



## In Performance: Richard Knight's tacky terrorism

**D**ick O'Day might get beaten up on a regular basis if he weren't so damn funny. O'Day, the host of the Annoyance Theatre's monthly *Big Lovely Bingo*, just snatched an audience member's purse and is busy riffling through the contents. "Nothing embarrassing," he says with great disappointment, then tosses it back to its owner. She laughs without a hint of resentment.

Maybe O'Day will start another bingo game, the ostensible reason a few dozen people have gathered here on a Tuesday night, but for now he'd rather find someone else to torment. He makes a woman get up and model a handful of crappy prizes someone could win if the game ever starts. Earlier in the ragtag, schlock-filled show, O'Day punished a guy in the crowd who called a premature bingo by stuffing him into



pumps, wig, glasses, and a dowdy frock, sitting in a chair facing an upstage wall, taping open a porno magazine a few inches in front of his face, and leaving him there for a good 15 minutes.

Through it all, the victims smile as though being ridiculed is a privilege. During the two-hour, insult-saturated evening, only two people leave—Kathy and Debbie, whom O'Day tried to fix up with a none-too-sober guy at the table behind them. But they've got to drive home to Naperville, they explain through profuse apologies, smiling and waving at O'Day all the way out of the theater.

O'Day is one of several obnoxious alter egos claimed by Richard Knight. Like most of Knight's characters, O'Day is a cheesy, talent-free hack who inadvertently ridicules himself more than anyone else. He claims to have had lunch with every showbiz has-been you could think of, produced the Andrea True Connection's disco hit "More, More, More," and starred in *Beyond the Poseidon Adventure* as the henchman who hit Sally Field over the head with a wrench.

O'Day was born by accident. Back in the mid-80s Knight, a perennial club kid who also studied composition at the Chicago Conservatory of Music, was doing special events

for Limelight. He'd made up "Name That TV Tune," a game show spoof staged to promote an album of television theme songs. One of the Refrigerettes was supposed to be the hostess, but she had to pull out at the last minute, so someone told Knight he was the host, that his name was Dick O'Day, and shoved him onstage.

Soon Dick had his own show at Limelight, "Dick O'Day's Celebrity Gabfest," where people like Seka and Robert Murphy were regulars. That morphed into "The Club Act From Hell." Then Knight teamed up with singer Becca Kaufman to become "Showbiz Kids From Hell," an act they threw together in two weeks. A medley of "Feelings," "Sing," "Top of the World," "Tie a Yellow Ribbon Round the Ole Oak Tree," and "You Light Up My Life" was just the beginning.

The Showbiz Kids started out at the late-night hangout Espial and then moved to Gentry on Rush Street, where they belted out their horrors once a week for three years. Typical of Knight, by the time the act fizzled he already had another monstrous project in the works.

That project was Samba Bamba, a Latin party band fronted by three characters: Lupe Lowenstein (Jenniphre Zias), a Mexican Jew with a voice like Martha Wash; Monty "Sugarloaf" Mattachine (Knight), the greasy pencil-mustached bandleader; and Lindo McCartney (Victor Salvo), a former busboy who provided a few background vocals but mostly held Monty's drink. Knight knew the folks opening the north-side club Vinyl, as he seems to know the people behind every hipster nightspot, and pitched the idea of the band. "They said, 'Let's try it for a month,'" Knight recalls. "We were there for a year. It was a hit from the get-go."

The seven-piece combo, meant to give Sergio Mendes a run for his money, played every week. Then in 1996, at the height of Bambamania, Knight got a call from a friend who'd heard about an opening for a lounge pianist on a cruise ship. Despite his complete lack of experience, he applied and got the job. "I'm really not a great pianist, and I don't play by ear. But I'm a great scam artist," he explains. Suddenly the club kid from hell was plunked in the middle of the Love Boat.

"I was set up in the Crystal Cove," he says. "Domed ceiling, waterfall behind me, playing a



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clear Plexiglas piano. Most of the passengers were 60 and up, either sweet and delightful or just hideous and horrible. This was a luxury liner, very, very expensive. You'd have people come over and say, 'You're the worst piano player I ever heard.' Or 'Play the airplane song.' That's 'Rhapsody in Blue,' because of the airline commercial. 'Can't you play the plane song? I love the plane song.'"

When he returned to Chicago in the fall of 1996, Samba Bamba had lost some of its momentum (these days they gig about twice a year). So he formed a "corporate band" to play private parties, picked up some freelance writing projects, and booked *Big Lovely Bingo* at Gentry. Somehow the hetero folks at the Annoyance wandered into the north-side gay piano bar and offered Knight their theater, where he's been every last Tuesday of the month ever since.

These days Knight is doing double duty at the Annoyance, hosting their absurdly terrible dinner theater send-up *Taint!* as David DeLanzo, the most demanding, feyest theater queen on earth. Each month he presides over the Dreary Lane Players and a new musical meant to complement chef Frank Janisch's ever-changing cuisine. This month it's "The Linda Blair Witch Project," accompanying Janisch's Halloween feast.

But it's Dick O'Day's terrorist chicanery that really seems to capture Knight's heart. "It allows me to act out. I can say outrageous things and make people do outrageous things. Every time we do the show, I'm amazed what people will do. Things I would never do. I'd be a terrible audience for myself."

Both shows play at the Annoyance next week. *Big Lovely Bingo* is on Tuesday and *Taint!* runs Thursday. Show time for both is 8:30 (which usually means 8:45 by the Annoyance clock). Admission to *Bingo* is \$5, \$10 for *Taint!*. The theater is at 3747 N. Clark (773-929-6200).

—JUSTIN HAYFORD

