The Waters of Babylon

April 1, 2001 By Patrick Califia

Puritanical, self-loathing gays vs. suicidal advocates of extreme sex: Much mud was slung in the San Francisco bathhouse wars of 1984. The gay Mecca became the first U.S. city to shut off the steam when, on April 9, just weeks before the discovery of HIV as the cause of AIDS was announced, Public Health Director Mervyn Silverman, MD, told the press that he was banning sex in these sex emporia to stop the spread of the disease. The fate of Animals (the vanilla bath for fucking and sucking), the Slot (fisting, leather, S/M), the Hothouse (three floors of dungeons, jail cells and bondage) and many other lucrative locales beloved by the queens of public rut floated in the balance.

At the last minute, Silverman delayed the actual closing, claiming legal technicalities. Having previously insisted that a ban on baths was unlikely to change the behavior of their clientele, he finally pulled the plug in October, after 50 local gay leaders signed a petition saying that the sex spots were killing gay men. “These establishments promote and profit from the spread of AIDS,” Silverman announced. “They are not fostering gay liberation. They are fostering disease and death.”

As someone who had gotten off on the thrill of cruising in public for sex with strangers and performing for a rapt but faceless crowd at the Catacombs and Sutro baths, the end of the baths felt like another kind of death to me. I had lost friends and lovers; now I was losing a realm of sexual possibilities. The intense erotic encounters to be had in the baths were a powerful balm for the wounds gay men endured in a world that hated us. These steamy trysts enfolded us in a web of shared identity and values that was a forerunner of AIDS activism. Others, of course, viewed the bathhouse closure as a triumphant first step toward our treating each other better, including safer sex.

The clubs were padlocked 17 years ago. In January the city health department announced that the rate of new infections among gay men in San Francisco has doubled since 1997, while effective prevention continues to take a bath.

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