

# Homosexuality in the movies: out of the closet

By TONY JAMES

"Fags," someone wailed as the sound of breaking glass was heard from the emergency exit of the Bloor Cinema. How appropriate it seemed, as a congregation of fashionably dressed young men smelling of eau de toilette gathered to see what the Celluloid Closet was all about.

On June 3rd, Vito Russo, a speaker and founder of Act Up (AIDS Coalition), came to Toronto to lecture on the topic of homosexuality in Hollywood, from its beginning in

silent cinema up to the present. Russo, author of *The Celluloid Closet*, clearly expressed that his intentions were not to reveal "who is and who isn't" in Hollywood, but to examine how homosexuals have been treated in film and the impression this treatment makes upon those who are great followers of the cinema.

During the origins of the "silver screen," homosexuality was practically taboo, as it simply could not exist for most audiences in the '20s and '30s. Gay men were seen as

bumbling sissies dressed in women's clothing, terrified of mice and kissing other men for comic effect; their role was jeered at by audiences as they failed to comply with the standard American code of masculinity. As Russo stated, America was founded by pioneers, where only the roughest and the most manly survived, an attitude which remains to this day.

For lesbians, however, the story was quite different. Women were thought of as being sexist when dressed as men. In *Morocco*, for example, Marlene Dietrich is dressed in a top hat and tails, performing in a nightclub and turning on men until their pants burst, bringing shame to other women for not being sensual enough. The question that arises is, why are gay men less tolerable than lesbians in narrative cinema. Russo stated that it is perhaps America's insecurity with women that creates this prejudice against effeminate men and most women in Hollywood.

The portrayal of "sissies" in the '50s, nevertheless, was not any more favourable than before, as homophobia was quote the rage at the time. This left audiences feeling that effeminate men were monsters, deserving of punishment for the nausea they stirred up in most people.

As the popularity of television increased in the early '60s, the lure of the movie was dispelled. This left the moral code of Hollywood open, as the more popular films at the time were of the European new wave nature, renowned for their more liberal attitude towards sex than American films. Homosexuals — people who actually loved someone of their own sex rather than just being sissies — were actually revealed. However, they were still not well received because they were considered monsters, incapable of "real love," even-

tually committing suicide. The role of the homosexual shifted from comic effect to tragic (a good example being *The Children's Hour* where Shirley MacLaine hangs herself after having verbally expressed her love for another woman).

As the '70s approached, so did the homosexuals. "Coming out of the closet" was a big deal and America was forced to face the issue of homosexuality relatively for the first time. Films such as *Cruising* and *Boys from the Band* were released, portraying homosexual characters. Gays were thoroughly examined for what they were. They were now the most masculine and tough; a threat to heterosexuals and still worthy of being considered monsters. Yet gays had never looked better in cinematic history.

The conservative attitudes of the '80s, however, have not made the outlook for gays any better. Films such as *The Hunger* with lesbian

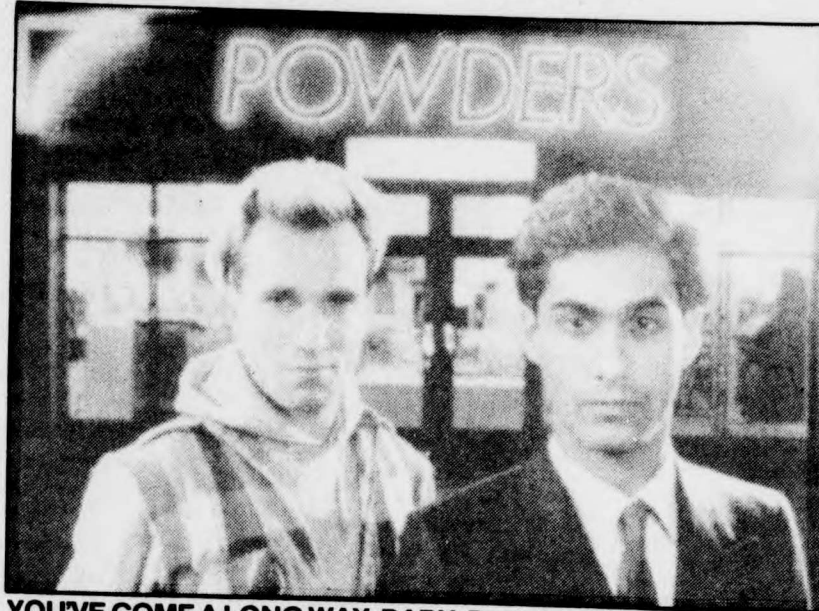
vampires (monsters) have still dealt with the matter of homosexuality in a precarious fashion. Homophobic entertainment is becoming more and more popular despite the efforts of *My Beautiful Laundrette*, *Silkwood*, and *Desert Hearts*.

As cinema is a reflection of our own reality, homosexuality must be treated with a better outlook. Films should no longer deal solely with the topic of homosexuality as it further alienates gays from society, Russo noted. Furthermore, Hollywood's intentions are not to exterminate gays (as many involved in film are homosexual), but to reap a good profit. If we are to support films that express homophobic attitudes, then Hollywood will keep churning them out for money.

For more information, see a copy of *The Celluloid Closet* by Vito Russo, available at the Gay Archives and most libraries.



SISSY: Ernest Treux as Sapiens in *The Warrior's Husband* (1933).



YOU'VE COME A LONG WAY, BABY: Daniel Day Lewis and Gordon Warnecke in *My Beautiful Laundrette*.



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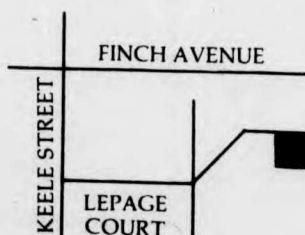
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