

**The Insider:**  
A Mexican  
"divorce" and a  
Chinese marriage  
equals a UH  
dean's adieu

**BY TIM FLECK**

**A look back  
at news past:**  
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football winners  
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losers

**The Greatest?**  
*Ali* lands some  
solid blows,  
but sadly it's  
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**BY BILL GALLO**

**The *Press*  
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Your definitive  
guide to New

# Houston Press



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December 27-January 2, 2002

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The Gay Men's Chorus of Houston sings  
out for Santa Claus and the baby Jesus

By Wendy Grossman

# Inside



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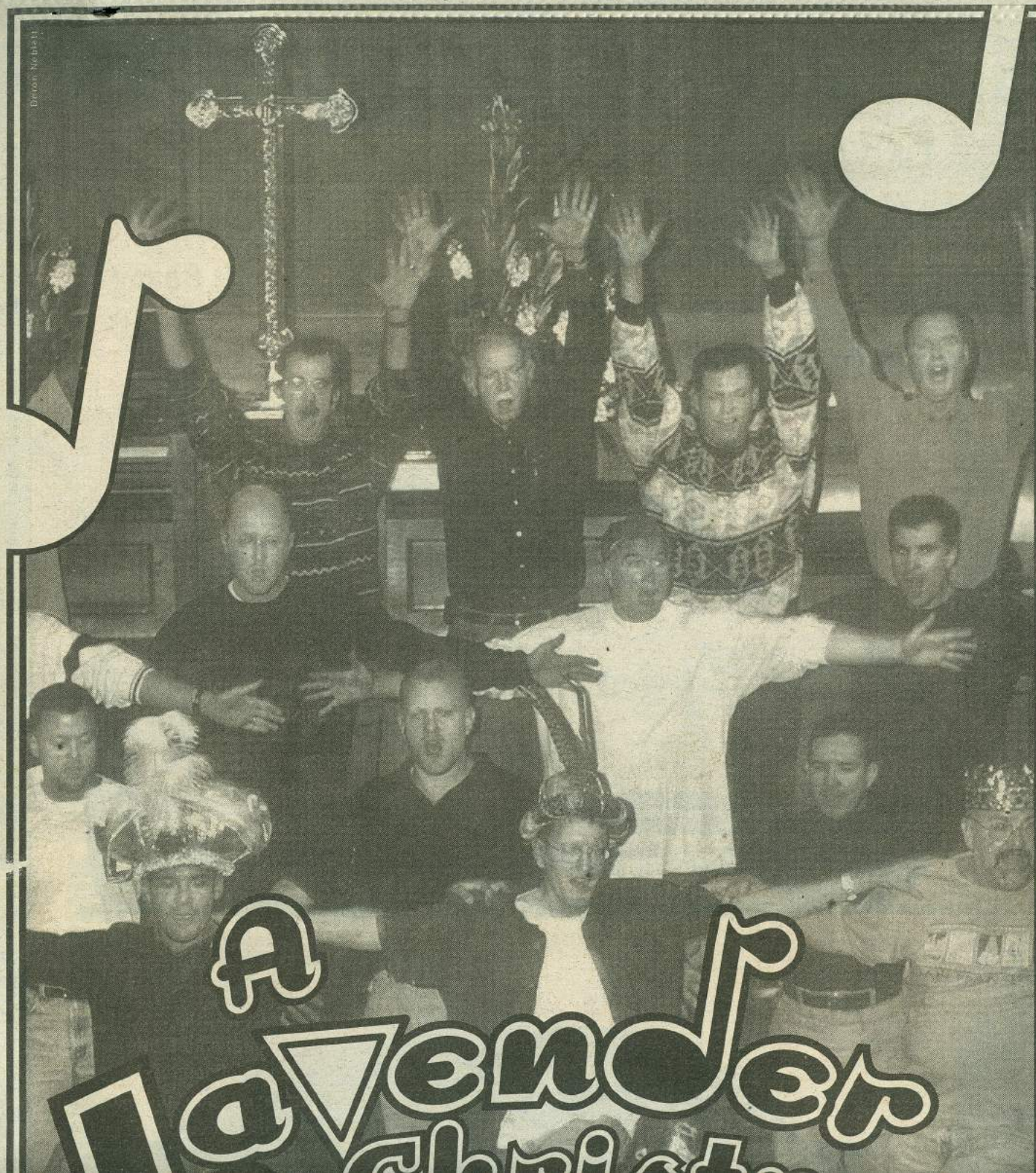
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**T**wo guys wearing bathrobes and fuzzy purple slippers storm onto the stage. Standing on mauve carpet, a choir sings beneath a stained-glass Jesus. Stage right is a red AIDS ribbon; stage left, a dove flies across a pink triangle. A Christmas tree in the corner is covered in butterflies, stars and shamrocks.

*How can you have a lavender Christmas when your mother comes to town? sings a fuzzy-slippered man. Up go the ornaments and boughs of holly, and the calendars all come down.*

The other guy sighs. Commiserating, he sings, *Even though you say, "Mom, no thanks," she keeps on trying to set you up with girls. And no matter where you try to hide them, she's bound to find your heels and pearls.*

A woman walks onto the stage, her arms draped in sequined dresses, blond wigs and feather boas. "Honey," she asks. "What's this all about?"

