

THE FIRST TIME I saw him I could hardly believe my eyes. His naked body was awesome, the shoulders broad enough to fill a doorway. The sculpted mass of his chest was covered with soft brown fur, as were his powerful arms and legs. His thick, uncut cock could keep a boy busy for days on end. And the face—deep, dark eyes, aquiline nose, lush moustache—was the soulful essence of Latin masculinity.

This man who riveted my gaze, this cynosure hunk, was called Bruno—or so claimed the caption under his photos in the magazine. And, almost as astonishing as Bruno's superb face and physique was the magazine's revelation that he was, yes, gay. Openly and unabashedly so.

When I first encountered Bruno in the mid-1970s, I was taking my first tentative steps out of the closet. I'd managed to seduce, thanks to dope and booze, a few of my closest straight buddies, but I kept my distance from real gay men and the "gay scene." In my fear and ignorance, I believed that to be gay meant to become a stereotype: effeminate, limp of wrist, hysterically devoted to Judy Garland. Sure, I dug men, but that image wasn't *me*.

What Bruno's pictures in the magazine did for me (besides providing abundant fantasy fodder) was to offer the alternative image of homosexuality that I craved. If this guy could be gay, then why couldn't I? Not only was he a fantastic sex object, he was also a role model. I could desire him, and desire to be like him.

The magazine that brought me Bruno was called *Mandate*, and over the next months, and for several years, I discovered in its pages more great-looking, masculine guys who redefined for me my image of gay manhood. And I came to realize that this new image of muscled bodies and assertive butch sexuality represented a profound change occurring throughout gay male culture in the 70s: out with the sissy, in with the clone.

By the early 1980s I was openly gay, living with a lover, and working as a writer and editor for Modernismo Publications, Ltd., the company that published *Mandate*. I was part of a five-man editorial and production team that each month put together *Mandate*, as well as its baby brothers, *Honcho* and *Playguy*. At the time *Mandate* was hybrid of nude male photospreads, hardcore porno stories and general interest feature articles and reviews. The other two magazines were strictly sex, *Honcho* quasi-S&M and mildly kinky, *Playguy* more oriented to younger, boyish models.

My editorial duties at Modernismo ran the gamut of writing "boy copy," the captions for the photospreads ("He's played hard on the soccer field, and now it's time to strip off that sweaty jersey..."), to jerk-off fiction (under the *nom de porn*, "Mario Mangiacazzo"), to feature articles about travel, the arts and gay politics.

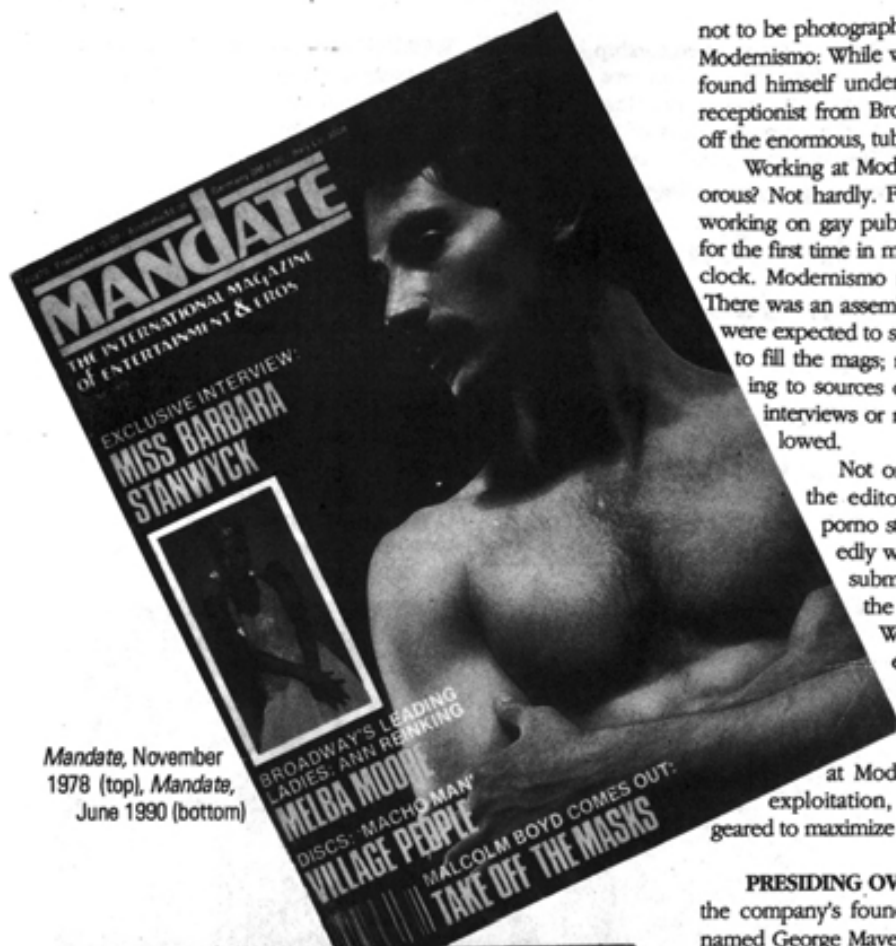
Upon learning that I worked at Modernismo, some people assumed the gig must be all sexy fun and gay glamor. As if we lounged around all day in our jockstraps while hot porno models poured into the offices to be photographed, and maybe, in exchange for a cover shot, flung themselves on our editorial casting couches.

