

Carpe diem

Michelangelo Signorile talks about politics while charming *Just Out's* reporter

by Grant Michael Menzies



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The lobby of the Heathman Hotel in Portland raises a whole hardwood forest about me while yards of marble and travertine spread underfoot, and Michelangelo Signorile is taking a shower in his eighth-floor room. His escort, Hallie, tells me that the schedule is slightly bungled. Signorile has just returned from an early radio interview, and we won't have much extended time to talk. Can I put up with grabbing a few minutes here, a few there? "Is that all right?" I gulp. I'm not sure. I have heard about Signorile; I have read his book, *Queer in America*; I am aware of his anger, his invective. This is the fearsome journalist of *OutWeek*, the fearsome outer of Assistant Defense Secretary Pete Williams. The picture on the book, and in *Time* magazine, shows less social commentator than unshaven street tough—glaring, daring and scaring. "Is that all right?" she asks again.

I nod and take a seat in the lobby to await him. It's then that the elevator doors open. Out steps a young man in a dark blue jacket, white crewneck shirt and dark blue pants. He's about 5-foot-7, compact in build, early thirties, with short-clipped hair that still betrays its blondness in the Heathman gloom. His eyes are large, blue, expressive; his clean-shaven cheeks pink and flushed. He is gnawing on a fingernail as he approaches. Did a cherub fall down from the ballroom ceiling? No—it's the man I'm waiting for.

Extending a polite hand, Signorile says, "How are you? Shall we go in here and talk till the next interview?" He is referring to a noonish appointment with KGW-TV a few blocks away.

More paneling rises about us, and now tapestries. We find a sofa and I ask him what his reception was like in Los Angeles, where his tour brought him before coming to Portland.

"It was one of the more lively and interesting discussions," he says. "We even talked about other issues—racism, community problems. There were something like 150 people at the talk I gave. It's strange how much movement there's been on the issue of gay rights and the closet since the more contentious attitudes two years ago. I

went on the Michael Jackson Show while in L.A.—he's this perfectly straight British guy who told me he found *Queer in America* incredibly enlightening. That's very important to me, to make it clear to everyone, regardless of orientation, be it political, sexual or whatever."

I venture to bring up R.K. Sheppard's review of his book in *Time* magazine, which unfavorably compared it with Randy Shilts's book on gays in the military. "I found it homophobic," he replies. "The accusation of using gossip... I don't believe he even read my book. But we knew it would be that way with *Time*. I guess the best thing about these diametric views is that they provoke discussion. And that will keep the issue alive."

Hallie is back; the KGW interview spot is drawing near. "Come with us," Signorile says.

Many-faced Portland passes us by as we proceed toward the television studio, and I comment on what I sensed was the best part of his book, the last chapter, titled "The Oregon Nightmare." Signorile grins a little—an apprehensive grin. "I was almost afraid to come back here, after what

I wrote about the 'Hill Crowd.' So many have asked about that. I just wanted to state what I saw was happening and not happening. I didn't feel it was necessary to out anyone, under the circumstances. But I think sometimes my arrival in town is an implicit threat."

We're now at the studios of KGW-TV Channel 8 and sitting on another sofa—less posh (but more comfortable) than the one at the Heathman.

"You have to strategize to the specific market you're targeting. You cater your message to that market but you still need to change perception about gay people and refute the lies, let people see the truth. I don't believe that 42 percent of the people here in Oregon are that innately hateful, that they hate lesbians and gay people. They *think* they do, based on what was told them; they *think* we shouldn't have rights based on what was told them we wanted. I really don't think we're going to convince those people that this is actually a larger assault on *their* rights. I just don't think that the average person, working and living, who's heterosexual and white and male, thinks he's next

on the right-wing's hit list. So to try to make this appear something in the abstract, that a concept of rights is being attacked, in a place as overwhelmingly white as this, is strange—who would believe *that*?"

It's time for him to go on; I am left in the great glassed lobby with a large television set on which the noon news is being shown. The anchors, Greg Carson and Mary McDermott, are preparing their television audience for Signorile's appearance and the polemical things he might say by steering them into the troubled waters of Colin Powell's receiving his honorary Harvard degree with the backs of gay and gay-sympathizing students turned toward him, and the case of a Navy officer in California trying to remain in the service despite being a lesbian. Obviously the anchors are as surprised as I was, and they rather nervously ask the questions they think everyone wants to know about Michelangelo Signorile and his "crusade." Could you briefly explain your conspiracy theory? asks McDermott, while Carson goes so far as to ask what has happened to freedom of choice. The unflustered

Signorile raises no sword at this but rather becomes visibly incredulous, particularly when Carson says, "Mr. Signorile, Chapter 15 of your book is entitled 'The Oregon Nightmare,' referring of course to Measure 9, the anti-homosexual rights initiative that was defeated, actually, last November. We're not the only state with an anti-gay rights movement. Do you think that people with more extreme views such as yours *ignite* the conservative, anti-gay movement?"

Signorile is obviously thinking, "What?" (he's not the only one), but replies quickly, "I think there is probably a backlash in this country toward all gay visibility. Certainly someone like myself is creating some of that...but the way I see it is that it is better than our staying locked in the closet. We've been almost picking this fight for 20 years—now they're taking us on.... I think we have to deal with that and live with that and take on these people, not run or hide from them. We have the right to live freely in this country."

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