

Sex in the Cinema...

A Night at the Nob Hill Theater

by Jack Fritscher

**This feature article was written August 12, 1979, while I was editor in chief of *Drummer*,
and was published by invitation from Bob Johnson at Magcorp to help start up
Skinflicks, Premiere Issue, Volume 1, Number 1, January 1980**

Author's Historical Context Introduction written February 25, 2002

Wakefield Poole was a 70s star. As a filmmaker, he was a producer involved in the movies screened at the Nob Hill and was also director of some shows on the Nob Hill stage—most famously Roger. See the companion to “A Night at the Nob Hill,” the feature, “Pumping Roger,” in *Drummer* 21, March 1978. In December 1977, I had met Wakefield Poole, whom I interviewed on August 24, 1978, for *Drummer* #27, February 1979.

Meeting Wakefield that rip-snorting Christmas 1977 got me swept away for the holidays into the backstage world of the Nob Hill Theater which revealed its star-spangled self with all the interest of a “backstage” musical. In fact, a great little gay musical comedy, quite sexy and sassy, like *42nd Street*, or *Cabaret*, could be written and titled with the sex pun of its name intended, *Nob Hill*. Through Wake, I met Roger, the pornstar, and Cliff Newman, owner (maybe) and manager (definitely) of the Nob Hill Cinema, where we partied in his garden apartment where he lived downstairs below the theater itself. That sex-hide-away was the basement height of 70s palms and mirrors and wicker baskets and drugs and “talent,” and therein lies the center of stories as fascinating as anything Christopher Isherwood ever wrote about Sally Bowles in 1930's Berlin.

I doubt if any of the patrons jerking off upstairs and cruising about in the dark of the moving feast of the Nob Hill auditorium knew that intimacies wilder than what they observed on stage or on screen were going on down stairs.

That “helix of sex” going on within sex was always the most wonderful aspect of gay sex in the 60s and 70s.

Gay sex got you into places and situations with people you'd have never met otherwise in a thousand lifetimes.

On the editorial advice of webmaster Mark Hemry, this “Virtual *Drummer*” feature is included because it fills in the local-color back-story of what gay movie theater culture was like for years before everyone in 1982 suddenly went home alone with their X-rated video cassettes.

Luckily for everyone, VCRs and videotape arrived at the same time as the virus caused people to pull back from public and anonymous sex where sanitary prep and cleanup were unsafe.

Bob Johnson who was a magazine packager for Magcorp liked my writing in *Drummer*, particularly my articles on Roger and Wakefield, and asked me to write two articles to help him start up *Skinflicks* magazine for George Mavety. So while I was editor in chief of *Drummer*, I wrote this feature article on August 12, 1979, as well as a second feature for the same premiere issue titled “Live! On Stage! Dan Pace & Clint Lockner.” Pace and Lockner, both of Los Angeles, having become recent lovers had appeared as an erotic duo at the Screening Room Theater in San Francisco in summer 1979. Both articles appeared in *Skinflicks*, Premiere Issue, Volume 1, Number 1, January 1980. I built this article around the new 1970s word *homomascularity* which I had coined and was aggressively launching as a concept in *Drummer*,

Man2Man, *Skinflicks*, and other gay publications.

Here is how the “helix of sex” worked in the salon I nurtured around *Drummer*. Dan Pace, whose real name was Daniel Pacella, was a Zeus model, and Clint Lockner was a Colt model famous for having been an LAPD officer. The immensely hung and handsome Clint Lockner under his real name, Charles “Chuck” Romanski, was the lover of the immensely hung and handsome blond bodybuilder, Jim Enger, immediately before I became the lover of Jim Enger who was drawn in LAPD uniform in my bedroom by the Manhattan artist Domino, and photographed nude in my home by the New York artist Robert Mapplethorpe. Tom of Finland drew Romanski and Enger together in one picture that is rather famous, and quite distinctly them, because both of them in real life looked like Tom of Finland drawings of the Platonic Ideal.

Because they were former lovers who were gentlemen living at the heart of homomascularity, the amicably parted Romanski and Enger, having taken up with Dan Pace and with me, thought it cool that we all hung out together in both San Francisco and Los Angeles. I, of course, am a writer, not a model, so I thought I had died and gone to heaven. They were homomasculine beauties who included ordinary mortals; they were not body fascists who excluded gay men who did not look like Colt models. Because of my experience with these guys, “acceptance and rejection of the ordinary by the gorgeous” was a main theme I worked into the plot of *Some Dance to Remember* where, finally, “gentlemanliness trumps looks” because “handsome is as handsome does.”

