owner asked to only work with Frankie, not me. (I did a remarkable job of not taking it personally.) They offered us the second Sunday of the month. Easy to remember, and it didn't conflict with any other regular shows that we knew of. That was an important detail, because I didn't want the competition, nor did I want to be competition for someone else. Sometimes my naivete is astonishing.

Frankie designed the elaborate flyers, with some input from me. He listed us at the top as hosts, as well as among the performers. It was technically accurate—I would open with a spoken word piece, and he played with his band—but seeing my name twice made me uncomfortable. Self-promotion is not my strong suit.

The cover charge was a sliding scale, with nobody turned away for lack of funds. That's fairly common in San Francisco, and it's all the more important for shows in bars. Even if an audience member doesn't pay the cover at the door, they may still buy alcohol. Everybody doesn't so much win as break even.

The first Wicked Messenger was on November 14, 2003. We pulled in about sixty people, respectable for a debut show on a chilly Sunday night. The owner had hoped for a bigger crowd, as had we, but we made enough at the door to cover our expenses and pay the performers. Not a lot, certainly not as much as I would have preferred to have paid them, but *something*. I didn't pay myself, as it was a labor of love, not profit.

The lineup was consisted mostly of friends, as well as a big a score by the name of John Shirley. A local horror writer, he doesn't read in public all that often, and even less at queer-oriented events. He's the farthest thing from a homophobe, and the sex in his books goes beyond any recognizable notions of straight or queer. (That the offer came from a pretty tranny girl such as myself was probably helped, too.) It's just that hardly anybody in the queer scene ever thinks to ask, and I considered his presence a good example of how I wanted Wicked Messenger to be different from every other queer variety show in town.

A tranny boy rapper cancelled, but that still left seven performances, not to mention the two or three open mic readers and a DJ before and after. The show felt overbooked, but Frankie wanted to give the audience as much bang for their buck as possible. A consummate showman, that one.

The first Wicked Messenger was barely over before work began on the next show: Wicked Messenger 2. People with marketing smarts would probably tell you that it's more difficult to build up a regular audience if you keep changing the name, even slight variations on a theme. It amused me, however, and that was all the reason I needed.

The issues for Wicked Messenger 2 started early. Lydia Lunch asked two of our features to open for her that night. They'd already committed to us, but since A) Lydia was a much bigger deal than our little dog-and-pony show, and B) I'm passive at all the wrong times, I told them it was fine. Frankie was extremely displeased, but he let it go.

Some flyers with their names had already been printed and distributed, but there wasn't much we could do about that. Besides, for all the audience knew, they'd had to cancel due to illness—as the tranny boy rapper did, *again*. I was learning that the audience need pay no attention to that person of indeterminate gender behind the curtain.

Though Frankie and I had collaborated on the original flyers, circumstances required me to design the new ones. I made them less elaborate and more printer toner-friendly, but otherwise they retained the spirit and the general layout. The very top of the flyer read *the 21st century variant kabaret returns*. Perhaps it was too soon to be announcing the return of a show which had only debuted the previous month, but once again my amusement at my own cleverness trumped my marketing savvy. If I even had any to trump.

Wicked Messenger 2 was Sunday, December 14, 2003. In addition to the three features we'd lost, Frankie was recovering from a back injury and couldn't make it. I'd never hosted a show by myself before, but I didn't have much choice. I wasn't too worried, really; I liked the idea of flying solo, though I wouldn't admit it

to anyone at the time. The turnout was the same as the first show, much to the owner's displeasure. She wanted us to bring in a minimum of a hundred people.

What we needed was some good press. We got it.

A reporter from the *San Francisco Chronicle* was at the show, researching an article about the tranny performance scene. I gave her my contact info, and she interviewed me on the phone a few days later. I yammered on about the birth of the show and our philosophy behind it.

Published in late December, the first line of the article read:

On a recent evening, 62 people traveled to the edge of the Mission District and paid \$5 at the door of El Rio bar to see "Wicked Messenger 3.0," a show aptly billed as "21st century variant cabaret."

