

BEHIND THE FLAMBOYANCE

WHAT ABOUT NORMAL GAYS?

by Larry Tate
photos by Janet Fries

As a public-relations idea, last Sunday's Gay Freedom Day Parade wasn't the greatest. I mean, you could take one look at the drag majorettes, Mr. Naked Grape, the Emperor and Empress, the bearded and powdered genderfuckers, Mr. Cowboy, Miss Gay San Francisco, etc., and be dead sure the media wouldn't be wasting time on the rest of us.

The Chronicle dismissed the thousands of ordinary gay people who turned out (very few women; sad) as "a few pallid exceptions in the rear ranks" and got off on a juicy catalogue of exotics. They ran photos of four drag queens and two streakers. The Examiner featured the drag majorettes and didn't mention the "pallid" types at all. The Tribune didn't cover it, which is probably just as well.

Channel 7 reported that "many of those who marched did so in flamboyant costumes," and proceeded to demonstrate; Channel 5 mentioned spectators "watching mostly in silent awe or amusement." The majorettes made every channel. (Channel 4, referring to a "celebration of life," was fairly decent by comparison.)

On the whole, the media coverage was of an order to make you think, What's the use? let's just go back in the closet and forget it. Some of it wasn't just bad reporting, it was lying. But it was, I guess, to be expected. And I am of two minds about that.

One attitude was expressed in an unsigned letter from a gay man in Monday's Daily Cal: "Gay Libbers are fools to plan public festivals where the media will capitalize on the sensationalism of the handful of weirdos who are bound to be there. It reinforces straight people's belief that gay men are degenerates. The majority of gays are just as normal as the majority of straights, and gay liberation would better serve its interests to get that fact across in the media."

Now, there is -- God knows -- no particular virtue in being "normal," that is to say in living to offend as few as possible. What's "abnormal" about people is very often what's best about them. But,

as far as dress and general behavior goes, somewhere in the range of "normal" (which varies, of course, from place to place) is where most people -- including most gay people, including me -- choose to live.

People who like being flamboyant are an invaluable minority; the world would be poor without them. I thought the majorettes were terrific, and the Carmen Miranda on roller skates, and the straw-hatted drum corps: on a cold drizzly Sunday in the Financial District the queens and cowboys and feathers and leathers were positively the light of the world. (Who says gay people can't sing and dance?) They were fun, they were gay, they belonged.

On the other hand, they hogged the spotlight. Flamboyance does that, that's what it's for. And I imagine that most of the guys were quite satisfied with the way the media appreciated them, and didn't see anything much wrong with the coverage. That I resent. I resent that very much.

Because they weren't me, they weren't most of my friends, they weren't the people who joined the parade along the way, they weren't the crush of "pallid" people filling Polk Street as far as I could see in either direction. (Six blocks, the Examiner said; but more, really, many more, even if lots of people didn't leave the sidewalk or just watched from windows.) Those people went unrepresented, just blank numbers. Those people were, and I am, just gay. Not flamboyant. Not exotic. Gay. And it is tiresome and vaguely rotten to be forever treated as supernumeraries, trailing unnoticed behind the people who came to get their pictures taken.

Moreover, the parade was supposed to have been staged with (among other things) the solemn purpose of winning the hearts and minds of straight people and -- presumably -- closeted gays. As such, what passed for a full-blast drag/camp spectacle made no sense whatever. What you needed was thousands of butch gays parading in business suits. Straight people probably wondered what these strange creatures needed with civil rights; and closety gays, who hate



to be seen as freaks, will probably go on isolating themselves and stifling. In a way it was all counterproductive.

Okay. Having said that, I'll say the opposite. Which is, basically, no drag queen ever called me faggot. So many gay people work so hard at being "normal," at pleasing straights ("I also fear the disapproval of friends if they found out," says the letter writer), that they never realize who their friends are. Push comes to shove, gay is gay, and (as someone said) a fairy is a homosexual gentleman who has just left the room.

"Gay Libbers are fools to plan public festivals where the media will capitalize on the sensationalism of the handful of weirdos who are unchangeable, irretrievably corrupt. Experience has shown (look at Blacks, women, maybe Chicanos now) that the media are probably more changeable than the public. As the gay movement grows, stabilizes, establishes that it isn't going away, the media will become more sympathetic if only because they need a new angle. The drag-queen approach can only stretch so far.

In the second place, what's the alternative? Private festivals, open only to "normals?" No gatherings at all? (That's the way it used to be. You'd maybe prefer the old days again? In that perspective, all publicity is good publicity; just spell our name right.)

In the third place, if you're the sort of person who's concerned to get across that "the majority of gays are just as normal as the majority of straights," you've got a real obvious place to start, and it isn't by staying in the closet and letting drag queens represent

you to your friends. There's no easy way down, people's minds are changed slowly and one at a time, and it takes a fair amount of nerve to sit in your closet and bitch at the "Gay Libbers" who are at least trying to do something.

Fourth and last, what is this shit about "weirdos?" Can you really partition Gay Freedom, extend it to "the majority of gays" and not the rest? Where do you draw the line, exactly? Who's a weirdo and who's just colorful? Or do people deserve freedom not because they're marketable but because they're there and they're human, and nobody has a right to put them down? So if there's a public-relations solution, it isn't to keep queens and characters out of the spotlight, it's to get the rest of the gay world in: we have to make it perfectly clear, millions-of-people

clear, we-are-everywhere clear, that some of us are flamboyant and some of us aren't and what the hell difference does it make, we're people.

And that, finally, is the feeling I had about the parade. Marching down the middle of the street arm

in arm, crowds of gays in the windows, on the sidewalk, smiling, waving, we goddamn owned the town. Just sensationally together. And there are times, there have to be times, when straight people just don't matter. Who cares how they react? It's our day, our space, our street, our time. Ours.

They can't take that away.

And so we all piled into Civic Center and there was a Gay Faire with booths and a rock band and people stripping in the reflecting pool and everybody milled around and that was pretty awful. The weather was foul and it's an ugly concrete cheerless place to start with, so no conclusions really need to be drawn. It's hard to imagine any fitting end to the parade, any climax adequate to that peculiar rush of solidarity. Gays are only human, and human solidarity is a rare bubble, floating to earth.

So in a while I was leaving and some man with his wife (a Lion, I think -- the convention was in town) walked up and hit a friend of mine in the back, then walked away without looking back. It was a small, senseless reminder that the world is not perfect yet, which I think we already knew.



Come Talk It Over At Gay Rap

A gay men's rap is held every Friday at 7 pm at the First Baptist Church, Haste and Dana, Berkeley, sponsored by the Gay Men's Collective.

The weekly meetings take the form of encounter groups and discussion groups, and provide a place for gay men to meet each other, exchange ideas, and learn new ways of relating.

Further information from 654-1978.

