Celluloid Activist

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Building the Closet

Vito came back to New York a hot commodity. He had brought the “Closet” to the capitals of Europe, and *Gay News* gave his wisecracks transatlantic snap. Professionally, he was on fire.

Politically he was in despair. He returned to a country pitching itself into right-wing freefall. On November 4, 1980, Vito, Arnie, and Jim huddled around Vito’s ten-inch television screen and watched numbly as Ronald Reagan trounced rivals Jimmy Carter and John Anderson. Republicans swept the Senate races and racked up thirty-three seats in the House of Representatives. Alphonse D’Amato, a vocal opponent of gay rights, ascended to the New York State Senate. The three GAA veterans, in Arnie’s understatement, were “depressed” over the evening’s returns.

In step with the more conservative times, gay American men settled into quiet, more affluent lives than they’d ever known. As Vito reported in one of his final articles for *Gay News*, the average annual gay household income spiked to twenty-three thousand dollars, 50 percent higher than the national average. Was it inevitable, he asked, that ready cash incurred a sense of “privilege which saps not only the will to fight against certain injustices, but eliminates the need to do so?” As gay yuppies flourished, Vito lacked both the will and the funds to join their apolitical numbers.

Not that he was opposed to gay professionalization. In January 1981, Vito covered the first meeting of the Gay Press Association (GPA), a three-day extravaganza held at Manhattan’s Roosevelt Hotel and attended by over eighty writers, editors, photographers, and sales reps from gay publications nationwide. If organizer Joseph DiSabato sounded alarmingly like David Goodstein in his preoccupation with “such countercultural issues as circulation, advertising, distribution, and effective business management,” he also caught Vito’s attention for
placing “pay staff” high on his list of priorities. After years of freelancing and struggling to wrest paychecks from practically every paper carrying his byline (the *Advocate*, under Goodstein’s business savvy, being a notable exception), Vito applauded DiSabato’s commitment. Banding together with several other writers at the conference, Vito helped form a committee “to investigate the status of gay journalists in areas like syndication, health benefits and just plain old payment for work delivered.” These goals would have sounded hopelessly Establishment to Vito in his Firehouse days, but now, in his mid-thirties, he had come to appreciate the value of a certain material security.

Such security was nowhere to be found with his latest employer. Sinking in a sea of red ink, *Christopher Street* publisher Chuck Ortleb had founded the *New York Native* as “a gay *Village Voice* that would pander . . . to the gay male desire for smooth flesh and bulging sex organs” sufficiently for him to turn a profit and save his foundering magazine. The *Native* quickly became the most substantial and longest-running gay newspaper in New York. Its first cover story focused on the recent Ramrod killings, which, coincidentally, prompted Annie Russo to fire off a mini-manifesto to the *Daily News*: “As parents and family of a gay human being, we are furious and saddened at what happened at the Ramrod. . . . Gays should get out of the closet and stand up for their rights. Don’t lose hope. We are with you all the way.” Noting his mother’s zeal on behalf of gay rights, Vito redoubled his own commitment to the gay press.

Unfortunately, the *Native* suffered the same financial woes as most gay publications. During the paper’s infancy, editor Tom Steele grimly recalls, “no one was paid anything.” He showed potential writers his own pathetic income tax return to prove that he wasn’t hoarding funds. According to advertising manager Tom Duane—later a New York state senator—*Native* writers often left the office without their expected checks. But Tom Steele realized that the new paper filled a yawning void in gay communication. He rallied his contributors with the grassroots vigor that Vito had found irresistible since his first days at *GAY*: “I don’t think any of this stuff could appear anywhere else. We need to build this up. New York needs a gay newspaper!” Vito fully conceded Tom’s point. Besides, he had a brilliant idea for his own contribution.

Nearly every day throughout the seventies, Vito found time for phone gab with Arthur Bell. At decade’s end, Arthur’s *Voice* gossip column, Bell Tells, was an institution, the forerunner to Michael Musto’s *La Dolce Musto*. By his own estimation, Arthur was “really feared” in New York. He exulted in sensing that people were “scared shitless” over what might pour out of his typewriter from week to week. Vito, tired of being offered Arthur’s sloppy seconds, was jealous. “I always say that if the phone rings and it’s the *Voice* then a gay person must have gotten killed the night before and Arthur Bell is out of town.” At the same
time, Vito lived for the dirt that Arthur dumped into their daily chats. Nobody in
town had better access to the glitterati or knew more of their secrets. What if
Vito and Arthur combined forces? Gay Manhattan might never recover.

As soon as the first Native hit the stands, Vito rushed to Tom Steele’s office
with a breathless proposal. “Would you be interested if Arthur and I just talked
about whatever is on at the moment and we transcribed it and gave it to you?”
Tom pounced on the idea. “Well, who wouldn’t? These two guys were hilarious.
The paper, God knows, needed levity, and they just knew so much.” Tom may
not have realized that Vito and Arthur had no intention of confining themselves
to film gossip. They set about writing a column that “should end some friend-
ships once and for all.” The Russo/Bell Connection was born.

Vito and Arthur’s first entry, published in the Native’s third issue, promised
an “unexpurgated” account of their phone conversation on December 23, 1980.
(The two friends supposedly shared transcription duties, though it’s likely that
Vito did most of the grunt work. In one conversation, he directs Arthur not
to withhold any gossip in the event that “maybe [he’s] not taping.”) In early
Connection columns, the authors dish themselves as much as others. Arthur
confesses his latest case of amebiasis, which he fears he may inadvertently have
passed to Queen Elizabeth by shaking Kim Novak’s hand. Vito, down all week
with a cold, relates that Aunt Jean has asked him to schlep up to the Bronx to
collect a medicinal meal. “Mine is the only family where they ask you to get on a
train and come to University Avenue so they can get you well with chicken soup.”

Friends and foes alike crowded the Connection. Both men lavishly praised
their pals. Arthur allowed that Larry Bush was “quite a good writer” and pro-
nounced New York Post gossip columnist Liz Smith “the loveliest person.” Vito
dubbed Arnie “lovely” and novelist Felice Picano a “doll.” But Vito and Arthur
knew that people weren’t following their chats simply to learn whom they
adored. Thus the venom flowed, even against friends. Arthur expressed open
distaste for San Francisco Sentinel (and later, Chronicle) critic Edward Guthmann—
whom Vito liked. Vito taunted Arthur about his age, and they took every oppor-
tunity to slam Stuart Byron, a difficult Voice writer who could name Vito as one
of his few friends. Vito identified his own tricks by full name and gleefully joined
Arthur in slamming—twice—William Atherton. On the occasion of the actor’s
wedding, Vito scoffed, “Now they can name their first child ‘Living Proof.’”

The columnists’ targets didn’t always live across the country or above the
barbs of the gay press. Not for nothing did they warn in one entry that names had
been “only slightly edited to avoid three local suicides.” When Vito quoted nov-
elist Andrew Holleran as canonizing himself and Felice Picano as “the status of
gay literature,” Arthur replied, “Hahahahahahaha. Constant writer throws up.”
Vito fired his own share of buckshot, which drew screams from the wounded. He
tried to mitigate one attack on the inflated prices at a new nightclub, s.n.a.f.u., by
calling the owner, Lewis Friedman, “nice and little.” Friedman, who wore platform sneakers to disguise his height of five feet two, didn’t appreciate the epithet “little.” As the previous owner of Reno Sweeney, he had comped Vito into countless concerts and couldn’t understand the betrayal. He called Tom Steele in a rage.

In another ill-advised move, Vito used the Connection to document a fight with a friend. In an article for the Soho News, he had announced the city council’s anticipated killing—for the tenth year—of the gay civil-rights bill. He quoted an old GAA buddy, politico Allen Roskoff, on the responsibility of Mayor Ed Koch for the bill’s likely failure: “The bottom line is crazy Eddie. He has to get off his ass and do what he did for the tenants’ bill and the unions’ bill and the pothole bill.” Allen went berserk at seeing his words in print and buttonholed Vito at the Eagle, demanding, “Vito, how could you do that to me?” He then tried to soften his tone by advising, “You don’t call the mayor Crazy Eddie in print without referring to him as the mayor or Ed Koch.” Defensive, Vito compounded his felony by recording the whole contretemps in the Connection. Having been Jim Owles’s lover, Allen had repeatedly witnessed what he considered Vito’s “bitchy” sense of humor. He was furious to find it directed against himself for gay New York’s amusement.

For the most part, readers found the column hilarious. Tom Steele and Native coeditor Michael Denneny were thrilled by the responses. After several Russo/Bell entries, Vito raved in his journal, “Column with Arthur in N.Y. Native a smash—everyone is talking about it and it may even be a book someday.” Michael had already hinted in that direction, and though Vito and Arthur chortled over whether the column was more “social history” or “social disease,” they realized that they were indeed recording a vibrant cross-section of gay New York history.

Accordingly, they didn’t limit the column to gossip. Vito championed self-defense classes offered to gay men at Greenwich House. He also gave enthusiastic nods to the experimental gay performers in San Francisco’s Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence, a kamikaze drag troupe, and Blookips, a British group whose expert mixture of clowning, impromptu drag, music-hall send-up, and political commentary intoxicated Vito. It surely didn’t hurt that he was having a fling with “Naughty Nickers” (Nicholas Phillips), a twenty-one-year-old Blookips neophyte, or that he had shepherded the group, who had never experienced anything like the bacchanal of Manhattan nightlife, to Hellfire, a straight/gay S and M club. Blookips leader Bette Bourne declined to accompany them, but his lover, “Precious Pearl” (Paul Shaw), went happily and was stunned to check his clothes at the door and see “dungeon stuff, people tied up in slings and getting pissed on.” This was not Vito’s scene, but he relished playing tour guide and promoting his friends as they made their American debut on the Lower East Side.
The Connection appeared in sixteen Native issues throughout the better part of 1981. Despite the column’s popularity, it eventually petered out in late October and never did become a book. Part of the problem was Arthur’s health. In early March, he was hospitalized with retina damage caused by advancing diabetes, which he tried to keep secret. In the column, Arthur treated his failing eyesight as a joke, but it made writing difficult.

