

Prophet of Peace

Historian John D'Emilio highlights the role of gay peace and civil rights activist Bayard Rustin

BY ROBERT WILLIAM WOLFF

John D'Emilio, Ph.D., offered a lecture in late October at the University of Vermont on the importance of Bayard Rustin as a gay man and a black civil rights activist committed to nonviolence. D'Emilio specializes in the history of sexuality and of social movements. A Guggenheim and National Endowment for the Humanities fellow, he also served from 1995 to 1997 as the founding director of the Policy Institute at the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force.

At UVM, the University of Illinois professor of history and of gender and women's studies used his award-winning book, *Lost Prophet: the Life and Times of Bayard Rustin* (2003), to present Rustin's contributions and to reflect on some points about achieving human rights. His lecture demonstrated how history helps to communicate ways people can influ-

ence the future.

I met Dr. D'Emilio on campus before his lecture and asked for suggestions to make sure the story of modern gay liberation is not lost here in Vermont. "Americans are not big on history," D'Emilio observed, adding that there is little historic memory, despite interest in some of America's big names — Washington, Jefferson, Lincoln. "If there were not a day celebrating Martin Luther King's birth, he would be largely forgotten," D'Emilio declared.

Universities have to be pushed to include teaching of popular struggles, including those of the LGBT community, he insisted. It essential for people who want to pass our legacy to young people to take advantage of informal opportunities as well: "Education must occur outside educational institutions. Statewide organizations need to ask what they can do about teaching LGBT history. Bars need to ask what they can display on their walls." I thought immediately that we may want to start celebrating a queer history day

here in Vermont.

Before starting *Lost Prophet*, D'Emilio did not intend to write a biography: "I hate biography!" He wanted to write about the 1960s. As he studied the decade's social history, he found that Rustin, born in 1912, a Quaker, a pacifist, an African-American gay man, played a pivotal role in the social and political happenings of that decade. The book that resulted is a detailed telling of Bayard Rustin's political life, with threads of the leader's private life that impinge on his political life woven in.

Bayard Rustin was a civil rights strategist, radical pacifist, and international human rights activist, who planted Gandhian nonviolence on American soil, and was a teacher and mentor to Martin Luther King, Jr. Rustin successfully planned and executed some of the most imaginative and influential citizen protests in the 1960s. According to D'Emilio, "By the time the 1960s began, Bayard Rustin had learned that war would never bring peace, and that democracy is only secure when wealth is spread around."

D'Emilio described the 1960s as a decade that started in an atmosphere of hope for the future. By its midpoint, it had turned into a time of repeated assassinations, the quagmire of Vietnam, and profound loss of hope. Bayard Rustin held fast to hope and devoted his significant leadership and tactical skills to peace and nonviolence resistance organizations.

Anything one might want to learn about making a better world can be learned from studying Bayard Rustin's life, D'Emilio announced. Rustin's strategic and tactical efforts on behalf of peace and nonviolent civil rights actions were perhaps the most effective ever. And he did it as an African-American man who had been arrested for what were, at that time, sexual crimes: cruising for sex with men.

Rustin's sexual promiscuity was well known: he did not hide it or feel ashamed of his homosexuality. His colleagues' reactions to the resulting potential for public relations problems, however, kept him in the background of activities in which he played key roles. During and after a relationship with Davis Platt, a young white man who changed his choice of college to be near Rustin's office, Rustin had a string of embarrassing arrests on 'morals' charges in the late 1940s and early 1950s. Because of his continued

scrapes with the law over his sexual activities, Rustin never had a secure home in the civil rights movement even though he organized the 1963 march on Washington and guided Dr. King's political activities for several years as he gave voice to the non-violent actions for peace, freedom and civil rights that were grasping the attention of Americans.

Rustin remained an activist for peace for his entire life, visiting countries from Africa to Asia and South America where he could encourage nonviolent resistance to oppression and colonialism. He died in 1987 after returning from Haiti.

D'Emilio's lecture convinced me not only of the convictions and abilities of Rustin, but that the historian sees Rustin's life worthy of emulation. When the master reality-storyteller departed Burlington I felt an unanticipated loss. Not only is he a wonderful fellow with whom to discuss subjects critical to our community, but I want to go to Chicago next semester where I could take his classes. ▼

For more information on Bayard Rustin, see *Lost Prophet: The Life and Times of Bayard Rustin* by John D'Emilio (University of Chicago Press).

