

# Odyssey of a Unicorn

By Nancy Walker

On Wednesday, July 7, 1982, my sother and I had breakfast, as usual, to the tune of my insistent, "Hurry up, let's go; I'm gonna be late for work." Sother sits looking placid, saying nothing. I gulp down my scrambled eggs and cheese, saving a small portion for Henry, the mystery pet, and jump up. My sother says, "Get your stuff together [I go to work every day looking for all the world like the bag lady to end all bag ladies] and go out the door. I'll be finished before you are." This irritates me because she is always right. I have two gears: first and reverse. She purrs along mostly in fourth. It's not fair, but there you are. Domestic bliss is precatid, I think, upon two people loving each other, but at different speeds and with vastly unlike nervous systems.

Because she loves me and believes in her heart of hearts that something unspeakable will happen to me if I am forced to use the T (Boston's over-priced, highly unreliable transit system), she drives me to work. No doubt, over the years, I have mentioned her unflappable good nature; taxi service is simply one instance of it.

On this particular morning, the hottest day of the summer, to date, we were listening to the news. The announcer was talking about a seven alarm fire in Boston's South End, the area we were driving through at that very moment. My sother said, "Amy Hoffman called this morning." "Shush," I replied, "I wanna hear the news." She waited a beat and then repeated, "Amy called this morning."

"All right, obviously you want to tell me something. Why did Amy call?" "Your office burned; it was completely destroyed. Amy didn't want you to learn about it on the radio. She said you shouldn't go there." "WHAT?!!!" "Your office burned. Amy got a call about 5:30 this morning." "WHAT?!!!"

I realize how silly my response must seem, but that is exactly how I reacted—stunned disbelief. How could 22 Bromfield Street and all it meant to me not be there any more? Frequently in these columns over the years I have mentioned that I don't believe in coincidence, that I think events or actions which seem causally unconnected are really directed by some unseen energy that makes sense of the whole chaotic mishmash of our lives, collectively and individually. We poor

mortals, of course, are not privy to the "energy's" intentions, but sometimes we willingly go along for the ride, so to speak.

During the two days before the disastrous fire, for no reason I could have explained, I was extraordinarily unnerved. Everything made me jumpy, even things that usually did not upset me. Monday was bad enough, but by Tuesday, late afternoon, I was in a considerably agitated condition and I mentioned how rotten I was feeling to Maxine Feldman, our new Promo Homo. She had her own business to attend to, and I was typing up the classifieds, preparing them to go to the typesetter, a task I have performed religiously for over five years, and for over five years, after I finished typing the ads, I put the forms away in my filing cabinet, a single drawer affair, painted lavender, sitting on one end of my desk. On Tuesday, July 6, 1982, a little voice in my head said, "Take them home with you." I asked the little voice why, and it replied that it didn't know why, but I should just take them home. So, I took them home in my briefcase, wondering why the hell I was doing such an unnecessary thing.

The following day I learned why the little voice had spoken and, even more importantly, why I had listened. What accounts for that? How do we explain behavior so contrary to our normal patterns? The classifieds are one of the three main sources of income for the paper, and, had they gone up in smoke, we would have had to make good for all the money paid for those classifieds. My having them unscathed was a real financial break, and I was relieved to be able to reconstruct my pages by the simple expedient of typing them over again at home on Wednesday evening.

If I had consciously known that I would never sit at my desk again, I would have kissed it good-bye. I keep it neat (notice the present tense, I haven't yet fully accepted the finality of fire). Neatness exists nowhere in my life except in my GCN desk and files. That small bit of our vast universe was like home plate to me. It was a place, once touched, where I was "safe."

If I could drag myself up the steep, seemingly endless staircase and plop my bottom into my chair, everything that had until that moment been wrong with the world (and many times it was) almost unbearably wrong) suddenly was

made right by the simple act of sitting in a special place. If this sounds religious, if sitting silently in the back of a church does the same for devout Christians as sitting at my desk did for me, I am not at all surprised.

Therefore, after my sother's announcement finally penetrated the inner layers of my consciousness on that fatal Wednesday, I wept my little weep but went to work as usual. I think some corner of my heart was frozen, it must have been or else I would not have been able to function at my job.

