

Sunday Styles



Chester Higgins Jr./The New York Times

Gloria Steinem and Hugh Hefner after entering the American Society of Magazine Editors hall of fame.

Bosom Foes Together Again

By ALEX KUCZYNSKI

It would have been an odd evening, that's for sure. Hugh Hefner, the man who put women in bunny costumes and set the wheels of the sexual revolution in motion for millions of Americans, and Gloria Steinem, the crusading leader of the women's movement, were supposed to go on a blind date a few decades ago, as Mr. Hefner tells it.

In a funny way, it would make sense if the two had hit it off. He, the creator of Playboy, and she, the founder of Ms. magazine, ran spectacularly successful publications at the forefront of social change, then watched the circulation — and relevance — of their magazines dwindle. Both have made enemies of the right wing. Both ran through a series of romantic partners, wrote about sex, support gay rights and think Al Gore would make a fine, if boring, President. But they hate each other's guts.

The long-ago meeting never took place, and instead, time pulled Mr. Hefner and Ms. Steinem further and further apart. But last week, cultural kismet — or just a shrewd publicity coup — brought them together after all these years for something resembling a blind date. The American Society of Magazine Editors chose the two of them to be inducted into its hall of fame at a luncheon on Wednesday at the Waldorf-Astoria.

His hair gray and his waist thickened with age, Mr. Hefner eschewed his trademark pajamas for a suit and tie, and clutched the lucite podium a tad shakily as he accepted the award from his daughter, Christie Hefner. He brought the house down when he said, "It takes something special ... to get me out of my pajamas."

Ms. Steinem, clad in black pants and a black scoop-neck shirt, accepted her award from the economist John Kenneth Galbraith, who praised her beauty and intelligence. The audience of magazine editors obedi-

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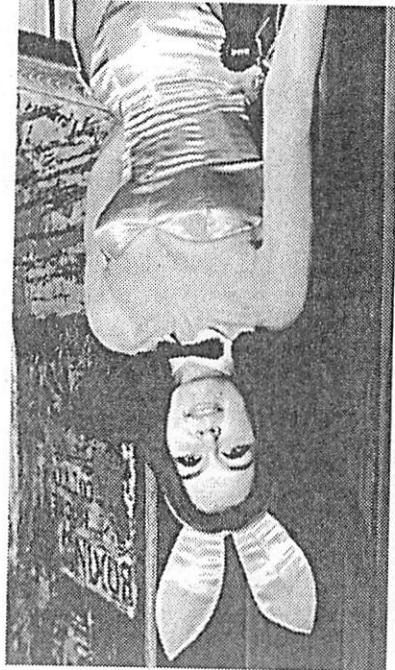
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selves by stripping for men and by young women who pose topless for the jackets of their books, which are purportedly about empowered, independent women. "The question is less what is done than who has the power to decide what to do and how to do it," Ms. Steinem said. "Remember, it's the right wing that is anti-sex — not feminists."

Mr. Heiner has, for his part, watched his empire steadily erode as Playboy's circulation, which peaked at 7.16 million in 1972, fell steadily to 3.15 million. A chain of Playboy clubs closed in the 1980's, and Mr. Heiner had to endure the ignominy of selling his purple corporate jet with built-in discotheque. He married for a second time. The bride was Kimberley Conrad, the 1989 playmate of the year. They have two sons, 6 and 8, but are now separated.

Recently, there have been signs of a small Playboy revival. The Playboy manner — with its winking, now-ironic images of martini-sipping lounge lizards and coquettish women — is in style with a retro-loving subculture. Esquire is working on a profile of Mr. Heiner. The Friars Club



Gloria Steinem as Bunny Marie. "The Bunny Years" (Pomgranate Press)

will roast him as its man of the year in the fall. Playboy Enterprises is underwriting an exhibition of stag films at the Whitney Museum of American Art, to open in December. Next year, the magazine will celebrate its 45th anniversary, and the best part of it all, Mr. Heiner said, is that "the year 2000 is the Chinese year of the rabbit."

Ms. Steinem and Mr. Heiner agreed that reaching old age no longer means what it did to their parents' generation. "Sixty and 70 doesn't mean much anymore, as long as you retain your health," Mr. Heiner said. Ms. Steinem agreed. "There is a great unexplored land after 60," she said. "It may be best indicated by who you were when you were 9 or 10 and a little girl. Climbing trees and saying: 'I know who I am. I know what I want.' That's before the feminine role has come down upon you. Then at the other end, when the feminine role has run out, you become this independent creature again, only now you have your own apartment, and you can reach all the light switches. It's also a time when you are no longer obsessed with sex, so that really helps."

ently ate their poached chicken and drank their white wine. The proceedings were terribly civil.

Things didn't turn frosty until Ms. Steinem and Mr. Heiner retired to a hotel suite for an interview. There they proved two things: that decades-ago date would have been a disaster. And it takes an awful lot to get a tough-as-nails Playboy press agent to cry.

Ms. Steinem, 63, insisted that except for the coincidence of their awards, she would never have found herself in the same room as Mr. Heiner. "I would not — no, I would never under normal circumstances even think of Mr. Heiner," she said. "And I doubt that he would think of me at all."

