

The Blue and the gay

Out on the air—and off—with *NYPD Blue* star Bill Brochtrup

BY ANDY MANGELS

Name the highest-rated television series that features not only an openly gay regular character, but which also features an openly gay man in that role. Stumped? Not if you switch on ABC every Tuesday night to see Bill Brochtrup in the role of Public Administrative Aide John Irvin in the long-running series *NYPD Blue*.

Best known for his telling glances and his nickname—gruff Detective Sipowicz calls him “Gay John”—Brochtrup’s character has been an integral part of the series for several seasons now. But it didn’t begin that way.

“When I first started doing the show,” says Brochtrup from his newly purchased home in the Los Angeles area, “I came on at the end of the second season. I came on to do two episodes as this funny gay temp. Then they sort of had me stay and stay and stay.”

Producers Stephen Bochco and David Milch kept using Brochtrup through *Blue*’s third season, before switching him to the short-lived Bochco productions *Public Morals* and *Total Security*. The John Irvin character returned as a series regular during *NYPD Blue*’s sixth season.

Brochtrup recalls his initial trepidation at being an openly gay actor, in the early days of *Blue*: “*The Advocate* called before the thing even aired. I didn’t have a publicist, I had never done an interview for anyone.... So in that first interview I did with them, I said I didn’t want to talk about my personal life, because I wasn’t sure how I wanted to handle it yet.”

He notes that the avoidance “lasted for about two weeks, and everything I’ve done since then, I have been open about [being gay].”

Brochtrup laughs at the irony of telling an interviewer this, then says, “The press is irrevocable. Once it’s written in the paper, then everybody can read about it for a dollar at the newsstand. You can’t be a whole lot more out than that!”

Brochtrup was born in Englewood, Calif., but grew up in Tacoma, Wash. He studied acting at New York University, then worked extensively in theater and did guest roles in television series and films, before landing the *Blue* role.

Brochtrup credits producer-writer David Milch with the complexity of his character.

“I think that he feels that John is very evolved, and that he is, in many ways, the character who is the most in touch with who he is,” Brochtrup explains. “We’re doing the squad room with all these people who can’t deal with their emotions and how they feel about things and can only do that monosyllabic grunt, and John has no shame about who he is.”

Another element of the series that has struck a chord with gay viewers is the complex relationship between John and bigoted Andy Sipowicz (played by Dennis Franz).

“[Milch] said that the entire series is about the redemption of the Sipowicz character,” Brochtrup says. “When John came on, it was to have him become a foil for Andy, and that we would see his homophobia in the same way we see his racism.”

He adds: “I think the audience looks at their own homophobia. You see John being

very sweet and you see Andy being very nasty to him and you think, ‘Gosh, I’ve been that way before. It’s not very attractive when I see it.’ It holds a mirror up to the audience.”

NYPD Blue has won two GLAAD Media

Does this mean one of *NYPD Blue*’s famous nude scenes is in the offing? “We do have to sign these contracts with a nudity clause in them. I guess at their request I have to do it. I feel like it’s gonna happen some day. Some day we’ll have a scene with two guys on TV,” Brochtrup says and, after a pause, enthusiastically adds, “I’d be happy to be in the forefront!”

As an openly gay actor, Brochtrup isn’t overly concerned about the dreaded Hollywood typecasting: “I think all actors are trying to push the envelope of what people think they can do. I think that typecasting is endemic to acting. I don’t think of it as particularly a gay problem. I’ve turned down a lot of parts of gay characters that I thought were not written well, and at the same time I’m very happy to play gay characters and I would be happy to play them exclusively the rest of my life if they were as well-written as this one is.”

Given current gay Hollywood success stories such as *Will & Grace* and Rupert Everett, and the continued success of Ellen DeGeneres, Brochtrup finds it “encouraging that there are more and more out gay actors working.”

He adds: “I don’t feel I’m having any career trouble. I’ve been working steadily since I did those interviews where I said I was gay.”

These days, 36-year-old Brochtrup is spending his off-set hours with roofers and landscapers on his new house, but in his spare time he loves backpacking and games.

He also jokes that he’s different from his character, saying, “I certainly have better hair than he does, and I think I dress better. I’m from Seattle. I wear flannel!”

He doesn’t party much or go to the clubs, and notes that he’s never done drugs.

