



PHOTO: GLOBAL TELEVISION

TV'S HIT SHOW **GLEE** IS GIVING OUR TEENS SOMETHING TO SING ABOUT.

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WORDS TOM ZILlich

ou wanna talk glee?

Perry Ehrlich was positively giddy the moment his ShowStoppers choir hit the opening riff of Journey's ubiquitous hit, *Don't Stop Believin'*, at a Christmas party, and watched as a thousand delirious tech-company employees screamed along with the uplifting high notes.

Sure, the song's been massive since acid wash, but there was something in the air that December night during the set's final number, something totally *Glee*-ful.

"It was so magical, such a feel-good moment," recalls Ehrlich, the choir's high-energy director and, in his daytime hours, a lawyer at a Richmond firm.

"Somehow, you could really tell

people were into it because they knew the song from *Glee*."

Nobody really saw it coming, but *Glee*, the hit American TV musical comedy-drama show set in a high school, is credited for making choral singing and choreographed moves cool and popular again, and some local ensembles are riding the wave. The thing is, ShowStoppers first made a splash with the sounds of Motown and more contemporary pop hits 11 years ago, all under Ehrlich's watch.

Natalie Hall performed with the show choir during her teen years, shuttling from the North Shore to Richmond for ShowStoppers and also doing a couple dozen hours of dance and singing lessons each week.

"For me, it was in that awkward stage in high school," the cheery blonde told Look. "It was very similar to the whole *Glee* world on TV, where you're just trying to figure out who you are and you're not very popular but you have this common bond with all these people — a

love and passion for singing and theatre."

Today, Hall shines in a co-starring role on daytime soap *All My Children*, and credits her experience with ShowStoppers for pushing her in the performing arts direction, career-wise.

"She was with us for about six or seven years," Ehrlich recalls, "and was so enormously talented but humble, sweet and kind. She's the kid you'd hope would be successful, just because she's so lovely."

Hall was based in New York and touring with a production of *A Chorus Line* when she got the call to do AMC. The soap is shot in Los Angeles, so Hall moved there and struck up friendships with some of the *Glee* gang early in the show's history, including Victoria-raised Cory Monteith, who plays jock-turned-singer Finn Hudson, and Matthew Morrison ("Will Schuester"), whom she met in the off-Broadway world of theatre.

"It's just crazy how their lives have all changed," Hall marvels, "and they all deserve it because they're talented and →

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→very nice people.”

Despite the TV show's popularity and cultural impact over the past two seasons, not everyone on the Metro Vancouver choral scene is so enamoured of *Glee*, including Ehlrich, who tunes in only every so often.

“It's fun,” he says of the show, “but sometimes it becomes a little inane. What I do with ShowStoppers has been called cheesy, but our choir isn't nearly as cheesy as what's on that show.”

For the uninitiated, hour-long *Glee* episodes mix stories involving embattled groups of jocks, cheerleaders and glee-club singers with two or three show-stopping choral songs done with clever choreography — mostly reworked pop songs of today and yesterday. In some ways, it's the *High School Musical* crowd with a little more edge.

Erin Bishop doesn't watch *Glee* much, either, which is a bit surprising given her work with the eight-woman choral group Aliqua.

“I'm just not a huge TV watcher,” says Bishop, who has handled most of Aliqua's business since its inception a decade ago.

“There are some of us in Aliqua who totally love *Glee*,” Bishop continues, “and I guess I should probably really like it. I have seen lots of episodes, because it's on where I get my nails done,” she adds, laughing.

For Bishop, it's interesting to hear the best Hollywood arrangers and producers have a go at some of the songs they do on *Glee*.

“The show is actually depressing for a cappella pop groups, especially in the States, where there's a stronger tradition of that, because the music on *Glee* is obviously pre-recorded and mixed and perfectly performed, so well produced, and it's impossible to replicate that in concert. When I go to pick up sheet music at Long & McQuade, there are *Glee* songbooks everywhere, so you know there's a million choirs doing these songs, but they'll never sound as good as they do on the show. But yeah, the arrangements are cool — really good.”

Aliqua's music is cleverly arranged, too, and dizzyingly diverse. Who knew a cover of Etta James could sound so good next to a hushed version of Metallica's metal anthem *Nothing Else Matters*, followed by a French lullaby and a Polynesian bird-worshipping chant? Hear for yourself when the group performs its 10th-anniversary concert this spring at Vancouver Playhouse (watch for news at www.aliqua.com).

When Aliqua started out as a →



PHOTO ADAM AND KEV



PHOTO STEVE BOSCH/VANCOUVER SUN

The ShowStoppers choir share its infectious energy with pre-Olympic crowds at the Richmond Skating Oval. Top The women of Aliqua defy the genre of choral music.

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→post-high-school group with roots at West Vancouver Secondary, they resisted using the word “choir” to describe what they did, fearing negative reaction to such “nerdy” music. But now that *Glee* is such a hit, the game has changed somewhat.

“I have noticed that I’m less gun-shy now to use the terms choral or choir, because it’s a bit more socially acceptable now, not so much super-dorky,” Bishop explains. “That’s the one tangible thing that’s changed. What we do is not really like what they do on *Glee*, musically speaking, but the show has definitely opened up some kids’ eyes and maybe made them more likely to check us out — kids being teenagers.”

