

THE RISKS OF BEING A GAY PERFORMER  
IN A "STRAIGHT" ENTERTAINMENT INDUSTRY

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## **SUMMARY**

This paper explores the history of gay Hollywood stars who were forced to remain in the closet to protect their careers and actors who tackled gay roles and accepted the risks. Gay actors continue to perform either in or out of the closet and find varied levels of acceptance and personal rewards. Other actors choose for various reasons to maintain a fabricated image to increase their selling power.

Gay images are being introduced to mainstream audiences in both film and television and through targeted niche marketing. Gay images are gradually finding a place in the vast world of entertainment. Gay producers and decision makers are living freely out of the closet and finding a way to showcase the important contributions that can be found in gay themed programming.

Audiences are learning tolerance and acceptance when gay lifestyles are presented in non-threatening ways. Hollywood executives and educators are finally taking responsibility and finding financial rewards as well as dispelling myths.

## CONCLUSIONS

Risks vary for gay performers in a straight entertainment world, depending on their career status. Hopefully, those risks will decrease with the success of movies like *Brokeback Mountain* and television shows like *Will & Grace*. As more and more shows debut to explore real aspects of gay lifestyles there is hope that audiences will become more tolerant and educated. Successful shows like *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy*--though filled with standard gay stereotypes--prove that heterosexual audiences and advertisers are willing to support gay themed shows. The risks can vary for a gay performer in a straight entertainment world depending on where he or she is in their career.

The success of shows like *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy*, (although filled with some stereotypes) prove that heterosexual audiences are willing to support gay themed shows through advertising. Advertisers and studios are starting to take more risks on mainstream television and films.

Gays in decision-making positions are making advertisers and studios take more risks by including more gay themes and openly gay actors in mainstream television and films. Money talks!

## RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the conclusions, it is the researcher's opinion there can be several courses of action

- Incorporate the inter-educate approach and use entertainment to educate.
- Teach gay sensitivity in middle and junior high schools.
- Include diversity training in corporate America.
- Demand positive images and balanced portrayals from the industry that audiences pay to support.

People can learn to walk vicariously in the shoes of a gay person without having to put on "high heels." Strangely enough, people might discover gay lives aren't very different after the mask of fear is taken off. Entertainment should serve as a learning tool to dispel myths, lies, and stereotypes. If audiences are taught tolerance and acceptance, gay actors will no longer be forced to be able to play "heterosexual" roles in their personal lives.

## **PROBLEM**

The entertainment industry portrays a negative image of the gay performer. This limited view restricts earning power and breeds fear and contempt among gay entertainers. The fear of being “*outed*” locks many gay actors in “*the celluloid closet*”, thereby robbing the audience of valuable learning experiences. Fear breeds secrecy and self-hatred that can lead to self destruction.

## **PURPOSE**

The Purpose of this research paper is to raise audience members’ awareness that gay talent has an important contribution to mainstream entertainment.

## **SCOPE**

The scope of the paper will cover gay stereotypes seen on television and film. The paper will discuss Hollywood actors and celebrities who were discovered to be gay after their death. Also included will be current Hollywood actors who have played gay roles and the risk it had on each of their careers. Personal experiences of the author will be included to cover the use of gay themed theater as a positive role model and educational tool. The current impact of the introduction of gay television will be covered. The paper will cover only a limited number of gay male images and not cover lesbians at this time.

## **RESEARCH METHODS**

### **Secondary Research**

The author will use for secondary research, a collection of gay books and magazine articles written on history of gay performers, gay stereotypes, popular actors playing gay roles, the introduction of gay television networks ,as well as his own experiences as an educational theater performer.

### **Primary Research**

For primary research the author will interview a promotions director who works for the gay channel (LOGO) and a heterosexual screen writer who has written gay themes for Hollywood.

## STEREOTYPICAL IMAGES

Two major gay stereotypes come out of mainstream media. The first is the extremely effeminate gay character. He tends to be popular and funny, because the audience recognizes him right away. The second is the sick corrupted evil gay person who suffers as a result of being bad. He gives the viewer a reason to detest the person who represents the behavior. Audiences want to either laugh at a gay character or cheer the tragic ending of a gay image because the homosexual threat got its just dessert.