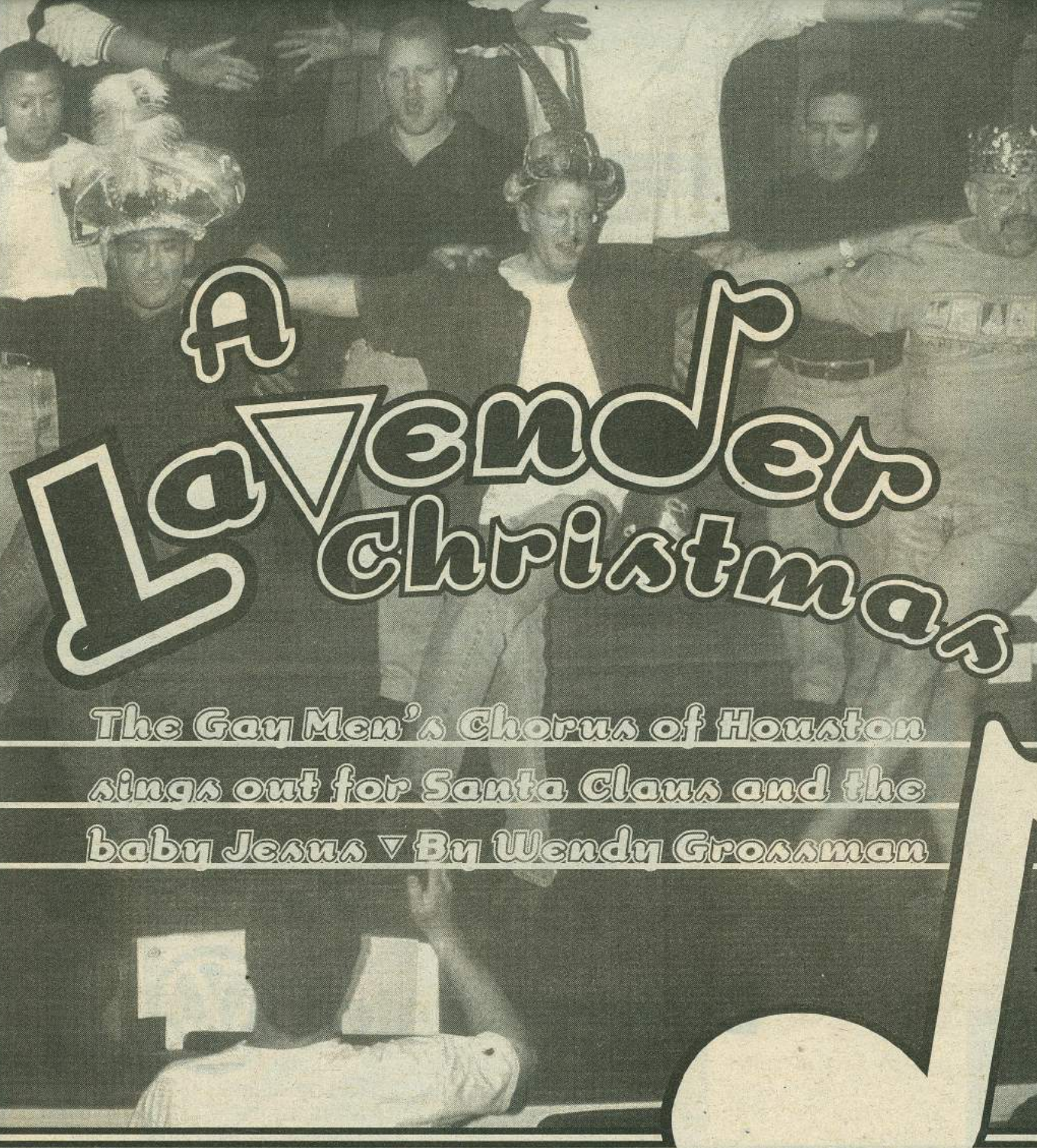
The men look at each other, shrug and sing, *Today would be a lot more merry if I could say, "I'm a sugarplum fairy!"* The couple turns toward the choir behind them; one grabs the other's butt.

This is Christmas 2001 at Bering Memorial United Methodist Church, and on stage is the fabulous Gay Men's Chorus of Houston presenting its 23rd holiday extravaganza.

It may not be many people's idea of a traditional Christmas, but it's standing room only at the church.

James Knapp has Nathan Lane eyebrows and a diamond-shaped goatee. Conducting with the intensity of a cartoon maestro, he always breaks into a postrun sweat. James reminds singers to take their vitamins and says he knows their performance is going to be good — but he wants it to be *fabulous*. "I want it to be special because *you* are special," he says at rehearsal a month before the Christmas concert.