Vito’s writing, meanwhile, was on an upswing that lifted him permanently above the Connection and local journalism. The day after Gay Pride 1981, he announced that he had just experienced the best weekend of his life. After eight years of labor, The Celluloid Closet: Homosexuality in the Movies, his lecture-turned-book, hit stores nationwide. Vito beamed from the cover of Christopher Street magazine and embarked on a seven-city autograph-and-lecture tour. Countless lonely hours spent trawling film archives across America and Europe had paid off. Vito couldn’t help but crow to Arthur and their readers that the recent weeks had been “glorious. . . . A book is born,” he exulted. For several years, he hadn’t thought “it would ever happen.”

Neither had the majority of Vito’s nearest and dearest, most of whom held “responsible jobs during daylight hours and [had] no call to be awake at four in the morning, listening to stories about sissies in the 1930s.” One of those friends was Jim Owles, who had prodded Vito with the same irritating question for three years: “Well, is it done yet?” Another was Arnie, who had been jolted out of more than one sound sleep to soothe Vito’s anxieties over money, writer’s block, and the prospect of never being able to finish the book. But Arnie was used to this hysteria. He had been present since Vito’s earliest Closet efforts.

In the summer of 1974, Vito, Bruce, and Arnie had rented a Cherry Grove cottage that Bruce dubbed “The Way We Are.” It was meant to be a writing haven away from the diversions of Manhattan. At the time Arnie was hard at work on Under the Rainbow, while Vito, with a year’s worth of “Closet” lectures to his credit, was trying to begin the book that he was still calling “Gays in/at the Movies.” As the pages of Arnie’s memoir piled up, Vito sat flummoxed. Swathed in white silk pajama bottoms or a roomy black-and-white striped caftan, he listened to the clackety-clack of Arnie’s typewriter while staring idly at his own. The raw material just wasn’t there. There was no way to parlay a twenty-minute presentation on The Children’s Hour, The Boys in the Band, and Victim into a book-length discussion of homosexuality in film. The specter of all the research yet to be done sent him straight to the beach, the Meat Rack, or Manhattan. Arnie laughed to see his friend taking pricey water planes back to the city to collect unemployment checks or to pick up groceries cheaper than those available on Fire Island. Such a move showed “a marvelous style,” if not also the chutzpah that Vito wore like a second skin.
No amount of chutzpah could help Vito brazen past one unavoidable fact about his book: he wasn’t the first to discuss gays and film. While still in college, he’d discovered Winston Reynolds’s ten-page “History of Homosexuality in the Movies” (*Drum*, October 1967). More recently, and far more chillingly, a book-length discussion of the topic had found its way into print.

In 1972, Holt, Rinehart and Winston published Parker Tyler’s *Screening the Sexes: Homosexuality in the Movies*. Tyler was an empress dowager of criticism who had already published books on Charles Chaplin and underground film along with studies of Van Gogh, Renoir, Degas, Cezanne, and Gauguin. He was also the author, with Charles Henri Ford, of the explicitly gay (and widely banned) experimental novel *The Young and the Evil* (1933), as well as a biography of Ford’s painter-lover, *The Divine Comedy of Pavel Tchelitchev* (1967). But Tyler had no political investment in gay subject matter. Born in 1904, he had reached his midsixties when Stonewall exploded and did not participate in gay liberation. In *Screening the Sexes*, he gives token nods to GAA, GLF, and the Mattachine Society, but he seems to miss the deep philosophical cleavages dividing them. He interprets gay imagery through the aesthetic lens he had employed for nearly thirty years. One year before the publication of *Screening the Sexes*, Andrew Sarris attacked Tyler for his “pose as the high priest of high art in the temples of the philistines.” The fact that Tyler had “never come out into the open on the real-life basis of his [critical] bias”—his homosexuality—made his criticism seem precious and evasive to many post-Stonewall readers.

*Screening the Sexes* proclaims its focus in its subtitle, but the book’s baroque prose style reveals Tyler’s insecurity about analyzing a subject that had brought condemnation to his early writing. Eager to secure the “seriousness” of his topic, he invents a “god of homosexuality, Homeros,” whose playful, androgynous spirit infuses all filmed representation of gayness. Unfortunately, Homeros cannot rescue Tyler from fatal defensiveness. Introducing a homoerotic reading of *The Great Escape* (1965), Tyler announces, “I was prepared to hear the worst charges against me that could possibly assault a critic’s integrity. People may go so far as to say that I’m not only homosexual myself, but a systematic fantasizer determined to use the movies as propaganda to slander normal sex and completely innocent motives.” This was, in fact, Sarris’s snide implication, so Tyler was not imagining potential hostility to his work. Afraid to analyze homosexual desire literally, he retreated into the safety of mythology. Of Visconti’s *Death in Venice* (1971), adapted from Thomas Mann’s novella of thwarted yearning, Tyler asks, “Is Tadzio, whose arm finally points toward the infinite while Aschenbach tries to rise and instead falls dead, an Angel of the Resurrection?” He is equally indirect when analyzing the fatal desire of Claggart for Billy Budd in Peter Ustinov’s film (1962): “Billy’s innocence, combined with his youth and beauty, and especially his death as a symbol of resurrection, qualify him as an incarnation of Homeros.”
When Tyler edges closer to contemporary subject matter, he betrays biases that put him squarely at odds with post-Stonewall rhetoric. By 1971, he was well aware that activists were attacking associations of gayness with impropriety or unhappiness. This realization didn’t prevent him, clearly uncomfortable with “the new homosexual militance,” from putting his geriatric foot in it time and again. In the book, he is all too eager to sympathize with the “therapeutic” police raids that had just lost their grip on the Meat Rack and to declare that while homophobia still exists, modern society no longer expresses “outrage” at the “private and public misfortunes” of gays and lesbians. Even as these words reached print, GAA was shouting its own outrage in the streets. When he died in 1974, Tyler left behind gay successors who relegated his work to Victoriana.

Still, Screening the Sexes gave Vito a necessary starting point, far more so than he acknowledged in later years. When interviewers asked him about the genesis of Celluloid Closet, Vito invoked Tyler with Oedipal annihilation. He found Sexes “inadequate,” “esoteric,” and “elitist”; it was an annoyingly apolitical book that refused to tackle homophobia; it was “difficult to read”; Vito could not name even “a dozen people who [would] admit to having gotten through” it. In fairness to Tyler, it should be noted that Sexes did receive strong notices in Film Quarterly, Publishers Weekly, and the Kirkus Review. However, it is unquestionably better known today as the book whose shortcomings showed Vito Russo how to shape The Celluloid Closet.

Where Tyler’s focus had been heavily European (Visconti, Fellini, Bergman, Losey, Pasolini) and experimental (Warhol, Morrissey, Smith, Anger), Vito determined to write a “plain spoken history of the various ways in which gay characters have been portrayed by commercial American film.” In contrast with the remote, apolitical Sexes, Vito was determined to examine how homophobia on- and offscreen informed Hollywood’s more mainstream portrayal of gays. He also aimed to capture a “wider and less specialized audience” than Tyler’s. He hoped to write a book that his mother “could read and understand. [She didn’t] know shit from shinola about Kenneth Anger or The Film Forum, but she sure as hell [knew] that Roddy McDowall got called a pansy by James Caan in Funny Lady [1975].” Vito targeted “the average mainstream moviegoer, so these people could be made to understand how they were being manipulated” by Hollywood bigotry.

His first step, Vito realized, was to unearth all gay images in commercial American film. He was already conversant with many postwar examples, and it was obvious that he should revisit any film bearing the names Tennessee Williams, Gore Vidal, or Truman Capote. Beyond these instances lay a brick wall. In an era before Betamax/VHS, Vito began scouring musty shelves and 16mm archives without the benefit of a Library of Congress “Homosexuality in Motion Pictures” subject heading. He put out a desperate call to friends, film
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critics, and movie queens of all genders and orientations: if they came across any gay character or plotline, no matter how obscure, could they write it down and send it to him? Responses began pouring in. Some contained wishful thinking, allegations of gayness where none existed. Some referred him to gay allegory, as per Andrew Sarris’s suggestion that Vito check out My Son John (1952), in which Robert Walker’s parents gradually learn that their son is a . . . Communist. (Sarris’s reference made Vito chuckle, but John ended up in the Closet just the same.) Other people stopped Vito at parties or on the street to remind him of films that he knew but had never considered for the book: “‘Oh, God, have you seen The Black Cat [1934] with Boris Karloff and Bela Lugosi?’ And I’d say, ‘What’s gay about that?’ And they’d say, ‘Take a look at it and you’ll see.’ And they were right!” After years of surprising audiences with gay content in films they thought they knew inside out, Vito was getting a taste of his own medicine.

Flooded with references, he needed some kind of organizing principle. He found his hook upon meeting Bill Johnson at GAU. During the fall 1976 semester, Bill was teaching men’s liberation classes at San Francisco State College (later University). Inspired by talks with his new lover, Vito began thinking about how men saw themselves and their prescribed roles in society. The “phony masculinity” of men terrified of being branded gay began to anger him. That anger manifested itself in his “Closet” lectures, the openings of which now took on an aggressively feminist tone: “The first thing I say to audiences when I lecture on film is the reason why it’s supposed to be an insult to call a man effeminate is because it means he’s like a woman and so he’s not as good as a man.” The topic also inspired one of Vito’s rare early forays into the straight press when he analyzed the “death of machismo” for the unlikely source of Bell Telephone Magazine—which was so nervous about its freelance author that he received vague billing as a “lecturer on stereotyped roles.” As straight men took baby steps toward acknowledging their sensitivity, Vito was distressed to find a reactionary “hatred of women” among gay men, especially those who advocated all-male discos or decried drag queens in Pride marches. Even the self-proclaimed “effeminists,” who promoted nonmacho behavior among gay men, seemed to Vito “to advocate a return to the Fifties idea of gay men as being ‘like women’ inherently. This ignore[d] that the female role is just as full of shit as the macho man role they [were] all attacking.” To Vito, true gender liberation meant “re-defining and creating an identity free from the necessity of choosing male or female roles.”

