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Michigan: two camps face off over trans inclusion

R.J. Grubb

With only a mile of dirt road between them, campers at Michigan Womyn's Music Festival (MWMF) and Camp Trans pitched their tents for another aching feud in northern Michigan earlier this month. Stuck in a stalemate, both sides headed home without resolution.

Peace is a painful work in progress. Nearing a decade old, the feud between those who support Michigan's controversial "womyn-born-womyn" (WBW) admission policy and those who argue that it excludes and demeans trans women has not lost its ardor with age. With heated debates and ongoing protests, it's become a symbol of an enduring and tumultuous conflict between the lesbian and transgender community.

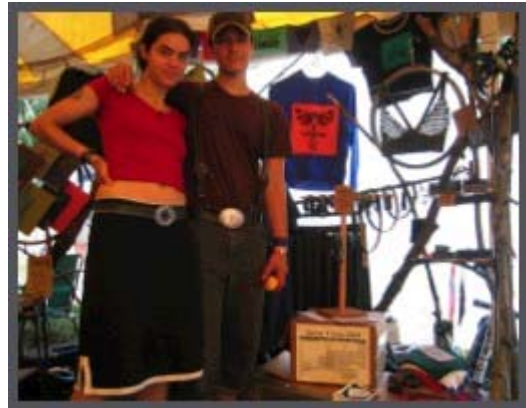
"It's not about one week in the woods," said Sadie Crabtree, strategic organizer at Camp Trans. "It's about the ripple effect that impacts feminist and women's and lesbian communities across the country."

Although celebrating its twenty-eighth year with a concoction of music, community and female empowerment, MWMF again found itself overshadowed by what's known as the "trans controversy." Across its pastoral 650 acres - called "The Land" - people talked on the downlow about low attendance and how the performer lineup felt weak. Some gathered to commiserate about being ostracized back home for attending. Others openly feared for the festival's future. If one asked festival workers where Camp Trans was located, some gave a polite answer. Others glared at you like you were an asshole.

But there were also people - like Ami Puri - who shined hope. Wedged into a painful gray middle, a growing number of people are coming out as respecting the origin of the festival and its feminist principles while pushing for Michigan to adapt and change. Working from "inside" the fest, they hope to influence a collective shift in attitudes that hasn't been accomplished by confrontational protests and boycotts. Like accidental ambassadors, their appeals ask people to reconsider their judgments and expand their sympathies.

"I don't support the policy but I choose to be here at this point and talk about it inside even though it's very stressful for me and I'm not sure it's the right way to support change," said Puri, a festival artisan who sold belts and metal bracelets crafted from old bike cogs and chains. "But this is where I want to be and this is how I want to do it."

Puri's decision is not popular. As Bryan Burgess, a Michigan worker, explained, "If you're a person in a trans community, you don't say you're going to Michigan. It doesn't fly well."



Seda Rhodes and Ami Puri in their booth: Byketrash



Camp Trans attendees

Associating with both camps, Puri, who identifies as gender queer, gets heat from both sides. When Puri arrived at Michigan to unload with his girlfriend Seda Rhodes, they were too late to enter the gates at Michigan. Puri drove up the road and stopped at Camp Trans to park for the night. With few campers present, he thought it would be fine. But restricted to Camp Trans attendees only, they asked the couple to leave. With a nod of irony, Puri said, "I felt super rejected."

Nonetheless, at his booth called Byketrash, Puri posted a schedule of Camp Trans and provided fliers on the trans controversy that he eventually took from the camp. Throughout the festival, people grabbed the information and asked questions. "It seems like they know something is going on and they know something is up but they don't feel like they even know what trans folks are or they don't even know what the policy is," said Puri. "They want to ask what I'm doing here and if I've been hassled."

Last year, Puri was hassled. Back then, while in line to wash dishes after dinner, Puri was "attacked" by festival security. Unable to see Puri's wristband since he was wearing it on his ankle, security wanted Puri to leave. Quick mediation diffused the situation. Afterward, security apologized.

But this year proved more encouraging. While presenting a festival sanctioned workshop on bicycle repair, Puri wore a T-shirt that read: "Trans bodies are gorgeous." People reacted positively. "I only got great comments," he said. "People asked where I got it and stayed after to talk about trans stuff in a positive way."

Dichotomies are ever-present in this debate. Male/female. Pro-Michigan/Pro-trans. The sense is you can't be both. Yet to build bridges, it's necessary to straddle.

"So many people say that the only way to affect change is to boycott completely and I don't believe that," said Rhodes. "I think it's really important to be creating connections and bridges and not have it be like 'this side' and 'that side'."