A meeting had been arranged for 1:00 pm that day, and when I arrived at the meeting site, I saw a number of GCN people in the elevator and yelled for them to wait for me, which they did, but explained that the elevator wasn't working, so we had to walk up to the third floor. Our newly defunct offices had been on the second floor. It was a very hot day, and I had all I could do to schlep myself into the meeting. As I entered, I said, "It's about those stairs..." And everyone broke up. Maxine Feldman told me that before I came in several people had been wondering what Nancy Walker would say, and Maxine said, "She'll ask us to get a new office without stairs." So, I came in cue.

As I was rushing to the meeting I wondered how other people would feel about our loss. Working at GCN is a very intense experience. No one who cares about the paper cares only a little bit about it. We care for it with a depth of emotion reserved for no other activity, no other institution in our lives. For me personally, GCN is, and has been for over six years, the second most important thing in my life.

The one thing I was sure of was that we would put out Volume Ten, Number One on Friday, come hell or high water, both of which had already come, as a matter of fact. But my sother and I have a house, and I knew that, if worst came to worst, we could have gotten the paper out using our Victorian wreck as a base of operations. As it turned out, and as you all must know by now, we had incredibly kind offers of assistance, space, labor, just about everything, in an outpouring of love and support that more than justified our faith in our readers and members of our community here and all across the country.

At the meeting morale was very high and we set up whatever tempo-

rary measures were necessary to continue publishing without breaking our long-established rhythm. There were no tears at the meeting, but as I looked at the familiar faces, I saw many red eyes. We were hurt emotionally, but we had work to do and we were going to do it.

When the meeting was over, I went with a number of comrades back to Bromfield Street to survey the remains. I don't think I could have gone alone. It was a devastating experience. Though ever since I began working at GCN I have been worried about fire, I could not have imagined how hideous the aftermath of fire would be.

If you have seen war films, you know what bombed out buildings look like, particularly ones destroyed by incendiary bombs. Our offices looked just like that. The ceilings had melted and fallen in. There were jagged pieces of wood, glass and metal covered with soot and slime all over the floors. We were hoping to find the cause of the fire and to see what, if anything, could be salvaged.

Much of what was in closed metal cabinets could be saved and the removal operation began on the spot. I stood, petrified of falling and being impaled on some of the debris, looking at what had been my precious desk, my fortress, my long-term friend in need. It had proved to be a friend in deed and, because it too was made of metal, the mail and other items inside its drawers would eventually dry out and be at least partially useful. But I felt in that moment as if someone very close to me had been murdered.

Of course, I knew the paper would go on, and we would find new quarters and it would only be a matter of time before we were all back to a semblance of normal operation. But as of this writing I feel like the fabled Wandering Jew. I don't know where to go. I have dreams of displacement, being lost, looking for somewhere, the address of which I don't know.

One of the chief reasons I accepted the particular civil service job I took two and a half years ago was its location within easy walking distance of the old GCN office. On lunch hour I could sit at my cool green desk and feel at home, surrounded by other people who shared my commitment to a whole that is surely much greater than the sum of all its parts. I could go back to my desk on Tuesday and Thurs-

day evenings and attend to my classifieds. Now that comfortable routine is over.

Our office was a meeting place for organizations who needed to meet in emergency situations. It was home to most of its workers who looked on their efforts at GCN not as a job but as a way of life. It was our place and it had a very special ambience. It was in no way beautiful. There was nothing whatever lavish or luxurious about it. It was a hard climb up a difficult mountain to get there. It was hot as hell in summer (we could not afford to pay the electric bills even if someone gave us an air conditioner) and often cold in winter. We had only cold water. From the standpoint of physical comfort, there was none. But love, ah love, there was a superabundance of that. We loved the office. And we worked together with a great deal of mutual affection and respect even when we disagreed.

In my mind's eye, I can see every detail of the room I spent so much time in during the past six years. No doubt, my colleagues have the same mental images, though everyone's emotional connections with the office are different. Our individual experiences there are far from identical. But we share our loss with each other and the wider community.

