

Resolution of Council

19 February 2024

Item 3.2

Vale Steve Ostrow OAM

Minute by the Lord Mayor

To Council:

I wish to inform Council of the passing of Steve Ostrow, entrepreneur, opera singer and founder of ACON'S Mature Aged Gays Group (MAGS) on 4 February 2024 at the age of 91.

I first met Steve when I attended MAGS' Saturday night dinners in ACON'S basement as Member for Bligh in the early 1990s. He initiated the dinners for older gay men to meet, socialise and learn about HIV in a convivial atmosphere. They generally featured a guest speaker, which is why I was invited.

Steve settled in Sydney in the 1980s after a career which alternated singing opera with running businesses in New York, Canada and Europe. Soon after his arrival in Australia, he secured the role of Dr Engel in Queensland Opera's production of 'The Student Prince with Simon Gallagher and Marina Prior'. Work with Opera Australia followed, as an understudy and singing in the chorus. To improve his acting, he enrolled at the Ensemble Studios and subsequently secured roles in film and television. He also taught singing for the Ensemble and established his own Academy of Vocal Arts, where he taught and mentored many private students.

In 1988, at the age of 56, he took a HIV test. As he reflected in his memoir, Saturday Night at the Baths, "If there was a likely candidate to have the disease, it was surely me." Two weeks after the test he received the result. It was negative. He wrote in his memoir: "I feel very blessed. Suddenly I can see beyond today into tomorrow. It's time to give something back."

Giving something back initially involved becoming an Ankali volunteer. Ankali was an Aboriginal word for "friend". Established by the Reverend Jim Dykes, the Ankali Project provided emotional support to people living with AIDS, in the remaining years of their lives.

Over the following six years, Steve provided such support to four gay men, as well as becoming an Ankali group leader.

His work with Ankali led him to becoming a telephone volunteer with the AIDS Council of NSW (now ACON). He would spend several hours a day on the ACON hotline, taking calls from people who wanted information or just needed to talk.

In 1990, he responded to an advertisement placed by the Australian Federation of AIDS Organisations, the national body which co-ordinated the community response to HIV/AIDS. "Project officer wanted for pilot program to assess needs and concerns of men 40 and over who are having sex with other men. Part-time 6-month position." The project was to be based at ACON. "I got the job and became ACON's token mature age gay man," Steve wrote. He was to continue with ACON for the next 18 years.

One early initiative was to request a regular column in the Star Observer which he wanted to call "The Best is Yet to Come". The then editor agreed. In his first column, he invited readers to contact him about their needs and concerns, to be addressed in future issues. The response was overwhelming. Many told him they felt isolated, lonely and scared. This led to monthly meetings at ACON, the formation of MAGS and the monthly Saturday night dinners.

Creating a social space for gay men to meet was not new to Steve. Many years before, in September 1968, he opened the Continental Baths in the basement of the Beaux-arts style Ansonia Hotel in New York. With its opulent décor, he sought to provide a more attractive, safe, friendly alternative to existing venues where its patrons were treated with dignity and kindness. Over time, the Baths' expanded to include a gymnasium, health clinic, disco dance floor, restaurant, a stage and live entertainment.

Among those who performed at the Baths was a young Bette Midler. Steve discovered her singing at the Improv, a New York coffee house where she also worked as a waiter. He offered her \$US50 a week to sing at the Baths on Friday and Saturday nights. She accepted. Within weeks she had built a strong following and attracted wider interest. In 1972, she released her first album, 'The Devine Miss M', featuring many of the songs she had performed live at the Baths. The record was co-produced by Barry Manilow, who frequently accompanied her on the piano.

The Baths gave other performers a chance to advance their careers, including Manilow, Manhattan Transfer, Melba Moore, Peter Allen and Melissa Manchester. Steve experimented with other forms of entertainment, including a night of opera featuring Eleanor Sterber, a leading soprano with the New York Met. It was promoted as a "black towel" evening. Her performance was recorded and released on vinyl as 'Eleanor Sterber: Live at the Continental Baths'. The album cover featured Ms Sterber singing at the end of a large ornate swimming pool, accompanied by a violinist, with a black-tied Steve Ostrow watching on from a large cane chair.

The Baths' reputation grew beyond its primary clientele - New Yorkers and celebrities including Alfred Hitchcock, Andy Warhol, Mick Jagger and Rudolph Nureyev all came to experience entertainment in a unique venue. Their presence however increasingly discomfited the Baths' gay patrons. In 1974, Steve ceased the entertainment and closed the Baths in 1976. He pursued other business ventures, and his career in opera, eventually moving to Germany to sing with the Stuttgart Opera, and then to Australia.

Apart from his teaching and work with ACON, Steve found time to write. His output included three memoirs, a guidebook for singers, a collection of thoughts about life after 50 and a crime novel, set not surprisingly against the background of a production of Wagner's Ring Cycle.

In 2013, he received the NSW Seniors Week Award – Health and Wellbeing and in 2021, he received a Medal in the Order of Australia. The citation read “For service to the LGBTIQ community, and to the performing arts.”

The media note on the Australian Honours website included a reference to the Continental Baths and stated, “Influential in having homosexuality being declared legal in New York City.”

COUNCILLOR CLOVER MOORE AO

Lord Mayor

Moved by the Chair (the Lord Mayor), seconded by Councillor Worling –

It is resolved that:

- (A) all persons attending this meeting of Council observe one minute's silence to commemorate the life of Steve Ostrow and his significant contribution to LGBTIQ+ communities of New York and Sydney and to the performing arts;
- (B) Council express its condolences to Steve's many friends, including the members of Mature Aged Gays; and
- (C) the Lord Mayor convey Council's condolences to Mature Aged Gays.

Carried unanimously.

S051491

Note – All Councillors, staff and members of the public present stood in silence for one minute as a mark of respect to Steve Ostrow OAM.