

What's Up and Coming in Downtown Entertainment - pages 6 & 7

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## The Case of Marsha's Death: Mystery on the Waterfront

By Claude Solnik

It was rush hour last Monday, but things were quiet on the Christopher Street pier. Then, children walking down the pier spotted a body floating in the water. Minutes later, officers in police boats fished the body out of the Hudson as bystanders tried to figure out who it was.

"I didn't realize who it was," said a man who had come from a local deli when the police arrived. "I couldn't identify who it was at all."

By the end of the day, although family members were not allowed to view the body or photos of it, the body had been identified through fingerprints. It was 46-year-old Malcolm Michaels, Jr., better known as "Marsha," a transvestite who had become a well-known campaigner for gay rights. One of those involved

in the Stonewall Rebellion, he had ridden in a limousine for a previous Gay Pride march and just days before his death had walked in this year's march marking the 23rd anniversary of Stonewall. He had once modelled for a silk screen portrait by Andy Warhol.

"We don't have evidence whether Marsha walked out to the water or not. What we're looking for is evidence, whether it was a crime or not a crime," said Bea Hanson, a spokesperson for the New York City Gay and Lesbian Anti-Violence Project. "Transvestites are often targets, in this neighborhood especially. We want to rule out foul play."

The death, only days after the Gay Pride March held a dance on that pier, has raised questions over whether he fell, was pushed or

worse. And it has raised further questions about the safety of nearby derelict and dangerous piers.

Some people say that, as the medical examiner's report indicates, Marsha probably committed suicide. Although no note was left, Marsha, they say, would not have written one. He was being treated at St. Vincent's for AIDS and was in pain that, some people say, might have become excruciating.

"He once said he went to the river and saw his father in the water at the bottom of the river," said Randy Wicker, one of Marsha's housemates. "Marsha was incapable of saying I'm going to kill myself and jump in the river, but my reaction

*Continued on page 5*



Villager Photo by Darleen Rubin



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*Continued from page 1*

was he might've gone down there."

Many people - including Wicker and the Gay and Lesbian Anti-Violence Project - also feel that, while a suicide is possible, it is not necessarily probable.

The police, officially have labeled Marsha's death as a probable suicide, but are also investigating the death as the fifth possible anti-gay homicide in New York City this year.

The second possibility - after suicide - is that the death may have been an accident. Signs on the piers saying "Area Unsafe Keep Off" have become a kind of joke.

"Cops come by and blow their horn and tell them to come off the piers," said a man who works in the area. "I see people go out there at night. Homeless people sleep out there. Somebody's going to fall."

If Marsha fell from any pier except the one on Christopher Street, an accident would be more than likely. While some piers in Chelsea are being developed, others are in bad disrepair. Oil cans serve as trash cans beside graffiti that says "Queers Rule the Piers." On a recent day, a flier entitled "Personal Finances and HIV" and July Fourth leftovers, cheap firecrackers, littered the ground. On the other side of a chain link fence, which sags where dozens of people climb it every day, broken pieces of police barricades were regularly used as planks to reach the dilapidated piers. People routinely set the piers on fire, said one man.

But the Christopher Street Pier, renovated and paved, is in better condition than the rest.

If Marsha fell from the Christopher Street Pier, questions over when he fell may be more than academic. A report from the city's medical



*Villager Photo by Brad Rickerby*

## Impromptu Memorial on the Piers

examiner indicated that Marsha drowned on July 2 or 3. But several people have since reported seeing Marsha on July 4 at locations including 21st and West Sts. and a bookstore on Hudson St. The difference is significant, because as of July 3, to prepare for Operation Sail, the entire Christopher Street pier had been fenced in, making it more difficult if not impossible to fall off it.

Then there is the third possibility: that Marsha may have been pushed. Violence on or near the piers is hardly rare.

"Beware of Muggers. Don't be Caught Alone" is scrawled on one pier.

Several years ago a man who worked at Riker's Island killed transvestites on the piers. And on July 4, in what is being described as a "bias" incident, Edgardo Medina (known as Willie Medina) was attacked and beaten by six people at Christopher and Hudson Streets. He was treated at St. Vincent's Hospital.

"In the beginning I thought this must've been accidental," said Wicker, whose store, Uplift Lighting, includes a window with several memorials to people who died of AIDS. "Now I've gone from thinking it's a 10 percent chance to more of a 40 percent chance of foul play."

Marsha left the house he shared with Randy Wicker and George Flimlin early Thursday (laundry day for them) morning. He sometimes but did not always dress in drag, and four days later, when he was fished out of the Hudson, he was wearing male clothes including a red t-shirt, jeans and sneakers.

"Wearing male clothes, he was less likely to have any trouble," said an employee at Wicker's store. "But there are some people who are less likely to go after a transvestite than after someone who just seems effeminate. Transvestites have a reputation for taking care of themselves. They often carry weapons."

The New York City Gay and Lesbian Anti-Violence Project, which recorded some sort of anti-gay attack in the Village every 14 hours last year, is treating the case as a possible homicide. Transvestites, they said, are prime targets for attacks near the piers.

"I have every reason to believe that there's a high possibility of some sort of foul play in this case," said Bea Hanson. "Police said the body was severely decomposed. I wonder whether something had happened to the body so they couldn't detect anything. No photos were released to relatives or friends."

People reported that teenagers sometimes head down to the piers to cause trouble.

"They tried to torch me," said a homeless man. "They break bottles on your head. They're just looking for something to do. They prey on homeless and homosexuals."

Another man told a similar story. "I watched

a guy get pushed in three weeks ago and I helped a cop pull him out with jumper cables."

"We're still asking if anyone knows anything," said a friend of Marsha who worked at Uplift Lighting. "We don't know what happened. We may never know."

On and near the piers this week, Marsha's friends talked about him. Marsha had been a member of Hot Peaches, a theater troupe, and had joined the Gay Liberation Front. He would assemble elaborate floral hairpieces at Uplift Lighting and head out with them on in full regalia.

"He was part of Stonewall. He threw bottles. He helped people led into the paddywagon out of the paddywagon," said Robert Heide, a Village resident. "He was a defiant, aggressive force at Stonewall, which has become such a mythic thing."

Other memories, though, were more recent and less pleasant. The Elizabeth, New Jersey, native was being treated for AIDS at St. Vincent's. He had, Wicker says, some "mental episodes." Robert Heide told about how he had walked Marsha to the PATH station before Marsha went home to Hoboken and how, with AIDS, Marsha had said he was "wobbly." Although he received Social Security benefits, he had panhandled at and near the piers. One of Marsha's housemates, George Flimlin, had celebrated a birthday on July 4, but Marsha hadn't been there.

A memorial service is planned for July 26 at 3 p.m. at the Duane United Methodist Church, Seventh Ave. and 13th Street, but other small memorials have already been set up.

Beside the metal wall along the pier covered with spraypainted names of people who have died of AIDS, a bunch of bottles (Budweiser, Crazy Horse, St. Ides) were neatly arranged into the shape of a body. Two twigs were tied together into a cross with a red and white striped straw. There was no name on the memorial.