She looked at him defiantly. "That's not true," Mr. Heiner said, hunched stiffly in his chair, his eyes cast toward the beige plush carpet. "I would think of you. Sure I would." In Ms. Steinem's presence, Mr. Heiner, 72, seemed crumpled, almost deflated. It was unclear whether he was responding that way out of a misguided, gentlemanly deference to her as a woman or whether he was genuinely terrified of her.

Their history is laced with ironies. In the early 1960's, Mr. Heiner said, Ms. Steinem wrote to him to suggest they meet socially. A rendezvous never took place despite what Mr. Heiner called "a flurry" of telephone calls and letters. Ms. Steinem denies ever trying to set something up. Mr. Heiner's office later faxed the interview a letter from Ms. Steinem dated July 7, 1962, in which she said she hoped to meet him. Ms. Steinem said later by telephone, "It was not to set up a date, I assure you."

The following year, Show magazine published an instantly famous expose by Ms. Steinem, then 28, about going undercover as Bunny Marie (she began as a Playboy door bunny, moved on to hatcheck bunny and graduated to table bunny). The article was included in Ms. Steinem's best-selling 1983 book of essays, "Outrageous Acts and Everyday Rebellions," and it was made into "A Bunny's Tale," a television movie starring Kirstie Alley. In an interview of Mr. Heiner for McCall's in the mid-60's, Ms. Steinem described him as "a skinny, apologetic white man" and called the Playboy philosophy "boyish, undeveloped, anti-social, vicarious and sad."

Mr. Heiner never concealed his distaste for Ms. Steinem or her activism. In the McCall's interview — the last time they met until last week — he said of the women's movement, "Women shouldn't be wasting their time on this foolishness."

But 1998 finds them, if not exactly mellowed toward each other, at least close on some issues. For example, there is Viagra, the male potency drug. "The implications of Viagra go far beyond just male sexual impotence," Mr. Heiner said, fumbling with his Playboy cuff links. "It will go on to much more serious stuff. There is some evidence that it may have positive physical effects for women as well."

Had he tried it? "Sure," he said. "And the Monday afterward I went out and bought a chunk of Pfizer stock."

Ms. Steinem said she was disgusted that some news reports said "it was impossible for women to even tell if it worked," and that it looks as if it worked.

if insurance companies may cover the cost of Viagra for some male patients, but exclude women. "It's already scandalous that insurance companies don't cover birth control, contraception and even abortion," she said, the color rising in her cheeks. "Now this. It seems like Viagra in about two minutes has become more likely to be covered by health insurance than birth control, contraception and abortion combined."

Then there is Paula Jones, another topic that has made Ms. Steinem and Mr. Hefner into strange bedfellows (only metaphorically, to be sure). Ms. Steinem angered feminists by refusing to support Ms. Jones's allegation of sexual harassment against the President. Mr. Hefner wrote essays critical of Ms. Jones.

"I have always supported her access to the legal system," Ms. Steinem said. "But her case was always borderline legally. She was never told what her real chances were. I wish with all my heart she had gone to a women's group in Arkansas at the time. Even if it wasn't a good legal case — which it wasn't — there are ways of making complaints that she should have been able to use."

Ms. Steinem sat utterly still, her legs crossed at the knee and her hands locked in her lap.

Mr. Hefner, who wrote in a Playboy essay that "the President's enemies are enemies of sex," added now that Mr. Clinton's detractors "have a serious conservative agenda."

In the last decade, Ms. Steinem's brand of feminism and Mr. Hefner's libertine Playboy philosophy have undergone major transformations. Ms. Steinem has weathered the onslaught of so-called bimbo feminism, exemplified by women strippers who say they are empowering them-

Mr. Hefner's eyebrows shot up.

Ms. Steinem argued that post-menopausal women are free from the storms of sex and romantic love, and so are happier. She said: "When I meet women who are over 55 who have just fallen in love and are miserable, I always ask, 'Are you on hormone replacement therapy?'"

How many centerfolds were feminists, Mr. Hefner? "I wouldn't know," he said. "I have no idea."

"Of course not," she said.

Mr. Hefner shook his head woefully. A photographer asked them to pose together, holding their etched-glass awards from the editors.

"Do we have to do that?" Mr. Hefner asked. "Haven't we done enough?" He turned to Ms. Steinem and asked, "Are you comfortable with that?"

"No, I don't think so," she said. She accused the magazine editors' board of arranging the joint awards to her and Mr. Hefner as a publicity stunt. "We've done enough," she said. "We can't pose with our awards. It's not the awards that are the problems. It's us doing it together. I am not going to pose with him."

Mr. Hefner, clearly uncomfortable with her rising anger, paused to wipe a hand across his brow. His publicity agent, Cindy Rakowitz, walked over to guide him out of the room.

"This was obviously an error in judgment," a furious Ms. Steinem said of her decision to accept the award. Her eyes followed Mr. Hefner as he shuffled away. "It's just so outrageous."

Mr. Hefner returned to his hotel suite to change his shirt. Outside, Ms. Rakowitz dabbed at her mascara, tears falling.

"She was so mean to him," Ms. Rakowitz said, the spangles on her navy suit sparkling in the dim hallway light. "She doesn't understand, he's such a nice guy. He is so nice to the women who work for him."

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