



OUR BEST and
BRIGHTEST
ACTIVISTS

the arts

Armistead Maupin

>> "It's been another uphill climb, but we're ready to roll with *Further Tales of the City*," says novelist Armistead Maupin. The *Tales* books, which have already given birth to two acclaimed television miniseries, are the cornerstones of Maupin's achievement. As a chronicler of our time, he's as boisterous and entertaining as Dickens—and just as socially conscious. For Maupin, who's nearing completion of the *Vertigo*-inspired novel *The Night Listener*, his art has always been personal and political. "My goal from the very beginning," he says, "has been to be a big old queer for the general public." Maupin speaks passionately these days about reaching out to queer teens. "I know how important it is for both gay and straight kids to be exposed to successful homos who are happy with their lives."

George C. Wolfe



>> He directed *Angels in America* on Broadway and turned Lea DeLaria into a star with *On the Town*. And as the impresario of the Public Theater in New York City, he's proud that it's "deeply committed to presenting theater that is a true reflection of the United States." But personal success isn't what George C. Wolfe is after. "From a very early age," he confesses, "I was taught that it isn't enough to obey my own ambitions. I had to work to dismantle structures which kept others out." Now working on a musical version of *The Wild Party*—as well as a screenplay and a new play—Wolfe doesn't have to do much to get attention. "I'm a black gay artist with power," he says. "Hell, anytime I open my mouth to say 'Hello,' it's assumed I have an agenda."

Luis Alfaro



>> A dynamic force in contemporary theater, Los Angeles actor-director-playwright Luis Alfaro donated most of his 1997 "genius" grant from the MacArthur Foundation to his parents. He has often brought his sharp political sensibility to bear on the juncture between AIDS and art. The former chair of the Gay Men of Color Consortium, the largest AIDS consortium in the country, he also served for four years as project director for Teatro VIVA, a Los Angeles AIDS-awareness theater troupe. He has performed more than a dozen solo pieces (his latest is *Cuerpo Politizado*); as an artist in residence and codirector of the Latino Theater Initiative at the Mark Taper Forum theater, he has commissioned 15 new plays that give voice to the Latino community. "I get asked a lot, 'Are you a gay Latino or a Latino gay?'" he says. "As if these parts of oneself could be separated."

Jewelle Gomez



>> "I'm not interested in *every* queer organization out there," says poet and novelist Jewelle Gomez. "There are professional activists that are invested in a piece of the proverbial pie for us. I'm more interested in how we think about changing the pie overall, because we are connected to a lot of struggles in addition to our own." Along with her poetry (Gomez runs the Poetry Center and the American Poetry Archives at San Francisco State University), she is best known for *The Gilda Stories*, her linked tales of a lesbian vampire who overcame slavery to help others. "Being able to create a black lesbian heroic character who is not saintly and who people can relate to honestly and emotionally—I'm very proud of that."



Tom Ford

Tom Ford, the world's hottest fashion designer, brought Gucci back from the dead and—just as significantly—convinced that venerable house it should make hefty contributions to fight AIDS, first in the form of completely underwriting AIDS Project Los Angeles's lavish Passport fund-raiser in 1997, then by bringing along a \$100,000 check from Gucci when APLA gave Ford its Commitment to Life Award in May. "I don't want to wake up and be a miserable 60-year-old fashion designer worrying whether the skirt should be six inches above the knee," Ford told *The Advocate* in 1997 when asked about his activism. Now the out designer appears to be the guiding force in Gucci's takeover of Yves Saint Laurent, which can only give him further opportunities both to create and to raise money and awareness.

Debra Chasnoff



>> Debra Chasnoff made history at the Oscars as the first lesbian winner to openly thank her partner. (Her short film *Deadly Deception* also helped push General Electric out of the nuclear weapons industry.) In June, despite right-wing ire, Chasnoff's 1996 documentary *It's Elementary* aired on PBS. The film, which asserts that school kids should be taught about gay issues, has sparked "one incredible story after another," Chasnoff says. "People have used it to start little revolutions in their communities."

Lillian Faderman

>> When historian Lillian Faderman was 16, she recalls, "I went to the library to find out more about lesbians—and found them wedged in between necrophiliacs and people who have sex with chickens." From her 1981 book *Surpassing the Love of Men* through her latest, *To Believe in Women*, Faderman has unearthed a trove of queer history as she works toward her remarkable goal: to provide gays and lesbians with what she terms "a usable past."

David Drake

>> "I just finished shooting *The Night Larry Kramer Kissed Me*," says David Drake about the film version of his acclaimed one-man show, which begins with a reference to the Stonewall riots and ends with a vision of a happy future. He's updated his script: Now its glimpse of a queer-friendly future and a cure for AIDS takes place at the dawn of 2018 instead of in 1999. "But [the AIDS epidemic] will be over," says Drake. "And we will be able to look back and say there were a brave and courageous people who took the steps forward to end it. And those people were the gay and lesbian community."





Sarah Schulman

» "I've always felt that my work has to matter," says author and activist Sarah Schulman. Famed for fiction (*Shimmer*) and nonfiction (*Stagestruck*), she's now writing a novel "about how gay people are pathologized as children." This summer she'll workshop the material as a play with director Craig Lucas. Above and beyond her individual projects, she notes that she has been laboring since 1981 to open the world of American arts to more writing "with primary lesbian content."

