

A WORD FROM THE CENTER: RED HOT DANCE FOR LGBTQ+ WOMEN

A WORD FROM THE ARCHIVES: DEFEATING A DISCRIMINATORY LAW

**AUGUST
2025**

A WORD FROM SD BLACK PRIDE: CREATING SPACES FOR JOY

THE WORD ON ART: VILLAGE VISIONARIES IN BALBOA PARK

THE WORD

SAN DIEGO

Volume 2 | Issue 12

TRANSGENDER HISTORY MONTH

A CHAT WITH
THE SPIRIT OF STONEWALL
JULIA LEGASPI AWARDEE

BLISS VASQUEZ
BUILDING QUEER FUTURES
THROUGH INTENTION,
ABOLITION, AND
COMMUNITY MAGIC

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PLASTIC BOX

HOW DO YOU WANT
TO DEFINE YOUR FUTURE?

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MUSICAL **THE HEART**

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A CELEBRATION OF
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A CONVERSATION WITH

**KALEB
GABRIEL**

EXECUTIVE
DIRECTOR

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AND RAW TRUTHS:

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A WORD FROM THE CENTER

By **Gus Hernandez**

photo courtesy of **The Center**

RED HOT DANCE FOR LGBTQ+ WOMEN ON AUGUST 23

HONORING WOMEN'S EQUALITY DAY IN A TIME OF RESISTANCE

Women's

Equality Day is August 26, a date that marks the ratification of the 19th Amendment, granting women the right to vote. Today, it also reminds us that the fight for equality is far from over. Across the country, attacks on bodily autonomy, LGBTQ+ rights, and the safety and dignity of women and gender-diverse people are on the rise. These aren't just political issues; they affect our loved ones, our colleagues, and our communities.

And yet, in the face of these challenges, our LGBTQ+ community continues to rise. We resist through advocacy and action, and also through joy, connection, and celebration. Just like we did at San Diego Pride last month, we gather, dance, find connection, and in doing so, reclaim space, affirm our identities, and strengthen our resilience.

RED HOT DANCE RETURNS TO THE CENTER

One joyful expression of this resistance is the Red Hot Dance, a biannual event hosted by The San Diego LGBT Community Center to celebrate queer women. The next Red Hot Dance will take place Saturday, August 23, 2025, from 6 to 9 p.m. in The Center's auditorium in Hillcrest.



This is more than a dance party. It's a vibrant, affirming space created by and for queer women and gender-diverse people. It's a place where folks can show up as their full, authentic selves. It's where queer women can move, laugh, connect, and celebrate the beauty and strength of our community.

CREATING SPACE FOR JOY AND BELONGING

Since The Center revived the Red Hot Dance in 2023, it has become clear that this event fills a vital need. Queer women deserve spaces that reflect diversity, honor identities, and uplift joy. The Red Hot Dance responds to that need—a place where com-

munity members come together in celebration, solidarity, and love.

If you identify as a lesbian, transgender woman, cisgender woman, nonbinary person, womxn, womyn, queer woman, dyke, bisexual woman, femme-identifying, pansexual woman, or any combination within our vibrant queer spectrum, this space is for you.

A NIGHT OF MUSIC, MOVEMENT, AND CONNECTION

We're thrilled to welcome back DJ Muzette, who will be spinning everything from nostalgic 80s anthems to today's hottest tracks.

Whether you're dancing the night away or just vibing with community, there's something for everyone.

Guests can enjoy free appetizers and drinks, take a break in the quiet sensory space, or relax in a comfy seating area if they need a moment away from the dance floor. The evening is designed to be accessible, inclusive, and affirming because joy should never come with barriers.

MORE THAN A PARTY: A COMMITMENT TO COMMUNITY

The Red Hot Dance is more than a party. It's part of The Center's broader commitment to creating spaces that reflect and uplift queer women. Through Women's Services, The Center offers support groups, resource navigation, and events that build resilience, connection, and care, especially when community members need it most.

In a time when the political climate feels heavy and attacks on our rights are relentless, events like Red Hot Dance remind us of our strength. They show us that joy is a form of resistance, that community is a source of power, and that we are not alone.

EVENT DETAILS AND RSVP INFORMATION

Red Hot Dance takes place at The Center, 3909 Centre Street in Hillcrest, from 6 to 9 p.m. on Saturday, August 23, 2025. There's a suggested \$10 donation at the door, but no one will be turned away for lack of funds. Visit The Center's website at <https://thecentersd.org/red-hot> to RSVP.

CELEBRATING QUEER WOMEN'S POWER AND PRESENCE

As we honor Women's Equality Day this year, let's do so by lifting up the voices, experiences, and joy of queer women. **W**



Fierce and *Fearless* at 5



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SAN DIEGO BLACK PRIDE WEEKEND

August 8-10, 2025

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A WORD FROM SD BLACK PRIDE

By **Jordan Daniels**

images courtesy of **The North County Resource Center**

SAN DIEGO BLACK PRIDE: CREATING SPACES FOR JOY

Black. That's the word. Black joy. That's the phrase. Black queer and trans joy. That's the movement.

At San Diego Black Pride, we're a non-profit that centers this movement in all of our programming and resources. It's essential for us to create, facilitate, and sustain Black LGBTQ+ spaces in our region, because few are doing it, and even fewer have the resources. As one of the few organizations focused on the Black LGBTQ+ experience in San Diego, we're continually asked to do more with limited capacity. We're a small, volunteer-led team, with no paid staff and minimal funding, especially now, amid rollbacks in DEI support and corporations retreating from their public commitments.

We're not just underresourced—we're underestimated and undercounted.

According to the U.S. Census, roughly 5.6% of San Diego's 1.38 million-person population is Black. A 2022 report from the county's Health and Human Services Agency states that approximately 9% of residents identify as LGBTQ. But data about our trans community is missing from the Community Health Interview Survey, and data on Black LGBTQ+ individuals is considered "statistically unstable." How can we fully support and invest in a community that lacks complete representation? That's why we're doing the work we do.

FACILITATING BETTER DATA

Part of my role as President is fundraising. My goal is to raise \$200,000 this year, in part to commission a community study of San Diego's Black LGBTQ+ population. The current data gap misses an essential story: who we are, where we are, what we do, what we like, what we need, and how to support us. Both qualitative and quantitative data matter, and we aim to gather both with trusted, equity-centered research partners.



Our goal is to better inform local governments and organizations on how to serve us.

BUILDING SELF-SUFFICIENCY

This year, we launched two new initiatives: financial literacy and self-defense courses. As the cost of living rises, we're investing in our community's ability to manage its finances. We partnered with Hillcrest's Financial Haus to offer our first workshop, covering the basics of debt, investments, and future planning. Fifteen participants attended, and we plan to expand this program for free at multiple education levels.

We also worked with Sagaz Jiu-Jitsu to offer beginner self-defense courses, giving attendees tools to de-escalate danger and protect themselves. We don't promote violence—we promote harm reduction. LGBTQ+ individuals face disproportionate violence, particularly Black trans women, who accounted for 73% of gun-related murders of trans people over the last decade. Our goal is to equip our community with the tools to stay safe.

CREATING SPACES FOR JOY

As a newer nonprofit, we're taking big

swings to be seen, heard, respected, uplifted, and funded. For five years, we've hosted our Annual Black Pride Festival, growing from a one-day event to a multi-day celebration throughout San Diego. This year, we return August 8–10 with the theme: Fierce and Fearless at Five! Everyone is welcome—especially those who believe in centering Black experiences.

We kick off Friday, August 8 with a mini ball at Gossip Grill, one of our strongest event partners. Ballroom houses from both traditional and kiki scenes will showcase their legacy. Whether you're voguing, walking body, serving realness, or just spectating, come witness one of the longest-running traditions in Black and Brown LGBTQ+ culture.

On Saturday, August 9, we host Back Room Rewind at Urban Mo's—a night to throw it back and celebrate Black joy with two fire hip-hop DJs spinning old-school favorites. Come ready to dance.