The newspaper is not just a collective of hardworking people. It is also, by extension, the people it serves. The significance of GCN is that it makes a bridge between distant individuals. It creates community and keeps all of us informed of each other's joys and sorrows, accomplishments and failures. For me, the paper represents a network of love and understanding. It is a serious and determined attempt to make necessary human connections, to prevent gay men and lesbians from feeling cut off from humanity.

The response to the fire has been enormously inspiring. The love we send out is coming back to us many times multiplied, and, as I said to Maxine at the meeting on Flaming Wednesday, "We'll turn this devastation into profit." We have lost some things, but we have not lost people. We are going forward with greater energy than ever before, and I am prouder and happier than I have ever been to feel somehow part of this spunky publication.

## Film

### Glen or Glenda?

# Not Just a Puppy Dog's Tale

#### Glen or Glenda?

Written and directed by Edward D. Wood. With Bela Lugosi, Lyle Talbot, Timothy Farrell. At Off The Wall in Boston. Running time 73 minutes.

by Michael Bronski

It's difficult to know where to begin talking about *Glen or Glenda?* I suppose you could say that it's a "one of a kind" movie, but the question keeps arising: what kind? Just a few basic facts will fill in the background before any elucidation on the film's most peculiar sensibility.

Written and directed in 1953 by Edward Wood, *Glen or Glenda?* was marketed as an exploitation film and pushed in New York's 42nd street grind houses. Wood had already made a small name and reputation for himself as a truly terrible filmmaker. (He was later to receive the "Life Time Achievement Award: Worst Director of all Time" bestowed by several film

critics.) Coming on the heels of the Christine Jorgenson headlines of several years before, *Glen or Glenda?* tackles—perhaps the word is assaults—the question of transvestites and transsexuals. Wood himself was a transvestite—and apparently heterosexual—and was fond of telling how he went through World War II wearing panties and bras under his Marine uniforms. The film did not do very well and had very limited distribution. This was partially due to the subject matter (it probably could not have played Boston at all), partially because it is just so badly made, and finally because it's just so weird.

Basically *Glen or Glenda?* is an impassioned defense (emotionally, psychologically, and socially) of transvestites and transsexuals. The film mix-and-matches several genres to sustain its arguments and somewhat startling (though perhaps unintentional) effects. First

there is Bela Lugosi—who at this point in his life had become an alcoholic and morphine addict and looks simply terrible—as "the scientist." He sits in a skull strewed room filled with smoking beakers and "unusual" scientific equipment. He lectures the audience on social and psychological matters and never interacts with any of the film's other characters. "Beware, beware! The story must be told. . . Beware of the big green dragon that sits on the doorstep. He eats little boys! Puppy dog tails! Big fat snails! Beware! Beware!" After a bit of this we are introduced to the story proper (?). A transvestite has been found dead, in drag, and has left a note that s/he was going to the next world in the clothes s/he was not able to wear in this one. From here we are taken to the office of a psychiatrist who is explaining the transvestite/transsexual phenomenon to a concerned police chief. This is a funny

mixture of your basic sex education film (Young man: "Gee, doctor, I have these sores on my body and a painful sensation when I urinate. Is something the matter.") and also the format of early soft-core porn films (Doctor: "Many married Americans experience some sexual problems. We are going to show you—for purely scientific reasons—different sexual positions that will help solve those problems.")

With the police chief asking pertinent, leading question, the doctor tells us the stories of Glen/ Glenda and Alan/Ann. The first is a transvestite, the second a transsexual. The scientific information here isn't bad. It is made clear that neither the transvestite nor the transsexual is a homosexual and that social pressures make life very hard on these groups. The facts are backed up by bolder suggestions: it is more sensible to wear women's, rather than men's, clothes; people scoffed at the car and the airplane

as scientific inventions—the sex change is no different; the characteristics of each sex are more mutable than we think.

