

# A High-Seas Show With Gay Family Values



Bruce Gilkas/Rfamilyvacations.Com

Rosie O'Donnell on this year's R Family Vacations cruise.  
By ARIEL KAMINER  
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Correction Appended

ABOARD THE NORWEGIAN DAWN — If you've ever wondered what became of the belief in musical theater's power to transform lives, take note: for most of this week it could be found a few hundred nautical miles out of New York, chugging north on the way to Halifax, Nova Scotia.

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Daphne Rubin-Vega and the performers the Broadway Boys on the R Family Vacations musical-theater cruise to Nova Scotia.

The 2,300 passengers of this R Family Vacations charter were on board for an annual week of swimming, frolicking, eating and building their own social utopia — one in which musical theater plays an essential role. Really.

R Family Vacations is led by [Rosie O'Donnell](#), the entertainer and talk-show host; Kelli O'Donnell, the pixieish entertainment executive who became her wife in 2004; and their business partner, Gregg Kaminsky, and caters to gay and lesbian families. But anyone who might have signed up looking for something sexy or even illicit — for a Love That Dare Not Speak Its Name Boat — well, that ship had left the harbor. Whatever their sexual orientation, this was an extremely straight bunch.

Wearing T-shirts and Crocs, straining at their waistbands and beginning to contemplate middle age, they might have passed for the guests on any other [cruise](#). If, that is, they were not quite so wholesome, so relentlessly focused on being good parents and raising happy kids. At the dock, the ship seemed to serve as a kind

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A cruise team member, Anne Steele, delivers a song.

of reverse quarantine, a metal container moored off 12th Avenue to prevent the passengers' expansive child-friendly values from wiping out New York's social ecology.

Whether they had come for their own family or the "We Are Family" spirit of community, all the guests — from the dual mommies to the leather daddies to the grandparents, siblings, cousins and kids they all had in tow — were excited to cheer on the [raft](#) of song-and-dance shows that the week would offer.

Among the more than 100 entertainers on board were celebrated performers like [Christine Ebersole](#), Daphne Rubin-Vega, Andrea McArdle and [Lillias White](#). In one configuration or another, this collection of [Tony Award](#) winners and marquee names would put on two shows every night, as well as make countless impromptu appearances at the piano bar, karaoke bar or salad bar. By the

schlocky standards of much cruise-line entertainment, it was a floating [Royal Shakespeare Company](#).

To Ms. O'Donnell, putting on high-quality shows was a matter of basic justice. "If you're given a crumb and told it's a meal, you'll believe it's a meal," she said. "So often gay people are given a crumb. I didn't want anything that wasn't top of the line. I wanted a smorgasbord." And if there's one thing a cruise ship can provide, it's a smorgasbord.

What it cannot provide, however, is top dollar. Now in its seventh year, the cruise, Ms. O'Donnell says, is far from making a profit. So the organizers look for entertainers who might want to come along for the ride.

"We're in international waters, so it's O.K. to say: we hire our friends," confessed Michael Lee, the venture's artistic director. It helps that he, the company's founders and Seth Rudetsky, the musical director, are all so well connected. But, as he took care to point out, in addition to being friends, the performers are all professionals.

This turns out to be a euphemism for "people who can be pushed onstage with almost no rehearsal."

The first afternoon of the cruise, while everyone was still checking in, the cast and crew of the big opening-night revue were meeting for the first time. No one had yet completed a lineup, much less mastered the technicalities of the theater's equipment. Ms. McArdle and her 19-year-old daughter, Alexa Koloff, who were signed up for the cruise only a week before, hadn't even tried their duet more than twice. And then, with just hours to put it all together, they all had to stop for the ship's lifeboat drill.

The semimanic Mr. Rudetsky admitted he nearly had a meltdown. But when the curtain rose for the first of the evening's two shows, the audience at the Stardust Theater saw only glitzy showmanship.

With the exception, that is, of Ms. O'Donnell herself, who in a floppy shirt and uneven leggings did a little soft shoe in the opening number. Wary of trying to teach her new steps, Mr. Lee had just spliced in some moves she already knew from another production. As an added precaution, he performed them right alongside her, gently applying a bit of what he refers to as "elbow choreography." Meanwhile, she saved the audience the effort of mocking her performance and went on to remind them she'd recently been voted most annoying celebrity.

