

The suppression of homosexuality, or the incorporation of it as something alien and sinister, plus the emotional tension created by the all-male dynamic in buddy films influenced homoerotic ideas and longings that achieved expression on the screen. Some repressed homosexual dreams and fantasies found that expression in underground film, where a scant measure of the gay subculture was reflected. In 1947, Kenneth Anger's *Fireworks* and Jean Genet's *Un Chant d'Amour* exposed two dazzlingly different visions of repressed homosexual desires, thwarted in real life and painfully exorcised onscreen. Anger, a high school student who had grown up on Hollywood's sanitized images, filled *Fireworks* with his hidden fantasies, complete with the bald sexuality inherent

"Good morning, Mary Sunshine." Frank Faylen as Bim, the male nurse, tends to Ray Milland in The Lost Weekend (1945).



in the images of cowboys, test pilots and, in this case, sailors, images that dominated the dreams of millions. In a prologue to the film, Anger wrote:

In *Fireworks* I released all the explosive pyrotechnics of a dream. Inflammable desires dampened by day under the cold water of consciousness are ignited that night by the libertarian matches of sleep and burst forth in showers of shimmering incandescence. These imaginary displays provide a temporary release.

Anger dared to film one of his own wet dreams, and it brought the release of shattered silence, exposing illusions for the relative few who saw his work. The release from illusion as well as the necessity of that illusion is the subject of Genet's *Un Chant d'Amour*. In this case the need for fantasy grows from the cravings of men trapped in prison cells and driven to furtive homoerotic liaisons that desperately attempt to approximate tenderness and affection. Plaintive images of hands reaching through cell windows for symbolic union clash furiously with sadomasochistic visions of guards using dominance, submission, masturbatory fantasy and sex as power to get a little contact. *Fireworks* and *Un Chant d'Amour* are unforgettable reactions to the restrictions placed on the male role in society, told almost in pleading terms, on behalf of a subculture filled with unrequited passion and social despair. The films belied the half-truths of the commercial cinema and gave the secret dreams of a hidden minority a small, avant-garde voice. It was a large wilderness, however, and *Un Chant d'Amour* and *Fireworks* are rarely seen even today outside large cities with film forums and art theaters.

The secret signals and hidden signs of homosexuality in Hollywood features were the only frames of reference for most gays, who learned about themselves chiefly from movies that said that the whole world was heterosexual. The Mariposa Film Group's documentary *Word Is Out* (1977) shows that, as a result of this silence, most gays across America believed that they were the only ones in the world. Years later, *Fireworks* would help to pave the way for the legitimization of homosexual subject matter onscreen when Supreme Court decisions involving the film's exhibition pronounced it not obscene in spite of its homosexual material. But in the early and middle 1950s, the invisibility of homosexuality was enforced with an almost fanatical paranoia.

One line of dialogue in Betty Comden and Adolph Green's screenplay for *Singin' in the Rain* (1952) was penciled out by the censors because it gave "a hint of sexual perversion" between Donald O'Connor and Gene Kelly. When O'Connor gets the idea of dubbing the voice of Debbie Reynolds for the high-pitched, tinny voice of Jean Hagen in a proposed musical, *The Dancing Cavalier*, he illustrates his idea for Kelly by standing in front of Reynolds and mouthing

the words to "Good Morning" while she sings behind him. When the song is over, O'Connor turns to Kelly and asks, "Well? Convincing?" Kelly, not yet catching on, takes it as a joke and replies, "Enchanting! What are you doing later?" The joke was eliminated.

The censor's notation on a scene from the film *Everybody's Girl* (1951) involved a similar reaction.

Eliminate the underlined in Reel One between showgirl and producer:

Producer: Did you ever have a fairy godfather?

Showgirl: No. But I have an uncle in Chicago we're not too sure about.

Pop psychoanalysis was rampant in the Forties and Fifties, and gays were increasingly being defined in psychiatric jargon both onscreen and off. Suddenly people began talking about dominant mothers and weak, passive fathers. The perversity of the outsider, the oddball or the alien screen character was very noticeable in an era of rigid conformity such as the 1950s. The equation between being different in any way and being homosexual was easy to see.

In Leo McCarey's *My Son John* (1952), Dean Jagger and Helen Hayes play the distraught parents of a young Communist agent (Robert Walker). When their suspicions about their son's activities are confirmed, it is an American tragedy. Suddenly they see their son as a shifty, unfamiliar "thing" with no respect for God or country, an unprincipled monster to whom it is impossible to relate as of old. The healthy family situation disappears. Walker's coldness, his superiority and his open contempt for his parents and their way of life conspire to create a perverse unnaturalness not unlike that of his sinister Bruno in *Strangers on a Train*. The parents' reaction on learning of their son's Communist activities is exactly the same as if they had discovered their child's homosexuality.

In a 1950 *New York Times* story, Guy George Gabrielson, Republican National Committee chairman, asserted that "sexual perverts who have infiltrated our government in recent years are perhaps as dangerous as actual Communists." By December of that year, 4,954 suspected homosexuals had been removed from employment in the federal government.

The presentation of lesbianism as an alien state of being emerged much more strongly in the Fifties in hard female characters who were seen as bitter reminders of the fate of women who tried to perform male roles. The strong women who fled their kitchens while men made the wartime world safe for democracy were turned back into dumb sexpots in the 1950s, and women who persisted in being independent were certainly perceived onscreen and

off as outsiders, sometimes as even "things," foolishly competing in a man's world. Neurotic and cold, these steely gorgons hinted at a perverse sexuality that was never quite made specific. Their behavior was often pathological; they were seen as women trying to be men while in reality needing a man; they were grownup tomboys made to look pathetic and incomplete in their quest for status.

In 1950, Lauren Bacall's sophisticated Amy North in Michael Curtiz' *Young Man with a Horn*, Anne Baxter's cool and deadly Eve Harrington in Joseph L. Mankiewicz' *All About Eve* and Hope Emerson's sadistic prison matron Evelyn Harper in John Cromwell's *Caged* all shared unstated lesbian feelings and murderous impulses. Amy North's murderous impulses in *Young Man with a Horn* were aimed at the virility of Kirk Douglas. Described in the Dorothy Baker novel from which the film was adapted as having lesbian tendencies, the Amy North in the film is "a neurotic young girl who's tried everything." Unable to make a heterosexual relationship with Douglas work, she is finally taken with a young woman artist whose patron she becomes. The two women leave together for Paris. A shattered Kirk Douglas, left in the consoling arms of a wholesome Doris Day, tells Bacall at the kissoff, "You're a sick girl, Amy. You'd better see a doctor."

Lauren Bacall and her protégée in Young Man with a Horn (1950).





