

NEW UNIVERSITY

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Holly, Jolly Gay Men

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Despite the writers' strike, Hollywood came to Irvine for holiday music. Men Alive, the Orange County gay men's chorus, performed 'Holly, Jolly Hollywood,' its first concert of the touring season. Featuring holiday numbers from classic and contemporary movies, Men Alive lit up the stage last Friday, Nov. 30 at the Irvine Barclay Theatre.

Though the theme for the concert was undoubtedly picked months before the strike, Men Alive could not resist making a sketch in good fun. The music started with a fanfare and a song from 'The Polar Express' before shifting into a collage of musical themes from 'Holiday Inn,' 'Miracle on 34th Street' and 'It's a Wonderful Life,' complete with film clips of the movies projected onto the back of the stage. Some contemporary pieces included 'Ooh Child (Things Are Going to Get Easier),' 'I've Got My Love to Keep Me Warm' and 'All I Want for Christmas is You.'

The night struck a great balance between classic songs and new numbers, with clever visual effects (falling 'snow' in 'White Christmas') and fun dance numbers cued to the music. Of particular note was the hilarious sing-along of 'Hallelujah' featuring the Sisters of Perpetual Silence, who helped the audience along with cue cards of the lyrics.

Men Alive is open to new talent and interested people. Aside from ads in 'Playbill,' most of the group's advertising is by word-of-mouth.

Despite some members having their Men Alive debut at the Barclay, most of the group are seasoned veterans. Rich Johnson has been in the group since its inception in 2001 and has served on the Board of Directors. His singing is as good as his dancing, as he performed on Friday as the buxom, golden lady toy in the Wooden Soldiers number.

'I do it to give back to the community, and to bridge the gap between the gay and lesbian community and the straight community,' Johnson said.

Men Alive is the brainchild of Richard Cook, a conductor from the Orange County area. Cook was inspired by the Turtle Creek Chorale in Dallas and the Gay Men's Chorus of Los Angeles to create an Orange County gay men's group. Through a series of serendipitous events, Men Alive put on its first concert just after 9-11 with 19 members. Today, Men Alive is thriving with over 100 members. Its next concert is planned for March 8 in Las Vegas before coming home to the Orange County Performing Arts Center on May 31 for a Broadway-themed show.

Men Alive is much more than a performing group for gay men. Its mission is: 'Through music, men's voices unite as a vehicle to entertain, educate, bring healing, joy, community and build bridges to the public at large.'

Cook is emphatic about the purpose of the group, articulating his desire to portray gay men as living people. 'We eat, we drink, we love, we laugh. Music is great communication to spread that message.'

Though a few numbers each concert are dedicated to bridging the gap, such as 'Believe' from 'The Polar Express,' Cook rarely selects music or makes statements explicit of his message. 'I believe living it is more important than speaking it,' Cook said.

Men Alive can be reached at <http://www.menalivechorus.org>.