

STEP INTO MY PARLOUR



SHAUN PROULX TALKS TO SKY GILBERT

By Shaun Proulx

Sky Gilbert. You either love him or he drives you nuts. Writer, director, filmmaker and one hell of a drag queen, he's a controversial Canadian artist to be reckoned with. His plays have been produced from Toronto to New York, San Francisco, Chicago and London, and include the 1990 Dora Award winning *The Whore's Revenge* and *Suzie Goo: Private Secretary* which won him another Dora in 1992. His poetry has been published in a number of anthologies, his films include *My Summer Vacation* (presented at Hong Kong, Melbourne, London, San Francisco and Los Angeles gay and lesbian film festivals), and of course, he's most widely touted as co-founder of the premiere North American queer theatre, Buddies In Bad Times. His theatrical directing credits include *Anything Goes* and *Salome* at the Shaw Festival, and ever catch the children's show *Dudley The Dragon?* That's him playing the Genie. Then there's his column in every other eye - the alternative magazine usually clogged with angry reader mail ranting about something he's gone and said in his *Pink Panther* space. His memoirs, *Ejaculations From The Charm Factory*, had everyone reading just to see if their names made it in.

Gilbert's most recent novel, *I Am Kasper Klotz* has him stirring the pot again - with a mighty big spoon. In it he delves into the psycho-sexual issues all gay men have to deal with in this time of AIDS, with mass-hysteria and epidemics thrown in and starring Kasper Klotz, HIV positive, ugly, and calculatingly infecting anyone who angers or even annoys him. It's challenging, riveting, funny, and whether anyone will admit it or not, tells a few things the way they really are.



I caught up with Gilbert for lunch in the Village to discuss the book that's going to anger a lot of people - when they finally get around to reading it.



I Am Kasper Klotz is an awesome book.



Oh, I'm glad you liked it.



I didn't know what to expect, I hadn't read any of the reviews when it first came out.



It was really mixed. Kind of angry. Some good reviews, but a lot of negative ones.



Why angry? Because you're raising things people don't want to talk about?



Yeah, exactly. Some of them couldn't deal with it. Someone said I was trying to piss people off, (laughs) which isn't true. But anyway.



I can see why people feel that way, even though it's a shame, but you've got to be used to it.



Well, the book got a great review in the *Globe*. I didn't expect it to get good reviews in the community because it's just dealing with the community too much.



One of your inspirations for the book was an essay on AIDS and mass hysteria.



I quote from it at the beginning of the book and it's called 'The Group Fantasy Origins Of AIDS'. The essay just completely blew me away, and it's written by a guy named Casper Schmidt. In this essay he wrote about the notion that AIDS was a mass hysteria and he basically related it to various actual mass hysterias. And there isn't much documentation on them but there are certain mass hysterias. Mass hysterias are when a large group of people get a disease and there's either no pathogen or they can't find why and those are the hysterias that are also in the book. I sort of put all that into (the character) Cindy Lou.



You are obviously very interested in HIV and AIDS from a social and cultural perspective.



What interests me most about AIDS and HIV is looking at it culturally and socially because it's not just a physical disease. It has so much baggage. And that's what the book is about. One of the things the book is about.



On the 'We Recommend' page of **GayGuideToronto.com** we have *I Am Kasper Klotz* listed, and the blurb alongside it goes something like 'the truths within this book will stick with you long after you put it down.' Because I really do think you raise points that people in our community will recognize in certain aspects of their own behaviour or way of thinking, whether or not that will ever be admitted to.



The book deals with issues like barebacking and notions of morality around safe sex behaviour, and these are not issues that I feel are dealt with. I don't think some little forum on barebacking is dealing with the fact that every time I go out to the bathhouse I get somebody – practically – who wants to have bareback sex with me. That's what happens. It's just everywhere. One of the ways I totally agree with the whole AIDS community service organizations is that the issue should be discussed. It's like the argument that we shouldn't talk about sex in education because then school kids will want to have sex. Well excuse me, but kids are already having sex, we'd better discuss it. 'If we talk about barebacking then gay men will want to bareback.' Well excuse me, but gay men are barebacking, so you'd better talk about it.