"Pipe the new fish." Hope Emerson as the sadistic matron Evelyn Harper in John Cromwell's *Caged* (1950). (Homer Dickens Collection)

The same kind of girl-nobody-can-tame coldness which characterized Amy North's contempt for men emerged as a contempt for humanity in Eve Harrington. In *All About Eve*, the acerbic critic Addison DeWitt calls Harrington "a killer" and tells her that they share a basic contempt for the human race. Harrington is certainly made to look "boyish" throughout the film, a sort of malevolent Huck Finn who betrays her friends to achieve stardom. Pushy and aggressive, she is described as being willing to "ask Abbott to give her Costello." The reason for her downfall, the same flaw that indicated Amy North's sickness to Kirk Douglas, was her lesbianism. According to writer-director Mankiewicz, her vulnerability in the last scene to another conniving woman is the result of physical attraction. Eve does not have the kind of generosity that led Margo Channing (Bette Davis) to take a waif like her under her wing. To ask Phoebe (Barbara Bates) to spend the night rather than take the subway home to Brooklyn could have only one motive, and it spells the beginning of the end for Eve Harrington.

Mannish, aggressive and a killer, the matron Evelyn Harper is another kind of user. The women's prison of *Caged* provides the most controlled and therefore the most specific kind of ghetto situation, one in which the sexual perversity of aliens is highly stereotyped. Amy North's sophisticated manipulation and Eve Harrington's stylish trickery occur in the civilized ghettos of the jazz and

theater worlds; in the prison of *Caged*, where the pretenses of polite society are ripped away, there is an astonishing amount of lesbianism. The world of *Caged* is a total underworld, corrupting and brilliantly drawn. Like the reflections of homosexuality in the *cinema noir* of the Forties, lesbianism appears here as a product of an outlaw social structure—it comes with the territory. Evelyn Harper, the super-aggressive bull dyke, brutalizes the women while vice queen Elvira Powell (Lee Patrick) seduces them into prostitution with a sweet smile and a lecherous gaze.

All lesbians are outsiders, the films said, and in each film the myth of the predatory but lonely lesbian was reinforced. Yet overt homosexuality was seldom mentioned. Mervyn LeRoy's *The Bad Seed* (1956) omitted the "latent homosexuality" of Emory Breedlove that had appeared in William March's novel, and even Henri-Georges Clouzot's *Diabolique* (1955) changed lesbian lovers into a murder victim's wife and mistress. The only film of the 1950s to deal openly with lesbianism was a French melodrama that rejected such love as a valid emotional option. Jacqueline Audry's *Olivia* (1951) was given a sensational release in the United States as *Pit of Loneliness* (1954), the title chosen by the American distributors for its similarity to the title of the notorious novel *The Well of Loneliness*, by Radclyffe Hall, which had never been filmed. Scripted by Colette, *Olivia* offered hothouse lesbian passion in an upper class French girls' school. It was a perfect "shadow people" film for the Fifties. It featured dark doings in school corridors and ended in the obligatory tragic circumstances.

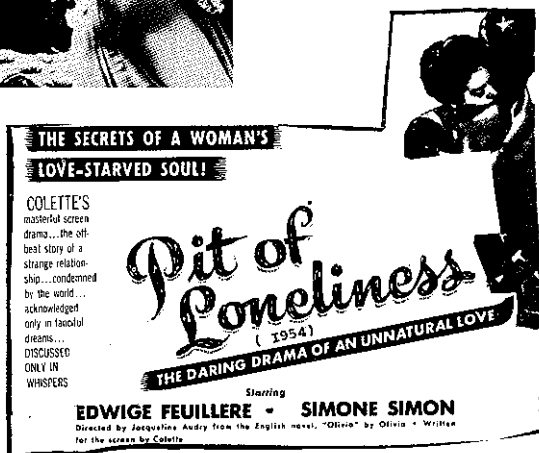
American censors assured the delicacy of treatment for which *Pit of Loneliness* was touted. One censor's notation read: "Eliminate in Reel 5D: Scene of Miss Julie holding Olivia in close embrace and kissing her on the mouth. Reason: Immoral, would tend to corrupt morals." The critics reflected the general tone of the advertising campaign, referring to "the love that dared not speak its name" and "the subject talked about in whispers." Nadine Edwards wrote in the Hollywood *Citizen-News*: "That there will be controversy surrounding the picture there is little doubt. Few will deny, however, that *Pit of Loneliness* carries with it an air of pathos and emotional tragedy—the only real outcome of such an unhappy and unnatural relationship."

The end of the film finds the older teacher renouncing her love for her student in order to save the girl from the disgrace of abnormal love. "All my life," she says, "I have had to fight these feelings within me." Her noble sacrifice on behalf of Olivia is seen as an act of civilized behavior, lesbian longings being freakish by any standards.

A look at covert lesbian behavior in films throughout the 1950s certainly bears out the neuroticism with which it was tinged onscreen. In addition to



Teacher comforts student in *Pit of Loneliness* (1954).



the obvious lesbian allusions in *Caged*, *Young Man with a Horn* and *All About Eve*, other films depicting lonely, frustrated women often contained clues to lesbian leanings. In *Screaming Mimi* (1958), Gypsy Rose Lee almost certainly has a brief affair with a stripper who works in her club, the Gay and Frisky, which features a sadomasochistic strip scene unusual for 1950s Hollywood. Elizabeth Wilson, as the woman who finally takes charge of the life of Kim Stanley, a Marilyn Monroe prototype in *The Goddess* (1958), has repressed lesbian feelings for the star; in a final scene, Wilson fiercely protects her interests in Stanley in a fight with the star's former husband (Dane Clark) and their little girl. "You take care of your little girl, and I'll take care of mine," she tells him, adding, "I'll take good care of her . . . I kind of love her."

Nicholas Ray's neurotic western *Johnny Guitar* (1954) features a butch Joan Crawford and an even more butch Mercedes McCambridge in a series of confrontations that keep present-day gay audiences howling. But McCambridge outdoes *Johnny Guitar* in her unbilled appearance as a Chicano motorcycle tough in Orson Welles' *Touch of Evil* (1958). The character, unlike the other



Elizabeth Wilson watches over her "little girl," Kim Stanley, in The Goddess (1958).

two girlfriends of the gang rapists, is almost undetectable as a woman, and she insists on staying in the motel room while Janet Leigh is raped. "Get out!" her boyfriend hisses. "No," she whispers hoarsely, "I wanna watch!"

