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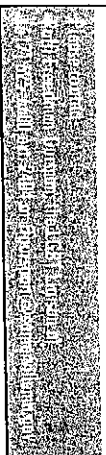
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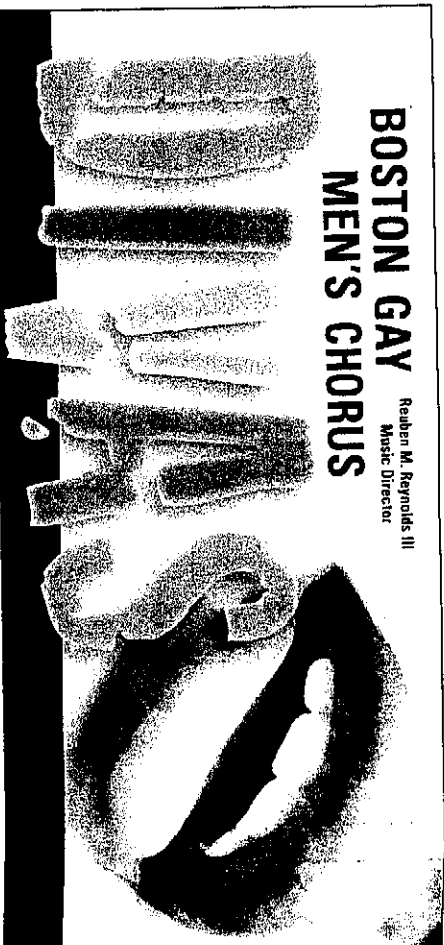
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How to be a diva

BOSTON GAY MEN'S CHORUS

Reuben M. Reynolds III
Music Director



The Boston Gay Men's Chorus celebrates Pride in a fabulous way.

by **Jules Becker**
contributing writer

If you want to honor divas, hire one. The Boston Gay Men's Chorus did exactly that in headlining Hild premier actress Leigh Barrett along with former Boston Conservatory student and rising star Claire Philippe in their Pride Week tribute "Divas" at the Carter Majestic Theatre.

Barrett, in talking about the concert with *Boy Windows*, spoke of a diva as "an icon, a name that people know whose music people like." While the Reading performer admitted that the word "diva" is "tossed around so much," she easily qualifies for the iconic title by her own definition. Just remember her touching Sally in "Follies" and her engaging Florence Foster Jenkins in "Souvenir," both at the Lyric Stage Company of Boston. Fondly think back to her undaunted Mother in "Ragtime" at New Repertory Theatre, her elegant Vera in "Yal Joey" at Southam Theatre, and especially her vulnerable and winning Little Edie in "Grey Gardens" at Lyric Stage, and it is no surprise that the title "diva" fits her in the best sense of the word.

She and Philippe delivered hit songs of a number of the 25 celebrated performers chosen as divas. An eclectic group from such diverse areas and genres as stage, screen, jazz, pop, rhythm and blues, country, and gospel music, the

dream girls line-up here includes the likes of Barbra Streisand, Judy Garland, Ella Fitzgerald, Ethel Merman, Beyonce, Dolly Parton, Peggy Lee, Bette Midler, Cher, Madonna, Tina Turner, Lady Gaga, and Mahalia Jackson, among others. (While no such group can please everyone, fans of Sarah Vaughan, Patti LaBelle, Betty Buckley, Bernadette Peters, and Audra McDonald found their favorites conspicuous by their absence.) Look for such signature songs as "Somebody Over the Rainbow" (Garland, of course), "Bad Romance" (Lady Gaga), "Maybe This Time" (Liza Minnelli), and "Jolene" (Parton).

Call it serendipity or kismet, but Barrett met BGM's executive director Steve E. Smith as fellow classmates during their freshman year at Ohio's Baldwin College and Conservatory, where she received a bachelor's degree in voice performance. She became one of only a few freshmen to ever be in a recital, namely the senior honors recital. Although she sang classical music pieces with the high school chorus in Wakefield, where she grew up, and virtually only performed in opera in her early performance work, she did enjoy working in her mentoring Wakefield drama instructor Jim Ventura's original coming-of-age musical "Lucky Man in Life."

She moved to opera at the Boston Academy of Music, now Opera Boston. Then came a chance to play Audrey in the musical "Little Shop of Horrors," and the rest is history. Smith immediately thought of Barrett when BGM's decided on the theme of "Divas." As in the past, the concert,

under the musical direction of Reuben Reynolds III, features a big production as well as solo pieces. The 150-member chorus serves as backdrop, Barrett noted, for her rendition of "Le Jazz Hot" from "Victor/Victoria." She will "show off my opera" in a piece entitled "The Girl in 14G." Barrett also returns to the "Follies" gem "Losing My Mind," which she sang with fine dramatic tone at the Lyric Stage. Boston Conservatory faculty member Michelle Chase directs and choreographs the two-hour tribute.

Philippe delivers the "Dreamgirls" showstopper "And I Am Telling You" that brought diva status to Jennifer Holliday. Barrett and Philippe evoke a celebrated Streisand/Garland duo on the rousing standard "Happy Days Are Here Again." Asked if she will be wearing any boas and unusual costumes, Barrett quipped, "I think the boys [the chorus members] will. I'll leave the boas to the boys. I will be wearing fancy gowns with jewels." Costume considerations aside, she offered, "I'm doing my best Patti LaBelle in the sense of the boys being around me."

After "Divas," she will be covering for Tony Award-winning Broadway actress Judy Kaye in the musical version of "Bon Appetit" for Boston Midsummer Opera at the Tsai Performance Center (July 28-Aug. 1). For much of the first half of the 2010-2011 theater season (Oct. 21 - Dec. 19), Barrett will play an opera singer as well as a landlady in the highly awaited Lyric Stage production of the theatrical adaptation of the Dickens classic "Nicholas Nickleby."



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