

The Life and Times of Diana

By Christian Kelleher

In 1953 Houston florist David Moncrief hosted a cocktail party for a group of gay friends in his midtown apartment to watch the first ever televised Academy Awards. When television reception of the broadcast failed, the bemused and disappointed guests turned on the radio to listen to the presentation. Undaunted, Moncrief the following year organized a second cocktail party, but this time as the broadcast was about to begin he gathered the group together to present his own award for best local performance — which historian and journalist Brandon Wolf describes as “most likely an amorous adventure” — to guest Virginia “Hub” Lankford. In a corner of the apartment stood a nearly life-size plaster statue of Diana, the Roman goddess of the hunt, which had come from the Saks Department Store, where Moncrief’s roommate Curtis Wright headed the window design department. This was the birth of the Diana Awards and the beginning of what became The Diana Foundation.

In the 1950s and 1960s lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender Houstonians, like LGBT people everywhere, were forced into a largely hidden existence. The history of these early gatherings is predominantly preserved only in interviews by attendees. Thom Guthrie,

who joined The Diana Foundation in later years, remembers, “This is all pre-Stonewall, and you didn’t want people to think you were gay because you could get arrested, you could get thrown in jail, you could be beaten. ... You couldn’t be gay, that’s all there was to it.” Police would arrest people from the LGBT community who congregated in bars or write down

license plate numbers from the parking lot and alert employers so they would lose their jobs. Private parties, often with gay men and lesbian women arriving as “couples” to deceive prying neighbors’ eyes, were one of the few places the community could gather unreservedly. The Diana Awards Show during this period was typically held in private residences, which made it hard to find space for the theater-style seating to mimic the Academy Awards that inspired the gathering.

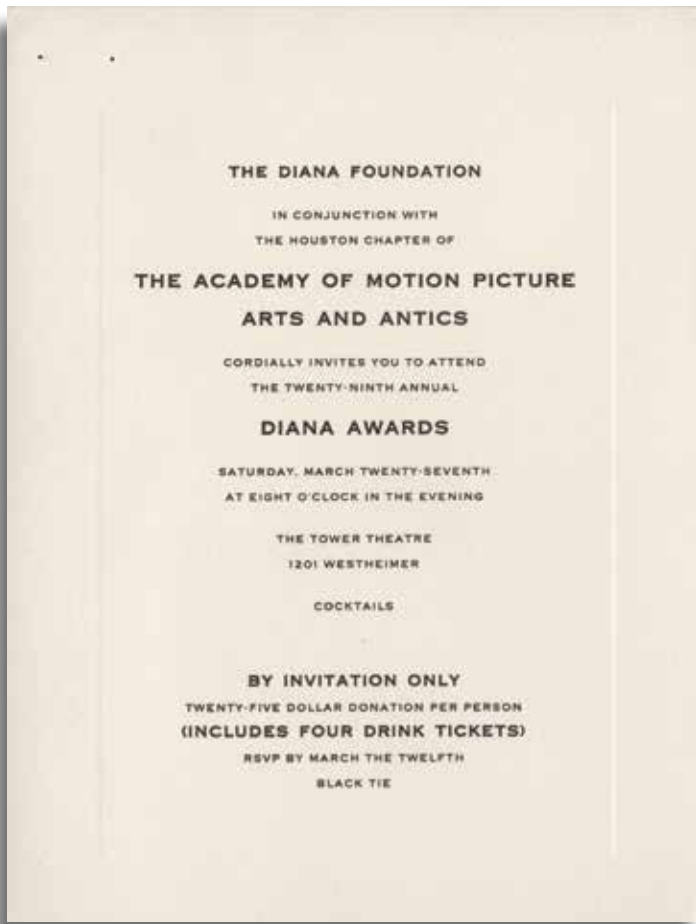
In contrast to the more polite Oscars, the Diana Awards was a roast of attendees. Moncrief, joined by friends Charles Hebert and Tom Adams, wrote the awards in language that was, “depending on one’s sensitivities, risqué, ribald, crass, or just downright lewd.” During that time it was popular for gay men to call each other by female names. Hebert

“Los Angeles has Oscar, New York has Tony, and Houston has Diana.”



