

# INTERVIEW WITH GEORGE BIRIMISA

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*George Birimisa turned 84 in February of this year. A Caffe Cino pioneer, he is recognized as one of the first American playwrights to write plays featuring gay characters who were full-bodied people, not merely victims or villains. Still writing, and working as a writing teacher, editor and activist, George took time out from work on his memoir, "Wildflowers," to talk with Steve Susoyev.*

STEVE SUSOYEV: I had the honor of being present in 2006 when you won the Harry Hay award in San Francisco, for your work in gay theater and as an "inspiration across the generations." Among your students you're known as a role model of gay pride, but I understand your history is a bit more complex than that.

GEORGE BIRIMISA: When I got involved in theater in the late nineteen-forties, I went around trying to act like Marlon Brando as Stanley Kowalski, in a leather jacket, always with a cigarette hanging out of my mouth. I was living a contradiction, out of the closet to only a few people. Some of my plays are full of homophobia. In the early sixties I wrote my first gay play, "Degrees," but it was very mild and didn't reflect me or my life at all. Inching my way out of the closet. But then, in "Georgie Porgie," in 1968, I put it all out there, so the world would know I was gay.

STEVE SUSOYEV: "Georgie Porgie" was a breakthrough for gay theater. Tennessee Williams wrote, "Bravo! A beautiful, courageous play. I loved it!"

GEORGE BIRIMISA: Under the surface I was still ashamed and very guilty. I felt filthy, as if I should be exterminated. I didn't know about Harry Hay, Phyllis Lyon, Del Martin. I think New York was very homophobic then, or maybe it was just me, looking at the world through the murk of my own self-hatred. And I had plenty of it.

STEVE SUSOYEV: You were in New York during the Stonewall riot, weren't you?

GEORGE BIRIMISA: I get a lot of mileage out of my image as a radical, a revolutionary. So it's painful to admit this today, but I looked down on those brave queens at Stonewall. They were sissies and they embarrassed me. I think one of the pernicious things about homophobia is how it isolates us from the people we need most for support, and who most need our support.

I had been arrested and brutalized by cops. But when the queens were brutalized, I just wanted to distance myself from them. That was 1969. I was getting a reputation in the avant-garde gay theater. But still in that leather jacket with the constant cigarette, still viewing the world through my self-hatred. I don't know if I'm completely over it yet.

STEVE SUSOYEV: You're describing a very complex process that we try to simplify. "Coming out" seems to have taken place in stages for you.

GEORGE BIRIMISA: Baby steps.

STEVE SUSOYEV: Did you make an effort not to be gay?

GEORGE BIRIMISA: Oh, God, in 1951 I got married to a woman named Nancy, thinking that she would make me straight.

STEVE SUSOYEV: And how did that turn out?

GEORGE BIRIMISA: Well, we had three-ways with straight guys, so in some ways our relationship deepened my homophobia—tough straight guys were my drug of choice. I remember many times, walking down the street with Nancy and feeling powerful and straight—at least hoping to fool people into thinking I was not a queer. Once a gay man walked by and cruised me and Nancy said, “See, he figured out you were gay.” “He did not,” I said angrily. “Anyway, most gays are attracted to straight men. They don’t want another fuckin’ fag!”

But there were some hidden blessings. Nancy was the first “intellectual” I had ever known. My father had been a communist whose nickname was “Rough Rider.” When I was six, he gave a speech in the park in downtown Watsonville, California, where I was born. The fire department turned their hoses on him and threw him in jail. He gave his bunk to an old man, slept on the concrete, caught pneumonia and died. I had a love-hate relationship with him. He was nearly illiterate, and like so many things in my life, I was ashamed of him. But I have his fierce spirit inside me and I have been a rebel ever since. My mother ran off with a music teacher and I ended up in an orphanage at age seven. I was deeply ashamed of my poverty, and joined the Navy at 17 so I could have decent clothes to wear.

Nancy got me to read “Das Kapital” by Karl Marx and “Anti-Dühring” by Engels. Suddenly I had a language to explain how I felt in the world.

STEVE SUSOYEV: So your wife woke you up to politics?