But no porno sexpots were ever snapped at Modernismo; the art directors selected the pictures from slides shown them by the photographers. During my two-and-a-half years at the company, the only porno star I ever met was Al Parker (not Bruno, alas), and he came in to sell some of his own pictures,

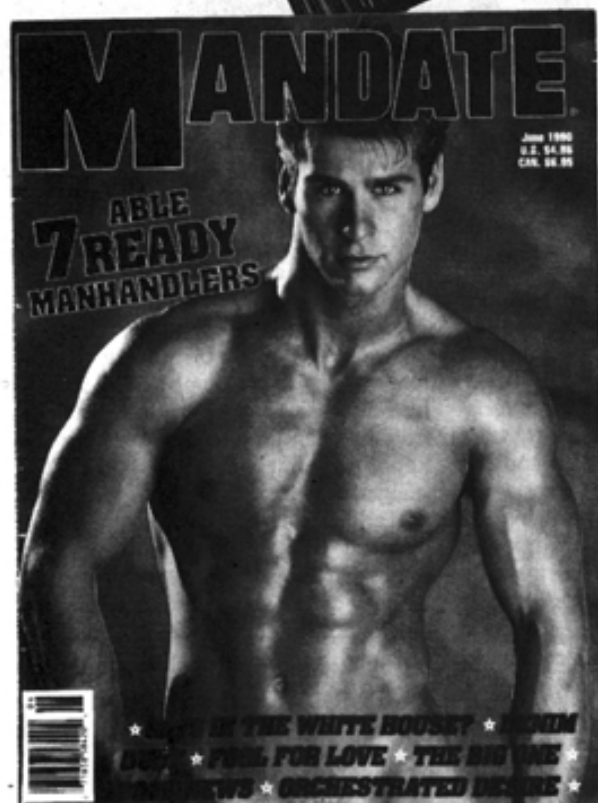
A WANK THROUGH HISTORY

How the cultural chronicles
of a generation
became mere
flesh-flashers
of a new age

by George De Stefano



Mandate, November 1978 (top), Mandate, June 1990 (bottom)



not to be photographed. (My fondest memory of Mr. Parker at Modernismo: While waiting at the front desk one afternoon, he found himself under the rapt gaze of Renee, the big-haired receptionist from Brooklyn, who couldn't take her wide eyes off the enormous, tuberous bulge in his 501s.)

Working at Modernismo could be fun at times, but glamorous? Not hardly. For the first time I was "out on the job," working on gay publications with other openly gay men. But for the first time in my journalism career I had to punch a time clock. Modernismo resembled a factory in other ways, too. There was an assembly-line aspect to editorial production. We were expected to stay at our desks all day churning out copy to fill the mags; normal journalistic practices, such as talking to sources on the phone or leaving the office to do interviews or research, were frowned upon, if not disallowed.

