



MUM'S THE WORD

BY MIKE CIRIACO

Over the decades, several taboos have strangled their way into the collective gay unconscious. No white shoes after Labor Day. No carbs after 10 p.m. Most importantly, no wire hangers—ever!

The last edict was bequeathed unto the homo masses via Joan Crawford by way of Faye Dunaway in the cult camp classic *Mommie Dearest*. The 1981 film, based on adopted daughter Christina's tell-all novel, depicts silver screen diva Crawford as a controlling, alcoholic, Jungian 'Terrible Mother' nightmare. Dunaway's over-the-top performance, coupled with a laundry list of kitschy quotes, has secured *Mommie Dearest's* foothold in the gay camp pantheon.

In honor of the movie's 30th anniversary, the Joan-Christina battle between good and crazy manifests in the heart of WeHo as a live performance. Starting Sept. 22, *Mommie Queerest* returns to Los Angeles for a six-performance run as part of a national tour. Jamie Morris and Brooks Braselman reprise their roles as the respective mother/daughter duo at Cabaret Ultra Suede, but with a twist: This stage iteration of a modern Electra conflict poses the question, "What if Joan Crawford was really a man all those years?" The all-male cast of four explores an alternate reality where the artist formerly known as Box Office Poison was actually a man in very convincing drag. "Even when Christina finds out, takes revenge and writes *Daddy Dearest*, it's Joan who still has the last laugh."

Playwright/star Jamie Morris recounts the origin of this warped comedy. "Years ago I saw a live stage production of *Valley of the Dolls* in New York and was inspired to do the same for the movie *Mommie Dearest* but I wanted to make

it my own, give it a twist. The movie is so ripe for parody. The title came first and then I had the idea to make Joan a man and the rest of the story followed."

Mommie Queerest premiered in Provincetown in 2003 and has since toured in dozens of cities across the country, including sold-out runs in New York and Los Angeles. In fact, when *MQ* last performed in SoCal, the show earned four *L.A. Weekly* Theater Award nominations, as well as a Best Comedy Direction for helmsman Christopher Kenney.

"We have been fortunate enough to have been received very well over the last eight years since we debuted in Provincetown," says Morris. "Every city is special, and we've had great runs. Since we started the tour earlier this year the two highlights have been San Diego and Ft. Lauderdale, where the show sold out after the first weekend. But an odd thing happened. All the straight retirees bought up most of the tickets. In one of the gayest cities in America the gays didn't have a chance to see the show. So we are going back!"

The dynamic between the show and its audience is crucial in a camp fest like *MQ*.

"The best part about doing a show like *Mommie* is the audience reaction," says Morris. "Some nights it's like a rock concert, with the audience shouting the lines from the movie with us. It can be a very interactive experience, which for us is magic."

But what's the allure in a story of an alcoholic, abusive parent?

"The movie gave us a great gay camp villain," Morris explains. "A strong, larger-than-life, glamorous woman in Faye Dunaway's portrayal of the Big Bad Mama Joan. Unfortunately, to many, this will be Joan Crawford's legacy. Not as a great actress who knew every tech person's name and bought random gifts for her colleagues and who personally wrote back to all her fans. But as a psychotic, over-the-top nut. Christina's story has given us great, great laughs for decades. But I don't think anyone will truly ever know what went on inside the Brentwood Estate. But it's delicious to imagine."

But gay L.A. has a small window to witness this drag extravaganza. "We are doing a limited run, only six shows," Morris spells out. "It's our third time in WeHo, and this will probably be the last chance to see *Mommie Queerest*." The *MQ* star channels her malicious muse when warning, "Don't f*ck with me fellas! Get your ass to Ultra Suede and cheer me on as I beat Christina senseless!"

Mommie Queerest

Ultra Suede
661 N. Robertson Blvd., WeHo.
plays411.net/mq