If it swishes, snaps, lisps, sashays, bends a wrist and makes us laugh, the general audience member is comfortable with seeing a gay character on television or in film. Audiences are conditioned to view those expressions as a sign of weakness, thereby seem harmless and an easy subject to laugh about. As long as the character is on the “receiving end” of the joke, all is well with the world. If on the other hand a gay character is portrayed just like everyone else, people get uncomfortable. If he has a sex life, advertisers are sweating bullets. Paris Barclay, an openly gay director of such shows as NBC’s *West Wing* and *ER*, points out the concept that gay characters who are non-threatening and lack a visible sex life do not pose a threat to the audience viewing them (Epstein,11). The lack of threat is visible on air today where the hit NBC show, *Will & Grace* sits at the top of Neilson ratings. The popular character of Jack McFarland on the show is seen as an effeminate person who’s every expression sends out the message, “I am gay!” The character of Will Truman tragically has never had a successful relationship and does not have much of a sex life as depicted on the program (Tropiano, 250). The

unique balance of keeping a gay character on television, but not scaring off advertisers, has been the challenge to gay producers since the concept of gay characters were first introduced (Epstein,11). Craig Zadan, producer of Storyline Entertainment, who also produced the 2002 film “Chicago”, feels it all boils down to money. When shows like *Will & Grace* bring in huge sums of advertising dollars, others will emulate the formula.

When that stereotype moves to the big screen, sometimes those images are played for homophobic fear. Films like *The 40-year old Virgin*, *The Wedding Crashers*, *The Man*, *Four Brothers* and *Duece Bigalow: European Gigolo* set up comedic moments that place a heterosexual man in a situation with a gay experience either to shock or embarrass him as a way to threaten his masculinity (White, 64). While none of these films have the Oscar potential of a *Brokeback Mountain*, the message is clear that it is terrifying to be gay, or to be perceived “that way.” All of these films present stereotypical gay images that typically make heterosexual men uncomfortable.

More and more people are acknowledging that they know someone who's gay--a family member, a friend, a co-worker--because more gay men and lesbians have been coming out of the closet. "You work with people on a day-to-day basis, and they're not ogres, they're not something demonic, and it becomes more acceptable," said Edd Sewell, a communications professor at Virginia Tech (“Wider Accept...” ).

## HISTORY OF FAMOUS CLOSETED GAY PERFORMERS

Subjects interviewed for *Behind the Screen: How Gays and Lesbians Shaped Hollywood, 1910-1969* expressed that Hollywood did not care if they were gay, as long as they sent out the right image to the public. Evidence uncovered after the death of a gay performer often becomes the unchallenged fodder for conspiracy theories.

Hollywood was called the dream factory because the studios were the creators of myths. Dreams could be transferred to the celluloid screen to fit the need of a starving public's desire to destroy or punish talent who stepped out of line.

### **Cesar Romero 1907-1994**

Sexy Latin heart throb of the 30's and later television's Joker on *Batman*, Cesar Romero never came out as gay. He was always photographed with popular female stars of the day such as Joan Crawford and Barbara Stanwick (both rumored to have had lesbian relationships). Romero was known as the ladies man who could never find a lady to win his heart. He even staged a press photo opportunity/interview in what he described as his "empty bridal suite." Survivors of that era claim Romero and Tyrone Powers were lovers for many years, although Powers was also considered a ladies man (Mann 158).

### **Rock Hudson 1925-1985**

*Photoplay* and *Confidential* were major gossip magazines during the heyday of the Hollywood studio system. Although widely known in Hollywood circles that Rock Hudson was gay, his star power was considered important enough that studio executives

would often sacrifice another actor to the magazines to deter negative publicity away from a money maker like Hudson. It is widely documented that in 1955 Universal Pictures gave *Confidential Magazine* an article on a prison record of lesser known actor Rory Calhoun in exchange for not running a piece exposing Rock Hudson's sexuality (Mann 310). Armistead Maupin, openly gay author of *Tales of the City*, remembers Rock Hudson contemplating the idea of coming out of the closet (Mann 363). This conversation occurred long before the actor had been diagnosed with AIDS. This could have easily been plausible since the studio system had long since ended. Hudson was quite wealthy from the producing efforts of his successful television show *McMillan and Wife*. He simply may not have felt the need to keep the image up since he did not live under the fear of having his career taken from him. Actors have to appear to be heterosexual because as a whole, most people who are spending their dollars to see them have a fantasy that they can have them (Ehrenstein, 21).

