



NIGHT CRAWLER

"Now when I'm cleanshaven, I feel like a little kid."

Hair Story

Combing the aisles at the World Beard and Moustache Championships

BY SILKE TUDOR

No, no, not by the hair on my chinny-chin-chin.
— from "The Three Little Pigs"

Time was that an oath made on a man's beard was as binding as blood. The beard, or its lack, denoted a man's position in society and his standing in the eye of God. According to **Aitan Peterkin's One Thousand Beards: A Cultural History of Facial Hair**, an insult to one's whiskers, such as that perpetrated by the Ammonite **King Hanum** on the Hebrew ambassadors of **King David**, could incite nations to war. Among the ever fashionable, ever fastidious nobility of Egypt, not even the faintest wisp of body hair was tolerated, yet their beards were legendary: Egyptian kings and queens alike adorned themselves with ceremonial

chin pieces dusted with gold, braided in plaits, and perfumed with oils. The Assyrians wore their beards layered in flowing curls, while the Persians preferred short, pointy beards, which they dyed red and threaded with gold. A style some defended to the death when the Tartars insisted upon a sudden change. The Greeks wore by their beards and held contests for coiffing. The Romans, while insisting their style was not as fussy or effeminate as the Greeks', introduced barbershops, where men shaved. The massive, two-wheeled gladiator scores and facial hair fashion tips. When **Julius Caesar** conquered the barbarians (a word meaning "bearded ones"), his first act of subjugation was a widespread shearing. In Europe, beards, mustaches, and sideburns went in and out of fashion with the fickle tide of politics, a dizzying reality that might have prompted the trend of various colors



Steven RaSpa.

owning fake beards of various colors became all the rage. It wasn't until the 20th century that the style and cut of facial hair ceased to be a mere act of fealty to church, lineage, or liege, and became something altogether different.

"My parents hate beards," jokes **Jürgen Draheim**, a full-time teacher who sports an expertly manicured, walnut-hued beard and mustache, along with collar-length hair, a feathered hat, a sword, and a blue velvet tunic with a white satin crest. If there was any doubt as to whether he styled his hair to match his outfit or chose this outfit to complement his beard, he carries a small stuffed bear with the same configuration of facial hair, a mode known to barbers as the "Musketeer."

"We all have the bears," says Draheim in a thick German accent. "I made them." **Karl-Heinz Hille**, a stately gentleman in a powder-gray flannel suit with a gray top hat and satin ascot, smiles and wags his own bear to underscore his dear friend's point. Like Hille, the bear is adorned with a white mustache that

fades into long whiskers growing out of the cheeks and styled upward toward the ears, like the haughty, imposing wings of a swan; the stuffed animal's chin is bare. The "Imperial," as such a beard is known, is indeed so.

"[Hille] says women will ask how he can sleep with such a beard," translates Draheim, who is also vice president of the **First Berlin Beard Club** of Germany. "He says, 'Any way they want him to.'"

Hille grins. All around me, German men with unrealistic facial hair and complementary outfits waggle their little bears and grin. I stop for a moment and look for a rabbit hole, but find only more beards and a ring of snow-capped mountains. I have not crashed through the looking glass but arrived in Carson City, Nev., just in time to watch competitors in the **World Beard and Moustache Championships** march in the Nevada Day Parade. As if to punctuate the point, two military jets rip through the icy blue firmament overhead: the beards and mustaches, some of them more than 3 feet from continued on page 16

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tip to tip, turn skyward and track the planes' progress like a surrealist sculpture garden reaching for twin suns.

When I first read about the WBMC, one name sprang to mind: **Steven RaSpa**. RaSpa is a grand character belonging to a short list of grand San Francisco characters that includes the likes of **Emperor Norton**, **Big Alma**, and the **Red Man**, people whose carriage and lifestyle became pure expressions of their internal world. RaSpa's world seems equal parts **Dr. Seuss**, **Salvador Dalí**, **Henry Darger**, and **Mervyn Peake**. Ridiculous in intention but elegant in execution, he adorns himself in capes, platform boots, bunny ears, top hats, fishnets, stiffs, tuxedos, potted plants, feathery frocks, fish, and classroom globes with equal aplomb, and manages to make a regal entrance, even

when it's only a conversation or someone's field of vision that he's entering. And yet there is an easy warmth and generosity of spirit about him that makes even the most pedantic brute feel right at home. Hugs and homemade cookies are bestowed upon new acquaintances and old friends alike, and words such as "wonderful," "splendid," and "miraculous" double their syllable count as they fall from his lips and stretch across the world like rose-colored gossamer. Still, it's the beard that most people remember. Two waist-length tendrils wrapped in wire coil and around one another like embracing serpents, ending in an adornment of his choosing (sometimes smiley faces, sometimes rubber turds, but most often daisies). The tendrils, one thick, the other willowy, are called **Preprostero** and **Imaginarja**, respectively, and are generally regarded by RaSpa as their own enti-

"You'd think I could grow something more practical, like corn or carrots."

tire. The entire beard he describes as a candy-coated treat, "soft and hairy on the inside, hard and wiry on the outside, and only recommended for those with an iron deficiency."

