

WRESTLE YR FRIENDS IS A QUEER THUNDERDOME

HOT TO THE TOUCH BY EMILY COX

Editor's Note: The events covered were written before social distancing guidelines were imposed. The stories here delight us, and we cannot wait for these events to return. We realize, under current circumstances, the idea of touching people and even seeing friends almost come across as nostalgic. So perhaps read this through that lens. Let's get stoked for when the world allows us to live in such a tactile way again.

"Next up, **The Librarian!**" called out the emcee, Dick Von Dyke, a drag king dressed in a red suit, with black mesh shirt and a red bow tie. I took my shoes and earrings off, and stepped onto the mat. The crowd chattered as my opponent and I set up for the match. The referee, Woke Hogan, crouched down and asked us individually: "Do you consent to wrestle this person?" We made eye contact with her in turn, said "Yes." Woke Hogan nodded to Dick Von Dyke. Dick led the crowd in a countdown: "3! 2! 1! Wrestle your fucking friends!" I lunged forward.

Wrestle Yr Friends has been throwing queer wrestling parties for over a year now. "Wrestle Yr Friends itself started in my living room," says Noah Albee. "But the legacy goes back much, much, much further." Casual wrestling parties have lowkey been a trend in queer houses around town for over a decade. After attending these parties hosted by friends over the years, the torch was passed to Albee.

Albee hosted three wrestling parties in their third-floor apartment before outgrowing the space. "We threw Noah a surprise wrestling birthday party," says Roya Rafiq, one of the core organizers for Wrestle Yr Friends, "and really put our hearts and souls into it, and so many people came, and people kept coming to the wrestling parties. Then too many people started coming."

Stray Cat, the microcinema that regularly hosts DIY events, invited Wrestle Yr Friends to hold their events there starting in April 2019.

In June, their event Stonewall Brawl featured a fundamental shift in how the collective programmed their shows. Inspired to celebrate the 50th anniversary of the Stonewall Riots, organizers showed a short film on its history, connected the community with outside organizations, and incorporat-

ed performances. "We started building each one as a show, as a curated kind of art experience," says Albee. In just six months, they went from casually scrapping on an apartment floor, to a staged, rehearsed, costumed, exceeded, planned out events.

While the shows include rehearsed performances and staged brawls, any attendee can sign up and participate in wrestling. Some participants have wrestling names and costumes, but just as many folks wear casual clothes and use their regular names. (Some of the wrestling names are real gems, like Auntie Vaxx, Sparkle Motion, and Venus Thigh Gap.)

February's event was dubbed Valentine's Gay. Near the entryway there was a table full of paper valentines, which you could fill out and pass off to Cupid (aka Roya Rafiq) to deliver to the object of your affection. There were glittery heart stickers; there was a poet in the corner with a typewriter, writing love poems on the spot; there were cherry pastries and an ostentatiously adorned photo-booth.

It was not only super gay, but super welcoming, with an earnest sweetness about the whole thing. No one was trying to be cool by being ironic and standoffish, instead the event was cool because they'd worked hard to make it enjoyable and engaging for everyone. I'd expected unruly chaos, a pulsing thrum of a crowd, DIY dysfunction, but that wasn't the case. Supportiveness was palpable.

Stray Cat's theater was set up with seating around a square of thick black floor mats. Red theater lights shone. Attendees calmly filled the seats, waiting patiently for the show to begin.

Attendees also had a chance to connect with local organizations Thrive (formerly known as Good Samaritan), who had a lobby table with safer sex kits and information about their free STI testing, and Kansas City Anti-Violence Project gave a brief shout-out about their services around domestic violence and sexual assault for the LGBTQ+ community.

The opening act featured the evening's referee, Kailee Karr as Woke Hogan, sporting a red velvet cape with plastic gems spelling out WOKE inside of a heart. Woke Hogan's performance to a song with the lyrics "If it feels good, do it," segued into her in-



The crowd cheers on friends, neighbors, and strangers hitting the mat together. MAK ALLEN

roduction on the rules of wrestling. "There's nothing we love more than consent!" she said.