A place of privilege

Though the tranquil backdrop of tangled trees and unpaved roads remains the same, Michigan's festies hardly resemble politically correct Birkenstock feminists. Sure, the women - mostly lesbians - still popped their tops en masse. But festies now include many bearded women, people who no longer identify as female, and presumably people taking T. As a whole, Michigan looked like a mushrooming gender queer community.

"I really love how gender queer this festival is despite the fact that it's supposed to be all women," said Puri. "I come to this place and pronouns get totally thrown out the window more than anywhere else I've hung out, except trans places. That's been a shocker for me and other people."

It's a visual paradox. For some, it imparts hope for change. For others, it's a thorny dynamic that presents a smokescreen of revolution. As Crabtree, explained, "If you're saying that trans guys are still dykes, then you're saying that trans women are not. That's hurtful to the inclusion of trans women in lesbian and women communities."

Exasperating dialogue about the festival's apparent inconsistencies is that Michigan reeks of calm. Lulled by the quietness of the space, author/poet Michelle Tea admitted that she once tried working from the inside but took a reality check.

"I have always been against the policy but for a while I thought I could work from the inside and still attend the festival," she said. "I stopped because I felt like I wasn't actually making a difference. It was way too easy to be lulled by the peacefulness of 'The Land', the feeling of community, not wanting to deal with the problem."

This year, Tea spent three days at Camp Trans covering the camp as a reporter for Dave Eggers' magazine *The Believer*. Though she "misses Michigan", she refuses to enter "The Land" until the policy is changed.

Amazon rising and falling

It's no coincidence that Michigan - however slowly - appears to be making an identity shift at the same time that transgender activists call for it to adapt or fold. Hard transitions have hit every '70s feminist-born establishment in the country. In Boston, for instance, New Words bookstore and Sojourner newspaper were forced to close after three decades of economic and social change.

Post-feminism, the fest has arguably lost its bite. Yet ever since transwoman Nancy Jean Burkholder was kicked out of Michigan in 1992, "The Land" has never been the same. Though the festival's organizer Lisa Vogel issued a public statement in the publication "Lesbian Connection", workers and festies have largely taken the matter into their own hands. As such, Michigan has adopted an implicit "Don't Ask, Don't Tell, and Don't Show" policy toward trans women. In protest, Camp Trans opened a rustic educational camp a mile away in 1994 that runs simultaneously with MWMF.

Today, Camp Trans fends off its own critics. With only six trans women among attendees last year, people quip that it's become "Camp Tranny Boy." Plus, advancing its own exclusionist policy, Camp Trans has designated spaces that are off limits to people with Michigan wristbands.

"It sends a message that Camp Trans is not a suburb of Michigan," explained Crabtree. "It wasn't to stigmatize people who go to the festival, but to help them think a little more critically about what it means to give hundreds of dollars to a transphobic organization in exchange for the permission to do activism inside, and what it means to speak in a space where other voices are not allowed, and what it's like to have a space that specifically excludes you."

Perhaps the biggest hurdle for Camp Trans to transcend is the festival's sense of sacredness. In fact, asking long-time festies to talk about the controversy met with a wall of impenetrable purity. Many preferred to focus on how radical the festival remains. And it's true. Equipped with 700 workers, the festival produced a seamless affair for its roughly 4000 campers this year. Considering the coordination from staging to lighting to cooking three meals a day, it's an awesome accomplishment.

Then there's the personal testimony. One worker, who has attended for the past seventeen years said, "When I get here one of the amazing things is that I forget that I'm a woman. I feel more like a person." Many people described it as "a rite of passage." People spoke of it as a "safe space." A path to define oneself as female and as a woman, which does not exist elsewhere. It's also common to see people in wheelchairs happily climb hills and rocks for the opportunity to camp. With sign language interpreters for each performance, a contingent of deaf women smiled in the front rows at riveting musical performances. And adolescent girls described it as "the best part of their year."

"Really amazing stuff happens here," said Burgess. "It's a place worth preserving and a place of so much hope."

More telling was how one woman flatly told this reporter, "This is your issue. Not mine." The evasion gave the sense that after fighting the festival's various internal fights - from separatism to SM - this woman was tired. Perhaps she didn't even have the language to talk about it.

Gender 101

While attending a Michigan workshop on gender last year, Bonnie Fenton realized that something fundamental was missing. "We weren't even talking the same language," she said. "It became real clear to me that if you're not doing that, then how do you even start the conversation?"

Four years ago, Fenton, 58, came to Michigan for the first time. At the time, she had ended a long marriage and fell in love with a woman. She described herself as a "late in life lesbian."

This year, along with Bryan Burgess, 26, Fenton co-led an intergenerational workshop called Gender 101. Expecting 20 people, 120 showed. Fenton and Burgess looked overwhelmed by the nonstop flow of people into the workshop. Astutely, one woman remarked, "Maybe you hit the nail on the head."