Tom “Ava” Osborn, David Moncrief, Charles Hebert, and the statue of Diana in the earliest known photograph of the Diana Awards, 1969, at the Windmill Theater. This photograph was scanned by Brandon Wolf from Tom Osborn’s collection, but the location of the original copy is currently unknown.

Digital scan courtesy of The Diana Foundation Records, Special Collections, University of Houston Libraries.



Invitation to the 29th Diana Awards, 1982, at the Tower Theater.

Photo courtesy of The Diana Foundation Records, Special Collections, University of Houston Libraries.

and Adams took on duties of co-hosts, often in character as gossip columnists Louella Parsons and Hedda Hopper, while Moncrief handed them sealed envelopes as Pricene Waterhouse (a feminization of accounting firm Price Waterhouse that secured Oscars' results). Hebert became the Diana organization's creative and organizational driving force through the sixties and into the seventies, and the popularity of the awards show continued to grow. Beginning in 1966, the awards moved from private residences into the Village Theater in Rice Village.

As Diana entered its teenage years, the exuberance of youth blossomed with the 1967 debut of Tom Osborn's "Ava," the diva whose drag performances were a mainstay of the Diana Awards shows for the next twenty years. Osborn, who had performed in the Sonja Henie Hollywood Ice Revue during the late 1940s and early 1950s, borrowed an "elegant purple robe" from a show business friend for his first performance, and the following year borrowed another ensemble from a friend in the *Hello Dolly* traveling show that was in town at the time. He later led "Ava's Glamorizing Committee" for Diana Awards Show costumes.

After the pivotal Stonewall uprising in New York's Greenwich Village in 1969, the LGBT community, including the Diana organization and its members—collectively known as the Dianas—had an increasingly public presence in Houston. In 1970 the Diana Awards, now seventeen, went to its first gay bar, Club Romulus on Richmond Avenue, followed in later years by the Palace Club on Montrose, the



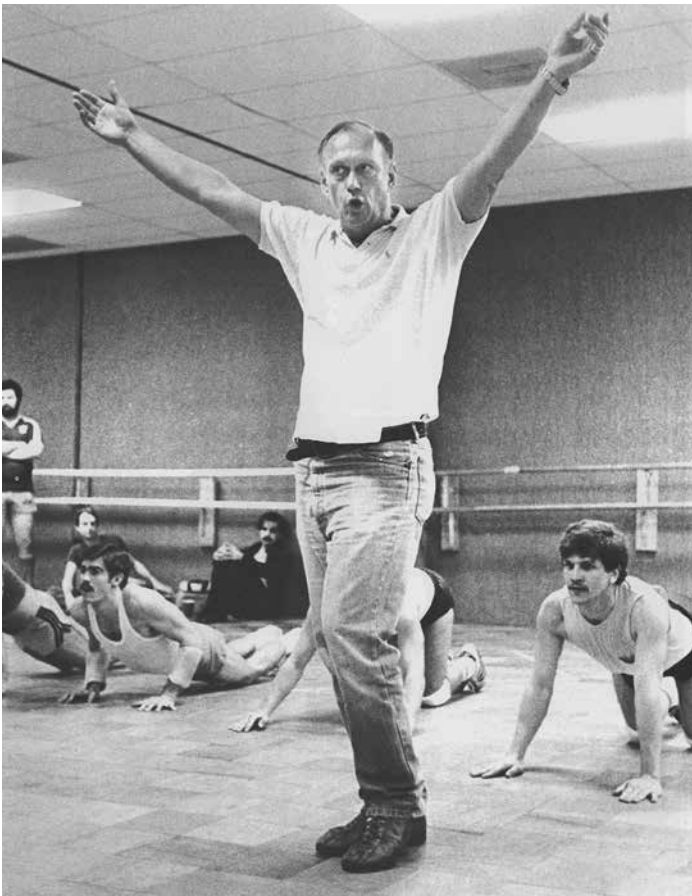
The 22nd Diana Awards, 1975, at Bayou Landing drew a celebratory crowd.