Experimenting with his own gender identity, Vito began wearing what friend Joe Brewer labeled “some of the strangest clothes ever assembled.” Sometimes he accessorized the clone’s flannel and denim boots look with a flash of his favorite color: a pink belt or socks. Or he might abandon clone drag altogether and parade down Castro Street sporting a pink chemise Lacoste shirt and short shorts that Edward Guthmann remembers with a fond laugh: “I don’t know
how to describe [Vito’s outfit]. It looked very fruity. Vito with his hairy legs and probably some sneakers. . . . If Vito was wearing something that would scream ‘gay,’ it didn’t matter to him. So many gay men are trying to play it down and be acceptable. So many work really hard to be ‘butch’ and Vito was not like that at all.”

Writing, lecturing, and toying with his own masculinity helped Vito discover one of The Celluloid Closet’s central arguments: Hollywood’s representations of homosexuality proceeded from ossified American notions of (im)proper male behavior. From the silents through the films of the seventies, men who didn’t “act like men” were coded gay; women who acted “too much like men” faced the same stigma. This revelation was vital for tracking homosexuality in films released before 1964, the year that The Best Man and Lady in a Cage belatedly introduced the terms “homosexual” and “gay” into mainstream American movies. Vito set about finding filmed sissies who predated the language that named them.

He had an invaluable resource in his friend Adam Reilly at AFI. The author of a book on Harold Lloyd, Adam was an expert on American silent film. He pointed out to Vito that Lloyd comedies, as well as Laurel and Hardy features, were rife with gay overtones predicated on sissy behavior. From his vast 16mm collection, Adam was able to copy numerous sequences for Vito’s use in both his lecture and his book manuscript. Chaplin’s A Woman (1915), Stan Laurel’s The Soilers (1923), and Lloyd’s Sailor Made Man (1921), Grandma’s Boy (1922), and The Kid Brother (1927) came to anchor Vito’s illustrations of early American effeminacy. Adam also expanded Vito’s sound repertoire by dubbing for him sequences from Red River, in which John Ireland and Montgomery Clift fondle and fire each other’s guns to considerable homoerotic effect.

While staying with Adam and his partner Everett Engstrom in May 1978, Vito spent two weeks gorging on films at the Library of Congress (LOC). Sixteen and thirty-five millimeter prints of extremely rare movies, such as Hitchcock’s thriller Rope (1948), abounded. Any U.S. citizen was entitled to see any film in the library’s vast holdings for free. Vito devoured three titles per day, though many of them—Boom! (1968), Performance (1970), Busting (1974)—sickened him with their queasy dread of gay men.

Several archives proved less accessible than the LOC’s. In August 1978, Vito traveled to Los Angeles for three weeks of research at UCLA, the Motion Picture Association of America (MPAA), and the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences (AMPAS). The MPAA didn’t pan out. As Vito wrote to Lily Tomlin before his trip, if he did manage to gain entry, it would be “the first time they’ve let someone in.” AMPAS’s Margaret Herrick Library opened its doors to Vito, but getting what he needed required careful strategizing. Stuart Timmons, who worked in the Herrick Library during the late seventies, claims that a certain protocol was required for talking with closeted Academy officials about gay
matters. That a gay activist would have to play “diplomat” to get his materials was simply part of the game. Vito swallowed his pride and jumped in.

While in LA, Vito also hoped to interview several actors, writers, and directors who were gay or who had contributed to gay imagery in American film. But in the late 1970s, he discovered, there were no influential “gays in the industry . . . who want[ed] positive gay films made.” He lamented, “It’s the difference between being proud of your heritage and being ashamed of who you are.” Of the gays he approached in Hollywood, “not a single one would speak for the record; some would speak off the record, but nothing any of them said was useful.”

Ironically, Vito had his best luck with straight actors who had played gay. Don Murray invited Vito to his Broadway dressing room after a performance of Same Time, Next Year to discuss his participation in Advise & Consent. In LA, Perry King, fresh from playing a gay man turned straight in A Different Story (1978), shared Sylvester Stallone’s preproduction advice, “Don’t play no faggots.” Robert La Tourneaux, the gay actor who appeared as the hustler in The Boys in the Band, couldn’t land a film role afterward and bitterly insisted that playing Cowboy cost him the lead in Love Story (1970).

These chatty actors were the exception. Vito received “some very polite personal ‘no’s” to interview requests from Al Pacino, star of Dog Day Afternoon and Cruising, and Paul Newman, who played the quasi-gay Brick in Cat on a Hot Tin Roof (1958) and had, more recently, purchased the film rights to Patricia Nell Warren’s pulp gay love story The Front Runner (1974). Sixteen years after starring as the tortured Martha in The Children’s Hour, Shirley MacLaine consented to an interview but then drove Vito insane with repeated cancellations. Barbara Stanwyck, about whom rumors of lesbianism had circulated for years, refused to discuss her lesbian madam in Walk on the Wild Side.

Director Edward Dmytryk (Crossfire [1947], Walk on the Wild Side) expected payment for an interview, prompting Vito’s poverty-stricken wail to Lily, “What goes on with these people? Don’t they know art when they see it?” But directors were generally more receptive than actors and often provided invaluable production history. Bryan Forbes told Vito that Columbia Pictures cut from his King Rat (1965) a sequence involving one character’s sex change and subsequent suicide. Richard Brooks agreed to meet with Vito, though curiously, whatever he said about his novel The Brick Foxhole (1945) (which Hollywood de-gayed as Crossfire) or his films Cat on a Hot Tin Roof and Looking for Mr. Goodbar (1977) went unrecorded in The Celluloid Closet. Robert Aldrich gave Vito considerable backstory on his filming of the landmark lesbian drama The Killing of Sister George, particularly Angela Lansbury’s revulsion over being offered the title lead and Susannah York’s inability to film a convincing love scene with Coral Browne (211, 212). Unfortunately, Vito leaves us guessing as to what Aldrich felt about the squeamish homophobia in two of his other films, The Legend of Lylah Clare (1968) and The
Choirboys (1977). But he does quote Aldrich’s provocative assertion that director James Whale (Frankenstein [1931] and Bride of Frankenstein [1935]) threw away his Hollywood career by refusing to hide his homosexuality (50). Novelist Christopher Bram questions this interpretation of Whale’s professional demise, but he names The Celluloid Closet as the first source to inform him about Whale’s homosexuality. Bram eventually fictionalized Whale’s life in his novel Father of Frankenstein (1995), which was adapted into the Oscar-winning film Gods and Monsters (1998).

Vito had excellent luck with several prominent screenwriters. Stewart Stern confirmed that Vito wasn’t just imagining romantic longing between Sal Mineo and James Dean in Rebel Without a Cause (1955); Arthur Laurents kept him in stitches with accounts of censors’ hysteria over the “homosexual dialogue”—for example, “My dear boy”—in his original screenplay of Rope (92). Gore Vidal provided Vito with an uproarious tale, which he later re-created in perfect deadpan for the screen version of Celluloid Closet (1995), about his worming homo-erotic subtext into Ben-Hur (1959) past oblivious (and homophobic) star Charlton Heston (77).

With Mart Crowley, author of The Boys in the Band, Vito had a rockier rapport. Well aware of what gay activists thought of his play, Crowley met warily with Vito. Aiming for politeness, he conceded of his self-loathing main character, “Nobody would try to pass Michael off as having today’s [1978] consciousness” (177). Vito kept things friendly by telling Crowley that he admired his play. On the whole, Crowley thought their interview was “quite civil.”

He was, therefore, horrified to read the Closet’s attack on his film for presenting “a perfunctory compendium of easily acceptable [gay] stereotypes” whose “zippy fag humor . . . posed as philosophy.” Though Boys offers some “attractive and functional gay men” in the characters of Larry and Hank, a couple trying to work through difficulties and stay together, Vito dismisses the film as an instant “period piece” (177).

Though allowing that Vito scores some “good and valid points” in his critique of the film, Crowley emphatically disputes Vito’s claim that Boys occasioned “the first time gay people protested against a Hollywood movie.” In the first place, Crowley notes, Boys was definitely not a “Hollywood movie.” In fact, as the film’s producer, he turned down offers from Paramount Pictures and überproducer Ray Stark specifically so that he could keep control over the casting, retaining all nine of the original stage actors and shooting the film in Manhattan. Crowley is, moreover, hard pressed to recall any protests at the film’s New York or Los Angeles premieres. In fact, he claims, “the real backlash against the film began with [The Celluloid Closet] and [Vito’s] promotion of it. Frankly, I got the idea that Russo saw ‘this one’ as his MAIN CHANCE—and worked it . . . One could feel the reverse of ‘flop sweat’ coming out of his pores: a HUNGER to use the play to make his mark—i.e. grab attention at any price.”
Vito generally didn’t let personal relationships come between him and film. As he worked on the book, one sexy guy approached him with the offer of a “tumble,” provided that Vito “could stop talking about film for an evening.” Vito shrugged. Deep into his writing, he was “not interested in non-film talk or tumbling.” Many other men found Vito’s passion for movies deeply engaging. As soon as he unearthed a new film or a fleeting gay reference, he rushed to friends to gauge their reactions. Listening to Vito, art historian Jim Saslow recalls,

“You just knew he was going to tell you things that no one else had ever looked at or faced openly, and then it would be very funny because he’d show you a clip from a film where the two guys are obviously eyeing one another with some kind of suggestive leer and no one had ever talked about it because it was something that the editor had sneaked in or the actors had sneaked in and there was that terrible conspiracy of silence all through the forties, fifties, sixties about things that were right out there. . . . Vito just had this sort of infectious glee like [Saslow imitates Vito’s animated tone] ‘I found another one! Here’s another one!’ That was the attitude . . . the idea was that he was gathering up example after example of gay content in movies and basically saying, ‘I’m going to document this so well and so extensively that no one will be able to deny it anymore.’

