

roskoff on the redistricting mess

OUTWEEK

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JEWELLE
GOMEZ &
MARTIN
DUBERMAN
OUT IN PRINT

addressing
an asian
agenda the "model
minority"
acts up

BY NINA REYES



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Photo: T.L. Litt

"I don't want to portray the killing of others as a heroic thing to do. As a feminist, I had to take away the murder aspect—that was the greatest challenge, making the genre mine, because it certainly wasn't mine."

The foundation of much of Gomez's critical writing—she has written numerous essays for lesbian, feminist and gay publications nationwide—is racism, sexism and homophobia. When she talks about gay men's ignorance of sexism, even in the face of AIDS, the "downwardly mobile white girls" of New York's Lower East Side and the imperative of responsible characterization in queer fiction, Gomez is bound to set some teeth on edge. And yet this same maverick voice also states that she no longer reviews books she thinks are bad because she doesn't like to give negative criticism, she worries about self-censorship in the queer community, and, perhaps most unexpectedly, her response to the publication of *The Gilda Stories* (she has published two books of poetry and her essays have been anthologized) is more like that of a fledgling twentysomething author than the seasoned writer she is. These are the many competing tensions in Jewelle Gomez.

Carving out a niche has been part of Gomez's struggle as a Black lesbian-feminist writer; one of her stories about herself puts the struggle in exquisite perspective. "I did this speech once for NYU law school. I stood there, and I told them, 'I am everything you were raised to be afraid of: a person who grew up on welfare, a Black lesbian.' I told them, 'I get it—what it means that I

am here, talking to you—but I want *you* to get it.' I told them, 'It has to make a change in *your* life, not just a change in my life.' That's the big perspective—being Black, being a lesbian. It informs everything I do."

Gomez talks about being a lesbian as if she sprang queer from the womb. But when asked, she admits to having slept with men "for years. I certainly had many, many relationships with men until I decided to just let that part go. But I knew I was a lesbian from the time I was 16—and even as I slept with men, I would tell them I was a lesbian. It has been very exciting to have a lesbian movement to work with. The whole idea of being a lesbian is such an odd thing, such a wonderful thing. If you haven't lived through dealing with creating an identity as a Black woman—well, it's another layer to add on. And it's the most obvious layer."

Being a lesbian is central in Gomez's life, she explains: "It's who I am, it's the heart and soul of my writing. That's who I write for, predominantly—lesbian publications. If I am writing about anything in my life, it is the perspective of a Black lesbian. It informs everything."

And, unlike some lesbian writers who have devoted writing energy to the AIDS epidemic, Gomez is more circumspect, trying, as with every other issue she examines, to explain a larger context: "I feel very strongly that there is a cultural reality that gay men are sexist. If a similar situation [to the AIDS crisis] arose in *our* community, men would not be running to our

side. I think that's a reality that women have to hold on to, that we have to keep our eye on. It doesn't mean we *don't* do the AIDS work. But then we were trained as women to focus on more than one thing at a time. My focus, as a person of color, is to point out that people of color—and women—are used to facing the world on a multitude of thrusts. That perspective is invaluable in the struggle against AIDS."

But it is a perspective that Gomez believes is sorely lacking in the AIDS movement. She said that people have forgotten that, once the epidemic is defeated, "there will still be a need for gay rights. It's unfortunate that it always ends up looking like 'either/or'—if I'm not devoting my time to AIDS work, then I'm a betrayer. But we cannot rank the oppressions and say, 'I am more important than you.' AIDS work does not need to be done at the expense of dealing with men's sexism or racism or anti-lesbian and anti-gay violence. It's something—being able to focus on more than one issue at a time—that women can really teach men. Men would learn a lot if men could get that."

Gomez is a hard worker, and, although she never states it, one believes that she wishes others would work as hard on some of the issues she has devoted her life to. "We have a lot of responsibility to take on—as a movement, as individuals. We have to shake off our roles as oppressors and confront sexism, confront racism, confront the ease with which we lapse into those oppressor roles." ▼

Waking Up From History

CURES: A GAY MAN'S ODYSSEY by Martin Duberman. Dutton. \$19.95 cl. 305 pp.

by Max Cavitch

We were pieces of shit around whom the world revolved.

—from *Cures*

Hart Crane once said that the only thing that can give happiness is "the identification of yourself with all of life. It is a fierce and humble happiness, both at the same time." This is the spirit in which the best autobiographical writing is done, and it is also the spirit that informs Martin Duberman's fierce and humble new book.

Cures is not the first life history

Duberman has set out to tell. His highly praised biographies of Charles Francis Adams (1961), James Russell Lowell (1966) and Paul Robeson (1989) are brilliant examples of how rich and peculiar details of individual lives compose images of whole places and times, nations and generations. A prize-winning historian, playwright, teacher and journalist, Martin Duberman has spent the past three decades

speaking usefully and importantly about the lives of others. In *Cures*, he at last speaks as forthrightly about his own life.

There is something inevitable about this autobiography, as though Duberman's previous work was a sort of rehearsal for it. Throughout his career (cleverly plotted in *Cures*), he follows his urge toward the contemporary and the radical, both politically and professionally.

