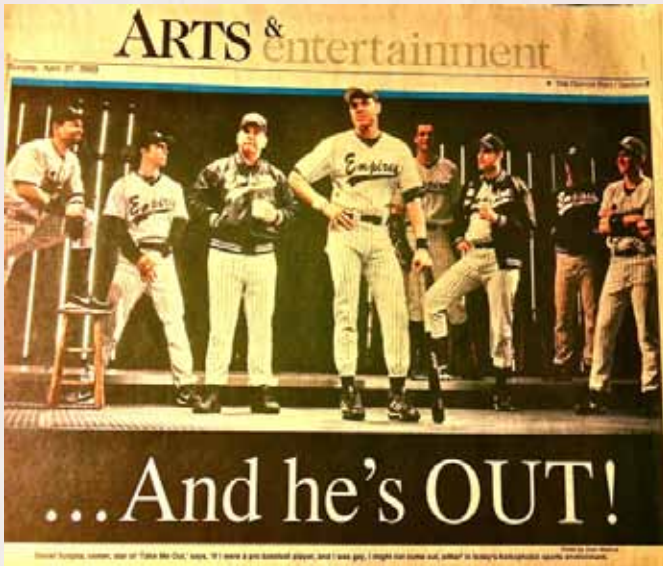


...And he's OUT!

Broadway portrayal of homosexual ballplayer runs counter to reality



By John Moore, The Denver Post

NEW YORK - In the few first seconds of the most controversial new play on Broadway, a young, handsome and cocky major-league baseball superstar casually and unashamedly mentions to the media and his teammates that he is gay. His talents are so god-like, his life to date so charmed and insulated from hatred, it never occurs to him to care what anyone else might think about that.

Art, in this case, certainly does not imitate life. Because in the entire history of the four major American professional team sports, not one player ever has come out as a homosexual while still collecting paychecks and banking endorsements.

In the real world, this is what really happens when an athlete turns out to be gay:

Last year, when retired NFL player Esera Tuaolo revealed his homosexuality, Sterling Sharpe told a national television audience that his 6-foot-3, 300-pound former teammate would have been hated and "eaten

alive" by his own kind, had they known. Tuaolo would have been "taken out" on a Tuesday, Sharpe vowed, before he could ever make it to a game on Sunday.

How ironic that Richard Greenberg's Pulitzer-nominated new play is titled "Take Me Out" as both an homage to America's pastime and a reference to the lead character's sexuality. Like a baseball triple play, Sharpe's attitude reveals an unintended third entendre that speaks to the consequences any real-life ballplayer might face: He would be taken out.

"I think it would be an enormously difficult thing to do," said Greenberg, "and I think it will probably be hellish for whoever does it, no matter who he is. There is nothing but disincentive."

Not only would the player likely lose endorsements and face tension in his own locker room, he would be hounded by the media in every city he visited, and he would be constantly subjected to verbal and even physical abuse. Last year, a father and son rushed the field in Kansas City just to attack an opposing base coach.

"You can imagine what a gay player would be up against," said Greenberg, an openly gay man. "You're endangering his life."

The only incentive for doing it anyway, he said, "is if the player just can't stand it anymore. When living the lie becomes impossible."

An irony is that even a terrified player taken to the brink and involuntarily shoved off likely would land in a vast safety net held up by supporters he cannot possibly yet imagine, and not just from the gay community. A lifetime of celebrity and speeches would follow, as well as mail from suicidal gay teens crediting him with saving their lives. That doesn't qualify as incentive, but it would certainly counter the inevitable negative fallout.

Greenberg grew up on Long Island with no interest in baseball until the 1998 World Series, when, at age 38, with the help of his fanatical brothers, he became intoxicated with the New York Yankees and baseball's ability to reveal the heart and mind of America.

His play gets to the heart of America's love for the game ("baseball is unrelentingly meaningful") but also shows how it can be unrelentingly mean (the protagonist gets a fan letter from a father who would be proud to have him as his son's scoutmaster or teacher ... "but do you have to play baseball?").