Vito was especially gleeful when he had something to show audiences. He leapt at the image that would become the Closet’s first: a still from a Thomas Edison experimental film (1895) that depicts two men waltzing before a violinist. While traveling through Amsterdam, Vito discovered a 1901 Berlin catalog that listed the film’s title as The Gay Brothers. Vito rushed this provocative title into print, prompting later allegations against both the title and Edison’s supposed suggestion of homosexuality. At Amsterdam’s Gay Arts Festival, Vito also ran across “the very first gay liberation statement ever made on film.” Anders als die Anderen [Different from the Others] (1919) stars Conrad Veidt (later a memorable villain in Casablanca [1943]) as a homosexual violinist ruined by blackmail. Dr. Magnus Hirschfeld, whose progay Institute for Sexual Science predated Stonewall by more than half a century, appears as himself to plead tolerance for homosexuals criminalized under Paragraph 175 of the German Penal Code. Christopher Isherwood recalls that during the 1930s, Nazis opened fire at an audience watching Anders (20–21). They subsequently destroyed what they presumed to be all copies of the film, which retreated to mythical status until one print was discovered in the Ukraine, restored in Berlin, and then screened in Amsterdam in 1980. Vito saw the film dubbed in Russian and subtitled in Dutch—but he “got the drift,” especially when the festival organizer translated it into English for him. Seeing Anders in any language was like looking back through time at ancestors he hadn’t known existed. It became one of the centerpieces of his lecture and his book.
Europe also yielded a bumper crop of rare illustrations that Vito had de-

{\textit{spaired} of finding in the United States. Within a week of arriving at the \textit{Gay News} office, he located forty-two photos, which a staff photographer offered to
duplicate for the low price of two pounds apiece. A few weeks later, he turned up
twelve more images at the British Film Institute, which seemed to specialize in
American photos featuring the homoerotic male gaze. Sizzling stills from \textit{Flesh and the Devil} (1927), \textit{Wings} (1927), \textit{The Big Sky} (1952), and \textit{Rebel Without a Cause}
promptly went into the manuscript. But Vito quickly realized that no archive in
the world contained the images of gay and lesbian romance that he hoped to
include in the book. This lacuna meant running films with painful slowness to
photograph individual frames: “I mean, that’s how you get Peter Finch kissing
Murray Head in \textit{Sunday Bloody Sunday} or Garbo kissing Elizabeth Young in \textit{Queen Christina}. They don’t make stills of the things I was looking for.” Processing these
photographs for publication was expensive—fifty dollars each—but they were
indispensable for Vito’s documentation of homosexual desire.

As interviews and photographs fell into place, Vito continued screening films
in archives throughout Europe and America. Before he began the major draft-
ing of \textit{Celluloid Closet}, he scrutinized roughly four hundred movies for homo-
exual content or innuendo. Only when the bulk of his viewing was completed did
he turn his full attention to writing.

Thanks to the New Line lectures, Vito came to the notice of a wunderkind at
International Creative Management (ICM). Joseph Edward (“Jed”) Mattes had
moved to New York from Dubuque, Iowa, in 1970 as a teenager desperate to find
gay community. While still in his early twenties, he landed a job in the ICM
mailroom and quickly worked his way up to agenting, representing such promi-
nent figures as children’s author Theodore Geisel (Dr. Seuss) and actor Leonard
Nimoy. But Mattes was also passionately committed to the burgeoning field of
gay literature. Armistead Maupin, winning national attention with his \textit{Tales of the
City} series, signed on as a client, and Mattes’s roster eventually included Urvashi
Vaid, Greg Louganis, Michelangelo Signorile, Eric Marcus, Betty Berzon, and
Gabriel Rotello. It is no exaggeration to say that Mattes shepherded into exis-
tence a significant cross-section of modern gay American writing.

Besides all that, he was a looker. With a shock of thick blond hair tumbling
over his forehead, the boyish, corn-fed Iowan caught Vito’s eye at once. The two
enjoyed a brief fling just as Vito was leaving Bruce for Bill. The romance didn’t
last but the friendship did, as did Jed’s unerring advocacy of Vito’s work. Jed’s
first advice to Vito was to concentrate exclusively on the book and stop writing
all those time-consuming articles for the \textit{Advocate}. Knowing that Jed was capable
of getting results, Vito obeyed. When Prentice-Hall expressed interest in, then
deprecated \textit{The Celluloid Closet}, Jed shopped the book to seventeen other publishers,
most of whom responded, “Who cares? There’s not a market for this book,” or
pointed out that if such a market did exist, Parker Tyler had already cornered it. Vito was astonished. Didn’t publishers recognize gay men’s endless affinity for movies? And what about the book’s crossover appeal to “film freaks” of all sexualities? More broadly, the field of gay publishing was beginning to boom. Jonathan Ned Katz’s *Gay American History* appeared in 1976, followed by Jeffrey Weeks’s *Coming Out* (1977), and Michel Foucault’s groundbreaking *History of Sexuality* (1978). The year 1978 saw the publication of three important, and widely divergent, gay novels: Edmund White’s *Nocturnes for the King of Naples*, Andrew Holleran’s elegiac *Dancer from the Dance*, and Larry Kramer’s scathing satire *Faggots*. Vito wanted to take his place among these sudden giants.

Fortunately, he had a friend in the industry. Homer Dickens, a Harper & Row editor and Omnibus regular, recognized the *Closet*’s market appeal and helped Vito pitch it. The Harper & Row board assigned Homer to the book and offered Vito a contract on March 11, 1978. When he received half of his five-thousand-dollar payment on signing, he and Arnie celebrated with a bottle of Korbel champagne. But the party was short lived. Vito’s contractual deadline was October 1. He had just over six months to write a book that he’d barely begun.

In a sense, Vito had been writing *The Celluloid Closet* for five years. The book’s central arguments sprang from his lectures, and in the *Advocate* he had been rehearsing specific film analyses (*Reflections in a Golden Eye* [1967], *The Sergeant* [1968], *The Boys in the Band*, *Norman, Is That You?* [1976]) that he recycled nearly verbatim in the manuscript. That left him with several hundred films yet to categorize.

He proceeded with a few guiding principles. Harper & Row was terrified that Vito intended to use the book to “name names,” that is, to stage a mass outing of Hollywood stars. Vito took a higher ground, arguing that while any actor’s sexuality, regardless of orientation, should be known, it would be “immoral” and “valueless” to drag the reluctant from their closets (xi). Which left the question of what exactly the book *would* cover. Neither Vito nor Harper & Row wanted a coffee-table tome with glossy pictures of Hollywood’s deviants. But the publisher did insist that the book should be “lively and funny and narrative and interesting and not a political book.” Vito blinked over this last clause. The movement’s current malaise notwithstanding, he still considered himself a “militant gay activist,” and his first impulse was to pen a diatribe against Hollywood’s generally vicious portrayal of gays and lesbians. A cooler head prevailed when he realized, rightly, that “nobody would want to read a yell.” He also relaxed when a few straight editors at Harper & Row took up his cause, agreeing with him that a post-Stonewall book on gay imagery couldn’t help but be political. Now he had the task of writing an edgy but funny book—in other words, putting his personality on paper.
He began from inside the closet. Though Vito had no interest in outing any one individual, he was determined to expose Hollywood’s conspiracy to keep homosexuality hidden or demonized. The book’s central tenet drew on GAA’s commitment to visibility at any cost: “The big lie about lesbians and gay men is that we do not exist.” In part, Vito blamed would-be Hollywood moralists for perpetuating this lie throughout most of the twentieth century. And he certainly denounced closeted industry gays who, fearful of their own exposure, permitted only silence and stereotyping to reach the screen. But Vito reserved most of his rage for the closet itself. “To see homosexuality as a dirty secret,” he argued, “is something we all learned as children, both gays and straights.” He demanded that gays and lesbians abandon this mind-set and recognize how deliberately the media had cheated them of fair representation. It was high time they politicized their thinking. “We have cooperated for a very long time in the maintenance of our own invisibility. And now the party is over” (xii).

With the closet as his book’s central conceit, Vito plotted a roughly chronological discussion of how Hollywood applied various forms of silence in its treatment of gay characters. He had his chapter outline and titles set in stone from the first draft. Chapter 1, “Who’s a Sissy?,” would focus primarily on films spanning 1895 through the late 1930s, a time during which homosexuality was communicated via a character’s departure from gender convention. “The Way We Weren’t,” chapter 2, brought the discussion into the 1940s and 1950s, when gay characters “were routinely laundered off the screen” (63), even in films adapted from novels and plays about homosexuality. Chapter 3’s title, “Frightening the Horses,” Vito borrowed from Mrs. Patrick Campbell and, more directly, from Pauline Kael’s review of The Killing of Sister George. In the 1960s, homosexuality became more visible onscreen as the Motion Picture Production Code, established in 1934 to safeguard American film audiences from morally questionable material, lost its bite. Nevertheless, as Vito contended, the freer post-code atmosphere only meant that gay and lesbian characters moved “out of the closets and into the shadows” (127). Far from receiving thoughtful treatment, homosexuality in the 1960s became “the dirty secret exposed at the end of the last reel” (123). Finally, chapter 4, “Struggle,” detailed the efforts of Hollywood in the 1970s to come to terms with the increased visibility of the post-Stonewall gay movement while still chafing at the possibility of a gay hero onscreen. The general result was a dizzying panoply of cartoonish victims and villains who, Vito felt, bore little resemblance to anyone he knew. As stated in his concluding remarks, “There have never been lesbians or gay men in Hollywood films. Only homosexuals” (246).

Before he started writing, Vito dug in his heels about the parameters of the films he would be analyzing. Though guessing (correctly) that he would face criticism for omitting such gay staples as Death in Venice, Bertolucci’s The Conformist (1971), and Pasolini’s Salo (1975), he realized that these films would clutter
his arguments about American masculinity and femininity. Discussions of Eisenstein’s *Qué Viva México!* (1930) and Murnau’s *Tabu* (1931) did not survive the first edit. Also, though acknowledging the experimental directors Kenneth Anger, James Watson, Melville Weber, Gregory Markopoulos, and Maya Deren, Vito generally omitted experimental film from his roster. In part, this was a personal choice for a critic who ran screaming from alternative cinema: “I’ve had enough real Warhol to last several lifetimes and I don’t need any imitators to remind me what it was like to be bored to death for two hours. And yes, I know all about the value of experimental film, but as far as I’m concerned they can experiment somewhere else.” Beyond his personal tastes, he believed that experimental film was “just another way of dismissing homosexuality—by making it so precious and poetic that it becomes strange and beyond the reach of most people.” Vito targeted films that he knew reached “huge numbers of people” and thus had a marked effect on how gays were viewed in society.