BOOKS

Beginning as a historian of the American Civil War, Duberman's attention migrates over the years to the story of race relations in this country, the Civil Rights movement, the emergence of the New Left and the crisis in higher education. Alongside these concerns, an increasingly less private and tormented, and more publicly accepting, view of himself as a gay man develops—in part as a result of lessons learned from the battles he witnesses elsewhere. As Duberman puts it, "My understanding and empathy went primarily toward individuals, my interest concentrated on the world of *personal* idiosyncrasy, motive, struggle." For Duberman, history is what people make out of their own lives.

Of course, anybody who calls his life story an "odyssey" has not given up on the power of the past to resonate in the present. Odysseys, from Homer onward, are stories in which the public memory and private life come together, opportunities for identification and recognition and for the rearticulation of hopes long denied. And the articulation of hope is something of which the always-vital, always-imperilled gay community is much in need. Duberman does not mean audaciously to speak for an

entire community, either for its past or for its present. But his book is now part of the public memory that gay people in this country need to preserve and retell. *Cures* demonstrates how and why the rest of us might speak about ourselves: "We all *must* tell our secrets, must come out of our 'shameful' closets, if a more humane, genuinely diverse culture is ever to emerge."

For Duberman, "history" is another word for "self-realization." It's appropriate, therefore, that he should center his life history on his experiences in various forms of therapy. Ranging from the bizarre to the conventional, the "cures" Duberman undergoes all share the negative, often irrational, frequently vicious attitude toward homosexuality that has characterized the mental-health profession for most of this century. Delighted to confirm and exacerbate his early self-hatred, the array of quacks Duberman encounters gives a farcical but sadly accurate picture of the kind of solicitous care that has, until recently, been available to most gay people seeking help.

Most disturbing are the lengthy reconstructions of a number of group therapy sessions, lead by a charlatan named Karl. Despite the caricatured, *Bob Neuhart Show* quality of the sessions and our own ironic detachment from the Dark Age mentality they reflect, the horror of these meetings (which often descend into emotional and even physical abuse) is real. To call Karl's tactics unprofessional is absurd understatement. At various points, Karl advises Duberman to break off all relations with his mother, encourages sexual contact with a woman

in his group and comes close to forbidding any discussion of Duberman's homosexual experiences.

Yet beyond these chilling particulars, it is Duberman's growing unwillingness to see himself through the myopic, hate-filled eyes of others that is the most affecting part of his narrative—the part that gives his reader the greatest opportunity for identification and recognition. In a recent review of *Cures*, *The New York Times* complained that Duberman's odyssey is somehow incomplete, that his healing journey is still underway and does not include a proper "homecoming." But this is not a story about human perfectability. I trust that Martin Duberman has many more books up his sleeve—perhaps even another volume of memoirs (*Cures* leaves off in the mid-70s)—but I don't think that this personal history in any way fails to stand on its own. Duberman himself puts it well in the preface to a collection of his early essays: "My view is that the past will always remain 'uncompleted': We will never grasp its meaning whole, never understand its influence over our lives to the extent we might like, nor be able to free ourselves from that influence to the degree many might wish."

He puts it even better toward the end of *Cures* when he describes his evolving relationship with a man named Stanley: "Sensibly, we stopped talking about a life-partnership and started building, day by day, the history that might in the future convert that hope into a reality." Anyone searching for a homecoming need look no further than this. ▼

Cocoon

ADVICE FROM A CATERPILLAR by Douglas Carter Beane. Directed by Edgar Lansbury. The Lucille Lortel Theatre. 121 Christopher St. (212) 924-8782. Tuesdays through Fridays at 9 pm; Saturdays at 6 pm and 9 pm; Sundays at 3 pm and 7 pm.

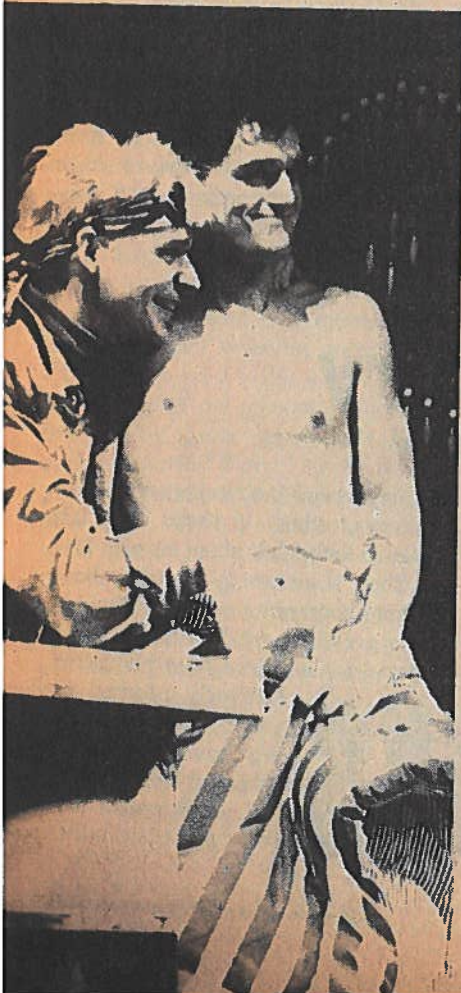
by Jim Provenzano

While *Variety* calls it "a comedy for the '90s," *Advice From a Caterpillar*, a farce, stems from decidedly '80s attitudes. And thankfully, we are all hard-pressed for light entertainment that can deal with the quite-ridiculous permutations

of contemporary romance among gays, straights and bisexuals.

The characters are: Missy (Ally Sheedy), an artist whose work involves collecting and showing her parents' home movies, accompanied by her own biting commentary; her

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