

# ILGO REPORT

The Spring 1992 Newsletter

## The Queers Turn to Jeer

By RANDY WICKER

*An ILGO Members Personal Notes on the 1992 St. Patrick's Day Parade:*

At last, St. Patrick's Day. Real-life nitty gritty showdown time. Once again, I would join the Irish Lesbian and Gay Organization marching up Fifth Avenue.

Last year, Dr. Suzanne Phillips and I had joined ILGO and Mayor David Dinkins. Later, endless arguments over how many had booed us and how many had cheered us motivated me to buy a top-of-the-line Sony camcorder to avoid such confusion in 1992. That's why I call my camera "Paddy."

Dressed in simple male drag, my roommate, Marsha - the legendary black transvestite veteran of the original Stonewall uprising - agreed to join me.

Armed with an official NYPD press pass from cable's "Out in the 90's" and an assignment from NYQ, Paddy and I would watch it happen from both sides of the police lines.

With stunning skill, the mainly lesbian leadership of ILGO had brilliantly stalked and cornered the Hibernians, brought them to court and publicly convicted them of unlawful-but-legally-unpunishable anti-gay discrimination. For the second year running they'd made Irish homophobia and religious intolerance the media's big, interesting story on St. Patrick's Day.

It was a stunning accomplishment for the informally structured 2-year-old group with only about 150 unofficial members, barely 10 percent of whom comprise an activist hard core.

The first round of legal battles might have left the Hibernians "officially" in charge of "their" parade and the gays legally excluded, but today it was ILGO that was pulling the strings and really running the show.

Refusing to use ill health and bad weather as an excuse, an ailing Mayor Dinkins (he only recently had been hospitalized) officially said he was "boycotting" the parade and stayed home. Along with a warm message, he

dispatched hundreds of NYC's Finest to protect his friends.

Gav Councilman Tom Duane was joined by Comptroller Liz Holtzman, Attorney General Robert Abrams, council President Andrew Stein, Borough President Ruth Messinger and a gaggle of other office holders for the alternative gay parade up Fifth Avenue.

The gays stepped off early. The Hibernians' unintended gift, a worldwide media bonanza, was readily apparent. Ne women and camera crews outnumbered both the onlookers and the cops all the way to 66th Street. Parade.

There, a half-block long pen was ringed by a solid wall of policemen, securely separated from all adjoining areas by a wide no-man's land, on either side.

Sixty-Sixth Street was heavily guarded so as to be both a safe entrance and exit.

In 1991, Mayor Dinkins' presence and respect for their Division 7 host's hospitality acted to subdue the wilder activists. As appreciative guests, ILGO had agreed to observe parade rules which prohibited all slogans and signs except those reading: "England Out of Ireland." Political buttons, even T-shirts with symbols or slogans weren't supposed to be worn.

This year was different. ILGO and the hundreds of tag-alongs who'd joined them were not bound by parade rules. As outsiders, they were free - free to camp it up, free to wear whatever they wanted, free to express themselves with signs, free to chant or taunt and heckle various groups as they filed by.

This year, the rejected would sit in judgment of those who had rejected them. Those who had done the reviewing last year would be reviewed themselves this year. As the press analysts noted, using other terms, now the roles were reversed. It was the queers turn to jeer.

It was great living theater, righteous anger, hilarious parody, relieved mainly through frivolity. Critics would take it all too seriously, complaining that civility had certainly died.

Bill Dobbs was no longer the respected lawyer pictured next to the NEW YORK TIMES news story about various noted gay activists supporting the ACLU's contention that, in fact, the Hibernians had a Constitutional right to discriminate.

Now, Dobbs sported a string of pearls the size of golf balls, wore a baseball cap turned backwards and held high his sign mockingly proclaiming: "Lavender Emerald Society - Oscar Wilde Division."