On a Sunday afternoon in a room at Roundhouse Community Centre in Vancouver, a dozen older teens and young adults are stretching to the music of Justin Timberlake’s *Rock Your Body* to warm up. It’s a mix of five guys and seven girls for this rehearsal, and soon everyone is oohing, aahing and buzzing their lips in synch with scales played on piano by Sara Zacharias.

Most of the singers in this new (and still unnamed) auditioned show choir know Zacharias from time spent in her recent *Glee* Camp, musical-instruction sessions launched in the summer of 2010 in reaction to, and inspired by, the TV show. In boot camp style, they rehearse and record choreographed versions of hit songs, giving participants a taste of that *Glee* life.

Now, Zacharias, a longtime musician who lives in East Van and teaches vocal lessons throughout the region, is taking things a step further with an auditioned show choir — one she hopes will compete and possibly tour one day, with much more emphasis on singing than choreographed moves.

“I’ve found a niche with this, yes,” says Zacharias, totally stoked by the idea of like-minded young people attached by a sort of musical glue. “Kids tell me how much the choir experience has changed their lives, because they never sang at home but always felt they had a voice but were really shy about it. One girl, who is about 22, said how great it was to get into a choir with others who love singing as much as she does, and you can just see the confidence blossom before your very eyes.”

Early into rehearsals at the Roundhouse, Zacharias instructs the group to sing solo and group versions of Cee Lo Green’s *Forget You*, a lyrically dirty number cleansed for the purposes of this fledgling show choir.

“I love that song — just so much attitude!” raves choir member Stephanie Appels, sporting a *Glee*-graphic sweatshirt, a sure sign of her fandom. She is, Zacharias tells me, a dancer who loves to sing, especially harmonies, and “practically lives for” singing with the choir and an adult “Gleeks” group Thursday nights at Douglas College in New Westminster.

At Richmond’s South Arm Community Centre, Sunday evenings are special for Ehrlich’s 20-member, gender-equal ShowStoppers group, most of them graduates of the Gotta Sing! Gotta Dance! summer program he has run at Vancouver’s Jewish Community Centre over the past 16 years.

“I turn myself into a pretzel to find performance opportunities for the choir,” says Ehrlich, who is slightly troubled that more local event planners, businesses and organizations don’t know about ShowStoppers and what the group is capable of on stage.

“These are talented kids, you betcha,” notes Ehrlich, clearly proud of his group.

“I’m lucky because there’s not much turnover (in ShowStoppers). They have to be committed, because we do 20 shows a year, and I choose them carefully, with that mix of talent but also grounded.”

There is a shift happening in the group, however, as some members are due to graduate from school and move out of the area for higher education, Ehrlich says.

A door is open with Zacharias’ group, too, though she’s already working with some young people who are vocally blessed — and totally into it.

“It’s so much fun right now, with the camps and the choir,” she says, “and it’s obvious that the kids are loving the experience.”

Yes, they’re positively gleeful. ●



TEEN TALENT

North Van’s Asha Diaz dreams of a life on stage.

At just 14, Asha Diaz is on the road to a promising recording career, with a dozen songwriting credits to her name and a newly release CD, *Jumpin’ Off*. Look caught up with the teen talent between classes at Handsworth secondary.

First big break was Harmony Arts Festival when I was 10 (2008). We call it “Harmony One,” because it is one of three I’ve performed at. **Writing songs** is how I communicate my opinion. People will listen to somebody if it is something pleasing to listen to. It helps me define who I am and who I want to be — it’s my voice in the hallways of a huge school. It’s also just fun. **I write about** being true to yourself. I’m interested in lyrics that are meaningful and smart and that resonate with people — pop songs are fun to listen to but I’m really into writing songs from the heart. **First real song I wrote** was *Cauliflower Clouds*. I was eight when I finished it, and nine when I performed it at the PNE. **Musical influence**

(Sony Music recording artist) Sara Bareilles is huge. Her chords, her lyrics, her everything. **Recording artists I’d like to work with** Sara Bareilles, mostly, but also Sarah Harmer, Colbie Caillat and Jason Mraz. **I’m listening to** *King of Anything*, by Sara Bareilles or *Letters* (acoustic) by Stroke 9. **I’m working on** writing a lot of songs, rehearsing for a big show at Centennial Theatre and working at Creativ Music as the vocal coach for their Pop Star Birthday Parties. **In 10 years** I’d like to be doing what I’m doing now on a bigger scale. Travelling, for sure. Living in Paris. Singing lots. **I feel really lucky** to have had so many people help me. Jim Kwan from Creativ Music has been my teacher for years. He has helped me so much with writing, singing, performing, recording. Also Pete Ryznar and my dad (Omar Diaz) have been playing with me since I was 8. I have had awesome support from the community around here. It’s really fun just to see how far I can go... ●



Natalie Hall belts it on Broadway during an AIDS benefit featuring ABC Daytime stars.

PHOTO: STEVE FENN/ABC

PHOTO: LORI MILES