

OUT IN THE INDUSTRY

Dan Butler has done well in Hollywood as an out gay man

by Dale Reynolds



Dan Butler (left) with Kelsey Grammer on the set of Frasier

If you don't believe there's great freedom in coming out to the world as a gay person, just ask actor Dan Butler. He is bringing his one-man show *The Only Thing Worse You Could Have Told Me...* to Portland pre-New York to break in some new material. His marvelous show is an 80-minute autobiographical play which is extraordinarily candid, revealing, and funny. The 5-foot-7-inch, 40-year-old native of Hunting-

Theater

ton, Ind. (home of former vice president and Washington jokester Dan Quayle), has been a professional actor since his early 20s, mainly in New York, until his move out to Los Angeles to co-star in gay writer Terrence McNally's funny and pa-

thetic play about opera queens, *The Lisbon Traviata*. Butler has since done guest shots on *Roseanne* (recurring as the character Art), *Picket Fences*, and *Quantum Leap*, culminating in his semi-regular role as Bulldog, the straight sportscaster, on NBC's *Frasier*. And this after being seen in *Silence of the Lambs*, *Rising Sun*, and *Longtime Companion*. In other words, he's a working actor.

Butler, an attractive, balding man of well-built stature, doesn't fit into any stereotype of what gay men are supposed to look like. He has a friendly-but-rugged, Anglo-Irish look, and is clearly capable of playing broad comedy as well as moments of pathos. So didn't he consider it a wee bit dangerous to his acting career in historically homophobic Hollywood to make public statements about his sexual orientation?

"No," Butler says, "I've always been out to the world. I didn't give a lot of thought to the wisdom

of doing it or not doing it; I work on the credo that you do it and then find out what happens, and I wanted and needed to do this show. We're artists, doing and talking about what challenges us."

One of those challenges was society's ignoring of the AIDS crisis. He was present during the formation of ACT UP in the mid-80s, which he says "felt very much like being present at the Continental Congress—there was so much passion driving us—and it wasn't about sex; it was to stand up for oneself and to quickly find the cure for AIDS. That flush of excitement that led me to believe that because we were all gay we necessarily were all alike; it was naive on my part, and it quickly dissipated."

And then the idea of *The Only Thing Worse...* came to him. "When I was workshopping my show, it became very clear that I was supposed to do this at this time. And it's tremendously freeing, standing up and being counted, although I must say I don't feel particularly courageous doing it. Throughout the evening I pay tribute in large and small ways to those who've affected me in my past. I'm doing it for them, too." The shape the show took, not too surprisingly, was an autobiographical one, although Butler says "it's the issues of love and sex that I'm intrigued with working through—how we define and limit ourselves and each other. I feel very good when people laugh at, and think about, the ideas in my play."

Butler has written theatrical works before, mainly the book and lyrics to two unproduced musicals, as well as an upcoming, unfinished play. In the current show, he acts out scenes which deal with his family, dating (including an especially amusing monologue in which he "shows" us his sleeping boyfriend of the night), his straight friends' reactions to his coming out, and the community-based criticism of some of the more extravagant ways we show ourselves to the world. The show is tightly structured, always absorbing and provocative, and wonderfully acted.

"I personally love the section with Derrick the Flamboyant [where a 'sissy' confronts a gay friend about his constant put-downs] because it's all far-too prevalent in our society," he says. "It's the journey of a needy person asking for acceptance and coming to the conclusion that he's really OK, which came out of an event in my life when I was coming out and I found I was very uneasy around these effeminate friends of mine—one day I'd have a 100 percent friendship, then the next day only 50 percent. It took a friend to call me on it before I woke up to what I was doing."

Butler showcased *The Only Thing Worse...* for a year before opening his successful six-month run in Hollywood. The financial backing came from friends and connections—mostly non-gay money, interestingly. "I think non-gays like it because we don't consider this to be a gay play. There are a lot

of things universal about love and sex, but it goes to a wider idea of what or how we define anything. We forget the miracle of what living really is. I've been very heartened by everyone in this journey of processing love. I hope it inspires and helps or moves everyone to stand up for themselves. Friends have come and commented on the piece where [a gay man] stands up to bullies. One young guy met me after the show and said, 'My dad was gay and died of AIDS. I'm not gay, but it helped me understand being gay better.' Straights learn from our problems by watching us touching in the street—even the Bible-thumpers."

The show is also articulate about Butler's concern with the closet. He says, "There's a pain in being divorced from yourself, I've learned. That's why I'm out in the industry: I just don't give much thought to any homophobic impact on my career. If you don't walk through the fear, it's always going to be a bigger and bigger phantom. I'm not afraid of what people think about me—if you're so hung up on fear, you can't live your life. Early on, I was more uptight. I was performing Off-Broadway in a show, and the men and women were all sharing this small dressing room. People almost always assume I'm straight. And sometimes in the small talk, there'd be a distasteful allusion to 'fags,' and I didn't say anything at the time. My

then-lover, Tim, called me on not introducing him to the other actors when he picked me up, so I thought about it, called an actor-friend in the show and came out to him. That was the start of where this show came from."

Although he's reluctant to discuss his personal life, he jokingly acknowledges that "friends imply that the only reason I'm doing the show is to get a date." But he continues to do what it is he's good at—acting. "I've had great, great experiences in my professional career. Whether homophobia affects me or not, I'm very grateful to be in a place where I can use my talents as an actor and writer to say what I want to say—the rest of it is out of my hands."

Butler has received rave reviews for the play and gives a lot of the credit for making the show a hit to its director, Randy Brenner: "He's been a great collaborator and is a very talented and unfairly overlooked director."

For the Portland run, Butler wants people "to just come and see the show. I think it's a good piece of theater, and I'm glad the gay community came to see it [in L.A.], although some of my best audiences have been non-gays. I want to let it speak for itself."

Dan Butler brings his show to the Echo Theatre
8 pm Friday, Jan. 27; 8 and 10 pm Saturday,
Jan. 28; and 7 pm Sunday, Jan. 29.
Tickets are \$14 in advance and \$17 at the door.
Call 231-1232 for details.

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