

When Art and Life Collide

Paul Rudnick on his new play.

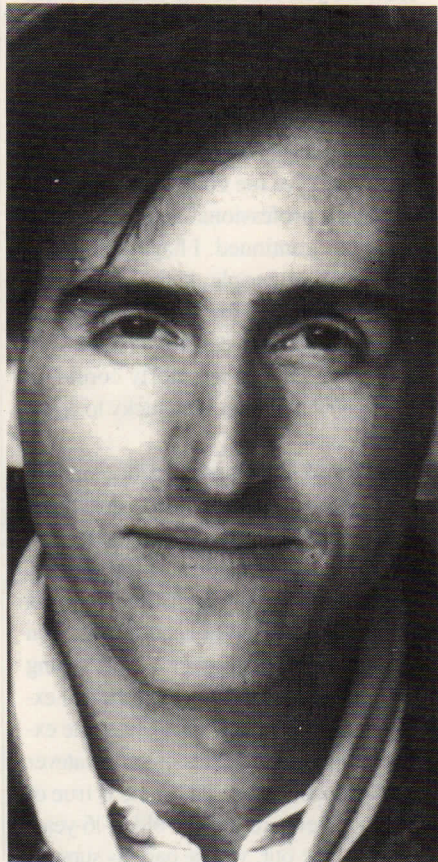
BY GERARD RAYMOND

Paul Rudnick, author of last season's hit *Jeffrey*, gets unabashedly high on his own work. The morning after the second preview of his new comedy, *The Naked Truth*, at the WPA Theater, he was gurgling with delight over the beginning of the second act: "There is something about that opening—a gorgeous woman coming down a pure white flight of stairs in a red evening gown, carrying an armload of lilies. I think not since Katharine Cornell or Bernhardt has anyone entered that way. And Mary Beth Peil does it so superbly, you just say, 'I love this woman. I love theater. I want that dress!'"

A chat with Rudnick can be every bit as entertaining as listening to his characters on stage. He's never at a loss for words, with a *bon mot* for every occasion. You just sit back and enjoy the show.

TheaterWeek: Your new play, *The Naked Truth*, is opening just before the 25th anniversary of Stonewall, the symbolic birth of gay rights.

Paul Rudnick: What a thrilling time to be in New York. Stonewall Week will be a peak for everyone. It is gay people enjoying their lives and the wonderful thing is that Stonewall is so politically incorrect. We owe every right we have gotten to those men in heels who fought back. One of my favorite things about being gay is that our George Washington is Silvia Riviera or Marsha Johnson or any number of Christopher Street drag queens. It is exciting on a political level, but it is also great theater. It's no coincidence that it happened in New York, that it happened on Christopher Street, and that it is related to the death of a great musical comedy star [Judy Garland]. That has such poetry to it, rather than your usual armed rebellion.



Paul Rudnick photographed by Jerry Eaderesto

Tell us about *The Naked Truth*.

I had been thinking about it for years and I had started on early drafts of it even before *Jeffrey*. It was inspired by an opening of a Robert Mapplethorpe exhibit. There were these gorgeous photos, beautifully framed, but sexually explicit. Because it was a Manhattan occasion there were very well-dressed local celebrities and socialites in multi-thousand dollar outfits standing with cocktails and hors d'oeuvres in front of an enormous erect black penis. I loved that contrast. How should you respond? Do you treat it, you know, "Nice lighting," or "It speaks to me," or do you just do what most people

do at any Manhattan social event and gossip about each other and ignore what's hanging on the wall? It seemed just delicious—a rich comic situation, and a great route towards dealing with everyone's attitudes towards sex and romance.

I take it this is a comedy.

What I find entertaining is that whenever sex enters the American consciousness on any national level—the Anita Hill hearing, with 70-year-old senators discussing pubic hairs on Coke cans, or gays in the military, where they were chatting on about sodomy with no one quite sure what it even referred to anymore—the entire country seems like a kindergarten or a locker room. There is some part of the American character that is so uncomfortable with sex, and yet so obsessed with it, it just brings out the fingerpainting in all of us.

Also, I thought it was possible to set a romantic comedy in a world of pornography, which I think is completely compatible, [though it does not] seem so at first. You can have people waltzing before a Mapplethorpe. Rather than seeing it as a contradiction or a shock, it is also—in a strange way—something that you can put Cary Grant and Irene Dunne in the middle of.

Love in unlikely places was also one of *Jeffrey's* themes.

At the core, *Jeffrey* was a most traditional love story—with perhaps one of the most horrendous obstacles of all time in AIDS—but it really was about two people sharing a kiss against the Manhattan skyline in the moonlight, and the two people happened to be men and one of them was HIV-positive. In *The Naked Truth* it is a stageful of beautiful women in evening gowns and handsome men in tuxedos, with an erect penis in the center, but you still have that pleasure of glamour and a

night on the town.

Tell us about the characters in *Naked Truth*.

The Naked Truth is a play with very strong gay characters and strong straight characters interacting. It is fascinating to see what happens when we leave our studio apartments, our clubs and bars, and our bookshops. We had better learn either to confront, get along with, or just deal with the rest of the world, and the rest of the world better deal with us. One of the things I really like about the play is that it deals with the suspicions and stereotypes on both sides. A lot of straight people aren't quite sure what gay people do sexually or socially; they somehow immediately associate any gay sexuality with S&M and they are not sure that lesbians even can have sex. In the play, Pete, the Republican Presidential nominee, says to Alex, the gay artist, "Is it one of those gay things, anal sex, whips, and chains, humor?" The same thing on the gay side. There is the sense of "those breeders, they are hopeless." I love the contrast of having wonderful, ultra ironic, ultra hip downtown New Yorkers with a socialite in Chanel in their midst.

What are your impressions of recent gay theater?

It is nice that gay theater is not becoming merely a minority concern. I think there was a time in theatrical history when you were allowed maybe one gay play every five years and it was treated as sociology, as a documentary peek at a subculture or an underbelly of society. Now because you have so many wonderful gay writers all working at once—Tony Kushner, Craig Lucas, Paula Vogel, Larry Kramer—no one writer or play has to carry every gay concern. There are so many voices that it is just theater, not a special interest anymore. That means you are also allowed to have plenty of bad gay theater and gay people don't have to worry too much about supporting every second of it; we can laugh at ourselves. That is why I never worry about whether something I am working on is a gay play or a straight play. I assume there will always be plenty of gay characters hanging around because, Lord knows, they are the funniest, sexiest, and the most appealing people on earth. I also feel I function as a kind of a lighthouse for the heterosexual community: Walk this way, fix those flowers. I am the swatchbook for the heterosexual.

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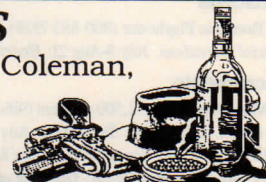
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