With his original deadline of October 1 now three months past, Vito began writing in earnest after New Year’s 1979. He sat down with high hopes, imagining himself and his yet unwritten tome plastered across the coveted billboard over Sheridan Square. But how to jumpstart chapter 1? He snickered over Dorothy Parker’s definition of a writer as “someone sitting at his desk with a fresh piece of paper in his typewriter waiting for the phone to ring.” Daydreaming was understandable; he wasn’t off to a promising start. He began “Who’s a Sissy?” with an academic dryness that made him itch: “The reason that this section is concerned primarily with the genesis of the sissy and not that of the tomboy . . .” Yawn. The second draft he opened with a knockout punch: “Nobody likes a sissy. That includes dykes, faggots, and feminists of both sexes.” There. That ought to keep ’em reading.

Who exactly was a “sissy,” and why was he so central to early screen portrayals of homosexuality? In keeping with his American focus, Vito read the sissy, a stock comedy figure in films of the teens through the thirties, as fallout from the young nation’s “pioneer spirit.” To the extent that a “real man” existed, “the creation of the sissy [was] inevitable” in order to show what a “real man” was not. Even detached from explicit homosexual connotations, the sissy obliquely introduced the concept of homosexuality onscreen “as an unseen danger, a reflection of our fears about the perils of tampering with male and female roles” (5, 6). Vito set about demonstrating the ways in which effeminate characters played by Harold Lloyd, Edward Everett Horton, Eric Blore, and Franklin Pangborn provided “yardsticks for measuring the virility of the men around them” (16).

Charting the sissy’s evolution against changing Hollywood standards proved tricky. Cinema’s need of the sissy as homosexual shorthand became more urgent and, ironically, more indirect after the introduction of the production code,
which banished “sexual perversion” (along with rape, incest, abortion, open-mouthed kissing, and white slavery) from the screen. But how much code history could Vito expect his readers to know? He had to force himself to remember that he was not writing for an audience of film historians. What began as the most fleeting reference to “pre-Code years” (D1, 42) ultimately expanded into detailed coverage of the code’s genesis under former postmaster general Will Hays and its subsequent name changes (31). Vito wanted to take no chances on losing readers’ comprehension or interest.

More than in later chapters, Vito struggled with the argument of “Who’s A Sissy?” He knew that he didn’t have enough “sissy” material to fill an entire chapter. He also knew that “sissy” portrayals were mounted contemporaneously with a variety of lesbian characters who often weren’t used for comedic purposes. Moreover, despite his determination to focus primarily on American films, Vito realized that early German representations of homosexuality, such as in Anders and Pandora’s Box (1928), were often more explicit than their American counterparts and demanded analysis. Finally, ever mindful of his lay readership, Vito feared basing an entire chapter on obscure silents and early talkies that no nonspecialist could be expected to recognize.

Trying to address these problems, Vito turned the “Sissy” chapter into a fascinating but chaotic catchall that strains to link extremely different films through the accident of having been made during the same era. He carefully records the lesbian erotics of Pandora’s Box, Morocco (1930), Queen Christina, Dracula’s Daughter (1936), and Mädchen in Uniform (1931)—but these films lack connection to male effeminacy and seem to need their own chapter, one dealing at length with lesbian sexuality. Mädchen, moreover, is a German film; while Vito contrasts it with The Children’s Hour and provides a detailed overview of its censorship in America, he does not indicate what, if anything, the film illustrates about American attitudes toward gender. The discussion of Anders creates similar confusion. While in Amsterdam after finishing the Closet’s second draft, Vito picked up the program that accompanied Anders’s original screening in 1919. He raced to include this invaluable source material in the manuscript, noting that the suicide of Anders’s protagonist anticipates suicides that would befall gay American characters of the 1960s and 1970s in epidemic proportions (21). The first American character to follow this path is the unseen Skipper in Cat on a Hot Tin Roof nearly forty years after Anders’s debut and more than twenty years prior to its rediscovery. How likely is thematic influence?

Efforts to make the chapter’s older films more relevant for modern readers also ran aground. In his first draft of “Sissy,” Vito aims for historic coherence and focuses almost entirely on films immediately preceding and following the production code. In subsequent drafts, including the published version, he takes pains to link older representations of male homosexuality with later, more familiar
examples, such as *Tea and Sympathy* (1956), *Some Like It Hot* (1959), *The Sergeant*, *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* (1975), and *La Cage aux Folles* (1978). The presence of these titles in “Sissy” is obviously a bone tossed to readers who, Vito fears, may tire of plowing through dozens of films that predate their birth. To justify the later films’ anachronistic presence, he argues that representations of men in drag and/or men attracted to other men changed very little throughout the twentieth century. Across the decades, such characters figured disproportionately in comedy and horror, incited hostility from straight society, and seldom met with happy endings. It’s hard to deny these claims, but it’s also disingenuous to pretend that filmmakers or audiences of the twentieth century’s second half approached gay-themed material with the same preconceptions as their predecessors. While *Rocky Horror* and *La Cage* may borrow earlier sissy trappings and plotting, their defiant post-Stonewall sensibility frames, even promotes, homosexuality with an explicitness that would have been unthinkable under the production code.

Vito made far more successful efforts to draw readers in by borrowing from Richard Dyer, whose short anthology *Gays & Film* (1977) predated *The Celluloid Closet* by four years. In Dyer’s work, Vito was particularly drawn to the concept of “bricolage,” a term adapted from Claude Lévi-Strauss to indicate gay spectators’ “playing around with [filmed] elements available to [them] in such a way as to bend their meanings to [their] own purposes.” Dyer’s adaptation of bricolage signaled exciting possibilities for gay audiences who were used to tolerating heterosexual movies that either denied their existence or turned them into a joke. Now it was possible to reverse the joke and read ostensibly straight imagery through a gay lens, thereby inviting gay audiences to participate in interpretation and make spectatorship their own. Vito eagerly acknowledges the presence of “covert” gay audiences as far back as 1936, when *Sylvia Scarlett* allowed them to feast on the image of Cary Grant sleeping with a cute boy—even if “he” is actually Katharine Hepburn in disguise (14). Though skipping too quickly over *Rocky Horror*’s enduring cult popularity, Vito does reference the baroque Freudian excesses “that keep present-day gay audiences howling” through *Johnny Guitar* (1954) (53, 103). He also notes the inadvertent political expediency of *The Boys in the Band*, which, he claims, “moved homosexuals throughout the country” to protest their image on screen and to examine their own degree of self-acceptance (176, 177).

Vito knew from the Firehouse Flicks that apolitical spectators could be radicalized once they began participating actively in interpretation. Though still mindful that the book should not seem an off-putting “yell,” Vito attempted between drafts to embolden its political messages such that readers would recognize their own stake in spotting homophobia onscreen. The finished *Closet* thus contains a number of overtly political observations that help unify its
cross-generational survey: effeminate men, onscreen and off, are subject to terrifying violence (54); gays may be bashedit onscreen, but seldom with an examination of homophobia’s causes (70); gay men too often replicate the macho imagery on which the empty signifier of a “real man” depends (83); American films almost never depict a “gentle man” who happens to love other men (72); American films almost never show the possibility of parents accepting children’s homosexuality (149); American films, well after Stonewall, made virtually no acknowledgment of gays’ political evolution (164). While drafting, Vito also realized that the book required detailed analysis of the lesbophobia souring portrayals of female friendships in the 1970s. Discussions of Sheila Levine Is Dead and Living in New York (1975), Julia (1977), and Girlfriends (1978) were added to the final manuscript (88–89). The addition of these central points to later drafts indicates Vito’s rising urgency to show readers their own investment in reading film alongside him.

Writing steadily through the first half of 1979, Vito neared the completion of his first rough draft in summer. Dissatisfied with the manuscript, however, he let his apartment slide into a grimy mess, stopped returning calls, and gave up on “being particularly polite to people.” He tried to convince himself that personal distress was the inevitable result of artistic labor: “I’ve become convinced that I work best when the rest of my life is in a chaotic state—or perhaps the chaos is caused by the fact that I’m working so hard and haven’t allowed anything else to get at me.” In July, friend Mark Pinney recognized Vito’s angst and invited him to spend a month at his house in Garrison, New York, where he could work far from Manhattan’s many distractions.

While in Garrison, Vito slogged away at problems still slowing his argument. For days he agonized over the linked analyses of The Killing of Sister George and The Boys in the Band. Based on popular plays and premiering, respectively, one year before and one year after Stonewall, the two films made the perfect “liberation” coda for a decade in which homosexuality was exploited as a seamy “gotcha” plot point. With lesbian and gay protagonists, George and Boys communicate their characters’ homosexuality immediately—problematicizing Vito’s contention that in the 1970s, a “hero still could not be queer” (179)—and underscore the exorbitant psychic price that characters pay for any degree of self-acceptance. In his wrap-up to “Frightening the Horses,” Vito wanted to present the two films as a twinned pivot between sixties shadows and seventies openness. Unfortunately, pairing them proved more difficult than he’d anticipated. While none of Mart Crowley’s Boys celebrates being gay, Sister George’s June Buckridge has great fun as a snorting, stomping butch. Her outrageous persona may cost her both her lover and her television soap role, but she barrels through the film with little of the misery that hampers the Boys.
Vito broke his block by recognizing that the reception of the two films was nearly identical. America took *George* and *Boys* as “definitive portraits of gay life” (170). George’s rollicking butchness and, in *Boys*, Emory’s electric effeminacy comforted audiences who “had never met a live homosexual in their entire lives” but thought they could easily recognize the signs of gayness (175). Both films also confirmed the notion that being gay or lesbian, no matter how well one accepts it, does not lead to peace. Sister George ends up alone and demoted, literally mooing in the voice of the cow character she must now play for a children’s show; in *Boys*, Emory is beaten to a pulp, Harold’s sole romantic consolation is a hustler who doesn’t want to spend the night with him, and Michael, easily the band’s most self-loathing member, ends the film by departing to midnight Mass in apparent atonement for his sexual “sins.” Together, *Boys* and *Sister George* helped Vito demonstrate that although the gay sixties may have ended more forthrightly than they began, they certainly didn’t portend gay joy in the next decade.

