

In Memoriam

by Miles Christian Daniels

Heath Ledger: More than that 'gay cowboy'

It's funny how we remember famous people. Tammy Faye Bakker will always be remembered for her eyelashes. Richard Nixon for Watergate. Luciano Pavarotti for his sprawling tenor voice. And, if headlines are any indication, Heath Ledger for his Oscar-nominated performance in "Brokeback Mountain."

Celebrities, for the most part, have little or no say in how they'll be thought of. They put themselves out there and whether it's baseball,



Heath Ledger at the Berlin Film Festival in 2006. Photo Credit: Howie Berlin

singing, televangelism or acting, we decide their legacy.

I'll admit. I wasn't a huge fan of the "gay cowboy" film. Maybe it was the hype. I saw it late in its release and was expecting — I don't know — something more. Could be I had accepted my sexuality years before and so much of the pain I had experienced through that process had been tucked away in my closet of now-fading memories.

Whatever the reason, I left thinking the film was just okay.

What I did come away with, however, was an appreciation for the bravery of both Ledger and Jake Gyllenhaal for accepting the roles many of their counterparts had rejected for fear it might just ruin their respective careers.

And in spite of my disappointment with the film, Ledger and Gyllenhaal helped challenge a notion many of us in the gay community have battled with since our coming out: that we're all effeminate, fashion gurus whose sexuality is defined entirely by stereotype — and even worse — by choice. This is why I have never been attracted to shows like "Will and Grace" or "Queer Eye for the Straight Guy." These, in my opinion, only confirm what

many already assume.

In a 2006 interview with Fordham University's *The Observer*, an unassuming Ledger said "... [we] wanted to tell a story of someone who transcends the label of straight or gay; he's a soul that falls in love with another soul within the vessel of a man."

Ledger went on to say that his character, Ennis Del Mar, "was the most complex and internal character I've been offered to play and it would take a very mature performance out of me to complete this character."

Ledger received a Golden Globe and an Oscar nomination for his career-defining performance in "Brokeback Mountain." But, beyond the accolades (and whether he meant to or not), Ledger also helped those like my father, three brothers and friends I've known since grade school come one step closer to understanding that being gay has nothing to do with stereotype and everything to do with love. Because of this, my hope is that Heath Ledger will be remembered as an individual who made life just a little bit easier for folks like me. ▀

— Miles Christian Daniels lives in New York City and is the director of the documentary film, "Dixie Queen," which features North Carolina drag queen, Tara Nicole. His columns have appeared in more than one hundred newspapers and magazines.

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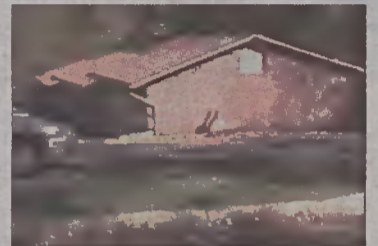
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