Hilarious but instructive on the subject of crude stereotyping in the Fifties is the film *Children of Loneliness*, which appeared in 1953 and now seems to have disappeared completely. An independently produced documentary drama in the tradition of *Reefer Madness* (an hysterical 1930s film about the evils of marijuana), *Children of Loneliness* was actually made in 1939 but was denied a license for exhibition until the 1950s on the grounds that it was immoral. The film tells two stories, both accompanied by the interpreta-

Mercedes McCambridge (far right) was one of the boys who watched Janet Leigh being raped in Orson Welles' Touch of Evil (1958), but her name is not in the credits. (Cinemabilia)



tions of an onscreen analyst, a psychiatrist who "aids the police in cases of abnormal sexuality." In the first episode, Eleanor Gordon is about to succumb to the charms of her girlfriend, Bobby Allen. Eleanor works in an office with Bobby and is particularly susceptible to lesbianism, the doctor says, because she was "frightened by a man in her infancy" and cannot love in a normal way. In a confrontation scene in his office, the doctor tells Eleanor, "Let's be frank, Eleanor. What this girl offers to you is a false, barren substitute for the rich emotional life of a normal love. If you accept it, you will pay with misery, shame and despair. You should pity this girl. She undoubtedly belongs to that unfortunate class in whom this condition is congenital. She was born that way and there's nothing you or I can do for her. But *you* I can help."

Bobby Allen throws acid at Eleanor for spurning her advances. Eleanor throws it back and hits Bobby in the face. Partially maimed, Bobby rushes into the street and is killed by a speeding truck. The doctor introduces Eleanor to a fullback, whom she marries.

The second part of the film concerns Paul Van Tyne, an artist whose work a critic has judged "too feminine." Afraid that he can no longer conceal the truth of his abnormality, Paul seeks the advice of the doctor, who tells him that he "can never love as a husband because mentally he's a woman." Paul kills himself.

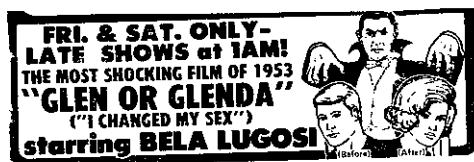
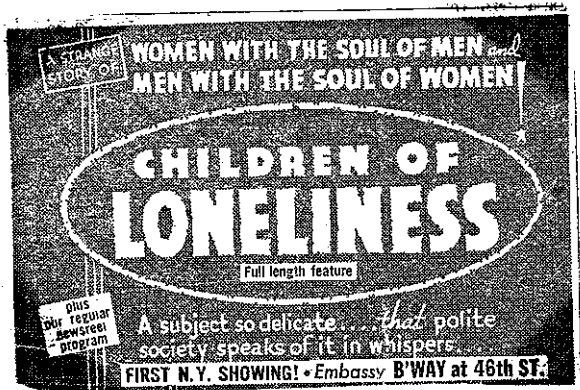
The film was "rejected in toto" by the censorship office in May 1939 with the comment, "As its title implies, the film is about sex perversion." In 1952 it was resubmitted by the distributor, Jewel Productions, and rejected once again. Finally the film passed the censorship board of review in 1953, but the censor's report stipulated several deletions, including one scene in a homosexual "cafe" set in Los Angeles in the early 1930s.

Delete entire cafe scene in which the following exchange takes place:

Eleanor: What are these people?
Paul Van Tyne: The Children of Loneliness! Nature's tragic mistakes, inverts, perverts and lesbians! Look at them—trying to escape from the fate to which they are condemned at birth, from the futility of their empty lives, from themselves.

Delete all views portraying acts of sexual perversion. These will include:

1. View of two women sitting on settee in embrace.
2. View of two men at table with hands joined, leaning forward, about to kiss each other.
3. Eliminate all views of homosexual couples and lesbian couples dancing together.



Advertisements for Children of Loneliness and Glen or Glenda?

Reason: Immoral and obscene. Also, there are certain scenes which add to the depressing effect of the film and are suggestive of immoral acts associated with homosexuality. I would therefore consider also the following eliminations:

1. Eliminate dialogue, "I will tell everybody about the dresses you own," in argument between Paul and former male model.
2. Scene in cafe where companion refers to dancer dressed as a woman as "he" and a "true artiste." It is felt that these pieces of dialogue are immoral as they refer to transvestitism and other acts of immorality which a homosexual might perpetrate.

Transvestism and transsexualism were used interchangeably with homosexuality and with each other in a similar low-budget epic of 1953, *Glen or Glenda? I Changed My Sex*. Produced in virtually the same documentary fashion as *Children of Loneliness* in order to cash in on the sensational sex change operation of Christine Jorgensen the previous year, the film starred Bela Lugosi as a divine being who preaches wise words from a large armchair. Surrounded by skulls, shadows and smoke pots that emit green vapor, Lugosi ponders aloud the mysteries of creation and assures the audience menacingly that "there are more things in heaven and earth than we know." He warns against tampering with the "natural order." Lugosi then introduces the familiar pompous psychiatrist, who relates the sad tale of a young man, Glen, who has an overpowering desire to wear female clothing. Glen is seen strolling down Main Street in

broad daylight, wearing a sweater and skirt, with five o'clock shadow on his cheeks and lots of hair on his forearms. The aim of psychiatry, the doctor says, is "to save poor creatures like this one—four-time losers—and to help society understand that there but for the grace of God go all of us."

At first the censors rejected *Glen or Glenda?*, then they reconsidered and approved a version with three cuts.

1. A homosexual caressing the hand of another man as he is offered a light.
2. A man approaching Glen while he is dressed as a woman.
3. Dream sequence showing Glen tearing off his girlfriend's sweater.

The "dream sequence" was one in which Glen was suddenly seized with the uncontrollable desire to possess his girlfriend's white angora sweater. In a scene at the analyst's office, Glen's girlfriend learns about his problem and offers to help. "I don't fully understand this," she tells Glen, "but maybe we can work it out." She then gives him her sweater.

While *Children of Loneliness* and *Glen or Glenda?* may sound like films that belong on a midnight triple bill with *Pink Flamingos*, in their day they reflected prevailing opinion. In 1950, *Coronet* magazine called homosexuality "that new menace" and listed "glandular imbalance" as one of its causes. In 1956, *Time* quoted psychoanalyst Edmund Bergler (under Medicine) as saying, "The full-grown homosexual wallows in self-pity and continually provokes hostility to insure himself more opportunities for self-pity; he is full of defensive malice and flippancy, covering his guilt and depression with extreme narcissism and superciliousness. He is generally unreliable in an essentially psychopathic way and (unconsciously) always hates his family. There are no happy homosexuals." In 1954, *Commonweal* said, "the homosexual is a freak of nature as is the albino or the midget." Compared with *Time* and other national magazines, *Children of Loneliness* was a scholarly work on its subject.

