

Queer Classics

Andrew Holleran's "Dancer from the Dance"

By ERNIE MCLEOD

The prologue to Andrew Holleran's "Dancer from the Dance" consists of a series of letters between two gay men, one of whom has fled the 70's New York gay scene for "The Deep South," the other of whom has decided to write "a gay novel" chronicling their passing youth. These letters, in addition to providing a context for the novel and setting its often catty tone, serve also as a disclaimer. The aspiring novelist tells his friend he has no interest in successful fags, only failures: "So you see I've written about a small subspecies only, I've written about doomed queens . . . THAT is what I want to write about—why life is SAD. And what people do for Love (everything)—whether they're gay or not."

"Dancer from the Dance" was published in 1978, well into the hedonistic gay disco era, but at a time when realistic portrayals of gay characters in fiction were virtually nonexistent. Of course, "realistic" is a relative term. As the prologue to the novel suggests, Holleran (who writes only under a pseudonym) is showing the reader a narrow slice of urban gay life. However, because gay life of any kind was so absent from fiction at the time, "Dancer" became falsely representative of a whole generation, one of the early must-read novels for any young man coming out in the 1980's.

Today, "Dancer" is both revered as having laid the foundation for unapologetically gay contemporary fiction and lambasted for creating an urban "ghetto" mold from which gay writers are still struggling to break free. I think it falls somewhere in between and is worth reading as an important time capsule and for Holleran's lush, uncompromising prose.

"Dancer from the Dance" basically

Quotable Dancer

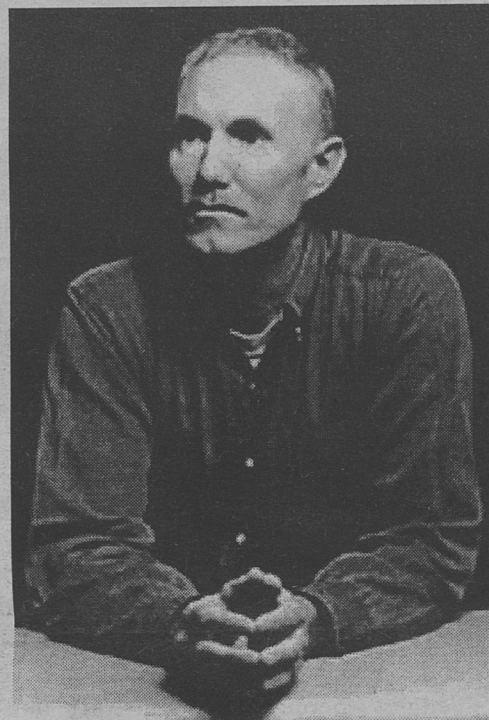
We would not stop dancing. We moved with the regularity of the Pope from the city to Fire Island in the summer, where we danced till the fall, and then, with the geese flying south, the butterflies dying in the dunes, we found some new place in Manhattan and danced all winter there.

I thought Malone was the handsomest man I'd ever seen. But then I was in love with half those people, and I never said hello or good-bye to any of them.

Falling in love is such a delicate matter, he said, lighting up a Gauloise. Really like timing a roast.

tells the story of Malone and Sutherland, the former a goldenly beautiful young man who discovers his sexuality and embarks on a "career in love" amid the burgeoning 70's gay circuit scene, the latter a sharp-witted queen of the scene who takes Malone under his wing. More than that, though, the novel describes a new gay world where, for a few moments at least, young men believed they had escaped to a sexually liberated paradise beneath the spinning disco ball. Holleran passionately evokes the romantic idealism of this ephemeral paradise while scorning its shallowness: "They were bound together by a common love of a certain kind of music, physical beauty, and style—all the things one shouldn't throw an ounce of energy pursuing, and sometimes throw away a life pursuing."

Though "Dancer" was written and set in the 70's, it has a haunted, elegiac quality that seems to foreshadow the AIDS epidemic, adding an eerie bite to its pathos and humor. Later Holleran works reveal that this hauntedness is natural to his style, but it's impossible to read "Dancer" now without feeling



Further Fiction by Andrew Holleran:

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the shadow of AIDS on its pages. At the same time, comparing the novel to the allegedly ground breaking "Queer as Folk," one realizes that the more things change, the more they remain the same. 20-plus years separate these two cultural milestones, yet they mine, for better or worse, much the same territory.

Personally, I avoided "Dancer from the Dance" for 20-plus years. As a young person unsuccessfully struggling to envision life as a gay man, I didn't want to know about the bitchy, one-night-stand (or less) realm of Fire Island disco queens. Its campy dialogue, naughtier than but not dissimilar to "Will & Grace" quips today, would have been almost as depressing to me as the repeated descriptions of tea room trolling. Malone's initial emergence from years of self-enforced celibacy into the arms of an adoring male lover would have fueled my own equally unrealistic romantic dreams, but his subsequent disillusionment and downfall might have reinforced my view that the closet was preferable to such an existence.

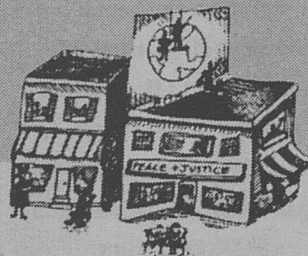
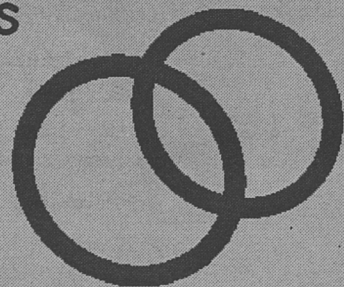
In other words, "Dancer from the Dance," like all of Holleran's work, is far too bleak to be a gay pep talk. The good news is that nowadays, with many more books (not to mention TV shows, movies, and real-life role models) out there, it doesn't have to be. It can be what it is: an often gorgeously sad, wickedly funny, unflinchingly honest look at what it was like to be exuberantly gay but less than proud. The other good news is that Holleran is still writing, the fiercely wary eye he once cast upon the dance now focussed on what happens when the dance is long over but the desire for love refuses to quit.

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