



Behind the Screen: How Gays and Lesbians Shaped Hollywood, 1910-1969

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William Mann's *Behind the Screen* is a thoughtful and eye-opening look at the totality of the gay experience in studio-era Hollywood. Much has been written about how gays have been portrayed in the movies but no book -- until now -- has looked at their influence behind the screen. Whether out of or in the closet, gays and lesbians have from the very beginning played a significant role in shaping Hollywood. Gay actors were among the earliest matinee idols and gay directors have long been among the most popular and commercially successful filmmakers. In fact, gay set and costume designers created the very look of Hollywood. With this landmark book, Mann fills a void in the Hollywood history archives. Written in the tradition of Neal Gabler's *An Empire of Their Own: How the Jews Invented Hollywood* and based on hundreds of hours of interviews with survivors of this golden age, *Behind the Screen* is destined to become a classic of film literature.

Behind the Screen: How Gays and Lesbians Shaped Hollywood, 1910-1969 Details

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Kate says

I found this book very interesting. For the record I am a straight middle aged white woman who loves the 'old' Hollywood especially the silent era. It is fascinating to read how open and overt the gays were in those days. All

directors, actors, writers and the technical people seem to either be gay or have gay friends and thought nothing of it. I have always had this belief that the reason there are so many gays in all the arts is they have special gifts of artistic talent. One of my dearest friends and I first met over 35 years ago. At that time she had an 11 year old son. By the time he had reached puberty I think she and I both knew that he would be gay. He could sing, dance, act, paint, draw and write. No one on either side of their family had any of these gifts. He is now in his late 30s married (In Canada 8 years ago) to his 'long time companion') and working as an academic in the USA. He frequently is the guest star in the University fund raising shows and there are a great many videos of him singing and dancing on YouTube. Seems like gays are given these gifts to make up for the fact that they will, in all likelihood be reviled for the sexuality which is no fault of their own.

Brett says

As a historian I found this book lacking the clarity and strength in sources that appear in the biographies that he has written.

As a social history this lacks sufficient sources to make some of the arguments. He also uses sources that would be better used in a cultural history.

Shelley says

He presumed that I know a lot more names than I actually do, but it was pretty fascinating. It wasn't interesting enough to read straight through, but grabbing out a chapter or person here and there was great. A few of them were big names, but most weren't and I enjoyed reading their stories.

Benjamin says

Fantastic historical study of gays in Hollywood from 1910 to 1969. Whether as actors, directors, producers, writers, set decorators or publicists, gays helped to shape American movies, living through many cultural changes, the liberal 1920s, the Depression-era backlash of the 1930s, the more liberal war years of the 1940s, the area of McCarthy and the blacklist in the 1950s, up to Stonewall in 1969 and beyond.

William J. Mann, one of the great Hollywood historians, gives a fantastically comprehensive overview of this gay history in Hollywood, an area that had been overlooked for far too long.

Nancy Loe says

I think Mann is the most gifted Hollywood historian today. I'd read anything he published and his first book (I think) is an insightful look at gay culture and its influence on the Golden Age of Hollywood. Must read.

Jon says

Regarding his movie-making philosophy, producer Ross Hunter once said: “You might just as well have a murder take place on an Oriental rug as on someone’s dirty linoleum”. This pretty well sums up the attitude of most of the folks who manufactured style for the masses in an industry built upon a foundation of glorious illusion – the “dream factories” of Hollywood’s golden age. Vito Russo has illustrated how one of its most monumental illusions was the non-existence of homosexuals, but what comes as something of a shock – as revealed in *Behind the Screen* – is the extent to which gay artists who plied their multifarious trades on every level of the business happily and contentedly contributed to that illusion, perpetuating a synthetic “image” at the seeming expense of gay visibility. Even that most celebrated of queer iconoclasts, James Whale, made films informed not so much by sexual politics as by “a consciousness inspired by (his) idiosyncrasy”.

Ah, but quelle idiosyncrasy! It’s what gave words to Norma Desmond (Charles Brackett’s) and shape to the Yellow Brick Road (Jack Moore’s). It’s what prompted set decorator George James Hopkins to remark: “I would be held back having to think of technicalities instead of giving my imagination free rein.” It’s what makes the great Hollywood films a hell of a lot more fabulous than they might have been (if such a thing is imaginable) without the contribution of homosexuals. *Behind the Screen* celebrates that contribution and illustrates, through many entertaining, informative, and well-chosen anecdotes and personal recollections, how in the end, gay Hollywood managed to articulate itself on the silver screen without ever really trying to do so. In that respect, Mr. Mann’s is a most triumphant and liberating accomplishment.