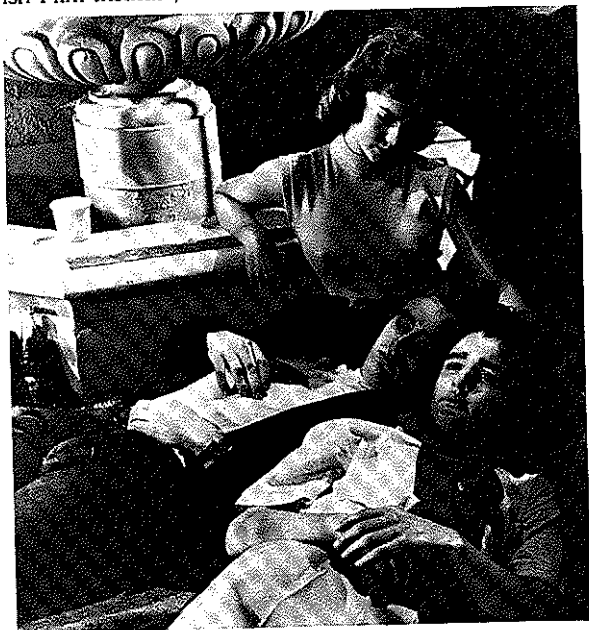
The opinion of psychiatry that homosexuality is an illness was formally reversed in 1974 when the American Psychiatric Association stated that homosexuality, like heterosexuality, was not in itself a disturbance, but that there could be disturbed homosexuals just as there could be disturbed heterosexuals. In the 1950s, however, the shrinks ruled the day with opinions that had not come far from the thinking of those who had burned witches and heretics in the sixteenth century. The consensus of psychiatric opinion fed the legacy of sexual guilt and masculine doubt of the war years. In 1949, *Newsweek* had reported that "although army regulations forbade the drafting of homosexuals, scores of inverts managed to slip through during the war." Among the methods

that induction psychiatrists used to detect homosexuals, *Newsweek* listed:

1. By their effeminate manner and dress.
2. By repeating words from the homosexual vocabulary and quickly looking for signs of recognition.

The fear of homosexuality emerged in several films of the late 1950s, notably in the first serious examination of sissyhood, Robert Anderson's *Tea and Sympathy*, which was brought to the screen by Vincente Minnelli in 1956. In other films, the pressure to conform, to hide any secret sensitivity out of fear of the word *queer*, was a popular subtext. Nicholas Ray's *Rebel Without a Cause* (1955) contained broad hints of alternative sexual behavior and the choices offered in the ritualism of gang members. In Jack Garfein's *The Strange One* (1957), perverse sexuality supplements the equally ritualistic behavior of cadets in a southern military school. In Joseph L. Mankiewicz's screen version of Tennessee Williams' *Suddenly Last Summer* (1959), homosexuality becomes evil incarnate, the symbol of a sterile decadence that is punishable by death. In all these films the homoeroticism of the chief characters is destroyed or discredited as being alien to normal life.

Natalie Wood watches over James Dean and Sal Mineo in Rebel Without a Cause (1955). Was this a family? (British Film Institute)



In 1963, Kenneth Anger's *Scorpio Rising* would use elements of all those films, especially *Rebel Without a Cause*, in its exploitation and exploration of "the masculine fascination with The Thing That Goes." Anger's homage to the motorcycle myth uses the violence, the decadence and the ritualism in tracing the path of boys and their toys to men and their machines—the sort of thing that film art catalogues refer to as "counterculture iconography."

Of the three troubled teenagers in *Rebel Without a Cause* (James Dean, Natalie Wood and Sal Mineo), it is Mineo's Plato who is the lonely, tormented sissy. Although he is not accused of it—unlike Tom Lee in *Tea and Sympathy*—Plato is the mama's boy, brought up by a smothering maid in the absence of his father. In his adoration of James Dean, he seeks a father more than a lover. But because Dean returns his feelings so blatantly, sparks fly. Dean's rebellious youth in crisis, a tender and courageous figure, is as loving toward Plato as he is toward Natalie Wood, and the three form a family relationship. Dean's Jim Stark is torn between society's guidelines for masculine behavior and his own natural feelings of affection for men and women. To act upon them in the case of Plato or any other man was forbidden, of course; even Jim explodes at finding his father (Jim Backus) in an apron.

Stewart Stern, the screenwriter for *Rebel*, has told how he drew on his own military experience to create parallels between gang behavior and the all-male dynamic that was present in wartime.

The gang in *Rebel Without a Cause* isn't much different from the army; both their rituals are tribal. The affection in gang behavior has to be hidden inside a different vocabulary, both spoken and unspoken, inside gestures and words which desensitized everything and made everything brutal. Also, they had to wear skins to keep the image intact—boots and leather. They had to put on a horse skin in order to feel defended against the discovery of their own sensitivity.

I don't know what other experiences in World War II were, but for us it was deliberate and conscious. We were told that the buddy system prevailed. The choice of a buddy was as or more critical than that of a bride. You'd be living in a kind of physical intimacy which was unlike any other. The classic David Duncan photos of buddies consoling each other, those who had lost their buddies, was very expressive of this. And what greater love song in those days than "My Buddy"? Men were having the experience of never having been so close to other men, and there was something of that love operating within the structure of the teenage gang whose members had left home, where there wasn't much love, to fight each other in the streets.

Fighting may have been a pretext for being close in *Rebel*. When Jim and Buzz decide to enter a "chicken" race to the edge of a cliff, a race in which Buzz will die, the two regard each other for a moment and question their participation in such an event. "We have to do something," they decide, and

their encounter becomes the motivation for all that follows. Jim Stark refuses to deny his feelings, and in the screenplay Stern uses the character's guilt and grief over the death of Buzz as a weapon against conformity.

One of the things I wanted to show in *Rebel* is that underneath all the bullshit macho defense, there was that pure drive for affection, and it didn't matter who the recipient might be. There was a longer time in those days for young men to be in the warrior phase, where a lot of romantic attachments were formed before heterosexual encounters. My favorite moment in the film is not between Jim and Plato but between Jim and Buzz, who dies in the "chicken" race. It was tender and loving, and the killing of that boy, whom Jim had known for all of twelve minutes, motivated the entire last half of the film.

Rebel Without a Cause pleads a redefinition of manhood in the same way that *Tea and Sympathy* one year later would plead tolerance for "shy but normal" young men whose behavior sets them apart from the pack. Stewart Stern discusses the character of Jim Stark.

In talking to gang members, I realized that it was necessary to get through the barriers and redefine masculine behavior so that it was all right for a man to see tenderness as strength. The real power of Jim in *Rebel* was the opportunity he gave himself to choose and take the public consequences for an unpopular choice. He was willing not to dump all over Plato as a scapegoat. Even though we didn't get into that aspect of it, Plato was the one who would've been tagged as the faggot character. He hadn't shaved yet, and he had a picture of Alan Ladd in his locker at school. Jim was willing to forgo his own popularity to protect Plato.

The explosion of bottled-up feelings over this kind of emotional attachment kills Plato and Buzz, though Jim is left safely in the arms of Natalie Wood. Adult responsibility clearly includes settling down to a heterosexual relationship following the adolescent fantasies of youth. Homosexuality is considered "normal" until the end of adolescence; after that it is arrested development.

