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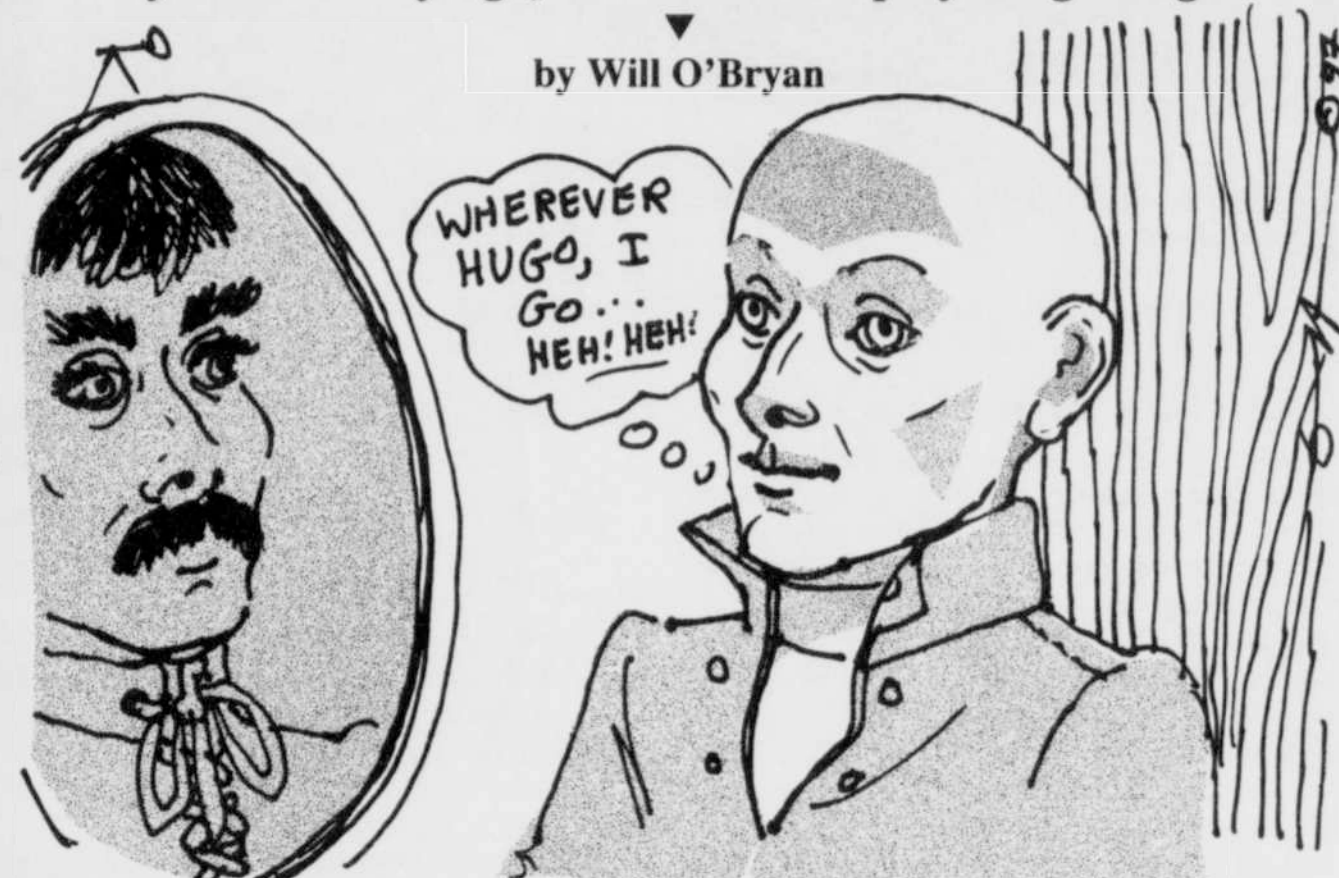
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STONEWALL BABY

Toys, toys, toys

Who can easily shed the relentless training of those formative years? At any age, Christmas is a plaything thing

by Will O'Bryan



You may still be digesting Thanksgiving, but the holiday season is upon us. For me, that means Christmas. Actually, for me that means Xmas. I've only seen the inside of a church twice in the past five years and both occasions were funerals.

