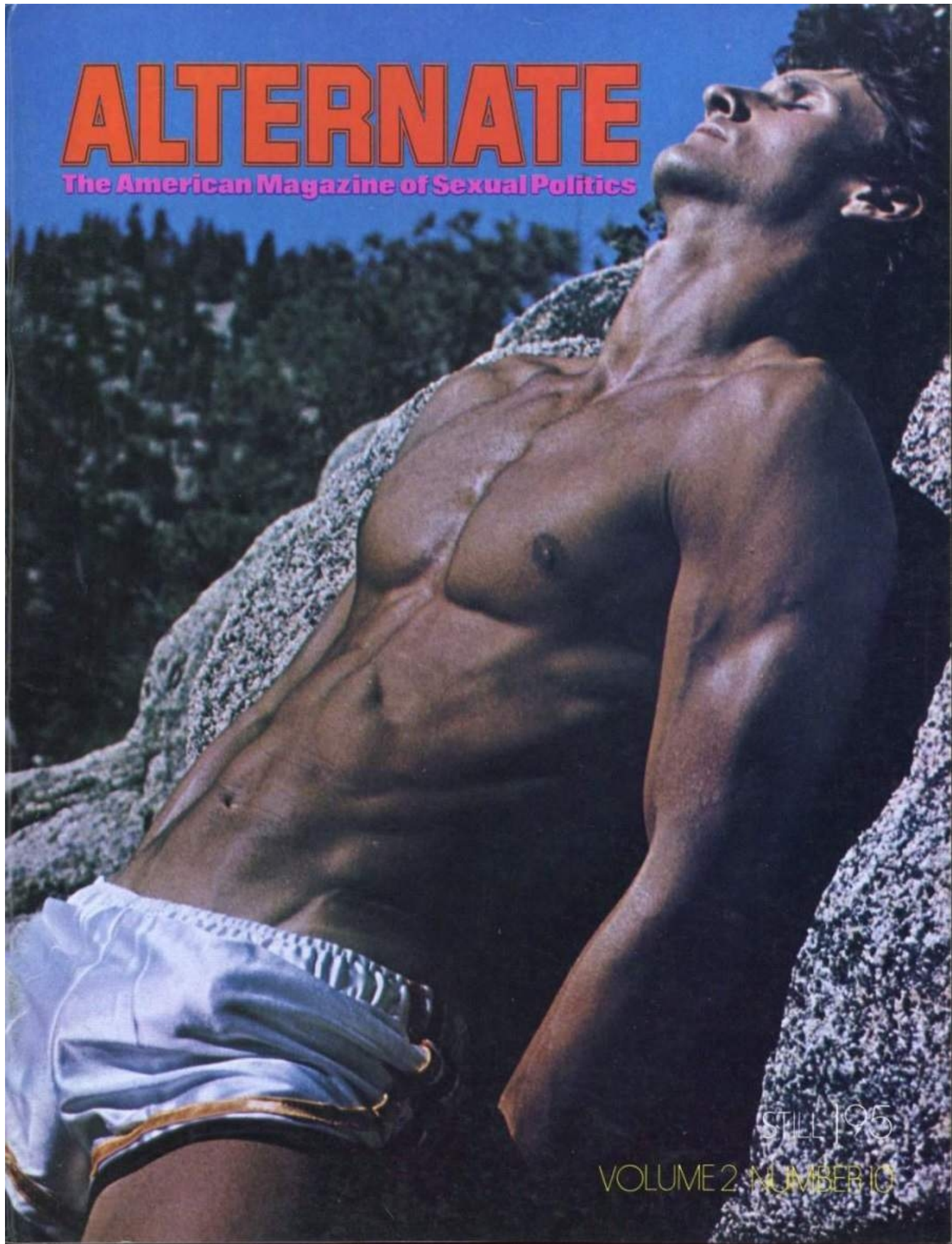




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"I'm not interested in the traditional Porno Framework
... it's too easy ..."

Arthur J. Bressan & Forbidden Letters

by Edward Guthmann

All photos by Efrén Ramirez

It is said of great people that five minutes in their company can change your life, and while this may be true of Arthur J. Bressan, Jr. — the director of *Passing Strangers* and *Gay U.S.A.* — I have found that anything over an hour in proximity to the human tornado he creates, and I am ready for a long nap.