Don't you think one of the things that stop us all from talking about things like this is that we worry too much about what others will think of us?



I really think it has a lot to do with notions of respectability, which I'm constantly challenging.



Self-respectability?



Trying to be a 'respectable' member of the community. What's happened to gay men is something that happens to anyone who has been put down all their life and berated. You see the opportunity for some kind of respectability.



And you go for it.



And you go for it. And it's totally understandable and it's also kind of silly because you over-do it, you go in the opposite direction: 'Oh, I *can't* be seen smoking a cigarette in public!'. It's like the Rosie O'Donnell thing I wrote in my column. It's like she has to become a super-dyke, hardly a 'dyke' at all - a super-person basically. The most charitable generous mother in the world, and it's insane to imagine you have to do all that. Imagine that kind of pressure. I remember one of my therapists once saying to me - this is very revealing of my upbringing and my background - 'Oh, you couldn't just be gay, you had to be the *best faggot*.' I do have notions of success in myself that I'm constantly countering, notions of, you know, 'getting somewhere', and doing what I want to do with my life.



Early in the book Kasper tells us about his neighbours in the apartment he lives in, including the drag queen who is bound and determined to get AIDS. (*"Without HIV, she was, by day, a janitor at a pharmacy and, by night, an ugly untalented drag queen whose family despised her. With HIV, she became a glamorous drag star whose family visited her at least once a month to keep up on her precarious health....And I could tell. She was wishing, praying, and hoping that her stubborn "indeterminate" could become HIV positive."*) Have you ever heard of the medical intuitive Carolyn Myss? One of her books is called *Why People Don't Heal and How They Can* and I'd dare say she'd agree that mindset exists more than we'd like to know in all kinds of people.



I don't think in anyway the mindset is particularly a gay thing, but it is applicable. This isn't just my theory. There's a wonderful book called *The Stonewall Experiment* by Ian Young and he talks about self-hatred in gay men and the gay culture, and how it's a perfect breeding ground for AIDS. He talks about this whole notion of wanting to be sick, having an identity as a gay men, a way to deal with your family....people's parents still ask whose fault it was their kid turned out gay. 'Did I do something wrong?', and you say, 'No, Mom, you didn't do anything wrong.' *About being gay*. I think in many ways AIDS is a way for people to deal with homophobia. One person I know came to me and his story of getting HIV was a happy story. He was gleeful. He told me 'It's the best thing that's ever happened to me, it's changed me', and sure, I understand the idea of turning around your life and making the best of everything, but then there's a difference between that and having a psychological need to be dying. Or to be seen as a dying person.



I have a friend who is HIV positive who, when he told me, had the definite stance about it that it was something he was glad to have gotten over with.



Gay men are so terrified about it, about getting it, about the uncertainty. 'I have a huge chance of getting it....I have a huge chance of dying...sex is really dangerous....'



That's exactly how my friend was about it, 'Just get it and get it over with.' And his attitude has never changed.



It's cynical, but I do see that around and I find it really frightening.



Then in *I Am Kasper Klotz*, Kasper says "A lot of gay guys...get drunk because they want to have sex, but they don't want to know who their partners are." Because the next day they might have to say hi to them on the street. What does Sky say?



(laughs) Well, you know, I'm guilty of that. And I'm writing about myself to some degree. I've done that. I think that's one of the things that makes my book, I hope – it's already been called by the *Globe* a humane book or whatever, although I should be able to say that myself without it – the things that I criticize in the book are things about myself that I see, it's not about me pointing fingers at other people. And I would say as much as I love promiscuous sex, there can be a huge humanity about it as well as a huge inhumanity about it.



There's also a real civility about it.



(laughs) It can be. But it gets such a bad rap and I think it's very important to talk about it, because so many people avoid it because of it's bad rap, when I think it's really good for you. (laughs) It's really good for your mental psychological functioning. I don't talk about the dark things about being promiscuous like going out and getting murdered – which people think is what ends up happening to promiscuous people and it hardly ever happens. I do think that Kasper is so hating, and I put some of my own self-hatred in there and my own homophobia. Because I think that's something we all have too, as gay men. You just brought up a really interesting point that I don't think a lot of gay men understand, that I think it is civil, that's what the deal is. If I go to a bathhouse it's not to have a love affair with someone, it's to have a civil sexual situation and you don't expect to be followed around. And that's what's civil about it. What's civil is when people know the rules. We'll have better sex in the future if we keep to the deal. The dark side of it though is the people that are ashamed and self-hating and don't want to acknowledge the fact that they go there.



