



Unsafe haven: Unsafe sexual practices were observed during 10 visits to the Fine Arts Theatre in May and June. PHOTO/SHOSHANNAH WHITE

Risking your life

Anonymous sex means unsafe sex at two Portland venues

■ RICK MACPHERSON

A naked young man, about 25 years old, kneels in the back of a dark, pornographic movie theater. He performs oral sex on a circle of six middle-aged men standing around him. A movie clerk walks in, observes the scene, makes a humorous remark to a regular customer, then returns to his desk.

New York? San Francisco? Portland?

Try Portland — more specifically, Congress Street. This scene took place in early June. During the months of May and June, made 10 visits to the Fine Arts Theatre at 27 Congress St. and the Video Expo at 666 Congress St. During each visit, instances of public, anonymous and unsafe sex were observed. This activity occurred despite city ordinances prohibiting it — and despite ongoing efforts by local groups to educate Portlanders about the spread of HIV and sexually transmitted diseases.

Public sex environments (or PSEs as they're called by safe sex educators) are areas where individuals — overwhelmingly male — actively engage in public sexual activity. PSEs aren't new to Portland.

Deering Oaks was once a popular PSE, until police surveillance drove participants to other areas, notably the Western Prom. When police attention was redirected there, players migrated to less visible environments. While almost all visitors to PSE's engage in male-male sexual activity, those who've studied PSEs say that many participants do not consider themselves to be gay. In other words, they go home to their wives and girlfriends.

In the Fine Arts Cinema — one of 11 theaters in a Massachusetts-based chain — public sex is highly choreographed. Upon entering the theater, patrons choose between the cinema on the left (which shows gay sex films) and one on the right (straight sex films). Most patrons were approximately 40 to 60 years old.

Those who enter the theaters are constantly observed, followed and often propositioned. Propositions took place through eye contact and body language. (The only verbal proposition encountered over the 10 visits was, "Do you know what time it is?") Men approached each other, stood for a time, walked away, then returned. Most invitations came in the form

of a staring match, a nod, a stare accompanied by a guy grabbing his crotch, or a patron approaching and standing very close. Public flashing was very common, as was masturbation.

Few patrons sit in the seats. On each visit, the back wall had anywhere from one to eight men standing against it. "Couples" spaced themselves along the back wall, some oblivious to observation, some shielding their activities. Standing "couples" were observed kissing, mutually masturbating, and performing oral and anal sex.

Any activity drew the attention of other men. Crowds of up to 12 men were observed gathered around some couples. On three occasions, a pair of men invited observers to participate in the activity. Group activity included fondling, masturbation, oral sex and anal sex.

The straight theater is smaller and better lit than the gay theater, and there seemed to be more people actually watching the videos in this theater. The straight theater has an exit door that leads to a long, poorly lit hallway that exits behind the theater. On every visit, I observed men following each other into this hallway where they engaged in oral and anal sex.

On only one visit did I observe a woman (perhaps mid-40s) in the theater, accompanied by a man (also mid-40s). After they seated themselves, men who had been standing against the back wall repositioned themselves in seats behind, in front and across from the two. After approximately 15 minutes, she began masturbating the

man, and then performed oral sex. Men left their seats and stood around the two. Several began fondling the woman. She sat up and began performing oral sex on the three closest men.

During these 10 visits, the only condoms seen were on actors in the films.

The Video Expo at 666 Congress has an altogether different environment. The store — one of a Rhode Island-based chain of adult entertainment centers — sells videos, magazines, assorted sexual toys and condoms. A back hallway is lined with a series of private booths. Each booth has a video screen with a search button. After feeding dollar bills into the slot, you choose from straight, gay, bisexual or transgendered videos.

The booths are small and smelly, and the floors in many are moist with semen. Some of the video screens are also stained. A chair affixed to the wall is provided in all booths. Although signs admonish against more than one patron in a booth, I regularly observed two patrons entering a single booth, and patrons waiting outside occupied booths to be let in.

Some of the booths in the rear have an additional feature — a waist-level hole that one might assume was for peep show purposes. Locations such as this have been traditionally called "glory holes."

To confirm my suspicion, I entered a booth and sat until someone entered the adjacent booth. A man sat down, looked at me through the hole, inserted money into the slot to begin the video, then looked at me again. He came to the bottom of the hole, which I assumed meant for me to insert my penis. I declined, but tapped the hole with my index finger. The man immediately stood up and proceeded to insert his penis through the hole. I left the booth, but not before noticing the absence of a condom.

CBW contacted the managers of the Fine Arts Theatre and the Video Expo. Both declined to comment about the activities taking place behind their doors.

What can be done to reach those who endanger themselves and others through their activities?

John Holverson is director of outreach education at The AIDS Project in Portland. He oversees a group of safe sex educators who encourage Portlanders to practice safe sex through various programs, including condom distribution and education. Holverson said field workers take one of two basic approaches to working with players in PSEs. They can openly announce their presence and their education mission, distribute kits with condoms and information, then depart. Or a field worker can pretend to be a player, draw the other person into conversation and attempt to educate them this way. Holverson prefers the latter method, and he and his staff seek to become "regulars" at PSEs to teach others about safe sex practices.

Holverson stressed that PSEs are saddled with a set of more complex issues — including sexual addiction — above and beyond simple education about condom use. Many experts who have studied unsafe sexual behavior of this type agree that unsafe sexual addiction needs to be analyzed and treated