But this informational format is nothing compared to the dramatic telling of the two stories. Wood's notion of casting was apparently of the "let's-put-on-a-show" variety and he just called his friends over to make a movie. The sets are no different; flat, uninteresting living rooms and kitchens that make the sets on TV soap operas look like Busby Berkeley productions. His notion of camera work is also peculiar: static and unmoving, the camera seems to sit and record from wherever it was plopped down in the room. Like the parts of a John Waters film that don't work, *Glen or Glenda?* is staggeringly bad. The difference between this and muddled Waters is that *Glen or Glenda?* isn't failed comedy, through the sheer force of

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## Puppy Dog's Tale . . .

its convictions and sometimes crackpot notions it transcends its failures to become (while neither moving nor truly convincing), disarming and engaging.

Take the scene where Glen is contemplating telling his fiancée Barbara about his "other self." They sit on the tacky couch in the tacky living room holding one another. Suddenly we realize that Glen is fondling Barbara's white angora sweater. "Is anything wrong, dear?" she asks, "you look so far away." Glen quickly explains that he was just "thinking" and assures her that everything is all right. It is a badly written, clichéd, dramatic moment that ends up working because it is worse than it should be. This may be one of the few cases in which (to paraphrase Gore Vidal) having no talent is more than enough. I'm not sure why, perhaps it is some unconscious Brechtian alienation technique, but the sheer rottenness of Wood's filmmaking becomes oddly affecting.

This is not to say that the film is totally enjoyable or "so bad it's good," some of it is simply too boring to be fun or interesting.

There are enough moments however that do perk things up: the constant cutting to a stock footage of lightning whenever an important point is being made; the "guilt" dream sequence (Glen imagines not telling Barbara about Glenda) which is a Dali-esque mishmash mixed with what looks like outtakes from *Night of the Living Dead*; a scene where Glenda gives herself away by fondling, too lovingly, a sheer black nightie "she" is buying in a woman's dress shop.

Much of Wood's technique relies upon montage to convey ideas and arguments and much of the film material looks like stock studio footage: the lightning, cars along a freeway, boys playing in a schoolyard, the workings of a steel mill. In fact it's one of the few films I can think of that may have been put together with as much "ready made" as shot footage. In the midst of the film is a soft core, strip, semi-S/M, bondage and rape scene that has nothing to do with anything else in the film. I suspect it may have been added to keep the exploitation audience happy.

*Glen or Glenda?* is well worth seeing; as funny as *Pink Flamingos* and as intriguing off the wall as any Kenneth Anger or Jack Smith experimental film it is certainly unlike anything else. But there are actually other reasons to prompt viewing. Although it may seem naively simplistic now, *Glen or Glenda?* was made during one of the heights of sexual repression in America. It is a document—and an act of courage on the part of Wood—that is an important part of our sexual history; an indictment of sexual fascism. For whatever its artistic faults/merits it is a defense of being different, a plea for sexual tolerance, and an attempt to present radical ideas through a popular medium.

*Glen or Glenda?* is hardly ever shown so this isn't just as good a time as any, but possibly the only time to see it. As film and history you'll never see anything like it again. And in case you were worried, it has a happy ending: Barbara gives Glen her angora sweater and says that with love they will work everything out. What more could you want?

## National Anti-Klan Network

### Specter of Fascism: The Third Annual Conference of the National Anti-Klan Network

Atlanta, June 21, 1982  
by Barry Mehler

While Atlanta celebrated its gay pride week, one hundred delegates from over fifty organizations met at the Atlanta Biltmore Hotel between June 18-20 for the third annual conference of the National Anti-Klan Network (NAKN). NAKN, organized in 1979 by the Southern Christian Leadership Conference and the Interreligious Foundation for Community Organizing, is the nation's leading organization monitoring and fighting the growth of Klan/Nazi organizations.

In her keynote address, Anne Braden, a founder of NAKN and co-chair of the Southern Organizing Committee for Economic Justice, told the gathering that "the rise in racist violence has reached crisis proportions . . . cross-burnings, bombings, shootings and other acts of violence against minority people occur daily in virtually every state in this country." The killings in Greensboro perpetrated in broad daylight in front of TV cameras "was a new peak in racist terror in America." The acquittal of those murderers by an all white jury "sent a signal of approval to racist groups all across the country."