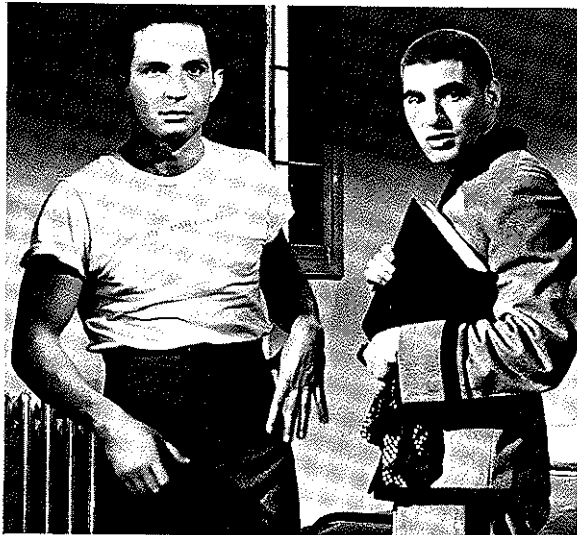
While no overt homosexuality emerged in *Rebel Without a Cause*, it could hardly be disguised, even by overvigilant censors, in Jack Garfein's *The Strange One* (1957), a film based on Calder Willingham's novel *End as a Man*. Although three scenes "indicating a homosexual relationship" between Ben Gazzara and Paul Richards were deleted prior to the film's release, it was enough of a Fifties psychological horror show to suggest strong sexual perversity without actually showing it. Gazzara plays a sadistic bully, Jocko DeParis, a highly unnatural presence among the all-American boys of a southern military school. Even his name juxtaposes clashing images of American virility and European dandyism. He engages in sadomasochistic games with freshmen cadets and

holds several students under his evil spell. There is more than one dark hint that his interests in young men may have a sexual dimension that lurks beneath the surface of his cool manipulations.

In part because this intimation, frowned upon by the Code, could go nowhere, the military academy itself becomes an Old Dark House, populated with all sorts of goons and terrors. Cadet Simmons (Arthur Storch), for example, is a repulsive religious fanatic who does not date girls and refuses to shower with the boys because "some people are modest, you know." Gazzara shows Simmons an enema bag he keeps in his locker and then threatens him with a broom handle. Another cadet, aptly nicknamed Cockroach (Paul Richards), is obviously in love with Jocko, and here the censors intervened. Nevertheless, Cockroach does everything but buy Jocko a gold cigarette case. One explosively sexual scene shows Cockroach cleaning Jocko's sword with loving strokes. Ultimately Cockroach turns out to be a budding Sebastian Venable, a poet of sorts who imagines his oddness to be a product of his genius as a creative writer. He confesses shyly to Jocko that he has written a novel, *Nightboy*, in which Jocko is obviously the title character, whose activities are determined by Cockroach's erotic fantasies.

The moral is that one sickie can ruin an entire school. The honorable cadets eventually drive Jocko out of town, literally on a rail, in a scene whose righteous anger smacks of Ku Klux Klan tactics. The real key to Jocko DeParis and

Ben Gazzara as Jocko DeParis and Paul Richards as Cockroach, the author of a homoerotic novel, in The Strange One (1957).



his threat—his sexual control over certain men—is never turned. “As a matter of fact,” the director has pointed out, “there’s still a bleep in the soundtrack when you see the film on television. At the end of the picture, Gazzara goes to a local cafe with the girl. Cockroach approaches them on the street and confesses his feelings to Jocko. The Johnston Office insisted that it be taken out.”

Suddenly the “real” problem, the one that is never talked about in the film, becomes the ultimate culprit—because it seems to be the one subject that is so ostentatiously avoided. A review in *Time* said that audiences seeing *The Strange One* “will learn what goes on inside a sadist—mostly repressed homosexuality.” But who is doing the repressing here? The author certainly made Jocko a sexually repressed character, but the sexuality that characters repress shows itself in their behavior in certain ways—ways that were then repressed by the censors.

A classic story of enforced repression is that of *Tea and Sympathy*. The play and the film have become so symbolic of the classic cure for homosexuality, the love of a good woman secured in the nick of time, that people forget it is the story of a shy heterosexual. Robert Anderson, who adapted his own play for the screen in 1956, uses the classic outsider image of the man who marches to the sound of a different drummer and must face the scorn of his contemporaries. Never in the film or in the play is it indicated that sensitive student Tom Lee (John Kerr) might actually prefer boys to girls. The subject here is the accusation of homosexuality, not the presence of it (at least not in Tom Lee). Lee’s classmates call him “Sister Boy” because, like Jim Stark, he refuses to run with the pack. And Anderson, like Stewart Stern, was saying, “Look! This too is a man,” Tom Lee likes Bach more than baseball and prefers the company of his housemaster’s wife Laura (Deborah Kerr) to touch football with the guys on the beach. He is also clearly in love with the older woman, a fact that his male tormentors overlook because he does not fill the standard male role.

Most of the accusatory remarks about homosexuality were toned down for the Vincente Minnelli film. In the play, Tom is discovered swimming naked with a teacher who is also suspected of homosexuality. In the film, he is labeled a sissy because he is discovered sitting on the beach with a group of faculty wives, sewing a button on his shirt. Also muted in the film version is the repressed homosexuality of Tom’s chief tormentor, the virile housemaster (Leif Erickson) who married Laura in order to prove *his* manhood. Erickson ignores Laura in favor of the young male students he coaches in both football and masculinity. *Tea and Sympathy* is about a heterosexual boy who is falsely

accused of homosexuality by men whose sporting activities provide the most homoerotic action on the screen. In buddy relationships well established by his fellow students, Tom fits in as a scapegoat sissy. The film pleads tolerance, therefore, not for sexual deviation but for unfortunate heterosexuals who happen to be less than "masculine." At no time is homosexuality seen as a valid option for a real man. The message is that one cannot assume that a young man is homosexual just because he doesn't knock himself out playing football.

When Laura finally sleeps with Tom Lee, she is saving him not from a life of sissiness but from his own fear that his fellow students might be right about his sexuality—a thought that has already driven him to attempt suicide. "To me, it was never a play about homosexuality," Anderson says. "When Leif Erickson hounds Tom Lee, he's really persecuting what he fears in himself." Thus *Tea and Sympathy* is the ultimate sissy film; it confirms what the creators and portrayers of sissies have always sought to deny, that the iconography for sissies and for sexual deviates is the same and that the one has come to mean the other.

