

# Sexual Identity Crisis

Keith Curran satirizes gay politics in *The Stand-In*

BY GERARD RAYMOND

**P**retty Boy Soap Stud Outed by Gay Activists"—that's the premise of *The Stand-In*, Keith Curran's new play currently at Naked Angels. Lester, a closeted soap actor who is playing a homosexual in a cable TV movie, unwittingly reveals his true self to Michael, a journalist for a radical activist gay publication, and suddenly finds himself in the midst of a media feeding-frenzy. *The Stand-In* is an hilarious farce that spoofs the tabloid press in short satiric sketches, but playwright Keith Curran, who took a black comic look at a complex tangle of transexuality, gender crossing, and homophobia in his last play, *Walking the Dead*, has more than entertainment in mind.

The title of his new play acquires several meanings as the serious issues underlying his farce surface. Lester uses a stand-in for the same-sex scenes in the movie he is making; in the real world he leads a double life. Finally, he is accused by members of the gay community of hiding, while they stand-in for him in the front ranks of the fight for equal rights.

Who says writers don't have to work? When *TheaterWeek* talked to Curran early in January, the playwright was commuting daily from Philadelphia to attend rehearsals of his play in New York. His out-of-town job? Performing in a production of *Me and My Girl*.

**TheaterWeek:** How did *The Stand-In* come about?

**Keith Curran:** I started writing it about a year-and-a-half ago. For a while I had wanted to write something about the media and also to write about gay people from a political standpoint. It seemed to make sense that the two would come together. It clearly led me to outing, which is how the media deals with gay people and gay issues.



Keith Curran's "day job": performing in *Me and My Girl* in Philadelphia. Gerry Goodstein

**Do you think outing is an issue of the past? It was certainly a burning topic a couple of years ago.**

The whole thing, as I recognized it, was to get cute people—movie stars and TV people—to come out of the closet. We want them to all be gay, and we want them to tell us [about it] on television. Then when people said you couldn't do that, the outers said they were not being superficial, that they wanted to out government officials and politicians, too—gay people who were using their power against the gay community. But I think that was really secondary. I also think that the outing situation was about finding heroes. The outers realized pretty quickly that all they were doing was outing cowards and the blood lust diminished after the first few kills. If you want role models, you don't drag out someone who will either issue a denial or disappear.

The initial impulse was one of frustration with people not coming out themselves. Now there are more people coming out themselves, though it seems to be our sisters rather than our brothers, bless them. I still think there is an awful lot of fascination with cute people. Where celebrities are concerned, we really think it is

possible for them to come out now. Every article we read about somebody famous, in *Vanity Fair* anyway, we assume that this could be the one. And rather than there being the feeling that this will never happen so drag 'em out, there is the sense that this actually could happen, which makes *The Stand-In* less of a fantasy. It becomes more of a possible choice for Lester.

**Obviously, even though you wrote a farce, you intended to raise some political issues in the play.**

At the time of writing, [all I knew] was that there was this gay journalist who outed a gay person. But [in rehearsals] I found that we had a scene which was chilling, in a way, because here was a gay person engaging in a political act against another gay person. And that's something you don't see in a lot of quote-unquote minority writing.

I agree with Michael when he says we are a theoretical people. We don't really exist as far as the vast majority of people in this country are concerned. It is incredibly frustrating to be an out gay person and realize that you are, with your every breath, representing thousands of other people who have not given themselves voice. And their silence is a choice. I think



that every gay person who hides should be understood and should be helped, but we also should let them know that their silence is killing us. The only homosexual that can be denied rights is an out homosexual; a closeted homosexual isn't denied anything, which is of course why they are closeted. What do we do to empower people to say something very simple—I'm gay, or whatever word they happen to want to use that week? I must say that with the gays in the military debates and hearings, I certainly have a lot more understanding as to why people don't come out. But it really is a fundamentally simple gesture, although it becomes very complicated when applied.

But in *The Stand-In* you present Lester in a sympathetic light. Until Michael has his speech at the end, he appears as intrusive as the rest of the media.

Oh sure. Every Michael has been a Lester. Every activist, every out, proud, proclaiming homosexual has been a closeted, fearful homosexual. It is a stage you must go through, which now, hopefully, young gay people won't have to anymore. And Lester is kind of like Bambi in the headlights about the whole thing, he doesn't know what hit him. What is interesting is that he is outed as a gay person before he really knows he is one. The evidence is clearly there, he just doesn't read the runes terribly well. It is that whole denial thing where if you don't kiss you are not gay. A man can have sex with another man, you can admit that, but [still say] you are not gay. There are an awful lot of people who have sex with people of the same sex who don't identify themselves as gay.

You also portray activist groups like ACT UP in a satirical light, people who "hold signs and chant annoying things that rhyme."

One of the things that I like most about the play, and what I am most nervous about, is satirizing anything to do with the gay community. I have no intention of diminishing anyone's point of view or seriousness, but it is very clear that as much as ACT UP doesn't want to play the game and wants to break down the walls, their activities are all planned to get media attention.

