

COME OUT, COME OUT

Signorile's ten-year-old message still resonates

By DAVID HINZ

If visibility is a legitimate standard by which progress can be measured, then the gay and lesbian community has much to be thankful for. At present, the issue of gay marriage garners a great deal of attention in the mainstream media, openly-gay members of Congress such as Barney Frank and Tammy Baldwin enjoy the support of a wide constituency, and television shows such as *Will & Grace*, *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy*, and *The Ellen DeGeneres Show* have become immensely popular among a diverse audience.

However, even most casual observers admit that such examples of gay visibility captivate our attention precisely because we have grown accustomed to well-nigh total invisibility in every aspect of American culture, from media to politics to entertainment. We may find ourselves wondering why, for example, the media have largely failed to explore the underlying causes and consequences of blatantly anti-gay legislation such as the Defense of Marriage Act, what underlying assumptions and prejudices are fueling the reactionary winds blowing in Washington at this time, and why Hollywood's portrayal of gays and lesbians remains so woefully inadequate.

It is in this atmosphere of heady optimism and profound disappointment that Michelangelo Signorile's 1993 classic *Queer in America: Sex, the Media, and the Closets of Power* was edited and re-published in 2003, offering readers a sobering reminder that the dialectic of progress and reaction is rooted in the closet and our

ability to overcome it. Signorile, some readers may recall, first brought the issue of outing to the forefront of public debate more than a decade ago with a cover story on Malcolm Forbes in *OutWeek*, a now-defunct magazine he helped to found. He recounts that event in *Queer in America*, and offers a thorough analysis of gay invisibility, focusing on what he dubs the "Trinity of the Closet": the corporate media establishment, the political system, and the entertainment industry, each of which conspires to keep homosexuality a shameful, dirty secret.

In part one, "Queer in New York," Signorile traces his own evolution from column planter to gay activist. Central to his development was the realization that gay invisibility fuels homophobia, which serves, in turn, to justify continued invisibility. This vicious cycle can only be broken when the homosexuality of public figures is openly disclosed. If public figures lack the courage to make such disclosures willingly, he argues at length, then it is the role of responsible journalists to do so on their behalf — especially, though not exclusively, when the actions of these closeted figures directly or indirectly harm the gay and lesbian community.

Although many liberals — both gay and straight — object that the outing of public officials is an invasion of privacy, Signorile plants gayness squarely in the public sphere. Being gay, he writes, is not about sex acts or what we do in our bedrooms but is a much larger matter regarding identity and culture and community. Maintaining the closet under the guise of privacy sends a clear

**Queer in America:
Sex, the Media,
and the Closets of
Power**
Michelangelo Signorile
University of Wisconsin Press, 2003
446 pp.

message to the American public: homosexuality is so utterly grotesque that it should never be discussed.

In part two, "Queer in Washington," Signorile recounts in exhaustive detail his outing of Pete Williams, Assistant Secretary of Defense for Public Affairs in the first Bush Administration, and examines the implications of gay invisibility inside the Beltway. Many lobbyists, congressional staffers, campaign strategists, White House staffers, legislators, and high-ranking appointed officials such as Williams treat homosexuality as a dirty secret that must be guarded at all costs. In this atmosphere, some closeted gay men use their positions of power to sexually assault and abuse young gay staffers, who, to protect their own careers, remain silent. Others, to dispel rumors of their homosexuality, promote an ardent anti-gay agenda. Caught up in this system of power and oppression, they all live pathetic lives of hypocrisy, self-loathing, and fear.

Like Washington, Hollywood is a magnet for gay men and lesbians in search of power and influence in American society. Here too, Signorile argues in part 3, closeted gays wield tremendous influence, often to the detriment of the gay and lesbian community. Because gays in Hollywood, like Jews before them, are victims of society's prejudices, they can be easily

manipulated by conservative forces from Washington such as the Christian right.

Despite its liberal image, and that of many individual actors such as Jane Fonda and Ed Asner, Hollywood the industry fosters its own brand of conservatism, rooted in the profit motive and a notion that the American television and film audience is essentially conservative and homophobic. Most Hollywood power brokers and actors kowtow to these conservative forces by remaining deeply closeted — even after their careers and lives have ended. The result is a system of self-censorship that preserves Tinsel Town's heterosexual image, thus robbing American society of gay and lesbian role models and perpetuating the very homophobia that gave rise to the Hollywood closet in the first place.

Signorile follows up this forceful analysis with a rather diffuse epilogue, "Gay Manifesto," and Afterword. He concludes his book with a new chapter, "Queer in America 2003." While recognizing the increased visibility of gay men and lesbians, he argues that the closet survives as an institution in 2003, proving itself quite resilient, responding to challenges

by remaking and redefining itself.

Although he is forced to admit that the outing of public officials is no longer a hotly-debated topic in the gay and lesbian press, the concept behind it has been taken up by mainstream journalism in recent years, as the shroud of secrecy around the homosexuality of public figures has begun to erode. Nonetheless, many public figures continue to live in what he dubs a "Glass Closet," fighting public disclosure of their homosexuality.

And he scolds the gay community for becoming complacent in the face of reactionary forces. The concluding lines of his book's 1993 edition ring equally true more than a decade later: "Abolishing the closet will do more to disarm our enemies and win us our rights than any heterosexual pro-gay politician — or even an army of them — will ever do. When it comes to our liberation, the only people who will save us are ourselves." This exhortation to visibility, more than any defense of outing, is this book's real contribution. ▼

David Hinz works at Seventh Generation and lives in South Burlington.

Hardwick Chiropractic
54 School Circle
East Hardwick, VT 05836
802-472-3033
www.bgivernmont.net

Montpelier Chiropractic
58 East State Street
Montpelier, VT 05602
802-223-2967
www.bgivernmont.net



Gentle, Effective Health Care

Dr. Grace Johnstone

Dr. Rick Eschholz

WATER CARE SYSTEM

BAQUA
Spa.

Bromine-Free. Chlorine-Free. Care-Free.

www.gotopoolstuff.com