

How The Gay Lobby Has Changed Television

Using both protest and persuasion, gay activists may have become the most effective pressure group in Hollywood

by Richard M. Levine

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A recent meeting on the 20th Century-Fox lot between Newton Deiter, a Los Angeles psychologist, and Esther Shapiro, executive producer of the ABC series *Dynasty*, was remarkable only for being so routine. A few years ago it would have been unthinkable. Deiter, head of the Los Angeles-based Gay Media Task Force, was there to suggest some script changes and to preview scenes that had already been shot, and Esther Shapiro was there to listen to his opinion--gladly. Infact, she had paid for it. These days the three networks send Deiter virtually all scripts involving "gay themes," and many producers seek out his suggestions. With such an amiable relationship now the general rule, it is arguable that gays have become the most effective lobby in television.

Deiter is a barrel-chested, back-slapping fellow whose looks and background (from Korean War pilot to his years as head of the National Family Planning Council) provide the most forceful illustration of his principal argument--that stereotypes "deceive and disserve." His ear and eye are finely attuned to lisping, limp-wristed mannerisms. With *Dynasty*, Deiter's concern focuses on "sensitive son Steven Carrington" (as the network's press release describes him), who is "in search of his sexual identity" and thus in conflict with his "dynamic family patriarch" of a father, Blake Carrington, played by John Forsythe.

I want you to see the confrontation with his father in the library, "Shapiro began the meeting." The actor is very strong. We took out a moment where he sobs at the end." She found the scene from the three-hour premiere of the series on a videocassette. In fact, the actor who plays Steven (Al Corley) has the kind of boy-next-door good looks and mannerisms that have become a reverse cliché for homosexuals on television, thanks in large part to the efforts of the gay lobby. Deiter seemed pleased with the scene.

"Have you got any film on [Steven's boyfriend] Ted yet?" he asked.

"No," Shapiro said, "but physically he's tall, all-American."

"The sense I get of Ted is that he loves Steven enough to let him make his choice," Deiter says.

"That's the point," Shapiro agrees. "They're just two human beings."

And so it goes for another hour. Shapiro agrees to take out the word "faggot" in a later episode, as well as the phrase "gay-schmay" from a speech (Deiter: "To me, 'gay-schmay' just isnt Claudia"). After some discussion, Deiter agrees that the dramatic context justifies Steven's sister Fallon's harsh line to his visiting boy friend: "Ted, Steven comes from a world where culls, cripples and homosexuals are taken out behind the barn and slaughtered. "A little give, a little take, and no one the worse for wear.

It was not always thus in the dealings between gays and the television industry. For the first two decades of television, the image of gays was not an issue--there was no image. Except for Uncle Miltie in drag and "homo" or "Brucie" jokes from Bob Hope or Johnny Carson, gays were more invisible on TV than in the society at large. Then, in 1967, Mike Wallace did a *CBS Reports* on homosexuals that brought them out of the closet and into the leafy shadows behind potted palm trees, where the interviewees were questioned, to protect their identities, as though they were mob informers in Miami. (One such shadowy figure said: "I know that I'm sick inside...and the sex part of it is a symptom, like a stomachache is a symptom of who knows what.") The same year an *N.Y.P.D.* episode about a hotel extortion ring that preyed on homosexuals marked the first dramatic treatment of "an area of human activity feared and detested everywhere," in the announcer's words.

Then five more years of silence on the subject, until the breakthrough TV movie "That Certain Summer" in 1972, which starred Hal Holbrook as a divorced building contractor and Martin Sheen as his live-in lover. Sheen moves out during a summer visit by Holbrook's 14-year-old son, but the boy manages to discover in the medicine chest the nature of the relationship (key insight: "Dad, you don't need shaving cream with an electric razor") and runs away. "That Certain Summer" was an honest treatment of a complex and sensitive subject, but by then the gay rights movement was in full swing and the movie was also criticized for being too cautious (the lovers never touch) and oddly "balanced." At the network's insistence the Holbrook character was made to tell his son: "A lot of people think it's wrong. They say it's a sickness... If I had a choice, it's not something I'd pick for myself."

