

COLUMBIA SPECTATOR ARCHIVE

Columbia Daily Spectator, Volume CXIX, Number 53, 12 April 1995 — Quilt appeases straight guilt [ARTICLE]

Quilt appeases straight guilt

By JONEIL ADRIANO

By and large, I would agree with Adam Epstein's premise that the money currently being spent to bring the AIDS Quilt to Columbia can and should be more wisely spent for more constructive purposes like research and prevention ["AIDS Quilt wastes student time, money," *Spectator*, April 10]. I must, however, take exception to his reason-

ing and outline my own

objections to bringing the Quilt to campus.

To begin, Epstein believes that "the Quilt belongs in a museum" because the Quilt's main purpose, to cre-

ate "awareness" actually "has little relevance" to today. This is simply not true. We have all heard of the statistics pointing to the recent rise in AIDS cases (particularly in our age group) despite all of the attention that has been given to AIDS. If anything, there is still just as much, if not more, of a need for AIDS education and awareness.

Unfortunately, it has been the actual message of the Quilt itself that has been lost in the commodification and popularization of AIDS awareness. Epstein says that the Quilt was successful in putting a "human face" on the disease; I would agree, but would also add that the human face had a distinctly queer quality about it.

This brings me to my main objection to the Quilt being brought to Columbia. I don't

disagree with the premise of the Quilt itself, but with the ways in which it is being appropriated. It seems to me that (straight) people have forgotten that of all the communities affected by AIDS, it has been the gay community that has felt its effects most brutally, and for the better part of 10 years, no one was listening to our cries for help. It wasn't until Magic Johnson got AIDS, until movie stars felt it fashionable to wear those cute little red ribbons, in short, until the straight community actually realized that yes, they too can catch AIDS, that the government and the general public began to see AIDS as a priority. But how many gay men died in the meantime? The fact that their lives were considered expendable is the grossest offense.

Epstein was on to something when he said that many organizations gave money to the Quilt without question because they were afraid of being labelled “homophobic or insensitive.” But it isn’t just fear that is motivating the mobilization of straight people around AIDS—it is also their guilt, of their profound realization that for the 10 years that straight America sat on its hands and pretended that nothing was happening, they *were* being homophobic.

So what is the response now to AIDS? I hear everywhere that “anyone can catch AIDS” and that “AIDS is not just a gay disease.” And what I see and hear from the many non-queer-identified AIDS Quilt organizers is the same old tired cliches. I don’t deny that non-queer people can get AIDS, but what I am objecting to is the very convenient way in which the words “gay” and “lesbian” and “bisexual” get brushed to the side. And this is not just a matter of being PC, because the institutional effect of this heterosexist way of thinking is the diverting of resources from the communities that need it most, that first felt the grips of this national epidemic, watched their neighbors turn away from them as they suffer, and now see the minuscule resources allotted to AIDS go elsewhere.

On a personal level, I do not question the organizers’ commitment to fighting AIDS (I know many of them), but I do want to ask them as an organization, how they fit and participate in the sexphobic, heterosexist discourses of AIDS awareness. Who is your audience? Who do you want to get involved? Who are you leaving out? I am still bitter over the exclusion of Columbia’s LesBiGay community from the initial stages of the organizing.

Just recently, I saw a poster advertising the event and saw the panel with Ryan White's name draped on the lap of Alma Mater—again, why is it that he has become a legitimized “voice” for AIDS awareness? Because he isn't a disgusting queer that *deserves* to catch it; Ryan White, unlike the hundreds of thousands of queers, prostitutes, drug users, and other degenerates who didn't have a professional sports career to earn them respect, was an innocent victim.

Do I sound angry? Do I sound bitter? Do I sound furious? I am! In a time when my community is being devastated by a disease, and at a time when my government and “friendly” organizations are trying to sweep me under the rug, I have no choice but to be angry. This is no time to put my community's suffering on display to assuage your guilt, to let you think that because you have brought the Quilt to Columbia, that you have done your part. I must refuse attempts to appropriate the suffering of queer people. This is no time not to be angry. I can't afford not to be angry. What we are talking about here is life and death. What we are talking about here is survival.

“This is no time to put my community's suffering on display to assuage [straight people's] guilt.”

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