Great Moments in Politics

Shively, Mitzel, and the Struggle Against Chickenshit

Promiscuity, in addition to its immediate glories, has brought at least one long-term benefit to Charley Shively. While looking for a printer for the outlandish Fag Rag in Boston, he found one who said he’d make a decision after an employee checked out a typical issue. The printer gave Fag Rag to one of his most “conservative” employees and she took the God-damned fucking thing home. Her son, like so many, happened to be one of Charley’s tricks, and on the strength of his whole-hearted endorsement, the printer took on Fag Rag.

Fag Rag’s 12th Anniversary Anthology, a sexual and intellectual thriller, was rejected by several printers in New York before Charley found a quality printer who recognized Fag Rag’s quality, and it was printed beautifully. People are sometimes misled by the paper’s four-letter words and by the meat photos and ass art which loiter suspiciously next to the poetry, fiction, humor, reviews, sexual memoirs, and articles about history and politics; Fag Rag has a photographer who has winning ways with handsome, bared ass young men (the dirty things).

But the paper’s intelligence and the precision of its several literary styles glow as blatantly as its bally, bratty look, and in the end the truth really does prevail; sorry. A Cape Cod bookseller did reject the paper because it has no ads (Charley is inexplicably calm in dealing with such people), but even ferociously ordinary and overprincipled gay bookstores are able to see Fag Rag’s authenticity, and even Alexander Cockburn, the big town’s hardest and prettiest critic and a practicing heterosexual, has written enthusiastically of Charley. Other media heavies, some with big fat asses, have praised another Fag Rag founder and writer, the literary terrorist, John Mitzel. Charley’s and John’s work, and that of the startling collection of youngish writers who are drawn to Fag Rag, is in a class by itself, alone in its greatness, and so on and so forth, all that sort of thing; Walta Borawski, for example, writes brief poems about Harvard that tell more than some 300-page histories of the place. But Fag Rag doesn’t make much money, or as Mitzel puts it, “$$. Few gay presses do. Some gay writers enjoy lucrative careers writing for ordinary “straight” publishers. Not only do they not suffer from having to turn out verbal Vaseline, they do so happily because they are blessed with the advantage of having nothing unorthodox to say or of being ashamed to say it. Fag Rag is shameless, fearless, and, to use most heterosexuals’ favorite funny word, tasteless. But Charley and John enjoy one sign of success that is more impressive than $$$: they never talk about themselves unless asked.

Mitzel, as he signs it, supports himself by working in what, in his imagiste style, he calls “a toilet”—that is to say, a skin theatre, which he manages. The job requires top management ability because, while it may be easy to manage the theatre, the same cannot be said, in light of the inflammatory attractions on the screen, of the audience. Even more sordid, Charley has to work as a university professor. These are debasing jobs for men of Charley’s and Mitzel’s original intelligence. Charley makes the most of his gig by teaching what he knows, rather than what he’s been told; he gave an American history course which omitted any mention of white heterosexual males. His students didn’t complain or, conceivably, even notice. You have to say this much for students: they may be absurd creatures, but they’ll let Teach get away with murder if he will them. Charley says, “I tell them less and less the longer I teach; they get confused.” Charley’s students appreciate this. There are students—Charley’s—loose in the world today armed with academic credentials based in part on the concept that heterosexuals are unspeakable. It is not Charley’s most important achievement but it is one of his most adorable.

Charley was unimpressed by Senator Glenn’s claim that you can’t count...
on homosexuals in the military. Charley knows that you can. "I have never met an Air Force man I didn't have sex with," he says. One of the best, I imagine, was an airman he met on a train; they had sex from Boston to Buffalo in a smoking car men's room.

Mitzel's theatre is a "twine." "On one side," he says, "it's boys sucking boys. On the other, it's girls sucking boys." A program that well-balanced draws a variety of theatregoers, who enable Mitzel to keep in touch, sometimes literally, with a fair sample of humanity. There are cops who come in for a break (Mitzel had an eight-year affair with one of them); hardhats from a "straight" bar next door; Martin Milner, a minor actor with major allure; Edward Albee, the playwright, to whom Mitzel gave a copy of his biography of John Horne Burns; and a married man, aged 50, who recently died in the theatre. A priest died with his pants down in a competing theatre; the church and press (except Gay Community News, which ran Mitzel's exclusive) claimed that the priest died in his office in the line of duty. What a way for the church and press to describe sex.

