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## FEATURES

### Faith in Porn

Ron Jeremy takes on Pastor Craig Gross in the Great Porn Debate

### Michael Mellini

On stage at the Lakeshore Theater, a short man with a recognizable mustache and long, greasy black hair shouts, "We're an 18-and-over business!" It's Ron Jeremy, he of many, many adult films (1,939 to be exact), in Chicago taking his "Great Porn Debate" on tour. Alongside Jeremy stands his opponent, Pastor Craig Gross. The two discuss how pornography affects society and whether it's helpful or not. Gross is against porn, of course, while Jeremy, well, really, really likes it.

But Gross isn't the fire-and-brimstone, elderly preacher one expects to stand up and blast the industry. Instead he sports a parted bowl haircut, a black stud earring, bright white shoes and an-ever-so-slightly loose pink tie. He looks more like a frontman from an emo band ditching Sunday school than a leader of a choir. Gross is the founder of XXXchurch.com, a Web site that aims to teach the problems of pornography and help addicts.

Gross is a frequenter of porn conventions and lets the audience know "I don't go to church to bash porn...I go to where the problem is...it's what Jesus would do."

"I'm a-a-a-a Jew!" Jeremy fake sneezes as a response to note his religious beliefs.

Topics range from youth learning about sex only from porn, feces porn ("you'll never see it in American porn," Jeremy says), priest pedophilia and the church's view on sex. "[Sex] is a gift from God," insists Gross, "and the church skates away from dealing with that." Conversation frequently comes back to what they call the "porn double-standard," claiming all male porn stars come off as heroes, while women are viewed as sluts.

The two are obviously friends and things are kept professional, yet comedic. "Ron's a great guy, I'd let him baby-sit my kids," says Gross. "I just don't agree with what he does for a living."

The audience (with only about six people over the age of 35), loves every second. People applaud and scream for points they agree with. Many are so eager to get their questions asked, they barely stay in their seats. A stuttering man rambles and shouts at Gross, "And you think everyone who doesn't believe in Jesus is going to hell!" (Gross never said this.) "Wait, what was your question?" someone shouts from the back. "Uh...there still hasn't been one," the moderator quips.

Jeremy cringes when asked the final question and notes it's "my Achilles heel." If he had a daughter would he let her do porn? His response: he hopes he would be able to provide a good enough life that she wouldn't need to, but if she really wanted to he'd allow it.

At the post-show meet-and-greet, most crowd around Jeremy to get autographs and pictures. "Ahh Ron Jeremy signed my boobs!" a woman shouts excitedly. Gross stands a few feet from Jeremy, as people exiting sincerely shout, "Nice job, man!" His crowd is smaller than Jeremy's.

*(2007-08-07)*

**Also by Michael Mellini**

**Playing Around**

Daniel Packard brings his "Live Group Sex Therapy Show" to

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the Lakeshore Theater July 26 and 27, in which he combines Q&A sessions, a bit of lecturing, approving/disapproving audience whistle-blowing and crowd conversation. Packard's show aims to divulge taboo topics (not to mention people discussing their personal affairs in front of hundreds of strangers), in hopes of improving sex lives and relationships (2007-07-24)

**Number One, With a Bullitt**

Surrounded by autographed movie posters of recent films like "The Departed," "Happy Feet" and "Ocean's Thirteen," several groups of well-dressed women chitchat with wine glasses in hand in the ballroom lobby of the Sheraton hotel. They're here for the 43rd Annual Chicago International Film Festival Summer Gala, honoring British actress Jacqueline Bisset (2007-07-20)

**Pizzaless Fest**

While hordes of people cram together chomping down on giant turkey legs at the Taste of Chicago, five and a half miles away on North Racine in Lincoln Park, a more subdued crowd gathers in a parking lot for Chicago's first ever Pizza Fest (2007-07-13)

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