Do not misunderstand: Artie Bressan is adorable. He is generous, he is affectionate, he is stimulating. He sings to his friends (beautifully). It's just that there's a speed limit to the average human capacity for attention, and this 6'4", 35-year old peripatetic long-haired filmmaker from New York is a serious moving violation of that unwritten code.

One does not interview Bressan in the sense that one may interview anyone else. There is no need to coax, to prod, to pamper. Rather, he comes armed with a flotilla of quotes and information, supplying questions to be asked of himself, meticulously giving the replies, fussing with the cassette deck to make sure his words are being preserved correctly.

Artie is a torrent of ideas and talk, and at the moment is fired-up over *Forbidden Letters*, his new film starring porno prince Richard Locke (Hank the Horny Truckdriver in *Kansas City Trucking Co.*). It's another in the Bressan oeuvre of romance-tinged porno, and is similar to his award-winning *Passing Strangers* (the gay *Elvira Madigan*) in a number of ways. Both have black-and-white and color sequences; both are two-character studies; both are heavy on colored gels, soft lighting, pastoral landscapes and folky musical backgrounds.

Like his previous features, *Letters* cost less than \$7000 to make. The other ingredients in the Bressan moviemaking recipe are pushiness, patience, a lot of help from friends, humor, welfare payments, a vast knowledge of film iconography, tenacity, technical werewithal and a brimming-over supply of energy.

This time out, Artie's promoting and

distributing himself, and has booked the picture into New York, L.A. and San Francisco for February — with Boston, San Diego, Washington, D.C. and Houston soon to follow. Artie's been burned by distributors before, and he's got some hair-curling stories apropos of that subject, most of which he won't share for fear of his own safety.

"They're paying rock bottom prices for gay films now," Artie said. "There's nothing left once they take their cut, so you *have* to do it yourself. It's not like 1975 — that was the Golden Age. Today it's sausage."

He feels good about the new film. "It's the most 'movie' movie I've ever made. Lots of flashbacks, freeze frames. Pure cinema." The film details an older man/younger man relationship ("a theme I seem to be obsessed with — and one that's in my own life"). The older man (Locke) has spent a year in prison, and with his imminent return, the younger partner (Robert Adams) develops a heartfelt of anxiety and desire. "It's about time and what it does to relationships," Artie said. "Gay people are very aware of how love changes from day to day, and even moment to moment."

More important, the film posits prison as a metaphor for the closet existence, exploring "the feeling of prison without going inside: the sense of separation, alienation and confinement."

The film's most powerful sequence, shot on San Francisco's Alcatraz Island at the decaying federal prison, has Locke and Adams masturbating in adjoining cells — a fairly typical Bressan fantasy riff. "It was very dangerous," he recalls. "We'd gotten permission to film on a ruse, by telling the tour guide it was 'an ecological film about prisons, Now and Then.' After shooting the bars and cells for an hour or more, the guide left us for a half-hour and we were able to do the double masturbation scene. Both Richard and Robert had to get into the

mood very quickly."

Forbidden Letters was filmed on a synchronized schedule with another Bressan feature, a heterosexual skinflick named *Navy Blue*. Artie used the same cameras, same crew, same music, same plot devices and one of the same actors (Victoria Young). It's on the back burner at the moment, and its release is in question. "So far the verdict is that it's too tender, too gentle and 'too real.' A distributor in L.A. said, 'People don't want to see real love on the screen — they want sleazy love.'"

You'd expect that type of thing would steal the wind from his sails, but it doesn't. Artie's remarkably resilient, one of the most systematically underappreciated people I know. Another of his feature films, *Take Two* ("a film about pornography told from the point of view of a woman who quits the business"), was completed years ago but has never been released.

More recently, Artie's attempt to finance a projected Harvey Milk documentary fizzled out, even after making a plea for funds in the *San Francisco Sentinel* newspaper. The idea was to make it "quickly, economically and get it out before the tide is lost." He'd even shot interviews with Milk's brother and some politicians, and was charged up with the potential for a film that would be "a winner's story."

I first met Artie Bressan six years ago, when my roommate fell in love with him for three weeks. I was working nights scooping ice cream at Old Uncle Gaylord's, and would ride my bicycle back from North Beach at 2 am. One night I arrived home to discover, lolling about naked in my Lupe Velez Memorial Living Room, a large hairy Teddy Bear of a man. I immediately recognized the vivid, almost fevered look in his eyes to be an indication of either brilliance or low-grade insanity — probably both.