Then on Sunday, August 10, we close with our Sunset Cookout at Wicked West in Barrio Logan—our biggest event of the weekend. Your ticket includes a BBQ meal and access to two stages: Bold and Belonging, our artist showcase featuring spoken word and drag performances, and Fierce and Fearless, our main stage featuring musical acts and DJs. Headliners include musician Virr and DJ Succubus. The event also features a vendor marketplace, community service booths, and—for VIPs—a bourbon tasting lounge hosted by Fierce and Kind with premium seating.

Tickets are on sale now and available throughout the weekend. We encourage advance purchases, as prices rise at the door and some events may sell out. This is our largest fundraiser of the year, with every dollar going back into our programming.

SUPPORT US

If you can't attend, there are other ways to help. You can donate via the PayPal Giving Fund or sign up to volunteer. We always need support at events and in the community. Contact us at info@sdblackpride.org to get involved.

We hope to see you soon, and we hope you'll stand with us in sustaining joy, safety, and community for Black LGBTQ+ San Diegans. With gratitude,

Jordan Daniels, President
San Diego Black Pride 

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A WORD FROM THE ARCHIVES

By **Nicole Verdes**

Images courtesy of **Lambda Archives**

T

his August, Lambda Archives was invited to present as part of a monthly Civic Education series hosted by the AJA Project, Our Time to Act, Viet Voices, and Youth Will. We were asked to share insights into San Diego's LGBTQ+ history, with an intentional focus on local trans history. At a time when trans communities across the country are facing relentless political and cultural attacks, it's critical to lift up the legacies of resistance, resilience, and organizing—and to ensure these stories are preserved and shared so future generations have the historical context needed to continue the ongoing struggle for trans liberation.

I focused my presentation on the long fight to repeal San Diego's "Cross-dressing Ordinance," Municipal Code 56.19, adopted by the City Council in 1966. This law made it illegal to appear in public "in apparel customarily worn by the opposite sex, with the intent to deceive." Though framed as a crime-prevention measure, it was used primarily to target and criminalize trans women and sex workers—particularly Black and Brown women.

The effort to repeal 56.19 was not the work of one person or one moment—it was the result of decades of advocacy, community organizing, legal strategy, and coalition-building. Activists like Delores Dickerson, a trans woman and founding member of the advocacy group Trans Action, played a critical role in organizing support and shifting the

FOR TRANSGENDER HISTORY MONTH: HOW SAN DIEGO ACTIVISTS DEFEATED A DISCRIMINATORY LAW

SAN DIEGO NEWS

56.19 Headed for Full City Council Hearing: Golding Calls Law Obsolete

by TIMOTHY P. HOLMBERG
Staff Reporter

The last step in a long repeal process may be nearing for Municipal Code 56.19, otherwise known as the Cross-dressing Ordinance, according to Scott Maloni, deputy press secretary for Mayor Susan Golding. Maloni indicated that the ordinance will be placed on the April 21 City Council docket for consideration. If

the Council votes for repeal, it will be joining an expanding chorus of support that includes City Attorney Casey Gwinn and San Diego Chief of Police Jerry Sanders.

The Ordinance
M.C. 56.19 - Appearance in Apparel Customarily Worn by the Opposite Sex Prohibited.

(a) Purpose and Intent: To protect the public from deceit and improper influence.

(b) No person shall appear in a public place, or in a place open to public view, in apparel customarily worn by the opposite sex, with the intent to deceive another person for the purpose of committing an unlawful act.

The law was originally intended to protect military service members from being robbed by transvestites.

The Activists
Delores Dickerson, a transgender activist and head of TransAction, a transgender support group, said she would be happy to see the ordinance repealed.



Delores Dickerson spoke out against the 56.19 at a recent public hearing.

The Council
The repeal drive received a major boost when Deputy Mayor Barbara Warden (District Five) took the issue to the city's Public Safety and Neighborhood Services Committee, which she chairs. The committee recommended repealing the ordinance in a 3-0 vote. Warden voted to recommend its repeal, along with councilmembers Judy McCarty (District Seven) and Juan Vargas (District Eight). Councilmembers Bryon Wear (District Two) and George Stevens (District Four) excused themselves from the vote. It remains unclear what Wear will do when the issue goes before the full Council. Sharon Kelley, Stevens' press



public narrative. Trans Action, originally formed to combat employment discrimination, quickly made repeal of the ordinance a top priority. Legal support came from attorney Bridget Wilson, who provided pro bono services, and her law clerk Christine DiEduardo, a trans woman whose painstaking research proved key to demonstrating the ordinance's

discriminatory roots. Others, like Tony Zampella, who served on the City's Human Relations Commission, helped bring the issue before the Council, while Dr. Kurt Buis from The Center played a hand in the Center becoming a fiscal sponsor for Trans Action.

Together, this coalition chipped away at a deeply entrenched policy—

and won. On July 20, 1998, the San Diego City Council voted seven to one to repeal 56.19. The effort was met with resistance, particularly from law enforcement officials who defended the ordinance as a crime-fighting "tool," and from Councilmember George Stevens, who opposed the repeal on the grounds that crossdressing itself was inherently deceptive. But the tide turned thanks to sustained advocacy and the power of many voices working in unison.

In nearby National City, a similar ordinance—Municipal Code 10.32—prohibited crossdressing while purchasing alcohol, using public restrooms, or "deceiving" others. That ordinance, too, was ultimately repealed thanks to community pressure, led in part by activist Coyote Moon, who reminded us that even laws that go unenforced can serve as potent symbols of exclusion and discrimination.

Today, as we continue to confront the criminalization and stigma that still disproportionately impact trans folks, the lessons of this history remain clear. Change does not happen in a vacuum. It requires strategic organizing, informed legal advocacy, deep community engagement, and the unwavering presence of allies who are willing to fight for our transgender community.

At this year's Spirit of Stonewall Rally, Courtney Johnson—named Champion of Pride—issued a powerful call to action: "Don't just stand next to us. Stand in front of us." When asked to elaborate, Courtney emphasized that cisgender and heterosexual allies, especially those who hold institutional power or access, must take a more visible role in pushing for change. Allyship is not passive; it is active, accountable, and rooted in solidarity.

As we celebrate Transgender History Month, it's important to acknowledge and hold tight to the fact that the erasure of trans history is not a relic of the past—it is an urgent and ongoing threat. Preserving and sharing these stories is an act of resistance in itself. Trans history is not marginal history. It is foundational. It is powerful. And it must never be forgotten. **W**

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COMMUNITY FEATURE

By Cesar A Reyes

main photography by Cesar A Reyes

Bliss Vasquez (they/he/elle/friend) is a community builder, organizer, and visionary whose life and work are rooted in magic, abolition, and radical care. In their own words, they are a “mixed-race, neurodivergent, gendertrash nerd.” Bliss is committed to cultivating liberatory spaces for queer and trans people, especially those often pushed to the margins. “I am a believer of magic, the power of words and intention,” Bliss says, “and an activist since before I knew that’s what I was doing.”

Bliss’s upbringing was shaped by instability and movement. Born in San Diego, they were sent at age five to live with their mother on the East Coast and raised as a military child across Kentucky, Texas, Arizona, Mississippi, and more. Constantly uprooted, Bliss learned to adapt quickly and form community wherever they landed. At 14, they were kicked out of their mother’s home. “My mom told me to ‘have a good life.’ My dad picked me up at the airport, and a new life began.”

TRANSGENDER HISTORY MONTH

A CHAT WITH THE SPIRIT OF STONEWALL

JULIA LEGASPI AWARDEE

BLISS VASQUEZ

BUILDING QUEER FUTURES THROUGH INTENTION, ABOLITION, AND COMMUNITY MAGIC



That life included being part of the first graduating class of e3 Civic High in San Diego’s Downtown Library and later attending San Diego City College. Their first official job came through the San Diego Workforce Partnership, helping youth revise resumes and find employment—an early signal of their community-centered leadership. But Bliss’s political awakening happened even earlier. “I remember being 15 and at the corner of University and 30th for a Take Back the Night rally, dragging my then-boyfriend along with me, knowing I was part of a much larger queer world,” they recall. “I specifically remember the chant, ‘We’re feminists, don’t f***

with us!’ and knowing this is the feeling I want to invoke in my community.”

