POLITICAL PROFILE

n Tony Kushner's gay fantasia, Angels in America, an angel describes heaven as a "City Much Like San Francisco. House upon house depended from Hillside, From Crest down to Dockside, The green Mirror-

For gay men and lesbians worldwide, the City by the Bay has indeed been their heaven on earth: a place of refuge from an oppressive Bible Belt or an entrenched East Coast establishment. With its cable-carred peaks, pink Victorians and bustling basin, San Francisco's physical beauty alone is enough to attract residents of all stripes. But clearly it is not only the landscape that draws so many queer settlers, it is the city's historical—if not mythical—significance to our community: Harvey Milk. The Castro. Armistead Maupin and his Tales of the City. For generations, San Francisco has equaled liberation for gay men, lesbians and transgendered people.

"San Francisco is the most beautiful city in the world. It's diverse and cultural, open-minded and physically very beautiful. It is the place I've always wanted to live," says Roberta Achtenberg in a crisp, indisputable tone that leaves you wondering whether she authored the angel's words herself. (Kushner and Achtenberg actually share many commonalties: They are Jewish, gay, self-defined progressives, and were named *The Advocate*'s Man and Woman of the Year in 1993.)

Missing from the city's rich queer heritage, however, is the presence of an openly gay or lesbian mayor. That could change this November, when San Francisco voters go to the polls to choose a mayor, a prize the 45-year-old Achtenberg, who is lesbian, has set her eager eyes upon.

"I want to be mayor not only of the gay and lesbian community, but of all of this city's [700,000] residents," says the longtime civil rights attorney.

Who exactly is Roberta Achtenberg? Break it down on paper, and we can tell you that she is the long-term partner of former San Francisco municipal court justice Mary Morgan (who was the nation's first openly lesbian judge) and the mother of a son, Benjamin (conceived through alternative insemination, birthed by Morgan, and who, unlike President Bill Clinton's kid, attends public school). The trio live in the city's Noe Valley neighborhood.

Like many politicians who feel the need to tout at least a few hard-knocks credentials, Achtenberg declares in a prepared bio that she is the child of "immigrant parents who owned a small grocery store." Her father died when she was just 18; her mother passed away when Achtenberg was 26; her brother became a quadriplegic following a car accident.

Achtenberg is a lifelong Californian who married at 21, realized she was a lesbian at 25, and became dean of the New College of California School of Law at the age of 28. She later left the post (and got divorced) and became director of the San Francisco-based Lesbian Rights Project, an organization that worked on myriad sexual orien-

Running uphill

Roberta Achtenberg strives to make history, again—this time in taking on the tough San Francisco mayoral race

by Inga Sorensen

tation discrimination cases and evolved into the National Center for Lesbian Rights.

In 1988 she unsuccessfully ran for a state Assembly seat, but she was elected to the San Francisco Board of Supervisors in 1990. Yet it wasn't until 1993, when Clinton asked her to become the assistant secretary for Fair Housing and Equal Opportunity at the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development that Achtenberg first entered the national consciousness.

For that, she can largely thank U.S. Sen. Jesse Helms (R-N.C.), the nasty-tongued nemesis of gay

men and lesbians everywhere, who pugnaciously labeled Achtenberg a "damn lesbian" during rigorous confirmation hearings. Short and not so sweet, that line-which has found its way onto many a T-shirt-will undoubtedly go down in our lavender archives as one of the more memorable descriptions lodged against a queer official.

Despite Helms' ranting, Achtenberg was confirmed, making her the highest-ranking openly gay woman or man ever to serve in any presidential administration. When we asked Achtenberg what she thinks of Helms today, she answers

sharply: "Not much." After pausing a moment, she adds, "You know what? I beat him. He is a sinister force and I was able to beat him. That gives me satisfaction."

After two years, Achtenberg resigned from her HUD post this past April. (Sen. Lauch Faircloth, another North Carolina Republican, reportedly issued a news release after Achtenberg submitted her resignation saying that Clinton requested she step down. She has denied that charge.)

"The weather in Washington was awful. Dreadful," says Achtenberg, who seems happy to be back on her own turf where the air is "cool and fresh."

"Washington was fun, but quite frankly, power goes to people's heads, and two years is about as

long as any normal person can stay there without getting swept away in that," she says. "Members of Congress can be vicious. It's a real hot house."

