1990 Article about Angela Bowen's Black Entertainment Television appearance

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Black Entertainment Television talk show tackles Gay issues

by Mark Sullivan

Black Entertainment Television’s nightly talk show “Our Voice” has tackled Gay issues in its past shows focusing on the problems facing the Gay community. Two of the past shows have dealt with AIDS, and two upcoming programs will deal with female impersonators and transsexuals.

The guest on Tuesday’s show agreed that many Gay people are reluctant to come out because of the black community’s response of threats to isolate them.

“No one will talk about it,” said Barbara Smith, publisher of the Boston-based Kitchen Table Press, “but out of something you’re very afraid of.”

But they also agreed that the fear of isolation is not the only fear black Gay men have about acknowledging their homosexuality. Another fear is potential violence.

“I know I was different when I was five,” said poet Esmer Hemphill. “As I grew older I also knew that what I was about could be dangerous for me. I knew that being flamboyant, like switching or carrying a pochette could get me beat up.”

But some black Gay men don’t know that people with similar feelings exist, while others don’t know how to find them.

“I didn’t come out as a Lesbian until I was 40,” Bowen said. “Until then, I wasn’t aware that there was a word for it.”

But black Gay role models are still difficult to find, Hemphill said. The homosexuality of many historical figures, even those who were openly Gay, like civil rights activist Bayard Rustin and novelist James Baldwin, has been “carefully watched with whispers and silence.”

One viewer of the call-ins program said he believed homosexuality was a European phenomenon and that there was no such thing as homosexuality in ancient African cultures.

“I don’t want to go back in history,” said Bowen. “My family were slaves in history.”

Boswell said Kenya burned Lesbians from a 1985 conference held at the University of Nairobi becase there were no Gay people in Africa. She said and a few others attended anyway, and dozens of Gay came up to them and told them about how severely they had to guard their sexuality.

“I don’t believe that there weren’t black Lesbians and Gays in every part of history,” Bowen said. “People who say they don’t know history.”

Another caller asked how to create Black Lesbians and Gay men more visible. The guests suggested joining “some of the old black organizations”, like the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People.

“You might cause some of them to have a heart attack,” Hemphill said, joking, “but that’s how you get the old people to die off and let new people come in.”

Boswell suggested that starting a group where no groups for black Gays currently exist.

“Get one or two friends together at Pride Day and make a banner that says BLACK LESBIANS LOOKING FOR MORE,” Bowen said.

They also encouraged black Gay organizations to build coalitions with other progressive groups, like women’s groups.

“Sexual orientation come from the same root,” Smith said. “Racism is the same people who are after us for being Gay. The right wing knows this, because they hate us all. And we all hate each other. We need to build together.”

Black Entertainment Television: Our Voice will present programs on transsexuals and female impersonators in April, and also plans to turn Tuesday night’s program sometime this summer.

For dates and times, call (202) 636-2066.