Bliss now brings that same spirit to their role at The Center as a key staff member of Project TRANS (Transgender Referrals, Assistance, Navigation, and Services). For nearly three years, Bliss and their teammate Gael (they/he) have served San Diego’s trans and nonbinary community through direct services and mutual aid. Whether helping someone call their doctor’s office, apply for EBT, or connect with affirming care, the team makes every effort count. “With little monetary resources, we make something out of nothing often,” Bliss explains. “This is why we have such



a heavy emphasis on doing what we can, because we know how little there is, even in social support from those around us as trans and enby people.”

During San Diego Pride, Bliss helped organize a distribution of over 100 gender-affirming items, including packers, tucking underwear, and binders, purchased from trans-owned and local queer businesses like EnFemme and Pleasures and Treasures of Hillcrest. “Everything I do in my role, I try to imagine how we can meet the needs of our clients more and make things more accessible.”

Outside of their day job, Bliss leads Gender Enders Meet (G.E.M.), a virtual community space for BIPOC queer and gender-nonconforming adults. Founded in 2021, G.E.M. meets twice monthly via Discord and has hosted over 500 participants in its five-year lifespan. “A lot of trans and nonbinary spaces are dominated by white folks,” Bliss explains. “We try to create the space for the ‘outcasts’ of the world—coming from one themselves (me).”

G.E.M. is grounded in a radical framework called C.A.R.E.: Commitment to Abolition, Redistribution, and Eccentricity. “We believe in abolition, that we can abolish the oppressive systems like the prison industrial complex and the police. We believe in redistribution—the end of greed and individualistic mindsets. And lastly, we are reminded that we must think eccentrically. We must act different for different results.”

Much of Bliss’s organizing is informed by trans history. This August—Transgender History Month—they are especially focused on honoring the 1966 Compton’s Cafeteria Riot, a foundational moment of trans resistance in San Francisco’s Tenderloin that predates Stonewall by nearly three years. “I first learned of this history after I had transferred from City College to UCSD,” Bliss shares. “I was amazed that I was able to watch this history told by some of its participants.” They’ve since screened *Screaming Queens*, the Susan



Stryker-directed documentary on Compton’s, with The Center’s Trans Elder Network (T.E.N.), creating inter-generational spaces of learning and connection.

This year, Bliss was honored as the first recipient of the Spirit of Stonewall Julia Legaspi Award, named after a fierce local trans activist. “As a nonbinary, self-identified gender-trash, there is often an expectation for trans to equal a binary sex or gender,” Bliss says. “I’m grateful to be seen as the genderqueer trans person I am. Receiving this award feels like an affirmation to keep doing what I’m doing and leaning into not just my dreams, but our dreams as a collective to be free.”

When asked about the importance of safe spaces, Bliss is clear: “A lot of spaces, whether queer or not, are already dominated by the white supremacist culture we live in. That’s why we must keep organizing our space. We must keep meeting, dreaming, and talking, because we’re not going to discover the solutions if we’re not actively interacting with the parts of our brains and hearts that can imagine what it looks like outside of this current social hellscape.”

To LGBTQ+ youth, Bliss offers unwavering encouragement: “There are adults who will respect you. There are other youth that will embrace you. And you are never alone.” They recall their own youth, looking to the sky and asking for a sign. “Life is hard a lot for us, but there is always beauty and things to be grateful for. We’re allowed to be sad and dwell, but we can’t let it be everything.”

Looking ahead, Bliss hopes for a future filled with deeper acceptance of all forms of difference. “Whether ability, gender, body type, skin color—we need to stop thinking in prescriptive terms like, ‘Oh you’re this? You should act like that.’ Instead, ask: ‘Can you share with me who you are?’” 

COVER FEATURE

By Cesar A Reyes

main photography by Cesar A Reyes

Kaleb Gabriel

James has been a tireless advocate for LGBTQ+ storytelling, culture, and community in San Diego for over two decades. His path to becoming a key figure in queer cinema began far from the spotlight—on a remote alfalfa farm in southern Utah, where he grew up seven miles from his nearest neighbor. “It was isolated, conservative, and I didn’t have access to queer culture or language,” Kaleb shares. “I didn’t even really know what the word ‘gay’ meant when I was a teenager.”

Everything changed in 1999 when Kaleb moved to San Diego the day after graduating high school. He arrived with ambition but very little else. “I was homeless on the beach for a few days until an elderly gay couple took a chance on me and let me rent a room,” he recalls. “They showed me film after film from queer history. It was the first time I began to understand what it meant to be a queer person in America. Those films educated me, empowered me, and laid the groundwork for how I would move through the world.”



FILMOUT SAN DIEGO

SHINES BRIGHT AT
25TH ANNUAL
LGBTQ FILM FESTIVAL

A CELEBRATION OF QUEER
STORIES, COMMUNITY,
AND CINEMA!

A CONVERSATION WITH
KALEB GABRIEL
EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR



Today, Kaleb is the Chief Financial Officer and part-owner of an environmental health and safety firm, a role he’s held since 2001. But alongside his career in finance, he’s also become a prominent nightlife producer and community organizer, launching events such as OVERDRIVE at Spin Nightclub (2013–2023) and UNITE! Music Festival during San Diego Pride since 2016. Still, it’s his long-running involvement with FilmOut San Diego, the city’s only LGBTQ+ film festival, that Kaleb holds especially close to his heart.

Kaleb first became involved with FilmOut in 2004, when he began volunteering after being recruited by then-Executive Director Michael McQuiggan. “I was still pretty shy and unsure of myself, but Film-



Out gave me purpose,” Kaleb says. “It was incredible to see people coming together to celebrate queer cinema. It made me feel like I had found my tribe.”

FilmOut began in 1993 as a thesis project at SDSU by Joe Ferrelli and evolved over time through mergers and leadership changes. “At one point, we partnered with a Los Angeles group, but it didn’t give us the control or vision we needed,” Kaleb explains. “Eventually we split off, and that’s when we really started to build the FilmOut that exists today.” Leadership transitioned from Krista Page to Matt Habecker, and now to current Executive Director Kaleb Nicola, who started out as a volunteer himself. “Kaleb Nicola has been a rock—steadfast and passionate,” says James. “And our team includes people who’ve been committed for years, like Rick Goldenstein, Bob Bouchard, and Brad Bond. FilmOut is truly a labor of love.”

Among the many impactful moments in Kaleb’s tenure, one stands out: Jane



Clark's Meth Head, screened in 2013. "It was raw, unapologetic, and painfully honest," he says. "It portrayed a plague that has haunted our community for decades. That film didn't let the audience look away—it made them feel the devastation. I remember thinking: every queer person should see this when they come out."

This year, FilmOut celebrates its 25th anniversary with a four-day festival from August 21–24, 2025, featuring 40 films from around the world. Screenings will take place at The San Diego Natural History Museum (THE NAT) and The Museum of Photographic Arts at The San Diego Museum of Art (MOPA @ SDMA) in beautiful Balboa Park. "We'll feature award-winning selections from Sundance, SXSW, and BFI, alongside groundbreaking shorts and indie gems," Kaleb says. "It's our most ambitious lineup yet."

But beyond the films, Kaleb emphasizes the deeper mission of the festival. "FilmOut is about visibility, dialogue, and celebration. It's about preserving and sharing our stories with honesty and pride," he says. "We want people to laugh, cry, reflect—but most importantly, to see themselves on screen."

Kaleb encourages the community to support FilmOut's future. "We're a nonprofit, and we rely entirely on our community's support," he says. "Become a sponsor, donate, or consider joining our board. This festival exists because people care enough to keep it going."