Robert William Wolff lives and writes in Randolph.

Ten Bad Attitudes

Scott Sherman finds the trouble with 'tudes: faulty filmmaking.

I don't know why, but I dreaded watching *10 Attitudes*, a new comedy that promotes itself with the tagline "Finally — a gay *Swingers*."

Was anyone really waiting for a gay *Swingers*? Have any gay people even seen that 1996 movie about wannabe actors who hang out in LA? If the best you can do is proclaim your movie the "gay *Swingers*" what's next? The all-female *Midnight Express*? The French *True Grit*? The white *The Wiz*?

Hoping to get some background on *10 Attitudes*, I surfed over to the International Movie Database at IMDB.com. There, I saw the movie got a shockingly low user rating of 1.7. Granted, only six people voted, but 1.7 is still pretty low. To put that number in perspective, the stinker *Ishtar* has a user rating of 3.7, the leaden *Valley of the Dolls* gets a 5.4, and Pia Zadora starrer *The Lonely Lady* rates a 2.4.

Just in case you think *10 Attitudes*' low rating might be due to

homophobia, two other gay comedies, *Trick* and *The Broken Hearts Club*, get a 6.9 and a 6.7, respectively.

But the good thing about low expectations is that they can only go up. Hoping for the best, I invited my neighbors Gary and Real over to watch *10 Attitudes* with me. If I turned out to be pleasantly surprised, I'd be happy to share a good time with them. If the movie turned out to be bad, well, misery loves company.

As the DVD started, the full face of comedian Bruce Villanch appeared in what I first assumed was a public service announcement. Nobody quite heard what he had to say, and then the title music started playing.

"Was that part of the movie?" Gary asked.

"Who knows," I responded.

Bruce was followed by a completely bizarre montage of unrelated shots. A muscle-bound stud emerges from a pool. A car drives down a street.

10 Attitudes

Jason Stuart, David Faustino, Judy Tenuta, Jim Bullock

Ariztical Entertainment, 88 minutes
November 2004

Three men enter a sauna. A palm tree. All poorly lit and accompanied by bad music.

"This looks like an infomercial," Gary observed. I thought of bad '70s porn, myself.

The movie goes on (and on, and on — never have 88 minutes felt more like 800) to tell the story of Josh, a thirty-something caterer whose life falls apart when he finds his lover cheating on him. Josh vows to move back home to ... wherever, I can't even remember ... but his best friend challenges him to go on 10 dates before giving up on LA.

Technically, the movie is a horrifying mess. Bad camera angles,

bad music, bad lighting and bad set design give new meaning to the word "amateurish." The film was obviously done on the cheap, and not endearingly so. Scenes shot at night are difficult to see, dialogue is hard to hear, and the handheld camerawork is at times nauseating to watch.

The editing is sometimes jarringly staccato — not so much for artistic reasons, one suspects, but because the filmmakers didn't shoot enough coverage of several scenes. Other editing snafus include the bizarre disappearance and reappearance of the lead character's goatee over the course of the film, and frequent cutaways to characters whose facial expressions appear inappropriate for the scene in which they're appearing.

All that aside, there are entertaining moments in the film. Some are due to the cast, which includes a very funny Judy Tenuta, David Faustino (from *Married with Children*), and openly gay comic Jim Bullock. Other funniness is contributed by the film's star, openly gay comic Jason Stuart. Stuart is OK, but he has neither the looks nor the charisma to carry a film. At one point, he appears shirtless, and you have to wonder what he was thinking.

Stuart also co-produced and co-wrote the film, so you could say he has only himself to blame for the mess in which he finds himself. His penchant for casting very good-looking men as his dates might have inflated his ego, but it didn't do much for the film's believability.

Stuart is a better writer than he is an actor. I loved Josh's reply when his boyfriend insisted that the adulterous sex he was caught having was just something that was "happening."

"This isn't a 'happening'," Josh screams. "A 'happening' is something that happens with Barbra Streisand in Central Park!"

At one point, Josh is propositioned by a male prostitute, whom he politely informs "I'm sorry, I just broke up with my boyfriend. I don't know if I'm at the point where I have to pay yet."

Is *10 Attitudes* worth seeing? Probably not. But it does show that even when buried in mud, talent will sometimes shine through. In this case, though, you have to look really hard. ▼

Scott Sherman telecommutes to Washington, DC from the Richmond, Vermont home he shares with his partner and son.