The choir rehearses year-round, pre-



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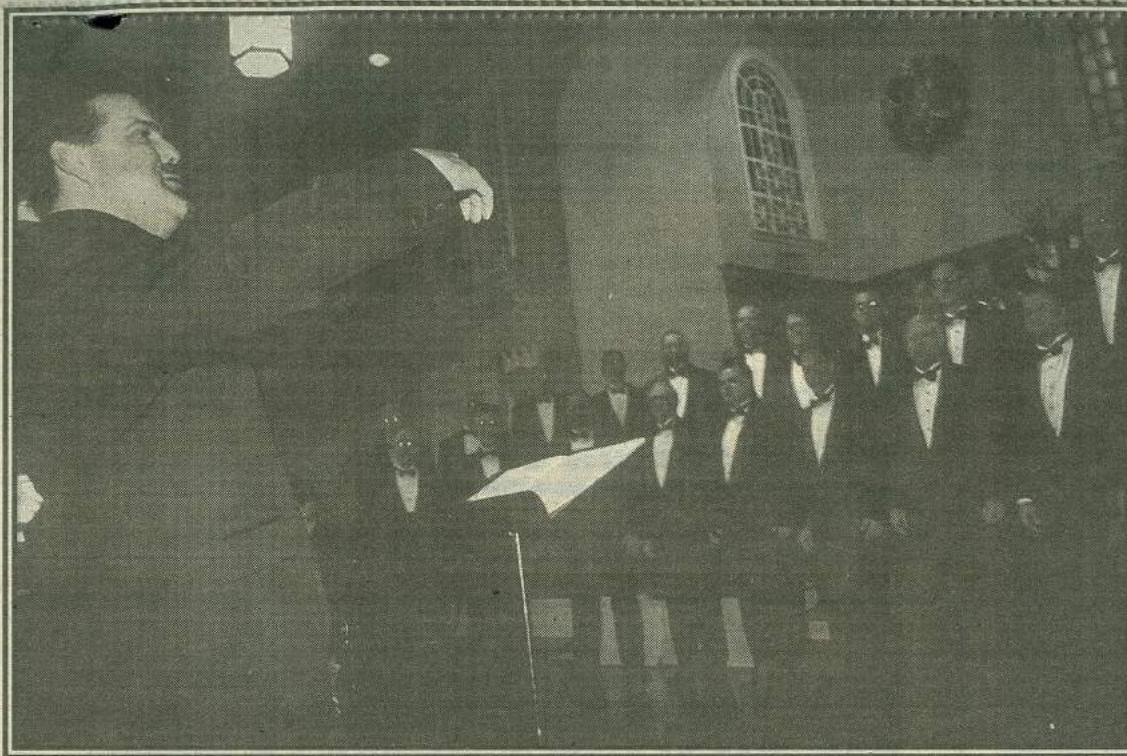
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The choir rehearses year-round, presenting winter, spring and summer shows. The original — and most popular — performance, the Christmas pageant started in 1979 when carolers gathered around the tree at Mary's leather bar. Set free, their inner showgirls refused to be silenced, and the choir was created. The

San Francisco Gay Men's Choir had just toured the country, and gay choirs were forming nationwide. The next winter, about 80 men wearing white tuxedos took the Tower Theater's stage for the Montrose Singers' first official concert.

During the mid-1980s, the choir was hit by the AIDS epidemic, and more than half the members died. "We were singing at memorial services every couple of weeks," says Rex Gillit, a member of the choir's board. At one point the choir was nothing more than an a cappella group with six members rehearsing in the director's living room.

In 1992 the choir changed its name to the Gay Men's Chorus of Houston. "There was a substantial debate," Rex says. "Several guys were concerned" **continued on page 29**



James Knapp conducts with the intensity of a cartoon maestro.

## A Lavender Christmas

continued from page 27

that putting the G-word in the name would scare away potential members. We had been very closeted as the Montrose Singers. No chorus in Texas had the word *gay* in its name. It was a very daring thing to do."

Membership tripled, and the next year concerts sold out.

Over the next few years, directors came and left; membership diminished with each departure. Members complained that the choir wasn't fun anymore, the music was religious, serious and sad. "There was a haze over people," says member Warren Morales. "People didn't talk. You came and you sang and you went home." The artistic director stepped down and more members deserted. The gay men's choirs in Dallas, San Francisco and Seattle all have more than 200 singing members. In June, Houston had 20.

James has added 30 new voices since becoming artistic director this summer. He wrote letters to past members and called people who had shown up for a rehearsal or two and asked them to return to kick off the Christmas season. He titled

group toured throughout the United States, Europe and the Soviet Union.

Over the last ten years, James watched the Gay Men's Chorus perform but never considered joining because he wasn't out at work. He turned down dates with parishioners' daughters and said he was a loner, not interested in dating — even though he lived with a man.

Three years ago James became the choral director at a large church in Houston. Before they made an offer, James told the search committee that he was gay. Committee members assured him that his sexuality didn't matter and that the church welcomed him.

Apparently they didn't inform the pastor. On James's first day, the pastor asked him his sexual preference and fired him.

When he interviewed this spring, James said he would

wears a wedding ring and always talks about his "friend" Steve.

Like Mike, many members aren't out anywhere but at rehearsals. Not everyone's name is printed in the program. Before joining the choir, David Opheim says, he went to gay bars to feel normal and safe. Living in Katy, he didn't feel comfortable kissing his husband on the street. But bars are dark and loud, and David's not looking for a beer-soaked encounter.

Randy Mitschke says the Lutheran choir he sang in lacked a feeling of comfort and camaraderie. "These guys, I can relate to," he says. "All the guys in this choir have been through the same experiences I have." Everyone's story is a variation on the

same theme of fear and loss and love. At some point they've all come out of the closet or hidden inside. They share experiences like taking a boyfriend home for Christmas and worrying about Dad's reaction. "You don't have the same problems straight people do," he says.

Board member Ryan Raser says he could have joined any men's club or choir, but straight men wouldn't have been able to help him deal with his brother telling him

he's going to hell, and his fears of finally telling his mother he's gay. His choir friends have become his family. This year 70 people attended the choir's ninth annual Thanksgiving potluck dinner.

Before he joined, Walter Tompkins says, he had never been around a group of openly gay people. Raised Baptist in Lufkin, Walter never took long looks at other men, or let guys sit on his lap in public.

Walter served in the navy, got married when he was 22, and within a year had a blond baby boy. He didn't come out of the closet until Christmas three years ago. His wife had always known he was gay; Sue stayed with him because she loved him, and because she was sick. A diabetic with several other serious medical conditions, she soon lost both legs and an eye. "I was her shoulder and she was mine," Walter says.

He met Michael Howland, a nurse, on the Internet; Michael made the three-hour drive from Houston every weekend to help Walter care for his dying wife. Sue made Michael promise to take care of Walter and their son, Cody, after she was gone. She had her first heart operation in February; in May, she didn't live through her second.

When Sue died, her mother wanted Walter to sign over his parental rights, because she didn't want her nine-year-old grandson to have two dads. Walter refused. This summer, he and Cody moved in with Michael, and Walter immediately joined the choir. Despite his mother-in-law's protests, he brings his son to practice, where the boy gets hundreds of hugs.