### **Anthony Perkins 1932-1992**

The star of such films as *Psycho*, *Desire Under the Elms* and *Mahogany* always played characters that were weak or unstable mentally. He made a living off the quirky roles that suited him so well. Because his image was non-threatening, Perkins could stay under the radar since his image was one that was reflected in the kinds of roles he performed on screen. He enjoyed a clandestine relationship with another actor of the 50's, Tab Hunter who just recently published his gay memoirs (Mann 311). Perkins would later marry and avoid any public contact with known homosexuals. He died of AIDS complications in 1992.

**Luther Vandross 1951-2005**

Luther Vandross, the soulful balladeer, who died after a diabetes related stroke in July 2005, never came out publicly as a gay performer. Vandross was celebrated for hits like *Love Power*, *Here and Now*, *Superstar*, and *If Only For One Night*. His music spoke to female audiences of love and romance. However there was always rumor, speculation and accusations that haunted his career. Several times Luther had been asked directly in magazine and television interviews, but he never confirmed or denied his sexuality, which many took as an admission that he was gay. His entire music career was built on the projection of a romantic image. Luther's fear was if a gay artist performed a sexy and romantic (heterosexual) song, the magic of the song and/or music would be destroyed (Weinstein 62). The listener somehow cannot separate the artist singing the song from the music of the song. The music industry is notorious for creating images of performers with less than talented skills because the audience will buy into an image before they will buy into talent. Music videos of the 80's support this image by using more visually appealing models lip-synching the words to the songs sung by heavier, less attractive artists. Luther was savvy enough to know who was audience, what image they wanted and played to that image to preserve his selling power. The downside was that Vandross was plagued with self-image issues directly related to an eating disorder. He gained and lost over 100 lbs several times throughout his lifetime (Weinstein 64).

## ACTORS WHO HAVE PLAYED GAY ROLES

### Harry Hamlin

In the 1980's, Harry Hamlin took on the gay role of Bart McGuire in the first gay-themed movie released by a major studio. The movie *Making Love*, released by 20<sup>th</sup> Century Fox, was not a financial success, but it was considered an important step in the gay movement. It told the story of a husband who wrestles with his homosexuality and falls in love with a writer played by Hamlin. He did not make a major studio film for the next 22 years. Hamlin did find eventual fame on the television show *LA Law* and does not regret his career choice. His explanation in taking on the gay role was that he wanted to step out of the box (Epstein 36).

### Doug Savant

Savant is known today as the husband of one of television's *Desperate Housewives*, Felicity Huffman. He was first introduced to audiences as Matt, one of the first regular gay characters on the popular series *Melrose Place*. His character received a lot of mixed comments from the gay community because he could never maintain a stable relationship and was considered too nice to be realistic. Work became scarce after *Melrose Place* because he found that casting directors always thought of him as that "gay character" from *Melrose Place* and wanted to let the image die down before they would submit him for other roles. Looking back 14 years later, Savant is still proud that he took on the role and is happy that he has endured (Epstein 38).

## **Will Smith**

Straight from the success of the television show “Fresh Prince of Bel Air,” Will Smith’s first foray into movies was in a serious drama. The popular stage play “Six Degrees of Separation” was made into a movie around 1993. The advice he received from actor Denzel Washington, was not to let the audiences see him kiss a man for fear his image would be tainted forever with black audiences. Smith took the risk on the role that included a nude love scene with Anthony Michael Hall. The gay community criticized the kiss in the love scene because all that is seen is Smith leaning into Hall (the camera cuts away to a different angle) and then as he pulls away, the audience hears the sounds of a kiss, but the kiss is never clearly seen (Morris, *Steamy Romance...*). The critical success of the movie caused Smith’s gamble to pay off as he went on to become a huge action star. The gay community has often suggested that Will Smith and wife Jada Pinkett have ‘close and personal’ ties to the gay community, but nothing has ever been substantiated.

## ROLE MODELING

In July of 1995, Baltimore actor, entrepreneur and AIDS activist, Dale Madison, collaborated with playwright, Darryl LeMont Wharton, to create *FREEda SLAVE: MASK of A DIVA*. The 1995 Artscape Festival in Baltimore selected their 45 minute work-in-progress and staged it in the performance art division. The critically acclaimed one-man show, *FREEda Slave: Mask of a DIVA*, focuses on the life of a gay cross-dresser. Through music, slides, monologues and videos, losses in his life, the choice about “coming out,” and the way the family and church affected his growth and self-esteem are revealed. The theatre piece breaks the “fourth wall” by having the character share his life experiences as “asides” during the performance of his one-man show. FREEda talks “straight” to the audience and engages them in conversation and participation as each “mask” is unveiled.