While enjoying Garrison’s pastoral peace, Vito began torturing himself over his final chapter, “Struggle.” Fifty pages into the drafting, he confessed, “[I feel] no excitement because I hate it. Don’t know how to pull it into shape—want to run away but have to get it all down and try to make it sing in a second draft. . . . The book is full of information but except for certain sections it’s not exciting and it has to be.” In part, the problem was one of relentlessly grim source material. For every psychologically believable treatment of homosexuality in 1970s films like *Sunday Bloody Sunday* or *Cabaret*, there were a dozen others in which gays were savagely lampooned, “cured” of their homosexuality, or murdered. Even an allegedly progressive movie like *The Ritz* (1976), an adaptation Terrence McNally’s Broadway comedy, Vito found filled with “looney tunes” rather than realized characters. It irked him that *The Ritz*’s bathhouse denizens were presented “as though the existence of gays in such a place were joke enough” (219). He tried to smile at a press screening where Pauline Kael—a critic whose homophobia Vito frequently flags in the *Closet*—remarked to him and Arthur Bell, “It’s a sad day for you people.” But *The Ritz* so offended him that he stalked leading lady Rita Moreno at a premiere party, demanding whether she felt her film would “reinforce Middle America’s stereotypes” of gays. Affronted, Moreno shot back, “Don’t give me stereotypes! We’re a farce, darling.” She was, however, sufficiently angered by stereotypes to confront Vito two days later at a Fire Island fashion show, where she spotted him in a “faggot”-emblazoned T-shirt. “I hate that word,” Moreno spat. “It’s like spic.”

Doggedly chronicling miserable 1970s portrayals, up to the grisly attacks of *Cruising*, left Vito as limp as his prose. In his second draft, he still had no idea how to lift himself or his manuscript out of the dumps. He made the problem worse by attacking his readers along with Hollywood in the book’s new downer of an
The movies have ‘done’ nothing to homosexuals. We’ve done it to ourselves. We didn’t recognize each other nor did we recognize ourselves. We tried to fit into society on its terms, always failing, always filling the stereotype because we believed it and wanted to belong on any terms” (D2, 393).

This was not the proper reward for readers who had just waded through 250 pages of oppression. Vito’s anger was spoiling a book that needed to yield equal portions of outrage and affection. The new ending, he despaired to Arnie, is “not just faulty but genuine shit. I’m not stupid or blind and the book isn’t very good.” In his frustration, Vito took to lashing out at friends like Howard Rosenman, an openly gay producer about to premiere the Barbra Streisand vehicle *The Main Event* (1979). Over dinner, Vito excoriated Howard for “selling out to the Establishment” rather than making “radical movies.” Having worked furiously to establish himself in Hollywood, Howard felt betrayed by Vito’s attack and was tempted to dismiss his friend as “a kind of loser” who enmeshed himself in esoteric “bullshit” rather than a viable cause. Howard gently declined to point out that Vito lived for Hollywood, no matter his criticisms of it.

Vito later apologized to Howard for his outburst. He realized that his anger stemmed more from literary helplessness than genuine disapproval. Unfortunately, he wasn’t getting much support at Harper & Row from Homer Dickens, whom Vito was coming to consider “the biggest idiot [he had] ever met.” Their relationship began well; Homer was a renowned film connoisseur who had published books (*The Films of . . .*) on Katharine Hepburn, Ginger Rogers, Marlene Dietrich, Barbara Stanwyck, and Gary Cooper. He had also assembled a huge assortment of obscure stills, including images from the original *Ben-Hur* (1925), *Irene* (1926), *Caged*, *Caprice* (1967), and *They Only Kill Their Masters* (1972), which he offered to Vito for the book. However, the man who lived by Constance Bennett’s dictum to “keep it light!” was not ideally suited to oversee Vito’s work. Vito privately attacked Homer for his “lack of interest, insight, involvement in [the] project,” charging, “He hasn’t the slightest idea what the book is all about, how to present it, what to say about it or how to promote it.” Homer was also not disposed to do the sort of hand-holding that Vito had come to expect from friends like Arnie. One day, hoping to elicit a compliment from his editor, Vito told Homer that Jed Mattes had just sent him a congratulatory telegram on the book’s latest draft. Homer airily replied, “He’s your agent, darling, he has to say things like that” before switching the subject to Dietrich.

Vito did recognize a grain of wisdom in Homer’s “keep it light” mantra. His anger at friends and at Hollywood was beginning to sabotage the book. To soften its tone, he had to infuse it with the humor and “offhand, breezy writing” he had originally planned. Unable to muster necessary cheer in his grungy apartment, Vito turned to wealthy friends with idle real estate at their disposal.
As soon as he returned to Manhattan from Garrison, Bruce Mailman, owner of the St. Marks Baths and soon-to-be owner of the legendary Saint disco, offered Vito use of his empty Pines house during the fall. The frustrated author spent several tranquil stretches in September and October on the island, tinkering with his manuscript and letting the crash of the waves soothe his jangled nerves.

In late November, he packed up several hundred ragged pages and headed for Los Angeles, which, he stewed, was filled with “lots of rich people—younger than [he] and less talented—not a good place to be poor.” On the other hand, it also contained the vacant Los Feliz mansion that Lily Tomlin had bought a year earlier and was thoroughly overhauling before she and Jane took occupancy. There on DeMille Drive, Vito found an expansive nest saturated with Hollywood lore. The house, which sat directly opposite the former residences of Cecil B. DeMille and Charlie Chaplin, had been owned by W. C. Fields, who lived there with his lover, Carlotta Monti. Down a slope was the home of soprano Deanna Durbin, at whose swans Fields fired BB’s whenever the diva flexed her vocal cords. A pond on Lily’s property had its own fatal history: DeMille’s toddler grandson, the son of actor Anthony Quinn, had drowned there.

What better place to invoke Hollywood horrors and filter them through a camp lens? For weeks, Vito slept on a pullout couch in Lily’s basement, which he had turned into an impromptu office with stacks of film books that served double duty as reference material and dining-table legs under a rickety board. During the days, he escaped contractors’ deafening hammering and choking dust clouds by haunting the UCLA and AMPAS archives for last-minute research. At night, he visited with Lily’s assistant, Cheryl Swannack, and pounded away on his revisions while standing up at a kitchen counter with stove burners as his sole source of heat. When the mansion’s cold became too oppressive, Vito moved to a Santa Monica beachfront bungalow belonging to John Morgan Wilson, a new friend and mystery writer backpacking his way through Wyoming and Utah. With John’s cat for company, Vito continued to lighten the Closet’s tone. John returned to find Vito freshly departed and his home altered, not necessarily for the better: “The cat was fat and happy but all the windows were closed tight and Vito’s tobacco smoke permeated every inch of the house.” Vito, meanwhile, was on his way back to New York with a fully revised, significantly sunnier manuscript.

In his revisions, Vito took pains to remind readers that Hollywood’s early sissies were “fun,” a “refuge for nonconformity,” not simply examples of masculine failure (D2, 38). If Franklin Pangborn fought to defend his masculinity offscreen with “five hard knuckles,” onscreen he was, Vito now grinned, “one of the girls” (34; D1, 50 [handwritten addition]). He allowed himself to laugh about the homoeroticism of silent films that made later audiences uneasy: “If only people
wouldn’t assume that all those loving brothers were as queer as three-dollar bills, men could hug without having nightmares” (D2, 94). Referencing the sexy vibe between costars Robert Redford and Paul Newman, Vito jested of their leading lady, “After all, who remembers Katharine Ross from Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid [1969]?” (81). He recommended that the prehistoric transsexual howlers *Children of Loneliness* (1939) and Ed Wood’s *Glen or Glenda?* (1953) be scheduled on midnight double bills with *Pink Flamingos* (1972) (D2, 146). Of the dimwitted sexual politics in *M*A*S*H* and *Tell Me That You Love Me, Junie Moon* (both 1970), Vito chortled, “People really thought that a good [heterosexual] lay cured homosexuals” (D2, 246). In revisions, he also took care to rein in humor that might offend readers, as when he redlined a reference to Erik Rhodes’s effeminate Italian gigolo in *The Gay Divorcee* (1934) as “the oiliest spaghetti sucker of the 30’s” (D2, 45).

The manuscript now reflected Vito’s irreverent personality. Richard Dyer rightly points out that despite the Closet’s catalog of sins against homosexuals, “[Vito] loved Hollywood . . . he loved Clifton Webb and a whole lot of the images that perhaps from a certain kind of politically correct gay liberation viewpoint one shouldn’t love.” Clifton Webb may have provided the “ultimate sissy portrait” via the viper-tongued, homicidal Waldo Lydecker in *Laura* (1944), but what thoughtful gay viewer could fail to admire Webb’s “classic portrayal of a homosexual,” the fussy Elliot Templeton in *The Razor’s Edge* (1946) (45)? For all his raving about the murderous lesbian stereotypes of *Caged* (101–2), Vito planned a *Caged* theme party at which all attendees would come dressed as their favorite character. (For himself, Vito chose the prim prison reformer essayed by Agnes Moorehead, though he also loved leaving New Year’s Eve phone messages for Tom Steele in the persona of sadistic matron Hope Emerson.) If Paul Mazursky’s *Next Stop, Greenwich Village* (1976) was “depressing as hell” for Antonio Fargas’s performance as “Bernstein the depressed faggot” (228, 338), this didn’t stop Vito from showing the film constantly to friends and family right up to his final day at home in 1990. While packing for New York University Medical Center, Vito ignored his spiking fever and racking cough long enough to screen, with commentary, *Next Stop’s* first scene for his brother. Charlie had never seen the film, and Vito had to share the love.

