

# Theater Offensive—Profile of a Pioneer

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Operating out of small office at the MIT Press, Abe Rybeck juggled a job and passion. Fifteen years later, the Theater Offensive is one of the leading theater organizations in the Boston area, producer of dozens of productions annually and a pioneer in the entertainment world focusing on Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, and Transgender (GLBT) topics. "I can't believe we're doing this," said Abe Rybeck, 40, the founder and Artistic Director of the Theater Offensive. Abe achieved creating a life out of his art.

After high school, Abe and friends started the United Fruit Company working on political activism about apartheid in Africa, U.S. wars in Central America, and AIDS. Abe started to find his routine frustrating. He and his friends would sit and yell to be arrested. When the police arrested them, they would yell to be let go. Abe wanted to attract more attention and enjoy his efforts.

Abe started writing scripts and arranging Guerilla Theater performances: quick street theater performed in various locations. "People would say, what was that I just saw? I'm going to look back," Abe described. Feeling more of a response, the United Fruit Performing Troupe was started. They performed throughout Boston for almost five years.

In 1989, Abe again wanted more. The current performance troupe could not perform during the winter and limited much of its themes to male gender issues. The Theater Offensive was born with an original musical Abe wrote called *Blame it on the Big Banana*, where drag queens venture on a cultural exchange to Nicaragua during the Sandinista Period.

Abe started organizing his efforts, forming a non-profit business with a regular staff, computers, and a database that he slowly filled with donors, performers, directors, and other workers. He found the most difficult part of starting his own theater company was keeping a staff. People often burned out after one project. Money was a constant concern. As organization increased, the staff became steadier and work became more efficient. The process went slowly, until a structured organization was built. "Infrastructure made a big difference [with everything]" Abe said, but he added that if he had started with the infrastructure he has now, the work might have suffered. Time may be devoted to approving invitations for a fund raiser instead of perfecting scripts. Abe is thankful he could concentrate on creating art in the beginning.

The early Theater Offensive quickly placed itself as a force in the GLBT community and a pioneer in theater. In 1992, they produced the *Out on the Edge Fest*,

one of the earliest GLBT theater festivals and the first with a majority of colored works. This was followed by *Spic Out*, the first Latino GLBT theater festival. Additionally, the Theater Offensive started a band/cabaret performance group called Adult Children of Heterosexuals. The group performed original songs

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—Abe Rybeck

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with dances, back-up singers, and stories. In 1994, True Colors Out Youth Troupe started; a performance group of GLBT youth and allies who write an original piece and perform for schools and conferences around Massachusetts. 1995 saw the start of Plays At Work, a forum to produce original plays by GLBT writers.

In 1993, the Theater Offensive's band performed at the March on Washington, appearing after Jesse Jackson and before Eartha Kitt, which Abe referred to as "a peak experience. [I would] never need to perform again."

But that thrill has not ended the continued work of the Theater Offensive. After 10 years, True Colors Out Youth Troupe continues to perform. Plays at Work has produced work from Leeta Nealy, Tom Cole, Kate Bornstein, and many others. The Theater Offensive keeps progressing in GLBT activism with Street Theater Named Desire, a guerrilla theater troupe that performs AIDS activism in the middle of night at gay cruising spots. ClimACTS, the Theater Offensive's major fund raiser brought in \$140,000.

Even with numerous awards and avid supporters, Abe remembers the hard times and knows there is still work to be done. He remembers spending the entire summer of 1993 crying, once not even wanting to get off the floor. Abe credits imagination, tenacity, and an aptitude for joy with his success. He tries to highlight the good parts of his work. He learned to ask and get the impossible. Companies donate thousands of dollars worth of goods for auctions and individuals pay the same for even less in return. Certainly working with others is vital, but Abe accentuates learning how to apologize is more important than avoiding mistakes.

"Think about your audience and ask: does what your doing mean something to them," Abe says. "Pour yourself into [your work]. If you can get satisfaction from that, then you're on to something."

