

An Intimate Circle of Friends

By Linda Moody

Charlotte Cushman — superstar of the nineteenth century theatre — was born in Boston's North End in 1916. "I was born a tomboy," she said and proceeded to prove it time and time again when she appeared on stage in male roles and again in her personal life where she ignored many of the feminine restraints of the nineteenth century, living a totally self-directed and unconventional life. Much of Charlotte's off-stage life was spent wooing and winning female hearts and building friendships with women who, like herself, were the antithesis of proper Victorian ladies. By publicly keeping just enough of the prevailing conventions, these women insured a measure of respectability while privately they moved in an intimate circle of friends where the rules were their own, female conformity was dismissed, and they found protection from a restrictive society.

she stumbled over an old woman clothed in rags and dying alone, whom she dragged back to her room, put to bed and comforted through a long night. Gasping a last breath, the dying woman left Charlotte all her worldly goods — only the pitiful clothes on her back — but perfect for the role of Nancy Sykes. Dressed in the grimy, patched dress, filthy bonnet and red shoes, Charlotte added a great rusty key scratched from a trash heap, swept on stage and dominated the scene.

After years of grueling schedules, followed by great success, Cushman bought a home in

for riding to the hounds. She formed an English hunt club that rode in the countryside around Rome and there established her reputation as a skilled but reckless rider who was constantly being thrown in her effort to outride everyone else. In the night, she regularly rode alone through the dark city streets, causing the charge d'affaires in the American consulate to offer her protection on her nocturnal outings. She laughed, declined the help and made him the same offer.

This aggressive abandon did not touch the lives of other couples like the Boston sculptor, Anne

A Place in the Past

A series of articles by the Boston Area Lesbian and Gay History Project



Harriet Hosmer

Unlike other well-known nineteenth century female couples, these women approached life with a fearless enthusiasm that was unique for Victorian women. In the case of Cushman, determination and fearlessness helped her survive the hardships of the theatrical world of the 1800s. Fleabag theatres were thrown up in a few weeks and burned down so often that some actors never played twice in the same building. What warmth there was came only from entryway stoves. The main halls remained unheated. Plays often changed nightly with actors struggling to remember daily scripts; costumes were designed and brought from actors' savings.

When Charles Dickens' *Oliver Twist* was adapted for the stage, Charlotte was given a week to learn lines and assemble a costume. The role of the vulgar Nancy Sykes fell to Cushman as punishment by a vindictive theatre manager. As disreputable as the character was, Charlotte was determined to play the role to the hilt. She hurried off to New York's Five Points slum, a hideously filthy and dangerous neighborhood. There she rented a room at Mother Hennessey's — a rooming house catering to prostitutes and down-and-out people. Roaming through the streets, she carefully studied faces, noting gestures and vocal inflections needed to play the role realistically. In a saloon

Whitney, and her lifelong painter companion, Addie Manning, who also lived in Italy at the time Harriet was there. These women embraced a genteel and quiet lifestyle, more in keeping with old-line WASPish New England values. They frowned on Harriet's brash behavior.

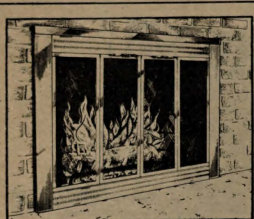
Another unusual characteristic found in the Cushman group was a fondness for wearing men's clothes. Although not all the "emancipated ladies" in Cushman's circle were considered "manny," Harriet Hosmer, Cushman, and her friend Eliza Cook, a British poet, did cross-dress. When Cushman pulled down a neat profit on the London stage, she bought matching outfits for herself and Eliza which were made in a "masculine style — tight-fitting bodice, lapelled, showing shirt front and ruffles."

Eliza Cook is described as short and dumpy, sporting a boyish hairstyle, and given to throwing her feet up on the fireplace fenders and calling out for another beer. Cushman's mother and close friends were unsympathetic to Charlotte's penchant for wearing a man's collar, cravat and Wellington boots in private life. As to her roaming all over the countryside with her odd friend, Eliza, they were plainly distressed and disapproving. In fact, Cushman's family never approved of her intimate friendships with women and, although they tried to ignore the closeness of these relationships, Charlotte made no bones about the feelings she had for her long-time companions.