Achtenberg is no-nonsense, through and through. When I asked her whether she receives letters from gay and lesbian youth, she says yes, adding that some of those missives are from young people who are grappling with difficult issues. "In those cases," she says dryly, "I refer them to the appropriate agency." She talks of restructuring city government from top to bottom, and without a hint of irony says she is tired of "career politicians running the show."

This tough-cookie attitude is undoubtedly a virtue—if not a necessity given the bruiser political battle Achtenberg has chosen for herself.

When she jumped into the mayoral race in April, Achtenberg transformed an already hot race into a sizzler. In addition to Achtenberg, mayoral candidates include incumbent mayor Frank Jordan and Supervisor Angela Alioto, who is considered a friend of the gay and lesbian community and is the daughter of a former San Francisco mayor.

And then there is Willie Brown, who has been state Assembly speaker for more than a decade and is con-

sidered California's most powerful Democrat. Brown, a liberal attorney, is also hailed as one of the foremost African American leaders in the nation and has many gay supporters, including long-time lesbian activist Pat Norman, who is co-chair of the Lesbian and Gay Committee to Elect Willie Brown. Brown is also backed by Matthew Rothschild, a gay man who heads the city's Democratic Party, and pioneering AIDS researcher Marcus Conant, who has credited Brown with securing \$100 million for AIDS treatment and research. Carole Migden, an openly lesbian city supervisor, has endorsed Brown, as has one of the city's gay and lesbian democratic clubs.

To put it simply, the gay and lesbian vote which roughly represents a significant 15 percent of the electorate-is no easy grab for Achtenberg.

"There isn't a lot of excitement about [Achtenberg's] candidacy right now. Maybe that will change as we get closer to the election," says Mike Salinas, editor of the weekly gay and lesbian newspaper Bay Area Reporter. (In San Francisco, if no one receives a majority of votes, the top two candidates face each other in a run-off; many expect a run-off between Jordan and either Brown or Achtenberg.)

Some political observers have questioned whether Achtenberg is a job-hopper who is most interested in her own résumé, while others have questioned her effectiveness in Washington, D.C.

Asked whether there was any dissention generated by her unexpected jump into the mayoral race, Achtenberg curtly replies: "Absolutely not."

She will tell you she is "the only progressive in the race," and she has been hailed by supporters as someone who is paradoxically an insider and outsider all at once: someone who can get the job done without being one of the bad good ol' boys. (The San Francisco Examiner is trumpeting Achtenberg's effort, describing her as "whip smart," "fresh," and "an independent candidate who does her own thinking and makes her own decisions.")

Granted, to be involved in government today and advocate for housing integration and jobtraining for low-income citizens—as Achtenberg did at HUD—could, in fact, give a politician the all-important appearance of being an outsider, and if she continues positioning herself as such, she could pull off a victory.

The candidate also continues to line up an impressive cadre of supporters. Her campaign recently created a national advisory board featuring a host of glamor gays including Tony Kushner, Greta Cammermeyer, Larry Kramer and Harvey Fierstein, and local fund-raising committees are cropping up across the country, including here in Portland. (According to campaign finance reports filed on July 31, Achtenberg had raised nearly \$190,000—a notable amount given her late entry into the race; Brown reported \$163,306, and Jordan pulled in \$500,000 during the first six months of 1995.)

True to her Golden State roots, Achtenberg looks to the water when she has a few moments to relax. "Mary and I go scuba diving, and we love to windsurf," she says. (You won't find the couple windsurfing with yahoos in the bay, however.) "There's a reservoir about a half-hour away that we go to, and we also try to get to a wonderful lake in the Sierras."

When asked what she'll do if she loses the mayoral race, she answers—in characteristic fashion—"That's not going to happen."

Roberta Achtenberg will be the keynote speaker at the Oregon Gay and Lesbian Law Association's Fifth Annual Dinner on Sept. 16. Tickets are \$40 and can be purchased by calling 231-9340 or 248-1063.



Roberta Achtenberg

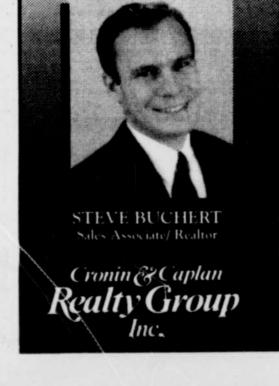
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