The man who first monitored the depiction of homosexuals on TV was Ronald Gold, a gay activist who had been a staff reporter on *Variety*, the entertainment industry paper. "I told the networks: You're violating your own tradition by compromising with bigotry. You wouldn't have a black character saying, 'I don't know if I'm lazy and shiftless,' or give the Ku Klux Klan equal time to represent its point of view. But you have gays saying, 'I don't know if I'm sick,' and you pay careful attention to the Anita Bryants."

The following year, 1973, a similar attitude on a *Marcus Welby, M.D.* episode called "The Other Martin Loring" (in which kindly Robert Young assured a gay husband and father that with proper care he'd get better) provoked the first gay activist "zap" against the networks--a sit in at ABC chairman Leonard Goldenson's office that ended with the police carrying out the protesters bodily.

In short order, gays on television went from invisibility to near total abuse. In 1974, another *Welby* episode, "The Outrage," about a male science teacher who molests a 14-year-old boy, sparked a nationwide protest that caused several major affiliates to refuse to broadcast the program and some sponsors to cancel their spots. But when the New York based National Gay Task Force requested that the *Welby* shows be removed from syndication, an MCA-TV vice president proved how much consciousness-raising remained to be done by writing back: "If, as you indicate, there are 20 million homosexuals in America, then there must be at least 180 million heterosexuals. To our knowledge not one heterosexual has ever pressured us or attempted to dictate program content."

That same 1974-75 season produced what is probably the single most "homophobic" show to date, an episode of *Police Woman* called "Flowers of Evil," about three lesbians who murder patients in their old age home. (David Gerber, the series' unrepentant producer, comments today: "That was a tough-minded show about homicidal maniacs who happened to be homosexual. That's honest. That's realistic.") "Flowers of Evil" provoked another sit-in, this time at NBC headquarters. Soon afterward the National Gay Task Force persuaded the NAB Television Code Review Board to issue a directive to its members specifically stating that the Television Code's broad injunction that "material with sexual

connotations shall not be treated exploitatively or irresponsibly" applied to homosexuals. Meanwhile, in Los Angeles, the newly formed Gay Media Task Force saw itself, in Newton Deiter's words, as "more problem solvers than problem creators." With gay lobbying groups on both coasts, the networks could no longer use what Deiter calls their "shuttle tactic--telling us in L.A. that whatever we objected to was a corporate decision for New York, and in New York that it was a Hollywood problem."

As important as the organizational talents of the lobbying groups was the implied pressure of millions of gays around the country, the vast majority of them possessing the kind of "disposable income" TV advertisers lust after. There was also an element of inspired bluff, as when, in 1977, ABC and the producers of *Soap*, with its controversial gay character, negotiated with a group calling itself the International Union of Gay Athletes, without realizing that it consisted of four rank-and-file members and a fictitious leader.

Soon all three networks were consulting with Deiter on scripts involving gay characters. Some individual producers objected to the practice on the grounds that it constituted, as Paul Newman once wrote Deiter, "cleverly disguised censorship." But most found Deiter genuinely helpful. He sought out a lesbian teacher to provide advice for a *Family* episode and, more recently, a gay cop willing to talk to the writer of a *Lou Grant* episode. (In an orgy of overcompensation so typical of gay characters on television, the cop lifts weights, practices target shooting, coaches a soccer team and drinks beer--all in the first 10 minutes of the show.)