Dorothy Allison



>> Writer Dorothy Allison's *Bastard Out of Carolina* was the publishing phenomenon of the early '90s, a word-of-mouth smash that just kept selling and selling. Her story of a dirt-poor family in South Carolina touched on child abuse, the disdain of an indifferent world, and a young girl's coming-of-age that was more like trying to stay alive. Even before the success of her second novel, *Cavedweller*, Allison became an instant icon as she toured the country reading and lecturing. She appears with her partner and their son in the anthology *Love Makes a Family*, in which she writes on lesbian motherhood: "When I was doing my book tour for *Bastard Out of Carolina*, I met all these butch women who wanted children. They'd ask me, 'What's your pregnant girlfriend wearing?' 'Overalls,' I'd say. You should have seen them—it was like a light went off in their heads. 'Hey, Marge,' they'd say to their lover, 'we can do it!'"

Jed Mattes

>> "I think it was Vito Russo's *The Celluloid Closet* that began it all for me," says literary agent Jed Mattes, reflecting on why he began representing queer authors nearly three decades ago. Did he worry that such a move might harm his career? "This was back in the '70s," Mattes laughs. "I don't know what I was thinking then." But he's done plenty of thinking since. Mattes has championed such diverse authors as Michelangelo Signorile, Rich Tafel, and Urvashi Vaid.

Edmund White



>> Edmund White, whose work has defined eloquence in the age of AIDS, has just finished *The Married Man*, a novel about an American and his younger French lover who dies of AIDS-related complications. "I thought at this late date it was important to write a tough book about AIDS and avoid sentimentality," White says. Of his career he adds: "I've been a reluctant activist working against the grain. I've posed questions rather than providing answers. The publication of my books can be regarded as strategic acts, but they've never been rallying cries nor agitprop. I've always chosen the tough truths over a feel-good bromide." ►



Mitchell Anderson

>> "Clearly, coming out at the [1996] GLAAD Awards was the most important moment of my life," says Mitchell Anderson, who first caught our eye as the gay classical-music teacher on the Fox TV series *Party of Five*. "From that moment on I was able to join my life as an actor and an activist in a way I was never able to do before." Instead of hurting his career, Anderson's bold, unpremeditated move made him more in demand than ever. (One indisputable proof: He'll appear with stars Ellen DeGeneres and Sharon Stone in HBO's *If These Walls Could Talk 2*.) Politically, Anderson is throwing himself wholeheartedly into the fight to legalize same-sex marriages. "If the state finally recognizes our unions," he says, "we will have conquered a huge stumbling block."

Barbara Smith

» Anyone who's read Barbara Smith's *The Truth That Never Hurts*—a 1998 collection of her penetrating essays—knows that the black, lesbian, feminist, radical, socialist scholar has always argued persuasively that the various issues she embodies are really part of one overall struggle to make the world a better place for everyone. During 1998's Black Radical Congress in Chicago, Smith shared a stage with Angela Davis and other mainstays of the movement. "For the first time in my life," Smith says, "I'd been included in that group. It was just so gratifying."



Tim Miller



>> He will always be remembered as one of the NEA Four. But provocative performance artist Tim Miller's talents range beyond taking off his clothes in theaters and taking on Sen. Jesse Helms in 1990's brouhaha over arts funding. Miller has been a producer-curator at two of the most avant of avant-garde spaces: PS 122 in New York City and Highways Performance Space in Santa Monica, Calif. Miller's one-man show and book *Shirts & Skin* traces his turbulent life through the clothes he's worn. And—get this—he moonlights by teaching Protestant ministers how to improve their sermons. Miller promises “to continue being an activist, slutty, queer point of light.” ►

Wilson Cruz



>> Ever since Wilson Cruz played a gay teen on ABC's *My So-Called Life*, young people have approached him on the street to say how much that series meant to them. "I always end up in tears. I feel very protective of them," admits the 25-year-old Latino actor, who often works with gay youth—and who also has a gay younger brother. Being out hasn't slowed Cruz down: He's starred in *Rent*, appeared on *Ally McBeal*, and just wrapped a role in the big-budget sci-fi film *Supernova*, starring James Spader. Best of all, Cruz returns to TV next season as a series regular on *Party of Five*. Is he playing gay? We'll have to wait and see.

Cher

» She's a certified superstar. She's also the mother who moved a thousand mothers—not by claiming that all was hunky-dory but by admitting that she struggled to accept the news that daughter Chastity is a lesbian. Wonderfully blunt as always, Cher admitted getting the news was hard. And that will make it easier for other parents in the future. ►



Frances Goldin



>> Every year, literary agent Frances Goldin marches in New York City's gay pride parade. "I carry a sign that says, I ADORE MY LESBIAN DAUGHTERS," Goldin says. "[But] I've been involved in the movement, including equality for homosexuals, since I was in my 20s," recalls the 75-year-old rep for Dorothy Allison, Martin Duberman, and other gay stars. "I met a socialist when I was 18 years old, eventually married him, and he educated me." If Goldin retires, it will be from the business only, not the struggle. "It will be nice to spend all my time getting arrested," she laughs.

Bill T. Jones



>> Perhaps no dance piece in the last decade inspired more debate and than *Still/Here*, Bill T. Jones's meditation on AIDS and death. "True activism or true social engagement implies a willingness to be 'up-front' at all times," says the choreographer. "I have never made what I would consider overtly political statements in my work. Any statements I made were the result of my answering urgent questions for myself." Lately these questions have led Jones to genre-bending collaborations with soprano Jessye Norman and jazz pianist Fred Hersch. In the fall he's touring with a solo piece called *The Breathing Show*.