

Continued from previous page

We're in the lobby again, and he's asking whether it was all right, and how did it sound, did he make sense. I have to laugh, and I say, "Everyone sees you as being an angry young man, perhaps a dangerous young man, and you don't seem either."

He says, "So much of it is a persona that I created in the column [in *OutWeek*] two years ago. It worked, it pushed buttons. You find this winning formula and you go with it. I think the media have used that to further demonize and distort me. With another writer they would acknowledge this as a persona and in the interview would show the person for what they really are, but not me; they make like I'm that person in the column. Like the picture on the back of the book, which was also used in *Time*. I smiled a thousand times, and they used the attitude picture instead. I have my angry side, but," he adds, eyes twinkling, "I also have moments when I'm actually calm and rational. I've always had this sense of right and wrong. When I think I'm doing something wrong—and that's what I thought about my own homosexuality—it is hard for me. In my writing I feel I haven't been sensitive enough to or taken enough account of lesbians or people of color, for example. I'm asking people to be sensitive to homophobia, so I think people have the right to ask me to be sensitive to other issues of repression. But you have to know when to say, 'Now wait a minute.' People can be *too* PC. There

are those who are obsessed or carry a chip on their shoulder that you can never possibly please. Then you have to say, 'You're being too much here, get outta here!'"

Back in the car and on our way back to lunch at the Heathman, Signorile suddenly laughs and says, "I wonder if that's how I got on the show? I'm just speculating, but whoever was whispering in my ear [through the ear wire], a producer or whoever, somewhere in that building, said at the end, 'Thanks so much; I really appreciated that.' I remember once on Larry King a woman—never the person you're actually talking to—said to me, the voice coming in, 'Thanks so much! I'm a lesbian and I really appreciate that you came here. We need more people coming on TV to do this.' In Washington, I did an interview on radio, and the woman at the end said to the guys, 'Look, I'll walk him down.' And in the elevator she said, 'I need to tell you

something. I'm queer in America, too.' Her organization's very homophobic—she could not come out. I felt really bad for her. We hugged. It was very nice." He looks at passing Portland with less apprehension than before.

"This seems to happen a lot. They're doing what they can. They got me on the show. They're using whatever power they have to further gay visibility in the best way they can."

Quiet music, clicking of

fork to plate underscoring low conversing voices, and more soaring hardwood: the Heathman tea room. We're having white wine.

"Does the process of outing sometimes backfire?" I ask Signorile. "Can it make the fortress even more impregnable?"

"I don't think so," he says. "You have to look at outing in the context of the times. What we have right now is this enormous tension on gay issues. More people are

coming out than ever before. The closet is breaking down all over the place: in the workplace, in people's homes. The rules of concealment are breaking down also. People at this point are realizing that it's futile to even try to go deeper into the closet, if that's possible. Private individuals might have that option—they could move to some far-off place, or whatever. But people who are pursuing public careers and public lives see all this breaking down, and they have to come to terms with it. Going deeper is not an option for them. Remember, people in public careers are ambitious and smart. They were never deeply into any closet. They just had everyone around them colluding and putting a veneer on their lives. The closet was once an option. It is no longer that option."

"We've discussed the American take on closeting," I remark. "Europe, for example, is different, but is it all that different?"

"The whole issue of outing, and of the closet, plays out in every country and culture in a different way. In the other Western countries outing movements have developed. There's been a movement in England of gay journalists and activists who've outed; there are movements in France, Germany, Australia. It all depends on what homosexuality means to each culture. Take Italy, for example. It's a whole different ideology; I mean, *everyone's* bisexual." We laugh; is it the wine or is it the truth? "You'd be outing

Continued on next page

Queer USA

Swimming to shore

by Grant Michael Menzies

Michelangelo Signorile, at the end of his book *Queer in America*, offers a "Queer Manifesto" in which he says, "We have come to an exciting, critical juncture, one for which we have all worked hard. But we are fractured, split into a million factions. It is essential that we put our differences aside, at least for this crucial moment in our history.... Our diversity is in fact our greatest weapon."

Signorile, normally known—and feared—for his caustic approach to the issue of outing the closeted, is here pulling punches with his request that differences be surmounted among the gay and lesbian community "at least for this crucial moment in our history." We are seeing a quieter, more sober side to a writer whose block-letter, mad-as-hell paper persona seemed to be all there was to know. *Queer in America* tells Michelangelo Signorile's own story from his unhappy Brooklyn school days to his in-your-face journalistic crusade to break open the "three power structures in America, closeted societies that are uniquely interrelated and dependent upon each other... the Trinity of the Closet:" the media industry centered in New York; the political system centered in Washington; and the entertainment industry centered in Hollywood. He's made war upon unbelievers within the pages of *The Advocate*, *OutWeek*, *The Village Voice* and other forums, and he has also made many enemies, not least among those in the gay and lesbian community who would rather preserve the status quo and make like trees in the forest.

