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Gay Role Models

by Scott Stiffler
EDGE New York City Contributor
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Where have all the gay role models gone? Have they disappeared, or were they ever really there in the first place? Quick now, in twenty seconds or less: who are the gay politicians you most admire? Who are your favorite gay TV stars, musicians and A-list film actors?



If you can't name more than ten queer heroes off the top of your head, something is clearly amiss with the state of this country. Why aren't we inundated with high profile gay

ambassadors living by example and, by extension, empowering the bashful, the bashed, the closeted and the questioning?

Although we're hardly in a golden age of tolerance and acceptance, society is at least, finally, acutely aware of its LGBT citizens - but awareness doesn't necessarily correspond to visibility, and visibility doesn't guarantee respect. If statistics can be believed, one in ten of us have at least a little lavender tint - so when you take the total population and do the math, America should be flush with stellar examples of out, proud, successful and relatively well-adjusted homos. But a funny thing happened on the way from Stonewall, around the corner past the AIDS crisis and down the street to the apartment where they shot that episode of *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy*: the increased media presence of gays hasn't resulted in a surplus of positive role models. But before exploring the why, let's consider the when.



The Past

Writer, former fashionista, timeless culture culture and all around witty fag **Frank DeCaro** is host of the Frank DeCaro show (on Sirius Satellite Radio's 24/7 GLBT channel Sirius OutQ; airing 11am-2pm,

Mon-Fri, Eastern time).

Now that we've sufficiently plugged his show, Frank graciously weighs in on the bad old days: "Historically, gay role models in pop culture have run the gamut from English eccentrics like Oscar Wilde and Quentin Crisp to international style icons like Gianni Versace and Andy Warhol, to out-but-not-out pretty boys like Tab Hunter and Rock Hudson. ... As more prominent gays and lesbians have come out of the closet, we've been able to look up to people who are out and proud and happily gay, instead of having to make due with the discreet or tortured homosexual of yore. It's the difference between looking up to the late Paul Lynde, who was a very funny man but not

a very happy homo, and Bruce Vilanch, who is every bit as funny, but also a sweetheart. I adore the original 'Center Square' Paul Lynde, but one might want to take life lessons from Bruce Vilanch instead."

Lynde and Vilanch, although of different eras, shared more than just prime real estate on the set of Hollywood Squares; they both embody the naughty, caustic gay wit that has met with scorn and holier-than-thou attitude from homophobes as well as self-loathing homosexuals who belittle the most flamboyant among us; the always wispy, often lisping gay men who couldn't butch it up if they had to - and why should they have to? DeCaro points out that "People don't look at Charles Nelson Reilly and say he did an amazing thing by being out before any of us knew what it was; and yet he truly was a pioneer. Because he's so flamboyant, they don't realize what he contributed was really important. He was more than an ascot and a sailor cap and quick quip. He was told they'll never let a queer on TV and he went on to be a beloved figure. There were a lot of us flamboyant little boys who saw him and said maybe there is a place in the world for me. And I would guess people look up to Carson Kressley and think the same thing."

For playwright, screenwriter, actor and director **Craig Lucas** (Longtime Companion, Prelude to a Kiss), "My gay role models, growing up, were writers - particularly Christopher Isherwood, the first out-gay writer I knew about - also John Cheever and Virginia Woolf (neither of whom did I know to be gay). But a lot of my role models were NOT gay and they were equally important to me - J.D. Salinger, Anne Sexton, Eugene O'Neill. Later I came to admire a host of playwrights, painters and poets, many of whom were gay - some out, some not - and many of whom were not.

"What made them role models was not whether or not they identified as gay or fought for gay-rights legislation but whether or not their art was any good," Lucas continued. "And if they turned out to be gay then I guess I felt validated because I knew there were great artists alive and thriving who were homosexual. So as a child and a teenager, in finding the self-identification to live honestly with myself, role models did matter to me. But as an adult I find the idea of role models repellant. Children need role models. It helps them to see openly-gay people living their lives honestly and without fear. That said, I didn't see any of that, and I'm here, I managed to survive and become a decent person, I am loving and responsible and productive. I didn't have any good gay role models. That's too bad. But obviously it wasn't absolutely essential."



Reverse Role Models

There's nothing so instructive as a mistake, observed at a distance, made by another person. Call them reverse role models: folks whose lives resemble train wrecks and provide cautionary lessons (Britney Spears, are you listening? Of course not, you're either fucked up or passed out).

Sometimes, the most deplorable behavior in others can inspire us to better ourselves simply by avoiding the flaws

and morally questionable activities that have brought down the high and mighty. DeCaro thinks " ... there are good negative role models. You look at someone like Senator Craig and think, look at how much power he has ceded to other people and his detractors by not being

out of the closet. If you are open about everything, what is someone going to blackmail you with? If you were gay, wouldn't you say I was bored senseless at the airport? I could get a hummer or I could read People. You take all the power away from your detractors if you're open about everything."

