



Butler, Dan (b. 1954)

by Linda Rapp

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Best known for his portrayal of "Bulldog" Briscoe, a lecherous heterosexual sports reporter, on the television comedy *Frasier*, Dan Butler not only came out as a gay man, but also authored and starred in the gay-themed play *The Only Worse Thing You Could Have Told Me*.

Dan Butler's roots are in the American Midwest. Born December 2, 1954 in Huntington, Indiana, he grew up in the nearby city of Fort Wayne. He showed an early interest in acting, gathering neighborhood children to put on "little vaudevilles."

In high school Butler pursued his penchant for the stage, winning leading roles in student plays. He also excelled in sports and was elected class president.

Upon graduating in 1973 he enrolled at Purdue University and then transferred to San Jose State University, but dropped out to study acting at the American Conservatory Theater in San Francisco from 1976 to 1978.

Although he had had girlfriends, Butler realized that had always been attracted to men. His first gay romance, however, only came in 1977. He confided the news to his sister, Pam Conrad, announcing on the first page of a letter that he was in love and writing on the top of the second page, "And his name is Tommy." Although she and their mother, who subsequently happened upon the letter, were surprised by the revelation, both women were quick to accept Butler's sexual orientation.

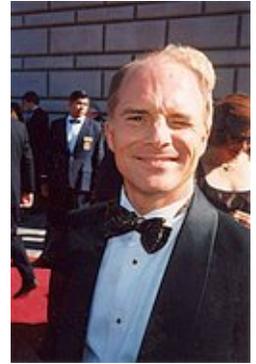
Butler's father, on the other hand, did not take the news well at first. Although he eventually came to accept his son's sexuality, his initial reaction was one of anger. Even ten years later, when their relationship had improved, he said of the moment that Butler had revealed his sexual orientation, "The only worse thing that you could have told me is that you were dead"--a line that Butler would take for the title of his play.

Butler moved to New York in 1980 to pursue a career on the stage. Over the next decade he appeared in a number of plays, including Terrence McNally's *The Lisbon Traviata*. After a successful New York run in 1989 and 1990, the show moved to Los Angeles, where Butler performed in 1990 and 1991.

In the meanwhile he had begun performing in films. He debuted in *Manhunter* (1986, directed by Michael Mann). His numerous movie credits also include Norman René's *Longtime Companion* (1989) and Jonathan Demme's *Silence of the Lambs* (1991).

Butler also pursued opportunities in television. He landed a recurring role on the situation comedy *Roseanne* (1991-1992) and made guest appearances on many others, but he is best known for the character that he played on *Frasier* (1993-2004)--a libidinous heterosexual sports reporter called Bob "Bulldog" Briscoe.

It was during the run of *Frasier* that Butler came out publicly as a gay man. He did so in unusually dramatic



Dan Butler outside the Academy Awards ceremony in 1995.

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fashion--starring in a one-man play that he had authored, *The Only Worse Thing You Could Have Told Me*. The show earned rave reviews when it opened in Los Angeles in 1994, and the accolades continued to pour in when Butler took it to New York the following year.

The semi-autobiographical play presents a series of fourteen vignettes of different characters, all of them gay except for a macho jock whose best friend has just come out to him. The rest of the characters present a wide range of situations and experiences. Among them are an ACT-UP demonstrator, an opera queen, an AIDS worker who falls in love with a dying patient, a man about to attend his high school class reunion, and an angry closeted man.

New York Times critic Ben Brantley described *The Only Worse Thing . . .* as a "beautifully executed show" and "a remarkably clear-eyed and human portrait of the existential questions of gay identity that is more than the sum of its parts."

Butler incorporated a very personal element into the play, a taped conversation with his mother about why she had not revealed his homosexuality to his stepfather.

Butler did not, however, want to focus narrowly on his own experience. "There are so many different camps about what being gay means. The danger comes when each one is so rigid that it sees itself as the true picture," he commented.

Butler compared doing the play with working as a trapeze artist without a net. He feels that the experience made him stronger and more confident both personally and professionally.

Butler has become an active proponent of glbtq rights. In 1995 he and Candace Gingrich served as spokespersons for the National Coming Out Day Project. Butler appeared in public service announcements that included the gently humorous statement, "I'm not a straight man, but I play one on television."

Butler was among the public figures to speak out in 2000 against California's Proposition 22 (also known as the Knight Initiative) that sought to define marriage as a union between a man and a woman.

Butler has participated in fundraisers for AIDS charities, among them one in his native state of Indiana in 2002 that brought in a record amount of money for the event. He has also done volunteer service, including working as a counselor on the Trevor Helpline, a telephone resource for gay youth in crisis or considering suicide.

Butler has been in a stable relationship with acting teacher Richard Waterhouse since the mid-1990s. Although they had known each other before, they cemented their relationship soon after Waterhouse lost a former lover to AIDS. At first they felt guilty for falling in love so soon after a bereavement and Waterhouse asked Butler to "slow down" a little. He did and the two have been together ever since.

Butler and Waterhouse were married--albeit without the sanction of the state of California--in a private ceremony in March 1999 on their fifth anniversary together. The families of both men were in attendance.

Butler showed courage by making a public declaration of his homosexuality. He realized that doing so might adversely affect his career, but he bravely took the chance. Happily, his career has not suffered, and he continues to appear in a variety of projects in film, television, and theater.

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