

## A "GAY" MAGAZINE AHEAD OF ITS DAY?



BY NEEL BATE

**C**ruising a newsstand in the year 1937 for anything of specifically gay male interest was, for the most part, unrewarding. Not that there wasn't a wealth of fine periodicals, many of them abounding—as they are today—with fiction, essays, photographs and art by people we knew through the grapevine to be our gay brothers. But we really had to do detective work to come up with anything to read or look at that was even a little bit gay. There was *Esquire*, whose groundbreaking male fashion slant and refreshing wit proved that a man's magazine didn't have to be *Field and Stream* or *The Police Gazette*, but its straighter-than-straight outlook put us off. As for bodies, except for *Physical Culture* there was nothing; the "beefcake" we can now expect in both gay and straight publications didn't appear until after World War II.

So catching a glimpse of the first issue of *Bachelor* in March of that year—the handsome color reproduction of Bronzino's portrait of Cosimo de' Medici on the cover and the magazine's slick, *Vogue*-size bulk promising all kinds of mysterious delights—caused a flurry of excitement at my Hollywood Boulevard drugstore. The *Bachelor* logo bore the silhouettes of the trylon (the A) and the perisphere (the O), just-announced symbols of the upcoming New York World's Fair. Opposite the masthead and intriguing table of contents was a page, as if torn from a memo book, announcing: "To a reader . . . We give you *Bachelor*. A visual expression of contemporary thought—mirroring the varied interests of the discerning cosmopolite in society as well as in business or profession, in politics as well as in sport or the theater, in adventure as well as in the arts and sciences. Our aim is to present these observations with sympathy, dignity, and a leavening amount of humor."

Neel Bate, a free-lance designer, signs some of his work as *Blade*, the erotic artist (see story this issue).

For those of us who were aware and out, that message was enough to have us tearing out the subscription coupon and mailing it off at once. Here at last was what looked to be "our" publication, with an editorial staff and contributors who, if not actually gay and out themselves, expressed our interests in their essays and fiction, in their selection of subject matter (theater, literature, travel, fashion, sports, film), in their photographs and art. All phases of society were covered, though the content was heavily slanted toward those handsome and successful young men who seemed bent on avoiding marriage.

**A**mong the list of contributors—mostly but not exclusively gay—was the prominent designer Franklin Hughes, art editor of the magazine. He selected the *Bachelor* cover art, which included during the brief, nine-month run a drawing entitled "Francisco" by Paul

most outrageously teasing smile and sporting what looked like a partial erection; the fact that his wife, Lily Damita, stood next to him didn't dull Errol's "just for you" appeal. That *Bachelor* was "ours" seemed to become more apparent with each new issue.

Women were very much a part of *Bachelor*, quite apart from their role in camouflaging our closets. The May 1937 issue pictured or mentioned Dietrich, Paulette Goddard, Janet Gaynor, Talullah, Garbo and Bea Lillie—all emblems of the style and glamour many of us admired. There was a cartoon of two naked females (backs to the viewer) emerging from the ocean. "Don't look now," said one to the other, "But I think we've come up in the wrong magazine!"

**T**he magazine's mysterious publisher was also a woman, listed on the masthead as Fanchon Devoe. When interviewed, Zerbe told us he couldn't

out of our collective closet for a bit of nose-thumbing, then darting back into its protection—*Bachelor* was generally years ahead of its time. Yet it could not come out completely and still survive. The magazine's existence, along with our own, depended on acceptance, and in order to gain that acceptance there was constant compromise. For every "obviously" gay picture or article there would be another one to throw the reader slightly off scent: Who at that time would have thought that J. Edgar Hoover, a feature subject, was anything but straight?

The deeper reasons for *Bachelor's* demise are hinted at in its advertising: smart hotels; men's specialty shops; a smattering of liquor, auto and tobacco ads. A little like *The New Yorker's* ads today, though unfortunately less numerous. The advertisements reflect the social attitudes we held in that era, as if, now that the Great Depression was almost defeated, we were all playboys and favored young gods. *Bachelor* was escapist and trivial, and—as revealed in an apologetic profile of Mussolini—it flirted with fascism. Although certain features, such as the book reviews, fought this tendency, the magazine was as isolationist and self-assured as the rest of the country prior to our involvement in World War II.

*Bachelor* died, not because there were fewer homosexuals in 1937 but because gay interests were generally so much narrower. Our ideas about the world around us, about our own identity and potential, were limited to what we were able to learn from radio, movies and whatever personal experience we were lucky enough to have. I know that in my own case, I gained some breadth only later, through travel and meeting others (straight and gay) during the war. It is only now—delighting in my reacquaintance with this defunct and sadly dated magazine—that I can see how naive and narrow I was on first reading it.

[Anyone who can provide information concerning the identity of publisher Fanchon Devoe or other aspects of *Bachelor* magazine is requested to write to Bate c/o The ADVOCATE.]

**Although many of its contributors were consciously playing games, darting in and out of the closet, Bachelor was generally years ahead of its time . . . Here at last was what looked to be "our" publication.**

Cadmus; George IV of England, painted by Sir Thomas Lawrence; and a charming anonymous American primitive, "Boy with Wheelbarrow."

The photo editor was the photographer and author Jerry Zerbe, who had entree to the most exclusive salons in Europe and the "in" clubs of cafe society in New York, as well as the homes of the Hollywood stars. He blessed *Bachelor's* pages with candid shots of all the "beautiful people" of the day, with an accent on beautiful men—not necessarily gay but certainly our idols and role models. Buster Crabbe, Cary Grant, Ronald Colman and Tyrone Power paraded across the pages in swim suits or gym shorts. One shot of Errol Flynn by Zerbe had him posed in his swimming pool in revealing trunks, flashing his

recall ever having met her. Since the magazine's publishing address was Philadelphia (although the editorial offices were in New York), it may be assumed that Devoe and the financial backing originated in the City of Brotherly Love. A search turned up no trace of any woman by that name in either city. It has been suggested that the publisher was a socially prominent, wealthy married woman who enjoyed the company of gay men and used Devoe as a pseudonym.

Unfortunately, even the resources of Devoe had their limit. *Bachelor* published just nine issues before folding in 1938; its last issue, printed in only two colors, consisted of a single photograph.

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