New York Empires ballplayer Darren Lemming's teammates are fairly accepting of his homosexuality, but that might be because they are so enormously dependent on his talent. What stirs up the chalk line is the promotion of a minor-league pitcher named Shane Mungitt, who sounds like John Rocker and looks libelously like menacing mullet-head Randy Johnson. The conflict builds to a violent end, and not just for the two antagonists.

In real life, a hostile reception of some degree certainly awaits whatever player decides to become the gay equivalent of Jackie Robinson - if the decision is actually his.

Colorado Rockies pitcher Todd Jones, a 6-foot, 3-inch pitcher from Marietta, Ga., said an openly gay player would create a hostile locker-room environment, and that opposing pitchers would likely throw intentionally at his head.

"I wouldn't want a gay guy being around me," Jones said. "It's got nothing to do with me being scared. That's the problem: All these people say he's got all these rights. Yeah, he's got rights or whatever, but he shouldn't walk around proud. It's like he's rubbing it in our face.



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'See me, hear me roar.' We're not trying to be close-minded, but then again, why be confrontational when you don't really have to be?"

That kind of attitude "speaks volumes about America," said actor Daniel Sunjata, a Jeter lookalike who plays Lemming in "Take Me Out." "Sports are the last bastion of sanctioned homophobia in this country. The fact that something like sexual preference can so adversely affect your career and your income is depressing. If I were a pro baseball player, and I was gay, I might not come out, either, for those exact reasons."

Mark Grace, a 38-year-old first baseman for the Arizona Diamondbacks, said most ballplayers are less threatened by the idea of a gay teammate. "I've played for 16 years, and I'm sure I've had homosexual teammates that I didn't know about," he said. "If one out of six or seven men are homosexual - do the math."

Any problem, Grace said, would manifest itself not so much in the field but in the locker room and in the showers - where, coincidentally, the majority of "Take Me Out" takes place.

"I think the perception in the clubhouse would be one of, for lack of a better word - fear," Grace said.

"Fear that they'd be stared at or (that a gay player might fall) in love with them. But I think if you're intelligent at all, you'd understand that homosexuals are just like us. They don't think everybody's attractive. Just because this guy's homosexual doesn't mean he's attracted to me."

The play's nude shower scenes are at first just a titillation, but later the crucial context for the play's penultimate confrontation - and it is motivated not by the redneck but the superstar. When Mungitt complains

to a reporter about “havin’ to take a shower every night with a faggot,” Lemming confronts him in the shower, and humiliates him by angrily kissing him.

What happens next is dramatic but problematic from a baseball and a theater point of view. The debased pitcher exacts his revenge by firing a lethal beanball at the head of Lemming’s best friend, who is conveniently a member of the opposing team and (to beanball the message home) a religious guy who approves of Lemming’s homosexuality about as much as Mungitt does.

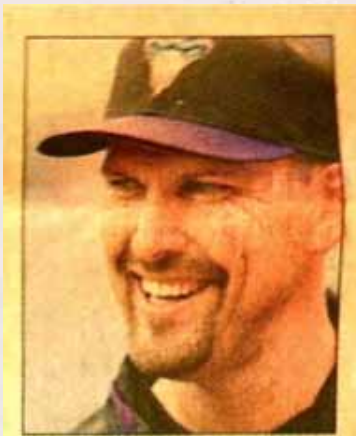
It’s a touchy subject

The likelihood of the friendship or the killer accuracy of the beanball are debatable, but the very idea of a gay player - or worse, a rumor that you might be a gay player, can turn players and their agents into scared little boys.

Last May, when a tabloid gossip column hinted an unnamed New York Mets superstar might be gay, Mike Piazza was so threatened that he called a press conference the next day in Philadelphia. Flanked by beautiful woman on either side, he announced famously, “I’m not gay.” The tabloid reprinted the quote in 600-point type.

