

PARTY ON

By Alan Bennett Ilagan

Dancing, we move as one ~ a collective crush of bones and flesh, sweat-streaked skin, sinewy muscular curvature ~ forming a single gigantic mass ~ an immense organism flailing and undulating beneath flashing colored lights and pounding dance music. The night is ours, and for this one brief moment nothing else matters. Caught up in the heady atmosphere, we breathe in the heavy vapors of club life ~ thick smoke, biting liquor, and the razor-sharp wisps of amyl nitrate. A cacophony of cologne clashes and does battle with the cigarette smoke, as the music predictably crescendos and subsides ~ the lone held note of the latest dance diva cutting through a sudden quick stay of silence before the monotonous throbbing begins again.

This is the party circuit world ~ a parallel universe of sorts that finds gay men converging by the thousands in one intense, elaborate interval of dancing, drinking, drug-taking, and other debauchery. The men assembled at these events are usually decked out to the hilt, covered with glitter, make-up, and impossibly-skimpy skin-baring outfits. Yet for all this over-the-top glamour, the guys somehow manage to look remarkably alike one another. With everyone working so strenuously to stand out, no one quite manages to do so.

Standing in the midst of such a scene, one can't help but feel a part of something. There is a certain unity bonding all of us together, but it's a superficial unity ~ one quickly and easily dissipated with a judgmental catty stare or a Bette-Davis-like dismissal. We are together, dancing collectively as one, but there is an underlying sense that we have never been further removed from humanity and simple human kindness. Of course, one does not attend a circuit party looking for love, romance, or human decency: these parties are for fun and/or hooking up. Perhaps because of this open celebration of hedonism, a major aspect of the circuit scene is the rampant use of drugs.

While alcohol remains by far the most prevalent drug in use, illegal substances have been winning over partygoers for years. In a throwback to the free-loving bacchanal of the 60's and 70's, the grand circuit parties of today are high on drug use and low on responsible behavior. Despite all that we know about AIDS and disease transmission,

bare-backing and other forms of unsafe sex are more popular now than they were ten years ago, and some people point to the inhibitory effects of drugs such as cocaine, Special K, and GHB as reasons for the dangerous turnaround.

From the giddy Ecstasy-driven heights of raving youngsters to the depths of those drowning in the dreaded K-hole, casual drug use on the gay scene may have deeper repercussions than a bad trip or a speed-induced freak-out. In one sense, drugs have become just another mask that we as gay men put on in order to hide our true selves. Even though many of us have come out of the closet, we still sometimes feel the need to hide ~ from pain, from possible rejection, from life itself. What better way to do it than in an altered state, where we can always lay claim to the excuse that “we weren’t our real selves”? Of course, there is another contingent which believes that drugs such as Ecstasy and alcohol enable them to reveal who they really are ~ uninhibited and honest in a way that is often forbidden in society.

Whatever the reasons and ramifications of party drug use may be, I maintain that they do not, in my case, make for closer contact. When a guy has that far-away gleam of being high in his eyes, I know he can’t possibly be hearing or seeing me as I am in the light of day. No matter how much I may want him to know me for who I truly am, I realize that in his happy haze he can experience nothing but a vague, distorted image ~ the false feeling of love and chemically-induced happiness. With the booze or the coke, I will never be sure if they are enjoying my company, or their state of mind.

On a grander social scheme, circuit parties themselves are much like addictive drugs. I know men who put in full work-weeks, only to travel thousands of miles for the next weekend party, thrashing their bodies physically and emotionally before heading into work on Monday morning and starting all over again. These gatherings have become a weekend way of life for some, rather than the good time to be had once-in-a-while. Don’t misunderstand ~ I am not judging or condemning anyone’s choice of living, and as an occasional fun excursion, these parties can be great fun. I simply wonder at the effect they might be having on the gay community.

Should our main goal be finding that perfect highlight color in order for our hair to gleam in the dim black-light of the dance floor? Should our disposable incomes be saved up for the hottest designer drugs or airfare for one single night of enjoyment? Once upon

a time I would have said yes to these questions while holding my independent head high. And though I will fight to the death for the rights of others to live such a life, I realize now that it's not, nor was it ever, right for me. If the sex you're having is so bad that you need poppers to heighten the experience, then you're doing something wrong. If you need to be ogled and seen at every circuit party, then you don't really have a life. If you can't spend an entire weekend sitting still, reading, hanging out with friends, or whispering to your lover, then something inside of you is in need of help, and no amount of party drugs or atmosphere is going to change that. Then again, this is just my perspective ~ perhaps the party circuit is all some men need to be happy, and for those lucky folk I offer my admiration and awe.