Private citizens, naturally, have the right to their privacy; indeed, all citizens have this right. But Signorile asks some pertinent questions: Should public figures, whose influence extends over a greater range of society's varied topography than that of the private citizen—thanks to the media, the political structure or the entertainment

world—be able to live by the same circumscribed rules as the private citizen? Given the influence of politicians, Hollywood producers and media czars over the mindset of a nation, should the closeted among them enjoy the benefits of cushy imprisonment when their endorsement of the closet's destruction, and/or admission of their own queerness, might not only dismantle that unlovely institution itself but open the minds of those gays and straights whose self-oppression makes the closet what it is? Chances are, if you're invested to an appreciable degree in the closet, you will not agree with his answers.

As the journalist who outed Pete Williams and Malcolm Forbes, as well as having abraded the protective layers of others in their same unenviable predicament, Signorile has earned as many plaudits as remonstrances by saying *No*, you *don't* have to vote for closeted politicians who enact from their hiding-places legislation detrimental to queers who have no marble columns to hide behind, nor do you, in Signorile's estimation, have to let them get away with it. And *Yes*, he says, you *do* and *must* stand up and speak your name, whether you're a constituent or a legislator, movie-goer or movie-maker, news-watcher or newspaper owner.

So what is this book all about? It's not just about fighting back after the years of name-calling and beating and hatred. Nor is it about trying to destroy the lives of those who've made such comfortable houses of cards. It's simply about hypocrisy and how palatable it can become when served up with power. Power is supposed to

QUEER IN AMERICA

SEX, THE MEDIA, AND THE CLOSETS OF POWER

MICHELANGELO SIGNORILE

bring freedom, but when you're closeted, in order to enjoy it, you've made your life a police state. And the pure freedom which ought to be the goal of every individual is traded off for something ultimately transitory, counterproductive and sad.

Only now—largely due to the outing movement—has that alleged playland of liberality, Hollywood, opened up to the potential behind gay and lesbian subject matter for films and television, after years of lives half-lived or, in many cases, destroyed by the relentless requirement to be like all those wonderful *straight* people out there in the dark. Signorile's virtual harassment (as he himself admits) of multimillionaire record-producer David Geffen, who went from being "Cher's boyfriend" to the openly gay man and supporter of gay rights that he is, demonstrates both the positive power of outing and the weakness of the walls of Hollywood's closet. As Signorile points out, the health of the media, living as it does off what it gets from both Washington and Hollywood, might show change from the improved diet he proposes: not the eating of crow per se, but by transferring to a simpler economy where truth is the only currency people can deal in.

Signorile's weak point is in his shifting style while approaching a subject that demands complete consistency. At times the book reads like so many news briefs taped together. Then when it flows, he's taking you in a kayak down the Colorado River; it, and he, is fun, incisive, articulate, angry. Sometimes he seems uncertain of the status of the United States' enforced closeting. At

the beginning he sizes it up as being the result of a "carefully orchestrated" plan, which a little later has metamorphosed into a consequence of unconscious tendencies "ingrained... in our culture." Fact is, both are operating at full tilt. It is, after all, the "American" way to take something good and make it better. In this case, society excels at taking something bad—intolerance—and making it worse.

For those who fought the Oregon Citizens Alliance in 1992, Signorile's final chapter, "The Oregon Nightmare," detailing the bravery of those who battled it and the hatred of its instigators, takes the breath away. In the tired joy of having (narrowly) defeated Lon Mabon and crew, it is easy to forget what was almost lost. It is sometimes easy to forget what was salvaged. Signorile's interviews with members of Portland's "Hill Crowd" may be somewhat generalized, or the information insufficient to brand the Crowd pro-closet and anti-Semitic en masse, but from these few grains of sand it may be possible to infer the beachhead. His suggested strategy for dealing with the OCA entailed mounting a visibility campaign for the lesbian and gay communities, getting voters educated about gays (so that, for the isolated and/or the ignorant among us, not all things that go bump in the night are gays and lesbians up to no good) and fighting Mabon with his own weapons. Signorile ran up against No on 9's conceptual approach of appealing to the larger, more abstract notion of basic rights as a whole being threatened by this one barbarous foot in the door. As we all know from old cowboy movies, this town ain't big enough for the two of us, or in this case, shared priorities. What emerges is that no one particular avenue has to be adhered to with all the zeal of a religion. All avenues are invaluable to the ongoing effort to do more than keep the lesbian and gay communities' heads above water. We need to get past the rocks and swim ashore. The best way, as Signorile asserts, is to educate, clear the fog and defuse the falsehood with truth.

Michelangelo Signorile wants the hypocrisy to come to an end. He wants the oppressed to cease siding with their oppressors. If his cries sometimes seem strident and fierce, just remember the wilderness in which we all have to live.