Designed as a way for women in their 50s and 60s to talk with women in their 20s and 30s, the workshop shaped itself as a conversation; not a debate. But before the end, the dialogue delicately wrapped itself around the controversy.

Having just read Kate Bornstein's "Gender Outlaw", Fenton has recently begun familiarizing herself with gender theory and transgenderism. Burgess, on the other hand, who identifies as gender queer, has been immersed in the boon of gender theory. Yet, Fenton acknowledged, she never questioned gender. Only with the help of her 27-year-old daughter's eyes did she begin to look at gender differently.

Burgess, however, came to the workshop as a means to encourage people to talk and progress to a solution. "My motivation came from being here last year and having this conversation over and over again ad nauseam and realizing that the conversation was at a complete stalemate," said Burgess.

Though a couple people criticized the workshop for having an agenda, many more approached Fenton afterward and thanked her. Buoyed by the positive feedback, both are planning to pitch an intensive gender workshop next year.

Of course a next year without trans inclusion runs contrary to the aims of Camp Trans. But even Crabtree acknowledged that the problem isn't going away soon. Instead Crabtree is busy building a reliable base of committed activists and devising ways to improve Camp Trans. Michigan, presumably, is taking a vacation before inviting performers for its next festival.

It seems safe to say that, come next August, with only a mile of dirt road between them, MWMF and Camp Trans will pitch their tents for another aching feud in northern Michigan.

RJ Grubb is a staff writer at Bay Windows. Her e-mail address is rjgrubb@baywindows.com.

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Going to the Chapel in Toronto **POPULAR**

BY R.J. GRUBB | JULY 3, 2003



During the last weekend in June, half-a-million people converged at the raucous and wild street festivals of Toronto Pride. Yet located a few miles from the fun, others gathered at an unusual spot to witness gay history in the making.

That spot was Toronto City Hall. Normally closed for the weekend, the

building reverberated with foot traffic that rivaled a Las Vegas chapel on Valentine's Day. But rather than slot machines and Elvis, camera crews from CNN, ABC News, and the international media jockeyed for positions to capture the biggest news story of the weekend: same-sex marriages.

"I didn't know there was so many media," said Teresa Tedesco, Director of Legislative Services for the Toronto City Clerk's Office.

Working overtime, Tedesco and her staff opened City Hall - and its wedding chamber - from 11 a.m. to 5 p.m. on June 28 and 29 to accommodate Canada's groundbreaking June 10 court ruling legalizing same-sex marriage in Ontario. A three-judge Ontario appeal panel defined marriage as "the voluntary union for life of two persons to the exclusion of all others." The ruling stated that denying same-sex couples access to a fundamental societal institution like marriage discriminated on the basis of their sexual orientation and violated their Charter equality rights. Immediately following the court's decision, Tedesco and her staff were instructed to remedy the wrong. Despite the weekend hours, city employees appeared pleasant and excited.

"Since it coincided with Pride, people asked us to stay open and we agreed to the hours," said Tedesco. "The staff is quite pleased and we wanted to allow this opportunity for people. We think the timing is right."

Since the ruling, the City Hall licensing office has been busy. On June 28, straight and gay couples seemed to arrive every five minutes while ceremonies took place every 30 minutes. According to Tedesco, her staff has issued 1565 marriage licenses, including 247 for same-sex couples since June 10. Twenty-seven couples were American. Filings by same-sex couples were expected to soar throughout the weekend and in coming weeks. While most couples made appointments, the staff processed walk-ins and accommodated as many couples as they could.

One such couple was Ashley and Dana Morgan. The 22-year-olds enjoyed a commitment ceremony back home in northern Virginia. However, upon hearing of the Canadian court's

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ruling, they immediately drove to Canada.

"It's always been my dream to be legally married," said Ashley. "When we heard, it was a split-second decision."

The step was essential, Dana explained, since they want to secure their rights as parents. "We want to have children," she said. "It's important that we have the same rights as other married couples."

Of course the big question on everyone's lips was whether or not the marriages will be recognized in America. While Canadian marriages are generally authorized in the U.S., the question is hotly contested since no state legally recognizes same-sex marriages. Plus if a state does suddenly sanction same-sex marriages, the federal Defense of Marriage Act permits states to refuse a gay couple's marriage in another state. To further buttress conservative agendas, five U.S representatives recently introduced the Federal Marriage Amendment, a proposed constitutional amendment that would ban gay marriage. Days ago, Senate Majority Leader Bill Frist supported the measure.

Though American couples acknowledged their ambiguous plight, they kept arriving at City Hall. Like the Morgans, they appeared determined to proceed despite the uncertainty.

"It's going to be a big battle," said Ashley. "I can't imagine what's going to happen but, to be honest, a straight couple can get married in Canada and they don't have to be remarried when they come back home."