Mitzel occasionally wears a cop uniform. He directed traffic in uniform one night at one of Boston's most satisfying intersections, Copley Square. He got away with it, as did the motorists. But one night a cop in a prowl car spotted Mitzel outside a gay bar and, sensing a lack of authentic swishiness about him, yelled, "Hey you, come here." The cop asked Mitzel if he's a cop, Mitzel said no, the cop asked his partner if they should run him in, Mitzel said it takes all kinds to make a world. It was an unusually banal remark coming from so unique a literary stylist, but it worked; the cops drove away.

Charley and Mitzel have lasted together on Fog Rag for 12 years. Charley has a house in Cambridge, Mitzel an apartment in Dorchester.

Charley's in his forties and Mitzel's in his thirties; they're old enough not to care what mother, and so on, think of their work; they are confident soloists who do not have to keep in step with the literary chorus line (or each other). Charley expresses his unorthodox thoughts in neat sentences; Mitzel's gorgeous prose accommodates anything from low slang to the postpostero- rously high "yclept." Even in his most murderous assaults, he remembers to address the reader, with elephantine grace, as "my dear." But they both use the king's, not the queen's, English. They achieve a patrician authority easily, rather than striving for it with pinn elegance; they do not, unless for laughs, use "one" for "I," and they do not have that sense, now that they're no longer in Freshman French, of deja vu. There are few puns and anuses in Fog Rag but there are some cocks and—don't you see?—ashes. It's comprehensively homosexual, not just homo and not just sexual. Being intelligent, they don't have to try to seem educated. Mitzel's books and articles—incredibly—keep up a thick poetic density, and do it for 100 pages (a "Dr. Day" is "a well-known local Irish poet drunken sot crook"). Charley was turned out with honors (Magna cum laude) from Harvard, but he had the sensitivity to publicly burn (or as Mitzel would put it, torch) his Harvard Ph.D. Other items that went up in Charley's smoke that day included his Bible and a closely-related document, his insurance policy.

Fog Rag is "the people speaking," Charley says. "People don't need spokespersons; we can speak (or suck or lick) for ourselves." Fog Rag's printed words are competitive with the best zingers and snappers spoken at work and in bars; there is no point in reading anything in private that is more timid than conversations you can have in public. Fog Rag's second decade could be better than its first; the numbers now show the existence of a public that prefers what's real to what's respectable. This public rejects much of what the publishers accept.

Charley stuffs his car with Fog Rag writers and copies of Fog Rag and drives to New York, Philadelphia, Washington, Baltimore, and so on to give readings and lectures in auditoria, gymnasium, and cafeteria. He seldom receives honoraria. It's heaven to be with him, and infuriating to see how beloved he is. Some of the young Fog Rag writers are photogenic. I've always thought it would be more fun to be admired for your body than for your mind; a perfectly sculpted butt is a rare gift from the Divine Chiseler. But one of Charley's entourage, yclept Jim McNiel, told Charley he was offended that I wanted to run a photo of him with this column. He wants to be admired for his mind. I told him that I am too old one. [Laughter, Charley's jolly.] But Jim does write beautifully for Fog Rag. His opposition to being singled out as a sex object, while politically correct, is easier said than done. I have never, for example, wanted to suck off Orson Welles, Alfred Hitchcock, or Mr. T. That Jim may not have wanted to either occurred to me when Peter (a kissy international favorite who happened to be in town) arrived, and Jim immediately gave him a kiss (they already knew each other, the dirty things). Mitzel I've never met. The ease with which, in our first "phone conversation years ago, he called me an old queen suggested that in later conversations, once he got to know me, he might manage even more advanced abuse, and I was not tempted to call him. I recently had a $2.21 "phone conversation with him. His access to his brain is as fast as a computer's; he's a swift. His letters to me over the years are better than most men's published work. He also keeps a journal, which ought to be edited and published. The 1983 gay parade had so many marchers ostentatiously identified as members of the professions that they appeared no longer to be afraid of being thought immoral, only of being thought insolvent. But there is usually, in both the Boston and New York City gay parades, a Fog Rag banner that not only does not claim socio-economic status but actually promotes activities that any member of the middle class, even the most dull-witted, knows cannot possibly help him in his rise:

PROMISCUITY
PROSTITUTION
PORNOGRAPHY
PEDERASTY
Fag Rag's most fundamental in the original Latin sense ("the buttocks; also the anus"). Ass-licking, the most fundamental issue, is given its due in Charley's forthcoming book in a chapter entitled "Ass-licking as an Act of Revolution." The book itself has a working title of *Cocksucking as an Act of Revolution*.