When asked to describe the core of his passion, Kaleb doesn't hesitate:

"The WORD is visibility—because without it, we don't exist." 

By Dwight Byrum

When Garrett Abdo sat down to write *Exit Interviews*, he wasn't chasing a breakout hit—he was chasing clarity. "It wasn't to make a film," he told me. "It was to make a mirror." That mirror, messy, vulnerable, and often achingly familiar, now takes center stage at FilmOut San Diego.

Shot in a pseudo-documentary format that blends fictional interviews with intimate monologues, *Exit Interviews* centers on Robert, a filmmaker confronting his past lovers in search of answers—and maybe, healing. The premise is deceptively simple: what if you asked your exes what went wrong? But under Abdo's direction, that question becomes a vessel for something deeper. What results is a layered and emotionally intelligent portrait of queer love, heartbreak, and self-discovery.

Tuc Watkins, who stars as Robert, delivers a performance full of restraint and revelation. Playing a man searching for emotional closure required Watkins to confront his own instincts. "It forced

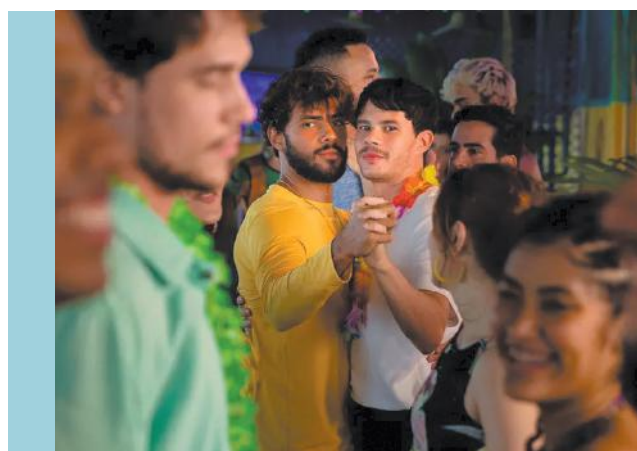


Tuc Watkins and Joseph Haro

me to think about relationships where I didn't get closure," he said. "It stayed with me." He described the experience as one that challenged him not to judge his character, but to simply listen and respond. "I enter conversations with an agenda," he admitted. "This role reminded me that unless I check that at the door, I won't learn anything."

Actor Joseph Haro, who plays Donny, a tender, open-hearted character, was originally in the running for a different role before Abdo intervened. "Garrett said, 'You need to play Donny,'" Haro recalled. "I was like, oh. But Donny was dealing with things I was dealing with. It just found me at the right time, like all great art does."

Haro's scene serves as a thematic turning point for Robert, laying the



OPENING NIGHT FILM

August 21 | 7PM
Natural History Museum in Balboa Park

THE BEST FRIEND

After a crisis with his boyfriend Martin, Lucas (Vinícius Teixeira), an architect searching for answers, travels alone to the idyllic beach of Canoa Quebrada in Ceará, Brazil. There, he reconnects with Felipe (Gabriel Fuentes), a former college classmate who now works as a tour guide. Their reunion stirs up long-buried feelings and forces Lucas to face a dilemma: return to his current relationship or give in to a passion from the past. Set against a vibrant backdrop and soundtracked by hits from the '80s and '90s, the film is a celebration of love, self-discovery, and the beauty of Brazil's northeastern coast. California Premiere!

FilmOut 2025 (cont)



Tuc Watkins, Garrett Abdo and Joseph Haro

emotional groundwork for the film's climax. "Our scene sort of had the kernel of the theme," Haro said. "Just because it didn't work out doesn't mean love didn't exist." The nuance of that idea, of love lingering beyond its expiration date, echoes throughout the film like a quiet aftershock.

That honesty, both in front of and behind the camera, defines *Exit Interviews*. Abdo calls the project his "most expensive therapy session." He wrote the majority of the script while traveling through Spain and Italy, sometimes overcome by the emotional toll of reliving past relationships. "I was curled up in a hotel bed in Barcelona, bawling my eyes out uncontrollably," he said. "It just ripped me apart."

Despite the film's deeply personal roots, Abdo was intentional about making something universally resonant. "Each character has an emotion attached," he explained. "And while none of the scenes are one-to-one depictions of my life, the emotions are real."

To achieve this balance of specificity and relatability, Abdo relied on the collaboration of his cast. "You have to let actors do their job," he said. "If you go into it thinking it's not a collaboration, you're going to make a horrible movie." That trust paid off in performances that feel lived-in and raw.

Abdo, who spent decades in comedy before pivoting to film, credits his background with shaping the movie's tone. While early drafts skewed dark, humor found its way in naturally during revisions. "We had to lighten it up," he said. "You can't have people jumping off buildings in the middle of the movie, we had to get them to the end."

That blend of levity and introspection is what makes *Exit Interviews* stand out, even in a crowded festival circuit. The film's visual structure, a story within a story layered with flashbacks and shifting camera formats, challenges viewers to reconsider what counts as closure, or even truth. "You're going into the documentary,

out of it, then back in again," Abdo explained. "I love that rhythm."

For Haro, the experience was just as transformative. "This feels like redefining what success is," he said. "We're going to be at a queer film festival, making queer art with queer artists, and that used to feel impossible."

He described the premiere at FilmOut San Diego as nearly indescribable, a powerful contrast to the fear he once felt hiding parts of himself to get roles.

As *Exit Interviews* makes its local debut, it arrives not just as a film, but as a conversation, a chance for audiences to see themselves, reflect, and maybe reach out to someone they used to love. As Watkins put it, "It's easy to watch this film and think about your own relationships. That's the mark of something honest."

Abdo hopes this is just the beginning. With new projects already in the works, including a genre-bending horror film and a script centered on a comedy club manager, he's not done experimenting. But for now, *Exit Interviews* stands as a deeply personal triumph, a reminder that sometimes the stories we're most afraid to tell are the ones worth sharing.

Exit Interviews screens Friday, August 22 at 7pm at FilmOut San Diego. The full cast, including Haro and Watkins, is expected to attend. 

SATURDAY LINE UP

Museum of Photographic Arts

DAY SPONSORED BY:



LGBTQ SHORTS 11am

A compilation of LGBTQ short films.



ROW OF LIFE 1:15pm

Fueled by relentless ambition, Angela Madsen shattered expectations to become a U.S. Marine, a three-time Paralympian, and a 14-time Guinness World Record holder. At 60, she set her sights on her most audacious goal yet: to be the first paraplegic—and the oldest woman—to row solo and unassisted across the vast Pacific Ocean. In 2020, Angela embarked on her final voyage, rowing from Los Angeles to Hawaii in a bold attempt to redefine the limits of human endurance.



DRIVE BACK HOME 3pm

A tragi-comedy about brotherhood, forgiveness, and overcoming deep divides. Set in the winter of 1970, stoic plumber Weldon (Charlie Creed-Miles) is sent by his mother to retrieve his estranged, openly gay brother Perley (Alan Cumming) from a Toronto jail, where he's been arrested for "public indecency." Reluctantly, Weldon sets out in a borrowed pickup, but the 1,000-mile journey becomes more than a simple drive home.



A NIGHT LIKE THIS 5:15pm

In this charming feature debut from Liam Calvert, two seemingly mismatched men cross paths on a chilly December night in London. Alexander Lincoln (In from the Side) and Jack Brett Anderson (Wolfblood) shine as Oliver, a brash British entrepreneur, and Lukas, a struggling German actor. After an awkward pub encounter, the two decide to spend the night together—barhopping, soul-searching, and confronting uncomfortable truths.



PLAINCLOTHES 7:30pm

In Carmen Emmi's '90s-set erotic drama, Tom Blyth plays a closeted undercover cop tasked with entrapping men cruising in shopping mall bathrooms. But when he crosses paths with a married man (Russell Tovey), a routine sting spirals into something far more complicated. A charged encounter ignites a dangerous attraction, turning the operation into a volatile dance of secrecy and desire, where the lines between duty and longing, watcher and watched, begin to blur.