He attempted to give the same joy to his readers. Early lectures had taught him not to end on a tragic note. Arnie once suggested that Vito conclude the “Closet” with a necrology summarizing the dozens of murders and suicides that had befallen gay characters throughout film history. It was an inspired idea, but not for a lecture. Audiences left dispirited. When Vito moved the necrology to an earlier slot, it scored strong thematic points but left room for hope. The book’s necrology traces the violent deaths of over thirty gay characters from *Anders* through *Cruising*. Vito placed it immediately before the index, visible only to
readers who sought it out. As a buffer, he preceded it with a filmography consisting of flippant capsule summaries of nearly four hundred gay-themed films. A few samples: *Cinderella’s* mice “Jock and Gus-Gus aren’t just good friends” (249); in *Fame* (1980), Paul McCrane is “the only gay student at Performing Arts High School (if you can believe that one)” (250); in *Myra Breckenridge* (1970), “Rex Reed wakes up in a hospital bed and screams, ‘My tits! Where are my tits?’” (255).

So much for the supplementary material. There was still the problem of how to buoy the final chapter’s leaden finish. By the time he was wrapping up the draft, Vito had despaired that even he had no idea of “how Hollywood might make a film that would portray [gays and lesbians] properly.” He belatedly recognized the “enormous naivete” that had permitted him to expect fair treatment from an industry whose economic interests limited its politics. At the same time, he knew that he couldn’t send readers off feeling depressed or defensive. Once more he turned to Professor Kantrowitz for advice. For the book’s end, Arnie recommended “something optimistic, perhaps a view of the ways things would, should and could be in a better world of filmdom.”

For Vito, that “better world” was best represented by gays and lesbians making films about their own lives and not waiting for Hollywood to do it “fairly.” In the mid-1970s, he became friendly with members of San Francisco’s Mariposa Film Group, which was compiling a documentary called *Who Are We?* from interviews of over two hundred gay men and lesbians. Vito enjoyed a brief fling and then a lifelong friendship with one Mariposan, Rob Epstein, a handsome blond New Jersey native who had gotten involved in the documentary upon moving to San Francisco. Soon after meeting Rob, Vito introduced him to his Garrison host, Mark Pinney, who appears in the film as a suited, straitlaced gay executive. Eventually, the film’s scope was whittled down to twenty-six interviews of subjects ranging in age from eighteen to seventy-seven, including women and men from a wide sampling of professions, races, and gender manifestation. The speakers sat before cameras and talked openly about their struggles toward self-acceptance, their sense of themselves as gay or lesbian. The finished film was titled *Word Is Out: Stories of Some of Our Lives* (1978).

Producer Peter Adair described himself as “quite frankly, a propagandist” who felt, along with the other Mariposa members, “tremendously concerned not to put across a political point of view other than ‘gay is good.’” That suited Vito, exhausted by endless media messages that gay was far less than “good,” just fine. Pronouncing the film “an electric piece of history,” Vito was enthralled by *Word Is Out*, which, he argued, provided rare confirmation of “the remarkably common experience of growing up gay in America, a straight world” (244, 245). The subjects’ battles with family, the medical establishment, and the law seemed to Vito a *tableau vivant*, a “future volume of Jonathan Katz’s *Gay American History* come to life while still being written.”
Word Is Out provided precisely the conclusion that Vito had been seeking for his book. The film gave many viewers their first glimpse of a gay community and thus vanquished the “great enemy” of invisibility (246). It also refused to present homosexuality as a tawdry plot device or a tragic aberration. Mariposa’s subjects were not victims, villains, or ciphers. To the extent that they were stereotypical—a preening drag queen, a stone-butch “husband”—they, not a smirking straight director, were in full control of their own stereotypes. Finally audiences had a chance to see actual gays and lesbians, not the minutely defined “homosexuals” whom Hollywood had been filming for decades (246).

Finishing The Celluloid Closet was no easier for Vito than writing it had been. Watching Vito work, Bill Johnson considered him a “perfectionist” who undermined his own efforts: “It was, ironically, a fear of success, of not being able to meet his own high expectations, that was holding him back” from completing the book. After typing out the nearly four-hundred-page manuscript twice and incorporating hundreds of changes, Vito still felt that he hadn’t quite nailed it. While in London he howled across the Atlantic to Arnie: “I know it needs a lot of work and intend to give it a lot of work even if it means starving and dragging out the ‘when will it be finished?’ all over again. Cher, it can’t just be OK, it has to be terrific.”

During the months of travel for Gay News, his heartbreak over Graham, and his return home, Vito finally got the manuscript where he wanted it. Submitted to Harper & Row during the fall of 1980, it arrived two years late with a dedication to his parents and to the memory of Marc Sutton, the friend who had been murdered in Paris the previous summer.

In January 1981, Vito studied the galleys with muted satisfaction—he “liked [the book] better this reading.”

For Vito on Vito, that was high praise.

For a book of such long-lasting appeal, The Celluloid Closet received decidedly mixed notices. To Vito’s relief, some reviews were unqualified raves. Both Booklist and Christian Century offered emphatic, if compact, endorsement. Vito was also pleased by squibs in Library Journal, Kirkus Review, and Publishers Weekly. More substantive praise came from Arthur Bell, who extolled in The Hollywood Reporter, “This is the book I’ve been yelling for since the gay liberation movement began in 1969. . . . [The Celluloid Closet] is militant and marvelous and must be read by anyone who goes to the movies, and isn’t that just about everyone?” The book was also cheered in London. The Observer hailed Closet as a “witty, good-tempered survey,” while Gay News marveled at Vito’s “remarkable ability to stay sensible and dispassionate about films and characters that make many of us lose our cool.” Who had expected such sangfroid from the bigmouthed New York activist?
Not all reviewers sensed serenity in Vito’s writing. Though critics generally admired the “scrupulous research” that yielded “a wealth of fascinating material” and an abundance of “marvelously bizarre facts,” they also grew impatient with Vito’s exhaustively expressed anger. Stephen Harvey, Vito’s MoMA crony, didn’t feel that Vito had sufficiently animated his last chapter; “example after lugubrious example” of depressing gay fates weigh down the argument. In *The New Republic*, Rhoda Koenig groaned over Vito’s insistence on including “every one- and two-line fag gag he’s ever heard.” Stephen Farber echoed Koenig in his *American Film* critique, which faulted Vito for being “so determined to mention every film ever made on [his] subject that larger themes are frequently sacrificed to a slavish chronicle of specific movies.” Discomfort over the *Closet’s* onslaught of homophobic examples sometimes bled into discomfort over gay politics. David Chute of *Film Comment* excused Vito for allowing his “activist feathers [to] get ruffled,” but he also chided him for uncertainty over his book’s true purpose: “Again and again, you can feel his critical and his activist muscles pulling in opposite directions.” Chute’s colleagues were often less tolerant of the activist-author. Koenig tired of Vito’s “too-insistent ideology,” while Farber resented Vito’s “grating tone,” his “preaching” of “an irrelevant sermon on society’s mistreatment of gays.”

Was Vito an activist or a critic? Some reviewers seemed to feel that he couldn’t be both; as Koenig argued, “Humanitarianism and art don’t proceed from the same impulse or have the same goal.” Others dismissed Vito’s critical faculties altogether. In the *Times Literary Supplement*, Peter Conrad slammed the *Closet* as a “compendious gabble,” a book “lacking critical subtlety and parlously ignorant of any culture outside the companionable dark of those art cinemas in London, New York, Los Angeles, San Francisco, Washington, and Amsterdam.” Lest Conrad be branded homophobic for such innuendo, he rushed to assure readers that he admired “good” gay criticism—*Screening the Sexes*. In his zeal to tear down closet walls, Vito seemed to spot homosexuality in unlikely sources, trumpeting his “jubilant conscription of new and hitherto unsuspected recruits.” Intentionally or not, the word “recruits” cast Vito in the unfortunate light of an alley-lurking pedophile, waiting patiently to lure “innocent” films into his net.

Other critics took the same tack: how dare Vito infer homosexuality from any film not expressly about homosexuals? As an “avowed gay,” *Choice’s* anonymous reviewer boomed, Vito “lacks objectivity.” Why, he even brands *Frankenstein* “a homosexual film without offering substantiation or even indicating who is supposedly homosexual.” This critique is curious on two counts. Nowhere in *Celluloid Closet* does Vito refer to *Frankenstein* as a “homosexual film.” Instead, he notes the “homosexual parallels” in *Frankenstein* and *Bride of Frankenstein*; both films present the Creature as an aberration of nature hunted by a murderous
society wishing to stamp out difference (49–52). Also, while Vito does reference James Whale’s gayness, between drafts he considerably muted its prominence. His analysis moves from the bald statement, “Director James Whale’s homosexuality certainly influenced the overall vision of the Frankenstein monster as the ‘aberration’ which eventually destroys his creator” (D1, 68A, 8) to the much more temperate assertion, “In both films the homosexuality of James Whale may have been a force in the vision” of the loathed Creature (50). These are not the words of a recruiter. They are the words of an author who senses bigoted critics on the horizon.

Openly gay critics sometimes joined the attack. In the *Los Angeles Times*, John Rechy, author of the landmark autobiographical novel *City of Night* (1963), dismissed Vito’s arguments as “long recitations of plots” that “reach simplistic conclusions.” Bizarrely, Rechy went on to fault Vito for missing the homoerotic subtext of Hollywood westerns and “buddy films”—a motif that Vito discusses at length in *Red River*, *Midnight Cowboy* (1969), and *Thunderbolt and Lightfoot* (1974) (78, 80–81, 84–86). Rechy also took Vito to task for exalting the “blown-up home-movie ‘documentaries’ of a posturing ‘Socialist’ German film maker”—i.e., Rosa von Praunheim—whose work Vito actually labels “highly dogmatic, almost dictatorial” and “distinctly nonfeminist” (204, 205).

