

Citation:

Freibert, Finley. "A Remembrance of Shan Sayles an Innovative Showman and Key Figure in the History of Gay Public Life." *Physique Pictorial: Official Quarterly of the Bob Mizer Foundation*, no. 49 (Summer 2019), 85-89.

Summary:

This article presents a microhistory of Shan Sayles' entrepreneurship in film exhibition that involved both arthouse and exploitation cinemas. Covering the years up to around 1970, it also functions as a commemoration for Sayles with particular focus on the gay films he acquired for his theaters across the country in the late 1960s and early 1970s. The article was commissioned by the Bob Mizer Foundation for their relaunch of Mizer's *Physique Pictorial* as an expansion on my article for *The Advocate* entitled "Commemorating Two Forgotten Figures of Stonewall-Era Gay Film." While some of the broader points echo from *The Advocate* article, this piece does not focus on Monroe Beehler, and instead includes additional original research fleshing out Sayles' beginnings in arthouse exhibition as well as his later business practices. As of this writing, *Physique Pictorial* 49 is out-of-print.

Note: New figures have been added to the original article text for illustration purposes. Page numbers for the original article text have been preserved from the original.

Article text:

[A Remembrance of Shan Sayles an Innovative Showman and Key Figure in the History of Gay Public Life](#)

Author: Finley Freibert

On August 19, 2018, San Francisco's Nob Hill Theatre, one of America's oldest venues for gay-oriented adult entertainment, shuttered its doors. This unfortunate event marked a culmination of the demise of public venues of pornography that had been sought by public decency campaigns since the mid-20th century and later urban renewal imperatives since the late 1970s. As asserted by Samuel Delany in *Times Square Red, Times Square Blue*, adult entertainment venues have served as institutions for sexual education and community formation for marginalized populations including LGBTQ folks and the working classes. Delany's sentiment was specifically about New York's adult theaters, but it can be generalized to West Coast venues, like the Nob Hill, that were at the forefront of courting gay male audiences. Often overlooked are the history and innovations of Shan Sayles, the man responsible for the Nob Hill's shift to an "all-male" film policy and a major figure in the emergence of American gay cinema. Sayles produced landmark queer films including *Song of the Loon* (1970) and Tom DeSimone's *The Collection* (1970), and expanded his theater chain to provide new venues for gay audiences across the nation.

In the 1960s and 1970s, before the proliferation of niche marketing, LGBTQ content was not widely accessible through mainstream media platforms such as cinemas or television. While gay print media such as homophile and physique magazines had circulated for some time, the studio produced *Boys in the Band* (1970) is often recognized as a landmark of overtly queer film from that era. Yet directly before *Boys'* release and also preceding the Stonewall uprisings of June 1969 there was a deluge of queer movies in the Los

Angeles area that were produced and distributed independently from the Hollywood studios.

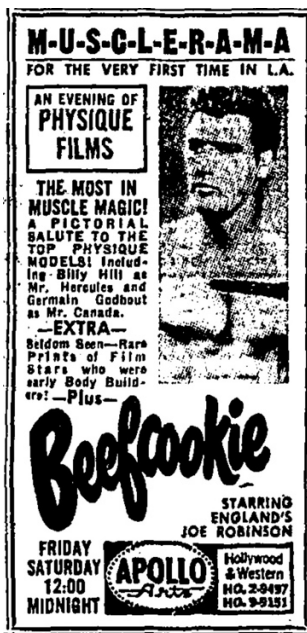
Los Angeles gay community figure and film director Pat Rocco is rightly acknowledged as a pioneer in gay independent filmmaking. Yet Rocco's movies were part of a larger movement that included early groundbreakers in the physique genre—Bob Mizer and Dick Fontaine—and later filmmakers such as Tom DeSimone, Barry Knight, Dick Martin, Warren Stephens, and Joe Tiffenbach.

The existence of a broader burgeoning Los Angeles gay film movement in the late 1960s and early 1970s is seldom acknowledged for two primary reasons. On the one hand, the majority of the films in this movement have been inaccessible for nearly 50 years. Existing copies are difficult to access within institutional archives and the films were seldom, if ever, released on home media formats. On the other hand, the majority of them are adult films, both softcore and hardcore. Despite shifts in American culture since the 1960s, adult film continues to have a diminished cultural status. The past two years saw the loss of several of the major figures of early independent LGBTQ cinema, Shan Sayles, Pat Rocco, and Monroe Beehler. Each of these individuals were involved with Los Angeles-based production, distribution, and exhibition of independent gay films in the late 1960s and through the 1970s. In addition to their significance to LGBTQ film history they should also be remembered for their struggles for first amendment rights against anti-gay censorship regimes, both local and national.

