

THE QUEEN



SOME DAYS IN THE LIFE

The Queen, currently packing us in at the Ansley Mall Mini Cinema, ranks with *A Hard Day's Night* and *The War Game* as one of the best of the genre of film-making which combines *cinema verite* techniques with those of British and American television documentaries. Unlike many "documentary" type films, *The Queen* is beautifully edited—it doesn't suffer from the sprawling inconclusiveness, and thus the structural sloppiness, of many such films. The camera maintains a perfect balance between realism and fantasy. It presents its controversial subject-matter honestly and at the same time sympathetically, without, however, falling prey to the *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner* kind of phony liberalism. But as much as I admire this film's technical virtuosity, "movie images are rarely abstract or geometric designs, and . . . when they include people and places and actions, they have implications and associations" (Pauline Kael.) It is the implications and associations of the images in *The Queen* to which I would like to devote some space, for this film has more to say about America than most political tracts about life in the best (affluence, technology) and worst (moral pollution, imperialism, violence) civilization ever to exist on this planet.

The Queen goes "behind the scenes" at a beauty contest. But this contest is different . . . and *vive la difference!* The film opens with the arrival in New York City of contestants for the title of Miss All-America, each of them a former regional contest winner, all of them men. We see them learning the rules of the contest from "Sabrina," promoter of the contest and sometimes-narrator of the film. We see them in their hotel rooms, practicing their acts, renewing old acquaintances, and discussing homosexuality. We go with them to try on evening gowns and wigs, and we are there when they are making up. And at last we see the contest itself, the crowning of Queen, the stunning "harlow" (Richard Finnochio), the angry protest of a bad loser and finally, we see the winner, equally beautiful out of drag, waiting at the bus station to leave the city, his suitcase in one hand, a sparkling crown in the other.

Throughout this exploration of a world normally

hidden, or invisible, to most Americans, the emotion or *tone* that emerges as dominant, a freshness, a freedom, the best word *gaiety*. You may ask why, since this film trespasses territory which is marked on all official maps as degraded, or, most euphemistically, "sad," indoctrinated with the belief that the homosexual is termed "gay" *ironically*, that its inhaling laughing on the outside, crying on the inside, reverse is true. Homosexuals, *outside* the parties, the gay bar, the drag ball, etc. live in a totalitarian world, one which is not merely liberal but anti-sexual. The word "gay" *accurately* the mood which reigns wherever homosexuals freely and enjoy each other's company *without degradation*, that of pretense. The paddy waddy billy club (not to mention universal moral censure) are never far away.

Most non-homosexuals, however "too pathetic" or "liberal," view the gay world as masquerade, of illusion and deception and Donald Webster Cory (a homosexual) put it on the contrary, a place where homosexuals lay aside their masks . . . here there is a gaiety that is seldom seen in the other comparable clubs, bars and inns. . . . Music comes forth. The audience talks to the rhythm, drinks to the drums and breathes the air of the music, and as the door opens to see who has just entered.

More pertinent to *The Queen*, in a clip from *Homosexual in America* entitled, appropriately, "Glitters Is Not Guilt," Mr. Cory describes "a masquerade, ironically enough, where one card the mask." Here is one of the few places where there is a sharply defined demarcation and illusion, between role and actor. One may compare *The Queen* with any television broadcast of the Miss America contest to appreciate this fact. The existence of the Miss America contest (gay, illegitimate, thus normal) and those of, for instance, the All-America contest (gay, illegitimate, thus normal) is the ostensible equation so that straight=fake=real. There is no more fantastic creature than

visible, to most Americans, the one mood, the one that emerges as dominant is of a healthy, vibrant, freedom, the best word for which is "gay." You may ask why, since this film travels through a world which is marked on all official maps as sordid, most euphemistically, "sad." We've all been with the belief that the homosexual subculture is "gay" ironically, that its inhabitants are living outside, crying on the inside. Actually the world of homosexuals, outside the private gay parlor, the drag ball, etc. live in a totally hostile, hostile world, one which is not merely anti-homosexual. The word "gay" accurately describes the atmosphere which reigns wherever homosexuals can meet for the company of each other's company without the real world of pretense. The paddy wagon and the police are to mention universal moral revulsion and are ever far away.

For homosexuals, however "tolerant" or "sympathetic," view the gay world as a realm of illusion and deception and disguise. As Mr. Cory (a homosexual) put it, a gay bar is, in essence, a place where homosexuals may go "to hide their faces . . . here there is a gaiety, a vivacity, a life, seen in the other comparable taverns, nightclubs, and inns. . . . Music comes forth unceasing. . . . They dance to the rhythm, drinks to the rhythm, they breathe the air of the music, and looks around to see who has just entered."

Relevant to *The Queen*, in a chapter of *The Queen of America* entitled, appropriately, "All That Glitters is Not Gold," Mr. Cory describes the drag ball as a place, ironically enough, where one goes to "hide their faces." Here is one of the few places in America where there is a sharply defined demarcation between truth and role and actor. One has only to compare the experience with any television broadcast of the Miss America contest to appreciate this fact. The reasons for the existence of the Miss America contest (straight, legitimate) and those of, for instance, the Miss Chicago contest (gay, illegitimate, thus *queer*) reverse the equation so that straight=fantasy and gay=the more fantastic creature than the young

woman who is crowned in Atlantic City to the tune of Bert Parks' "There she is . . ." The obscurity of the Miss America pageant could not exist outside a culture whose gods are Mammon and Hymen. Those lily-white smiles exude dollar marks and missiles and chastity belts. Homosexuals have lived intimately with the falseness and cruelty of America, and they have had to contend with their special insight by transforming it, lest it destroy them psychologically. Thus, the drag ball or beauty queen contest is in essence a quite serious game, a positive *healing* ritual where the contortions and gestures of a sick, insane society are transformed through the folk art of a troupe of self-sustaining actors into a true guerilla theatre, "caricaturing the caricature" (D.W.C.). These men are not transvestites; they don't want to be women. They are homosexuals who want to be good drag queens. God only knows, and I shudder to think, what the contestants for the crown of Miss America want to be!

As "Sabrina" says of her contestants, "All [they] want is to be loved." They obtain this love by learning the in's and out's of a nebulous, non-sexual enigma commonly referred to as *style*. That "style" in the gaudy affluent Western world has little to do with sex is demonstrated by *The Queen*: a group of young men, black and white (racial prejudice and discrimination are seldom a part of any gay community), from Fire Island to Mississippi, men who differ in appearance as much as any group of young men could, become, with the aid of clothes, make-up, music, their own ingenuity, and perhaps more than a little magic, real live Cinderellas, radiating sex and charm and majesty. This is the way it should be done—the Miss America contestants cheat (as does "Harlow" and, I might add, her first runner-up who really should have won) because they don't begin with nothing; the deck is not stacked against them.

If you are not gay and you see *The Queen*, your experience will illuminate some of the darkness of life in America; it will show you things—about yourself and the country in which you live—that you probably never would have seen otherwise. And, after all, isn't that one of the functions of film and drugs and sex and revolution—to take us where we think we are not able to go, but where we need, desperately, to be.

—miller francis, jr.