WHO WANTS TO MARRY AN ASTRONAUT? 9:30pm

After 15 years together, David (Raúl Tejón) is ready to marry his partner. He plans the perfect Route 66 road trip, ending with a wedding in Las Vegas. But when he proposes, he's publicly rejected. Undeterred, David is determined to experience the joy of a wedding—giving himself just 10 days to find someone new to say "yes."

By Cesar A Reyes

CARMEN EMMI

ON *PLAINCLOTHES*, QUEER STORYTELLING, AND THE POWER OF COMING HOME

Carmen Emmi didn't grow up dreaming of making movies. Raised in a traditional farming family in Syracuse, New York, he laughs that he didn't have "the greenest of thumbs." While his father and uncles worked the fields, Carmen spent more time exploring town and bonding with his grandparents. "I was the oldest grandchild, and I think my papa quickly realized I wasn't meant to be in the fields," he says. "I mostly just got to hang out with him and explore Syracuse, which I don't take for granted."

That connection to home shaped his debut feature film, *Plainclothes*, which he chose to shoot in Syracuse. "Being around my grandparents was, and still is, such a gift," he says. "My papa didn't get to see the film, but I dedicated it to him. My Nana and grandma are still here, and that kind of closeness means everything to me."

Carmen's early creative dream was to act—he grew up loving *The Wizard of Oz* and *The Sound of Music*. But behind the camera is where he ultimately found his voice. That discovery led to *Plainclothes*, a story set in 1997 about an undercover cop assigned to arrest men cruising in a public restroom. Things get complicated when he falls for one of them. "It's a film about what it feels like to police your own feelings," Carmen says. "And the kind of mind-altering state that can come from living that way."

The idea for the film began in 2016, not long after Carmen came out. He'd read an article in the *LA Times* about a sting operation in Long Beach where police went undercover to arrest men for indecent exposure. "I had told myself it



Carmen Emmi, Tom Blyth and Russell Tovey



was safe to be who I was, and then I read this, and it suddenly didn't feel safe anymore," he says. Around the same time, his brother was becoming a police officer, adding a layer of personal complexity to the story. "I'm very close to him. As he got deeper into training, I learned more about what that

world was like."

Writing *Plainclothes* was a way to process those feelings. "I spent so many years trying to stay safe—being funny, being agreeable—before anyone could ask about who I really was," he says. "When I learned about those sting operations, all of that came rushing back. I started

journaling, and that's how the character of Lucas was born."

Carmen cast Tom Blyth and Russell Tovey in the lead roles, working with Bernie Telsey and team. "Russell is a legend to me," he says. "Watching *Looking* helped me see a future for myself. And Tom brought such care and depth to Lucas. I'll always be grateful for that."

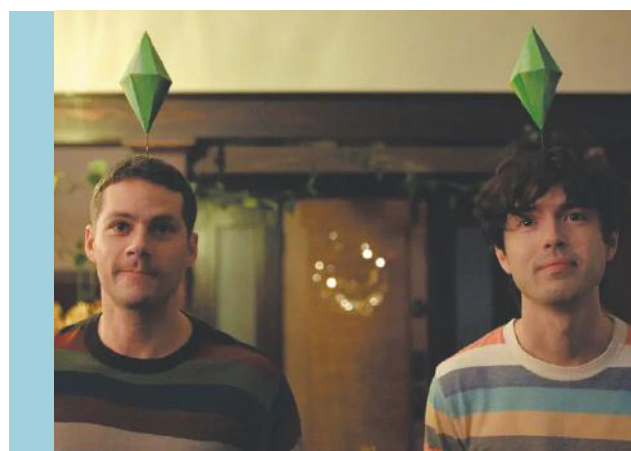
The film's emotional tone was shaped by its late-'90s setting and its music. "Music is how I stay emotionally grounded. I played it on set to help actors drop into character," he says. Composer Emily Wells created the score, blending new work with older tracks that echoed Lucas's emotional journey. Composer Lorne Balfe also mentored Carmen and Wells during post.

The project came together through deep personal ties. Carmen's college roommate, Alessandra Ford-Balazs—who also appears in the film—introduced him to producer Arthur Landon. Another longtime friend, Vanessa Pantley, came on board as producer. "This was an indie film built on trust," he says.

For Carmen, the experience of making *Plainclothes* was more than a career milestone. "I feel incredibly lucky that everything I wanted to say is on the screen," he says. "That kind of experience is rare."

As for what's next? Carmen smiles. "I really want to learn how to fly a plane."

Maybe that makes perfect sense. *Plainclothes* isn't just a film about secrecy and shame—it's about learning to lift off. **W**



CLOSING NIGHT FILM + DESSERT RECEPTION

August 24 | 7:30pm
Museum of Photographic Arts in Balboa Park

TWINLESS

Fresh from Sundance! *Twinless* blends humor and poignancy as it explores the complexities of male friendship and the unique grief of losing a twin. The story follows Roman (Dylan O'Brien, in a career-best dual role), who, reeling from the death of his twin brother Rocky, moves into Rocky's Portland apartment and joins a support group for twin loss. There, he meets Dennis (James Sweeney), a shy, gay man mourning his own twin. As their bond deepens, the two form an emotionally intense and unconventional friendship that challenges traditional boundaries and delves into identity, connection, and healing. With Aisling Franciosi & Lauren Graham.

THE WORD ON ART

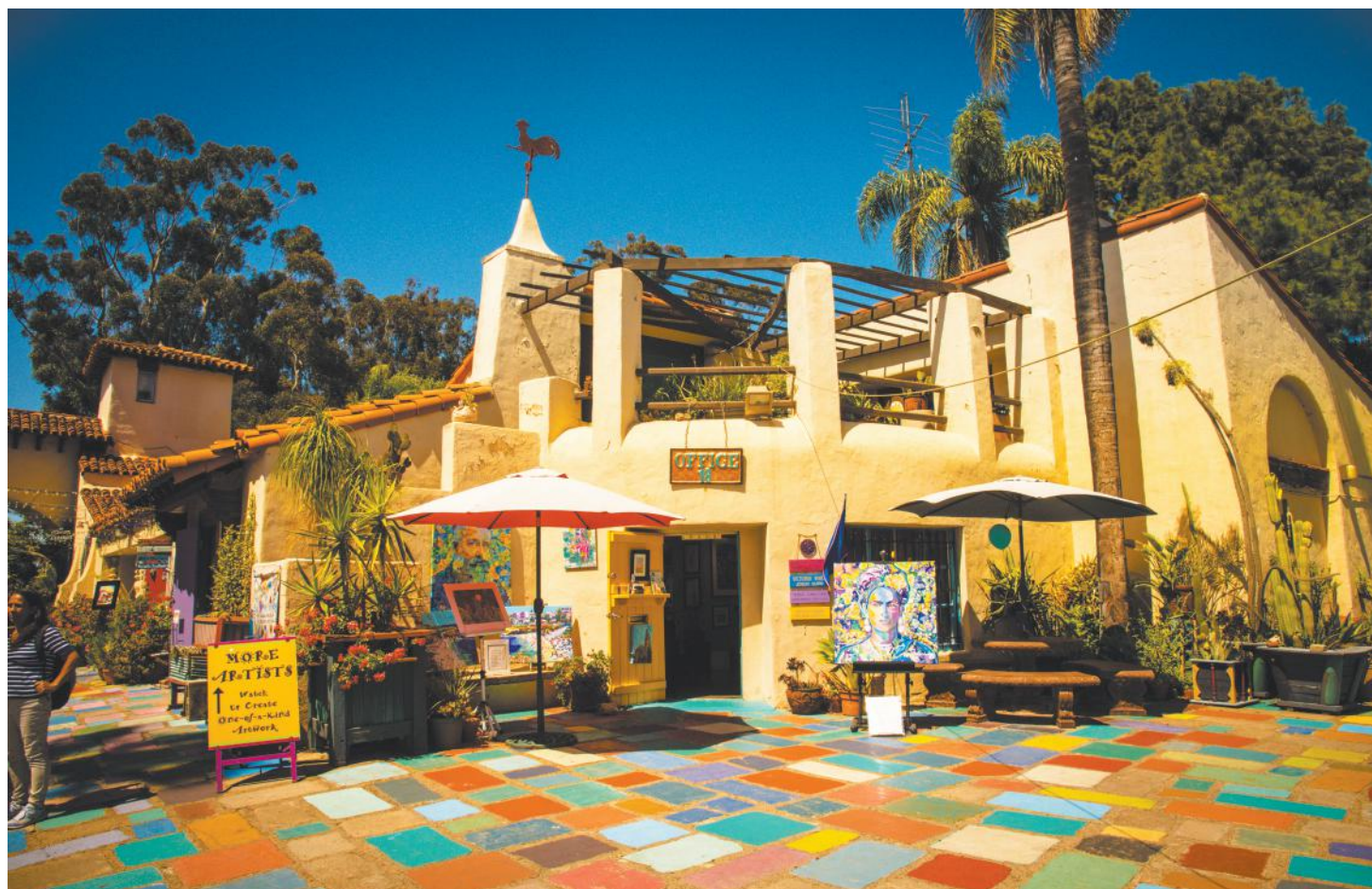
By **Patric Stillman**Image by **Michael Calas**