Not only did I and the other two members of the editorial staff crank out articles, boy copy, porno stories and the letters to the editor supposedly written by readers, we also edited freelance submissions and proofread all the material for the three magazines after it had been typeset. We were underpaid for these "diversified" editorial duties (the art directors got more; after all, it was the pictures that sold the magazines) and benefits were minimal.

In other words, the price of being out at Modernismo and doing gay journalism was exploitation, and acceptance of working conditions geared to maximize output, not foster creativity.

PRESIDING OVER THE Modernismo fantasy factory was the company's founder and owner, a Canadian heterosexual named George Mavety. A man of Falstaffian proportions and a chainsmoker (you could locate him during his frequent peregrinations through his corporate domain by following the trail of ash), Mavety was a mercurial character given to backslapping bonhomie one minute and explosions of bad temper the next.

He was also one savvy businessman. In 1974, Mavety saw in the emergence of the post-Stonewall urban gay male "lifestyle" a potential market for a slick, nationally-distributed, monthly, gay magazine. Mavety knew the business end of publishing (he'd been publishing and distributing what's known in the trade as "men's sophisticates"—hetero skin mags); he needed a gay collaborator for the new venture. He enlisted John Devere, who had been editing and publishing a cosy, *After Dark*-ish arts and entertainment magazine called *Dilettante*.

When *Dilettante* folded, Mavety told Devere that he would back a new, explicitly gay lifestyle magazine if Devere would be the editor. "He offered to run the business end, and I would have total editorial control of the new magazine," recalls Devere. "And he made good on that promise."

Devere, a former professor of comparative literature and a self-described "artsy-fartsy culture vulture," envisioned a magazine that would combine in-depth arts and entertainment coverage, gay lifestyle features and nude male photography. In April 1975, *Mandate* made its debut as the "magazine of eros and entertainment."

"There was nothing else like it at the time," claims Devere. *Blueboy* and *In Touch*, two other gay male maga-

zines, appeared at roughly the same time as *Mandate*, but they were not published monthly, were distributed less widely and lacked *Mandate's* distinctive editorial mix. An issue of the magazine might feature an interview with Harvey Milk or Bette Davis, a fashion spread photographed in Egypt and an excerpt from a gay-themed book such as Edmund White's *States of Desire* or Seymour Kleinberg's *Alienated Affections*. And, of course, pictures of naked guys.

The black-and-white nude male photography was supplied by the likes of Jim French (Colt Studios), Roy Blakey, Roy Dean and Target Studios, all of whom specialized in muscular, masculine-looking models. (Devere, art director as well as editor, selected the photos.)

"They were men with extraordinary

Devere's six-year editorship, *Mandate* began focusing more on eros than entertainment, a development Devere attributes to "the permissiveness of the late 70s." "The Mineshaft mindset began to dictate

The Mineshaft mindset began to dictate the evolution of Modernismo Publications

WHAT GEORGE MAVETY began with one artsy-sexy gay magazine in 1975 has grown into a diversified publishing corporation comprising a dozen mass market, slick gay men's magazines. (Mavety continues to publish straight sex magazines, including such titles as *Juggs*, *Hooters* and *Oralrama*.) Besides *Mandate*, *Honcho* and *Playguy*, The Mavety Media Group, as the company is now called, owns *All Man*, *Friction*, *Heat*, *Honcho Overload*, *Inches*, *Male Insider*, *Stallion*, *Torso* and *Uncut*.

Mavety founded some of these magazines; others he acquired from their original owners, such as *Friction*, which he bought from Liberation Publications, publisher of *The Advocate*. Over the past 15 years Mavety has managed not only to open up a market for gay skin magazines but virtually corner it. Though he doesn't



bodies who any hetero woman would want to go to bed with," Devere laughs.

"The nudes," he says, "did sell the magazine, but there were also articles worth reading and talking to your friends about."