GEORGE BIRIMISA: Absolutely. She opened my eyes. I began to understand, slowly, that gay people were oppressed just like blacks in the South and Jews during the Third Reich. And like poor people all over the world. And I wrote that anger at the unjust world into my plays.

STEVE SUSOYEV: So the political understanding moved you closer to self-acceptance?

GEORGE BIRIMISA: Oh, God, it was a long, twisting road. It didn’t take me long to learn that the commies hated gay people as much as the right-wingers hated us. For almost a year in New York I attended a group that was dedicated to turning guys like me into straight, God-fearing men. So painful to dredge this up today. When I quit the group I was disgusted. I told myself, “You’re condemned to being a fucking fag for the rest of your life.”

STEVE SUSOYEV: You don’t look like a condemned man today. To anyone looking at you now, it’s obvious that at some moment light began to shine into your life. When was that?

GEORGE BIRIMISA: I moved from New York to San Francisco in 1980, at 56, and I think I was starting to be ready to open my life to a different kind of person. [California State Assemblyman and former stand-up comic] Tom Ammiano was a sissy, and he was a very powerful person! I first experienced Tom in 1985, when I was doing volunteer work for Gay & Lesbian Outreach to Elders. I invited him to do his comedy routine at a Sunday brunch. He named all the synonyms for being queer. Words that had been flung at us all our lives, with hatred, words we had internalized. He made those words funny. He was totally out, and claimed his power as a human being. Such an inspiration.

Soon after that, when one of the scenes from “*Georgie Porgie*” was being performed, I gave my leather jacket to the actor playing the hustler and let him keep it

after the play's run. I started dressing differently, so people would see that I was gay—colorful hats with logos for GAY GAMES II or CASTRO, and long scarves, a dangling earring made of rainbow-colored beads. A slow process, but there was no turning back.

STEVE SUSOYEV: Speaking of the Gay Games, you won several gold medals in the Games, as a bodybuilder.

GEORGE BIRIMISA: Oh! Another part of my journey that involves an embarrassing example of my homophobia. Eventually I understood the political implications of what the U.S. Olympic Committee was doing when they sued the founder, Tom Waddell, to prevent him from using the name "Gay Olympics." Participating in the Physique Competition in the Games for the first time, in 1986, gave me my first sense of power as a man, and as a gay man.

STEVE SUSOYEV: But you mentioned homophobia. How did your self-hatred affect your participation in the Gay Games?

GEORGE BIRIMISA: Oh, I didn't bother trying out for the first Games, in 1982. When I first heard about the Games, I said, "What are we gonna see, a bunch of sissies tossing powder puffs at each other?" As with so many things, I had to move through my judgment to see the Games as a source of power for us as a community. Meeting and working with Tom Ammiano helped me to get there.

STEVE SUSOYEV: You've used the word "journey" several times.

GEORGE BIRIMISA: For years I was known as Mr. Pain. In the forties and fifties, I used to get on buses and people would avoid me. I gave myself to total strangers—until the age of 67, I was still paying hustlers to beat me up—but it was impossible for me to form a truly trusting bond with another person. To trust another human being is an incredible journey. I was too frightened to love anyone or anything. At that point in my life, I came to a crossroads—either get help or die in an alley with my head bashed in. I decided to get help, and ended up in the last place I ever would have imagined, a twelve-step program. In SLAA [Sex and Love Addicts Anonymous], I've had a chance to open myself to other human beings and learn to trust.

I no longer walk around with a sneer on my face. For much of my life, people never talked to me because I looked so mean. A long process and a lot of pain but I finally got in touch with my feeling and the real, loving George. I believe in a higher power that has order and incredible beauty. I am still growing spiritually at 84.

I embarked on what I understood from Joseph Campbell's writing as the "hero's journey"—going down that path and learning to open my heart. As a kid, I had no one to trust; I would have been nuts to trust anyone. Being "spiritual" for me doesn't mean necessarily believing in God. I believe in a higher power that has created an awe-inspiring earth.

I also believe that this journey is an adventure: exciting, learning something new about myself almost every day. Having the courage to go inside and find our one-ness with the world, with humanity. So much of my spirituality has come since I've been an old man. Such a blessing, with all the ailments I have—emphysema, bladder cancer, vertigo, blind in one eye—but I've come to see those as mere circumstances. Happy? Could be!