Not bad at all. Of course, the show she'd attended was Wicked Messenger 2. Wicked Messenger 3.0 wouldn't be until January 11, 2004 (*the 21 century variant kabaret continues*, my flyers proclaimed). It stung my eternally fragile ego a little that she neither quoted me nor even mentioned my name, but *did* reference someone who'd been in the open mic—someone possessing the marketing and self-promotional skills I so sorely lacked. At least she got the name of the show right. (Sorta.)

By the night of Wicked Messenger 3.0, the grind of promoting was getting to me. In addition to all the various means of online advertising, I also had to create *and* distribute the flyers.

For as tedious as it could be, I was okay with going around and taping up flyers. The part I deeply loathed was the act of shoving a flyer into someone's hand,

imaginatively known as “flyering.” One hopes that it comes across as more consensual than the word “shoving” implies, but it still feels like a violation to me, like I’m forcing myself into someone’s personal space.

It’s a trigger issue for me. Before I transitioned, I was very conscious of how much space I *felt* I took up as a boy. As a result, I now had the internal paradox of not wanting to interrupt a stranger, yet not wanting friends to feel like I’m taking advantage of them. Ergo, I had great difficulty giving someone a flyer unless I knew for absolute certain that they wanted one. Like I said, I’m passive at all the wrong times.

Still, though. We’d been around for a couple months, everyone who’d attended thus far had enjoyed themselves, we got that cherry writeup in the *Chronicle*, and the word was spreading. Right?

Unfortunately, Wicked Messenger 3.0 was up against another word: *The L Word*. It was the premiere episode of the lesbianic premium cable drama, and our dykey core crowd elected to stay home to watch the show--or, more likely, gather at the apartment of a friend who actually has cable. That was the operating theory for the low turnout, about half of the previous month, and I was inclined to believe it. Ironically, before I knew what else was on that night, I’d attempted to address the most probable televised competition on the flyer: *the simpsons is a repeat that night*. Of course I had no idea if it would be or not, but that hardly mattered.

The teevee-generated apathy was a shame, because they missed a really good show, one which was *not* going to be repeated several times and eventually released on DVD. The tranny boy rapper canceled yet again, but we got the acts who had been spirited away by Lydia. The most interesting moment was when a priest in the Church of Satan (another score in the booking department, thank you very much) read a provocative and quite damning piece about the San

Francisco performance scene. It succeeded in provoking a number of people, including but not limited to the singer of that evening's guest band. When the singer confronted him, the Reverend's well-schnookered girlfriend took umbrage at what she perceived as her boyfriend being accosted—and by another girl, no less. Sparks did not fly, but they came damn close. It was uncomfortable yet thrilling, and I was proud to have facilitated it.

End of show. *go home, sleep, get up, start promoting next show, hurryhurryhurry!*

I was rapidly exhausting the creative possibilities of numerals, so I decided to spell out the next show: Wicked Messenger Four. No—even better—wickedmessengerfour. All one word, lowercase, pretentious and beautiful in that order. But it was still missing that certain something...a-ha! An umlaut! wickedmessengerföür! (*the 21st century variant kabaret sallies 4th*, if the flyers could be trusted.) The best name yet, so surely this show would have the highest attendance yet.

The band we'd originally booked cancelled, so I approached my pal Lynn Breedlove about her band Tribe 8 playing instead. Shim liked the idea, except that they were between rhythm sections at the time and weren't certain whether or not they'd be a functioning unit by the night of the show. As it turns out, they weren't, but they were on the flyers anyway. They were the biggest name on any of the flyers yet, so surely this show would have the highest attendance yet.

Speaking of the flyers, I made the conscious decision to only list myself as co-host, not a performer. I'd been uncomfortable all along having my name listed twice. It felt egotistical, and it took valuable flyer space away from the features--nobody was coming to see *me*. There was even the possibility that repeating my

name might have been turning people off altogether. Since this flyer *didn't* give the impression that I was in love with myself, so surely this show would--

Anyone smart enough to read a book published by AK Press has recognized a pattern by now.

wickedmessengerfoür was on February 8, 2004. So was the fourth(!) episode of *The L Word*. I don't know what the teevee show's ratings were like, but it was *my* show's worst night yet. Oh, the performances were strong and varied and unpredictable and never boring, just like they should be. The tranny boy rapper finally performed, bringing a peculiar sort of closure, and Danielle Willis practically stole the show on the open mic, as is her wont.

