

FRANK RICH

Gay Kiss: Business As Usual

LESS than two weeks after Bravo announced that American TV's first gay reality series, "Boy Meets Boy," would arrive on cable this summer, CBS jumped the gun, staging the first live gay network reality show in prime time. They called it "The Tony Awards."

Its host was Hugh Jackman, there to plug his Broadway musical debut next fall as the gay singer-songwriter Peter Allen. Its most exuberant winner was Harvey Fierstein, playing a Baltimore hausfrau in "Hairspray." Best play was "Take Me Out," a ballplayer's coming-out story, replete with full-frontal locker room nudity. Lest there be a gay drought during the commercial breaks, CBS tossed in promos for a new sitcom starring Nathan Lane as a gay Congressman. Even the featured song from the one kid-die musical of the theater season, "A Year With Frog and Toad," seemed to have an amphibious sexual orientation.

And then there was The Kiss. Barely a half-hour in, smack in the middle of what used to be known as TV's "family hour," Marc Shaiman and Scott Wittman, the "Hairspray" songwriters, locked lips to celebrate their Tony and their 25-year partnership. "We're not allowed to get married in this world," Mr. Shaiman told the nation. "But I'd like to declare in front of all these people, I love you and I'd like to live with you the rest of my life."

Mr. Shaiman was wrong on the first point. Gay people can get married in this world, if not yet in Radio City Music Hall. Within 48 hours after he spoke, same-sex American couples started flocking to Canada, following an Ontario appeals court decision extending them full marital rights. The civil weddings are open to foreigners

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with no waiting period, Vegas-style. Whether Mr. Shaiman and Mr. Wittman headed north remains unknown, but after the Tonys they did turn up on "The View," where they discussed The Kiss.

"People are saying, whatever happened to heterosexual sex?" asked Barbara Walters as she and the other hosts on ABC's daily kaffeeklatsch celebrated the already oppressively self-celebratory pair.

Heterosexual sex is alive and well, but the day when homosexuality threatens most heterosexuals seems to be passing in America. In response to the Tony theatrics, CBS received only 10 phone calls of complaint and 68 e-mails (out of 8 million viewers). That's a smaller outcry than the furor that greeted CBS's undertaking of a Hitler miniseries, says Gil Schwartz, the network's spokesman. Bible Belt congressmen who took time out from the war on Iraq to noisily protest a potential "Beverly Hillbillies" reality show didn't raise a peep about the gay Tonys. Only Brent Bozell, of the right-wing Media Research Center, was sufficiently titillated by the spectacle to decry Broadway as "a sewer."

Given that the theater is, well, the theater, audiences may expect the Tonys to be over the top. But however skewed the Tony show is as a representative slice of pop culture, it is still consistent with a juggernaut that's been building in tandem with the modern gay civil-rights movement. It was 34 years ago this month that the movement took off, after the patrons of the Stonewall Inn, a gay bar in Greenwich Village, fought back against a police raid. Since then, entertainment has often been in the vanguard of familiarizing America with gay people, much as it was in spreading homophobia for decades before that. Now the speed of both political and cultural change is accelerating, so much so that politicians who are hostile to or flummoxed by homosexuality, including some in the Bush administration, are in a collision course with history.

To see how quickly the cultural mood has changed, go back just six years. It was then that Ellen DeGen-

eres's elaborately staged coming out on the ABC sitcom "Ellen" merited weeks of TV coverage, the cover of Time, a disapproving statement from the Republican Party chairman (who knocked Ms. DeGeneres for undermining "a family kind of life" and congratulated his own party for seizing the "moral high ground") and a boycott of all Disney products and theme parks by the Southern Baptist Convention. This month Richard Chamberlain — "who made a career of wooing women for five decades," in the words of Dateline NBC — declared he was gay to widespread yawns. The Disney boycott, an utter flop, is not being duplicated by boycotts of AOL Time Warner (for HBO's "Six Feet Under") or Viacom (for Showtime's "Queer as Folk"). The fashion maven Steven Cojocarlu flirts with Matt Lauer on NBC's "Today" show — itself the site of an unscripted 1999 gay kiss by on-camera gawkers in Rockefeller Center.

As goes the culture, so goes much else. The day before the Tonys, an Episcopal diocese in New Hampshire elected that denomination's first openly gay Bishop. The Supreme Court is thought likely to strike down state laws that forbid homosexual sex in the coming weeks, possibly as soon as tomorrow. Last Sunday, the former NATO Supreme Allied Commander and potential presidential candidate Wesley Clark indicated to Tim Russert that he was receptive to the idea of homosexuals serving openly in the armed forces. The notion of gay marriage in all but name is spreading from Vermont to court cases advancing in Massachusetts and New Jersey. The marital revolution in Canada is likely to apply further pressures on both American judges and politicians to address the issue.

