

DANCING THROUGH a CENTURY of SCREEN IMAGES Continued from previous page

The English were somewhat more progressive, having by this time received but not acted upon the Wolfenden Report, which recommended decriminalizing homosexual acts between consenting adults. Their frank portrayals of homosexuality in *Victim* and *A Taste of Honey* (and two 1960 films about Oscar Wilde) had the same effect on Hollywood as the heterosexual frankness of '50s films from France, Italy and Sweden—showing there was a buck to be made by treating adult audiences as adults. Such subject matter was at this point beyond the range of television, and widescreen and 3-D processes had by then lost the novelty that gave the movies a brief competitive edge over the younger medium.

It must be hard for those of Generation X and younger to imagine what our lives were like in the darkened theaters of that age. In his introduction to *Gays and Film*, which he edited, Richard Dyer cites "what Claude Lévi-Strauss has termed 'bricolage,' that is, playing around with the elements available to us in such a way as to bend their meanings to our own purposes. We could pilfer from straight society's images on the screen such that would help us build up a subculture, or what Jack Babuscio calls a 'gay sensibility.'"

We could, in other words, watch a love scene and identify with the character of the gender opposite to our own, so that we were in the arms of Clark Gable or Marilyn Monroe or whoever turned us on. This remains a primary source of fantasy today.

Bricolage (literally, tinkering) also allowed us to imagine what happened when the lights went out in all-male or all-female settings such as prisons, barracks and submarines; and to think of the heroes of "buddy movies" as another kind of "buddies." There's no overt reason for Thelma and Louise to be lesbian role models.

Cross-dressing has always existed in the movies, usually for comic purposes and never with anything but the slightest, teasingest hint of any-



Left to right: Longtime Companion, Go Fish and John Waters' Hairspray

thing sexual. Had anyone taken the ending of *Some Like it Hot* seriously—with Joe E. Brown unfazed ("nobody's perfect!") by Jack Lemmon's revelation of his true gender—it would have been seen as a sign that the end of the world was near.

There have always been gay and lesbian characters, but for most of movie history they weren't identified as such. They were innocuous sissies and tomboys; and if they were too old to be "going through a phase," they were as impossible as your own parents to imagine in sexual situations. Such actors as Franklin Pangborn, Edward Everett Horton and Grady Sutton, whatever their real orientation, built their careers on playing effeminate supporting characters—usually valets, desk clerks and other servile positions. Clifton Webb, who was gay, advanced to leading roles, as Mr. Belvedere and similarly asexual characters.

The more serious the gay or lesbian character was, the more villainous (e.g., Hope Emerson's prison matron in *Caged*, Farley Granger and John Dall's fictionalized Leopold and Loeb in *Rope*); hence the more harshly they had to be dealt with in the end.

Perverts, inverts—no chance to subvert

In his illustrated lecture "Psycho Killers and Twisted Sisters," a staple on the queer festival circuit, educator and historian Daniel Mangin points out that films reflect the period in which they are made, not that in which they're set. When the movies began to deal openly with homosexuality in the early '60s they embraced the prevailing "wisdom" that we were sick, perverted, and if human, only barely so. "Films are only a small part of what I call a symphony of information and disinformation about gays and lesbians," Mangin says.

He notes that as lesbians (e.g., Barbara Stanwyck in *Walk on the Wild Side*) were depicted as treacherous creatures who would do anything to hold on to their "girls," espionage was the perfect occupation for them. Lotte Lenya's Rosa Klebb in *From Russia With Love* is a quintessential example.

In the late '40s and early '50s Sen. Joseph McCarthy, aided by the closeted Roy Cohn, linked

homosexuality to communism and miscegenation as elements that threatened the "American" way of life. Is it any wonder the movies showed queers that way, subtly in the '50s and less so in the '60s; or that those of us who grew up in that period were starved for positive images and role models? (You think it's bad today...)

It wasn't a question of homophobia. Even well-intentioned, liberal filmmakers swallowed the line that we were sick, pathetic creatures, more to be pitied than censured. William Friedkin eventually apologized for the portrait he painted of us in his 1980 film *Cruising*; but even in the '90s Jonathan Demme made *The Silence of the Lambs* without realizing how his queer serial killer played into the hands of the radical right.

By the end of the 1960s the Production Code had been scrapped in favor of the earliest form (G, M, R, X) of the current rating system. While some of the letters have changed, the ratings, then as now, maintained a double standard for gay and straight sex, as for male and female frontal nudity, with the former in each case being rated more restrictively.



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