



STAND-UP GUYS

Groundbreaking gay comedian Bob Smith chats about the gay comic documentary *Laughing Matters ... The Men*.

BY GARY M. KRAMER

Gay men are generally known for their sharp wit, and the documentary *Laughing Matters ... The Men*, unspooling at Outfest, showcases a half dozen funny gay males. Chief among them is Bob Smith, a pioneer of gay comedy. Smith formed the comedy group Funny Gay Males back in the 1980s and was the first openly gay comic to appear on *The Tonight Show*.

Andrea Meyerson's amusing documentary features interviews and, of course, stand-up routines from the likes of Smith, Alec Mapa, Eddie Sarfaty, Andre Kelly, Scott Kennedy and Bruce Vilanch. Curiously, Smith was the only one among the group to know all of the others.

"Everyone comes across as an individual," Smith said on the phone from New York. "The implicit message is how diverse a group of gay man can be. That's what the film is about. The one thing we all show is that we're funny and quick."

Quick may describe Smith's sense of humor, but not his delivery. Giving away one of the secrets of his routine, the Buffalo, N.Y., native says, "Make the joke as concise as possible."

In his act, Smith also shares from his personal experiences. "Every joke in the act where I quote my mother is completely the truth," he insists. "A lot of [my] material comes from my life. I use real names of friends because the jokes are inspired by them."

Smith's performance—on stage and in the film—is a mix of classic comedy staples, from deadpan one-liners to sight gags to personal stories, but his goal is to make audiences laugh and perhaps change their opinions about gay stereotypes.

and admits to introducing a few fictitious elements on occasion to get a laugh. "That line about experimenting with heterosexuality—where I said I slept with a straight guy," Smith admits, is not true. But it is funny.

And when he relies on props such as rainbow gay pride "crap," he acknowledges that the props are "kitchy, and obvious." Yet Smith, with mock embarrassment, takes the opportunity to set up a joke. "I'm afraid they are going to call me 'Carrot Bottom.'"

"What's funny about a queer point of view,"—and here Smith plays on both the strange and ha-ha meaning of the word funny—"is that you are born into a family, and [as the one gay member] you are the only minority where your parents and siblings aren't in the same minority."

But if Bob Smith is unapologetic about being openly gay—he penned the book *Openly Bob* in 1999, and this September his first novel, *Selfish and Perverse*, is coming out—his outspoken act has not always been well received.

"I was in Seattle in a comedy club about 12 years ago, and there was a 200- to 300-person audience," he recalls, "and as soon as I started talking about being gay, half the audience started walking out." Smith thinks times have changed since then, but the experience still smarts.

That shouldn't be the case with folks who see *Laughing Matters ... The Men*. Audiences should be rolling in the aisles.

See *Laughing Matters ... The Men* at Outfest on July 21 at 11 a.m. at

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