Each year this festival exhibits works of merit created by artists from Maryland and Washington, D.C. These exhibitions demonstrate the tremendous creativity and dynamics of the arts community. After seeing the performance, the Executive Committee of the Men of Color AIDS Prevention Project asked the duo to re-mount it for AIDS Awareness Month in October of that year.

As the co-founder of two non-profit theater companies, Actors Against Drugs (AAD) and Umoja SaSa! Storytellers, Madison is familiar with the use of theater as a learning tool. Through these and other companies, he has made an impact on audiences about

1. the dangers of teenage sexuality
2. pregnancy prevention
3. substance abuse
4. HIV/AIDS awareness
5. the value of African and African-American storytelling

The play addressed many of the socio-sexual issues important in the African-American Community that are not readily discussed. The production provided a venue to present those issues for public discussion.

Besides introducing taboos that are rarely spoken of in the African-American community, the production offered a rare forum on discrimination within the African-American gay community (e.g., cross-dressers-versus-gay men) *FREEda SLAVE: Mask of a DIVA* showed the triumph of the human spirit as the character builds self-esteem throughout the course of the play. The universality of the theater piece resulted from its ability to carefully illustrate the kinds of social masks people wear. *FREEda SLAVE* showed how those masks often inhibit personal growth, development, self-acceptance, and acceptance by others.

In 1999, the Maryland State Arts Council awarded Madison the 1999 Individual Artist Award in Playwriting. The summer of 1999, Madison and Wharton moved the production to Los Angeles for a critically acclaimed run at the Hudson Backstage Theatre. Free performances were staged for the homeless gay youth of Santa Monica Blvd.

Theater in general allows people to vicariously experience the beliefs, attitudes, values and general lifestyles of people they may have very little, if any, familiarity with. Theater allows the viewer to see into someone else's lifestyle from a distance. The audiences are allowed to "Walk in someone else's shoes" for an hour and safely return the shoes when it is over. This well-known process of "walking in someone else's shoes" has been emphasized by social psychologist Dr. Albert Bandura in his social learning theory. Dr. Bandura proposes that much of how we experience the world is not direct but indirect. This indirect experience is referred to as vicarious learning or modeling. Dr. Bandura's research supports the idea that theater can be an important tool for enhancing understanding regarding a variety of social issues. At the 1993 conference, Entertainment for Social Change, Dr. Bandura stated:

"The inter-educate approach relies heavily on the social learning theory. This theory states that most behavior is learned through modeling. A person observes other people and uses their behavior as a model for future behavior. Educational theater in itself is a teaching tool for the changing of behavior."

## ALL GAY TELEVISION

After the success of shows like *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy* and *Will and Grace* a phenomenon entered the mainstream culture. Suddenly gay was “en vogue.” “Never before have we been so media savvy, nor have we had so much information at our fingertips about who's designing these clothes and who's writing these songs and who painted that picture,” said Carson Kressley, a stylist on Bravo's "Queer Eye for the Straight Guy" (“Wider Accept...”). The successes of gay themed shows were replicated across the globe. The natural evolution was to create a network to support gay programming. Andy Medhurst, a media studies lecturer at the University of Sussex, compared straight people to gay culture similar the way white people that borrow from black culture as a ‘hip’ thing to do. Italy launched *Gay TV* in May 2002 and France launched *Pink TV* January 2003 to capitalize on those markets (Masters, 20). In America, *Q Television Network* launched a premium channel in 3 million homes in July of 2003 and went under in February of 2006 (Vary, 58). Figure 1 illustrates there is more approval today of issues that address gay lifestyles.

Compiled from information provided by [www.allstocks.com](http://www.allstocks.com). “Wider Acceptance of Homosexuality Fueling Trends” July 16, 2003. The Dallas Morning News. posted April 23, 2004 21:17

Although there is still opposition to gay marriage, benefits, equal rights in the workplace and alternative lifestyles have gained acceptance.

Brian Graden, president of entertainment for MTV and VH1 (openly gay), launched the *Logo* channel in the summer of 2005 as the first commercially supported channel available on digital cable networks. *Logo* offers more than 200 lesbian and gay

films, an ongoing documentary series, newscasts tailored for a gay audience through the CBS network, music videos and quality original shows. *Logo* also broadcasts and sponsors the GLAAD Media Awards which celebrates positive portrayals of gays in television, movies and print ([Logoonline.com](http://Logoonline.com)).

