

Off The cuff

DON MILLIGAN'S

October 19, 2009

Boyz Will Be Boyz

STEPHEN GATELY was a working class lad who escaped a tough area of North Dublin where he was born and raised. His success explains only too well the reason that millions are entranced by celebrity and fables of escape from lives confined by inadequate income and the necessity of routine labour in jobs, which nobody would actually choose to do. As a member of Boyzone, Stephen escaped working for wages and from the fear of unemployment; he became rich and famous.

His success was guaranteed by his capacity to look directly through the lenses of the television camera at you and at you alone. His eyes were sparkling at you; he was singing to you, and if you were a straight teenage girl or a young gay lad, he fulfilled the fantasy: a grown man whom it would be safe *and* exciting to be with. Shorter, and smaller, than the other rather hulking members of Boyzone, Gately appeared vulnerable, dynamic, and sexy, in equal measure.

Consequently, he was able to draw the mawkish sentiment of Boyzone's histrionic ballads into a litany of determination to overcome all obstacles in order to *believe in love* and to fight, *no matter what*, for the simple power of romantic love. This said, he did not innovate, he added little or nothing to our musical culture which was not done better elsewhere by others. But he was, by all accounts, a nice man, modest and loyal.

In 1999, when a member of Boyzone's security team attempted to sell stories of Stephen's homosexuality to a tabloid newspaper, Stephen Gately wisely and boldly came out; yes, he was gay and he had nothing to hide. Boyzone broke up soon after but the teenage girls and boys – the core of Stephen's fan base – stuck by him as he pursued a solo career. His

future was secure and he could relax in the knowledge that revelations of his homosexuality would no longer haunt him. In 2003 he met and fell in love with Internet entrepreneur, Andy Cowles; the two married in a Civil Partnership ceremony three years later, and until last week, all was apparently well with the couple.

That was until, Stephen Gately's death on 10th October at their apartment in Port d'Andratx, South West Majorca. Gately had died after a night out drinking with his husband and a 25-year-old Bulgarian, Georgi Petrov Dochev. His sudden death caused consternation among his friends, relatives, and fans. Andy Cowles is reported to be inconsolable. Matters were made considerably worse, however, by the insinuations of *Daily Mail* columnist, Jan Moir.

"There was nothing 'natural' about Stephen Gately's death," she intoned. Stephen's death was "more than a little sleazy" and the circumstances of his demise has struck yet "another blow to the happy-ever-after myth of civil partnerships". Warming to her subject she became quite lyrical: "Under the carapace of glittering, hedonistic celebrity, the ooze of a very different and more dangerous lifestyle has seeped out for all to see."

What is really interesting about this rather routine piece of 'queer bashing' by Jan Moir and the *Daily Mail* is the nature and shape of the uproar that it has provoked and the apparent contradictions it has revealed in the attitude of the mass media towards homosexuality. Predictably, Stephen Fry and other gay celebrities were first into the fray, twittering for all they were worth against Moir and the *Mail*; complaints and outrage spread, and the website of the Press Complaints Commission crashed under the weight of public outrage. Marks and Spencer removed their advertisements from the *Mail's* website and Nestlé hurriedly issued a statement abhorring prejudice in all its forms.

However, despite Jan Moir's self-evident homophobia and the rather nasty cultural outlook of the *Daily Mail*, she did have a point. The couple had gone

out for drinks at around midnight at Aries a popular nightclub in Palma Majorca. At about 12:30 they went to the nearby bar, Euphoria, and from there, on to the Black Cat club. Three and a half hours later the couple, Stephen and Andy, took a taxi home in the company of Georgi who they'd met up with earlier in the night at Euphoria. I haven't the faintest idea what happened when they all got back to the flat, but cannabis, amyl nitrate, and other sex enhancing potions cannot be ruled out.

In such circumstances the constitution of a perfectly healthy young man like Stephen Gately might well give way. He died of a pulmonary oedema – an accumulation of fluid on the lungs. This death was shocking and an excess of alcohol and other stimulants may well have contributed to it. Despite this, the popular media, the Gately family, and his friends, have all stoutly denied this possibility and used the entirely justified outrage at the tone and nature of Jan Moir's insinuations in the *Mail* to bury any discussion of the actual risks, which the three young men might have been courting.

In particular, this week's *News of the World* is at pains to demonstrate that Stephen and Andy were sober; emphasizing how few drinks had been consumed at Aries and Euphoria, while passing silently over the three and a half hours spent drinking in the Black Cat. Dan Wootton, the *News of the World's* "showbiz editor", has constantly referred respectfully to Andy Cowles as Stephen's husband and has adopted an entirely positive tone in all his television appearances and in his print reports. This said, the newspaper decided to publish a photograph of a fight between Stephen and Andy a few months after they'd first met.

This fight is then used to explain why members of the band, Stephen's parents, and other relatives gave his husband "the cold shoulder" at the funeral. They refused to embrace him. He did not sit vigil with the band members on the night before the funeral Mass. It was "Boyzone, Family, and Fans" which bid the star

“Farewell”. The rights of Andy Cowles as the principal mourner at his husband’s funeral were evidently ridden over roughshod by the oh-so-straight Boyz from the Band, by Stephen’s siblings, and by his mother and father. It seems that they’d never liked Andy and didn’t think he was ‘right’ for Stephen.

None of this will come as any surprise to gay men living in long-term relationships, many of whom, when bereavement has struck, have found themselves fighting the massed ranks of their partner’s family, with the family claiming priority in everything from funeral arrangements to the disposal of the couples home and property. It is quite extraordinary that Andy Cowles should be facing insinuations of responsibility for his partner’s death, ostracised at his lover’s funeral, and facing the blatant trashing of his relationship with Stephen.

Evidently, Jan Moir’s article is not the only homophobic element within this sorry tale. Every week heterosexual relationships end in squalid divorces, suicides, beatings, and child abuse. Heterosexuals drink too much, take drugs, and engage in group sex, voyeurism, and much else. So, there is no reason why the circumstances of Stephen Gately’s death should call forth lurid insinuations concerning the failure of Civil Partnerships or of gay relationships in general. Jan Moir is evidently a nasty piece of work, incapable of stating the most obvious thing about equality, which is that homosexuals are equally capable of behaving badly or well, probably in much the same proportions of the rest of the population. I have no statistical evidence for believing this, but then neither does Jan Moir or the *Daily Mail*.

However, the most enraging thing about this death is not Jan Moir’s column, but the behaviour of the rest of the media, the Boyzone singers, Stephen’s family, and other media luminaries who have treated Andy Cowles in such an intrinsically homophobic manner.