Stopping by City Hall to witness the extraordinary scene, Canadian resident Matthew Krisko applauded its participants and its dogged American couples.

"I think it's great that these people are challenging the status quo and willing to go ahead with it," he said. "And I think it's great that American couples are coming here even though they don't know how their marriages will be recognized. They're still willing to do it and that's wonderful."

In the Canadian press, local reaction to the ruling is mixed. While many newspaper articles heralded the decision, local papers like the Toronto Star balanced its coverage by running an article about gay couples who said "I Don't." The story included interviews with local same-sex couples opting against marriage. One lesbian newspaper columnist speculated that on a list of things to do, marriage ranked alongside "watching paint dry." Religious conservatives weighed in by renaming the Pride Parade the "AIDS Parade" and condemning the court's decision.

Despite the criticism and ambivalence, when Dale Glover and Wanda Winfield drove down Yonge Street in a black convertible during the June 28 Dyke March, people crowded their car and enthusiastically cheered the couple as if they were rock stars. Many in the crowd, however, confused the couple for Elaine and Anne Vautour - the first same-sex couple to be married in Canada by the ancient Christian tradition of banns in 2001.

Michael Leshner and Michael Stark, one of the seven same-sex Canadian couples who filed the landmark lawsuit seeking the right to marry, were similarly greeted by throngs of people who reveled in their sight during the Pride Parade. Infamous, the pair is known as "the Michaels." Reached by phone after the parade, Stark described the moment as amazing.

"Even if as a gay or lesbian person you're not interested in marriage, I don't think you could help but be swept away by the momentum and the enormity of the ruling," he said. "To know that we now have full equal legal protection and that there are no more barriers from a legal point of view in Canada is an amazing thing to say."

Enjoying new distance from the hard-fought victory, Stark acknowledged that it's already feeling like old news and painted a hopeful future for gay Americans.

"It's been 20 days since the decision, but it seems like a lifetime since so much has happened," he said. "But you know, the sky hasn't fallen like they said. We had a tremendously successful gay Pride despite SARS. Life is going on. And you look back and think, 'What was all the fuss about? Why did we have to fight so many years for this?'"

"So I'm sure you just have to keep fighting down there," he continued. "There'll be ups and downs but in the long run, justice will prevail."

RJ Grubb is a staff writer at Bay Windows. Her e-mail address is rjgrubb@baywindows.com.

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Media hype spotlights transgendered memoir

R.J. Grubb

Haven't heard of Jennifer Finney Boylan? You will. Though she's authored a handful of books, Boylan's eighth, called "She's Not There: A Life in Two Genders" (DoubleDay), has sparked a media blitz. Recently Oprah Winfrey's camera crews hit the campus of Colby College where Finley is the co-chair of English. The Today Show also plans to air a segment that spotlights Boylan. In the works are feature articles in Vanity Fair and Newsweek. "She's Not There" comes clean about Boylan's experiences as a transgendered person. But why is this book - which won't be published until July - getting so much attention? Boylan says it's because she wrote a damn good book. But it could also be that she's best buds with 2002 Pulitzer Prize author Richard Russo, who coincidentally contributed the epilogue for "She's Not There." Whatever the reason, it clearly shows an increased interest and comfort with transgendered issues by the mainstream media. Recently, we caught up with Boylan in central Maine where she lives with her family to talk about gender, her new book, and why she's an academic and not an activist.



Jennifer Finney Boylan

RJ: Hi Jenny.

JB: Hi RJ. Oh, you're a woman.

RJ: Yes, I am.

JB: Well, we're already getting along much better.

RJ: That's fantastic. But why so quick?

JB: I just thought that RJ Grubb was going to be some angry guy local journalist that has too many things to do. That you were going to be this tough journalist guy with his sleeves rolled up and ink on his elbows yelling at me to explain myself. But instead, look, we're friends.

RJ: People always assume that I'm a man.

JB: That's the interesting thing. And by the way, we're already talking about the story. Why is it that people think RJ and think a man? Even me, little Ms. Diversity, I'm not subject to same gender prejudices that all other humans on earth are? Wrong. We all are. Everybody has something to learn. Okay, what do you want to know?

RJ: Let's talk about your new book She's Not There. What's it about?

JB: The subtitle is A Life in Two Genders. It's about my experiences as a transgendered person. It will be published in late July.

RJ: But you've already got quite a buzz?

JB: They're really taking over the world with this one. I've never seen anything like this. We're talking, I got two Oprah Winfrey shows, the Today Show, an article in Vanity Fair and Newsweek. Book of the month. It's a big transgender bloodbath.

RJ: That's a lot of pre-release press. Why do you think you're getting all this attention?

