



Tyler, Robin (b. 1942)

by Tina Gianoulis

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Volatile and charismatic, Robin Tyler has been a part of the public gay and lesbian scene since her early years as a stand-up comic in the 1960s. She has also spent much of her life enmeshed in the struggle for gay and lesbian rights, planning national marches and regional music festivals, and taking her and her partner's case for gay marriage to the California Supreme Court.

Tyler has often been a controversial figure within the glbtq community. The dynamic personality and insolent audacity that have given her command of many a hostile comedy stage have sometimes been perceived as arrogant authoritarianism by those working with her on community projects. In her defense, however, Tyler would point out a double standard: "When a woman is professional, it is called 'authoritarian.' When a man is professional, it is called competent."

Tyler was born Arlene Chernick in Winnipeg, Manitoba, Canada, on April 8, 1942. As early as 1959, she demonstrated a rebellious flamboyance by standing on a busy Winnipeg street corner holding a sign proclaiming, "Gay is Good." However, though her sign was greeted with cheerful waves from Manitoban drivers who did not yet recognize her political use of the word "gay," Tyler's family did not accept her lesbian identity, and in 1972 she moved to Toronto where she found a more tolerant community.

In Toronto, and later in New York City, she began performing in nightclubs as a Judy Garland impersonator and as a stand-up comic, a rigorous training ground where she developed both a thick skin and an aggressive banter in response to sexist and homophobic heckling. In response to one drunken patron who shouted, "Are you a lesbian?", the quick-witted Tyler quipped, "Are you the alternative?"

In 1978, Tyler made the question unnecessary when she became the first out lesbian on U.S. national television on a Showtime comedy special hosted by Phyllis Diller. The same year she released her comedy album, *Always a Bridesmaid, Never a Groom*, the first comedy album by an out lesbian.

During the 1970s, Tyler teamed up with sister comic Patty Harrison to form a feminist comedy act. Harrison and Tyler built their reputation with performances at colleges and coffeehouses, then signed a contract to develop a variety show for the American Broadcasting Company. They produced four pilots for ABC, and, though the network did not pick up their variety show, Harrison and Tyler did appear regularly on the Krofft Comedy Hour.

Tyler came out publicly during an early gay pride celebration, when she responded to a challenge to make up "pro-gay" jokes to counter the ubiquitous anti-gay jokes. As she tells the story, "I got up and did this joke about running into a right-wing guy and he said 'I think they should take all you queers and put you on an island someplace.' And I said 'They did, darling, and they call it Manhattan.'"

Pleased with the response to her first gay joke, Tyler determined to create jokes where gay men and lesbians "weren't the object of the humor, where we were the subject of the humor." Convinced that humor



Robin Tyler (second from right) with Diane Olson at their wedding in Los Angeles. Rabbi Denise Eger, who officiated at the wedding, stands beside Gloria Allred, the couple's attorney in their successful lawsuit against the County of Los Angeles demanding the right to marry. Image courtesy Robin Tyler.

"is the razor-sharp edge of the truth," she determined to hone her comedy to serve the needs of the burgeoning gay and lesbian political movement, though she knew that to do so might destroy her mainstream career.

From the very beginning, Tyler's comedy has been characterized by its political edge. For example, one of her most famous quotes takes on the question of whether homosexuality is a disease. "If homosexuality is a disease," Tyler says, "let's all call in queer to work: 'Hello. Can't work today, still queer.'" She is also known for her description of Christian fundamentalists, first applied to anti-gay activist Anita Bryant: "Fundamentalists are to Christianity what paint-by-numbers is to art."

Fittingly, Tyler's comedy career and her political career have enjoyed a symbiotic relationship, each nurturing the other. She has not hesitated to assume leadership positions in the quest for gay and lesbian rights.