Christmas is the hardest time of the year, Tom Case says, because it was the happiest time of year. Christmas was his partner's favorite holiday; they spent hours decorating, shopping and throwing fabulous dinner parties. But two years ago his lover died of complications from AIDS. Caring for his partner, Tom, a 55-year-old court clerk, had let his friendships dwindle.

Rehearsals for the Christmas concert started Labor Day. "It killed off any possibility of empty time, empty space," says Dewayne Ross, who joined



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James has added 30 new voices since becoming artistic director this summer. He wrote letters to past members and called people who had shown up for a rehearsal or two and asked them to return to kick off the Christmas season. He titled the show "Jubilation" and planned a program mixing outrageous comedy, campy skits and haunting melodies.

James placed an ad in *Houston Voice*, posted flyers at local colleges and invited everyone who might be interested to three cocktail parties at his house. "I cooked up a storm," James says. He served homemade hummus, salmon mousse and *baba ghanoush*.

**In seven years at the Sugar Land First United Methodist Church, James went from 40 to 125 regular singers.**

*noush*. Revamping the choir, James eliminated auditions, inviting everyone to join whether they sang in show choirs or showers. He also admitted women.

James has experience building choirs; in seven years at the Sugar Land First United Methodist Church, he went from 40 to 125 regular singers. Under his direction, the

Europe and the Soviet Union.

Over the last ten years, James watched the Gay Men's Chorus perform but never considered joining because he wasn't out at work. He turned down dates with parishioners' daughters and said he was a loner, not interested in dating — even though he lived with a man.

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When he interviewed this spring, James said he would conduct the gay men's choir with his head held high.

He was voted in unanimously.

Mike Wiggins isn't out at work, and members of his church choir in

some point they've all come out of the closet or hidden inside. They share experiences like taking a boyfriend home for Christmas and worrying about Dad's reaction. "You don't have the same problems straight people do," he says.

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Rehearsals for the Christmas concert started Labor Day. "It killed off any possibility of empty time, empty space," says Dewayne Ross, who joined after his father died Christmas Eve two years ago.

Rehearsals feel like 12-step meetings. When a new member is announced everyone applauds and the director jumps up and down. But unlike standard support groups, they don't spend hours analyzing and agonizing over nonmusical problems. If someone wants to talk, they do, but no one is forced to stand up and share. Mostly, they sing, dance, laugh and forget about their troubles.

"This is a breath of life for me in my week," says Warren Morales. "I get to come here and be alive."

The youngest of ten children, Warren came out to his family by sending invitations to his wedding. All nine brothers and sisters came. Warren's partner was

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James threw three cocktail parties to try to build choir membership.

## A Lavender Christmas

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HIV-positive when they met, and they started a fitness center together before he got sick. They spent Christmas in the hospital last year, and he hasn't been the same since, Warren says. He's stopped eating and has lost more than 50 pounds. "He struggles," Warren says. "Every day is a struggle."

Before rehearsal one night, Warren's partner was too weak to stand in the shower and had to sit down. Feeling overwhelmed, Warren went to rehearsal. Another man noticed Warren was hurting, hugged him and held him while he cried.

Rehearsals feel like three-hour *Will & Grace* episodes. Gay jokes are piled on top of each other as guys trash the choreography, pinching each other's nipples and "accidentally" grabbing each other's crotches.

A month before the concert, they begin rehearsing a Christmas cheer.

*Who needs Thanksgiving, or Independence Day?* the choir gruffly sings. *Take a hike, Saint Valentine!*

James shouts, "Indignant, guys."

*Our voices, we live for December 25. It's the best time of the year,* they sing. *We're gonna fight, fight, fight for the holy night. Rah, rah, it's our Christmas cheer.*

Half the choir chants, *We've got spirit, yes we do, Christmas spirit, how about you?*

The other side counters, *We've got more.*

James sadly shakes his head. "No," he says. "You don't got more."

He tries to get them to sound more manly and forceful. Like in *La Cage*, he wants them to be more John Wayne and less Brigitte Bardot.

"These are the quarterbacks, the defensive ends," James says.

A guy squeals, "Ooh, tight ends!"



Carolers at a leather bar created the choir, which first performed in 1980.

"Go for the hands," James screams. "Hands!"

Despite numerous warnings not to wear cologne because it irritates asthmatic singers, the rehearsal room smells like a

The choir collectively answers, "Yeeeeaaaaah!"

Another asks, "Where are the wide receivers?" And everyone snickers.

"Did you ever go to a basketball game in



Carolers at a leather bar created the choir, which first performed in 1980.

"Go for the hands," James screams. "Hands!"

Despite numerous warnings not to wear cologne because it irritates asthmatic singers, the rehearsal room smells like a men's magazine. The air is thick with the scent of expensive aftershave. "Everyone wants to smell pretty for all the girls at practice," Rex says.

They meet Monday evenings in the heart of Montrose at the Bering Memorial United Methodist Church on the corner of Mulberry and Dunlavy. Yellow police tape declaring a "hate-free zone" is coiled around the church's mammoth white pillars.

At first everyone didn't take to James's enthusiastic, den-mother style of directing. He selects soloists for certain songs based on their life experiences, not just vocal skills. He personalizes practices by discussing what's happening in world news and the gay community. The night Proposition 2, an antigay referendum, was passed prohibiting benefits to same-sex partners, James said he was outraged and wanted to channel that anger into the music.

He won't just let people stand still and sing, reciting the words. He wants them to sing the lyrics with feeling. He diligently drills the choir on enunciation, technique and musicality. He demands that they "be more Broadway," belt out the songs and seduce the audience.