While it was not about homosexuality, *Tea and Sympathy* served as a lesson for a generation of gay men who felt the sharp accusations of Tom Lee's tormentors not as shy heterosexuals but as terrified homosexuals. The film managed to describe some of what real homosexuals were feeling and experienc-



Tom Lee learns to walk like a man in *Tea and Sympathy* (1956).

ing in the 1950s while holding true to the cultural necessity of invisibility. Cultural necessity was in the hands of the Production Code, of course, and at no time was consideration given to making the homosexuality in *Tea and Sympathy* more explicit. Even the possibility that someone might actually be homosexual in real life was scotched from the film. Before the start of shooting, Deborah Kerr wrote Vincente Minnelli that "the Breen Office is very difficult about the homosexual angle, which is, I understand, their objection. Adultery is OK, impotence is OK, but perversion is their *bête noire*." In fact adultery was not OK, and it came under attack from the Catholic Legion of Decency. The already altered ending of *Tea and Sympathy* had to be made to reflect the necessary retribution for Laura's affair with Tom Lee. Thus the finished movie taught that instruction and initiation by an older woman was a positive thing but that at the same time such behavior could not be condoned.

The stage version ends as Laura, giving herself to Tom, undoes the top button of her blouse and says, "Years from now . . . when you talk about this . . . and you will . . . be kind." The fall of the curtain left the outcome of the encounter to the imagination of the audience. But this was not good enough for Hollywood. It filmed the seduction scene with an aura of hushed awe, like a church service. "The way the scene was shot, in the woods with the birds twittering and the special lighting," Robert Anderson says, "it looked more like the second coming of Christ than the first coming of Tom Lee." A sore-thumb epilogue then provides the morally correct ending that makes what has gone before acceptable to the Legion of Decency. Ten years later, at his class reunion, Tom Lee sports the largest gold wedding band ever held in close-up. He encounters his old housemaster, now bitter and alone, who gives Tom a letter from Laura. She writes that she was forced to leave her husband in disgrace because of what they did, and she says she cannot romanticize or excuse their sexual affair because it was "wrong." That word was used as a compromise for the word "sin," which the Catholic Church tried to pressure Anderson into using in the final screenplay. Anderson recalls a meeting with a group of bishops on the board of the Legion of Decency; one of them told him, "If you could only work the word 'sin' into that last scene, we would have no problem."

Tea and Sympathy was made too soon. The real issues raised by Anderson's play were dealt with more directly and with much humor in Claude Miller's *La Meilleure Façon de Marcher* (1976), which opened in the United States as *The Best Way* in 1978. In this film, the connection that society makes between homosexuality and sissy behavior is shown clearly. The relationship between two counselors at a boys' summer camp is parallel to that of Tom

Lee and his housemaster in *Tea and Sympathy*. The willowy, effeminate Philippe (Patrick Bouchitey), in charge of the drama group at camp, refuses to browbeat his students into mindless conformity, as does his friend Marc (Patrick Dewaere), the athletics coach. Marc catches Philippe in drag one day, and later he sees him kiss another man on the street. The film portrays the crucial days in their lives when Philippe's obvious homosexuality triggers Marc's misogyny and homophobia in a violent outburst. "I don't talk to people who take it up the ass," Marc tells Philippe. The same sentiment is expressed by the college professor in *Looking for Mr. Goodbar* when he tells Terry Dunn, "I can't stand having a conversation with a woman after I've fucked her." *Tea and Sympathy* implies that a hatred for women and a contempt for homosexuality go hand in hand, but *The Best Way* spells it out. At the end of *The Best Way*, an older Marc, now a real estate broker, shows Philippe and his new bride around an apartment in Paris. Marc sees that Philippe, though homosexual, has learned how to hide it, and he approves with a knowing smirk. "There are plenty of closets, Philippe . . . here and here and here."

The Best Way made the statement that *Tea and Sympathy* could not touch, and did it with whimsy. But *Tea and Sympathy* had paved the way. The zeal with which everyone had compromised to avoid giving offense backfired. *Saturday Review* said that "the movie demonstrates once more the old-hat nature of the Code," and *Time* said that "obviously the American public isn't old enough to know that there's such a thing as homosexuality." The end of the Fifties had brought the screen closer to actually speaking *its* name than ever before, and critics and audiences were practically yelling, "Say it, already; enough with the transparent innuendo!"

Tennessee Williams stepped forward to oblige with what became still another comment on the homosexual as alien. Twice before, plays of Williams had been brought to the screen with significant homosexual references deleted. In each case, the adaptors made sweeping statements claiming that the homosexual aspects of the play were unnecessary dramatically. In 1951, the "problem" that Blanche DuBois encountered with her husband was obscured for the screen version of *A Streetcar Named Desire*; in 1958, *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* was shorn of the homosexual implications in the relationship between Brick (Paul Newman) and the dead Skipper. In both cases, the producers pointed out that homosexuality was not "the point" after all, that it was easily disposed of in favor of more acceptable explanations. Brick could not have sex with Maggie because he was still an adolescent.

Then, in 1959, two years before the Code was revised to allow homosexual subject matter on the screen, *Suddenly Last Summer* dealt with the subject

as the kind of psychosexual freak show that the Fifties almost demanded. Treated like a dread disease, the homosexuality of Sebastian Venable, Williams' doomed poet, could be "inferred but not shown"—by special permission of the Breen Office. The resultant mixture of madness and cannibalism gave the film an unsavory, sick atmosphere that caused it to be approached with a pair of tongs by everyone involved. Katharine Hepburn, who played Sebastian's demented mother, Violet Venable, publicly expressed her distaste for the subject matter. According to director Joseph Mankiewicz' biographer, Ken Geist, Mankiewicz and Spencer Tracy, on location in Boston, spent the better part of an evening explaining homosexuality to Hepburn, but when they had finished, she flatly refused to believe that such people existed. In later years, she has been a vocal opponent of homosexuality, linking it with other "social ills" of society.

She need not have fussed so much about *Suddenly Last Summer*. The Breen Office, in a meeting with producer Sam Spiegel and screenwriter Gore Vidal, cut all direct reference to homosexual relations. "My script was perfectly explicit," Vidal says, "and then the Catholic Church struck." The Legion of Decency, after seeing that the necessary cuts were made, gave the film a special classification: "Since the film illustrates the horrors of such a lifestyle, it can be considered moral in theme even though it deals with sexual perversion."

Sebastian Venable, it was decided, would not appear in the flesh. According to Vidal, he was to be "a glimmer, an occasion for memory." With this decision, Hollywood achieved the impossible; it put an invisible homosexual on the screen.

In the January 1960 *Films in Review*, the critic Henry Hart discussed the genesis of *Suddenly Last Summer*, in which a young woman is used by her older cousin to attract boys when his mother becomes too old for that purpose. "It is said," Hart wrote, "that Tennessee Williams wrote *Suddenly Last Summer* when a psychiatrist advised him that for his own sake—not to mention society's—he had better stop denigrating normality and begin to expose the evils of homosexuality and its allied forms of vice." This Williams certainly did, whether or not the advice came from a doctor. Williams' tortured view of a failed homosexual artist and the people he victimizes with his abnormal desires is a classic horror story. Having used first his mother, in this case literally his mad creator, and then his cousin (Elizabeth Taylor) as bait for his affairs, the creature is finally destroyed by an angry mob of street urchins in a climax not much different from that of James Whale's *Frankenstein*, in which the peasants pursue the monster to the top of a hill, where fire engulfs him.

