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LOCAL NEWS

Do gay bars say 'no' to the ladies?

By [MATT KALKHOFF](#)

The velvet rope can be a harsh mistress. Just ask anyone who had to wait for the Broadway debut of "Cabaret" to see the inside of Studio 54. But what was dismissed as harmless (albeit degrading) elitist antics in the 1970s might very well be considered illegal discriminatory practices today.

On Saturday, Nov. 8, Tracey Trabue of Washington, D.C., found herself and two "unescorted" female friends outside the Roxy in the early-morning hours being denied entrance.

The incident and others like it raises the question about when discretion becomes discrimination.

Anecdotal evidence at this and other well-known gay clubs or gay nights indicates that women are sometimes allowed in only when accompanied by men. But according to an avid clubgoer named Barbara, who identifies herself as "queer-straight," Manhattan's gay nightlife has, in fact, been far more inclusive and welcoming lately.

"Honestly, I'm very rarely met with the kind of misogynistic attitude that I used to encounter years ago in gay clubs," she said. "On the other hand, I'm always respectful of the fact that I've been allowed into the gay boys' playhouse, and do not put myself in a position of becoming a liability."

But even if there are only a few isolated incidents, they raise the question of why a persecuted minority would want to exclude others. Is such behavior ever justified? And is it really discrimination if it only happens infrequently and without animosity?

Behind the velvet rope

In 1945, New York became the first state to enact an anti-discrimination law. New York's Human Rights Law prohibits discriminatory practices based on age, gender, race, sexual orientation and other criteria involving public accommodations (§ 8 107), including nightclubs. The law was a partial reaction to situations such as Harlem's world-famous Cotton Club, where blacks entertained but could be refused entry as patrons.

Strict enforcement of and widespread adherence to the law, however, is a relatively recent societal accomplishment.



Crowds outside of Studio 54 in its heyday. The club originated the velvet rope and doorman-as-god.

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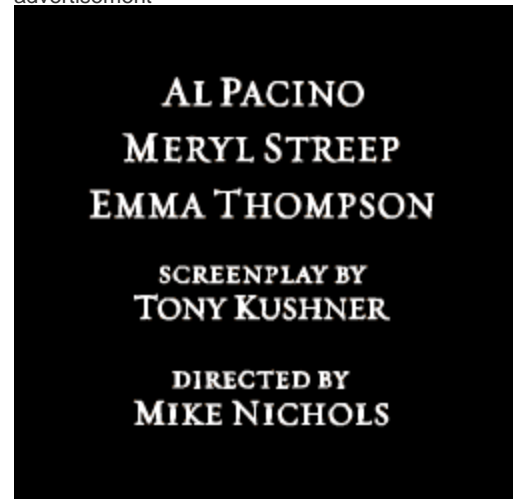
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During Studio 54's heyday in the late 1970s, the media actually glorified and celebrated such exclusivity. Minorities were not turned away simply because of their race; rather, Rubell and his door staff sought to admit a diverse cross-section of society. As long as someone was interesting looking and could attract owner Steve Rubell's eye, he or she was granted admittance.

At the same time, New York's gay scene exploded Downtown, with underground parties largely off the public's radar. Clubs like the Loft or 12 West had few enough women visitors that Bianca Jagger caused a sensation when she dressed in male drag and snuck into the Anvil, a notorious venue on Christopher Street.

The biggest and most famous gay club of them all, the Saint, was officially a members-only establishment. In its heyday of the early 1980s, the Saint never counted more than five women among its membership. Even Bette Midler is rumored to have been unsuccessful in gaining entry. If a member wanted to bring a female guest, he had to call ahead, lest there be too many women at one time.

"The choices the doormen made on admission were more important than anyone gave them credit for, because by bending the demographics of the venue at the door, you really controlled the personality of the room," noted Robbie Leslie, one of the original Saint DJs who also held residencies at Studio, Palladium and 12 West, among other influential nightclubs.

"That intangible personality is what can make or break a party," Leslie added. "Of course, a little homogenization is very healthy for any party and keeps things fresh and interesting. But there's always been an invisible line of an unspoken quota depending on the place."

More recently, leather bars like the Lure (now closed) institute discretionary dress codes. Although women are allowed, the doorman could use his own discretion in deciding whether a person was wearing the proper attire.

How much acceptance?

Many gay men privately complain about hair and purses hitting on them on the dance floor. But when does such talk moves into misogyny?

"Personally, I don't think it's much fun to find a gay bar full of straight women," said Joe, a 40-year-old attorney, who asked that his last name not be used. "At a certain point, the gay bar is no longer a gay bar if every guy brings along his straight friends. It definitely impedes the comfort level of the gay guys who go there to meet other gay guys if they feel like they are being gawked at like fish in a bowl."

Avid clubgoer Terry pointed out in an e-mail, "Many bartenders at these clubs are straight men. I have noticed that they are much more accommodating to women. They will serve them first pretty much all the time."

The fine line between catering to a core clientele and following the law puts promoters and club owners like John Blair and Brian Landeche in a difficult position. Blair's XL and his Avalon and Roxy gay nights certainly admit women. The question is, how many?

Blair does not condone discrimination of any sort, but concedes that a group of unfamiliar, unescorted women might encounter difficulty in gaining entry as late as 5 a.m., which is Tracey says she was denied entry. He admitted that he receives e-mails every week from irate gay patrons complaining about "too many women."

Legal discrimination?

Landeche's highly successful SBNY (the former Splash) used to be notorious for its controversial door policies that often made it difficult if not impossible for women to enter.

Such unofficial policies appear to have been abandoned — "everybody's welcome," says a manager. Numerous women (and, increasingly, gay men) now frequent the establishment.

Landeche clearly would prefer the right to exercise more discretion when it comes to admitting women, however. "We follow the law," he insisted.

"[But] this is not like race where there is a legacy of discrimination. Women do not have a history of being excluded from social clubs in the past."

Landeché believes he should be allowed to provide his mostly gay male customers with a "place of refuge and comfort to be with other gay men" free of the "boisterous, antagonistic straight men that tend to follow the women. We should have that right. We don't, but we should."

An anonymous source familiar with the inner workings of New York City's Commission on Human Rights might agree. When queried about the Roxy incident, the source confirmed that the allegation is technically a violation of the law.

But, the source added, "Far more serious complaints of discrimination command the commission's resources." Even so, the commission would investigate any formal complaint.

It may be that, in the age of the metrosexual, the gay-straight club divide may simply be fading. "Times are changing, and it's time we all learned to play together," Barbara said. "The lines are getting fuzzier as humanity evolves, and more people are feeling uncomfortable being put into old boxes with labels like straight, gay, bi, etc. The freedom to live outside the box while still finding ways to identify with others who feel similarly is the direction we seem to be heading in. I'm all for that."



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