Lucas reasons: "Great politicians should enact legislation that ensures better living conditions and they should fight for a more egalitarian world. But do I care if they are closeted or getting blowjobs in toilet stalls or taking illegal drugs? Frankly, no, I don't, and I don't think any of it is my business anyway. Let prominent people be as flawed as the rest of humanity. Why are we always taking other people's moral inventory? Do they do their job well? Then congratulations. If they don't, get rid of 'em. But not because they're bad role models. . . Some of the first out gay artists I encountered in literature and the public domain were absolutely appalling people. Nobody would aspire to be as self-involved and narcissistic and closed-minded as some of them. Being out and vocal about their sexuality didn't make them admirable people. Maybe they were basically big exhibitionists.

"Maybe the best role models would be people who don't trumpet their selfless, charitable acts in public all the time. Didn't Jesus say something about giving anonymously? Maybe we need more anonymous role models."

Reverse role models can also be found in the tragic, flawed women that gay men tend to put on a pedestal; Judy Garland and Marilyn Monroe have idealized and otherwise admired by gay men who've taken their suffering and turned it into a form of empowerment. But what's the difference between a sassy, charismatic drug-addled mental case and a true role model? As one would expect, DeCaro sets it straight: "Gay men raise the women they love to 'icon' status, which is different from making someone a role model. One might want to borrow a bit from Joan Crawford (in Mommie Dearest) when, say, dealing with contractors - No one could say 'Tear down that bitch of a bearing wall and put a window where a window ought to be!' better than she could - but very few of us want to be her. We worship our icons, we emulate our role models."



Up with Lesbians!

Ellen DeGeneres; Rosie O'Donnell: why do people who refuse to acknowledge gay men have a soft spot for funny lesbians? Middle (and even conservative)

America embraced Ellen and Rosie as morning talk show hosts - although for years, poor Rosie had to declare a hetero obsession with Tom Cruise; and I can't recall the last time I've heard Ellen mention her love of the ladies or made an off the cuff remark about an attractive female guest (par for the course and the source of much laughter when watching Jay or Dave).

Both came out at the height of their success without shame or apology - though bitchy nitpickers are quick to say they could have done more for "the community" by coming out earlier. That might be a valid point were it not for the fact that there's something just plain creepy, wrong and controlling about imposing your own lofty (and often unfulfilled) standards on others. But isn't that what role models are for? Still, an out lesbian is much more likely to be accepted, tolerated and otherwise supported than an out gay man.

Why? Well, the short answer is people hate fags; straight men project their own sexual insecurities upon confident gay men. As for their attitude towards lesbians, there's always the tantalizing possibility it may lead to them getting to see two hot chicks go at each other. For a far more classy analysis, DeCaro points out that:

"There's an assumption, very often a wrong assumption, that most lesbians are one good sexual encounter with a man from converting to heterosexuality ... Whereas with gay men, I think it's almost the same thing in reverse. If there's even a whiff of homosexuality about a man, then he's gotta be gay and there's no saving him. By nature of what gay male sex is, mainstream people have difficulty dealing with that; it involves penetration and that flips people out. People start imagining the sex act, and then say 'Oh my god, the leading man is a bottom!'



We Gays Need to Catch up to the Gals

Having pointed out the disparity between the public face of lesbians and gay men, DeCaro implores Hollywood leading men to " ... come out. We need someone of, say, Jake Gyllenhaal's status, to

come out and continue to play straight roles and make money at the box office ... I'm particularly pleased right now with Neil Patrick Harris. He came out at the height of his career and has continued to quite convincingly play a major womanizer on *How I Met Your Mother*. I think he even got an Emmy nomination for it. On Broadway, I'm a big fan of Cheyenne Jackson. He is a gorgeous leading man who didn't have to come out but he did."

On TV, DeCaro praises those from *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy*, *Project Runway* and *America's Next Top Model*: "I think fashionistas have led the way on TV in terms of being out of the closet. The fashion business is a good place to be gay. If you grew up loving clothes and sewing and fashion magazines, you really didn't have much choice of being in or out of the closet. Sometimes we underestimate the contributions of people who've always been out."

As for DeCaro's own homo role model mission statement: "The way I seen my own mission is: if I can show one lonely depressed kid that you can have a fab life and be the biggest homo on the planet, then I've done my job ... I think helping someone feel comfortable in his or her own skin is the best thing you can do for another generation of gays and lesbians. Go be you and be the best you can possibly be; just, if we're up for the same part, let me get it."

Scott Stiffler is a New York City-based writer and comedian.

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