“I’m pretty on the straight and narrow,” he says.

Although ABC hasn’t officially picked up *NYPD Blue* for next season, Brochtrup has three more years on his contract with the series.

“I will stay as long as they will have me. I think everyone also feels—and I certainly do—how lucky we are to find a place where everything has come together,” he says.

So, what is the best thing that’s happened to Bill Brochtrup as a result of coming out in Hollywood?

First, he recalls the letters he’s gotten, but then he says earnestly: “The best thing that’s happened about it is *nothing*. The world didn’t end, my career didn’t come to a complete halt, I didn’t get ridiculed, I didn’t get yelled at. Life went on just as I’d hoped it would. I hope that is the thing that I can sort of give to people. Nothing went wrong, it’s all going pretty darn well. I think that’s the day that we’re all kind of struggling toward; the day that will be the case for everyone, when everyone will be able to be out and who they are and no one will care...and life will just carry on.”

■ ANDY MANGELS is a longtime entertainment writer with three books and hundreds of comic books and magazine articles to his credit, including a biography of gay screenwriter Kevin Williamson. You can write to him at AMangelsSW@aol.com.

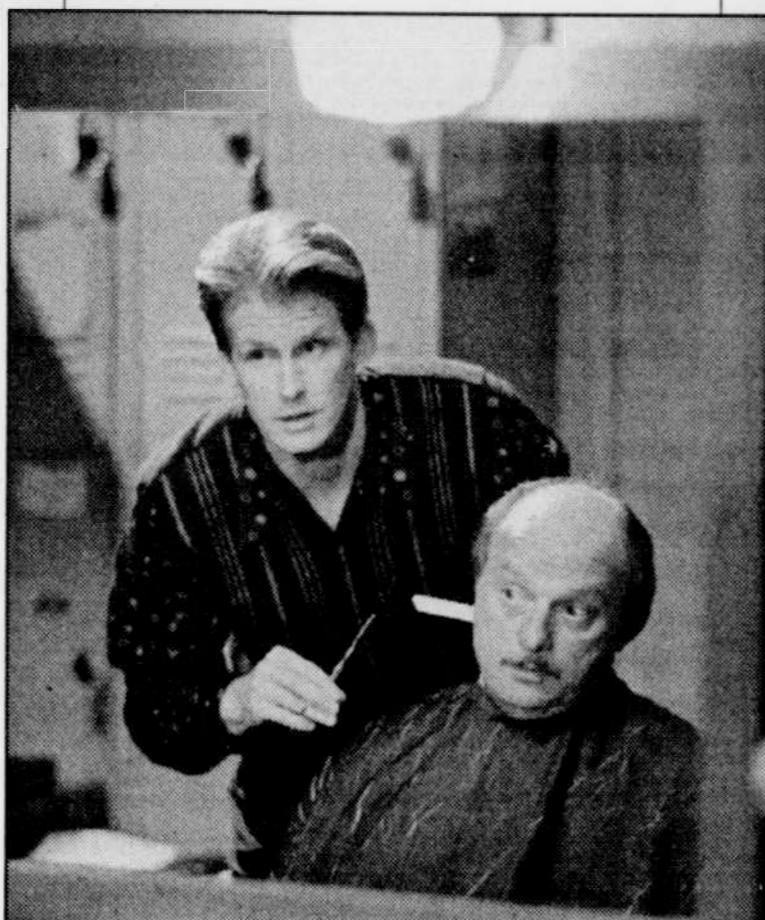


PHOTO BY RANDY HOLMES



“Gay John” (Bill Brochtrup) giving conservative co-worker Andy Sipowicz (Dennis Franz) a haircut on *NYPD Blue*

Awards for best portrayal of gay characters on television, and Brochtrup is happy with the accolades and the private response.

“I get letters from grandmothers and people who say, ‘Thank you, my grandson is gay and we appreciate what you’re doing.’ That means a lot to me,” Brochtrup says. “Truck drivers and cab drivers and everyday working-class, blue-collar guys you would not necessarily think would love this character come up to me and shake my hand and tell me how much they love this guy. I find that remarkable.”

An episode aired in late February that concentrated on Brochtrup’s character—“I like to think of it as ‘John Irvin, Boy Detective,’” he jokes. It set up a story line that will continue through the end of the season.

“We get to learn a little bit more about John’s personal life,” the actor explains.

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