Photo courtesy of Gary Evans Papers, Botts Collection of LGBT History, Special Collections, University of Houston Libraries.



The 22nd Diana Awards, 1975, as seen in this 35 mm slide.

Photo courtesy of the Botts Collection of LGBT History, Special Collections, University of Houston Libraries.



Tom Osborn rehearses for the Diana Awards in a photograph from the program for the 29th Diana Awards, 1982. Ava starred with "The Musclettes" in A Salute to Tony called "I'm One of the Boys Who's One of the Girls."

Photo courtesy of Michael Kemper Papers, Botts Collection of LGBT History, Special Collections, University of Houston Libraries.

Hi Kamp Club with its raised runway and stage, and Bayou Landing. When it turned twenty-one, Diana printed its first awards show program.

As Diana grew, so did its influence and impact on Houston. In 1976 The Diana Foundation became a nonprofit charitable organization. With proceeds from the awards show and other activities, the Dianas began supporting community organizations including the Houston Ballet, the Montrose Clinic, Theater Under the Stars, the Metropolitan Community Church of the Resurrection, the Montrose Symphonic Band, the Houston Gay Political Caucus, and support for students at the High School for the Performing and Visual Arts to attend college. The Dianas entered the 1980s with packed audiences at the Sheraton Lincoln Hotel downtown. Attendance enabled the awards show to continue to grow and The Diana Foundation to take an expanding role in supporting its community's civic and cultural society. Awards show programs became large booklets featuring photographs of performers and dozens of advertisements. Then in the early 1980s, as Diana entered its thirties, AIDS changed everything.

The foreword to the program for the 31st Diana Awards in 1984 noted, "This past year The Foundation recognized the

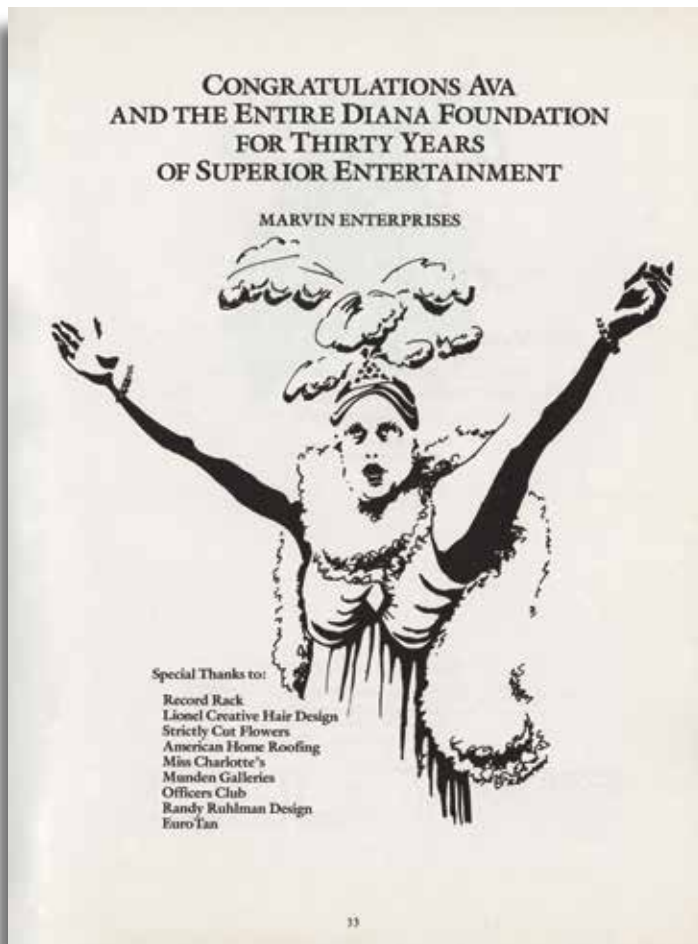
crisis occurring in our community and put its emphasis on assisting the efforts of the KS/AIDS Foundation to face and deal with this major problem." Full-page memorials to lost friends and members became increasingly common in the awards show programs. The Diana Foundation moved from being a social organization to becoming a major charitable organization in Houston. In later programs, the list of supported organizations grew to include AIDS Foundation Houston, Bering Community Service Foundation, Crisis Hotline, Omega House, Stone Soup, McAdory House, the Colt 45s AIDS TroubleFund, and Pet Patrol, which helped people with AIDS care for their pets.