The choir collectively answers, "Yeeeeaaaaah!"

Another asks, "Where are the wide receivers?" And everyone snickers.

"Did you ever go to a basketball game in high school?" James asks.

A hundred horrified voices echo: "No!"

"We go to the *theater*, James," one says. "We understand the theater."

James mutters that *he* went to basketball games.

"Sing it like you'd sing at the Harvard-Yale game," James instructs, then pauses. "Do they even play each other?"

Tom, the court clerk who joined after his lover died, walks to the front of the room. A musical theater veteran, Tom choreographed "Jingle Bells." "Tom worked really hard on this," James says.

As the choir sings about dashing through the snow, Tom stands by the piano with his arms casually crossed over his chest. He kicks a foot out, then switches feet.

"Tom," James prompts. "Go ahead."

Tom looks at him blankly. "I am," Tom says. That's the choreography. Which leads to arguments about the choreography, or lack thereof. James says there is *one* choreographer and this choreographer wants *I Dream of Jeannie* arms and baby Rockette kicks. "Shoulder to shoulder like Russian cossacks," James orders, arms crossed over his chest.

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## Lavender Christmas

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As they sing, James sighs.

"It's not even Mexican vanilla," he laments. "It's just vanilla."

James stands on his knees and butt bobbing, demonstrating a new dance move. Guys rumble that they don't want to bend over. Others joke that this is better than a mathhouse. A muscular man raises his hand and says the men behind him are complaining about the view.

"I doubt that," James says.

ment in one song. This morning they sang at two church services to promote ticket sales, they're rehearsing all afternoon, and have another promotional performance scheduled this evening.

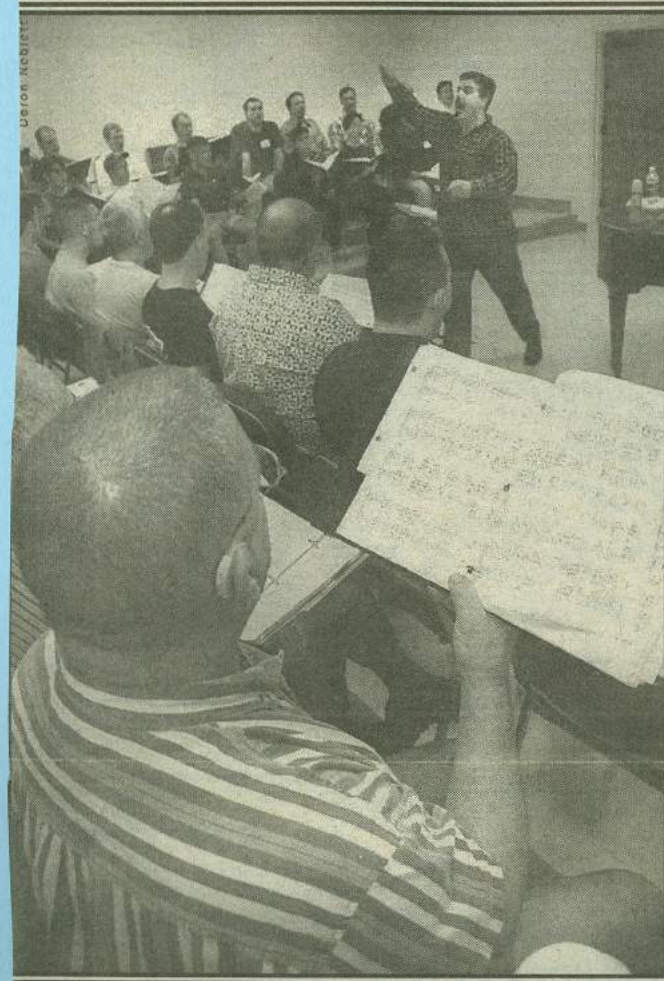
The next night, two of the three kings are sick. Pom-poms are passed out, and one guy swallows a couple of strands and starts choking. In the corner, the Christmas cheerleading squad is practicing jumps and pyramids. Dewayne keeps kicking Mike in the head, and whenever Dewayne runs toward Mike to leap into his arms, Mike backs up.

"What part of 'Spot me' did you not understand?" Dewayne screams.

Still arguing over choreography, several suggest moves that would "feel more natural" to them. Some guys think that a real, professional choir should stand completely still, singing without interpretive hula dancer hand motions. Others want to live out Fred Astaire fantasies, with pirouettes, leaps and high kicks down the stairs.

With only four rehearsal days until showtime, the choreographer's temper is getting short. Tom yells at them to quit joking around and concentrate. They ignore him. "If it's not fun, I don't want to do it," Mike says.

They continue fighting over the pom-poms, who gets red and who gets green. "Don't worry about what color your pom-pom is, worry what you're going to do with it,"

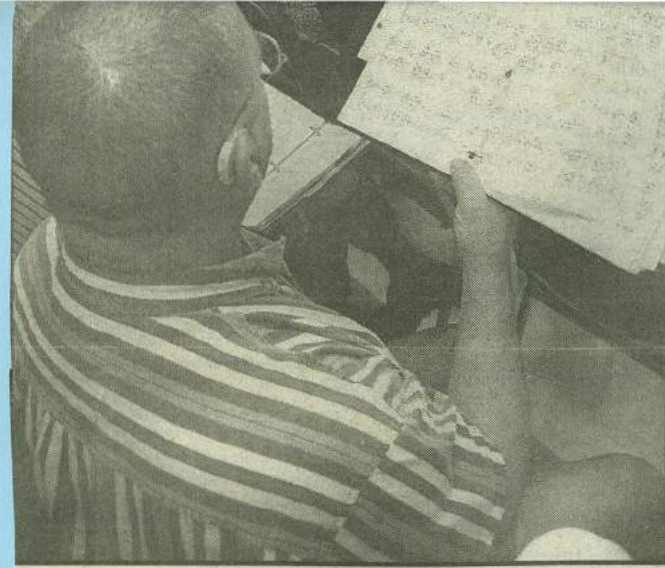


James wants their performances to be fabulous.