By the mid-'70s, half the sitcoms on television had done a positive ("pro-social") gay show that often made its point--and garnered laughs--by having a particularly macho character announce his homosexuality--a truck driver (on *All in the Family*), for example, or a football player (*Alice*). Without the laughter, dramatic series often seemed ploddingly self-conscious in announcing their good intentions, as typified by the *Family* episode that opened the 1976 season. Zeke, an old friend of Willie's, turns up to reveal his "secret"--not just to Willie but, by turns, to Doug, Kate, Buddy and his own father (a scene in which he wears a rugby shirt and shoots baskets). Each ritual announcement is followed by a pregnant pause, rising music (violas and flutes, mostly) and, of course, a commercial message. By the last scene, when Zeke tells Willie about "the summer I knew I was [pregnant pause] different, "the character has come out of the closet to announce his sexual preference in nearly every room in the house.

In that premiere week of the 1976-77 season, gays on television had completed the transition from invisibility to saturation. In addition to the *Family* episode, early segments of no fewer than three series--*Alice*, *Barney Miller* and the short-lived *Nancy Walker Show*--featured gay male characters in prominent roles. Although not all the shows were free of offending stereotypes, the gay lobby had clearly had a major impact on television. Gone forever, it seemed, were the dark days of potted palms, but the gay lobby's success would bring new problems that mirrored the old. "You won't find too many homosexual murderers on television these days," David Gerber said recently. "But you won't find too many gay doctors or lawyers, either. A lot of people have said, 'To hell with the whole issue'.

Next week: The TV industry's gay underground.

'Our Only Allies Now Are Our Worst Enemies'

Homosexuals explain how the Moral Majority helps their cause--and why they worry about an anti-gay backlash.

By the mid-'70s, the portrayal of gays on television had gone through a cycle of neglect and a cycle of abuse, and had, with a few isolated exceptions, reached a state of self-consciously unsteretyped acceptance. In 1976--TV's "Year of the Gay"--several situation comedies introduced ongoing homosexual characters, and many others did individual episodes around gay themes. This dramatic change in the image of gays came about mainly because of the consciousness-raising efforts of two gay groups, the New York-based National Gay Task Force (NGTF) and the Los Angeles-based Gay Media Task Force (GMTF).

The NGTF arranged meetings with program executives at network headquarters, conducted letter-writing campaigns to affiliates and advertisers and organized a system of "media alerts" to rouse other homosexual groups around the country to take action at their local level. Last year the Federal Communications Commission, acting on a petition filed by the NGTF, ruled that wherever gays represented a "significant element" of the community, broadcasters were required to "ascertain" their needs and interests as part of their mandatory license-renewal procedures.

On the West Coast, the deliberately nonconfrontational activities of Los Angeles psychologist Newton Deiter soon persuaded the networks to submit scripts involving homosexual characters to his Gay Media Task Force for review. "We are not censors," Deiter said recently. "We try to get across the idea that if a derogatory remark must be made about gays, make sure it is not made by a role model."

In the book-lined study of his Spanish-style ranch house, Deiter pulled out the "final" and "revised final" scripts of a *Trapper John, M.D.* episode that depicts the hospitalized results of a confrontation between gays and cops. "The real 'hero' of this show is a drag queen," Deiter said in some amazement. "That could have never happened a few years ago and I had nothing to do with it. "But what Deiter did have a great deal to do with was the language of the show, for in the earlier version he had underlined a number of taunting phrases ("pig," "fag scum," "screaming queers") that were eliminated from the revised version. In addition, the revised script was sprinkled with such emphatic warnings as: "NOTE: The Young Gay Man is *NOT* effeminate."

The elimination of such stereotypes is the gay lobby's principal concern, and one mark of its success is the number of television programs that have dramatized the message. Last season, for example, an episode of *The Associates* concerned a dispute between network censors and a TV producer about whether certain jokes in his show would offend gays. At the height of the argument, the producer brings out the head of the "Gay Task Force" from the next room. Mincing and flouncing in the most stereotypical manner, the gay leader walks in, limp-wristedly shakes hands all around, and says, in a lisping, high-pitched voice, "We're not really concerned with occasional derogatory emphasis." Then his voice drops two octaves and his effeminate mannerisms suddenly cease. "I'll tell you what we do find offensive," he continues. "We are deeply offended by the fact that supposedly sophisticated men like you could so readily accept the fact that a gay person would come in here talking like Sylvester the Cat."