JB: Maybe because the book is so wonderful? Or maybe because nothing gets journalists more excited than sex change because they think it will be lurid and titillating but the shocking thing is that I'm way normal like everyone else. And maybe it's because my friend [Pulitzer Prize winner] Richard Russo is my closest friend and I wrote about that relationship in the book. Russo writes the last chapter, the afterword of the book. So at any rate, the book is poised to get a lot of attention. But on the other hand you know how books are. It could yet be one more splash flop. So we'll see.

RJ: Why do you think transgendered people are such a hot topic in the mainstream now?

JB: You probably found this from your own experience but in a large way transgendered stuff is going through some of the same stuff that the gay and lesbian stuff went through a good twenty, thirty years ago. But people are finally kind of getting it and going, 'OK. Right.'

RJ: And not just straight people but gays and lesbians are finally kind of getting it too, right?

JB: For a while, progressive lesbian feminists thought of transsexuals, MTFs, (male to female transsexuals) as people who were colonizing sacred female space. That transsexuals were essentially a wolf in sheep's clothing. That it was a patriarchy in its most horrifying form. People who believed that had eaten one too many theory vitamins. There are still a couple of these characters out there. But what's so interesting is that in the last five years there's been a change in how we see transgendered people and part of that is because there are more MTFs. There are more people born female going the other way and who identify distinctly from the lesbian and dyke community. We've all become a little more sophisticated about it. It's interesting that among certain older generations there's a sense that transgendered people are just whack jobs. But my sense is that more and more people get it. There's been enough stuff out there that I didn't have to make people think that I invented it when I came out at Colby.

RJ: When did you come out at Colby and how was that experience?

JB: I'll say this about Colby, I am not the college transsexual, which is also a thing that I think has changed. I'm an English teacher. I'm the co-chair of English at Colby. A novelist and a short story writer and I teach fiction and screenwriting. That's what I do.

RJ: Are you involved in any queer organizations on campus?

JB: Queer means different and the whole point is that we're the same if you ask me. Again, I'm not some gender theorist but the entire point about understanding gay, lesbian, intersex, and transgendered people is that we're sons and daughters, mothers and fathers, teachers and students. We're people who are real familiar to most people. Let's talk about our agendas. My agenda is getting my kid to put his clothes on. Shocking revelations!

RJ: This brings up a big divide in the LGBT movement regarding whether or not to assimilate or differentiate from the norm.

JB: Right. Well, look, I celebrate anyone's right to live their life according to their own heart. It's no one's business to pass judgement. Period. The reason we study diversity is because it is hard to understand people who are different than we are. If you don't understand what makes people different, then it's very hard to understand what makes them the same.

RJ: And also just to have a simple dialogue about difference. I mean, how are we going to increase understanding and awareness if we don't talk about it?

JB: Yes, but my feelings about this are primarily pragmatic not theoretical. We become better people

when we understand those who are different from ourselves. That's not all we do at a college. That's not our only mission. But I'm here to tell you that everybody - even college professors - have something to learn. None of us - especially college professors - wants to admit that we are in a state of ignorance. But I am here to tell you that there are a lot of things that people still don't understand and that lack of understanding isn't some abstract thing. It's something that puts people's lives in danger and it affects every waking minute of the day. It's a fear that I faced for 12 years at Colby, which I no longer face. In the end, Colby turned out to be very generous and compassionate to me. I was grateful and amazed by that. It may well be that if I came out at any earlier period in the college's history, then things would have been different.

RJ: How so?

JB: I came out in the summer of 2001. Quite frankly I will tell you that when I came out, the response that I got was generally 'Thank God, it's that you're only a woman. I was afraid it was something serious.'

RJ: Were they worried about your health at the time?

JB: They knew something was up and they were worried that it was something terrible. People were worried about me, and I didn't talk about it until I was ready to. But when I was ready everybody was very accepting and I'm grateful.

RJ: That's a rare story that I don't usually hear from transgendered people.

JB: I don't think it's rare. In some ways, I think people are more accepting of transgendered people than they are of gay and lesbian people because the question of identity is maybe a little easier to get your mind around than the question of sexuality.

RJ: Given that you must be a high profile person on campus, especially with Oprah's camera crews wandering around, do questioning students ever seek you out for advice?

JB: No. In my case, it is what it ought to be. It's a non-issue. Every week about 25 to 30 students ask to talk with me. But it's always about how to get into an English course or they want to know what I think about their short story or will I want to read their novel. No one wants to talk about gender.

RJ: But I think you would be a fabulous resource on that topic.

JB: I can't say that there haven't been a couple people, but people are generally more sophisticated than we think. And young people in general are more sophisticated than their professors. We have a saying among teachers in fiction writing which is 'Show. Don't tell.' Yes, we are telling people to learn about people who are different than you are. Talk to people. But there's also some ways that showing is just as important. The simple act of walking around and living your life and demonstrating that you are living your life full measure has an impact on people. And quite frankly I think that in my own case that teaching writing, teaching English and being a mentor and a friend makes a much bigger impact than any lecture that I could give. The thing that people react to is not the speeches on gender that I give, because I don't give speeches on gender. People react to the fact of my existence.

