REVIEW

‘Vanilla Ice Spice’:
Henry Cohen navigates sex and the one-person play

// BY STEPHANIE ALTSCHUL


COURTESY OF SADIE SCHOENBERGER

On Henry Sims Cohen ’29

At a loss for questions to ask my good friend and campus celebrity Henry Sims Cohen ’29, I stripped the word count back. I asked him which three words might best describe him over a chicken burrito at 10 p.m. last Monday. He started on a tangent, introduced me to a friend passing by and named at least a dozen words I didn’t request. He finally gave me these three: “Vanilla Ice Spice.” “Vanilla Ice, like the rapper, and Ice Spice, like the rapper,” he said.

Forgive the periodical allusion, but “extra, extra,” may be two more words added to Henry’s description, although I think his endearing, relatable and uninhabitable demeanor may, ironically, exceed linguistic containment. To illustrate: when I sat down with Henry to discuss his upcoming one-man show, “To All the Boys I’ve Fucked Before,” we ended up discussing the queer experience, theater, Stonewall, the constraints of communication and “catching print” — a new internet pseudoscience in which one may attempt to measure the size of a penis through a “print” seen through pants.

On Influence

In addition to being a full-time student and actor starring in five shows this semester alone, Henry is somewhat of a celebrity on TikTok. He rejects responsibility for any influence he may have through this social media engagement. “I hope I’m not an influencer,” he told me. “I don’t want to encourage any of the behavior I show in my content.”

On ‘To All the Boys I’ve Fucked Before’

Henry’s one-man show, “To All the Boys I’ve Fucked Before,” is, at least on its surface, an hour of chaotic, deeply personal stories about Henry’s rich love life. He describes the show as a coming-of-age story through absurd, often uncomfortable memories. The show moves quickly between punch lines and confessions, the building blocks of what he calls “crazy sex stories that I know entertain people.” Henry knows that it’s not “a perfect piece of theater.” It’s a little too messy — too rough on the edges — and all the more charming for it.

As Henry puts it, audiences can expect to cry from “laughter, sadness or horniness,” but he wants to make sure audiences know what they’re getting into: “you’ll be stimulated intellectually, gutturally, or perhaps sexually,” he told me. “And also note that I do not get naked or touch you, so dampen your expectations.”

Despite all of these content warnings, the show, which was inspired by a short one-man play that Henry submitted as an assignment for his class, “Composing and Performing the One-Person Play” with professor Hal Brooks ’88, has become less about shock value than about making sense of his own life. His stories, however explicit, double as a lens through which to view identity, desire and what it means to grow up queer in a moment that is both highly visible and strangely isolating. Comedy holds the whole performance together, allowing Henry to approach themes that may otherwise feel too heavy — but never too personal.

On Theater

Henry has been drawn to theater since he was little. He talks about performance as both escape and self discovery, and he is drawn to “that whole high of being another person.” He’s unsurprisingly poetic about his theatrical history, its importance in his life and its ability to shape actor and audience in tandem. In a culture that’s increasingly self-centered, theater offers something unique.

“There’s something so powerful about being in a room of people you don’t know and doing something together,” he told me. “When the curtain goes down and the lights come up, you realize you lived through something together.” This, he thinks, holds true for both those on and off the stage.

On Individuality

Besides the roles that Henry plays, I asked him what about himself is unique. The question prompted another three-minute monologue on his hopes for society and his disappointment in our generation’s portrayal in media: “addicted to their phones, group texts to the whole school, super woke in a pejorative way, super wrapped up in things that don’t matter.”

“I wanted to offer a different reading of Gen Z life via my show” he told me, a reading that may be unique in some facets but is carefully and intentionally filled with shared experiences, emotions and laughter. Henry spent a few minutes explaining the semantic issue with uniqueness, and we were carried into yet another tangent with other late-night visitors of Good Nature Market.

On Jokes

In passing, Henry told me his greatest fear. “Every time I tell a joke, I worry that it’s the last joke I’ll ever tell,” he told me. “Jokes are always so spontaneous; there’s not a formula for a joke, it’s always something that’s just a little off in a funny way.” This, certainly, could double as a description for Henry himself.

On Homosexuality

Henry came out in seventh grade without a clear role model. Even in a moment of saturated queer visibility — “the age of Grindr,” as he puts it — he remembers feeling dissatisfied. Access to gay media doesn’t translate to understanding. “Being queer is an identity you have to seek out to learn about,” Henry told me. A lot of that process, as he tells it in his show, happened through sex.