VILLAGE VISIONARIES:

A CULTURAL CORNERSTONE IN THE HEART OF BALBOA PARK

Tucked between the San Diego Zoo and the San Diego Natural History Museum lies a charming enclave that has been nurturing creativity for nearly a century. The Village Arts and Education Foundation (VAF), operating in what was once Balboa Park's Spanish Village, is not just a place for art; it's a living, breathing cultural ecosystem. With its brightly colored tiles, twinkle-lit patios, and studios bustling with working artists, the Village offers a visual feast and a deeper mission: community engagement through art.

"It wasn't meant to be permanent," said Nancy Scheuermann, president of VAF, in a recent interview. "It was developed and built in 1935 for the second California exhibition. And what is interesting is that when they built many of the facilities there, including Spanish Village, it was meant to be temporary. But this little quaint Spanish town that they built for the tourists that came for the exhibition had restaurants and shops and cantinas, and they were supposed to be taken down at the end of the exposition. But in 1936, when everyone was taking other places down, a group of artists came and asked the city council if they could take over that spot where the Spanish Village was and develop that into an area where artists could do their artwork, display, show and sell. And the city council agreed to that, but they wanted something in return. What they wanted in return was that the artists shared, demonstrated and taught the art to the community. So, since 1936, we have been working with that synergy with the city as well."



That spirit of sharing remains at the heart of VAF's mission. As a nonprofit 501(c)(3) organization, the Foundation holds the city permit for the premises and has expanded its vision far beyond studio walls. Through education, exhibitions, and outreach, VAF has created a model of sustainability and relevance as one of the only artist communities in San Diego's tourism footprint.

Visitors to Balboa Park might stumble upon the Spanish Village by accident, drawn in by the kaleidoscopic tiles that pattern the patio. But what they find is

more than picturesque. It's a community of studios that are "each unique, each painted differently," said Scheuermann. "So just walking through, one finds a celebration of artistic vision."

Beyond the colorful spectacle, the Village is a cultural incubator. Locals know about 'December Nights,' but not many are aware of the other activities that take place within the Village. Last month, Opera Neo held its annual outdoor performance here, and VAF's educational programs continue year-round on a private patio tucked away from the foot

traffic of the park.

"Many of our artists are very good teachers. They teach their medium, like painting, jewelry making, glass design. There are so many kinds of art taught here," Scheuermann said. "One of the best things we have are summer camps. When you hear 'summer camps,' everyone thinks of little kids doing something, but this is also for adults. Every summer we have adult camps. We have five different artists, and each day you learn a different medium. The artists teach something new each day, and the students love it. Three

hours a day and you walk away with a project. We also have a teenager camp so they can be with their peers. And we have several little kid camps with ages from seven to ten years old. Everyone loves it.”

SPECTRUM 2026

Importantly, the Village’s role as a cultural touchstone is evolving to reflect the broader identity of San Diego. In 2026, the Village will celebrate its 90th birthday, and plans are already underway. Next spring, VAF will launch Spectrum, a multi-week celebration of LGBTQ+ visual arts.

“Many of our artists are part of the LGBTQ+ community, and we felt it was time to make that more visible,” Scheuermann said. “Art should speak truth. That’s part of what it means to be an artist.”

The upcoming exhibit, to be co-curated with artist and activist RD Riccoboni, promises to spotlight queer perspectives in visual storytelling and engage the public in dialogue around identity and community. Spectrum: Celebrating Diversity Through Art will run from May 5 through June 2, 2026, at the Village Art Center’s Gallery 21, serving as a vibrant lead-in to San Diego Pride. The collaboration between VAF and The Studio Door art gallery marks a powerful alliance between two longtime champions of LGBTQ+ visibility in the arts.

Far from a static gallery show, Spectrum will include special programming throughout its run, such as an arts panel, live music, artist receptions, and live art demonstrations. This inaugural year will lay the groundwork for a larger vision RD Riccoboni has long held—a permanent home in Balboa Park for queer art and its creators.

“As LGBTQ+ artists, we’ve always used color to challenge the gray spaces of the world,” Riccoboni shared. “Spectrum is our opportunity to amplify those voices, not just for Pride, but for all who believe art should reflect the full range of human experience.”

With its inclusive theme, accessible



programming, and celebratory tone, Spectrum is poised to become a cultural touchstone for San Diego’s queer community and a powerful addition to the city’s springtime arts calendar.

Cultural initiatives like Spectrum aren’t just gestures of inclusivity. They reflect VAF’s commitment to being a community space where people can see themselves in the art and artists around them. “This is a great starting point,” Scheuermann noted, “for the LGBTQ+ community to come in, be seen, and show their art in a place as historic and central as Balboa Park.”

And there’s something poetic about that legacy. The Village was founded by artists who fought to preserve a temporary structure and turn it into a sanctuary for creativity. Ninety years later, that impulse to preserve, create and share continues through the work of VAF and the community it serves.

Whether you’re a weekend tourist, a collector, a budding artist, or someone who just wants to experience the heartbeat of San Diego’s creative scene, the Village Arts and Education Foundation offers more than an afternoon stroll. It offers connection.

“We welcome everybody to come. We’d like more people to join our community,” Scheuermann explained. “Whether you want to be an artist or just help out, we’re always looking for volunteers. We’re a 100% volunteer organization.” With roughly 200 artists and six guilds representing mediums from sculpture to enamel, the Village serves as both a launching pad for new artists and a haven for experienced creators. New artists are juried in twice a year, a process detailed on the website under “Become an Artist in the Village.”

For details on classes, camps, artist opportunities, and upcoming exhibitions, visit villageartsandeducationfoundation.org.

As Scheuermann summed it up: “It’s not about guarding what we have. It’s about giving it away. The more we give, the more we receive. That’s what art does. That’s what we do.” **W**

B-SIDE

By Korie Houston

When it comes to love, I do not do anything halfway. b-side is where I unpack the messier, quieter parts of dating. The stories that do not always get a fairytale ending. Through music and memory, I try to make sense of what it means to love, to lose, and to feel everything in between. Flip the record with me.

O

n the heels of my 30th birthday, my so-called “twink death,” as some might say, I’ve been reflecting. Thinking about the hopes, dreams, fears, and heartbreaks that brought me here. It’s funny looking back, realizing how certain things were never right for me. That feeling of relief when you’re far enough in the rearview to admit: yeah, I’m better off now.

The truth is, I’ve never been the kind of person who seeks out lessons in love and life. Most of the time, I wish I could’ve learned them without the heartache. But sometimes, the things that hurt are the same things that shape you.

“It’s irrational and impossible.”