RJ: Given that you're an academic and not an activist, do people accuse you of being a cop out?

JB: Some people say 'Jenny, it's a cop out that you're not that radical.' They ask, why aren't you out there marching and manning the barricades? And I say the most revolutionary thing about me is that I'm normal. In me, you see pretty much what you would see in most other women. It's not the revolution you fight. It's the revolution you live.

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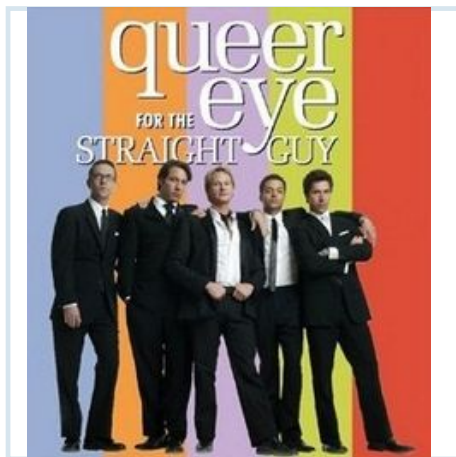
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HOME / NEWS: If you can't beat 'em, sell to 'em



If you can't beat 'em, sell to 'em

BY R.J. GRUBB | MARCH 25, 2004



If you watched "Queer Eye" last week then you may have caught Thom Filicia, the show's decorating guru, in a television ad as the new Pier 1 spokesman. But don't be surprised. As far as gay celebs go, Filicia is just one among many queers hawking housewares and cars to the general public.

Times sure have changed. Back in the '80s, ABC lost \$1 million in advertising revenue when "thirtysomething" depicted two gay men in bed. And who can forget the media frenzy during Ellen's star-studded coming out episode when sponsors, like Chrysler and J.C. Penny, pulled their ads from the episode.

But that's all history. It's now a brave new world for mainstream marketing and gay stars. Still, let's not lose our perspective. It's not like Filicia is throwing a football through a tire and saying, "Gay men could use Levitra." Not even close.

All the same, this increased media visibility and crossover appeal arguably marks progress for gay and lesbian equality. But these ads are also a clear indicator of how far the gay movement has embraced a political strategy based on sameness.

"Right now, in this very exciting moment, there really is evidence that a different kind of political strategy is proving arguably more effective than the older strategy which was emphasizing difference than commonality," explained Edward Turk, a Comparative Media Studies professor at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. "It's nonetheless a very effective way for people to embrace queerness in an unthreatening way."

Light and silly, the new Pier 1 ad is harmless. Playing the stylish gay stereotype, Filicia proves the perfect decorator and single-handedly fulfills an age-old female fantasy of his client. In the end, he evens gets an awkward peck on the cheek from his thankful client.

Progress? Or progress paradox? Despite the differing opinions, Filicia -along with rockers k.d. lang and Melissa Etheridge, designers Isaac Mizrahi and Todd Oldham, actor John Cameron Mitchell, and former football player Esera Tuaolo - is among the new team of gay stars cashing in on their sudden cool gayness and marketability.

These gay celebs tread into marketing territory once solely occupied by Martina Navratilova. The main difference being that Navratilova was strictly used by Subaru to target gay car

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buyers. Remember the ad: "Get out. And stay out."

Those were the days when the Wall Street Journal called the lesbian and gay community "a dream market." Back then, advertisers termed gay couples, D.I.N.Ks: double income, no kids. Buying potential was perceived as endless. Yet, a decade later, the queer community traded luxury items for kids as more gay families with children began to emerge.

Add greater representation via popular television shows like "Will & Grace," "The L Word," and Alan Ball's superb HBO drama series, "Six Feet Under," and retailers are increasingly using openly gay and lesbian celebrities as their human brands. k.d. lang, for one, participates in Audi's new "Never Follow" ad.

Twenty years ago, who would have predicted this mass media trend? Turk admitted he never had. Yet, despite the nagging stereotypes prevalent in mainstream advertising, he sees the trend as presenting a silver lining.

"One can regret the hyper-commercialism and a certain sanitizing but at the same time, things are being said and spoken whether it's a weekly series or whether it's pieces in the newspaper or talk radio," said Turk. "It's the incessant repetition of the issue that is truly changing the landscape of this country in what I see as a revolutionary way."

