

HEALTH

Black gays still ridiculed

By Earl Ofari Hutchinson
Special to Sentinel-Voice

The circus-like hype surrounding ABC/Disney's *Ellen* show has finally passed, but the problem of homophobia hasn't. It's still deeply entrenched in many Americans. And that includes many African-Americans, especially African-American men.

I still can't forget the scene I saw in a movie during the mid-1970s for two reasons. One, it was the first time that I had ever seen two men passionately kiss on the screen. Two, was the reaction from the mostly black audience. It went wild. People screamed, jeered, and hooted at the screen. It took several minutes for the crowd to quiet down and ushers to restore order.

As I left the theater I listened to the young men talk. Their contempt and disgust for these two men spilled out into the street and the parking lot. They called them "faggots," "punks," and "sissies."

A year or so later I was at a local political meeting. Afterwards, while talking with a friend, a young black man came up to us. My friend winked at me and whispered "he's queer," and quickly walked away. I stood there alone with him, and after a moment of awkward silence we started talking. I mentioned that I was a jogger. His eyes immediately lit up and he said he was too. He quickly suggested that maybe we could go jogging together. I didn't know anything about this man, or what he was, and I suspect my friend didn't either, but I still froze in naked panic.

I thought about the young men who ridiculed the gays at the theater. At the time I thought that their antics were downright silly and in poor taste. I now realize that I was no different from them. I had the same horror of, and prejudice against, gays as they had. But why did they threaten me? Why did they stir deep and violent passions in so many of us? Why did I feel such intense dislike for gay black men? Did they threaten and challenge my fragile masculinity at the basest and most ambiguous level?

They did. And this realization forced me to do some deep soul searching into my own homophobic fears. For even though I hated what I saw, I had no rational explanation for these fears.

From cradle to grave, much of America has drilled into black men the thought that they are less than men. This made many black men believe and accept the gender propaganda that the only real men in American society were white men. In a vain attempt to recapture their denied masculinity, many black men, mirrored America's traditional fear and hatred of homosexuality. They swallowed whole the phony and perverse John Wayne definition of manhood, believing that real men talked and acted tough, shed no tears and never showed their emotions.

These were the prized strengths of manhood. When men broke the prescribed male code of conduct and showed their feelings they were harangued as weaklings, and their manhood questioned. Many black men who bought this malarkey did not heap the same scorn on women who were lesbians. White and black gay women did not pose the same threat as gay men. They were women in a patriarchal society and that meant that they were fair game to be demeaned and marginalized by many men.

Many blacks in an attempt to distance themselves from gays and avoid confronting

their own biases dismissed homosexuality as "Their thing." Translated: Homosexuality was a perverse contrivance of white males and females that reflected the decadence of white America.

Also many blacks listened to countless numbers of black ministers shout and condemn to fire and brimstone any man who dared think about, yearn for, or engage in the "godless" and "unnatural act" of having a sexual relationship with another man. If they had any doubts about it, they fell back on the good book. They could, as generations of Bible-toting white preachers did, flip to the oft-cited line in *Leviticus* that sternly calls men being with men, "the abomination."

For many African-Americans, black gay men became their bogeymen and they waged open warfare against them. Black gay men became the pariahs among pariahs, and wherever possible every attempt was made to drum them out of black life. Some of these efforts have been especially pathetic. Civil Rights leader Bayard Rustin, a known gay, and the major mover and shaker behind the 1963 March on Washington, was all but banned by March leaders from speaking or having any visible public role at the March. A popular black nationalist magazine of that day frequently referred to him as "the little fairy." No black leader publicly challenged this

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Clergyman recognized for HIV/AIDS message

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The Rev. Lionel A. Starkes joined 16 other deacons in California June 21 for an event honoring their ministry to persons with HIV/AIDS.

Starkes, of St. Matthew's Episcopal Church, 4709 S. Nellis Blvd., was recognized by the North American Association for the Diaconate at its biannual conference in San Francisco.

Starkes' award reads: "His ministry brings his experience and compassion as a volunteer chaplain at Nathan Adelson Hospice."

A program, started by the association in 1995, began formally honoring deacons and their ministry in this capacity. The association has more than 1,600 deacons active in the United States and Canada.

Starkes has a bachelor's degree in psychology and a master's degree in counsel education-community counseling from Southern Illinois University. The 25-year U.S. Air Force veteran also has a son, Cory, who presently attends Penn State.

Starkes' duties are extensive. They include visiting patients, mentoring to at-risk youth and developing programs for parishes.

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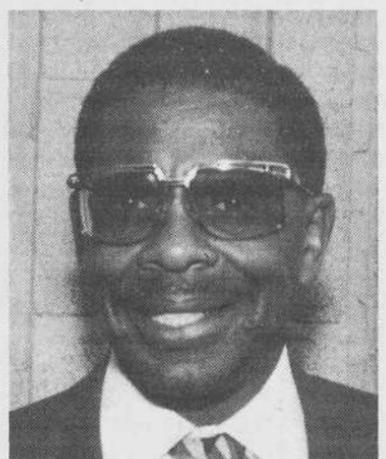


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