Cushman also liked cross-dressing on the stage and her great success playing Romeo (opposite her sister, Susan) caused the fashion to extend throughout the century much to the consternation of the critics. Her booming voice, large frame and unattractiveness made her seem "real" to audiences, perhaps even more "real" than the celebrated Edwin Booth whom she found a "mere willow." In his role as Macbeth, she thought his acting delicate and pushed and scolded him on to a forceful stage murder. Booth is reported to have said, "Why don't you kill him? You're a great deal bigger than I am." Several days later, she squeezed into one of Booth's borrowed costumes and played Hamlet in what she described as an amazing performance. The Philadelphia critics disagreed, however, finding a large woman in her forties playing the prince a bit much.

Although the friends kicked up their heels together, dressing in masculine clothes and enjoying a fast life filled with late-night par-

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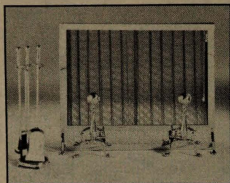
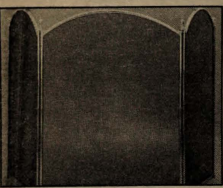


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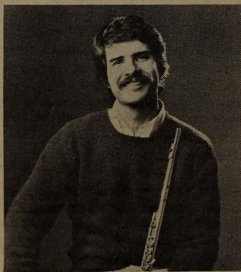
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To Life, an AIDS video

Positive Personal Profiles

By Ari Cohen

AIDS continues to be the subject of a media blitz of sorts, although a much more useful and accurate account than the mass media hysteria that we suffered over a year ago. Important as that episode may have been in raising public consciousness and spurring on research, the overall tone of the coverage created an irrational and unnecessary backlash against gay men and, by association, lesbians.

The current wave of media attention, on television at least, consists of longer and more thoughtful presentations which incorporate more fact than rumor. PBS's somewhat hastily assembled documentary, *AIDS: Profile of an Epidemic*, was the most complete and up-to-date presentation of the scientific and medical facts about AIDS, although in its attempt to be even-handed the program failed to deal with the effects AIDS has had specifically on the gay community.

While *To Life* is not a film you should go to for the latest scientific and medical information, filmmaker Susan Fleischmann succeeds where *Profile of an Epidemic* failed: *To Life* provides us with the "human facts" about how people cope with AIDS. The film profiles three men whose lives

have been changed by AIDS. Bob Andrews is a volunteer with the AIDS Action Committee. He became involved in the fight early, and now finds himself diagnosed with the AIDS Related Complex. This means he has been exposed to the AIDS virus but shows none of the opportunistic infections. Scientists really have no idea what this means since some of the men with ARC have come down with AIDS, and some, so far at least, have not. What does this mean for the people who have that diagnosis? Bob Andrews tells us what his experience has been.

Jim Carleton and Howard Hill are two men with AIDS, each coping with it in a different way. The documentary gives us a glimpse into their lives. Jim talks about his problem with finances, which requires him to rely on Social Security to pay his rent, food and other bills — a struggle faced by many gay men with AIDS. We watch as Jim gives himself an injection of interferon, part of his treatment. (Though this scene is not for the squeamish, it is part of Jim's reality.)

In another scene, Howard elegantly and deftly prepares dinner for friends. We are absolutely fascinated watching him slice vege-

tables as he describes what sounds like a re-birth and renewal. He talks with the zeal of a born-again Christian, whose crisis has made him appreciate his life, his friends and his energy for the first time.

A few minor quibbles about the film. The portrait of Andrews is too long, sometimes redundant, and we are left to think, for a while, that he has a full-blown case of AIDS, rather than ARC. The overall tone of the film is perhaps a bit too positive and takes on a propagandistic feel sometimes. We need to know about men who are not coping as well, which is part of the reality, and necessary to generate help and energy from the rest of the community.