In newspapers and on posters, this feature article was quoted as a review of the Pace-Lockner stage show when they appeared in Washington, D.C. Chuck and Dan so liked this piece that Dan wrote a very warm thank-you letter. Romanski and Pace both died (RIP) during the height of the plague, and I miss them to this day. –Jack Fritscher, February 25, 2002

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Probably nine outta ten guys found their first sex at the movies. You remember: the way the bright screen made your teenage eyes half-blind to the dark stranger who sat down in the next seat. His leg pressed against yours. You looked straight ahead. His leg pressed a little harder. You stared like an Eagle Scout at the screen. You could feel the muscle in his leg flexing against your corduroys. Your breath started to accelerate. He picked up on the cue you hardly knew you gave.

He worked his hand under his arm, through the side of your theater seat, and laid his warm big palm easy into your crotch. You wondered if he could feel your almost-cherry rod inching hardon down your leg. Deep inside, you were kinda glad your buddies had warned you why you shouldn't sit so far back up in the balcony. Their warning clicked in the information you needed to find what you secretly wanted.

INVISIBLE HAND JOBS

His hand stroked your dick. Other moviegoers, eating their popcorn, watched the screen like life was going on up there in Technicolor and Cinemascope.

Your guts knew that Real Life was here and now unzipping your fly, with insistent fingers digging in for your hard fresh cock, making you almost half-jump your butt up out of the plush seat when his hand forcibly bent your hard dick to spring it free of the fold of your white jockey shorts, and up out of your cords, into the dark cool of the air-conditioning.

Shit! His hand was warm and wet in the old upndown of the Now Lost Art of the Invisible Hand Job!

From the corner of your eye you could see he was a good-looking man, not too much older than you, but lots more skilled. You kept your face straight toward the screen, but your eyes kind of crossed unfocussed in mid-space in the almost empty movie house.

You knew your cock had found what you had really paid your admission for.

At that age, you mostly kept your dick to yourself; but, somehow, at the movies, it was okay to wait for the dark stranger with the warm hand that could take your cock out of your shorts and make you sit stone-still from the start to the finish of his slick stroke-job. You fast became master of cuming without shouting. You had to invent, right there in the balcony, the Art of Silent Cuming--when his wet hand, working your ripe-veined shaft, root to head, popped your teenaged nuts like the on-screen cavalry riding to the rescue.

Who the fuck were all those handy masked men who once so wordlessly gifted us with such special handshakes deep in the cinema dark?

Who cares?

We shot our silver bullets. They rode off. And we moved on.

TIMES HAVE CHANGED

Down from the old-time balconies and into the up-front rows of San Francisco's Nob Hill Theater is about the same distance as Kansas is from Oz.

Sex between consenting adults in private is legal in California, and the Nob Hill ain't some fleapit where your feet stick to the floor. The Nob Hill Theater is a high-button private club. A man can't just walk in off the street, ask what time's the next feature, plunk down his money, and feel his way on into the darkness.

Membership, however, is easy and formal. Private-Club status means showing your ID and signing a pro-forma agreement to abide by the rules of the club.

Once inside, you can sit undisturbed watching the fuck-films unreel. You're surrounded only by other hot and consenting adult males. The Nob Hill Theater is in perfect balance. Celluloid men fuck on screen to titles like *Boys in the Sand*, *LA Tool & Die*, and *Jockstrap*. J/O men sit rhythmically stroking themselves along with the men on screen. Other men, dressed in suits and jeans and leather lean up against the aisle walls. They keep one eye on the bright screen. They keep the other eye on the men who rise up out of the comfortably dark seats to cruise on back, with bulging crotches and hungry mouths, to the gloryhole booths that wend like a maze beside and behind the Nob Hill screen.

The Nob Hill not only knows how to protect legally the privacy of its members; it knows how to cater luxuriously to men who like Cinema Sex on the screen, in the seats, and in the flesh!

