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A rose for Charlie, in song

In Memoriam

By DEIRDRE FULTON | July 6, 2011

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CREATING A MEMORY Bruce Spang and Tom Wallace collaborate on *The White Rose*.  
On July 7, 1984, three teenagers threw 23-year-old Charlie Howard off of the State Street Bridge in Bangor. The openly gay man, who could not swim and had asthma, died in the Kenduskeag Stream below.

His death was part of the impetus for the formation of the Maine Lesbian and Gay Political Alliance (later known as EqualityMaine), and the crime (for which the perpetrators served about two years apiece in the Maine Youth Center) — and the life it took — is memorialized in Bangor every year.

Now, two local talents are preserving Howard's memory in a different way: through song and words, in *The White Rose*, an opera about salvation, forgiveness, and the lasting aftershocks of homophobia. Portland's Poet Laureate Bruce Spang and local musician Tom Wallace will present a preview of their unfinished collaboration on July 16 at the new Williston-Immanuel United Church on High Street. The program will feature the voices of the Maine Gay Men's Chorus and University of Southern Maine musical theater student Shane Brewster in the role of Charlie Howard.

Extensive research went into the project; Spang, who wrote the libretto, points out that much of the language in the opening trial sequence is taken verbatim from recorded testimony. He also spent time on Middle Street — an old cruising spot in Bangor — and absorbed the physicality, which led to the song "Middle Street" in the third act. Both men hope to someday see the production mounted on a larger scale.

Spang and Wallace both have personal connections to opera, and Howard loved musical theater (he was fond of singing selections from *La Cage aux Folles*, the groundbreakingly flamboyant Broadway musical). But this medium appealed to its creators for deeper reasons, too. "Song is redemptive," Spang says. "And this is a story about redemption."

He's talking not just about Howard, who comes to terms with his own identity through the course of the production, but also about "Rob," the character based on Jim Baines, one of

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On July 7, 1984, three teenagers threw 23-year-old Charlie Howard off of the State Street Bridge in Bangor.

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Howard's attackers. In real life, Baines went through something of a transformation after he was released from the Maine Youth Center, speaking out against discrimination and in favor of tolerance. *The White Rose* explores, in part, the moment at which Howard and "Rob" find their common humanity.

When mourners come to honor Howard, as they still do 27 years after Howard's murder, they often throw white rose petals (which he loved) from the bridge into the water. They create something beautiful where something ugly reared its head.

This new creative project attempts to do something similar. As Wallace says: "The opera is a white rose."

*The White Rose* | *The Maine Gay Men's Chorus season finale* | *Saturday, July 16 @ 7 pm* | *Williston-Immanuel United Church* | *156 High St, Portland* | *suggested donation \$10* | [mainegaymenschorus.com](http://mainegaymenschorus.com)

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**Kathryn Robyn**

Beautiful. And still timely.

*Posted: July 08 2011 at 10:39 PM*

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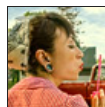
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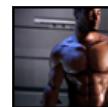
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