Dozens of extraordinary characters are marched through the pages of *Behind*, some of them so individually fascinating they deserve full-blown biographical treatment. Among these are Anderson Lawler (live-in lover of a youthful Gary Cooper and professional “beard” for many a dateless – and as often as not, lesbian – luminary), and actress Lilyan Tashman, “the biggest dyke Tinseltown had ever seen”, who said of her happy marriage to the equally gay Edmund Lowe – with tongue apparently in cheek – “I pride myself that I interest him more than any other woman”).

The history of homosexuals and their artistic contribution to Hollywood’s classic films is one that has gone largely unexplored. I was tempted to end that last sentence with the words “until now” as that phrase (and all the breathless grandiosity it implies) is employed no less than half a dozen times in the course of this volume. Why the fine author of this impressive tome (as well as the masterful 1998 biography of Billy Haines, *Wisecracker*) should feel the need to repeatedly blow his own horn while deliberately overlooking the efforts of David Ehrenstein (1998’s excellent *Open Secret*) and indirectly smearing those of some others (Axel Madsen’s 1995 *The Sewing Circle*) is quite inexplicable – but don’t let that stop you from purchasing and enjoying this otherwise marvelous book.

Nicole says

A broad, and at times, overwhelming, look at the impact gays and lesbians had on Hollywood. And spoiler alert, it was pretty much everyone. If you like them, they were gay. The book is heavily slanted towards men, but that is a product of it being easier to discern gay men from a sociological perspective. The author's methodology is meticulous and the conclusions he draws about the way homophobia ebbed and flowed are solid and fascinating. A must-read for any classic film fan, really.

Sketchbook says

A fine sociological survey on how Hollywood shaped and reflected America. The foreground is sexual but this study, which sometimes tries to encompass too much, uses the cultural and political climate as a revealing background. The story stops in 1969 and a new chapter (or book) could be written as the studios have crumbled and power lies with agents and "packagers." Has a lot changed? Well, a bit, but we still read about new heart throbs and their bogus romantic lives.

Hollywood has always been a small town with small town (middle-class, pls, conform) values. Image is everything, from the house you live in to the car you drive. Character and integrity count for naught. Sexually, said one exec, "if you gave them the right image, they [moguls] didn't care what you did when you left the studio." The myth-makers wanted an image from stars that translated into dollars. "It could be awful," said a publicist. "You had to be vigilant at all times." All quotes and anecdotes are sourced/footnoted.

Directors, writers, film editors, designers, choreographers and even publicists bowed to the Rules of the Game. Darryl Zanuck at Fox was the most tolerant; Louis B Mayer of Metro was the most odious. In sum, Hollywood was a schizophrenic world. Identity was consistently at risk. Yet it also recognized the fluid complexity, as with Dietrich, of the sexual experience.

The director William Desmond Taylor, found shot to death in 1922, palled around with Mabel Normand and Mary Miles Minter, but he was having a relationship w set decorator George James Hopkins, whose career went fr Theda Bara to "Virginia Woolf." Taylor's murder was never solved. Forgotten today, indeed, unknown, Lilyan Tashman was a comet in the early 30s, though women were advised not to go into the powder room with Lil. Her marriage to actor Edmund Lowe was non-exclusive. In Hollywood marriage was, and is, social protocol.

George Cukor & Kate Hepburn raised eyebrows w the subversive "Sylvia Scarlett" (1936). It was the story of a girl disguised as a boy who joins a gang of swindlers, among them Cary Grant. The producer claimed

that he'd been conned into this disaster. When rereleased in the 70s, the gender confusion seemed modern, but after "Sylvia" neither Cukor nor Hepburn strayed far from civilized comedy.

As for the civilized scripter Charles Brackett, who collaborated w Billy Wilder on "Ninotchka" and "Sunset Boulevard," the Sunday lunches at his home gathered some of the smartest members of the colony -- until his unhappy wife couldnt handle the Bloody Marys. Brackett mentored a young actor, then made him an assistant..."One just *knew* , " sniffs Don Bachardy, when asked what was going on.

"Being a queer and being in Hollywood was a potentially toxic mix," adds a survivor. There's fascinating research here as the author examines Dorothy Arzner, Gary Cooper, Zoe Atkins, Vincente Minnelli and Nicholas Ray. Finally, he reminds us that no individual story makes sense without the context of the place.