Vito expected critics to fault him for leaving Fassbinder, Eisenstein, and even John Waters out of his discussion. He made no effort to defend these omissions, but he did try to stave off certain philosophical objections that critics might take to his work. To an *Advocate* interviewer he insisted, “Because I talk so much about changing concepts of masculinity, I consider *The Celluloid Closet* a feminist book. It’s not a coffee-table book.” Some reviewers begged to differ. In the socialist journal *Jump Cut*, Martha Fleming contended that the *Closet* was “not a materialist feminist book about sexual representation and ideology by a sexual liberation activist.” It was, rather, “a book about straight images of homosexual people by a liberal gay man.” Fleming took strong issue with Vito’s “fundamentally gay male analysis,” as evidenced when he identifies a “gay sensibility” in the lesbian-themed *Mädchen in Uniform* (56). In Fleming’s view, “saying gay and intending to include lesbians under the umbrella roughly parallels saying mankind and presuming to include women.” She finds Vito similarly naïve for disregarding the depiction of gay and lesbian characters’ social class.

Other critics also faulted Vito for theoretical naïveté. Robin Wood consigned *The Celluloid Closet*, which “gives us much information and little theory,” to the “coffee tables” of “friendly liberals.” He vastly preferred the criticism of such theoreticians as Richard Dyer and Eisenstein scholar Andrew Britton, who are “able to go much further and say much more [than *The Celluloid Closet*] because they are equipped to assault the major social/ideological institutions of our culture instead of being partially ensnared by them.” In the *Soho News*, Jonathan
Rosenbaum took a similar swipe by noting that Vito’s faux “leftist stance and an overall piety in relation to capitalism of the film industry make for strangely compatible bedfellows.” In other words, Vito’s exclusive focus on mainstream commercial fare belies his rage at its homophobia. His avoidance of sexual, social, and economic theory proves that he had no serious interest in deconstructing Hollywood’s homophobia.

In his generally positive review of Celluloid Closet, Richard Dyer reproached Vito for falling on the wrong end of a “gay liberationist versus a social materialist theory/politics” continuum. The former philosophy, Dyer explained, holds that homosexuality is an historically repressed “essence” within certain individuals that only recently exploded in a “Gay Is Good!” release. The latter considers homosexuality a linguistically constructed category designed by oppressors to keep deviants in their social place. In fact, Vito tried not to read films in a social vacuum; he references homophobic attitudes in contemporary journalism (e.g., Coronet, Commonweal, Time, Newsweek) and film reviews (particularly in the writing of Richard Schickel and Pauline Kael) in order to explore how they both reflected and helped determine the treatment of gays onscreen. But it is also true that he had no interest in interrogating the social or material foundations of homosexuality. His own experience of desiring other men and encountering homophobia both onscreen and off convinced him of the political efficacy of his arguments.

Reminded of his critique today, Dyer shudders, “Embarrassing, all that jargon.” He notes that Vito was writing about film during an era when sexuality was undergoing formidable theorization. “If you were an academic,” Dyer remarks, “you had to think” in such abstruse terms in order to gain professional acceptance. “You had to think the basically Foucault-influenced idea that [sexuality] was all a social construction, so [in my review] it’s almost like I was going through that in order to show that I knew that argument.” Rethinking his position today, Dyer believes that social constructionism is more useful in discussing pre–nineteenth century representations of homosexuality. “When you’re talking about film,” Dyer concedes, “I’m not sure how much difference [social constructionism] makes since films were all made very much within the period of a quite fixed idea of what it means to be gay.”

More to the current point, Dyer emphasizes that nearly thirty years after its initial publication, The Celluloid Closet “hasn’t been surpassed, really.” Though the canon of gay films has exploded since 1981, Dyer argues, “I don’t think anyone’s changed the overall story. I think [Vito] laid down . . . the basic line of development and sets of concerns of Hollywood cinema: what are we to think about camp figures, and sissy figures, and so on? What do we think about stereotypes? What do we think about all these deaths of lesbians and gay men in movies?” Subsequent critics have answered Vito’s questions in their own ways, but the questions themselves remain integral to film criticism.
Vito paid little heed to critics. When Stuart Byron (inaccurately) warned him that Stephen Harvey’s *Voice* review would be a pan, Vito shrugged off his concern: “Maybe [Stuart’s] right but so what—everybody has to do what they have to do.” The one review that prompted his written response was Rosenbaum’s in the *Soho News*. Vito described it in his journal as “a sort of condescending piece by a straight leftist sympathizer who admires Robin [Wood] and Richard [Dyer] and Parker [Tyler] and cries out for trenchant analyses of Eisenstein and Fassbinder—dull as dishwater but current as hell.” This simply wasn’t Vito’s critical style. And his currency, he gloated, didn’t suffer for it. After the *Closet* had enjoyed several years of prominence, Vito confessed to an interviewer that he relished his success specifically “because it pisses off Marxist-feminists. They hate me because my book is so popular, because they think my work isn’t serious enough. It just makes them so angry that so many people listen to me and read me. That couldn’t make me happier because they’re wasting their time on dry, stupid politics when they could be reaching people with more accessible language.”

Vito wasn’t exaggerating his own or his book’s popularity. When the *Closet* officially appeared on July 1, 1981, he was in the middle of a whirlwind promotional tour that few academic critics ever experience. He took his first trip to Chicago, where he so wowed audiences that he was invited back twice that fall: in October to give GAU’s keynote address and in November to present his lecture at the Chicago International Film Festival. The tour continued smoothly in Boston, Washington, and Los Angeles.

In less cosmopolitan cities, Vito slammed headfirst into the kind of bigotry he generally avoided in Manhattan. Giving a radio interview in Tucson, he was at the mercy of a hostile crew incensed “by the fact that they had a fag on the show and that the interviewer was going to have to talk with me for fifteen minutes.” Another interviewer, an African American woman, blindsided him by beginning their on-air chat, “Mr. Russo, I confess I find homosexuality disgusting. . . . Why is it necessary to write a book at all on such a subject?” When Vito retorted that her question was the equivalent of asking “my brother and his wife not to wear a wedding ring or show their children in public,” the interviewer replied, “Now, Mr. Russo, one must recognize that we live in a heterosexual world.” To which Vito, neck veins bulging, shrieked, “*NO WE DON’T!* That’s like saying that we live in a white world.” The conversation devolved from there. But at least the interviewer didn’t hold Vito responsible for natural disasters. In Denver, where his appearance coincided with three tornadoes, homophobic sky-watchers “called in to the radio station and blamed [him] for being in town.”

Denver also yielded unexpected sweetness. Adam Reilly, now director of Denver Center Cinema, devoted the Gay Pride month of June to screenings of over twenty films analyzed in the *Closet*. Vito kicked off the festival with a rousing lecture on June 5, one day after he received his first paperback copies of the
Vito dedicated one of the first copies to the other houseguest staying with Adam Reilly and Everett Engstrom: cherubic político Sean Strub, who had tried to pick Vito up at New York’s GPA conference the previous January. At the time, Vito had been too engrossed to notice the twenty-three-year-old Iowan’s attentions, but in Denver, the pair clicked. Despite his youth, Sean was highly accomplished. At seventeen, he had worked as an elevator operator at the Capitol, where he chatted with Senators Gary Hart, Ted Kennedy, John Glenn, and Edmund Muskie. Within a few years, as executive director of the Kentucky Democratic Party, he secured from Tennessee Williams the first celebrity endorsement of the fledgling Human Rights Campaign Fund. Even without knowing that Sean would go on to run for Congress and to found *POZ*, a key magazine for people with HIV and AIDS, Vito was duly impressed.

Eight months after his turmoil over Graham McKerrow, Vito considered Sean “a patch of perfect weather.” A torrid fling resulted. One evening, as they shared a joint on Adam and Everett’s porch, Sean began hallucinating that a parked Volkswagen bug had “turned into a frog before [his] very eyes and was hopping up the street, leap-frogging over the other cars.” Sean described this vision to Vito, who requested “every detail imaginable (what color was the frog, did it see [them], how large was it in relation to the cars, etc.).” The next morning, Vito presented Sean with a copy of the *Closet*, in which he had inscribed: “I didn’t see any frogs, but I know a prince when I meet one. Love, Xxx Vito.” Lying in Vito’s arms that night, Sean whispered, “If I had to die when I was young I would want it to be at the end of a day like this.”

Vito returned to New York in a romantic tizzy. On the plane from Denver, he counseled himself to learn “to accept the joy of the moment and let it go gracefully when it’s finished.” Then, abruptly skeptical, he wondered “if we ever really learn anything at all.” He mused, “We think we’re so safe and protected from our emotions and then someone like Sean comes along and forces us to redefine feelings about everything—relationships, priorities, the meaning of life, everything. Yet another example of how I’m torn by the life I choose to lead, one of impermanence, constant travel, solitude for my writing always at war with a deep desire to find someone like [Sean] and discover a free, loving way to commit to another person without the restrictions which usually come with falling in love.” Vito didn’t see long-term prospects with Sean, who had returned to Lexington, but he felt certain that the young man would “stay in [his] heart for a long while to come.”

For several days, anyway. Vito was poised to enter “probably the best[,] most exciting two weeks in [his] life so far.” On June 19, just as the *Closet* began appearing in bookstores all over Manhattan, Vito flew to San Francisco, where he
was scheduled to present his lecture and *Mädchen in Uniform* at the palatial Castro Theatre for the International Lesbian and Gay Film Festival. He spent the week racing about town, swilling champagne, being showered with gardenias, and overseeing a private Castro screening of Midler at the Continental plus Garland and Streisand’s soaring 1963 duet, “Get Happy/Happy Days Are Here Again,” on Garland’s TV show. In the middle of all this hubbub, the San Francisco Gay Men’s Chorus returned home from a concert tour. Vito joined the thousands who serenaded them on Castro Street with “San Francisco,” the adopted anthem that honored their exquisitely gay hometown.

On the afternoon of the festival’s opening, Vito strolled down Castro Street with Rob Epstein. Rob glanced up at the Castro Theatre marquee, where a very tall, blond young man on a ladder was dropping into place the title letters of Rob’s latest film, *Greetings from Washington, D.C.* Vito followed Rob’s gaze but missed the marquee altogether. He had just made eye contact with Jeffrey Allan Sevcik.

Within a week of the *Closet*’s publication, Vito had spotted the love of his life.