



BY TIM MILLER

William J. Mann's new book *Behind the Screen: How Gays and Lesbians Shaped Hollywood* is a breath-taking, wide-angle, Panavision examination of how gay people helped form, and were formed by, the movies. Skillfully mixing equal parts kiss-n-tell dish and in-depth cultural history of gay people's lives, Mann's book is an enormous achievement of cultural history. Always informed by a soulful love of motion pictures and a real empathy for the gay people who in such major ways created the industry, the author sheds brave, new light on queer Hollywood. Mann describes how he sees these pioneers, "I definitely don't see these folks as victims, and neither would they have. One of the main points of the book is that virtually nowhere else in American society at the time did gays and lesbians have the opportunity to live and work with such authority and authenticity, without the need to hide their true selves." I caught up with William Mann at his home in Provincetown and we talked about his remarkable new book.

*Behind the Screen* really turns the table on the old saw that tars the golden age of Hollywood as being the most homophobic place for gay people and charts how the film industry was in fact one of the only businesses

where gay people had any agency and authority in the workplace. What was the "deal" gay people had to make to be allowed that freedom?

To understand the experience of gay people historically you really have to understand the context of the times. Of course the "deal" you are suggesting is about presenting a public image of heterosexuality in exchange for being allowed to live private authentic gay lives. On the surface, from a 21st century viewpoint, this would seem to be the same old paradigm of the closet.

But bear in mind that in the 1930s and 40s and 50s there was no such construct as an "openly gay or lesbian" person — at least not in the way we would view, say, Ellen or Harvey Fierstein or Tim Miller today. So therefore there was not the opposing construct of the closet, either. These people of Hollywood's Golden Age weren't so much "pretending" to be straight as they were simply living according to the protocol of the times. Of course the situation was different for movie actors and for people behind the scenes. Someone like Rock Hudson was actively engaged in promoting a heterosexual image for himself— you know, the photo-op dates and then the arranged marriage — where somebody like William Reynolds, a famed film editor, or Henry Grace, a well-known set decorator, didn't have to go to such lengths.

They each lived very undisguised gay lives, but knew to take women as escorts to the Academy Awards.

The dichotomy and tension of this "deal" really interested me as I read *Behind the Screen*. Of course gay people still have to make such deals at work and in the world. I was inspired how you keep pulling these gay people's lives away from any easy "victim" trope. What were the ways that Hollywood lied about gay people and what were the ways that perhaps queer folk managed to get Hollywood to tell the truth?

Again, I think it's important to see the full picture. A gay man might have become a bigwig in, say, the insurance industry, or become a politician, or the CEO of a major corporation. But his sexuality would have needed to have been deeply disguised. Certainly average joes and janets working in most American industries would have had to be very discreet about their gay lives. But in the movie studios, being gay was, in some fields, actually seen as a career advantage. In wardrobe, costume design, and set decoration, for example, gays actually had a degree of hegemony, where the heads of the department were almost always gay and there was no need to obfuscate that fact. Sure, they took dates of the opposite gender to industry functions but they lived with same-sex partners and often were very open about themselves at work. The MGM set decorators would make campy comments over the intercom; costume designers were known for being flamboyant and effeminate. None of this affected their careers. Where would this have been true in any other industry in America? The theater doesn't fit as a comparison, because it wasn't run like a middle-class corporation in the way that the Hollywood studios were.

So are you saying that Hollywood didn't, in fact, lie about gay lives?

There's a difference between Hollywood the industry and Hollywood the concept, the myth-maker, the shaper of popular culture. Of course Hollywood lied about gay lives. While the studios permitted an extraordinary degree of license in how gay people could live and work, the product that they were all manufacturing — movies — was designed to deny their existence. This is especially true after the enforcement of the Production Code in 1934. The Hollywood product was designed to put forward a white, Christian, heterosexual myth of what America supposedly was. So while allowing their workers to live undisguised gay lives, gay life remained disguised on the screen.

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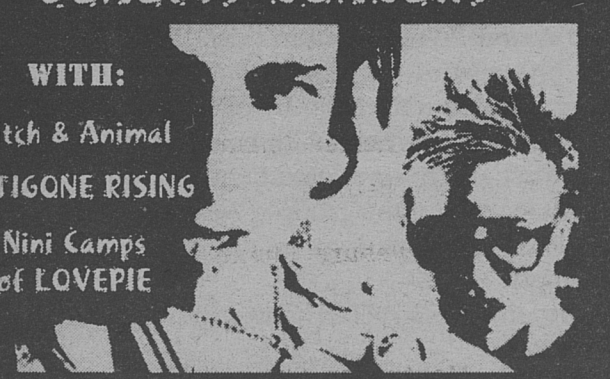
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