It's Sunday afternoon, a week before the performance. Their voices have gotten stronger and their timing is gelling, but they still can't do the simple "Jingle Bells" chore-

Tom says, exasperated.

The Christmas cheer still doesn't sound very enthusiastic. They chant, *We're gonna win, win, win! For Irving Berlin.* But every-



James wants their performances to be fabulous.

It's Sunday afternoon, a week before the performance. Their voices have gotten stronger and their timing is gelling, but they still can't do the simple "Jingle Bells" choreography in sync. In the Christmas cheer, the men are supposed to lift their pom-poms up

Tom says, exasperated.

The Christmas cheer still doesn't sound very enthusiastic. They chant, *We're gonna win, win, win! For Irving Berlin*. But everyone sounds tired and like they're not gonna break a sweat fighting.

**James instructs them to cheer like  
they're at a UT football game.  
They look at him blankly.**

and down like drum majors in *The Music Man*, but the choir members keep swishing their wrists. "You look like windshield wipers," James says. "Nice and straight."

"Straight?" Dewayne cries in mock error.

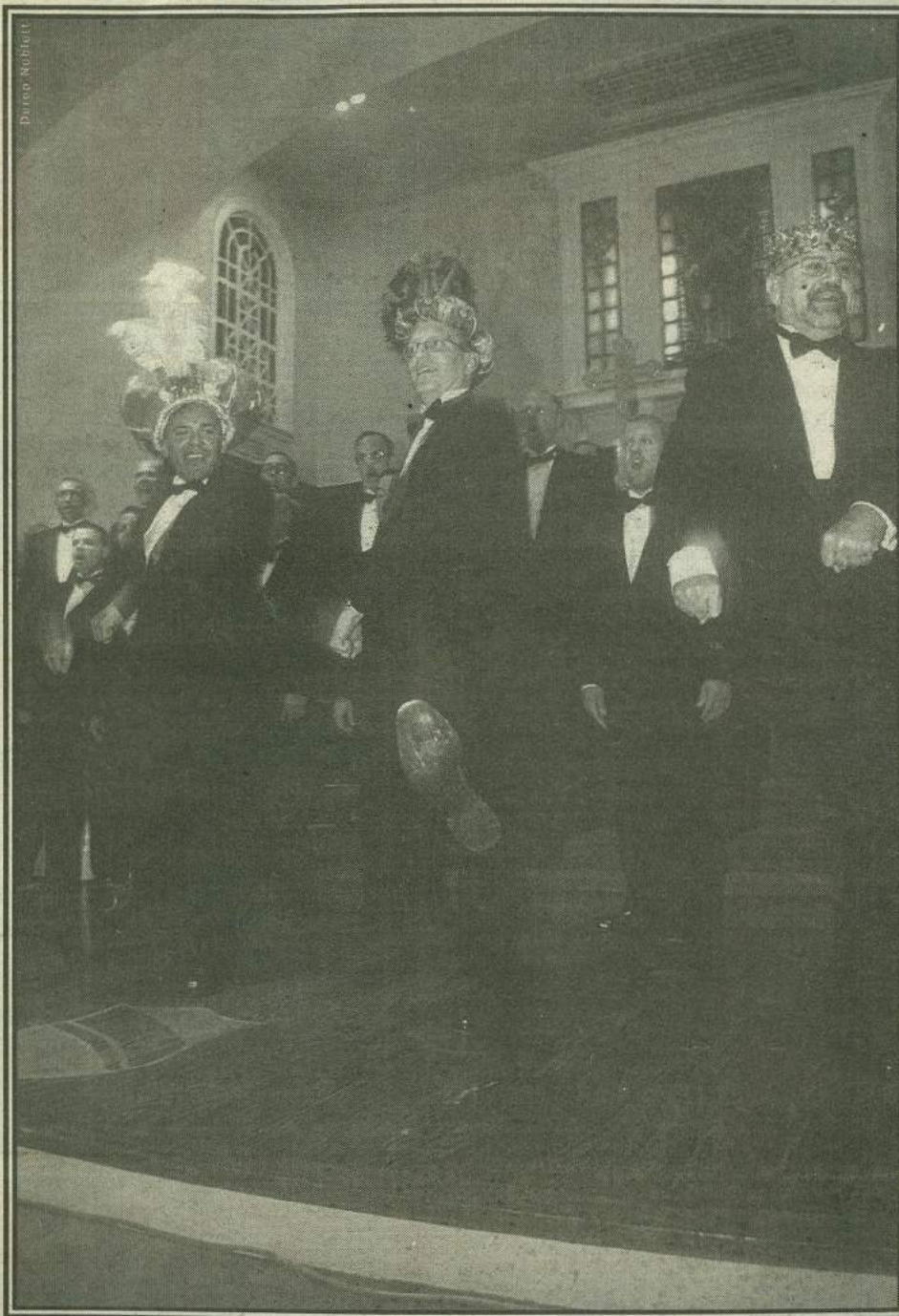
"Extended," James says, correcting himself.

From the back row, Mike whines, "I'm more."

He's serious. Every part of his body aches, and his chest is tight. Yesterday they spent four hours choreographing one move-

James instructs them to cheer like they're at a UT football game. They look at him blankly. Why would they care who wins a football game? Why would they even go to a football game? Sundays are for brunch and bottomless bellinis, one member says, not beer and uncomfortable outdoor bleachers.