Along with overt pressure tactics, the gay lobby, unlike most minority groups, could also count on the covert assistance of what Newton Deiter calls his "agents in place" and others refer to as the Gay

Mafia--the ubiquitous, and largely anonymous, group of gays within the entertainment industry. The fact is that Deiter had a lot of help from his friends. On one occasion he was tipped off to an offensive gay joke on *The Redd Foxx Show* before the network censors knew about it, and at other times he was able to arrive at a network meeting that had no previously announced agenda and pull out from his briefcase the scripts he knew would be under discussion.

The presence of homosexuals on all levels of the entertainment industry has long been the stuff of Hollywood memoirs, and television is no exception. "We don't get together on alternate Wednesdays, said one former network executive who is now a highly successful independent producer, "but we all know who we are. So do our straight colleagues, for the most part. Whenever there was too much office talk about football, I was the guy who always asked, 'Is that the round one?'" The producer claims that even in a generally macho industry he has not personally experienced discrimination, but he also points out that by and large his TV-movies have received good ratings.

Another gay TV producer spoke of a friend who had been treated royally by a major studio, given the best office space and his choice of scripts to produce, until his string of successes snapped. "After that everyone was asking, 'How can we get that queer off the lot?'" A colleague sitting beside him echoed the moral of the story: "In this town, a faggot is a homosexual gentleman who's had a few flops." It is, perhaps, just such volatility that prompted even those TV producers and executives who lead openly gay life styles to insist on anonymity in print.

Closet gays in the television industry, on the other hand, are often more of a hindrance than a help to other homosexuals. "At one of the networks," Newton Deiter claims, "nearly the entire broadcast-standards staff is gay, except for the head of the department. And since he's the only one who's not afraid of losing his job, he's also the only one who has been consistently helpful to us." Traditionally, this lack of cooperation by gays themselves has been most notorious in casting departments. "I know casting directors have been some of the worst offenders, but it's a difficult charge to prove," said one openly gay producer. "I myself was once burned badly when I cast a gay friend in a movie without even realizing that he had some effeminate mannerisms. That movie had the only Mafia hit man in television history who lisped."

Gay or straight, many television producers talked about the difficulty of getting homosexual material on the air without network interference, which would generally take opposite directions depending on whether the characters were lesbians or gay males. For example, in the 1978 made-for-television movie "A Question of Love," based on the real-life case of a lesbian mother who lost custody of her children because she was living with another woman, the network wanted to make the couple's sexual relationship more explicit. "ABC would have liked one of the characters to have said, 'You look tense. Let me rub your back,' and then gone from there as far as Broadcast Standards would allow," recalls writer Bill Blinn. "But we compromised on a less exploitative scene in which one woman dries the other's hair." Conversely, in "Sergeant Matlovich vs. the U.S. Air Force," NBC skirted the "love interest" in the story, thus obscuring the main motive of the real Leonard Matlovich for coming out of the closet in the first place.

Most people in television agree that there has been an antigay backlash in recent years and worry about the future. After the 1976-77 season, the networks began receiving complaints from religious groups and station owners about the number and positive portrayal of homosexual characters and themes on television. Anita Bryant's Save Our Children crusade was followed by Jerry Falwell's Moral Majority, which has recently announced that it is turning its attention from cleaning up Congress to cleaning up television, a campaign that will definitely include among its targets all but the most

damning portrayals of homosexuality. ("It was Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden," one of Falwell's favorite lines goes, "not Adam and Steve.") The result of this sort of pressure has been that gays are featured much more rarely on weekly series these days. "Word has gone out to get the fag out," Newton Deiter charges.