Carmen A. says

I am an obsessive/fanatic classic movie fan, and especially relish the behind-the-scenes anecdotes, stories, and gossip. Knowing the weaknesses and strengths of my idols, gives them a more approachable, human characteristic. I have read this book with relish, and enjoyed it very much. I reread it often. I would recommend it to all classic movie fans who want to know more in-depth knowledge of their silver screen idols. I give it a 4-star rating.

Kathi Jackson says

Guess I was expecting more on actors. This is more about (as the title says!) the folks behind the scenes. Well written.

Adam says

a little over my head, but great resource and immense amount of knowledge for those interested in this topic... I only recognized a handful of actors and actresses' names; however, it brought up quite a few movies I've always meant to check-out

although this was written first (2001), William Mann does for the gay/lesbian film industry what Christopher Bram does for gays in the literary scene in Eminent Outlaws: The Gay Writers Who Changed America (2012)

Sarah says

I found this book to be fascinating. I really enjoyed the author's take on the subject. It made me want to read more on the topic. At times, the author is a bit repetitive in phrasing, but his overarching argument was strong.

Evan says

In 1981 Vito Russo published a pioneering analysis of homosexuality in the movies, *The Celluloid Closet* (later made into a documentary which is a different animal and no substitute for the book, which I read and reviewed with a rave here in 2009). That book brilliantly read the "codes" of gayness that creators in the repressive time of Hollywood's censorious golden age slipped into mainstream films.

William Mann takes Vito's work several steps further by tracking down and telling the stories of the gay and lesbian men and women who worked within that system--from the biggest stars, producers, directors and writers to the "little people" behind the scenes who decorated the sets and designed the costumes--showing how their own lives and attitudes informed their creative work and what audiences saw on the screen. Even though it is not as scintillatingly written as Vito's classic, Mann's meticulously researched book is every bit as important and significant; a much-needed and enormously enlightening history of a subculture that shaped the iconic images seen by millions, while doing its best to survive both in a Hollywood and in a general social order hostile to the desires and identities of its individuals. This is essential reading for anyone who is the slightest bit interested in movies or in the struggles of gays and lesbians in the 20th century. I was surprised at just how much I learned from reading this, and I learned a LOT.

One thing that Mann discovers in his quest for the overall story of Hollywood's gay and lesbian creatives is that Hollywood during its pre-Stonewall history was probably the best and safest place on earth for someone "in the life" to be. But being there, of course, also required a balancing act: of being circumspect and in the closet just enough to not bring unwanted attention to your employer, the studios. Mann deeply examines the politics and the psychology and the morality of the times, how gays and straights blended in the social and professional mix, which jobs gay men and women were most likely to take in the studios, how different stars and crew handled their particular lifestyle and professional challenges, and a whole lot more. In his investigation he finds amazing stories and even some heroes and heroines, as well as some tragic figures. It is Hollywood, after all. Mann fills in great gaps in the biographical record, telling the stories of neglected and important figures for the first time. And, if nothing else, the book offers the most complete listing I've ever read of who was gay in Hollywood, including some people I had never thought were. Such was the triumph and enduring legacy of the Hollywood publicity machine. Image, as many Hollywood gays realized, was everything.

I had intended to go into more depth, but, suffice it to say the book is pretty amazing, though the density of information and the sheer number of names and mini-bios presented made it a tad slow-going. But this is a great book of Hollywood history, and goes right to the top of my essential movie-reading list. Magnifique.

A postscript: I don't think this is either a spoiler or an outing, but when Mann released this book in 2001 he mentioned on page 259 his failure to secure an interview with a major (unnamed) star of the 1940s who at that time of the writing of this book was still alive and still in the closet. Taking the bare hints he gives, I was able to ascertain that he was talking about Van Johnson, MGM's heartthrob of the bobbysoxers and for a

couple of years the number two star at the box office. When Johnson died in 2008 it was noted in the press that he was indeed closeted among the general public but well known in gay circles to be gay. Maybe this will be updated if Mann ever publishes another edition.

Mark says

Really informative and entertaining overview of how the GL community influenced hollywood and filmmaking. what i particularly liked about it was that it didn't just focus on actors and/or writers--it also talked in detail about directors, designers, agents and press reps which gives a more complete view of the environment. i got the book out of the library and someone had written additional facts (or desputed the author's) in the margin, so I felt like i was gaining added perspective and insight. have read some of the authors other books -- WISECRACKER, THE MEN FROM THE BOYS and THE BIOGRAPH GIRL -- and much prefer his non-fiction to his fiction.

Laura says

Read this for work and it was fascinating. A must-read for film lovers.