Representatives of Atlanta's Lesbian-Feminist Alliance (ALFA), the Feminist Women's Health Center as well as representatives of gay organizations from Washington to San Francisco participated in the three day conference. It was readily agreed that the battles over busing, the Anita Bryant campaign against gays, Phyllis Schlafly's Stop ERA drive and the violent anti-abortion movement were all examples of the emerging autonomous extreme right. The conference delegates voted to adopt a statement by the women's caucus as part of the final resolutions. The women's caucus statement called for a recognition that sexism and racism are equal components in the growing fascist movement.

Anne Braden said in her keynote address, "We are all heartened by the freeze march in New York in which nearly a million people demonstrated against nuclear

arms. But we must ask ourselves, 'when will a million people in this country be ready to march against racism?' It is not a question of which is the more important issue, for we will never end the arms race until we have put an end to racism."

At the plenary session I made an appeal for greater gay participation in NAKN: "If we are serious about putting a million people on the street to fight racism and fascism we must have the full cooperation and support of the gay and lesbian community. Since the end of the Vietnam War no group has been as active in the struggle for human rights. The gay community regularly puts a quarter of a million people on the streets for gay rights and pride in San Francisco and Washington." The Reverend C.T. Vivian, plenary session moderator, heartily endorsed my statement. And a burst of applause seconded the motion.

However, even as I was making the appeal, I realized it is our responsibility to join the Network, not the Network's responsibility to woo us. The radical right uses sexual issues in the same way they use anti-semitism and racism. We must recognize this and join with other progressive groups to fight repression. We must join this struggle for our own self-defense.

David Eager, author of the prize winning Broadway play, *Nicholas Nickleby* and currently a fellow of the Institute for Race Relations in England, spoke on the relationship between American and European fascist organizations. He said that leading American fascists such as Edward Fields and J.B. Stoner have traveled regularly to Europe to plan strategy and discuss the export of guns from America to Europe. He described the growing incidence of Nazi terror across Europe including the bombing of a railway station in Northern Italy which took the lives of 82 people, "the worst terrorist outrage in the post war period." It was only a month after that that 14 people died in the bombing in Munich, Germany and a month after that that French fascists bombed the synagogue in Paris. He said the fascist right which had been seeking popular support in the late '70s has now spurned respectability in favor of street riots and intimidation.

Ken Lawrence, an expert on the Klan from Jackson, Mississippi, drove home the new threat the Klan poses. He made clear that the Klan today fights under the banner of fascism. The old Klan was not a revolutionary movement. They stood for reaction, racism and segregation. Klan terror in the past has been aimed at "keeping the nigger in his place," and intimidating union organizers and reformers. The new Klan has a specifically fascist ideology aimed at starting a race war to exterminate blacks, gays and Jews.

The new Klan strategy is to polarize society and build on the fears and tensions that can be created by disrupting the fabric of politics as usual. That is the politics of the *Turner Diaries*, the new Klan best seller. Here, for example, is a sample of the Klan's new gruesome vision of the future:

Squads of our troops with synchronized watches suddenly appeared in a thousand blocks at once in fifty different residential neighborhoods. Every Squad leader had a long list of names and addresses. The blaring music suddenly stopped and was replaced by the sound of thousands of doors splintering as booted feet kicked them open. One of two things happened to those the troops dragged out onto the streets. If they were not whites and that included whoever even looked like he had a bit of non-white ancestry, they were shoved into hastily formed columns and started on their no return march to the canyon in the foothills North of the city. The slightest resistance, any attempt at backtalk or lagging brought a swift bullet. Whites, on the other hand, were in nearly all cases handed on the spot. . . . From tens of thousands of lampposts, power poles and trees throughout this vast metropolitan area the grisly forms hang. In the lighted areas one sees them everywhere. . . . And at practically every street corner I passed this morning on my way to headquarters there was a dangling corpse. Four at every street corner.

"Even if that was a bit more than you wanted to hear," Lawrence said, "it is important that you understand the ideology behind the latest Klan/Nazi violence. This is quite different from bombing a church here, lynching a civil rights worker there in order to put people in their place. It is a vision of seizing control of an entire society, exterminating blacks, Jews, gays and other minorities and creating something new. In order to accomplish this, and they are dead serious, something quite different from their previous approaches to mass political action are necessary."