Unfortunately, less than two dozen people saw it. This was a far cry from what the owner felt we should be pulling in, especially after four months, and we were conspicuously *not* asked back.

I was ready to call it quits anyway. Frankie's tumultuous personal life resulted in him being less involved with every show, and by February he handed me the keys to the enterprise and moved out of state. Though I knew I could do it, running the whole thing from soup to nuts and back to soup again sounded like way too much stress. Besides, I was lacking both a venue and anything resembling outside interest. Or so I thought.

A pal of mine who'd featured at wickedmessengerfoür invited me to move my show to his new performance space down the street in the old Mission Records building, called The Dark Room. I couldn't figure out *why*. I mean, he'd seen the turnout at the last show, he'd played to the threadbare audience, he'd felt the world's indifference. If he wanted to draw crowds to his new joint, Wicked Messenger was not the way to do it.

A downside was that they didn't serve alcohol, nor did it provide the ample socializing space of the El Rio. Though it was a peeve of Frankie's, I always liked seeing people talking with friends and boozing it up outside, even during a performance inside. After all, they were enjoying themselves at my event, and that was a measure of success.

On the plus side, there were actual seats. All I had to pay was one flat and very reasonable rental fee for the space, greatly reducing the pressure to get butts into the aforementioned seats. Obviously I *wanted* them full (the seats, not the butts), but it wasn't like The Dark Room was going to cancel the show, either. There could have been neither loud electric bands nor a DJ in order to maintain peaceful relations with the neighbors, and that was okay by me. I'd always found the DJ to be superfluous anyway.

I was processing about it when another friend asked if his new band, a low-key piano/trombone/voice ensemble, could perform at Wicked Messenger. I was floored. Again, *why*? Didn't he want people to see them? Still, this qualified as something resembling demand, and *die leistung muß weitergehen*. So *weitergehen* it would.

For consistency's sake, I decided to keep it on the second Sunday of the month. To give both me and the fledgling Dark Room enough time to put on a show from scratch, however, I pushed it back to April.

When it was written about at all, some people referred to wickedmessengerfour as Wicked Messenger 4. This annoyed me greatly, so I futzed with the numbering system. Since it was going to be on Sunday April 11, I called the fifth installment of Wicked Messenger 4.11 (Being for the Benefit of Heather MacAllister). The show was a fundraiser for one of the founders of the Dark Room, the titular Heather MacAllister, who had recently been diagnosed with cancer. To acknowledge the source of the subtitle, the bottom of the flyer read a

splendid time is guaranteed for all. As usual, the amusement I got out of my own perceived cleverness was almost enough to make up for everything else.

What I didn't realize until after the show was booked was that April 11 was Easter Sunday. That could either be a really good thing, or a really bad thing. I decided to think positive, and promote the show as an afterparty to the annual shindig thrown by The Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence at nearby Dolores Park. To wit, the top of the flyer implored, *after a day in the park with The Sisters, the 21st century beckons.* Further cowing to my fear of seeming big-headed, I bumped my name down to the bottom, as opposed to its usual place near the top.

I also indulged myself with the lineup. In addition to the band who had originally asked to play, I booked Wicked Messenger's first comedian, as well as a slam poet who had impressed me recently at an open mic but had never featured before. I was happy to offer her that opportunity.

Heather is burlesque dancer—her troupe performed at Wicked Messenger 2, in fact—so some other well-known burlesque acts offered their time, including The Lollies and Kitten on the Keys. The real *coup de grace*, however, was brought in by the Lollies: Roky Roulette, a male stripper on a pogo stick. As I watched him do his thing, stripping manically as he bounced around the stage on a pogo stick (what else would you expect a male stripper on a pogo stick to do? Recite Proust?), I felt a surge of joy. Goddamnit, I'd put together one hell of a show. I couldn't take direct credit for what was happening at that moment, but I'd facilitated it, and the audience was getting a unique experience.