They say they're method actors and they need more to work with. They don't understand their motivation. A tenor asks is it "sort of like we're getting together to cheer for" **continued on page 34**



These three say they aren't kings — they're queens.

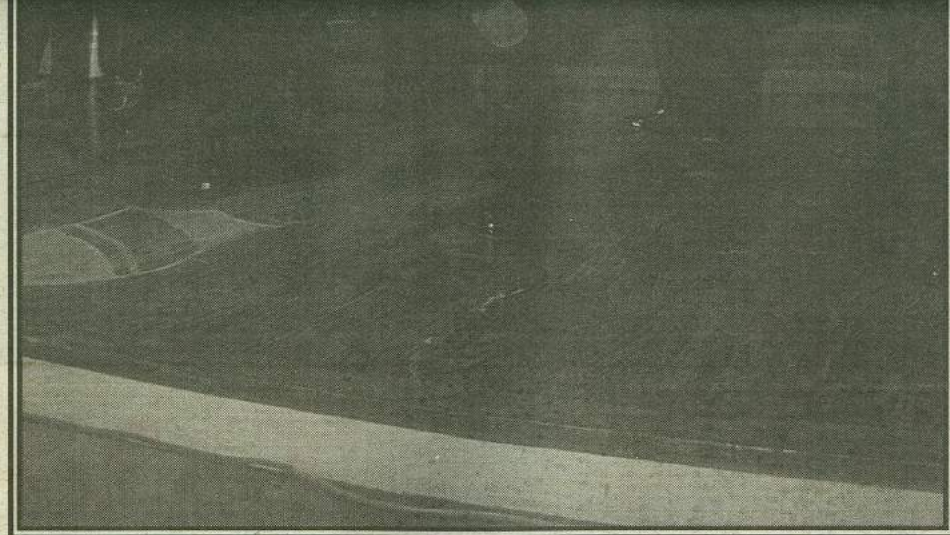
## A Lavender Christmas

continued from page 32

who has the prettiest dress at the Academy Awards?"

something-big-is-going-to-happen excitement in the air. A few members say they're a wreck. They're worn down, dying for a nap and afraid they're going to throw up.

The smell of Hall's cough drops over-



These three say they aren't kings — they're queens.

## A Lavender Christmas

continued from page 32

who has the prettiest dress at the Academy Awards?"

"Give us a reference we can use," he says.

It's 45 minutes before curtain Saturday night, and Dewayne's nose has been bleeding for half an hour. "It just cracked open," he says. Long boxes of single red roses sit on the table. Mike is upset that they want him to pin his boutonniere onto his tux's satin lapel. "You want me to poke a hole in the only satin I own?" he asks.

Barefoot, Walter is frantically pacing. He forgot to bring black socks and no one has a spare pair, so he sent his lover home. As it gets closer to showtime, Walter debates running to Kroger and buying a pair of panty hose. "I have to be perfect," he says repeatedly, rocking back and forth. "I have to be."

Like they're in a black-tie locker room, men walk around the dressing room in tuxedos and tightie-whities. As they help one another with cufflinks and cummerbunds, one laments that he can't wear his gold and ruby buttons but has to stick with boring black studs. Clutching ice to his upturned nose, Dewayne runs a lint brush over everyone's tuxes.

Men massage each other's shoulders, give encouraging hugs and quick kisses. There's a frantic, chaotic, any-minute-now-

something-big-is-going-to-happen excitement in the air. A few members say they're a wreck. They're worn down, dying for a nap and afraid they're going to throw up.

The smell of Hall's cough drops overpowers the cologne in the air. Several people are sick, drained from a grueling schedule of late-night, last-minute rehearsals. A handful look like they're wearing rouge, but it's just feverish blushing. James stands in the corner, his libretto lying atop the Christmas cookies as he sings and conducts toward the wall.

As people snap pictures, James — the eternal stage mom — cries, "Big teeth, girls! Lots of porcelain."

Ten minutes before 8 p.m., James gathers the choir together to read a semi-form letter from Mayor Lee Brown thanking them for the lovely invitation to see the performance. He says the choir adds to Houston's diversity and status as an international city and says the city will open its resources to the choir.

"I'm not exactly sure what that means," James says. "But I'm gonna find out."

Almost every pew in the sanctuary is full; it looks like a well-attended wedding of a well-liked couple. Yesterday the choir had already presold twice as many tickets as were sold for all performances last year.

They start with a serious, somewhat scary Latin "Gloria," accompanied by a creepy, film-noir organ. With a dash of Aun-

tie Mame, they declare it's time to haul out the holly and make the transition into more upbeat tunes and skits. There's also a scene from choir member Charles Baker's newly written musical, *All About Christmas Eve*, where guys in beanies and hair bows stand in line to see Santa, complaining that their inner child has to pee.

A 1950s-style doo-wop group steps forward wearing Santa's-little-helper hats. *Santa Claus is coming to to-ow-own. Down-town, they sing, snapping their fingers like the featured act on American Bandstand. He knows when you've been sleeping. He knows whose heart you break.*

In their shoop-shoop version, Saint Nick's coming to *Shop, fa la la la la, shop. Shop.*

The first act's showstopper is a series of rewritten carols. Charles narrates, saying that carols are folk tales handed down in the oral tradition — "oral tradition," he says, is one of his favorite phrases from music history class. They start with a scary *Sweeney Todd* version of a vengeful Santa coming to separate naughty from nice. "The flesh of the naughty is starting to tingle," they sing ominously.

Next is an unrecognizable Phillip Glass-style "Silent Night," which puts even the choir to sleep. A soloist charges out wearing

*We're gonna go go go, underneath the mistletoe, they forcefully sing. Yule! Boola, boola, boola, yule!*

James's voice cracks when he thanks the choir for filling a void in his life and giving him back his song. Board member Ryan Raser thanks James for giving the choir back its future. Last year they sold a total of about 350 tickets; this year they sold close to 1,000. Tuesday night's performance is sold out, the balcony is packed, and people are standing in the back.