"Edward," my roommate gushed as

only 22-year olds are allowed to, "this is Arthur and we're in love."

I groaned silently, and predicted an early demise for the affair. My precience was correct, and when the pair split — after a great deal of breast-beating and melodrama — I wondered when I'd meet Artie again.

It was months later that he appeared, unannounced and full of vinegar, at a revival of *It's A Wonderful Life* by Frank Capra (his favorite director). I was drowned in a big Artie-hug, told how "Wunnnnn-derful" everything on earth was (including me), informed of his latest film projects and boyfriends, and in a matter of minutes engaged to do voice-overs for *Passing Strangers*, then in its final production stage.

Artie has continued his re-appearance act — at irregular intervals — rather like the mysterious motorcyclist in Fellini's

calls his boyfriends "Little Scutters"). Probably as a product of his cinema conditioning, he also has a penchant for sudden romance, for falling quickly and rapturously in love: fast ignition, strings and harps, fast fadeout. Each time he bounces back, unscathed and unjaded, eager for the next round. ("People say that I'm overwhelming," he once told me.)

It is a remarkably constant pattern, and one that transfers quite clearly into his films. The schmaltzy elements of *Passing Strangers*; dreamy saxophone solos, frolics in Golden Gate Park, helicopter shots of San Francisco, are no accident. These are emblems of his own life; this is what he experiences. "When I get into a person," he said, "almost everything else vanishes from my attention."

Artie's taken a lot of flak for the romantic posture in his films. People say it

you are as a person — is more the domain of the novel, fiction and realism. Artie's mistake is in trying to adapt that second kind of sexuality to his films. His films are soft at the core, and that doesn't seem to me to be what porno is about. It goes against the tension that's in sex, makes it too utopian and romantic."

Certainly, his films would sell better were he to inject them with a harder stripe of sexuality: fist-fucking, bondage, water sports. As long ago as 1974, he was rebuffed by one exhibitor after another who demanded, "Does it have S&M or fist-fucking in it?" One theatre manager had \$500 lying on his desk, and offered it to Artie to finish *Passing Strangers*, "provided I lard it with S&M. He was genuinely trying to help me."

"When you make a gay porno film," Artie said, "you have three strikes against you: 1) it's gay; 2) it's sexual; and 3) if



Amarcord, usually on the rebound from New York or Hawaii. Each time the spirit is good, the eyes ablaze. (Even when Artie was felled by a critical remission of hepatitis, he'd answer his phone with a singsongy "Hello, Hepatitic Haven!")

Our friendship is a successfully complementary one: my nature being one of rapacious curiosity, Artie's being that of the compulsive monologist. He loves to talk, to pontificate, to share anecdotes and theories. I am a good listener. That our friendship has developed along these teacher/pupil lines is most likely a hold-over from Artie's days in Manhattan as the Jean Brodie-like mentor to a passle of gifted schoolboys. He was in his early 20s, quite enamored of his prodigies, and when the school administrators discovered that his instruction transcended the academic, he was fired.

Artie's taste in men has always run toward the young and very young (he

dilutes the impact and sexual heat of porno. I've seen men yawn at the lyrical passages of *Passing Strangers* and — bored with the absence of hard, tension-riddled sex — get up and walk out.

"I'm not interested in the traditional jackoff porno framework," Artie said. "It's too easy. You get two or three hot guys, pay them \$200 each to cum on cue, oil 'em up, get long 400-foot loads in your camera and start shooting — long takes of a cock going in an ass."

"I've enjoyed that type of thing; it can be very hot. But I always try to get into the characters. I like *starting* anonymous, but I usually get hotter once I get to know people, feel their sexual vibe."

A critic and friend of Artie told me, "Porno has always succeeded better at portraying the type of sexuality that's typified by chaos, uncertainty, anonymity. The other type of sexuality — security, romance, having to do with who

you attempt to do anything outside the genre, people think you're pretentious and uppity. 'Why not leave porno alone? Just let it be fuck and suck and lots of cum shots.' I've heard that from people for years."

Artie writes and directs his films, casts and edits and help with cameras, using a repeating repertory of friends that materializes for each project. Certain friends and lovers have acted in several of his projects. The three stars of *Forbidden Letters* (Locke, Adams, and Victoria Young) are all longtime Bressan collaborators.