Inasmuch as there *was* an audience. If even half the people who'd promised me they'd attend had shown up—some even told me to my face that afternoon at Dolores Park that they'd be there--the crowd would have been twice the size. Maybe I didn't promote it enough. Maybe everyone was too burned out from

Easter. Maybe The Dark Room was too new; Wicked Messenger 4.11 was The Dark Room's first show, and maybe nobody could find the place, although I clearly stated the address on the flyer in large type and even mentioned that it was the old Mission Records space. The old sign was even still up. Maybe the Mission Records connection scared them off, since it was known to have been a urine-stenched dive, thanks to the quote-punk-unquote kids pissing in the corners. (The interior had since been gutted, cleaned and rebuilt, but I couldn't quite fit that on a flyer.) Maybe that's just how things go, and there's no one reason.

What bothered me most was that nobody signed up for the open mic. At the four previous shows, there had always been at least *one*. Now, nothing at all, not even any of the performers who were among the sparse population of the audience.

The patient's rapidly graying skin be damned, my pride wouldn't allow me to declare Wicked Messenger dead. (I'm much more prideful than I care to admit.) (I'm not even admitting it right now.) Besides, The Dark Room still wanted to be Wicked Messenger's home, and having a willing venue is a pretty big deal. I figured I'd keep at it until I got it right.

To commemorate this false sense of determination, I called the next show Wicked Messenger Forever. (*the 21st century variant kabaret persists*, the flyer would have you believe.) It was also a subtle phonetic joke which I hoped at least few people would catch—the sixth installment of Wicked Messenger was still stuck in the fours.

In a deliberate attempt to keep the scale of the show as simple as possible, I only booked four acts. They were a diverse bunch, though: a homohop group I'd always admired, a poet, a bellydancer, and an all-girl comedy group. The last two were Wicked Messenger firsts. Shedding unnecessary pluralities wherever

possible, I removed both my name and the open mic from the flyer. In a font larger than I typically used for such things, however, the tagline read: *so far underground, it's practically nonexistent*. The line was cribbed from my pal Robin's 'zine *Cinema Sewer*, but it summed up Wicked Messenger perfectly.

The only prophecies you can count on are the self-fulfilling ones.

Wicked Messenger Forever existed on Sunday, June 13, 2004, but mostly on paper. Less than a dozen people showed up, including a couple who came to see a theatrical production which they hadn't realized was only running on Fridays and Saturdays. Since they'd made the trip out there and had nothing better to do, they decided to stick around and see what *this* show was all about. I couldn't pick them out of a lineup now if my life depended on it, but I'll love them until the end of the world.

The fundamental flaw with holding the show at the Dark Room became obvious: at least fifteen people were required into order to just break even after the very reasonable rental fee. On top of that was promotion costs—while individually cheap, all those photocopied flyers add up, even factoring in the use of Kinko's free colored paper and--and most importantly, paying the performers. The show had never been anything resembling profitable, but now it was getting actively expensive, and my day job wasn't exactly bringing in the big bucks. (Look for that story in an upcoming anthology called *Tales of Workplace Harassment and Self-Mutilation*.) The numbers just weren't working.

But I continued, again inspired by people requesting to perform. Deciding to move beyond the fours, the seventh installment was to be called A Fifth of Wicked Messenger. It was scheduled for Sunday, August 8, 2004. I designed a flyer (*the 21st century kabaret ferments*, it punned), booked a few other acts, started spreading the word in the usual directions...

...and realized I wanted out.

My heart was no longer in it. The Return On Investment was all out of whack. The pain wasn't worth the pleasure. It was no longer *fun*.

As though the universe wanted to show its support for my decision, I lost my job. With no source of income, continuing the show was simply not an option. It wasn't as though I had any reason to believe that people would start attending, in droves or otherwise.

Wicked Messenger started with a purr and ended with a whimper. A few people remember it fondly, but nobody is clamoring for its return. I'm occasionally asked these days to host other peoples' shows, with no greater obligation than to show up, be funny, and introduce performers. That, I'm happy to do.

Just don't ask me to flyer. I fucking hate flyer.



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