Indeed, Noah Albee says Wrestle Yr Friends is primarily a practice of consent. When wrestling, "the ref will set you down on the mat before you engage in your scene, and will ask you specifically, 'Do you consent to this match?' 'Do you want to tap out or is this a pin?' There are specific and direct rules. [If the ref] notices someone is uncomfortable, they'll break it up. You notice that you're uncomfortable and you realize you don't want to be there, plenty of people have tapped out."

Rafiq chimes in, "I've tapped out." Though you may have a hundred people watching, you have explicit permission here to stop when you want.

They point to how rarely consent is discussed outside of sexual contexts. And that when much of our socializing happens in alcohol-fueled environments, consent can be messy. While some folks choose to drink at Wrestle Yr Friends events, it is not the focal point. The emphasis on consent allows participants the opportunity to exercise their own autonomy, and practice in how to com-

municate about it.

Dick Von Dyke, who performed for 4 hours straight as emcee (as well as doing a performance to Beyonce's "Countdown") kept up a flirty, witty, and encouraging energy. As he called out to late arrivals lingering in the doorway that there was seating available near the front, he quipped, "I promise I won't bite...without your consent."

The night featured drag, burlesque, and musical performances interspersed between bouts of wrestling. The variety kept the pace brisk and never fell into monotony.

Experience varied among wrestlers. First-timers were often tentative, kneeling across from one another on the mat, hands out and ready, but both reluctant to make the first move. Some chose to just arm wrestle. Others, whether experienced or tenacious, were fast and intense, relentless in their movements and attempts to pin the opponent. A pair of best friends with matching tattoos arm wrestled one another. Some friends who take Krav Maga classes together sparred in a different way on the wrestling mat. Two folks about to wrestle shared, "We met last week at queer speed dating, and our first date is on Monday." I

wrestled a stranger.

During my match, I lunged forward, and all sound and sensation fell away aside from what was happening on the mat. I don't remember hearing the crowd, I don't know what song was booming through the speakers. I was fully present and awake, adrenaline pummeling through me. I had never wrestled before, but I'd been watching the matches before me, and tried to pick up some tactics. We rolled, tumbled, grasped. Finally, I slammed their shoulders down, straddling their body. My opponent looked surprised, exhaled, 'whoa.' I had a moment of alarm—I'm not used to fighting, I suppose—and I froze, still pinning them, 'Are you good?' My opponent nodded, the ref smacked the mat three times, and I'd won. The sound of the crowd came back to me, I heard Dick Von Dyke proclaiming, "That book has been checked out!" I retook my seat, my whole body shaking, I was ecstatic, and immediately wanted to do it again.

With each event they've produced, the Wrestle Yr Friends team has amped up their skills and dedication to the project. They started holding weekly planning meetings. "We don't feel like there's any hierarchy within the group," says Ash Anders, another core organizer. "Everyone's equal and listened to."

And anyone who's ready to put in the work is invited to come. Anders says anywhere from seven to 15 folks come to their weekly organizing meetings. They debrief and plan, but also have become a network of support. "We support other people in the group if they're out performing in the community somewhere," says Anders, "we help promote them, make sure a big group of us maybe are free that night we can go out and support one of their fellow members."

Making events accessible is at the core of what they do. A \$7 donation is requested at the door, but it is emphatically a pay-what-you-can situation. The funds go to pay the performers, with remaining funds going to a community member in need who is announced at each event. The organizers themselves are unpaid, though they are sometimes putting in 30 hours a week to produce the events.

When an organization is intentionally structured to be inclusive and accessible in practice, it shows. It's why Roya Rafiq is committed to it. After showing up to events deemed inclusive, they would discover, "I was the only brown person in the room," Rafiq says. "I was the only queer person in the room."

"Until you can show me that you're diverse without telling me that you are," Rafiq continues, "if you can show me that you're inclusive without saying that word to me, then I'll believe it. I think Wrestle Yr Friends does a really good job with that."

The crowd at Valentine's Gay held a variety of genders, of races, of ages. "It's most-



"Wrestle your fucking friends!" is the collectively shouted starting pistol for each match.
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ly AFAB [assigned female at birth] people," says Albee, "oftentimes on the nonbinary spectrum; there's a large age range, there's some middle aged lesbians that come out. Which is really cool. Those spaces don't exist in Kansas City. Even Alter—it was a queer space, but there were a lot of men there. There are almost no men that aren't trans [at Wrestle Yr Friends]."