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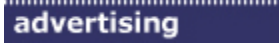
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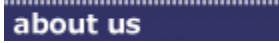
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Issue Date: 2/10/2005, Posted On: 2/10/2005

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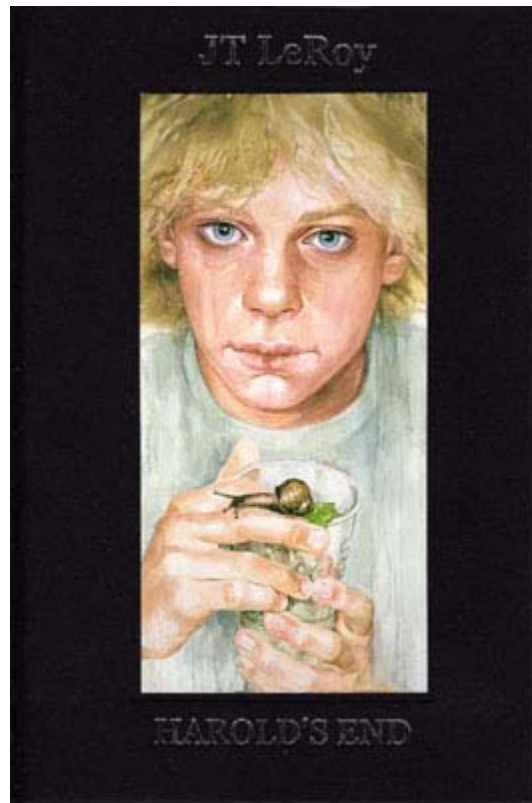
R.J. Grubb

With "Harold's End," JT LeRoy has achieved a rare rank as a writer. He's cherished as a cult author with a large underground following but also mainstream enough to get tapped for a recent New York Times Book Review symposium. In it, The Times asked LeRoy to reveal his most inspirational author for an article, called "The Hum Inside the Skull." While participating writers picked the well-known and well-read Kafka, Twain and C.S. Lewis, LeRoy touchingly spoke of Breece D'J Pancake, a cult colleague of sorts and wunderkind who succumbed to a brutal life, dead by suicide at the age of 26.

By all accounts, LeRoy could have met the same fate. The 24-year-old author, instead, turned a hard, drug-filled childhood into two bestsellers, Sarah and The Heart is Deceitful Above All Things. Both plunder the author's grim life as a child prostitute with unpretentious language, a lack of self-pity and a wildly clever imagination that never leans on clichés.

His latest returns LeRoy to familiar down and out territory. At only 81 pages, Harold's End (Last Gasp) delivers a gripping illustrated novella on loss, personal hell and survival. Compared with other books set amidst child prostitution, LeRoy has written a poignant human story that solidifies the author's stature as one of our most talented contemporary writers.

The book's narrator, a kid called Oliver, kicks around the dead end streets of San Francisco killing time until the next trick. Despite holding a healthy amount of skepticism, Oliver becomes wooed by a vice cop who lures the



androgynous- looking narrator with the comforts of drugs, food, warm showers and an unusual pet snail. The kid, reluctant to care for anything, eventually lets his defenses down and takes the slimy pet under his wing naming it Harold.

On the pecking order of pets, snails are as valued as goldfish. Oliver, a homeless street kid, feels a kinship with Harold and grows a fragile attachment. Oliver's other attachments include a motley bunch of similar lost children named Gotti, Serenity and Crayon. All are depicted in beautiful watercolor illustrations by Australian artist, Cherry Hood.

But what makes Harold's End come to life is LeRoy's spartan writing style. Like Raymond Carver, LeRoy writes without heavy-duty intentions and verbose digressions. In Harold's End, he uses bare bones language to tell the story ("I slowly push open the door. His room is yellow with candlelight and he stands in the middle, naked.")

Thematically, it focuses on Oliver's childhood exit wounds and lasting innocence ("The consoling aroma of food preparation for me makes me almost sleepy, like it would when I was a child. I yawn and stroke the soft napkin on my lap.") It also straddles that iffy space between self-protection and trust ("And then I talk. I tell him what I tell no one until I fall asleep against him.")

As in LeRoy's previous books, Harold's End explores sexual and gender ambiguity. To this day, LeRoy does not identify as either male or female. And only recently has the author begun to make public appearances. Even observing LeRoy has left witnesses scratching their heads. Oliver, with blond, corn-string hair and a baby face, likewise keeps mum.

LeRoy's mystique has generated a style of writing that takes a stranger than fiction vantage point and, consequently, gathered a large following. Besides everyday followers, the flock includes Garbage singer, Shirley Manson, who wrote a song about the author. Harold's End also comes with blurbs by John Waters, Lou Reed, Zadie Smith and Nan Goldin. Dave Eggers contributes the introduction.