Sebastian Venable is presented as a faceless terror, a horrifying presence



The face of the demon: a publicity photo of Sebastian Venable, who is not seen in the release print of Suddenly Last Summer (1959).

among normal people, like the Martians in *War of the Worlds* or the creature from the black lagoon. As he slinks along the streets of humid Spanish seacoast towns in pursuit of boys ("famished for the dark ones"), Sebastian's coattail or elbow occasionally intrudes into the frame at moments of intense emotion. He comes at us in sections, scaring us a little at a time, like a movie monster too horrible to be shown all at once. The piecemeal images of his retreat through the "white-hot cobblestoned streets" as he is hunted by his grimy victims suggest that he must die, finally, at the hands of the society he has exploited and outraged.

Although Williams was credited with the screenplay of *Suddenly Last Summer*, it was written by Vidal and altered by Mankiewicz. "Sam Spiegel wanted Tennessee's name on the script with mine," Vidal says. "He convinced Tennessee he'd get an Academy Award for the script he had not written. So Tennessee took the credit. I contemplated suing, but Tennessee is a friend, and he said, 'Ah mean, Go-wuh, it is mah play,' to which I said, 'Yes, all forty minutes of it, but the other sixty are mine.' Besides, there was no doubt in the billing from whose brow sprang this gorgeous work. We were also not helped by Mankiewicz' ending—those overweight ushers from the Roxy Theater on Fire Island pretending to be small ravenous boys."

What emerged in *Suddenly Last Summer* was a *Glen or Glenda?* with a budget. It was a film with high moral tone that could not, in the end, explore its own subject. Henry Hart concluded that *Suddenly Last Summer* "exposes clearly the foremost causes of homosexuality and . . . points to one of the

horrible fates that can overtake this particular kind of pervert." In fact the "cause" of Sebastian's homosexuality (no one ever asks what causes heterosexuality because no one is interested in stopping it) is certainly not explored in the film, which is concerned only with the effects of it—which are devastating to all. As for Sebastian's particular fate, it is unlikely that many homosexuals have died at the hands of cannibalistic Spanish-speaking street children. More have died at the hands of "fag bashers" in American cities.

The erosion of the power of the Production Code to maintain specific taboos had begun at the outset of the 1950s. Before 1953, no film rejected by the Code had ever had a commercial release. In that year, Otto Preminger's *The Moon Is Blue*, denied a seal of approval because of its light treatment of adultery (which does not actually take place in the film) and its use of the word *virgin*, was released without the seal and did very well at the box office. In 1956, Preminger again released a film on a controversial subject without a seal of approval. His adaptation of Nelson Algren's *The Man with the Golden Arm* graphically depicted drug addiction, in direct violation of Code precepts, and became highly profitable, earning receipts eleven times greater than its production costs.

Following the marked success of the two Preminger films, the Code was revised in 1956 to rescind the prohibitions against the use of narcotics, prostitution and miscegenation as film subjects. The enormous success of the British imports *Room at the Top* (1958) and *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning* (1960), both released in America without a seal of approval, further testified to the fact that the Code was too restrictive and essentially ineffective. The trend toward liberalizing the Code was helped along by a considerable drop in attendance at the movies, from seventy-five million people in 1950 to less than forty-six million in 1960. In a pamphlet on the Production Code written in the early 1960s, Bosley Crowther pointed out that "it was fashionable in the 1950s to boast, 'I haven't seen a movie in six months.'"

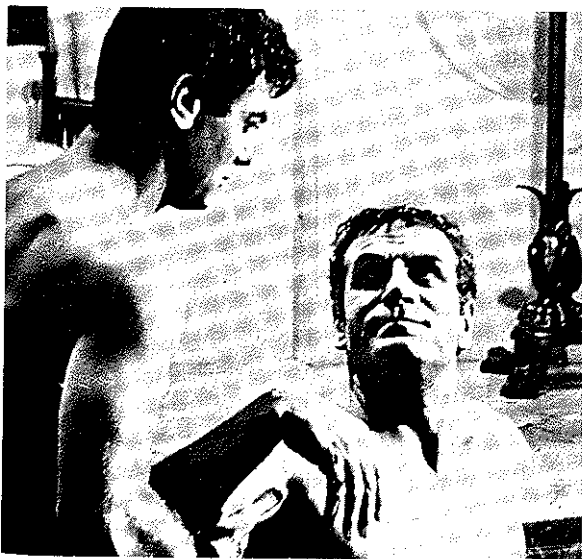
In early 1959, the California State Supreme Court, reviewing a case that involved a screening of Kenneth Anger's *Fireworks*, ruled that "homosexuality is older than Sodom and Gomorrah" and is a legitimate subject for screen treatment if handled properly. The ruling set aside the conviction of exhibitor Raymond Rohauer, who had been fined \$250 and sentenced to three years' probation for showing *Fireworks* in 1957. Calling *Fireworks* "an attempt to convey, through impressionism, the homosexual attitude on life in general," *Variety* noted that the court opinion declared that "homosexuality is not to be approved of, but society should understand its causes and effects." Seven years later, after homosexuality as a subject had reached commercial film

houses, Kenneth Anger's *Scorpio Rising* (1963) was finally released in theaters (albeit specialized "art" houses such as New York's Bleecker Street Cinema) and caused a similar commotion. Again the film was taken to represent homosexual life and attitudes in general. Andrew Sarris, reviewing *Scorpio Rising* in the *Village Voice* and noting that Anger parallels a sadistic homosexual orgy with footage from an old movie on the life of Christ, drew a homophobic conclusion. "Why the parallel with Christ?" he asked. "What else is there for beautiful homosexuals to experience after 30 but crucifixion?"

The handling of *Fireworks* and *Scorpio Rising* by the courts, the distributors and the critics suggested the way in which the Code would eventually change. There was far too much rampant, unchallenged homophobia, even in enlightened circles, for films with homosexual subjects to be viewed objectively, that is, on their cinematic merit alone. There would be no acceptance of the validity of homosexual subject matter, only a condescension to an amorphous "adult" audience that Hollywood was determined to reach without offending the blue-noses.

One of the last commercial films to have homosexuality removed from its script before the Code was changed was Stanley Kubrick's *Spartacus* (1960). Dalton Trumbo's screenplay contained a scene between Crassius (Laurence Olivier) and his young slave Antoninus (Tony Curtis), in which the older man

Antoninus (Tony Curtis) helps Crassius (Laurence Olivier) out of the bath in a scene cut from Spartacus (1960). (Universal Pictures, collection Lincoln Center Library for the Performing Arts)



subtly establishes his taste for both men and women. In the climactic bathing scene, the two are talking about how to treat a woman, when suddenly Crassius seems to change the subject.