The subject is so raw, none of the four major-league agents contacted by The Denver Post for this story would even comment on what advice they might give a hypothetical client who said he was gay. They wanted nothing to do with having their names attached to the subject. But Greenberg said any agent worth his 10 percent “would stop him every step of the way.”

“And if the agent is looking out for the best interest of his client both financially and physically, he’s right (to stop him),” he said. “But if he’s looking after the best



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interests of his client spiritually, he’d have to reconsider.”

What is the source of all this fear in the usually fearless arena of pro sports? For players, Grace said, “most of it is because your manhood is such an important thing to athletes.” For fans, the idea disrupts not only perceptions of the game and its history but its iconography, such as fathers and sons worshipping stars together.

“It’s a question of one’s nostalgia being troubled, because for all the differences in salaries, and the introduction of designated hitters, there is a continuity in American life between baseball as it was played originally, and baseball as it continues to be played,” Greenberg said. “Baseball is a place where you just don’t want things to be different. For most guys, baseball is a place where they can put the complexities of sexuality aside, where everything was assumed and everything was safe. And now suddenly there’s nuances and threats and dangers.”

Male athletes, the actor Sunjata said, symbolize to the American consciousness what it means to be male in a traditional sense. “And because of that fact, a lot of dated notions about masculinity that seem to be breaking down in society

at large are crystallized in these institutions, because this machismo is what it means to be a man.”

But it is a selective distinction, because from David Bowie to Mick Jagger to Michael Stipe, Greenberg said, “America has had a lot less trouble accepting the omnisexuality of rock stars.”

Barrier in baseball likely to remain

The gay barrier will one day be broken in baseball, but not likely for a very long time. Glenn Burke (who died of AIDS), and Billy Bean (a formerly married man

who led a double life as an active ballplayer) were outed in retirement. Greenberg took part of his inspiration for "Take Me Out" from Bean's story, which was released last week in the book, "Going the Other Way." Bean said given today's climate, he does not expect it to happen anytime soon.

Whenever it does, how may be more important than who. There are three possible scenarios, all resulting in some form of public mayhem.

The first would involve an established, Lemming-like superstar. "The guy in my play has a really misguided sense of self-knowledge," Greenberg said. "He really, startlingly, thinks he will get away with it because he looks at his remarkably approved life and figures that somehow it's not going to be a big deal."

Jones agreed that "if the guy's a gay, he'd better be a really, really good player. Because if (the team) thinks for one minute he's disrupting the clubhouse - if he doesn't hit 50 homers or win 20 games - they're not going to put up with that."

The second scenario would involve a retiring star who already has made his money in baseball and simply wants to break the barrier.

More likely, however, it will happen in a third, much uglier way, with a player being outed by a teammate, opponent or the media. And should that player have HIV or AIDS, like Burke, it will be far worse. Fan violence would almost be a given.

"There's a lot of free-floating violence in this country, and what a perfect target, because (if you're the instigator), you'll have a lot of people supporting you," Greenberg said. "That's why it can't be someone else's decision. There is just something profoundly wrong about that."

It can't happen soon enough for Greenberg.

"There will be a tension in baseball until it happens, because the subject keeps coming up," he said.

"I love the game, and I'm not interested in the private

lives of any of the players. I want to know that they are not abusing their families because I can't root for them if they are. But other than that, I don't care. It's the game that matters. But it has to be gotten through, so that it can be seen in its ultimate irrelevance."

The most daring and lasting legacy of "Take Me Out" is the fact that it does not end sentimentally but badly. And for better or worse, depending on the aftermath of a gay player coming out, it may be looked back upon as prescient.

"Richard's play is an interesting commentary on the ideals that are put forth in terms of what a democracy should be and how far we have to go yet to match our present reality with those ideals," Sunjata said. "Sometimes a play, a book or a song comes out that is a little bit ahead of its time, and being ahead of its time, it encourages the times to catch up a little bit."