

[statesman.com](https://www.statesman.com)

## Right on time: Austin revival of classic gay musical 'Falsettos' part of national trend

9–12 minutes



Revivals of modern LGBTQ+ classics, including a virtually perfect staging of the musical "Falsettos," now at Ground Floor Theatre, have arrived right on time.

Just as the community reels from increasingly virulent harassment and attempts to roll back the social and legal progress made over the past 50 years, theaters have responded in Austin and around the country with vivid new works, but also with powerful revivals of groundbreaking plays and musicals that premiered from roughly the 1960s through the 1990s.

Broadway, for instance, has seen fairly recent revivals of "The Boys in the Band" (premiered 1968), "The Normal Heart" (1985) and "Hedwig and the Angry Inch" (1998). Austin, too, has enjoyed rediscovered classics such as "Love, Valour, Compassion!"

(premiered 1994), "The Normal Heart" and "The Laramie Project" (2000).



## How do you stage a perfect revival of "Falsettos"?

Start with the theater. Executive artistic director Lisa Scheps has made Ground Floor Theatre a cozy professional home for formerly marginalized subjects, artists and audiences. Besides producing a four-show season of its own, Ground Floor hosts other troupes such as the Austin Rainbow Theatre. This queer company started its second season in September with the third local staging of Larry Kramer's "The Normal Heart."

**Need a break?** [Play the USA TODAY Daily Crossword Puzzle.](#)

Scheps turned "Falsettos" over to director Trace Turner, who has reimagined the show — with music and lyrics by William Finn and a book by Finn and James Lapine — for the 21st century. He and his team have firmly and imaginatively placed the action in 1979 and 1981, just before and just after the onset of AIDS. Yet a subtle sense of accrued wisdom in this staging seems to say: "We've been here before. Remember it."

Music director Trey Shonkwiler makes his four-piece band into an essential part of the scene, and dance-maker Richard Cerato inventively shaped the sometimes wacky movement of the actors. Andy Grapko served as intimacy director — and yes, this show needs one, given the array of dramatized sexual and affectionate interactions. Scenic designer Maggie Armendariz gives us a colorful nightclub setting around a high platform, rolling props and a Keith Haring-like translucent sculpture above the stage that alters with

the play's mood, amplified by Patrick Anthony's nimble lighting.

What about the play? "Falsettos" is, in fact, a gorgeous song cycle, or a fusion of two of them, based on the earlier Finn shows "March of the Falsettos" and "Falsettoland." Finn is among those composers who followed in Stephen Sondheim's footsteps by forging intricate and psychologically potent music and lyrics; genius storyteller Lapine also collaborated with Sondheim.

Set among middle-class Jews in New York City, the story belongs mainly to Marvin, a young man who has left his wife, Trina, and teenage son, Jason, for the gay life. Despite taking on male lovers, especially the well-matched Whizzer, Marvin "wants it all," including a tight community that involves his ex-wife and son. They all interact with a shared psychiatrist, Mendel. He eventually marries Trina, complicating the internal politics among the characters, who are introduced aptly in the cheerful song as "Four Jews in a Room Bitching."

AIDS, suggested by "Something Bad Is Happening," does not arrive until well into the second act, but we sense it coming. What it does to this inwardly-turned community is devastating, moving and, in some ways, still unexpected.

As Marvin, Jacob Rosenbaum is admirably restrained, at first irritatingly combative and then overcome by love and grief as he sings in a light tenor the show's most affecting song, "Unlikely Lovers."

Megan DeYoung is just as effective as Trina, turning several songs into outright showstoppers. Nicholas Hunter goes from glib to gripping as Whizzer; Max Green adds a hilarious goofiness to unconventional psychiatrist Mendel; and Juno McQueen is flawless as Jason, often the wisest character onstage. Coty Ross and Jessica Terán inject added dimensions to the second act as the lesbians next door.

I still treasure memories from Zach Theatre's 1994 staging of "Falsettos" with Joe York, Meredith Robertson, Wroe Jackson, Blake Yelavich and Scotty Roberts in the five lead roles. Now I will be eternally grateful to Scheps and Turner for reviving this LGBTQ+ classic which reminds me – and Austin audiences — that the show is every bit as edgy, funny and sweet as it was 30 years ago.





## Which shows count as LGBTQ+ modern classics?

It is fair to ask: Which LGBTQ+ modern classics should be revived next?

This following list does not include early plays such as "The Children's Hour" (1932), "Tea and Sympathy" (1953), "Cat on a Hot Tin Roof" (1955) or "The Killing of Sister George" (1964), which portrayed gay, lesbian or transgender characters as unavoidably maladjusted, self-loathing or doomed.

Nor does it encompass the bright wave of "camp light" entertainments — "Psycho Beach Party" (1987), "Pageant" (1991), "Naked Boys Singing" (1999), etc. — despite their self-evident charms.

