

Out of the park

Play about gay New York baseball star scores a hit

By MICHAEL GILTZ

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How soon before a baseball star comes out of the closet? "You know it's going to happen," predicted playwright Richard Greenberg, whose hit comic drama, "Take Me Out," is about a gay baseball player on a mythical New York team who outs himself. "I bet a big, famous retired person will come out."

The play, a success in London, goes into previews Friday at the Public Theater and opens Sept. 5 — but already it may have helped nudge the process along.

It was in rehearsals when an item in the late Neal Travis' column in *The Post* suggested that a Mets superstar was considering coming out, a story that prompted catcher Mike Piazza to declare he was straight.

And what of such rumors?

"I don't believe any rumors anymore," said the openly gay Greenberg, 44, a Chelsea resident who's had five of his plays staged in the last 14 months and was shortlisted for the Pulitzer for his 1997 drama, "Three Days of Rain."

"I've gone in the other direction. Now I think, if it's a rumor, it's a lie."

"Take Me Out," which scored rave reviews in London last month, is already being discussed as a likely transfer to Broadway. It grew from Greenberg's passionate, though recent, love for the game: He's been a Yankees fan for three years.

Beyond Piazza, the topic is certainly newsworthy.

The editor of the national gay magazine *Out*, Brendan Lemon, declared in May that he was in a relationship with a Major League Baseball player whose team was based on the East Coast.

And former San Diego utility



"Primal fear of the shower scene" keeps ballplayers in the closet, said Richard Greenberg, whose play, "Take Me Out," opens Sept. 5.

Rob Scherbaum

player Billy Bean, who came out in 1999 after retiring, said that he hoped to get a front-office job with a team.

In June, the Chicago Cubs became the first professional male sports organization in the United States to advertise in a gay publication, and even hosted an "Out at the Game" night.

The Atlanta Braves supported their city's bid to host the 2006 Gay Games by holding a pre-game ceremony this month and having the Atlanta Gay Men's Chorus sing the national anthem.

The Minnesota Twins will host a gay fan event Sept. 14.

With all that positive buzz, why hasn't any player come out yet?

"There's the primal fear of the shower scene," said Greenberg, who sets a fair amount of his show in the locker rooms and shower stalls of the imaginary but very Yankees-like New York Empires.

"There are places that are preserves, such as team sports. Baseball is so much about the past, and so much about untouchable values, which are heterosexual," said Greenberg.

"It's about how something like [a player coming out] can toy with your memories. Baseball is one of the things that hasn't changed that much in American life. It's been a link, and [altering it] troubles people's sense of nostalgia."

Greenberg thinks that when a player finally does come out, it will spark a media brouhaha, then everyone will accept it.

Just for saying he wasn't gay, Piazza faced chants of "Homo!" at Yankee Stadium when the Mets played there in June — not to mention jokes from David Letterman.

"For most of the players, I don't think it's going to matter," said Greenberg. "They're getting younger, so they've been reared in an era where there's more of an openness and they're less threatened by it. I think they'll probably be fine with it eventually."

Greenberg, who had two critical hits last season — a Broadway adaptation of Strindberg's "Dance of Death," starring Ian McKellen and Helen Mirren, and "The Dazzle" off-Broadway — says he's already gotten offers to do a TV pilot based on "Take Me Out."

Greenberg, who says he's single and not looking right now, has been deluged with interview requests since the London reviews appeared.

"I am so missing being inside and alone," he said. "I'm not exactly reclusive. I just function well alone."

Greenberg predicts that, should a gay Jackie Robinson emerge, baseball will get through any controversy fairly easily.

"A current player was asked, 'What would it be like if you played with a gay player?'" said Greenberg.

"He said, 'I'm pretty sure I already have.'"