Sex Positive

Porn star-cum-publisher Scott O'Hara wants to talk about it

June 1, 1995 By Jim Provenzano

In direct contrast to his appearance, Scott O'Hara speaks with the measured eloquence of a college professor. "Men shouldn't feel so insecure about themselves that they feel the need to eroticize younger, more attractive men," he says. "I believe that a man who is self-confident, who feels attractive, is attractive -- regardless of what he looks like. We would all do better to evaluate partners on other bases besides physical appearance. It eliminates far too large a sector of the population."

Fitting that the former porn performer and publisher of arguably the nation's most irreverent gay sex publication, *Steam*, should be so eloquent in matters sexual.

A quarterly review and journal of sex establishments and cruising spots, *Steam* has become a focus of controversy in regard to safer sex and public sex. *Steam*'s editors have often sounded off about bathhouse controversies and the publication was attacked by the San Diego police for supposedly encouraging illegal sex.

Yet O'Hara takes it all in stride. We chatted in sunny Duboce Park in San Francisco, where O'Hara, a longtime PWA who resides in the quiet hinterlands of Cazenovia, Wisconsin, near Madison, was attending several parties, gallery openings and sex events in his honor.

"There's so many guys who want to know about these bathhouses." O'Hara says. "They need to know if you can stay at this place or if the music's too loud, or should you take a blanket. I've always been into talking about sex, and it seemed like a good idea."

O'Hara sees his readership as diverse, spanning the spectrum from out to closeted gay men who "probably couldn't relate to reading *Honcho*, because it is a very gay 'pornographic' magazine. But *Steam* is something a doctor or lawyer might have in his briefcase."

Having such a diverse readership is also a responsibility in many ways. "It's not just getting AIDS. That may be the major risk of sex these days, but for many of our subscribers, the major risk is getting arrested or bashed or outed. We try to teach people how to minimize risk while acknowledging we can't get rid of it. Life is taking risks and evaluating them appropriately. As for AIDS transmission, there are so many conflicting sources of what is 'safe sex.' Anyone who blindly accepts one authority is going to get in trouble."

He takes the AIDS terminology of such sources as the NIH and the CDC “with a large dose of salt. They’re coming from a particular viewpoint, generally that sex is bad. If they can discourage people from having sex, that’s good to them.”

Both *Steam* and O’Hara have taken issue with elements within and outside the gay community who decry different kinds of sex. “Any time someone talks about a particular kind of sex being bad,” he says, “it’s a rationalization that sex is bad. I disagree completely. Rape is bad. That is the only form of sex that I condemn. Anything that involves consent is essentially a good thing. Putting all these qualifiers on it -- ’sex is good if...’ -- bothers me. Sex is good. That’s it.”

O’Hara’s porn career began shortly after he won a 1983 “Biggest Dick in San Francisco” Contest. He went on to perform in several videos. Asked about the possibility of porn videos featuring openly HIV positive performers, O’Hara grins. "I dream of that. I would love to make my comeback in films, now that everyone knows I have AIDS. That would give everyone a new image of what people with AIDS are: Among other things, sexual. I’m turned on by people with AIDS far more than by HIV negatives. I’m sure that’s politically incorrect, but it frees my inhibitions to know that I don’t have to worry about the possibility of infecting someone else. The sex can be so much hotter. Watching a film with [openly] positive actors in it would be *molto* hot for me."

A tattoo on O’Hara’s shoulder declares “HIV+.” “It makes it easier for me that my partner knows,” he says. But his taste for outdoor and semiprivate sex sometimes means his shoulder remains covered when other parts are exposed. “If I’m having sex with someone who doesn’t know that I’m positive, I spend most of my time worrying about when he’s going to find out. If I’m thinking about that, I’m not thinking about sex.”

O’Hara believes being out about his health contributes to his longevity. "The more you talk about something like that, the more power it gives you over it. This virus is in every part of my body and I acquired it through some of my favorite things -- sex, sperm. How can I *not* talk about it?"

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