But Harold's End is not a book driven by an author's mysterious persona. Its power comes from a pain born from everyday, street living. LeRoy's pages begin to bleed though Oliver's aches never become overwrought, vague or maudlin. It is not LeRoy's intention to dilute life's cruelties, but to show life as it simply is: sharp, sore and unfinished.

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Israel's Brad Pitt

R.J. Grubb

When Eytan Fox's latest film *Walk on Water* premiered in his hometown of Tel Aviv, *Time Out* magazine marked the occasion with a racy, naked cover. But as Fox tells it, all credit for the stripped spread goes to his straight leading man.

"He said, 'Let's do something provocative,'" Fox recalled with a grin during an interview in Brookline, where the film had an advance screening for the Boston Jewish Film Festival.

The snapshot - a bow to Annie Leibovitz's iconic portrait of John Lennon and Yoko Ono - shows Fox resting in bed while an in-the-buff Lior Ashkenazi crawls up the side of his gay director. A picture that speaks a thousand words, it marked a stunning move by Lior, Israel's top film star.

Especially stunning considering how Lior is the Brad Pitt of Israel. Both are marketed as sexy and straight. And both typically play the detached, no-nonsense stud. But Lior's repertoire expanded with *Walk on Water*, which opens at the Kendall Square Cinema and the West Newton Cinema on Friday, March 18. In it he plays Eyal, an Israeli secret agent who undergoes a seismic life-change after meeting a gay German. The film's downbeat meditation on masculinity moved the actor so much, he took a public relations risk.



Apart from the splashy magazine cover, Lior admitted to the press that he had a gay relationship. Imagine Pitt saying that in a *People* magazine interview? Lior also talked about feelings of guilt stemming from atrocities he committed while serving in the Israeli army, service required of every Israeli upon turning 18. Readers wrote in and called him a traitor. Others applauded his courage for shedding light on the pain shared by many Israeli men.

"He was proud of it," said Fox. "Proud of what the film was saying and I was so proud of what he went through as an individual."

Lior's about-face mirrors the mental turnaround experienced by Eyal. *Walk on Water*, which follows Fox's international hit, *Yossi and Jagger*, largely examines the burden of the masculine ideal through Eyal, a very sure of himself Mossad agent and second-generation Holocaust survivor.

Groomed from boyhood to become an emotionless soldier, Eyal will stop at nothing to protect his family and country. But he is alone and adrift in a hostile world crippled by daily suicide bombers and mass murder. In this world, Eyal derives his value from his ability to kill. Fox shows Eyal's steel in a grim opening scene, when a child witnesses the murder of his father. In slow motion, the son releases a red

balloon that zigzags into a bright, blue sky as Fox cues another boy forever altered by the close range of violence.

Nursing a ruptured psyche, Eyal takes on a mission to track down an aging Nazi war criminal. His orders are to "Get him before God does." Eyal poses as a tour guide and befriends the man's grandchildren, Pia, a soft-spoken woman fleeing from her past and Axel, an affable gay man whose idealism is matched by his denial. Eyal's journey takes him around Israel and later to Berlin.

A film examining the scarred landscape of Israel and its people can be expected of Fox. Still, colleagues were shocked that Fox shifted his center of gravity to a straight, man's-man like Eyal. "When I was starting to work on the film, my friends in Israel would say, 'But you don't like this man. You don't care about him. You don't give a fuck about him.'"

But Fox did care. In our interview, Fox admitted he has found himself in conflict with men like Eyal. Still, he was unequivocal about his motives. "I care about this man a lot. He's my best friend and my brother," he said. "A lot of me is in this man and he's in me. What he is going through is torture and I want to help this man."

Walk on Water, a study on violence and revenge, examines the search for inner peace and the deepening of relationships. Fox uses Buffalo Springfield's Vietnam-era anthem "For What It's Worth" in the hope that audiences will stop and look at the violence we've waged as well as its traumatic consequences that extend through time.

Acting the film's most developed characters, Lior and Knut Berger (Axel) deliver the most affecting performances. They also make the most chemistry during intimate chats by a desert fire or on the beach, where Fox appropriates Christian imagery on the Sea of Galilee granting the film its title.

Still for all its percolating tension, sex is absent. One reviewer has since renamed the movie, "The Spy Who (Almost) Shagged Me." When asked why he left out the sex, Fox replied, "When people ask that question, I think maybe there is a problem? Maybe I am afraid to show gay sex? Maybe I don't feel comfortable?"

Fox, however, retreated from those questions when he recalled his past work, *Florentine* 1995, an Israeli soap opera that radiated raging hormones. Eventually Fox explained that sex just wasn't necessary in telling this story and chalked up the decision to coming full circle as a gay artist. "Maybe when you feel more comfortable in your own skin and in your community, you don't need to wave flags so much," he said. "You just say, 'This is my life.'"

R.J. Grubb is a freelance arts writer and frequent contributor to Bay Windows.