

They can't get any nuder

Robert Wolf

1969

(Other Scenes/UPS) Tom Cushing added the last line of his play about nudism 40 years ago, then wrote above its original title: "The Unplayable Play." The play jocularly concerned a nudist girl who invited her swain home, on the condition that he observed all the customs her family observed. The suitor soon learned that this meant taking off all his clothes before sitting down to tea, as the family did.

This pro-nudist propaganda play was written by Cushing to be performed in an entertaining 30 minutes by a mixed nude cast of nine, none of whom would touch on stage except for a handshake. In anticipation of the prudish audiences he hoped it would someday be performed for, he wrote in a gratuitous immolation of the young hero—a cup of hot tea spilled in his bare lap.

Cushing never lived to see the play performed. He died seven years before it was presented to the public on a summer weekend in July, at Glen Gardner, New Jersey. When I saw it, it was titled "Barely Proper" and its nudist cast played to an audience of about 500 non-nudists at each show. Most of them had driven to the locus of the play—Circle H Nude Ranch—from New York City 50 miles away.

The nudist couple who owns the camp, Earl and Lucille Hansen, do not belong to the conservative American Sunbathing Association, so they often do things which would get ASA members suspended. After each performance of "Barely Proper", the Hansens would invite their entire audience (most of whom had been exposed to public nudity for their first time) to join the whole cast in the pool. And at each showing, about 30 persons did—once including this reviewer and his date.

The law likes to keep the franchise for nudity and sexual displays to itself, of course, and so the Hansens felt it necessary to receive the permission of the Governor of New Jersey before presenting the play publicly.

(An example of how the law uses the display of public nakedness for its own ends was described last summer by a *Village Voice* reporter, who told of a conversation he'd had with a Federal marshal in New York City while awaiting the convening of a court case. The marshal had begun to brag about his younger days as a vice cop: "I used to go trolling in the evenings. You know what trolling is? No, I bet you don't. I used to walk backwards in the park with my dick hanging out, giving guys the eye, and then when some fairy started going after me, I'd lead him into the john and when he'd grab my cock, I'd flash the badge.")

Not everyone seeks the law's permission, though. When Kusama took her troupe to appear on a bill with two rock groups at Fillmore East last December 5 and 6, she did not forewarn the authorities. In consequence, her two dozen boys and girls were able to strip under bright lights on the stage and cavort around nude for 20 minutes.

Meanwhile, at the Gayety Theatre, a few blocks up Second Avenue, an older crowd sat in the dark watching older naked bodies writhe on the screen, twice removed from the action. And uptown, off Broadway a more genteel crowd sat in the Biltmore Theater and strained their eyes in the dim light to see the public in "Hair."

But at the Fillmore it was all live and in living color: as girls danced around painting green the heads of boys' penises, the boys were painting red the girls' breasts.

While nudity on the stage had by then become barely improper, just a few months before at the Anderson Theater, a home of Yiddish plays down the street from the Fillmore, a nude actress had been dragged off stage in

a benefit performance of “The Christmas Turkey” because an executive of EVO (for whom the benefit was being given) had promised the management nothing “unpleasant” would happen.

But in the finale of the Kusamarama at the Fillmore, the troupe lay on their backs to a recording of “Oh, Say Can You See”—and spread their legs, lest the audience miss the finer points.

That’s more than the boys uptown had gotten for their money. And had the Hansens been there, even they might have said that public participation in voyeurism had gone too far.

“Two weeks before the unpublicized Kusama coup, an audience paid as much to fill as large a hall and hear a man simply talk about nudity. Paul Bindrim, a Los Angeles psychologist, was introduced by Dr. Harold Streitfeld, the founder-director of the Aureon Institute, a mental health resort upstate at Bear Mountain. Streitfeld introduced Bindrim as “an artist.”

Bindrim has since July 1967 concluded about two dozen nude, weekend “sensitivity training” sessions, including the one he held at Aureon last November.

As they do at Circle H, Bindrim breaks the ice for his group of strangers by having them first appear nude in the pool. They engage in touch water sports, then before long—in the water and out—they are touching each other, hugging, caressing, patting and snuggling: all while nude. When someone asked Bindrim how he reacts if a client gets an erection, he said: “It’s nothing—some guys are embarrassed if they get one and some are embarrassed if they don’t.”

Bindrim’s clients mostly came to him as a result of referrals from former participants. Included among those he’s helped have been a parole officer who had a fetish for pornography, and an exhibitionist who found he was cured when he couldn’t keep it up for a whole weekend.

Bindrim himself is a critic of nudist camps. He calls them a “convention of voyeurs and exhibitionists,” and says the participants are like pitiful kids who can’t touch the pastries they see, and don’t really believe they’re worthy to anyhow. “My rule of thumb,” Bindrim says, “is that if you can’t touch it, it’s pornography.”

Yet, for reasons of safety for the group from legal reprisal, he cannot allow his participants to either fondle each others’ genitals or to engage in sexual intercourse.

My conclusion, from exposure to the Aureon experiment, Kusama’s event, and the Circle H environment is that the real qualitative difference in the experience of a skeptical public that nudity need not lead to sensuality, then one’s participants dare not touch. But if one’s goal is personal self-fulfillment—and nudity is just a means to that end—one will want to touch. And to be touched.

Paul Bindrim has said: “Maybe some institutions would fall if people were really close. If you touch me, I no longer know where I end and you begin.”

So the battle of nudity on the public stage has probably been won in New York: after all, they can’t get any nuder. But the front line has now been advanced to the question of how much physical contact will now be allowed between those who are publicly nude.

fifth Estate

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<https://www.fifthestate.org/archive/75-march-20-april-2-1969/they-cant-get-any-nuder>
Fifth Estate #75, March 20-April 2, 1969

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