Never mind that I'm 28 (seemingly geriatric in gay terms, unless I want to categorize myself as a "daddy" or a bear), I'm still drawn to look at the toy catalogs. I won't be buying toys for anyone, but they're still so compelling. It doesn't seem like the holidays without channeling my 7-year-old self to make lists for Santa and watch Christmas specials.

Some portion of toy marketing has always been a loaded gun for those of us who don't adhere neatly to society's gender roles. One would hope that over the years the roles might've loosened slightly as far as Mattel and some of the other elves are concerned. Only slightly, maybe.

Fred Meyer, for example, is pushing air hockey, a pool table and foosball. They've posed boys with puck and billiard balls, but a couple of sporty overall-wearing girls are battling heatedly at the foosball table. They look very butch, in a playful, childlike way.

The Fisher-Price All-In-One Kitchen Center employs boy and girl models to show off this piece of molded plastic fun. The girl in a sensible dress fondles the 20-piece serving set, while the boy (pants, no dress) reaches in the little plastic refrigerator. This photo still-life of all-American marketing is open to interpretation. Someone might imagine these children are playing out a scenario wherein pristine Pam whips up a post-rally nosh for Promise Keeper Pete, who's fishing around for a Coors.

I prefer to imagine that these kids are imagining that they are dyke Barb and queer Bob, setting up their own catering business to empower themselves and ensure their own job security. After all, our little miss is wearing some awfully sensible tennis shoes, and the man of the kiddie kitchen is sporting an awfully festive sweater.

Some items aren't open to interpretation. Big Wheels definitely come in a His and Hers. His is the Turbo Racer, decked out in black and yellow with dangerous racing stripes. A really hostile-looking machine. Hers is the Seabreeze, in soft pink and teal. The boy who would rather make his way through the neighborhood on the Seabreeze probably won't make it to the new year.

The bulk of gender-specific toys, thanks in no small part to Barbie, are aimed at girls. Woe unto

the baby dyke who unwraps Barbie's "My Very Own Vanity." Far scarier is interactive Barbie.

"Simply plug Barbie's computer into your computer, pop in the CD-ROM and she's ready to start learning all about you...your name, your birthday, your favorite activities, more."

Yikes! It's Big Brother Barbie, just in time for the holidays. Think good thoughts.

Looking at my own childhood, I think I must've been pretty lucky. One year I got The Treetops, a little plastic family that lived in a plastic tree house. I don't know how the manufacturer was able to convince parents that this toy, essentially a doll house, was a unisex toy. I don't know, and I don't care. I was just happy to get it. But I knew better than to play with The Treetops when other boys were over.

Santa brought the best gift, by far, in 1976. I was 7 years old when I unwrapped Hugo, Man of a Thousand Faces. Hugo looked like a Yul Brynner puppet. He was just a little blue smock with a big bald head and two little plastic hands on the ends of his floppy arms. He came with wigs, fake mustaches and beards, warts, fake noses... He was marketed to boys as a cloak-and-dagger toy. Our own little spy to disguise and send on dangerous missions. In reality, he was a thinly veiled makeup mannequin for boys.

I could spend hours making Hugo look like any future husband I wanted, and no one was ever the wiser. I couldn't imagine him going on dangerous missions. I was too protective. There would be no spy games for my precious Hugo.

My fondness for Hugo is so deep that I keep him with me still. Twenty-one years later, Hugo still sits on a shelf in my bedroom, his plastic eyes attentively following me around the room.

Sometimes Mr. X, my spouse, asks me to stick Hugo in the basement: "That thing freaks me out!" Jealousy is a dirty thing.

Over the years I lost all of Hugo's accouterments. He can only be himself now. Looking through the catalogs, I can't find any toys that could hold a candle to him. But I'm probably just too old to see things through a child's eyes. For the masculine girls and feminine boys, I'm sure there must be innocent-looking toys that will help them survive childhood.

Maybe little Barb will find under the tree Tomb Raider II, starring a busty, gun-totin' Lara Croft, to plug into her Sony PlayStation and fuel her fantasies. And little Bob could do worse than to get a very single and sexually ambiguous Luke Skywalker action figure on the eighth day of Hanukkah.

Photo: Martin Ryler