Also off-limits for this list are major plays and musicals that debuted after 2000, such as "Take Me Out" (2002), "The History Boys" (2004), "Fun Home" (2013), "The Rolling Stone" (2015), "Southern Comfort" (2016) or "The Inheritance" (2019).

The following list covers major shows from the late 1960s through the 1990s that are candidates for revival. I record their premieres and revivals in New York and Austin. As always, update me at [mbarnes@statesman.com](mailto:mbarnes@statesman.com).

- **"The Boys in the Band"** (1968): This roiling comic drama by Mart Crowley about a birthday party among gay friends premiered Off-Broadway before inspiring a long stage run and a movie version directed by William Friedkin in 1970. Revived on Broadway in 2018. Remade into second movie in 2020. Austin premiere by Center Stage in 1972. No evidence of local revivals were found in our archives. That makes half a century without an Austin staging of this polarizing script that launched modern gay drama.



- **"The Ritz"** (1975): Terrence McNally's out-and-out farce set in a gay bathhouse did well on Broadway and was made into a 1976 movie directed by Richard Lester. Broadway revivals in 1983 and 2007. Austin premiere at Zach Theatre in 1982. Found no evidence of local revivals. It's been a while, so not sure if the humor ages well.
- **"Torch Song Trilogy"** (1978-1982): Harvey Fierstein's collection of plays deals with a Jewish drag performer and his personal relationships. The combined show made it to Broadway in 1982 and continued for a long run. Movie version made in 1998. Multiple New York City revivals. Austin premiere in 1991 by Inversion Repertory Company. Austin revival in 1999 by Public Domain Theatre Company. The full show is long, but I'm surprised nobody has taken it on more recently.
- **"Bent"** (1979): The Broadway premiere of Martin Sherman's drama about the Nazi oppression of homosexuals was led by movie star Richard Gere. Movie adaptation in 1997. Austin premiere in 2005 at the Blue Theater. Found no evidence of local revivals. Seems pretty timely, right?
- **"La Cage aux Folles"** (1981): After a few noble flops during the 1970s, hit composer Jerry Herman was back in fine form with this musical adaptation of the 1978 Franco-Italian movie by the same name about a drag nightclub on the Riviera. Austin premiere in 1991 by Capitol City Playhouse. Found no evidence of local revivals. It's a big show, but could be staged as a human-scale micro-musical.
- **"The Normal Heart"** (1985) Larry Kramer's searing indictment of mainstream media and the healthcare establishment in the early years of the AIDS crisis is as powerful as ever. Austin premiere in 1987 by Different Stages. Austin revivals in 2017 by City Theatre and in 2024 by Austin Rainbow Theatre.
- **"Angels in America"** (1991-1993): Tony Kushner's millennial epic set during the AIDS crisis is considered by some critics one of the 20th century's best plays. HBO movie version in 2003. New York revivals in 2010 and 2018. Austin premiere by Zach Theatre in 1998. Found no evidence of local revivals. At eight hours in two parts, it's a tricky one to revive.
- **"Jeffrey"** (1992) Paul Rudnick's Off-Broadway play was described disconcertingly as "a comedy about AIDS," which does not do it justice. Movie version in 1997. Austin premiere in by Capitol City Playhouse in 1995. Found no evidence of local revivals. Rudnick's quicksilver humor might not age well, but worth a look.
- **"Falsettos"** (1992) A pairing of "March of the Falsettos" and "Falsettoland," this musical opened on Broadway on April 29, 1992. Austin premiere in 1994 at Zach Theatre. Austin revival in 2024 at Ground Floor Theatre.

- **"Love, Valour, Compassion"** (1994-1995): As he did with his later and more controversial "Corpus Christi" (1999), playwright Terrence McNally explores the vagaries of gay friendships in this affecting, sometimes zany drama. Won the Tony Award for Best Play. Movie version in 1997. Austin premiere in 2003 by Zach Theatre. Austin revival in 2015 by City Theatre.
- **"Hedwig and the Angry Inch"** (1998): This glam-rock musical started Off-Broadway, but has rarely been far from the stage or screen in one form or another since it premiered. Movie version in 2001. Broadway revival in 2014. Austin premiere in 2002 by Zach Theatre (with Andrew Rannells before his breakout national stardom). Austin revival 2019 by Zach Theatre.

A word of thanks to the pioneering Austin producers and directors — Ken Johnson, Bil Pfuderer, Jim Fritzer, Dave Steakley, Michel Jaroschy, Norman Miller, Barry Pineo and Norman Blumensaadt among them — who introduced these modern LGBTQ+ classics here.

## 'Falsettos'

**When:** 7:30 p.m. Thursday-Saturday, 5 p.m. Sunday through Dec. 21

**Where:** Ground Floor Theatre, 979 Springdale Road

**Tickets:** Start at \$35

**Info:** [groundfloortheatre.org](https://groundfloortheatre.org)