The paper's "cocksuckers" banner adorns the cover of its 12th Anniversary Anthology, which has sold 5,000 copies so far. A New York bystander told Charley she thought his "cocksuckers" banner was in bad taste. Charley explained that some cocks are but most cocks aren't. He always takes time to answer questions, no matter how stupid his students. One youth deemed it worth mentioning in class that his cousin felt bad because a homosexual had looked at his cock in a man's toilet. What this was supposed to be a course in I don't know—nor, perhaps, did the student. Charley settled the question with the comment that the only legitimate reason for feeling bad in a man's room is the inability to display a satisfactory hard-on.

I had a question for him, about a small gay paper's use of the word "love" in its headline, "Men Loving Boys Loving Men." My point was that it is in bad taste to reduce reality to the level of Hallmark Mother's Day cards, that it debases sex to call it love, and that love is not a comprehensive term for the man-boy sex scene in which, after all, men frequently pay young whores for the chance to lick their butt holes. Charley explained that boys love to get money and love to get their assholes licked, that men love to lick them and love to pay them, so that in this limited sense at least the word love can be used.

Charley and Mitzel are not personally interested at all in all the activities they promote on their parade banners; they support these causes because so few others do, publicly. The two men are not, for instance, especially interested in underage boys (conceivably because, among other reasons, underage often equals under-hung). But they both front for NAMBLA (North American Man/Boy Love Association). Mitzel's back-stage term for this group underemphasizes the fifth word in its name; he calls them babyfuckers. It is inaccurate, but he's a fun-lover and so valuable he's usually given his way.

College crackers are the most disappointing of all crackers; Charley took
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the heat from about 50 of 'em at Cor-
nell when he gave a lecture during a re-
cent national scandal over child abuse. One youth asked, "Do you feel that all my children are supposed to be available to you?" Charley asked, "Do you have any children?" The youth hesitated, then said, "I don't know." He thus established that if he was so unconcern-
ed as to not even know if he had any children, he was being excessively con-
cerned about his right to decide when and with whom they could have sex.
Then The Sweetheart of Sigma Chi, or whatever, asked Charley if he con-
sidered himself a human being. No, he's never wanted to be only that. Something
for her to think about next time she has nothing better to think about whilst tak-
ing a shit.

Why does he appear before such
public masturbators and S-M thrill-
seekers? He can remember a time when
homosexuality was never mentioned at
all; now he feels all publicity is good
publicity, because it makes boys aware of
possibilities. When a coach, for ex-
ample, lands in the papers for blowing
the basketball team, it reminds millions
of other boys that they too can get
sucked off if they want to.

As for Charley's promiscuity, he has
said several times that what really makes
him hot is affection. He always has at
least one roommate.

Both Charley and Mitzel are
vegetarians for some reason and when
Charley's in New York he eats at Amy's
(strange food for strange people).
Charley is only faintly strange in the
farmer's coveralls he always wears, a
habit that dates back to a visit to San
Francisco. (Unaccustomed to that gold
rush city's apparently primitive bathing
facilities, he acquired scabies, a con-
tagious itch. Pants with belts, while in-
creasing his allure, increased also the
itch, so he started wearing loose
overalls.) But one night at Amy's, his
companion, Freddie Greenfield, a
hoarse-voiced tough who looks as though he could work in a Maria
Montez gypsy picture, was denied ad-
mission on grounds of unsuitable rai-
ment. Freddie's doing a book too—his
sexual memoirs. He's a former convict,
whore, junkie, carnie, boxer, and so on,
now and then acting actor. He knew Scollay
Square when Scollay Square still stood for
something (sailors); his roommate, a transvestite, robbed them. How many
men today can boast of anything that
original? Few men as interesting as
Freddie ever bother to write books, and
I'm awaiting his eagerly. I've seen parts
of it. It's smashing.

Mitzel gets to bed by 11 a.m. and,
worst, jogs; it's fantastic. But he compensates
for any excessive wholesomeness by
drinking more than the correct amounts
of wine and Bloody Marys upon return-
ning home from the theatre. Charley,
similarly, is not always an Amy's type;
he goes out at 2:30 a.m.—repeat,
2:30 a.m.—when the bars close and
prowl the bushes. A jealous bystander
once came up and held Charley's nose
while he was having intimate relations;
in one of his rare un-Christian moments,
Charley bit the man's fingers. Another
bystander, acting above it all rather than
out of it, once cried out scornfully,
"Pure sex!" Charley liked the phrase
and is using it as a chapter head in his
new book.

