

## BODY POLITICS

# Death in Drag

By Richard Goldstein

On July 6, a body surfaced in the Hudson River at the foot of Christopher Street. It was bloated from the water, the legs so swollen that one observer thought the corpse wore cement shoes. It seemed to have a large hole in the head. It looked like the body of a woman, but...

These were the remains of Malcolm Michaels, according to the death certificate. But to everyone who'd known the deceased, it was Marsha P. Johnson, drag-queen extraordinaire. Marsha's résumé in the gay community was legendary: He'd been a Stonewall veteran, a Warhol ingenue, and a streetwalker adept. From that avocation—and the times Marsha was busted for flaming on the Hudson Tubes in a red boa and black slip—he had a police file as thick as *War and Peace*. But it didn't stop him from working the West Side Highway in weather so cold there was no other action to be found. For the johns, it was either Marsha or the right hand.

Marsha braved more than the weather on these jaunts. He'd been stomped on, slapped around, shot by one client and dumped in the road. For a drag with a big, bony body and a sunflower smile, there was more job security in panhandling; so Marsha worked the bars, intoning, "Spare change for a dying queen?" In that clone zone, he was a Watts Tower of couture—a mixed metaphor with no intention of inhabiting any category for long. When marching at the head of the Gay Pride parade, Marsha wore a business suit. When visiting his family in Brooklyn, he'd chill till everyone kissed goodbye and then break into an explosive swish. His eldest sister, who spoke at Marsha's funeral, remembered that their mother was never surprised to find that a favorite brooch had migrated onto her son's chest.

When blue, Marsha might speak of "crossing the Jordan"; after all, he'd lost many friends to the virus that was in his body, too. When the demons closed in on Marsha, when sleep became impossible and the faces of dead rela-



Police call Marsha P. Johnson's death a suicide, but activists suspect foul play.

tives might appear in the clouds, he would scurry off to a clinic for some Mellaril. On such occasions, Jesus spoke to him from stained glass windows in churches around the city. Perhaps he'd beckoned Marsha into the Hudson.

The police decided that this death was a suicide, and so did the medical examiner. Marsha's body had been found with a birth certificate folded in one pocket, and people planning to kill themselves often carry vital documents. But Marsha had no Gold Card or driver's license: this was the only evidence of his identity and he kept it handy. True, he'd given all his clothes away, but that was not unusual for a person who could blow a welfare check on bouquets for friends. Besides, as Marsha liked to say, "A soul sister can't be seen in the same dress twice."

In the days before his death, Marsha felt a break coming on. Randy Wicker, the Village entrepreneur and activist with whom Marsha lived, noticed his restlessness. After Marsha left for the last time, Wicker's ailing roommate found Marsha's wedding ring on his pillow. That was odd, but Marsha had been planning to leave for L.A. He wasn't one to cling to things. Marsha chose the middle initial P because, he explained to more than one bemused judge, it stood for "Pay it no mind."

Randy Wicker is convinced that Marsha P. Johnson did

not intend to join Jesus so soon. "I never heard one word about suicide in the 12 years Marsha lived with me," Wicker says. "I honestly think foul play was involved. I'm not dismissing the possibility that he saw Jesus in the water, but the real problem is that the police want to stick a label on this and close the case."

Detectives from the 6th Precinct did not return phone calls from the *Voice*, and Wicker's efforts to get them to respond have been futile. He's compiled petitions, placed broadsides on the windshields of police cars, and even produced a witness who saw four men rough up Marsha near the spot where his body surfaced. Marsha's assailants were evidently trying to impress their girlfriends. To shouts of "faggot," they lifted Marsha in the air, spun him around, smacked him silly. The witness says he's seen this gang before, mugging people on the West Village piers.

"You cross that road [West Street] and you're entering a netherworld," Wicker notes, and activists who monitor gay bashing agree. "It's one of the most dangerous areas of the city," says Bea Hanson of the Gay and Lesbian Anti-Violence Project. "We have constant reports of people victimized on the piers. It's a dumping ground for homeless gays and lesbians—people left for dead."

It's also an area where homeys congregate, along with prostitutes, transvestites, and other folks cops might call *turds*. "The 6th has a way of not taking these cases seriously," says Hanson. "There's a feeling that assaults on transvestites and young black gays can be ignored." Wicker discovered that for himself when he took his witness to the 6th: "They didn't even show him mug shots." A day after his appearance, the witness got a death threat.

To label the demise of a drag queen suicide is to invoke a convenient stereotype. That's why Wicker is determined to prove Marsha was murdered, or driven to his death by gay-bashers. If he can make that case, Wicker wants the police to classify this as a bias crime. But for drags, justice is harder to come by than comfortable heels in size 15. No one may ever be sure how Marsha died.

In death, he has become an icon of ambiguity. Even the hole in the head bystanders saw on Marsha's corpse was an illusion caused by the effects of water on flesh, according to the medical examiner's office. They say they're willing to reopen this case if new information warrants. The police say nothing at all. And meanwhile on West Street, someone has smashed the makeshift monument to Marsha P. Johnson—a crèche of crucifixes, pink triangles, and glitter. ■