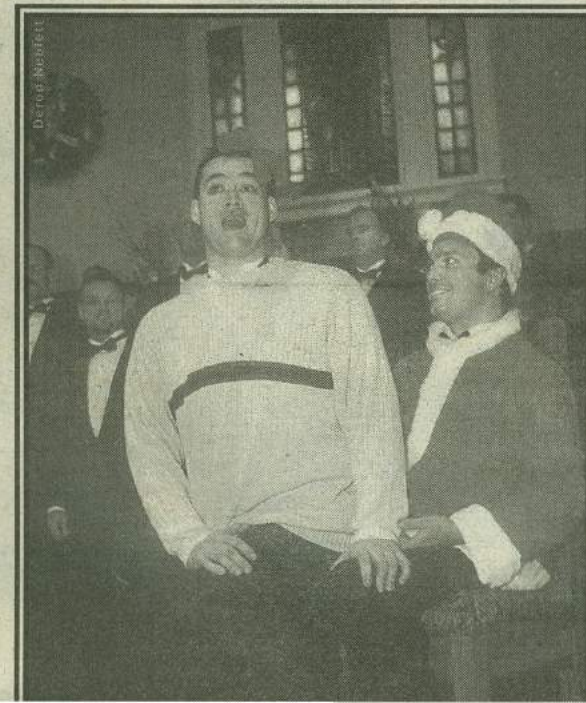
Before the final show, James hands a personal letter to each of the choir members thanking them for the opportunity and the honor of working with them. He reads aloud fan mail he received after Saturday's and Sunday's shows and asks everyone to hold hands. They stand in a campfire circle, and James tells them to feel the warmth.

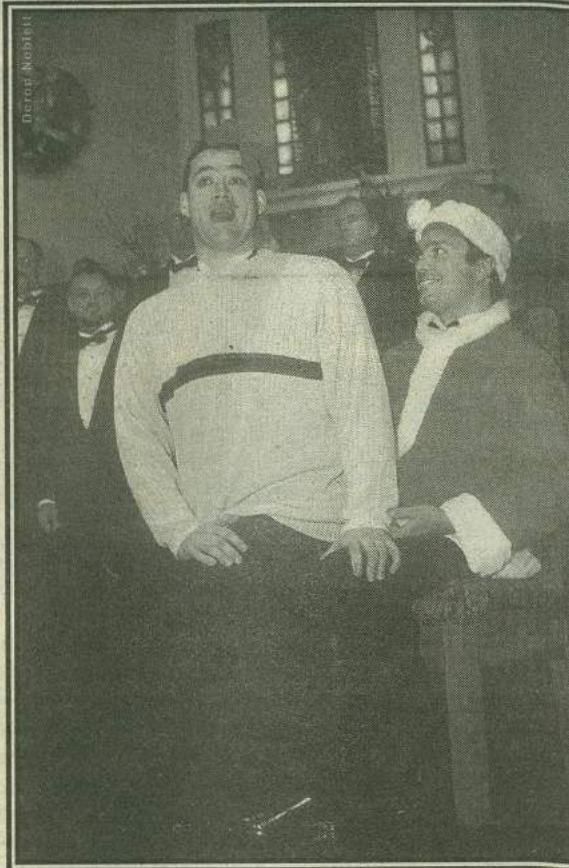
The men jog onstage for the second act wearing ski sweaters and jeans. A gentle flute plays as the ensemble sings "Silent Night." Couples in the audience sway to the music. James starts to cry.

After the church fired him, James applied for choral director jobs at other

major churches in Houston and across the country. Initially everyone seemed interested and impressed with his résumé. He has finished all but his dissertation for his doctorate of musical arts at the University of Texas, and studied at the Mozarteum Conservatory in Salzburg. In addition to his seven successful years at the Sugar Land church, he served as the director of choral activities at Aurora University near Chicago. He's conducted the Moscow Philharmonic and the Moscow Chamber Orchestra and led choral worships in South Africa, Zimbabwe, Thailand and Singapore.

James went on interviews, but once the mainstream churches found out he was gay, they turned him down. "I was blackballed," James says. Being rejected and cast out from





Separating naughty from nice.

lederhosen and white kneesocks and singing a Lawrence Welk polka version of "Away in a Manger."

Then they slip into a trashy cabaret version of "I Saw Mommy Kissing Santa Claus."

*Mommy gets it how she can — and Mommy's in the mood for a big, big man!* the soloist sings, belting out a Liza Minnelli-style lounge act. *Mommy thinks you're awful cute. Santa, show me what's beneath the suit!*

In the *Hello Dolly!* version of "We Three Kings," three guys wearing feathered gold lamé crowns dance around the stage. Described as three "biblical beauties" knocking at the stable door, they scream, *We're not kings, we're queens!*

Later they reach the grand finale, the Christmas cheer. Three cheerleaders run on in short shorts — they wanted pleated skirts and panties but couldn't get them in time.

A balding baritone steps forward; unlike other soloists, he doesn't need the mike. His deep, rich voice fills the deadly quiet room:

*It's midnight on Christmas Eve. The dark sparkles with snow.*

*I'm walking home the long way, through streets I don't know.*

*I'm thinking of the church I loved many years ago.*

*And as I walk, I start to sing, "Noel, Noel, Noel."*

*"I sing to bless the newborn king, "Noel, Noel, Noel."*

*Can you hear me, God? Sometimes I can't tell.*

*This is all I have to bring: "Noel, Noel, Noel."*

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