The clearest case in point was a prospective ABC series called *Adam and Yves* (shades of "Adam and Steve"), loosely based on the hit French movie "La Cage aux Folles." According to ABC-TV president Fred Pierce, the program "had never gone beyond the idea stage." Yet the network received more than 100,000 letters of protest. Most of them were generated by the American Christian Cause, whose director, the Rev. Robert G. Grant, warned his followers that "militant homosexuals may soon score a terrifying breakthrough in their war against the Christian family" and suggested that they let ABC know their feelings on the matter.

Next fall the lone exception to the antigay drift in sitcoms will be *Love, Sidney*, starring Tony Randall as a discreetly homosexual art director who befriends an aspiring actress and becomes a surrogate father to her young daughter. Not only has NBC vitiated the gay theme by having the characters form a quasinuclear family, but its press release, which never refers to the title character's sexual persuasion, describes the show simply as "a warm, poignant threecharacter comedy." However, the Rev. Donald Wildmon of the National Federation for Decency has his own description of *Love, Sidney*--"a program about a middle-aged homosexual, a promiscuous girl and an illegitimate child"--and he promises to keep those cards and letters coming.

But it is in the area of news and documentaries that many gays feel they are at best still invisible and at worst much maligned. They point to last year's controversial CBS documentary about the San Francisco homosexual community, "Gay Power, Gay Politics," of which the impartial National News Council said that "by concentrating on certain flamboyant examples of homosexual behavior, the program tended to reinforce stereotypes. (The network made an on-air apology about one specific misrepresentation.) "Our only allies now are our worst enemies," gay activist Ron Gold concludes. "I've been urging our people to plant stories with the Moral Majority. Since we're the point of their spear, every time they get media coverage, we do, too."

One gay producer I spoke to thinks that "the television community is generally receptive to an accurate portrayal of gay life styles these days, but with the current conservative mood the problem is how much soap a sympathetic story is going to sell." Others in Hollywood charge that the gay lobby's very vigilance in monitoring the networks is partially responsible for the current reluctance to deal with homosexual themes, since it has restricted the open discussion of an important issue. Two years ago at a television industry conference on the docudrama in Ojai, Cal., a panel of network executives was waxing lyrical about how any topic could be produced on television today if it were done with "taste" and "discretion." Ernest Kinoy, the head writer on *Roots II* and a man of impeccably liberal credentials, recalls raising his hand and saying: "Before we get too self-congratulatory, let's suppose I wanted to do a show about somebody who announces that he's gay, causing his family great distress, but instead of the usual 'positive' ending he decides to get psychiatric treatment to alter his behavior. Could this be done?" All the panelists agreed that it couldn't.

Despite the fact that television has largely relegated gay themes to the occasional TV-movie or miniseries, the old days of ignorance and invisibility can never return. For in a curious way television may need homosexuality as much as homosexuals need television. It is a family-oriented medium rooted in domestic conflict, and these days homosexuality is one of the few sure-fire dramatic issues in such a setting. In an age of greatly relaxed social and sexual barriers, a son or daughter can bring practically anyone home to mom and dad without it causing a "scene"--as long as the lover is not of

the same sex. Thus, gay themes on television perform the same function as racial ones did in the '50s and '60s: they can enlighten and titillate an audience simultaneously, holding out the rare promise of good ratings *and* good reviews. Because our society continually ups the ante on social conflict, so many of the perennial "issues" that are the staple diet of the electronic maw are only believable in homosexual terms. Can a woman who sleeps with another woman keep her children ("A Question of Love") or her life ("In the Glitter Palace")? Can a man who sleeps with another man keep his job ("Sergeant Matlovich vs. the U.S. Air Force") or his patrimony (*Dynasty*)? Stay tuned.

In his affable manner, Newton Deiter made the same point to Esther Shapiro, executive producer of the ABC series *Dynasty*, toward the end of a script conference last winter. Shapiro had just shown him a scene between Steven Carrington, the homosexual son of oil baron Blake Carrington, and Jeff Colby, the nephew of an even richer oil baron.

"I like both of these actors very much," she said afterward. "They're perfect!"

"But would you want your son to marry one?" Deiter joked.

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