

Didn't that begin to unravel with the end of the studio system and the beginning of modern American moviemaking?

Yes. By the late 1960s and 1970s we began seeing some alternative visions of America and the world on the screen. But interestingly, the images of gay life during these decades were almost entirely pathological and derogatory. Part of the reason for that, I argue, was the lack of an overt gay presence in filmmaking in immediate post-studio Hollywood. The studios, while officially denying the existence of gay life onscreen, had still been havens for undisguised gay creative talent offscreen. So the images that came out of the studios, even if ostensibly heterosexual, could often be seen as queer-affirming and inclusive.

What were some of these ways that gay people in Hollywood subtly - and sometimes not so subtly - subverted the Hollywood-American heterosexual myth? What reaction did this engender?

Take a look at nearly any of the musicals of MGM's legendary Freed unit. These are filled with a gay sensibility or alternative worldview. Films like *Meet Me in St. Louis* or *Easter Parade* or *Kismet* or *The Pirate* or *An American in Paris*. The Freed films were nearly all produced by Roger Edens, an undisguised gay man. Many were directed by Charles Walters, who was also undisguised in his gayness. There were so many gay people, so much queer talent in the Freed unit — composers, arrangers, writers, designers. Even Vincente Minnelli, who was pretty circumspect and hidden in his gayness, brought a particular queer poetry to his work. The Freed films are filled with alternative worldviews. I believe that it's important to take a second look at the films of directors like George Cukor, Mitchell Leisen, Dorothy Arzner, and James Whale, seeing them as products of artists who were gay. Not only gay, of course, for each artist brought a whole life of experience and influences to their work. I don't mean to be reductive in my analysis. But understanding the way Cukor or Arzner lived in the world does allow us to see their work in particular ways. Arzner never settles for the typical love-and-marriage course for her female protagonists. When her characters have to choose between career or marriage, they usually opt for their former. Gay directors brought their sensibilities into their films in so many ways. Mitchell Leisen eroticized the male form — something rare for those days. James Whale completely challenged the codes of convention. Just look at "Bride of Frankenstein" — he throws out every cherished heterosexual code. This is true for writers, too: DeWitt Bodeen's "Cat People," for example, can be read as a parable of queer desire and alienation.

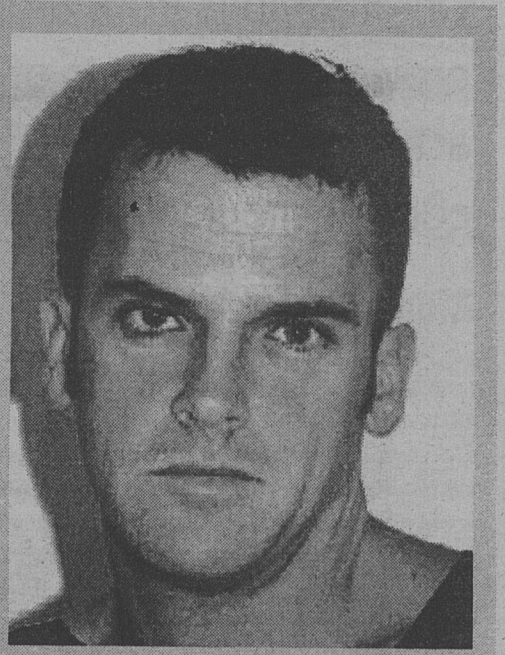
You have a finely-tuned eye for the breadth of lesbian and gay experience in Hollywood. You pay attention not only to the stars, but also to the

designers, press agents, screenwriters, set decorators etc. What did you discover by taking this wide view?

That you must never generalize. Just as gays had near-hegemony in wardrobe and set decoration, they were de facto prohibited from jobs as cameramen or in the other technical fields. Of course, there may well have been gays in those positions, but not overt gays, and it's only the overt gays who are revealed to us through history. I discovered that certain fields were considered "male" — like cinematography — and so both women and overt gay men were kept out. This changed when the studio structure was broken apart, and by the late 1960s we see gay men and women both gay and straight popping up in fields previously denied them. I was also struck by how many gays and lesbians were publicists during Hollywood's golden age. It makes sense: gays have experience with telling the truth without telling all of it. It's actually a fascinating irony that the myth and magic of Hollywood has, in large part, been spun by gay men and lesbians themselves.

The book must have been a daunting research challenge. How did you manage to uncover these hidden histories?

Writing gay histories requires reevaluating old rules of evidence. I went through thousands of obituaries in *Variety* to come up with a preliminary list of names — the ones who left "no survivors," the "lifelong bachelors," and so on. Then I embarked on a massive series of interviews with survivors of the era. I also went through records not usually used in film history research. Census records told me who was living with who, probate records revealed who estates and gifts were left to. I was fortunate to find a few unpublished manuscripts and considerable old correspondence. I know a lot of these figures — most of whom are deceased — would not have felt comfortable talking about their gay lives on the record, but in many cases their surviving partners were younger than they were and so had "moved with the times," so to speak. They were usually glad to share their recollections. They felt the



>30

GLBTV

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