He appeared in drag in Follie a Deux,
a play by Maya Silverthorne (born Mark
Martiesien, a relative to the famous Har-
vard professor). The play may not be
competitive with Broadway's dusty
tops-in-taps vaudevilles, but it should
be made available off-Broadway; it got
a money notice from the "straight"
Boston Phoenix and had good houses for
a satisfactory run. Charley must be good
in it; he says he was amazed to discover
how he and his co-stars actually lived
their roles instead of just reading them,
and this is what actors strive for.

Mitzel takes to the streets and the TV
news cameras for various causes; he ran
the Boston protest against Cruising.
"Oh, yes," he said when I asked if he's
an extrovert. He once ran a bowling
alley in South Boston. Bowling alleys,
especially in places like South Boston,
are breathtakingly glamorous places,
but he tired of the local folkways and
lasted only three months; it was social-
ly acceptable, he says, for small groups
of boys to beat up single men. That is
a form of sexual expression not
specifically prohibited by the church.
Recently, when two boys outside his
theatre yelled "faggots," he went out
and engaged them in sidewalk combat.
He got a few punches, but also gave
some; the boys fled; he's satisfied.

His books are scrappy: Sports and the
Macho Male, Some Stories About
Nasty People I Don't Like ("a collection of
short assassinations"), A Short
History of Modern Capitalism through Its
Ladies (the Duchess of Windsor is a
bumbling old sponge). He writes elsewhere of "Montini
[ Pope Paul VI], who looks like an
eater—the same quality that [Cardinal]
Fanny Spellman had. Yet I remember
Ms. Paul in her more robust days—in
the Vatican Pavillion at the N.Y.
World's Fair when, on live TV, she
shook her fancy like any piece of
Hollywood flesh; so I expect she's had
her sahre up the old Hershey Hi-Way.
His studies of the Protestant and Jewish
clergy are similarly realisitic.

One of his favorite heavies is the
abominable Judianne Densen-Gerber.
Her husband, a Dr. Bader, is no slouch
either; according to the New York Post,
Bader, as chief ghoul of the New York
morgues, called Judianne in to show her
the penis on Montgomery Clift's corpse.

Although, or conceivably because, the
dignity and respectability faction
doesn't dig such things, Mitzel wrote in
Gay News (Philadelphia) that Terry
Dolan, a fundraiser for anti-homosexual
propaganda, takes it in the ass; all the
other papers merely said Terry's gay.

The artistic, cultured, and refined fac-
tion, similarly, seldom endorses
Mitzel's work, unaware, in their in-
ocence, that he is an artist and does
not, therefore, have to try to seem to be
one. He's not above cooperating;
he cooed it in Boston Sex Scandal. This
true story about some men who were ar-
rested for allegedly having sex with
underage boy whores is so startling in
itself that Mitzel didn't write it "up."
The book could have been brought out
by an ordinary mass-market publisher, but it bore the small press label of Glad Day, the Boston-Toronto booksellers. It won money notices from Edmund White and other famous writers. It is filled with such people as a married doctor who testified that he was writing a book about prostitution and thus found it necessary to find out what a certain boy’s cock tasted like.

With Shannon Austin, a handsome little cuss who has perhaps the most interesting underwear of any Fag Rag writer and a literary style to match, Mitzel is collaborating on another cool one suitable for the general market—a gay detective story which takes off from the vicious old Raymond Chandler books. Mitzel’s doing the first draft, Shannon the final.

VIII

The University of Massachusetts has had surprisingly little difficulty with Charley (the only real problem in academia arises not with people like him but when the dumbest person in class turns out to be Teach). It is nothing to have a professor who writes for a gay paper but it is something when his department sees that that gay paper is Fag Rag. One day a functionary called Charley in and confronted him with an issue of Fag Rag. Charley, who had noticed that a bundle of Fag Rags in his office had been broken open, asked, sweetly, “Where did you get it?” The old bird was unable to give a satisfactory answer, and they dropped the matter.

IX

The Manchester, New Hampshire, Union Leader ran a front-page editorial in which it ranked Fag Rag as “one of the most loathsome publications in the English language.” Impressed by this endorsement, Gore Vidal, at whose Boston hotel, the Ritz, Mitzel had dropped off a copy, gave an audience to Fag Rag. The published account of this meeting is one of Vidal’s, and Fag Rag’s finest interviews. After examining Fag Rag, the great critic concluded that the Union Leader would be more accurate if it changed “most loathsome” to “best.”

Back issues of Fag Rag can be ordered from Fag Rag, Box 331, Kenmore Station, Boston, Massachusetts 02215. The paper is $3 the issue; its 12th Anniversary Anthology is $11 the copy.)