Although magazine wholesalers and retail outlets were initially hesitant to carry the new publication, resistance waned as sales figures climbed in the major U.S. cities where *Mandate* was available. Monthly circulation topped off at about 110,000, according to Devere—a figure no gay publication had attained or matched since. *Mandate's* success spawned the soft-core porno magazines *Honcho* and *Playguy*; they were created, says Devere, "to use all the extra photos we didn't have room for in *Mandate*." Toward the end of

the evolution" of all three Modernismo publications, he says. "I knew Mavety wanted to phase out" the original *Mandate* format. "Everything was going in that direction."

Devere responded to the zeitgeist and his publisher's inclinations. *Mandate* started carrying porno stories and the nude photography got progressively raunchier, with close-ups of hard-ons and assholes. Devere says he had nothing against the trend toward raunch; it simply didn't interest him. He left Modernismo in 1980 to start his own greeting cards company, serving as a part-time consultant to Modernismo until Mavety brought on a new team of editors and art directors for his expanding enterprise.

exactly have a monopoly on gay skin mags, he owns more of them than anyone else in the business.

A likely effect of Mavety's near-monopoly is to discourage other would-be publishers of gay erotic magazines from entering an already crowded market. And what about the fact that a straight man is profiting from packaging and selling us our sexual fantasies? Gay men may take the photos and write the stories that appear in Mavety's magazines, but they do not control the production or distribution of these publications. And certainly the profits don't go back into the gay community.

FIVE YEARS AFTER leaving his employ, I'm interviewing Mavety at his corpora-

tions' offices on lower Broadway. When he greets me, I fail to recognize him for a second; he's shed all his former corpulence and is now downright slim. During the interview he speaks in soft, measured tones, with none of the old bluster. Unaccustomed to being interviewed ("I've turned down *Newsweek*," he tells me) he carefully weighs his words, but apparently that's not the only reason for the new soft-spokenness. "I've mellowed a lot since the old days," he says.

Mavety wants to talk mostly about the persistence of homophobia in American society and the problems of being a publisher of gay sex magazines—two inseparable issues for him.

"There's still tremendous non-acceptance of the gay lifestyle in the hinterlands," he says. "I hoped there would've

it's difficult to gauge the boundaries of permissibility. The models display erections, but they don't ejaculate or otherwise engage in overt sexual activity. The fiction, says Mavety, cannot include descriptions of S&M or bondage; also *verboten*, say former staffers, is any mention of man-boy love and watersports. (And anything remotely suggestive of bestiality, as former editor Steven Danbach learned after he published a porno story in which a cat climbs in bed with two naked lovers, who commence fucking. Danbach says Mavety "flipped out" when he came across this scene of petophilia.)

"Lots of people think that because I publish all these magazines selling for \$4.95 I must be making millions," says Mavety. "Certainly I'm in business to make

out of the gay market after having worked so hard to cultivate it. "Besides," he adds, "I wouldn't want to give in to censorship. I consider myself a liberal thinker, and a maverick in my own way."

JUST HOW PROFITABLE are Mavety's magazines? His is a privately-held corporation, and he does not disclose circulation or sales figures. At its peak in the mid-70s, *Mandate* might have sold 110,000 copies a month, but back then there was much less competition. Today, with so many gay magazines on the market, Mavety's and others, it's unlikely that sales of any of Mavety's titles come close to that figure.

A general rule in magazine publishing is that publishers sell about half the magazines they print. To sell 110,000 copies of



been more progress by now, but I think there's actually more homophobia out there today" [than when he began publishing his gay magazines]. Though he spends "hundreds of thousands of dollars" to market the magazines, "there are still places in the country, mainly in the South and Midwest, where you can't get in for love or money."

Outside urban America, many retailers "are frightened to death" to stock gay publications. "If you have a little store in Alabama, are you going to argue that gay people have a right to buy this material?"

To keep the magazines on the market, "we make damn sure we fall within the unwritten guidelines of what's permissible." But with "community standards" varying across the United States,

The current crop of gay skin magazines make no pretense of raising gay consciousness

money, but you won't get rich selling gay magazines. With all the problems it brings, gay publishing has to be a labor of principle or love."