The right would have us believe that the homosexualizing of America is a conspiratorial "gay agenda" concocted by "special interest groups" and promoted by big bad Hollywood. After all, the Tonyish Oscar candidates this year included Ed Harris as a gay man with AIDS, Salma Hayek as the bisexual Frida



Sara Krulwich/The New York Times

Scott Wittman, left, and Marc Shaiman celebrating at the Tonys.

Kahlo and, heaven help the nation, the musical comedy "Chicago" in almost every category. The "Will and Grace" generation of network programming has spawned such unexpected phenomena as the gay-friendly Eminem movie, "8 Mile," and a coming-out scene of sorts in a summer blockbuster, "X2: X-Men United," marketed to teenage boys.

But in the vast cultural marketplace, gay America is a relatively small audience — a niche, albeit an often affluent one — which is why it is most explicitly served in arenas like cable, less-than-megabudget movies and the theater, where gargantuan numbers are not required to turn a profit. It's meeting gay people in person, not on a television or movie screen, that has done the most to integrate straight and gay America. More gay Americans are out than ever before, and at a younger age — down from the early- to mid-20's on average in the 1970's to 16 for males and 17 for females now, according to a recent study cited by Newsweek. A Gallup poll last month showed that 60 percent of Americans think homosexual relations between consenting adults should be legal and 88 percent think gays should have equal rights at the workplace. More astounding, the Gallup numbers for the hot-button issues — gay marriage and gay adoption — are now dead-even pro

and con.

No wonder anti-gay fulminations increasingly have few, if any, takers in the prime time of American mass media. The religious right's jeremiads on the subject were discredited by Jerry Falwell and Pat Robertson's post-9/11 listing of gay people among those who in their view caused the terrorist attacks. During the current Gay Pride Month, even

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Bill O'Reilly could be heard on Fox instructing Reverend Falwell to stop picking on gays. After the Republican Senator Rick Santorum compared homosexuality with bestiality, among other vices, in an April newspaper interview, he became a stock comic figure on TV. "When I said gay sex was as bad as man-on-dog sex, I meant man-on-male-dog," said his "Saturday Night Live" impersonator. "Sex between a human male and a female dog I got no problem with."

All of this puts our current president in a jam. By keeping the gay baiters and bashers in his party under wraps at the 2000 convention, he may have received as much as a third of the gay vote, according to exit polls — a far cry from 1992, when his father presided over a convention marked by homophobic ranting. It's in keeping with the president's slogan of "compassionate conservatism" that he or any national candidate can no longer afford to be soiled by anti-gay zealots — not only if they are to harvest gay votes but if they are to avoid alienating the far larger number of heterosexual American voters who find the demonizing of homosexuality abhorrent.

No wonder the White House tried (unsuccessfully) to keep its distance from Mr. Santorum's embarrassment and remained mum when John Ashcroft's Justice Department moved to cancel its annual Gay Pride Month celebration. Mr. Bush has left in place a Clinton executive order protecting gays from being penalized in federal employment. Only six years after Republican senators, including Mr. Ashcroft, went ballistic over Bill Clinton's appointment of a gay man as ambassador to Luxem-

bourg, Mr. Bush has appointed a gay man with a live-in partner as ambassador to Romania. And this week Marc Racicot, who has been repeatedly attacked by the religious right for meeting with gay groups, was selected as the Bush-Cheney re-election campaign chairman. Yet at the same time a Bush nominee to a federal judgeship, William H. Pryor Jr., is on record saying that when homosexual sex is legal, it leads to legalized prostitution, necrophilia, bestiality, incest and pedophilia.

This ideological switch-hitting doesn't fly anymore. Patrick Guerriero, the former Melrose, Mass., mayor who now runs the gay Log Cabin Republicans, said in an interview last week that the time is arriving when "the Bush administration is going to have to decide to go on record" embracing gays "as part of the American family and the Republican party." There are just too many gay news events on the court, political and cultural calendars for the president to hide in the closet, nonsensically trying to split the difference between "compassion" and homophobia. One of those events, Mr. Guerriero points out, is the 2004 convention in New York, where both of the leading Republican office holders, George Pataki and Michael Bloomberg, vocally support gay civil rights.

Besides, you can't hold a convention right off Broadway without acknowledging the culture just outside Madison Square Garden's door. If Harvey Fierstein is not invited to the party, there's always the risk that New York's previous Republican mayor, an even hamnier drag artist, will step into the spotlight instead. □