Of course, this was the beard that had to represent San Francisco.

I e-mailed him immediately. Unbeknownst to me, dozens of friends and admirers from all over the country had done the same. Sadly, RaSpa had already committed as producer and presenter of the **Headlands Center for the Arts** annual fund-raising ball, a large event, months in the planning. But the seeds had been planted; the campaign to get Steven RaSpa to Carson City was under way.

While he fretted over the decision, I attended the WBMC meet-and-greet. Representatives from Switzerland, Austria, Denmark, Hong Kong, Mexico, Italy, Germany, Sweden, and Norway descended on our fair city in unanimity for outlandish follicular expression. It was as

strange as one might imagine: a dark bar filled with facial hair that spilled out in swirls like heavy cream just added to coffee, or reached out like octopus tentacles, or pointed toward the ceiling in sharp 90-degree angles like inappropriate weather vanes; spikes, spires, and perfectly formed circles of hair that defied gravity and hovered inches above smiling faces. Two members of **Beard-O**, an old-timey music roadshow, began playing folk songs at the end of the bar, for the sheer love of beards.

"Isn't it exotic?" asked **Norman Larson**, whose cascading white beard is a local fixture in the Haight-Ashbury District and a point of discussion among the well-to-do on opening nights at **Davies Symphony Hall** and the **San Francisco Opera House**. Despite language barriers, everyone I met seemed to possess a familiar warm, lyrical quality.



Top honors went to Karl-Heinz Hille (right); he stands with Jürgen Draheim.



Heddesheim, Germany's Heinz E. Christophel was awarded the People's Choice Award.

I went home and e-mailed RaSpa again, only to find that he had also attended the meet-and-greet.

"I had to see what they were like," gushed RaSpa over the phone. "These other men who choose to work in a medium such as this."

I offered him a ride to Carson City and a shuttle to the Reno airport, if he still needed to attend the **Headlands Mystery Ball**.

"It's like a morality play, isn't it?" mused RaSpa. "The internal vs. the external journey. Here, I will be contributing to my community, but in Carson City, I might discover something about myself."

At the 12th hour, RaSpa agreed to accompany me to Nevada, just for the parade. The costume selection took another hour, but was sprinkled with a fanciful display of striped, spindly-fingered gloves and such charming quips as, "You'd think I could grow something more practical, like corn or carrots, so I could at least feed myself."

"I grew my first beard five years ago, in honor of my best friend's father, who died in a plane crash," explains Anchorage, Alaska's **Mr. Fur-face 2000**, **David Traver**. Traver, diminutive in stature but large in heart and even larger in beard, is an easy favorite among the contestants, and possessing of the same whimsical nature that seems to imbue all the wildly bearded men gathered in Carson City.

"Now when I'm cleanshaven, I feel like a little kid," says Traver, "but I have an agreement with my wife. I shave off my beard every two years so she can see my face. In between, I've won a few contests."

The titles are carved into a staff made of a caribou antler that Traver carries — a nice addition to the buckskin jacket, mukluks, and giant fur hat he wears — but titles are not his aim.

"These nice people are worth the trip," assures Traver, who works for the VA back home. "Don't you think? They're all so great." Amidst the **Fu Manchus**, **Dalis**, **Garibaldis**, **Verdis**, **Musketeers**, and **Imperialis**, RaSpa's daisies flit from person to person like agitated moths. Torn between his majorette outfit and a tuxedo, RaSpa has opted for the more subdued of the two "out of respect for the forum," topped with a silver and white-feathered cape and a felt hat crowned by a butterfly, but there is no downplaying the beard. Even here, RaSpa's facial ornamentation is an eccentric tour de force, and he is immediately surrounded by fellow beards and photojournalists.

His eyes say, "Isn't this splendid?" even while his mouth says, "I should have worn the majorette uniform."

Given instructions from event producer **Phil Olsen**, himself the possessor of a full beard in the natural category — beard flowing, mustache integrated, no artificial styling aids — the contestants line up in alphabetical order by country of origin and prepare to march before 40,000 bemused Nevadans.

It's a parade. Like any other parade. School floats, balloons, military might, donkeys, churches with crucified Jesus floats, flag-waving, canon salutes, clowns. But RaSpa is vibrating by the end.

"I must put on the majorette uniform!" I fetch the rolling suitcase from the car, and RaSpa changes at the end of the street and struts back up the parade route in all his San Francisco glory: red, white, and blue sequined leotard; black and white star-spangled platforms; a red, white, and blue train of feather boas; a shiny white majorette hat; fishnets; and, of course, Preprostero and Imaginarja.

"I love your beard," shouts a white-haired woman barbecuing in front of her RV. continued on page 18



Beard-O.