Mavety says it'd be "foolish" to pull

Mandate a month would necessitate a press run of about 200,000 copies. An industry veteran interviewed for this article strongly doubts that Mavety Media Group prints that many copies of *Mandate*. His best guess is that Mavety's most popular titles might sell around 25-35,000 copies.

But with printing costs of 40 to 60 cents per magazine, as the industry analyst estimates, Mavety stands to make a pretty fair profit on a magazine he sells for five dollars, even after marketing and distribution costs.

John Devere claims *Mandate*, *Honcho* and *Playguy* were not huge money-makers in the early years, "and I saw the balance sheets." With the hetero skin mags providing a cushion, Mavety, according to Devere, was able to develop and expand

the gay market. "His slow accretion of gay magazines must, by this point, have become very profitable."

"That's some of the biggest bullshit I've ever heard," snaps John Preston, when told that George Mavety had called gay publishing a labor of love or principle. "I can't believe for a minute that he sees it that way. He just saw a market and exploited it."

Preston, a well-known gay author and journalist, worked at *Modernismo* for a year-and-a-half during the late

70s, writing articles and sex stories for the three original magazines. Back then, under John Devere's editorship, "*Mandate* was a real magazine," he says. "It had some real literary and political value. Ten years ago, it was also one of the few publications that regularly reviewed gay books."

For budding gay writers, magazines like *Mandate* "were valid places for us to write and find our audiences. Now there's a gay writers movement," notes Preston, "but it used to be that the skin magazines were our only outlet, our apprenticeship."

Preston now lives in Maine, where he has been interviewing local men for an oral history project. Not a few of these men, he reports, told him that *Mandate* and other gay slicks "were an announcement of a world to which they could belong" when they felt isolated in their closets. The magazines gave them a window on a culture, a way of life—albeit one stratified by race (most of the models were white) and class (the lifestyle articles and the advertisements promoted middle class, consumerist values).

The magazines also helped some men to acknowledge their sexuality. "They'd be in a store, pick up a copy of *Mandate* and see someone so overwhelmingly attractive they could no longer deny that they



Mandate, November 1976

were homosexual," says Preston.

Sounds familiar. As Michael Bronski observed in his book *Culture Clash: The Making of Gay Sensibility*, magazines like *Mandate*, *Honcho*, *Blueboy*, *In Touch*, etc., "made images of gay male sexuality available to a large number of people, an especially important thing for gay men who may be insecure in their identities."

WHAT DO YOU GET when you plunk down \$4.95 for one of these magazines today? Glossy color photospreads and stroke stories, and there's little to distinguish *Mandate* from *Honcho* from *Playguy* from *Torso*. A non-sex feature occasionally appears in *Mandate* (what remained of the mixed format was eliminated several years

ago) or *Torso*, and the latter runs short book reviews. But basically the mags merit Steven Danbach's dismissal of them as "processed porn."

And how could it be otherwise? I thought *Modernismo* was a factory when I worked there in the early 80s, but it was a Mom and Pop operation compared to the setup at Mavety Media Group. Editor-in-chief Stan Leventhal and his three-man staff produce eight magazines, five of them monthlies. With so many pages to fill and so many deadlines to meet, Leventhal and crew could hardly be expected to shape a distinct editorial personality for each magazine, like John Devere did for *Mandate*.

The current crop of gay skin magazines, Mavety's and those of other publishers, make no pretense of raising gay consciousness or defining a culture. They don't need to, because today's young gay men, unlike my generation, have so many more sources of information, thanks to the expansion of gay publishing during the past 15 years.

The "gal slicks" now deal solely in sexual fantasy. The quality of the photography varies, and the models may or may not turn you on. The fiction is usually mundane, mechanical stuff. But whatever the quality of these magazines, they remain, even in the age of home video viewing, important to gay men's sexual culture.

Their continued presence has broader significance in American society. That these magazines remain available on newsstands, where thousands of men can buy them, is, if not liberation, at least a rebuke to the right-wing censorious brigades so intent on suppressing all images of gay sexuality. ▼



Mandate, June, 1990