Tyler has worked for almost three decades as a national event organizer. In 1979, she initiated a call for a gay and lesbian march on Washington, D.C., partially in response to the right-wing backlash against the gay liberation movement. The resultant National March on Washington for Lesbian and Gay Rights drew over 100,000 demonstrators to the U.S. capital, the first such national demand for gay and lesbian equality.

Tyler was also instrumental in organizing the second National March on Washington for Lesbian and Gay Rights in 1987, where the AIDS quilt was displayed for the first time, and the 1993 March on Washington for Lesbian, Gay and Bi Equal Rights and Liberation, which drew almost a million glbtq protesters from around the nation.

In the late 1990s, Tyler issued another call to march, this time for a 2000 Millennium March on Washington. However, she and other initiators of the march, such as the Human Rights Campaign and the Universal Fellowship of Metropolitan Community Churches, received a great deal of community criticism for what was perceived as a "top-down" organizing process.

Many grassroots groups, including young queers, queers of color, and labor-based organizations, withdrew support for the march, and a group called the Ad Hoc Committee for an Open Process formed to confront march organizers and demand a more inclusive structure. Tyler was replaced as executive director of the march.

Angered by what she later called "the insanity of the politically correct left," she quit the organizing team, determined never to organize another national march. However, in 2005, despite her vow not to work on another national march, Tyler wrote a letter to the feminist journal *off our backs*, issuing a call for a national glbtq demonstration in April 2008.

Women's culture has always been an important part of the lesbian movement, and Tyler has also devoted her considerable organizing skills to a number of women's music and comedy festivals. As early as 1972, she produced women's music recordings, including a 45 rpm record by Maxine Feldman that is sometimes said to be the first lesbian record.

During the 1980s, Tyler produced several West Coast Women's Music and Comedy Festivals and Southern Womyn's Music and Comedy Festivals.

In the 1990s, she branched out into the travel business with Robin Tyler Tours, offering upscale tour packages for lesbian travelers. On these tours to such exotic locales as China, New Zealand, the Greek isles, Machu Picchu, and Egypt, Tyler accompanies groups of 30 to 50 women who stay at the best hotels, camps, lodges, and yachts available.

Though Tyler has publicly expressed anger and dismay at the various criticisms she has received from the queer community, she remains a passionate activist. In 2000, she became national protest coordinator of the Stop Dr. Laura campaign, a movement that successfully lobbied for the cancellation of the television program hosted by homophobic psychologist Laura Schlessinger.

Tyler is also on the national advisory board of the National Association to Protect Children (PROTECT), an advocacy group for abused children, and in the early 2000s, she co-produced the Stroll-a-Thon to raise money to care for babies with AIDS.

Tyler is an outspoken advocate of equal marriage laws. She is executive director of the Equality Campaign, which works to legalize same-sex marriage, and national co-chair of DontAmend.com, the organization opposing federal and state constitutional amendments that would prohibit same-sex marriage.

Tyler and her partner Diane Olson, the granddaughter of a former governor of California, placed their personal lives in the fight on February 12, 2004, when they filed the first lawsuit for marriage equality in the state of California.

Their lawsuit, subsequently joined to other suits, including those stemming from the San Francisco marriages performed by Mayor Gavin Newsom in 2004 and later voided by the courts, culminated in the California Supreme Court's historic ruling of May 15, 2008 that legalized same-sex marriage in the state.

In recognition of the role Tyler and Olson played in securing marriage equality, they were permitted to be among the earliest couples married when the court decision became final on June 16, 2008 at 5:00 p.m. The two were married in front of the Beverly Hills Courthouse by a rabbi and then celebrated their wedding at a reception at their home in the San Fernando Valley.

In 2007, Tyler revamped her *Always a Bridesmaid, Never a Groom* comedy act to include the decades of glbtq and personal history since it was first written.

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About the Author

Tina Gianoulis is an essayist and free-lance writer who has contributed to a number of encyclopedias and anthologies, as well as to journals such as *Sinister Wisdom*.