ULTIMATE BIJOU

Once inside the Nob Hill Theater you feel the same erotic anticipation that well hung actor Bill Harrison felt entering the "movie house" in *Bijou*. Bijou is certainly the most erotic film made by gay-cinema pioneer Wakefield Poole who is to Male Movies what John Ford was to the Western. The celluloid fantasies that came down off the *Bijou* screen to fuck and suck and stroke Poole's Harrison into ecstasy aren't too far afield from the way the Nob Hill's screen turns its very adult, very private, very consenting audience into real-life "actors" who know how to stand, kneel, bend, suck, fuck, rim, fist, and roll with whatever "script" seems consensually right.

CELLULOID JUNKIES

Celluloid jerk-off junkies are always good buddies. We recognize each other in the front rows, in the red-lighted toilets, and in the amazing mazes where strangers in the night exchange be-do-be-do-me glances. Exhibit A is one hunk who ought to have a lifetime membership to the Nob Hill. When interviewed, he revealed that he is totally blissed out with the kind of "celluloid

fuck” that a movie house permits with all its dark anonymity.

“I get fed up, “ he said, “at work, and at home, sometimes, with my lover, and with close friends. Too much interpersonal relating. I want to go out hassle-free and fuck around with completely anonymous guys.”

This dude is 28, 6’ with 9”, built like a Mack, and graced with a face no man would kick out of bed.

“Some prissy sissies say anonymous sex is demeaning. Fuck them and their OD on Dear Abby. Anonymous sex is fun as a variation on a theme of a lot of real personal sex. Both have their place.” He rubs his hand across the light stubble on his chin. “And some faggots have attitude,” he says, “that only dirty old men hang out in porn palaces.” He smiles a great big grin in the light of the swank Nob Hill lobby. “The men I meet here are a good cross-section of the type of man I prefer. No hangups about some of their friends catching them on their knees blowing a merchant seaman behind the movie screen.”

“Merchant seamen?”

“Sailors. Seafood. Yeah. That’s no fantasy bullshit. I read that the latest census states there’s over 4,000 merchant seamen berthed in San Francisco. Now if you figure at least every sixth one prefers men, that’s a lot of guys living on a ship who have no place to go except to places like this movie house.”

He gropes his big crotch and a look like he’s remembering a couple thousand hefty blowjobs crosses his face.

“You never know who you’ll meet here. The rich. The famous. The almost totally straight. There’s not too many of your average street-disco faggot.”

He’s got nothing against the Castro Style, but he carries a definite hardon for the kind of men who when they’re not sucking and fucking with men, can pass for straight in the street and on the job. “Not that ‘straight’ is better. Just that I like that edge in a man. Those are the kind who come to an erotic picture show like the Nob Hill,” he says. “They feel a bit more secure in the half-dark. They know that nobody’s gonna see them unless that somebody is in this little old private club for the same reason.”

HOW SOCIALLY REDEEMING IS IT?

The Nob Hill Theater fulfills a special function for men who, although they’re hardly closeted, prefer not to run their number in a show-n-tell parade down Market Street. Not just merchant seamen, but men of all kinds, even the *endangered species* of good ol’ *straight trade*, frequent the lobby, the seats, the drinking fountain, and the everchanging cast in the maze behind the screen. Names are rarely exchanged. But after a few years living in San Francisco, a man can tell at a glance who’s fresh meat in town. And there’s nothing San Francisco men like better than out-of-towners!

THE NOB HILL: A FOUR-STAR EXPERIENCE

Located right in the heart of the City, just off Union Square and near all the hotels, the Nob Hill matches the best of the visitors with the best of the SF Welcome Wagon Brigade. The double feature changes frequently. Sometimes there is a live onstage male show. But always there is the changing audience: men who know what they want. Men who want it here and now!

The Nob Hill Theater, under excellent management, is proof-positive that adult men in private can behave themselves in the ways they prefer without offending anybody’s sense of propriety. The Nob Hill is not a porn theater. It is, in one sense, a quiet, private, erotic preserve. In another sense, the Nob Hill offers to our certain subculture a sensitizing “training film” experience: if you haven’t got the hang of what IT is all about when you open the doors to the dark auditorium, a couple reels later you’ll have IT all in hand!

When you finish, just you try to keep repeating “It’s only a movie, it’s only a movie,” as you crawl back out on to the Bush Street sidewalk on all fours!

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