"I WAS SOMEONE WHO DID KARATE AND SELF-DEFENSE AS A KID," SAYS ALBEE. "I KNOW HOW EMPOWERING IT IS TO FEEL STRONG."

"The kind of space that we've created is so different than what we're used to," says Rafiq. "Where do you go when you're queer and you're trying to go out and do something fun? I guess I can go to one of the three gay bars where there's going to be a bunch of like cis white gay men." Wrestle Yr Friends fills a need for folks who don't fit into dominant spaces, even the gay ones. They seek to include everyone, as long as you follow the rules.

"I personally have had so many cis straight dudes message me," adds Rafiq, "saying, like 'am I allowed to come?' and yea totally!"

"Just be nice," says Albee. "If we tell you not to take pictures, don't take pictures."

For most of us, most public spaces we're in are dominated by cis men. If you're a cis man, you might not have even noticed how often this is the case. Subverting that norm, and being in a space surrounded by nonbi-

nary, genderqueer, and trans folks can be a liberatory experience. People's guards come down; there's an air of joy and playfulness.

But don't call it a safe space: "I don't believe in safe spaces, and here's why," says Albee. "In what context, even being a woman, let alone being a black trans woman, where are you safe? Under a police state. Under a colonized government. Under the entire

American government start to finish. Where are you safe?"

Instead, Wrestle Yr Friends embraces the idea of being a brave space. "Brave, means empowering. Means accessible, being threatening to racism, being threatening to the status quo. It's more active, it's more honest."

Being a brave space also means they seek to address conflicts that arise. "Conflict is gonna happen, it will," says Albee. "People who don't like us, or people who don't like someone who is attending. It's going to happen. I don't believe in cancel culture, we can collectively say as an organization that we don't believe in cancel culture."

"We're working towards restorative justice," says Rafiq. "It's active, it's a lot of constant learning, unlearning, like swallowing our pride sometimes."

They're currently working with Kansas City Anti-Violence Project on developing a

framework for peer mediation.

"We are trying so hard, all of us as a community, we are trying so hard to be good to one another," says Albee, "and I think that there's a lot of misplaced existential dread at being at the end of the world, and having complete global awareness of every single fire that's happening around the planet, every single riot. It's this information overload, and we don't have an effective way to process it, because as individuals we are not built to process the world's suffering."

"We're also largely marginalized," continues Albee, "largely multiply marginalized, and don't have power over the people that are really hurting us, like the state, and cis white men. So we take it out on each other, because 'you hurt me, and I can do something about it.' That is very much a trauma response, very much from a place of survival, it makes sense, I understand it, I've been a kill-your-local-rapist person, and I'm not any more. Because people aren't disposable. We don't have a list at the door of people who can't come. We're not going to turn you away, unless you cause a problem."

Why wrestling though? What's the appeal? For those who have been marginalized, reclaiming a physical power and finding a release for aggression in a healthy way is necessary—and hard to find).

"We're not allowed in gyms half the time or don't feel comfortable there," says Albee. "Or don't feel comfortable going on a run, or don't feel comfortable at a jujitsu class..."

"Or just flat out aren't safe," Rafiq adds. "I had several trans women who said wrestling at Wrestle Yr Friends has been one of the most beautiful experiences they've had as trans women."

"I was someone who did karate and self-defense as a kid," says Albee. "I know how empowering it is to feel strong. Working in kitchens slinging 50 lb potato stacks feels good. To be weird and to be alternative and to be gay and to be trans—and to be powerful."

For Wrestle Yr Friends organizers, it's not just about releasing aggression or invoking their playful inner child, it's also about putting in work to build meaningful community. It's about wrestling, but it's also much bigger than that.

"Building those strong bonds: that's the revolution," says Albee. "When we think about anarchy, it's very much like 'Smash the state! Smash smash smash!' And that's kind of where we're at with conflict resolution collectively as a community, too, is 'smash smash smash.' But being a brave space, being a brave community, is 'What are we going to build?'"

"You come here and we're all working hard," says Rafiq. "That's what's special. So what can we make next?"