“I’ve had sex with so many different kinds of people that I’ve learned so much about the world,” he says, only half-joking. In the show, those encounters become amusing stories that double as informal education. For Henry, these are moments where identity is clarified or complicated but never resolved. The humor keeps the show moving, but there seems to be an underlying question: What does it mean to live out a version of queerness that previous generations fought for?

“Now, you can quote this. I want to see you writing this one down,” Henry interrupted. “This is a sneak peak into my script.” He contemplated the wording for a second before vocalizing, “part of you feels that if you’re not taking 5 dicks every weekend, then what was Stonewall for? Marsha P. Johnson did not throw that brick so you can keep your legs closed.”

Henry’s show, “To All the Boys I’ve Fucked Before,” will be showing in the Nick Chapel Theater in Trumbull College April 16 through April 18.

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PERSONAL ESSAY

To be known

// BY REETI MALHOTRA

There’s a fairly decent chance that if you see me walking around campus or sitting in the library I’ll be accompanied by the same person: a sprightly blonde adorned in gold jewelry with a pair of wired earphones perpetually in her ears. We met at the beginning of freshman year. She is my best friend and, to the vast majority of our friends and acquaintances, the other half of our dynamic duo. (We do not refer to ourselves as a dynamic duo, to be clear.)

We talk about everything. She gauges my mood and what I am thinking before I have the opportunity to tell her. It’s comforting to be known like that, and also frustrating. I can never surprise her. I get angrier at the people who wrong her than I do the people who hurt me. She is, as far as I am concerned, my person and a second sister.

Even as I write this article, she is beside me.

We have often spoken about it, the phenomenon of our closeness. It is sometimes confounding and terrifying to me that we are so deeply intertwined when we only met a year and a half ago. But I can say, without a shadow of doubt, that she knows me as well as only my family does.

College is a strange place to meet a person like that — someone who, you know, will see you through life and you through theirs — when you’re dimly aware that they have no idea who you were before arriving on this campus. I do not know her hometown. Before March, she had never seen mine. She cannot comprehend the stories I tell her of my life before Yale. I can only vaguely imagine her life in Cullman, Alabama.

I had the privilege of bringing Sophie home over spring break. I’d concluded that bringing my friends home was futile a long time ago. Being known entirely, in all of my contexts, was an asymptotic pursuit. The day-long air journey and several-thousand-dollar round-trip tickets made the visit to Singapore a hypothetical and distant ambition.

But in January, I realised I hadn’t yet organized a spring break trip. As an international, I had nowhere to go; as a student fatigued by the first half of the semester, I wanted a reprieve from this campus. I rang my dad and rolled my eyes as he casually raised the possibility.

“Why don’t you and Sophie just come here?”

I dismissed the notion. It would be too expensive and I would indubitably get bored and then so would she. For a quick getaway, we could go to Bali or Thailand if the monsoon season had passed, but those were big ifs. Conditionals clouded the idea.

But prices were curiously low. With strategic miles maneuvers and discounts, I could get two round-trip tickets from Singapore to New York, from Singapore to Ko Samui — an island in Thailand — and an idyllic resort stay for the same price as my usual round trip home. Eyes-wide, I proposed the idea to Soph.

“It’ll be my first time in Asia,” she responded. I was stunned. She was on board.

Our friends lauded the trip with harmless envy. “You will have so much fun,” was the general refrain. “Are you going to club? Where are you going to take her? Tell me everything when you’re back.”

But when we returned to campus, and the inevitable requests for debriefs began in earnest, I had little to share. We did have our fun, yes. But what I will remember most is how Sophie became a part of all of my worlds in a manner that I feel little desire to share. She bonded with my parents; they consider her a new daughter under their wings. She became friends with my sister; she messages us both for advice now. When I woke up at 10 a.m. — the product of jetlag having struck my body — I found Sophie sitting in the living room, sipping chai with my parents, having already been up for hours.

Our bond became stronger. My best friend at Yale became my best friend everywhere. In the grand scheme of our lives, she has known me for less than 10 percent of my lifetime. But she has seen me through the highest highs and lowest lows, the home I left behind and still long for, the life I am building and wish to lead with her right next to me.

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