## PRIMARY FINDINGS

Sivan Schlecter, president of Out of the Blue Solutions, handled the marketing for the MTV Network's launch of The Logo channel. She was also responsible for the marketing of *The L Word*, Showtime Network's lesbian drama. She explained in a telephone interview (5/11/2006) that what makes Logo unique is it's the first cable channel dedicated to gay programming. It is seen in 20 million digital cable and satellite homes across America. There are no current ratings for any of the programs because the Neilson ratings do not track a channel until they have been on the air more than 2 years. There are two other channels dedicated to gay programming, but they are pay-per-view channels. Logo comes as a part of a regular cable package program like many of the other options offered by MTV Networks. If a viewer subscribes to Direct TV, Logo can be found on Channel 263 nationwide.

Schlecter hires promotion teams to attend gay and lesbian events and distribute information on Logo and get direct feedback from the community about whether the network is satisfying the needs of its viewers. The biggest complaint when Logo launched was from the viewers who could not get it in their area. These people were referred to an on-line website where their opinions could be passed on to the cable networks to add Logo to their current cable packages. Logo is only seen in homes with digital cable or satellite, not regular analog cable sources.

The first six months there was a lot of repeat programming, and dedicated viewers were hungry for more varied programming. Slowly, introducing more shows to a twenty four hour format is typical of the MTV/Viacom niche market channels, like MTV2, VH1 Classics, Spike TV, and Comedy Central. When the channel first aired, it broadcasted

documentaries, movies, comedy shows and previously seen gay themed shows produced from other networks. In October 2005, Logo premiered its first original programming, *Noah's Arc* that chronicled the lives of four friends who lived and loved in Los Angeles. It was like the gay black man's version of *Sex in the City*. The show has developed a huge following and is currently shooting its second season.

Darryl LeMont Wharton got his start as a screenwriter for the NBC series "Homicide: Life on the Streets" shortly after graduating from Ithaca College. He later directed and produced his own film and currently writes for film, theater and television. During an on-line chat (May 16, 2006) Wharton expressed the idea that he does not feel that being out of the closet kills a career today, the way it would have years ago. A lot depends on the project; who is directing it and the kind of push a studio gives it. In his independent feature film, "Detention," five students are brought together in a special detention class and are forced to face their greatest struggles: teen pregnancy, drugs, violence, education, sexuality, careers, family and life. In that film, he hired an out performer that played an openly gay character.

Wharton says that he suspects at least three or four performers that he has met who work in the industry, keep their sexual preference hidden from industry decision makers. He feels it is their personal business if they decide to tell anyone. When asked if Wharton believed gay performers have the skills to play traditional heterosexual roles convincingly, he answered, "Yes most definitely. Rock Hudson did it for decades. I am sure there are actors today doing it. Could it be why it is called acting? If a closeted gay actor has to perform a heterosexual role, then he is in essence playing two roles; the one

for the screen and the one for the role of life. When he is able to pull that off successfully, then he is truly a talented individual.”

Wharton felt that if a performer is out, it could potentially have a potentially adverse long-term effect on their career, depending on who is in charge of the Hollywood decision-making process. “When you have the president of MTV networks Brian Graden, David Geffen, co-founder of Dreamworks, or producer John Goldwyn (son of Samuel Goldwyn Jr.), who are all openly gay power players, who could possibly hire gay talent on both sides of the camera, then that would speak volumes.” Wharton adds, “When Goldwyn was president of production at Paramount Pictures and about to be ‘outed’ by his wife over an affair he had, he beat her to the punch by sending out a press release and announcing it first.” Wharton admitted hearing rumors of a ‘rainbow mafia’ in Hollywood, a select group of powerful gay producers who look out for their own. When asked if he ever felt he suffered discrimination for writing gay themed projects, he says he didn’t focus on that, but instead writes what he thinks is a good story with good characters.

Wharton, who is straight, wrote “FREEda Slave: Mask of a Diva,” the award winning show about a gay cross-dresser. When asked if he had gained any insights into a lifestyle that was foreign to him, he explained his inspiration came from wanting to understand a family member better. It gave him the opportunity to talk with family members about a cousin who had died from AIDS. He described their last meeting as a passing on an escalator; his male cousin had begun to dress and look female. When he was asked what was the most uncomfortable thing he experienced researching a play

about the gay lifestyle, Wharton said “Having guys hit on me... but fortunately, I have a great friend who acted as a buffer.”

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