In June 1977, Artie gathered the technical members of his clan for *Gay U.S.A.*, a quickie documentary made in the heat of the Anita Bryant madness, spotlighting the Gay Freedom Day Parade in several U.S. cities. Camera crews were ferreted out to San Diego, New York, L.A.; in San Francisco Artie interviewed

gay men and Lesbians on Market Street. "We shot that entire film in one day and it was ready in two months. I like doing films quickly, working against deadline."

The film's left Artie with an acrid aftertaste, though: he spent the whole of 1978 trying to market *Gay U.S.A.* but hasn't made a cent. "It's played from Maui to Switzerland, but the cost of distribution has cancelled our revenues." The film also suffered enormously from comparisons to *Word Is Out*, another gay documentary, much more palatable, slick, straight-oriented, pretty and safe.

"People thought we were poaching on *Word Is Out's* territory," Artie said. "We locked horns with a lot of people, mostly gay, who sit at the bottlenecks of media power, who said, 'It's a great movie but it's too gay. Straight people will get the wrong impression.'"



"For a whole year I was turned out of one office after another, and not on cinematic grounds. That I could deal with." Currently, Artie's in debt \$20,000 on the film.

January 21. I phone Artie. "Rosemary DeCamp. Death Valley Days," he chimes. One of his opera tapes is screaming in the background. (Artie has an operatic range, dramatic tenor/baritone cantabile, and sings in five languages.) "How's your story coming along?" he asks. Artie has written profiles, too, for *Interview* years ago, and he understands my gut-wrenching. When he did a piece on Frank Capra he agonized; spending hours going over a ream of 3x5 card notes. My tape transcriptions at this moment are crammed onto eight typewritten pages, pinned on the wall by my desk. Writing is hell.

If you could afford to do any kind of picture you'd like, what would it be?

"I'd go down to L.A., look up Christopher Isherwood and say, 'Chris, baby, I want you to sell me the rights to *A Single Man*, and I want to write the screenplay with you and direct it with Jason Robards playing the single man.'"

"I'd also film Rolf Hochhuth's *The Deputy*. It's about the silence of the Vatican in World War II. It would have to be a large budget — you'd have to reproduce Europe.

Which film directors influenced you most?

"Visually, Sternberg and Eisenstein. Audience communication, Frank Capra and his screenwriter Robert Riskin. Also, musicals — not the MGM ones, which were easy, but the early operettas by W.S. Van Dyke and Robert Z. Leonard. I like the frontality of those Jeannette Mac-



Donald films. Very direct, sentimental, gargantuan."

Contemporary directors?

"Orson Welles is still great, but most modern films leave me cold. I think audiences have lost the use of their eyes from watching *Kojak* and *Baretta*. There's a total lack of visualism on TV: you're watching talking heads and they're telling you the script. That's why I like silent films best."

You've used Richard Locke several times in your films. What makes him hot cinematic material?

"Richard is a classic double-think. You look at him and he looks like Mr. Rapist/Lumberjack/Fuck-You-Up-The-Wall, but if you know Richard — I've known him nine years — you see that he's also emotional and tender. I hope you see that dimension in *Forbidden Letters*."

Artie Bressan's next picture will be a non-porno feature titled *Revenge*. It's

the story of Richard Heakin, a man who was murdered outside a bar in Tucson, Arizona by four teenagers. The boys were apprehended by police, and given, suspended sentences by a judge who commended them for "defending their manhood."

"I want to make this film because I've known several gay men who've been killed: Heakin, Robert Hillsborough, and now Harvey Milk. When it happens, we're told the only valid response is resignation and quietude, turning the other cheek."

"That's not in my nature, though. I haven't put my anger to rest, and I know from my own life that violence often stops violence . . . this film is going to reflect that. It's going to be very strange for most people."

Quite a departure from the prosy, painterly films he's done before, but

similar because it is pure Artie, an unbridged message from one filmmaker's rigidly individualist ethos. He once said that a large reason for shooting his films on such slim budgets was his wish to "retain whatever freedom of expression I have. If the films don't have astronomical budgets, less people have to be pleased to make them profitable."

Artie Bressan's films will never be easily pigeonholed, and that is precisely the way he would like it to remain. I wondered how he thought people will regard his films in 20 years — his reply required no hesitation:

"They'll always say my films are romantic. They'll probably say I was fumbling at first, not sure what I wanted to say. They'll say I was obsessed with saying something about the gay experience. And if they have their eyes open, they'll know that I was in love with making movies."

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