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Documentary's Camera Aims To Shed Light On D.C.'s Closet

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Documentary filmmaker Kirby Dick's latest exposé, "Outrage," promises to be a PR nightmare for certain closeted gay politicians. He names names. He interviews their alleged sex partners. He portrays these officials -- overwhelmingly Republican, with anti-gay voting records -- as hypocrites of the worst sort.

But there is a special place in his heart for one particular conservative lawmaker: Larry Craig, the former senator from Idaho, who was famously busted in 2007 on suspicion of lewd behavior in a Minneapolis airport men's room.

"He never should have been arrested," Dick says. The disgrace that befell Craig was itself a disgrace, in the director's view. "It's a form of entrapment. . . . I don't think that the police should be in that bathroom entrapping people."

Craig, he argues, was a victim of societal homophobia. "And I feel empathy for him."

This may seem an ironic, if not inauthentic, display of sympathy, given that the film makes good use of the police audiotapes released after Craig's arrest. (As "Outrage" begins, we hear Craig insisting to the undercover officer, "I don't seek activity in bathrooms." It plays as a laugh line.) Still, a conversation with Dick, who was in Washington last week to promote Friday's opening of the movie here, suggests a thoughtful auteur who does, on some level, pity his subjects even as his unforgiving camera attempts to strip them of their secret sexuality.

The closet, he points out, forces those who engage in homosexual acts to lead lives of elaborate deception, to betray their spouses, to seek anonymous sex. Conservative public officials who are gay, the film argues, adopt protective camouflage by opposing any legislation -- HIV/AIDS funding, benefits for unmarried partners, same-sex marriage

-- that might identify them as pro-gay: It's a tactic that sets up an interior war against their essential selves.

"The psychology of these people who would, in exchange for a political career, lead a double life, that's almost a Shakespearean character," Dick says.

This dissonance is part of what attracted him to the topic. It supplies a depth to the screen proceedings beyond mere prurience. It also adds to the director's more direct message: He wants to "advance the cause of gay rights," including same-sex marriage, he says. And, "I hope that this film contributes in some ways to the lessening and perhaps eventual demise of the closet."

Dick, 56, is a lanky man whose features weirdly recall an older Andy Dick (no relation). He is, if you must know, married and heterosexual. He lives among the moneyed bohemians of L.A.'s Silver Lake neighborhood with his wife of 23 years, actress Rita Valencia. They have a 22-year-old daughter and 19-year-old son.

"Outrage" will initially open in five cities before wider release. It is Dick's ninth full-form documentary in a career that has largely focused on sexual behavior and, more recently, sexual hypocrisy. His last effort, "This Film Is Not Yet Rated," explored how the movie rating system forgives "Saw"-variety violence and gore while punishing nudity and whoopeemaking. His Oscar-nominated "Twist of Faith" (2004) focused on pedophilia in the Ohio priesthood and how the Catholic Church stonewalled abuse victims. In other films, he has chronicled the work of a sex surrogate ("Private Practices," 1986) and the extreme masochistic acts of a friend who was dying of cystic fibrosis ("Sick," 1997).

The son of public school teachers in Tucson, Dick set out to be an artist and photographer before he became a filmmaker. His most recent projects seem more journalistic than outright artistic, and he welcomes working that niche. "In some ways, the demise of the investigative reporting departments in so many newspapers has left wide-open territory for documentary filmmakers," Dick says. "It's allowed me to pursue subjects that otherwise the press might have been pursuing."

In August 2006, during a visit promoting "This Film Is Not Yet Rated" in Washington, the director found his next project. He says he kept hearing about Republican politicians and staffers promoting an anti-gay agenda, deliberately throwing red meat to the party's base, who were themselves having sex with men. "There were a significant

amount of gay men, many of them closeted, who were behind the Republican victory of 2004," Dick contends.

Their names were bandied about among journalists, and you could easily find them in blogs or political-circuit chatter. But the mainstream media refused to out them even though "the gay press has been writing about this for many, many years," Dick says.

Informed that this newspaper's policy is to identify only self-declared homosexuals, he's perplexed and perceives a double standard. "The press often reports on things that are very painful to the subjects they are writing about," he says. The allegedly gay politicians and others he names in his film (at least five by our count) "are public officials; this is reporting on hypocrisy, and there is an obligation on the press to write about it."

Dick launched the project just two months before the homoerotic instant-message scandal involving congressional pages and Rep. Mark Foley (R-Fla.) hit the media. Then, in January 2007, the filmmaker got in touch with Michael Rogers, a gay blogger who'd been enthusiastically outing politicians and staffers for three years by that point.

"I knew who Kirby was immediately," Rogers recalls. "Hearing that he wanted to document this, I thought, 'That's amazing.' " And the timing couldn't have been better: The Larry Craig episode broke that summer, giving Dick even more material.

Rogers, 45, figures prominently in the movie. Among his scenes is a hammy, Michael Moore-style peregrination around Capitol Hill, where he points out the offices of supposedly gay members of Congress.

Some gay-rights supporters consider Rogers's tactics odious and invasive. Dan Gurley, who was national field director for the Republican National Committee in 2004, once called the blogger "despicable." It's easy to see why: A couple of months before the election, Rogers outed Gurley on Blogactive.com and later posted the RNC official's Gay.com dating profile. Gurley never hid being gay, but to avoid further controversy, he says, the GOP kicked him to the curb when he sought a position in the second Bush administration.

Now working in public policy in North Carolina, Gurley still bears some resentment toward Rogers. Even so, he did agree to appear in the film and attended its premiere the other day at New York's Tribeca Film Festival. Gurley, 44, remains a Republican, albeit a reluctant one, and is now vice chairman of a gay-equality group.

His capsule review of "Outrage"?

"There is more nuance than the film captured," Gurley says from Raleigh. "I am not defending someone who is a closeted gay and votes against the gay community. But it's important to have some understanding of where someone is coming from."

"What makes someone else the arbiter to pronounce when a certain individual should come out? No one can understand that person's individual journey except that person himself. . . . You have to have some understanding of what their personal struggles and generational struggles have been. It just is not as clearly black and white as people want to make it."

Gurley believes he was wrongly targeted for outing: "I make a distinction between the elected politicians and the people who work for them." But Rogers makes no apologies, and says of Gurley: "I think in a very short time he'll be over it. He's already doing good work in opposition to what he came from."

Dick says he doesn't support outing private people, and he acknowledges that outing can be "painful" for public officials. In his view the closet perpetuates a larger message that homosexuality is aberrant, and thereby fosters discrimination, hatred and violence.

He doesn't expect everyone to support his approach, and says: "I welcome the controversy."

In this town, with this topic, he's quite likely to get it.

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