JADE, formerly of Little Mix, created an anthem that became my song of the summer. *Plastic Box* hits deep because it gets it: we all carry a past. We all have scars. Some heal, but they never fully disappear. As I get older, I protect my peace more than I chase intensity. I don’t throw myself into the deep end like I used to. But still, I challenge myself to take risks with people. I remind myself: Are you really taking a chance if you’re always coloring inside the lines?

“Can I have your heart in a plastic box? Never used, fully clean, untouched.”

In a perfect world, we’d meet people whose pasts don’t stop them from letting us in. But it doesn’t work that way. I can’t

PLASTIC BOX

BY JADE



“I’m trying to be cool, but it really fucking hurts.”

speak for everyone I’ve loved or connected with, but I know this: I’m just as afraid of getting hurt as I am of feeling everything. It’s a weird contradiction. Two halves that don’t quite make a whole.

This song reminds me that everyone carries their own history. Their own trail of heartbreak. In JADE’s case, it’s about making space for new love without being

haunted by the old. It’s not fair or healthy to compare yourself to someone’s past. You’re not living in it. You’re here, now. For me, this song is a reminder that I can’t rewrite what’s behind me, but I also can’t let fear of the future hold me hostage.

“Are you sure you feel the same way? ’Cause it took me months, it only took her a day.”

photo by Kaplan Photography

You can’t become someone you’re not. You can change the outside—habits, looks, routines—but your core? That’s yours. And if something or someone isn’t meant for you, that’s okay. Still, insecurity creeps in. It blinds you. Makes you question yourself.

It’s okay to admit when we’re our own worst enemy. The hard part is learning how to stop sabotaging ourselves. I’m still young, I know that. But I also know it might take a lifetime to fully let my heart lead the way. To stop letting fear speak louder than love. Because love? Love will never be in mint condition. But if you’re lucky, you’ll find it in rare form.

“And I wanna burn all your history.”

This lyric hits a version of me that used to exist. The one who would’ve said: yeah, I’d erase it all if I could. I’d take back every time I let my heart be touched, torn, tested. But now? I wouldn’t be who I am without those moments. Without those scars.

Believe me, I don’t need any more life lessons detonating in my face. But for those of you who really know me, you know this: when I fall, I fall hard. And when I hit the ocean floor, I don’t rush to come up for air. But I’ve never let myself stay there long enough to drown. I refuse to become so jaded (no pun intended) that I can’t find my way back into the light.

“Like I’m the only one you’ve ever loved.”

We have the capacity to love endlessly in this life. Someone else’s past doesn’t have to overshadow our present. Their history isn’t competition. It’s a roadmap to understanding. A guide for how to love them better.

There’s real beauty in falling in love with yourself. In letting people see you fully, mess and all. And in allowing yourself to be loved by those who actually deserve you.

A plastic box is a metaphor for keeping your heart safe, pristine, untouched. But what’s the point of a heart no one’s allowed to hold?

So, whether it was a moment in time or a part of your present, how do you want to define your future? **W**

By Cesar A Reyes

photo by The WORD San Diego

SERVING LOOKS, BRUNCH, AND NOSTALGIA: MALIBU BARBIE CAFE ROLLS INTO SAN DIEGO – AND SHE'S FABULOUS



Darling, cancel your boring brunch plans and clear your calendar—Malibu Barbie Café has skated to San Diego and she's bringing pink power, '70s flair, and pure joy in a roller skate.

This immersive pop-up, taking over the Hilton Hotel Bayside's Kitchen and Bar in downtown San Diego, is a deliciously campy tribute to the iconic 1970s Malibu Barbie we all secretly wanted to be (or date). Created by the geniuses at Bucket Listers in collaboration with Mattel, the café is part dining experience, part photo fantasy, and full-on Barbiecore heaven.

After slaying in New York, Chicago, Miami, and Austin, this limited-run pop-up is making a sun-soaked splash just in time for Comic-Con—and trust, it's giving everything it needs to give. Think: retro roller rink, pastel dream interiors, and an all-day brunch menu curated by Chef Becky Brown (yes, she of

MasterChef and Chopped fame). We're talking salads, desserts, and cocktails as fabulous as your favorite drag queen's wig collection.

Yes, there's pink. Yes, there's glitter. And yes, you will want to take a hundred selfies. But honey, it doesn't stop at just looking cute. Expect themed events like cupcake decorating, paint nights, and adults-only skate sessions where you can werk that disco energy under the lights. Oh, and \$1 from every skate rental goes to the American Red Cross for California wildfire relief—because Barbie's got heart and style.

Tickets start at just \$25 and come with a dining credit and access to limited-edition Barbie merch (you know the gays love exclusive merch). So hop on the waitlist at [BucketListers.com](https://www.bucketlisters.com) and follow [@barbiecafeofficial](https://www.instagram.com/barbiecafeofficial) for sneak peeks and previews. Last day is October 12—don't miss it. 




BOOK AND ADDITIONAL LYRICS BY KAIT KERRIGAN | MUSIC AND LYRICS BY ANNE EISENDRATH & IAN EISENDRATH
CHOREOGRAPHED BY MANDY MOORE
DIRECTED BY CHRISTOPHER ASHLEY

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Home to the historic Diversionary Theatre



This is not a Diversionary Theatre production, although Diversionary is proud to host this Guest Production.

ON STAGE

Images courtesy of La Jolla Playhouse

By Cesar A Reyes

LA JOLLA PLAYHOUSE UNVEILS CAST AND CREATIVE TEAM FOR WORLD-PREMIERE MUSICAL *THE HEART*

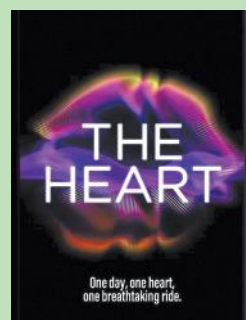
La Jolla Playhouse has announced the cast and creative team for the highly anticipated world-premiere musical *The Heart*, running August 19 to September 21 at the Sheila and Hughes Potiker Theatre. Adapted from the acclaimed French novel *Réparer les Vivants* by Maylis de Kerangal, the production features a book and additional lyrics by Kait Kerrigan (*The Great Gatsby*) and music and lyrics by Anne Eisendrath and Ian Eisendrath, known for their work on *Come From Away*. Tony Award-winning director and Playhouse Artistic Director Christopher Ashley helms the project, with choreography by Emmy winner Mandy Moore (*La La Land*).

The Heart follows a life-changing, 24-hour journey in San Diego after a young surfer's life is tragically cut short, triggering a chain of events surrounding a heart transplant. With a thrilling electronic score and emotionally gripping storytelling, the show dives into the interconnected lives of strangers whose worlds are changed by one selfless act.

The all-star cast includes Broadway veterans and La Jolla favorites: Heidi Blickenstaff (*Freaky Friday*, *Something Rotten*) as Claire, Lincoln Clauss (*Fly*) as Thomas Driscoll, Bre Jackson as Cordelia Owl, Max McKenna as Juliette, Kenita Miller as Marianne Lamar, Paul Alexander Nolan (*Escape to Margaritaville*, *Water for Elephants*) as Dr. Brevia, Zachary Noah Piser (*Redwood*) as Simon Lamar, Wren Rivera as Marthe, and Jason Tam as Sean Lamar. Understudies include Selena "Lena" Ceja, Cody Ingram, Brandon Keith Rogers, and Joy Yandell-Hall.



The Heart Creative Team - photo by Tia Byington



The Heart
August 19 – September 28
La Jolla Playhouse
lajollaplayhouse.org

The creative team is stacked with acclaimed talent, including scenic design by Robert Brill, costumes by Sarafina Bush, lighting by Amanda Zieve, sound by Gareth Owen, and projections by Lucy Mackinnon. Music direction is by Wendy Cavett, with orchestrations and music production by Juan Ariza and Elin Sandberg. Casting is by Tara Rubin, CSA, and Hannah Reinert of The Telsey Office.

