

TELEVISION

Comfort queen

Jim J. Bullock reflects on the sitcom that launched his career

BY LAWRENCE FERBER

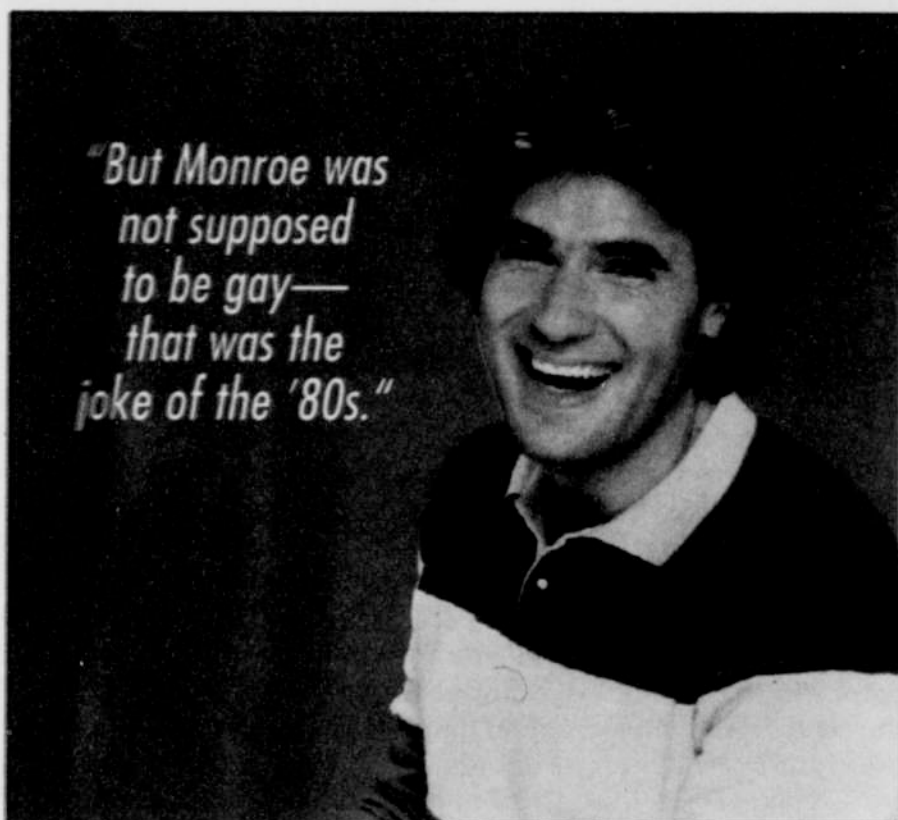
Jim J. Bullock may be forever haunted by the spirit of Monroe Ficus, his character on TV's *Too Close for Comfort*.

Since the sitcom ended its run in 1986, the actor's varied career has seen him occupy *Hollywood Squares'* chatty upper-right square, co-host a talk show with Tammy Faye Bakker, provide the voice of animated fey fowl *Queer Duck*, play a teacher on Nickelodeon's hit series *Ned's Declassified School Survival Guide*, appear in gay films like *Circuit* and *10 Attitudes* and co-star onstage in *When Pigs Fly*, *The Older Man You Always Wanted*, *End of the World Party* and now Broadway's *Hairspray*. But none of these roles have brought him more recognition than that foofy-haired archetypal airhead neighbor.

Set in a San Francisco house, *Too Close for Comfort* involved a cantankerous cartoonist, Henry Rush (Ted Knight), his wife, Muriel (Nancy Dussault), and their two grown daughters, Sara and Jackie (Lydia Cornell and Deborah Van Valkenburgh). For the just-released DVD set of *The Complete*

Season Two (Rhino Home Video), Bullock and Dussault reunite to provide delicious commentary for a pair of episodes. Bullock repeatedly cracks up Dussault with observations like, "This opening [sequence] was so cheap—and cheesy!" and "Look how gay I got there—I

"But Monroe was not supposed to be gay—that was the joke of the '80s."



Jim J. Bullock played the thorn in the side of a cantankerous cartoonist in *Too Close for Comfort*.

guess I'm getting very comfortable at this point because I just turned into Bette Davis!"

Bullock also reveals that the show's producers initially felt he was "too fat and too gay" to play the part. "As I was watching these [episodes] I was thinking about the suppression

in my life, how hushed everything was and I was on this hit show and I couldn't be out," he recalls. "Such a different time!"

Lawrence Ferber: How do you regard Monroe, Jim?

Jim J. Bullock: With fondness. I have great memories of that time. I'm very aware that show is what put me on the map, and I'm very grateful for that.

LF: Did the producers know you were gay?

JJB: Oh, yes. But Monroe was not supposed to be gay—that was the joke of the '80s. The producers would call me in and go, "We're getting letters questioning Monroe's sexuality." And I'd say: "What do you want me to do? Butch it up?" Monroe's not butch! He's a neutered animal, neither male nor female, and has no desires other than probably Henry Rush! Just to please him! But I've heard so many comments from guys—and girls—saying: "You really saved my life because I used to watch you on TV, and I related to you. Seeing you said there are other people like me, and if he can go and be on a series and be a success, obviously there's hope for someone like me." I don't get the title of *Ellen*, but it's wonderful that people related to me long before.

LF: When was the last time you watched

an episode from start to finish?

JJB: About five weeks ago. I don't even have a library of the show. It hasn't been on TV anywhere that I've known of for years! ...And I was thinking, you know what? I've belittled that show in my mind over the years because it [was] never...on the A-list. But for what it was, it was a really good show. Ted ran a tight ship.

LF: So besides it being almost 20 years since *Too Close for Comfort*, this year marks 20 years since you were diagnosed as HIV-positive. How much does HIV affect your daily life? Are you on any drug cocktails?

JJB: I've never taken a pill. I've been tested and retested and poked and prodded and a guinea pig because they were going: "You're a freak. You've been positive this long, and your T cells are here and you have no viral load." I've been retested many times. They would always come back positive, but for whatever reason I'm one of that minority—like 1 percent—of people who [stay] asymptomatic.

LF: I notice your character's name on the Nickelodeon show is "Mr. Monroe." A tribute to Mr. Ficus?

JJB: Well, the show's writer/producer, Scott Fellows, was a fan. When I went in to audition, just hoping I'd get a job, he goes, "Oh my God!" He was so excited I was there, I didn't really even have to audition. So when I got the part, he called and asked, "Could we call your character Mr. Monroe?" I said, "I don't give a rat's ass what you call me, so long as you pay me!" 

LAWRENCE FERBER has written for *Entertainment Weekly*, *The Advocate* and *Time Out New York*.

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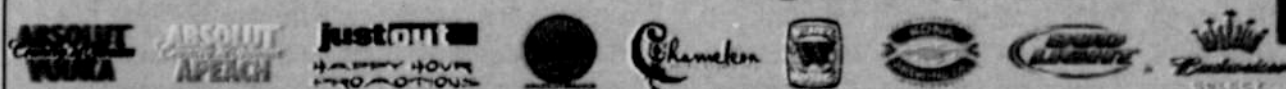
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