The film was made for the Cable Access Corporation (part of Boston's cable system) in association with the Studio No Collective. It suffers slightly from using less than the best video equipment, but it does suggest the promise of local access cable: free equipment, an opportunity for local people to learn how to work with television, and a chance for local cable viewers to meet their neighbors, in this case, neighbors with AIDS.

To Life can be seen in Boston on Thursday, October 11 at 6 p.m. on Channel 3, cable T.V.

Intimate Friends

Continued from previous page

ties and close relationships, there was occasional turmoil within the group. The same kind of interpersonal intrigue that goes on in today's lesbian communities was also problematic in Cushman's group.

Cushman had created a strong, intimate bond with the British actress Matilda Hays. In 1849, Charlotte, searching for a replacement for her actress sister, found an eager pupil in the feminine Matilda who had come knocking on the door. She took Matilda off on tour, coaching her in all the familiar roles, planning her theatre debut and cementing a romantic unit that Elizabeth Barrett Browning called a "female marriage." "She and Miss Hays have made vows of celibacy and of eternal attachment to each other — they live together, dress alike." Alas, the wished-for permanence of the union between Charlotte and Matilda was cruelly shattered in the spring of 1853 when the new housemate at the Italian villa, Harriet Hosmer, enticed and advanced on Matilda. In the splendid rooms of her mentor's home — where she lived rent-free — Harriet stole Matilda's heart and formed an attachment that left Charlotte angry and grief-stricken. In spite of Harriet's casual flirtation and Matilda's subsequent departure for England, Cushman and Hosmer remained friends and continued to help each other professionally and personally.

Within the circle, this continuing helpfulness and support for each other surpassed the little intrigues and occasional bitter moments. When Charlotte ran into financial difficulty, losing money because of the theft of funds by an unscrupulous financial manager, it was dear old "Hatty" (Harriet Hosmer) who led her to the safety of an honest money manager. And later it was Charlotte who, passing through London, began legal proceedings against the *London Art Journal* for irresponsibly reporting that Harriet's huge statue of "Zenobia" had actually been sculpted by one of the studio workmen.

Although the *London Art Journal* had printed the allegation, the rumor had been created by the jealous expatriate sculptor, Joseph Mozier, who was part of the powerful male art colony. The

Charlotte Cushman as Romeo



male artists jealously guarded their profession and disliked female encroachment into a profitable trade. After all, Harriet's small statues of Puck sold for \$1000 each, and thirty of them were purchased as quickly as she could turn them out. The acknowledged leader of the male art community was the stuffy Bostonian, William Wetmore Story, who particularly disliked Charlotte. The combination of Story's bitter feeling for Cushman and the other artists' jealousy towards the women in general, contributed to a real economic and social threat for the women and caused an even tighter bond to form among them. It was not forgotten that Story was powerful, chauvinistic and interested in actively promulgating morality among the expatriates. Story and his companions had shown their teeth before when they had formed a court of inquiry to investigate the unmentionable indiscretion of the American artist, Louise Lander. The poor woman had been found guilty and was ostracized from society.

Cushman's circle of friends flourished — in part because the participants needed a supportive female community that would stand steady against the rancor of

the male artists, but also because the women within the group possessed a unique ability to attract commissions. All of the women were exceptionally talented and they held the same values of hard-driving ambition and a desire to move within powerful social circles. They were unconventional in manners and dress and they burned through life with a tremendous energy. They worked to be the best they could be.

Would you like to help us? The Boston Area Lesbian and Gay History Project is always open to new members, or to stories, pictures, leads, etc. from people who are not interested in joining the group but who have information to share. Rest assured that your confidentiality will be protected if that is important to you.

So, if you have any information to share with us about these or other topics, if you have an interest of your own which you would like to research, or if you are interested in joining the History Project, you can contact us at: The History Project, c/o Janet Kahn, 110 College Avenue, Somerville, MA 02144.

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