"This deeply moving new musical expertly weaves a mesmerizing story through a propulsive, EDM-infused score," said Ashley. "I'm thrilled to bring *The Heart* to life with such an extraordinary team." 

ON STAGE JULY



The Comedy of Errors
Now – August 24
The Old Globe Theater
theoldglobe.org



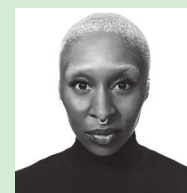
Shucked
August 12 - 17
Civic Theatre
broadwaysd.com



Matilda
Now – August 17
San Diego Musical Theatre
sdmt.org



**Gays, Theys, and
Baes Comedy Show**
August 17 | 5pm
Clark Cabaret
diversionary.org



**Cynthia Erivo with
the SD Symphony Orchestra**
Sunday August 17 | 7:30pm
The Rady Shell at Jacobs Park
sandiegosymphony.org

2025 SAN DIEGO LGBTQ+ COMMUNITY NEEDS ASSESSMENT SURVEY

Help us identify the needs of our community!

San Diego is conducting a comprehensive assessment of the needs of the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer communities in San Diego County.



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bit.ly/2025-lgbtq-survey



THE WORD ON READING

By Vaughn Frantz Miller

COUNTESS

BY SUZAN PALUMBO

I have been waiting for a lesbian sci-fi to bring to you all, and I've finally found one!

Countess by Suzan Palumbo is a short sci-fi novel about love, justice, and rebellion against a repressive empire. With punchy narration painting quick, vivid pictures, the book centers on Virika, a woman devoted to proving herself against the biases of the ruling empire through hard work and undying loyalty.

Unfortunately, bigots won't care about the true qualities a person has if they don't respect the identities that person carries. When the time is convenient for a professional rival to rise in the ranks, Virika is framed and found guilty of a crime she didn't commit. She is taken from her home, her family, her lover, and left in prison to waste.

While imprisoned and on the verge of losing her mind, Virika is helped by a prison guard who tells her how to find freedom not just for herself, but for everyone under the oppressive thumb of the empire. The guard shares a secret which will liberate their people, then helps Virika escape. Over time, Virika acquires the means and the cunning to build a party that will take a stand against the exploitation her people have endured since they left the planet Earth.

"Once you taste freedom, once you recognize the gruel they've forced you to submit to for their benefit, you will never swallow it willingly again."

Something I loved about this book is that while yes, Virika's homosexuality does have a part to play in the plot, this book is more about bigger ideas than just trying to be in a relationship. This is



not a book of a lesbian wooing women across the stars; this is a book about a hero of the people—and that hero is a lesbian. As Virika transforms into her role, her partner Dominique is at her side every step of the way. Though again, the plot is not as much about the love that blooms between them, but the fight for freedom long deserved.

This book left me reflecting on the heroes in our own community—those who have chosen to fight for what they believe in, putting themselves on the line and risking the ease of a quiet personal life. The world is better because of the choices they made. Virika is similar to that, but on an inter-planetary level.

Palumbo seems to have a good head for society-building. Without creating convoluted political games, she makes clear the workings of the ruling political body. In addition, she makes it clear what she means when she says freedom. It's a concrete concept instead of a meaningless platitude, making the actions of the book and goals of the characters all the more tangible.

I prefer to share books with happy endings—our community doesn't get enough of those, in my opinion. Truth to tell, this ending is bittersweet. With that in mind, it is absolutely worth the read.

There are only two copies of *Countess* available through San Diego Public Libraries, though this is definitely a book I'd encourage you to buy at your local bookstore. 

NEVADA: A NOVEL

BY IMOGEN BINNIE



Sometimes you run into someone who is an absolute mess. Other times, you have the luck to only read about them.

Meet Maria Griffiths, a trans woman in arrested development.

"This is kind of about trans stuff but mostly it's about me being a fucking asshole, is that okay?"

If you enjoyed *Hedwig and the Angry Inch*, you will love this book.

Imogen Binnie's *Nevada: A Novel* uses Maria's voice to share a lot of perspective about struggling with life after transition—the difficulty that comes with taking care of yourself after having spent every minute before your transition with no plan to ever do that. We are the habits we build. So if your habits are dissociating, ignoring your feelings, and thinking too much, who do you become?

Binnie's narrative voice is unique and genuine, though I wish it had more differentiation between the three characters' perspectives. Of those three main characters, one introduced halfway into the book felt like a redundant rendition of many topics covered in the first half. However, I loved that the main character, Maria, existed.

I love trans characters who are deeply flawed people instead of being role models for cisgender people's approval. Seeing a trans person authentically suck and fuck up in media honestly was kind of nice.

But then again, I enjoy *Hedwig and the Angry Inch* too. *Nevada: A Novel* is available at San Diego Public Libraries. 

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DJ DABDABOSSA

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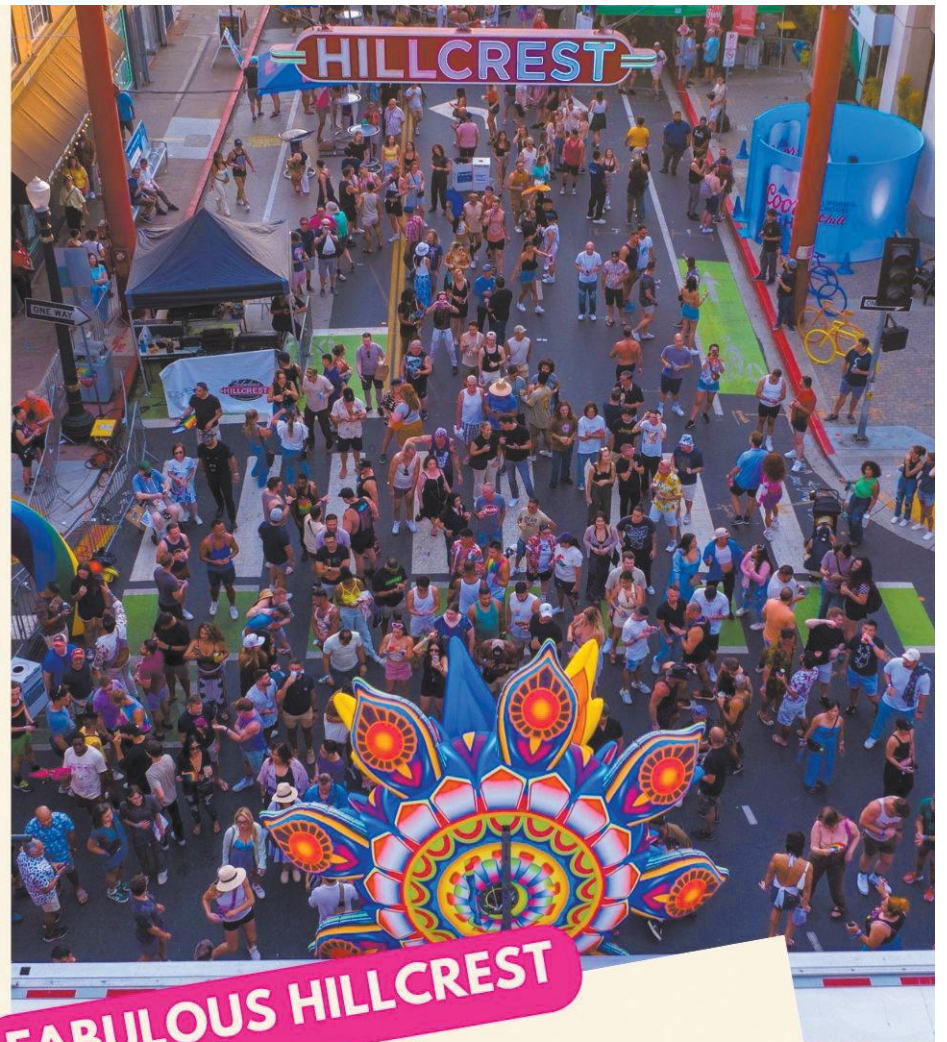
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