Crassius: Do you eat oysters?

Antoninus: Yes.

Crassius: Snails?

Antoninus: No.

Crassius: Do you consider the eating of oysters to be moral and the eating of snails to be immoral?

Antoninus: No, master.

Crassius: Of course not. It's all a matter of taste, isn't it?

Antoninus: Yes, master.

Crassius: And taste is not the same as appetite and therefore not a question of morals, is it?

Antoninus: It could be argued so, master.

Crassius: Um, that'll do. My robe, Antoninus. Ah, my taste . . . includes *both* oysters and snails.

This exchange was cut, and the conversation about how to treat a woman was followed by the slipping away of Antoninus to join Spartacus and the other slaves in revolt. What is lost, then, is all indication of Antoninus' fear of being homosexually involved with Crassius, the fear that causes Antoninus to flee at that particular time.

Deletions such as this led producers and writers in the film industry to complain that the Code restricted their artistic freedom and prevented Hollywood films from competing in an adult market with foreign films that dealt openly with such subjects. The taboo against "sex perversion" was the single specific restriction on subject matter left standing at the beginning of the 1960s. Then, in the summer of 1961, the Mirisch Company, coproducers of William Wyler's *The Children's Hour*, waged a carefully orchestrated campaign to prepare the public for the inevitable. They let it be known that Wyler's second version of Lillian Hellman's play would restore to the script the lesbian implications. Although the film had been shot by August 1961, it was still being edited and would not be ready for some months, and of course the Code could not pass on the film until it could be screened. During this time, the Mirisch Company took every opportunity to indicate that they were dissatisfied with the Code position on sex perversion as a screen subject.

Meanwhile, in September, Otto Preminger—who had twice before defied the Code and appeared to take a special pleasure in doing so—announced that he was beginning to shoot Allen Drury's *Advise and Consent* on location

in Washington, D.C., and said he would not soft-pedal the novel's homosexual episodes in his screen version. Preminger had reason to be pushy. According to Wendell Mayes, who adapted *Advise and Consent* for the screen, "It was always Otto's publicity game to break the Code, and he was successful at that game. You look at the record, and you will discover that many of the changes in the Code were a result of Otto Preminger's breaking the rules."

A debate was effectively begun on the merits of revising the Code to allow the onscreen treatment of sex perversion. The proponents of the change pointed out that the taboo against sex perversion was the last of the specific taboos, all the others having been dropped in favor of a Code that considered the taste and treatment of the subject matter of each film. There were many for whom the time was not yet ripe to do this, and there were also those for whom the time would never come. Some argued that to change the Code would bring down the wrath of what Vincent Canby, writing in *Variety*, termed "do-gooders and would-be censors all over the country" who were then pushing for an inquiry by the House of Representatives into the film industry and film morality. Canby quoted an unnamed "prominent screenwriter/novelist" who pointed out that William Wyler's first version of *The Children's Hour* had made a fine film as *These Three* in 1936 and that therefore "the use of the taboo subject in this subsidiary vein was unnecessary and rather capricious on the part of the filmmakers." It was clear that those who opposed the use of such subject matter did so because they perceived it as sexual material that would be ripe for exploitation. Canby's anonymous writer also attacked the work of Tennessee Williams, saying that the introduction of "bizarre undercurrents" in his work was simply a ploy to make the primary conflict in his drama "more exotic." In other words, why depict such things in drama or on film when we have learned that a play or a movie can be successful without them?

But the ball was rolling. In the fall, the Motion Picture Association of America said that it would "consider approving such references in motion pictures if the allusion to sexual aberration was treated with care, discretion and restraint." Seizing what was obviously the moment, Otto Preminger, ever the showman, used his appearance at a Washington Press Club luncheon in late September to stun the audience by announcing that the industry's Production Code had been changed to permit the tasteful treatment of homosexuality in order that he might be able to film *Advise and Consent*. The MPAA hotly denied that such a change had taken place, but less than a week later, on October 3, 1961, it approved the change publicly: "In keeping with the culture, the mores and the values of our time, homosexuality and other sexual aberrations may

now be treated with care, discretion and restraint." Intimations that the change had in any way been the result of pressure by the Mirisch Company, Otto Preminger or other producers were flatly—but not convincingly—denied. Preminger et al. had won the battle.

In addition to *The Children's Hour* and *Advise and Consent*, Gore Vidal's *The Best Man* and Morris West's *The Devil's Advocate*, both with homosexual subplots, were under consideration by major studios. It seemed that the film industry, waiting to deal with this subject, had successfully put the squeeze on an already weakened Code. For producers knew that their films, like Preminger's *The Moon Is Blue* and *The Man with the Golden Arm*, would do well at the box office even if they were released without a seal. So the Code was changed in order to maintain some illusion of control.

The changes raised, for the first time, basic questions that no one wanted to hear asked. In an attack on the Code revision, an editorial in the *Motion Picture Herald* cited the three basic principles of the Code.

1. No picture should be produced which would lower the moral standards of those who see it.
2. Correct standards of life . . . shall be presented.
3. Laws—divine or natural or human—should not be ridiculed, nor should sympathy be created for their violation.

The *Herald* took the position that to allow sex perversion as a subject in motion pictures would violate all three basic principles because "homosexuality does not represent correct standards of life by any stretch of the imagination" and because dealing with homosexuals would "create sympathy for those who violate both Divine and human law by perverted acts." In casting aside the last specific taboo, the Code allowed motion pictures to portray all facets of life.

In an argument that remains the bottom line today, opponents of change insisted that there are some facts of life which it is harmful for people to know about at all. The whispered secret of *Tea and Sympathy*, they said, would now certainly be shouted from the housetops; the dark hints of *Suddenly Last Summer* would take over our screens in a flood of perversion and filth. In fact the dirty secret of old emerged on the screen in those newly enlightened times as a dirty secret, still a subject to be whispered about but not to be explored in a meaningful way. Homosexuality had come out of the closet and into the shadows, where it would remain for the better part of two decades.

In the 1960s, lesbians and gay men were pathological, predatory and dangerous; villains and fools, but never heroes. It was sideshow time. In *The Legend*

of *Lylah Clare*, Rosella Falk played a cobra-eyed, dope-addicted dyke who had the hots for Kim Novak. In *Petulia*, Richard Chamberlain was a wife beater with a litch for young boys. Rod Steiger blew his brains out with a shotgun after kissing John Phillip Law in *The Sergeant*. Sandy Dennis died when a tree fell between her legs in *The Fox*. Homosexuals were the prime suspects in *The Boston Strangler*, rapists in *Riot* and hairdressers or queens in *No Way to Treat a Lady*, *Valley of the Dolls*, *The Producers*, *The Loved One* and countless stock comedies. Fear, hiding and self-destruction—the closet syndrome—were implicit in all these films. Homosexuality had become the dirty secret exposed at the end of the last reel.