

STOP THE WHIRL

Once known as "Scandal Boy," Alan Helms survived the gay high life to find his own measure of happiness

by Gip Plaster

It was a different world for gay and lesbian people in the '50s and early '60s. Gay people were rarely portrayed—either positively or negatively—on television or in the movies. People in this country had not learned to talk about sexuality yet, so it is little wonder that gay issues were never talked about. The American Psychiatry Association still considered gay men and lesbians mentally ill.

It was before Stonewall, the riot which marked

Books

the beginning of the gay and lesbian liberation movement. Gay men and lesbians did exist before that riot, though, and often just lived closeted and unhappy lives.

Against that backdrop, Alan Helms moved from the stifling atmosphere of his childhood home in Indiana to ultimately join the gay and lesbian circle in New York.

His move there marked the end of his childhood pain and isolation, while bringing him a whole new set of pains and disappointments.

Young Man from the Provinces: A Gay Life Before Stonewall chronicles Helms' adventures as he becomes a reasonably successful model and actor. At first, readers may be unsure what this book can offer. Most have never heard of Helms and may not see the value in reading the story of someone they don't know. His story, however, provides a look into the life of a gay man living in a time before anyone discussed gay and lesbian issues in public.

Helms began life with an array of both pleasant and unpleasant childhood experiences—something to which many other gay men and lesbians can relate.

"If in childhood I'd been only praised & told I was the best thing since zippers, I'd have grown up, encountered reality, become disappointed, & eventually recovered. If I'd been only abused & humiliated, I'd have grown up, been scarred for life, & probably killed myself," Helms writes. "Since I got both, I got confused."

He worked hard his last few years in high school to gain the opportunity to escape from the pain and isolation to New York and Columbia University. Soon he was invited to a cocktail party and thrust into a world that included Anthony Perkins, Marlene Dietrich, Leonard Bernstein, Steven Sondheim and other prominent New York gay men and lesbians.

"Without any preparation or the slightest hint of what was about to happen," Helms writes, "I

had just walked into a world of men like me, & I simultaneously experienced two overwhelming, diametrically opposed responses: 'My moral universe has just been turned upside down,' & 'Thank God, I'm no longer alone.' The dread of a new fear, the euphoria of an immense relief."

He became well known in that circle, but not because of the academic skills that had gotten him from his hometown to the big city. Instead, he became known for sex, which he gave freely to most who were interested. From his encounters he acquired a reputation, of which only a part was true.

"We called him 'Scandal Boy' and constructed endless gossip around him," writer Edmund White said.

Despite his scandalous entrance into the gay and lesbian scene, or maybe because of it, Helms achieved some happiness in New York—certainly more than it seems he had found growing up in Indiana. It wasn't all happiness, though, and the years of unresolved anger and pain eventually led Helms to start therapy. He moved to Boston to be closer to the therapist who was helping him.

Today Helms is a professor of literature at the University of Massachusetts in Boston, but it has been a long road from his Midwestern childhood, via the exciting and dangerous New York life, to a more settled life in Boston.

Helms battled severe depression and abused drugs for a number of years. Today he continues to battle for self-acceptance, but writes that he is emotionally recovering and physically well. He has watched former lovers and friends—more than 80 of them—die of AIDS. It is a miracle, he says, that he never con-

tracted the virus.

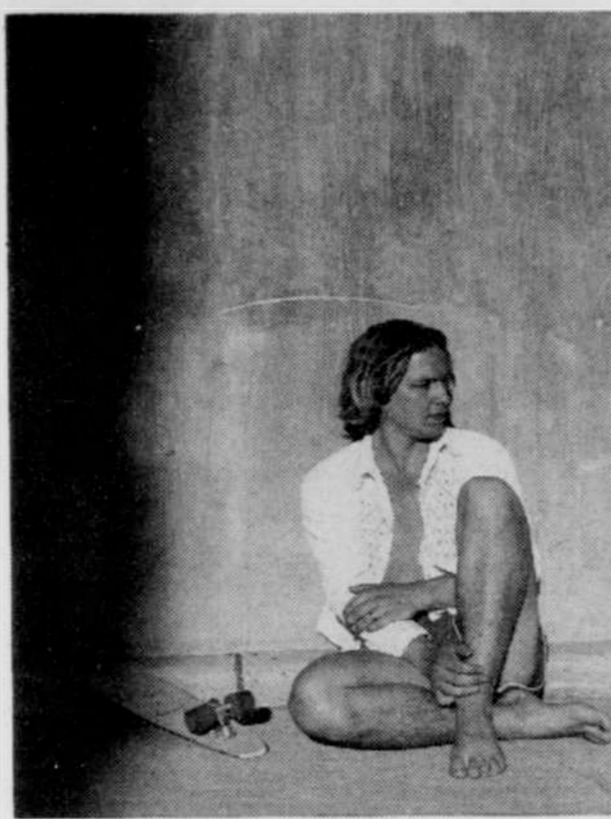
Helms' life is one of which he says he can be proud, and his book tells the story of his struggle eloquently.

His book provides a look into a world that has vanished, at least partially. While gay men and lesbians have more freedom today than ever, Helms writes of just how secretive and frankly, crude, gay men were once forced to be. He proves that the struggle for acceptance and happiness is fought and won one person at a time.

"Thirty & twenty & even ten years ago I wanted so desperately to be a happy man, but the thrust of my life was toward being popular.... Today I'm a reasonably contented man," Helms writes. "The man in the mirror & I are on good terms at last."

The struggle for happiness is one Helms is winning, and that is surely a happy ending.

Young Man from the Provinces: A Gay Life Before Stonewall by Alan Helms. Faber and Faber, 1995, \$22.95 cloth.



Pro Lab N.W. Inc.
133 SE Madison
Portland, OR 97214

503-231-1599

FULL SERVICE
CUSTOM PHOTO LAB



New on the market...

The Bender Properties real estate team welcomes the talent and promise of our newest associate, **Gail Davis**. Buying or selling a home? Come take advantage of our encyclopedic knowledge.

office (503) 653-8378
residence (503) 659-1515
fax (503) 786-1227

4725 Southeast Washington Street
Serving the entire Portland metro area since 1979.

Milwaukie, Oregon 97222

We just got smarter!

The See Vue

Lodging—where mountain meets the sea

95590 Highway 101
6.2 miles south of
Yachats, Oregon 97498
(541) 547-3227

Invest in a treasure
you'll enjoy for a lifetime
HAMID'S PERSIAN RUGS

— Unsurpassed customer service and reputation since 1981 —

248-9511
901 SW
Washington



Portland's finest
selection of new and
old Persian and
Oriental Rugs

Cleaning & Repair

Mon-Sat 10-6 • Sun 12-5