When the Howard Stern Show's stuttering interviewer wandered by seeking interviews for the weekend program, Dobbs declared that he was "furious that Howard has dumped me for Frankie Biene and burned all my love letters."

The first military units marched by stone-faced as the onlookers whistled, hooted and hollered. Then things got more serious with repeated chants of "Hey, Hey, Ho Ho! Homophobia has got to go!" the sight of frumpish, sash-festooned Hibernian officials, Sen. Alfonse D'Amato, former Mayor Edward Koch and others ignited furious taunts of "Shame! Shame! Shame!" A hundred fingers angrily jutted out in rhythmic unison.

A few marchers responded by giving the onlookers their middle-finger—exactly what the Hibernians had accused some gays of doing the previous year, describing it as "Outrageous behavior."

But Paddy would catch me in even the slightest exaggeration. The overwhelming majority of those marching comported themselves with utmost dignity as required by their own stultifying rules.

I spotted Brian Rohan, the Irish Voice reporter. For a short while, we stood side by side watching the event we'd both come to cover. I detailed my objections to last year's St. Patrick's Day sound-bite coverage by the media, including the gay media, which totally ignored the admittedly outnumbered bystanders who had cheered, choosing instead to fall back on ugly stereotypes depicting all Irish as crass, loud and intolerant.

"Funny, you'd say that," he volunteered. "That's the way I felt about last year's coverage too."

Nearby, everyone had just commenced booing a bagpipe band.

In every respect ILGO's leadership was desperately understaffed. Of those present, gay activists outraged over the homophobic behavior of the parade officials greatly outnumbered ILGO members and those genuinely concerned about Irish causes.

Paddy and I had gone back into action. I'd promised to capture some "smiling Irish Faces" this St. Patrick's Day. Little did I suspect, most of them would belong to cops.

Up went the chant "We're here! We're Queer! So are some of you!" Thousands of uniformed officers passed in casual relaxed formations. Nearly all smiled or laughed. Some nodded "Yes" and jokingly pointed at those marching beside, or in front of, themselves. A very few betrayed a thinly-veiled hostility, waving back with accentuated broken wrists. Paddy and I could clearly prove that at least the cops had a ball with the queers this St. Paddy's Day. The glum gumshoes were greatly outnumbered.

Still, Paddy and I waited, wondering when - if ever - we'd really hear cheers, of by and for the people.

Officer Steven McDonald, NYPD's living hero, paralyzed from the neck down was wheeled by. ILGO's Paul O'Dwyer and those who knew McDonald had spoke out for including the gays in last year's parade, applauded and tried to send up a small cheer.

But others, unaware of how badly-mannered they really were, continued shouting "Two, four, six, eight, How do you know your kids are straight?" at him, his wife and son.

Unexpectedly, IT happened. Several members of one of the first groups of marching youngsters, a college or high school contingent, commenced waving and cheering the outcasts. The greetings, sporadic at first, exploded into a crescendo as both groups really got into it - cheering and laughing and applauding one another.

For a few moments, everyone had ceased being prisoners of the war raging around them, managing to forge a short-lived warm respite on this otherwise cold, mostly hate-filled day.

The demonstrators were growing tired and desultory.

"Show more leg! Show more leg!" a few others chided jokingly as husky older men in kilts bounded by.

The nurses from St. Vincent's their small white hats glistening in the winter sun, smiling and waving as they passed, brought forth repeated declarations of "Thank You! Thank You!" and "We love You!"

Finally, the unexpected appearance of an all-black high school band wearing bright blue caps, blasting forth as they went, received a mini-ovation. At least one minority group had gotten in.