Despite the chewing-gum-and-baling-wire spirit of it all, Mr. Lee — who is so good at making something out of nothing that Ms. O'Donnell calls him MacGyver — could only laugh. "I'm dancing onstage with Rosie O'Donnell," he said just beforehand. "She's not a dancer. That's funny already."

The schedule for the week's big finale was no more relaxed. For a while the plan had been to do "Dreamgirls," so the organizers first focused on trying to cast black actors. Then a month or so ago they obtained the rights to "Chicago" and decided to stage that instead, in a nearly full-scale production. But up to the last week stars were still dropping out (like [Joel Grey](#), who had a scheduling conflict) or signing on (like Carolee Carmello, who happened to bump into Mr. Rudetsky's partner at

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The plan was for one hour of vocal rehearsals, some time in the studio blocking out the basic shape of the show, a few takes on each scene and, if they were lucky, two full run-throughs. But every time anyone tried to schedule a rehearsal, the room turned out to be booked for some other event. And how do you reschedule a few dozen people on a ship where no one has cell reception and the passenger manifest is somehow unavailable?

Somehow or other, everyone gets into the spirit of it. "No matter what diva gets on on Sunday, by Friday it's 'let me help you with that luggage.'" Mr. Lee said. "As performers we're so used to thinking, 'They're going to rip me to shreds.' But this is the only place where you feel they're not here to judge you — because this is the place where they're not judged."

Mr. Rudetsky was more emphatic. "It's the greatest entertainment in the world," he said. Add in the cruise's inclusive spirit, and, he said: "It's like, what if the world were perfect? And the taste is just so amazing. In part because it's my taste."

Colin Sheehan experienced that inclusiveness firsthand when, as a 13-year-old in the audience of Ms. O'Donnell's talk show, he got up the nerve to sing a song that he had written about her. She invited him back to be a co-host of the show; now an extremely eager and frequently perspiring 23, he is the entertainment coordinator for the operation. To him, the cruise and the entertainment are about the same thing: bringing outsiders into the fold. "We love that people in Iowa or Nebraska who don't get to see the A+ Broadway performers, they get to vacation with them for a week."

Eventually, all discussions of the role that musical theater plays in this come back around to Ms. O'Donnell. She is extremely accessible on the cruise, so low-key she sometimes looks as if she had just rolled out of bed. None of which diminishes the magical aura with which cruisegoers imbue her, running up to tell her about some experience they've had, to introduce their families, to pitch her on a project, as though she were a senator walking through a crowd of constituents. (She says she prefers the image of Mickey walking through [Disneyland](#).)

She may not have single-handedly saved Broadway, as folks on the ship like to say she did by featuring it on her talk show, but for one week at a stretch she does seem to have inspired an alternate universe of family values, where people fight for the chance to adopt children of all races and needs, where they stand in line to be bound by the vows of marriage (a nice Canadian souvenir), where lesbians in the karaoke bar un-self-consciously request [Eminem](#) songs, and where — at the disco, late at night — a brawny man who drops to the ground to feel for a missing tooth isn't the victim of a bar fight. He's a dad, and his daughter is waiting for a visit from the tooth fairy.

If the economics of the cruise business don't change, next year this social experiment will probably have to take place on dry land. But at Sheena Easton's late show one night, no one was worrying about the future. As she took the stage, vamping and bumping and camping it up, the 50-something camouflage-wearing lesbians and the 20-something gay men in expensive jeans and the two little girls dancing at the foot of the stage all seemed equally, ecstatically grateful.

How did the news that her baby takes the morning train validate the struggles of gay families? It was impossible to say, and yet somehow it all just worked. With the audience in a frenzy, she acknowledged their ovation and exhorted them to keep the party going into the wee hours. After all, she shouted, the ship had plenty of baby sitters.

*This article has been revised to reflect the following correction:*

*Correction: July 23, 2008*

*An article on Saturday about an R Family Vacations cruise for gay and lesbian families referred incorrectly to the marriage of the comedian Rosie O'Donnell and Kelli O'Donnell, a founder of the company. They were married in 2004, not "recently."*

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