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'Altar Boyz' Fans Could Give Lessons to the Devout

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Between performances of "Altar Boyz" on Sunday, Tyler Maynard, who plays Mark in the show's five-member Christian boy band, strolled downstairs to mingle with his fans.

"There's a guy here who's dressed just like me," he said. The guy in question approached. Indeed, their shirts matched, and, Mr. Maynard exclaimed, "You even have my pants!"

"They cost \$175," said Rob Keir, a 14-year-old from Staten Island who was seeing the show for the fourth time. Though Mr. Keir went to the trouble of researching Mr. Maynard's costume, he was a relative novice at Altarholics Appreciation Day.

The event, at New World Stages, was not a fancy affair: sandwiches and sodas, some karaoke and a few prize giveaways. But it offered another chance for the faithful to chat with, photograph and look at their treasured Altar Boyz.

Caitlin Mabon, 21, has seen the show 15 times, though she lives in Omaha. Heather Ticotin, 19, has seen it more than 90 times. (It opened a little over a year ago.) The Altarholics usually sit in the cheap seats, which cost \$25, but seeing a show dozens of times is still a serious commitment.

The passionate fan base is not an unusual phenomenon in the theater district. "Jekyll and Hyde" had its Jekkees, and "Rent" its Rentheads, but the formula for "Altar Boyz" is a little more complicated.

For "Altar Boyz" is a spoof, a kind of "Spinal Tap" for boy bands. There are the exaggerated personas mocking the classic boy band marketing strategy: the Latino one, the bad one, etc. There are deadpan remarks at the expense of Lance Bass and Clay Aiken. Though the show is performed, as the creators like to say, without winking at the audience, it is saturated with irony.

There is nothing ironic, however, about seeing a show 90 times. Or getting a tattoo of the show's logo on your arm. Or spending thousands of dollars. Or volunteering to hand out promotional materials on the sidewalk in teeth-chattering weather.

Though many of the Altarholics, as they have christened themselves, said that they genuinely connected with the show's message -- roughly, that everyone needs a group to fit into -- they all get the parody, and find it funny.

But in what universe would a teenager have a chance to start up a continuing e-mail correspondence with their favorite member of 'N Sync?

"If I went to an 'N Sync concert, Joey Fatone's not going to go talk to me," said Lori Mooney, 24, who has seen the show 71 times. "Here it's, 'Oh my God, Mark's going to come talk to me!'"

The possibility of a base of hardcore fans -- and, what's more, fans from a younger demographic with disposable money -- was not entirely unexpected. Ken Davenport, a producer and one of the show's creators, saw a similar enthusiasm as a producer of "Forever Plaid," which lampooned male quartets from the 1950's.

"There's something about audiences wanting to see groups of guys singing together," he said.

He added that a young, computer-savvy fan base like the Altarholics can scatter their zeal widely through Web sites like LiveJournal and MySpace, a significant advantage for Off Broadway productions with limited marketing budgets.

"This helps us tremendously," he said.

The fans gained traction last year in the chat forum on the production's official Web site, www.altarboyz.com, where they discuss their favorite Altar Boy, parse the tiniest variations in performances and generally act like Backstreet Boys fans, albeit ones with extraordinarily good access.

In September, the producers had a party for the Altarholics at which they asked them for feedback on marketing. And in March, the production helped the Altarholics start their own Web site, Altarholics.com, where fans can earn "communion wafers" by completing various acts that display their devotion. The wafers can be traded in for CD's and, in the case of a truly prodigious number, voice lessons and dinner dates with cast members.

Some of the long-standing Altarholics are skeptical of the Web site, which gives rewards for things they had long been doing for sheer pleasure.

"It's interesting to be competing with other Altarholics," Cristen Curley-Edwards, 27, said warily. "I'm afraid a little bit of competition."

As for the cast members, they generally stay after the show, signing autographs and posing for pictures. The Altarholics are not intrusive like some of the other Broadway fanatics, several cast members said, and this few minutes of one-on-one time is what keeps them coming back.

Over the year the cast has gone through several changes, and the postmodern allure of a mock boy band with real fans has faded a bit. The chat now often concerns differences between replacements and original cast members, including a where-are-they-now.

One original altar boy, Ryan Duncan, turned a bit wistful at Altarholics Appreciation Day. "For a little while," he said, "it was like a real band.

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