Why did you set the book in the States?



There are two things. I do feel guilty about that. But I think it's going to be a long time before it's widely read, so anyway. First of all, though, I'm an American. My father still lives there, I'm still a citizen. I really feel wonderful about Canada and I love Canada. But it's really hard for me to distance myself. And I also think that there's American-ness about the voice in the book. So there's that. But I will say my publisher told me it should be set in a nameless or American place because if it's a Canadian setting it won't sell in the States. And I know that's true. I had a big fight about that with my first novel, actually. What turned me around was just that it was an American voice. I love Canada but I feel like someone who's living in a benevolent country, because there's so many things about the States that I don't like, that I in fact hate.



Perhaps too from a writer's point of view or a creative point of view, if you were to set it in Toronto you'd be limited by the very strong mental image you'd constantly carry of the Village and the people you always see here.



Yeah, oh yeah. I also think that gay villages are everywhere to some degree.



Have you been accused of taking your shit-disturbing to a new height with this new book, doing it through Kasper's voice instead of your own? Having the character do the dirty work of expressing views that are bound to be unpopular?



(thinks) I am used to being demonized for my ideas within the gay community. The gay community's sort of ignoring this book. And I think *that's* important. They will ignore my work because it's upsetting and difficult for them. And I understand that and it's fine. The way they do it is they call the book a rant and say it's filled with my own opinions, and to some degree that's true, but it's true of any novelist, any writer. We have a notion that the best art does not have issues in it. That's not true. The best art is not limited by its issues. Even though Kasper is a plea for the radical view of AIDS, I don't think that's what the book is about. I think it's about homophobia, and it's also about love and self-hatred...human beings and how they hate themselves. And it's about dealing with the devil inside yourself.



Was it easier to write these views though through Kasper's mouth rather than say them through yours?



I take on voices. I discovered with my column in *eye* that I found a voice after about a year. I write 'Pink Panther' in that voice. It's not too complex, it's caustic and angry, but still hopefully somewhat reasonable. In the novel I can get all kinds of extreme emotions out. My anger comes out and spurs me to work. Also in the gay community I'm trying to get people to think about radical AIDS ideas. Those ideas are in there, they may make people think, and that's part of what the novel is but it's not what the novel is *about*.



One of the best parts in the book was having Aaron always going to the doctor for one thing or another, like an ingrown toenail for instance, and the doctors without fail would always assume he was sick with AIDS or at least assume he was gay based on the fact he was skinny and unhealthy looking. And they'd run a whole battery of tests on him over nothing because of it. It reminded me of going to a doctor when I was about 22 with some skin rash or something and her first question was 'are you gay?' and her second was 'are you HIV positive?'



What that has to do with dry skin, I don't know.



Tell me about it. Slapped on some Aveeno and I was dandy.



I've had experiences like that too. Gay men have the same problems that way as women do. Women are only seen as women, so their problems are women's problems. To me it would be great if a lot of professions just saw people as individuals, because we are. The medical establishment doesn't do that.



Why did the Aaron die like Matthew Sheppard?



He was Matthew Sheppard, and he was meant to be. And Matthew Sheppard was HIV positive and so was Aaron. It gave me the opportunity for Kasper to say that being killed by a bunch of homophobes is basically the same as dying of AIDS. I was just falling in love with my boyfriend when I wrote this book, who is very much like Aaron and I used it to help flesh out the character.



Whether anyone agrees with you or not, reason enough to buy the book in my opinion is just to get to that hysterical part at the end when your character Cindy-Lou writes that poem she thinks is in the abstract: 'Do. Me. Now.' I fell off my seat.



I loved writing that. I loved writing that character.



You'll never be called boring. Thanks very much, Sky



Not at all.