Lester has this breakdown where all the toxins come out, which in the past has been misnamed Lester's self-loathing moment. I see it very clearly as his loathing

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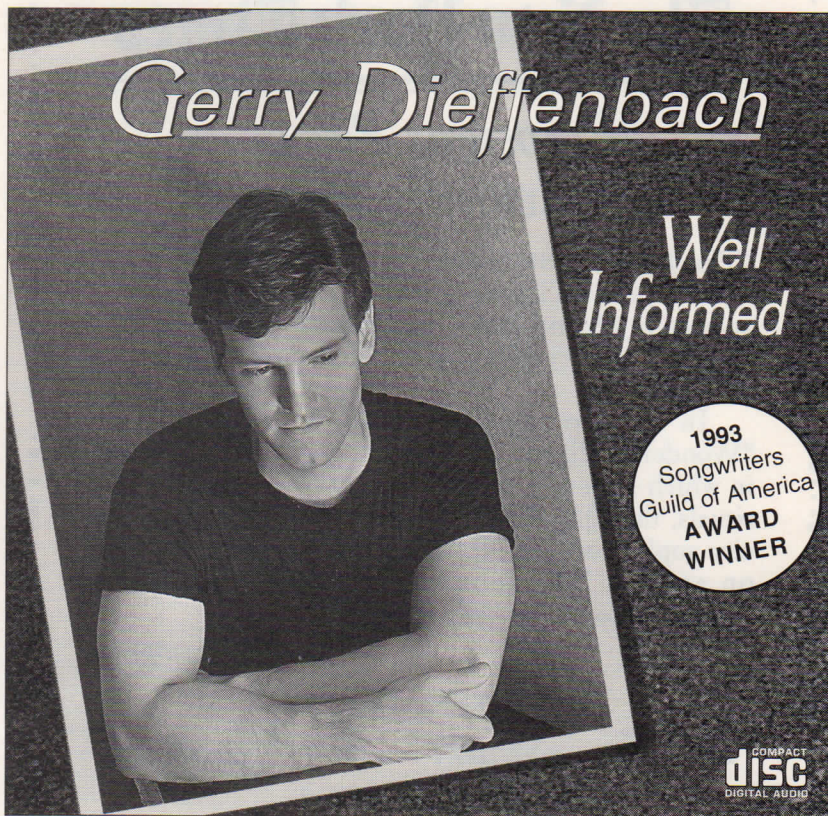
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them moment. As far as the people who have difficulty with coming out and with admitting to being gay even to themselves, it used to be "gay people are all drag queens, they all style hair, they all wear leather, and they all want to sleep with children, so I can't be a gay person." Now it seems to be much more "I am attracted to people of the same sex, but I am not gay because I don't want to hold signs and protest." One misperception has been replaced by another. Most gay people believe that gay people are like what they see on TV and that they are different.

**Isn't *The Stand-In* your first overtly gay-themed play?**

Actually the first plays I wrote, when I was teaching myself to be a playwright, were all about gay people. And they were awful. I started in 1978 because I couldn't get acting work. My first play, called *The Castoff*, is a mortifying and horrifying piece of work. It is about me, a 20-year-old gay man moving to New York City to be a song-and-dance man. I had lived in Boston, but I went to Indiana University to do an opera major for two years. I followed that with a play about a gay performance artist who committed suicide in front of all his friends, and after that, I wrote a play about a gay writer and his transvestite lover.

Then I decided to write about something that was little closer to home, which was my desire to have a child. That was *Dalton's Back*, which Circle Rep did in 1989. It was the first play I felt comfortable showing anyone at all. It made more sense that the man be with a woman and be trying to get the woman have his child in order for there to be more tension in the story. Still, some little moments of homosexuality crept in, thank God! So when I wrote *Walking the Dead* [also produced at Circle Rep], I was returning to writing about gay themes rather than discovering them the first time. I think I have since become more politicized. *The Stand-In* is certainly the first involving the gay community, gay issues, and gay politics.

I am not sure that I can ever write anything again that doesn't deal with gayness in some way. *The Stand-In* and *Walking the Dead*, to a certain degree, dealt with gay characters in the world as we live in it now. I think the way I may be using gay characters in the future is [to show] how they should be. There are those who will say that it isn't time for that yet, and that we should be focussing on the injustices of



now rather than the glories to come. But the victories will happen and the triumphs will continue, then what? That's what intrigues me.

**You have this other career as an actor. Is that to pay the bills?**

I always have to go back to acting, and as we are seeing now, I sometimes do it simultaneously. Acting is for me a way to make a living rather than a joy and love anymore. I've always done whatever I had to do when a play of mine is being produced. On the opening night of *Dalton's Back*, my first play off-Broadway, I was working in the box office at the West Side Arts selling tickets to *A Shayna Maidel*. After *Walking the Dead*, I went off and did a summer tour of *Lend Me a Tenor*. But you can't really make a living acting in the theater. I wish I was returning to my series.

**Can you envision a time when you can survive on your writing alone?**

For the first time I do, because of a deal I have with Oliver Stone's company. I had written an original screenplay last summer, during a tour of *Noises Off*. It had a good hook and I did all those things which I thought were satirized in *The Player*, but



Keith Curran backstage.

which are actually quite factual. There was lots of interest, but no one has bought

it. They asked what else I had written and that has generated some interest in *The Stand-In*. Then Stone's company sent me a script, the essence of which he liked, and they made a deal for me to rewrite it; more money than I have made before. So it may still be my wildest dream, but it does seem like a possibility.

**One last thing about *The Stand-In*. Are you prepared for the inevitable comparisons with Jeffrey?**

I can't rewrite my play because there is a play which is stylistically similar that contains homosexuals. Because *The Stand-In* has a number of short scenes, because it is a comedy and the lead is a gay person, that alone would be enough for people to go "we have one of those." As far as the comparisons are concerned, if someone looks at this and goes, "Oh it's just like Jeffrey" my response is, "Great, move it to a bigger theater!" TW

*The Stand-In, directed by Ray Cochran, plays at Naked Angels through February 7. The cast includes Bradley White, John Benjamin Hickey, and Kristen Johnson, Amy Hohn, and David Pittu.*

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