

LOOKING BOTH WAYS: Closets are for T-Shirts

Mike Rothbart

CUTTINGSVILLE -- My grandfather died last week. My mom called in the early morning, woke me up to let me know. I hung up, stumbled to the closet and faced the first question of this new day.

Not *how do I mourn?* but *what's a queen to wear?* I pushed the fancy evening gowns on their hangers down to the far end of my closet. Dressy enough, sure, but hopelessly inappropriate. Jeans? Ski pants? A miniskirt? In the end, I had to call back my mom, ask her to dig my old wool suit out of the cedar closet. Last worn to my high school prom, back when I thought men weren't sexy.

That would cover the funeral. And for the rest of the long black weekend? I dug through my t-shirt drawer, searching for shirts with acceptable slogans. CLINTON & GORE IN '92? Yes. *If you think my room's a mess, you should see my sex life?* No. GREENPEACE? Sure. *That's not a banana in my pocket?* Probably not.

Carrying my suitcase out to the car, I noticed my bumper stickers as if for the first time. I frowned. Then I reached to the ground, pulled up two fistfuls of mud and splattered them across the

fender until the I FEEL LIKE A NEW MAN: YOU'LL DO was unreadable. "You know," I explained, half out-loud, "Vermont in April can be quite muddy."

Many hours later, after two cute tollbooth operators and a quick stop in Nebraska to study the map, I arrived in Philadelphia, the city of brotherly love. I am out to my parents, actually. My brothers. But not the extended family. "Over my dead body," my grandpa would have said, had he ever known. Even so, his burial didn't strike me as the best time to announce my queerness. At any rate, we were all too busy wearing yarmulkes and reciting incomprehensible prayers in Hebrew to contemplate the sex lives of family members. That came later.

When I first came out to my mom, I'd been out eight months. I waited six weeks and then sat her down and fidgeted with my tea cup until she stared at me with her Well? What is it already? expression. "Ma," I blurted, "I'm bisexual."

Mom's initial reaction was lukewarm. "I hope you'll still have kids," she told me. And then, "please be careful." The word AIDS hung unspoken in the air between us. When I came out to my dad, he said very little. But he started to take me to movies with gay characters.

After the burial, we returned to my uncle's house. We had a reception -- a big party for my grandpa on the one day we knew he couldn't make it. After fourteen aunts, cousins, and strangers with familiar surnames asked me about my girlfriends, I managed to snag my cousin Beth the lesbian and retreat into a private corner. I then proceeded to ask her questions about her girlfriend. Last summer, my parents warmly welcomed my partner into the house, the family. In Beth's house, the reception was icy. Occasionally, her mother warmed up as far as chilly.

Beth and I sat eating bagels and other traditional Jewish comfort food. I fiddled with my yarmulke. Beth turned to me: "I wish my mom was as accepting as yours."

"I wonder if my mother will be as welcoming when I bring home a boy -- even a nice Jewish boy," I replied.

"She couldn't be less welcoming than mine."

I thought awhile. Bisexuals have been accused at times of being like the tide -- out one hour, in the next. I admit, it'd be easier for me to remain closeted than if I were gay. Certainly there are bi's who choose to spend their lives checked into a coatroom. Yet the same is true for some gays and lesbians.

For me, as a bisexual man dating a woman, the appearance of conforming to her expectations necessitates an active, constant process of outing myself. For a time, I considered having FAG tattooed on my forehead. But I couldn't decide on a color. Instead, I flirt with my (straight male) roommate in the midst of a crowded dance floor. I talk about my "partner" until it occurs to the other party that she might not be female. (Once, it took three weeks for this dweeb to catch on.) I speak out about being bi whenever I can. I wear confusing t-shirts like: I'M NOT A DYKE, BUT MY BOYFRIEND WAS.

After two more days of crying and feeling relieved I didn't get that tattoo, I fled back to the mountains. The first thing I did when I returned home was march directly back into my closet. And I pulled out a lovely dress.

Mike Rothbart lives outside Rutland and owns too many t-shirts. He plans to come out to his grandfather in heaven. ▼

Losing Steam: New Gay Play Getting Vermont Premiere

Chris Tebbetts

BURLINGTON -- Tony Kushner's *Angels in America* is perhaps the most important American play in 50 years. *Love, Valour, Compassion!* by Terrence McNally is one of the hottest tickets on Broadway today. Both of those works, and countless others, are part of what seems to be a gay renaissance in theatre. Some of these plays are winning prizes and others, less desirable notoriety. Either way, it seems that so-called gay subculture is turning into just plain culture. More and more, Bob and Carol Consumer are getting a glimpse at "our" world through the eyes of the playwright.

Vermont, likewise, has seen a rise in the volume of gay-themed works available to the public: last year's *Jeffrey* and actor/singer/DJ Craig Mitchell's one-man show are a couple examples. Now add to the pile, *Losing Steam*, a new play by Robert Charles Gompers, being produced by the Green Candle Theatre Company April 28, 29 and May 4, 5 and 6.

The play concerns a triangle of three gay men and the tangled web of friendship they weave. Director Steven Sharp sees a dichotomy of uniqueness and universality in their experience. "My approach," he says, "is to try to avoid gay stereotypes and to present these guys as human beings first." And yet, the play is also a celebration of their gay lives. The characters are completely comfortable in their gayness, says Sharp. "They're also a little off the wall -- and that's okay too."

While Sharp is the only openly gay member of Green Candle (and also its President), he has had no trouble finding support for this kind of work here. The company's upcoming season also includes *A Closet Year*, "a look at lesbianism through time," by Vermont playwright Jan Donley. In addition, *Losing Steam* will act as a benefit for the Men's Health Project of Vermont CARES. A portion of the proceeds will go to the Project, which provides social and HIV/AIDS prevention services in the gay and bisexual men's community.

Part of the mission of Green Candle is to do things that have not been done before, and to push the boundaries of what a general audience will go to see. Sharp first saw *Losing Steam* on vacation in North Carolina. While he enjoyed the play very much, there were several people who walked out that evening, uncomfortable with the frank dialogue on such subjects as gay male sex and the world of drag. "A lot of people have never seen a drag queen on stage before," he notes. "If Bob and Carol (or Bob and Steve) Consumer come and see this and say that they've never seen anything like it before -- that's a success!"

Losing Steam will be presented by the Green Candle Theatre Company on April 28, 29, and May 4, 5 and 6 at 8:00pm. Performances will be in Contois Auditorium in Burlington's City Hall. Tickets will cost a suggested donation of \$5 - \$10; no one will be turned away for inability to pay. A reception at Sweetwater's Restaurant with playwright Robert Charles Gompers will follow the April 28th performance. For information or reservations, call (802)893-7333.

For information on Men's Health Project, call (802)863-2437. ▼



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