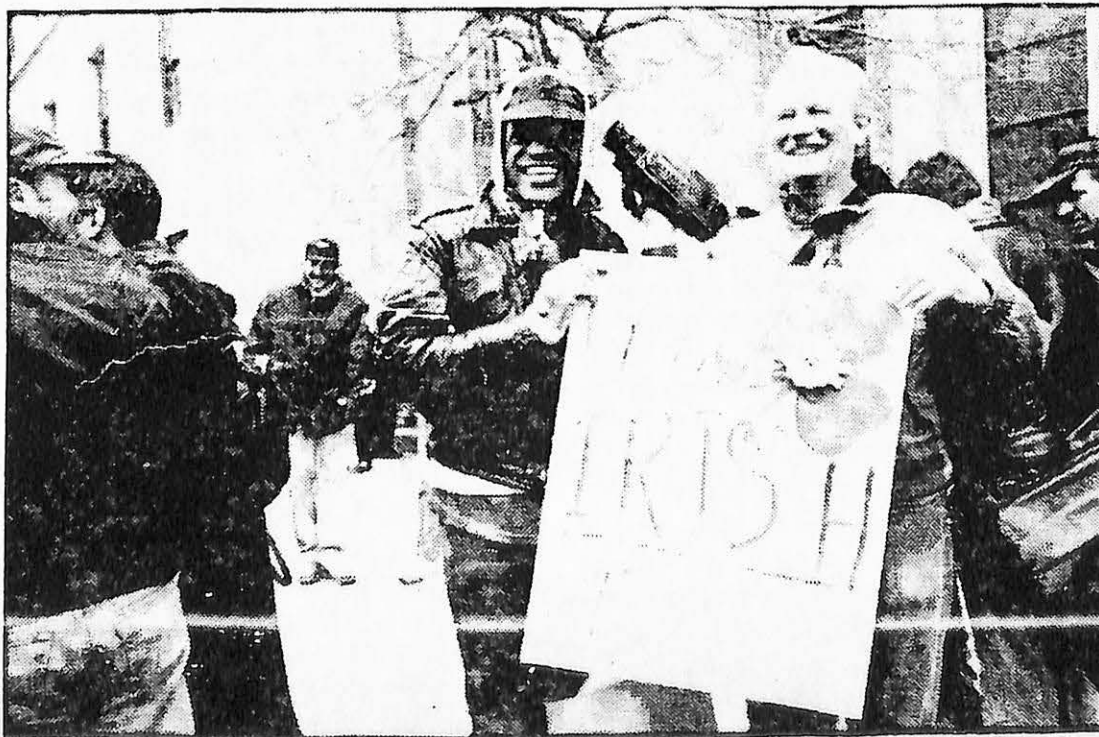
Three hours after stepping off, their ranks beginning to thin, Eileen Clancy, ILGO's chief marshal, announced the time had come to go. Under heavy police escort, singing "We're here, because we're queer, because we're here," they wound through the streets to the nearest subway, joined startled onlookers on several cars and headed home, still sharing gay tunes of fun and comradeship.

For two hours, with Paddy's help, I'd captured a bit of history. Later I could hardly sleep while mentally sorting through the day's lingering images.

Once again, I was haunted by memories of those marchers, sometimes only one of the 20 in their contingent, who broke ranks with the other, who openly waved and continued to wave despite everything.

It seems my heroes are the same, year after year.

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WEARIN' O' THE GREEN (AND LAVENDER) — Hoboken gay rights activists Malcolm "Marsha" Michaels (left) and Randy Wicker (right) joined the Irish Lesbian and Gay Organization (ILGO) at the New York St. Patrick's Day Parade Tuesday. Although the gay group was excluded from the parade proper, they staged their own procession up Fifth Avenue, from 59th to 66th street. Wicker says he plans to lead a gay contingent in Hoboken's St. Patrick's Day parade next year.

\*\* ONE FINAL NOTE: It's not worth missing sleep over, but if you want to tune in to The Jackie Mason Show's "Review of 92" (to be broadcast on channel 9 in NYC on tuesday, January 12th) you'll get to see Joe Cooper & myself get some comments in on gays in the military & the Rainbow Curriculum, the 3rd of 4 segments on that show. Broadcast in other markets at different times.