Then in 1987 further tragedy stunned The Diana Foundation when original member and long-time leader and friend Charles Hebert was murdered in his Montrose home. The *Houston Chronicle* noted that police said Hebert was killed by blows from his assailant's hands and feet. The theme for the Diana Awards the following year was "A Night to Remember," and the evening's performance was dedicated to Hebert, in "memory of the world's oldest living teenager." During this period programs also began to include "Diana Remembers..." memorial lists. In 1988 the list of sixteen names included both Hebert and Diana founder David Moncrief, who also died in 1987. By 1994 the memorial list



First Lady Barbara Bush's letter congratulating The Diana Foundation was distributed at the 37th Diana Awards, 1990.

Photo courtesy of The Diana Foundation Records, Special Collections, University of Houston Libraries.



From the program to the 30th Diana Awards, 1983, "That's Entertainment."

Photo courtesy of The Diana Foundation Records, Special Collections, University of Houston Libraries.

had increased to forty. Even the famed Diana statue from Sakowitz that inspired the group's name was lost in the late 1980s.

The Diana Awards Shows had moved to the Wortham Theater, and new president Harry Guyton, who succeeded Hebert, kept the show running with lavish sets and costumes. As Thom Guthrie noted, "It became one of the most fashionable things in Houston. Every socialite in the city wanted to have a table at the Diana Awards." It often took years for prospective members to be accepted into The Diana Foundation, and the organization's impact on the community continued to grow.

In 1990 then president Frank Campisi read a letter to the Dianas from First Lady Barbara Bush that saluted "the good work being done by the Diana Foundation" and stated that she was "grateful for your efforts on behalf of others." That same year, the Dianas presented Houston philanthropist Carolyn Farb with The Diana Award for Community Service in recognition of her urgent and important work during the AIDS crisis. Other community service award recipients over the years included mayors Kathy Whitmire and Annise Parker, and Dr. Edwin Cordray of the Bering Dental Clinic, among others. In 2001, the awards show moved to a

smaller venue. Following the losses of Hebert, Moncrief, and so many members and loved ones, and now entering middle age, Diana was very aware of the organization's advancing years and changing community.

For the 39th Diana Awards in 1992 the theme was "39 and Holding," but by Diana 41 the organization's famous irreverent humor roasted itself with the theme "Dianasaurus: Geriatric Park." That year featured Tom "Ava" Osborn's return for a final encore performance, after being sidelined from previous shows by arthritis. But as Diana 41's subtitle warned, "Just when you thought it was over," Diana was back again the next year at the Houston Club affirming "Glamour is Everything." Though the extravagance of the younger Diana was behind them, the "A-list gays" of the matured and sophisticated Diana Foundation held claim to their place as members of the oldest continuously operating gay organization in the country.



A growing archive at the University of Houston Libraries is documenting the history, legacy, and continuing impact of Houston's Diana Foundation as one of the oldest gay organizations in the country. Among the records are programs for 1992, 1994, and 1995.

Photo courtesy of The Diana Foundation Records, Special Collections, University of Houston Libraries.

As with any life, there are many different stories that can be told—by and about us, through our archives, and in our own words through oral history. The Diana Foundation Records at the University of Houston Libraries is a vibrant part of telling the story of Houston's LGBTQ community.

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