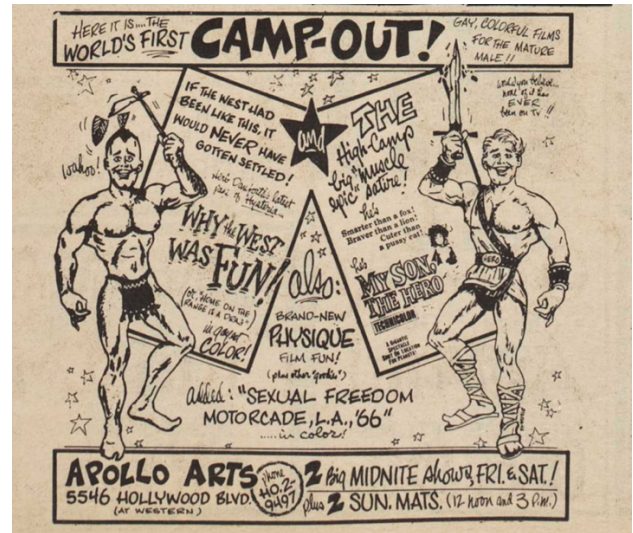
While there are numerous biographical narratives that explain Shan Sayles' entrance into the film exhibition industry, his pioneering work in pornographic film exhibition and distribution was a result of his earlier innovations in arthouse exhibition. Arthouses were theaters known for screening European imports to an educated elite, but gained a more suggestive connotation by the 1950s when they began to promote their films as more sexually tantalizing than domestic productions. After working in numerous capacities for theaters in Michigan and California, by the end of the 1950s Sayles became the manager of the Apollo, an arthouse theater on Hollywood Boulevard in Los Angeles. In 1959 Sayles moved on to shift a general release theater called the Lido on West Pico to an arthouse policy. He boldly initiated his new position as manager of the Lido when he scheduled the film *L'Amant de lady Chatterley* (*Lady Chatterley's Lover*, 1955), a French adaptation of the D. H. Lawrence novel. The film had been a subject of controversy for the past several years because New York's censor board had effectively banned the film, and in 1958 a New York Court of Appeals upheld the ban with a ruling that condemned the film for presenting adultery "as being right and desirable for certain people under certain circumstances." Only a few months prior to Sayles scheduling of the film, the New York ban was struck down by the Supreme Court in *Kingsley Int'l Pictures Corp. v. Regents*, 360 U.S. 684 (1959).

Perhaps Sayles' most influential endeavor was his work as the president of the theater chain and management company Continental Theatres from the 1960s and through the 1970s. The company commenced operations around 1960 with its first theater, the Vista, located at 4473 Sunset Drive. Open since 1923, this theater was already historic by 1959 when *Variety* reported it was bought by a Detroit exhibitor and a "group of private investors" (while not named in the article, this likely involved Sayles given his previous experience in Detroit cinema management). In December 1959, the theater was renamed the Vista-Continental and transitioned to an arthouse policy. From this point forward, Sayles and fellow exhibitor Violet Sawyer co-operated the Vista-Continental, and the two programmed European art films and also continued to screen Soviet imports for an already established Russian immigrant community.

Meanwhile, in mid-1960 Alex Cooperman, a foreign film distributor who was previously employed for distributors in the eastern states, acquired the Apollo theater that Sayles had formerly managed for the Fox West Coast chain. Under Cooperman the theater became the Apollo Arts and was transitioned to an arthouse policy, similar to Sayles strategy for the Lido and the Vista-Continental. By the end of 1960, Cooperman and Sayles joined forces with local lawyer-entrepreneur Eugene Berchin to acquire the Carmel theater on Santa Monica Boulevard. The three reopened the theater as an arthouse and incorporated



October 1966 advertisement for a physique film program at the Apollo Arts.



December 1966 advertisement for the Apollo Arts’ “Camp-Out.”

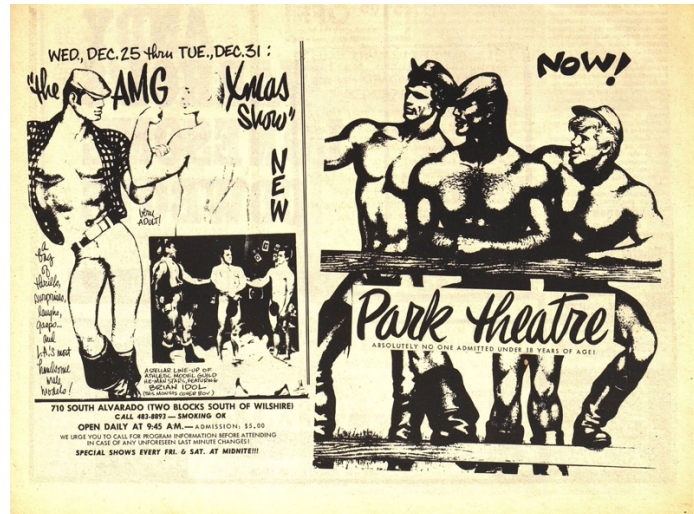
their venture as the Paris Theater. Continental Theatres continued to expand as an arthouse circuit and by 1964 the company added Samuel Decker as a partner to handle real estate services and acquisitions. As the theater holdings expanded under differing direct ownership, Continental began to operate as a management company for its shareholders’ numerous corporations including: Crescent Theatres, Paris Theater, Sawyer Theatres, Sayles Brothers Theatres, and Signature Theatres. As Sayles described in a 1965 interview with the journal *Film Quarterly*, “Some of the theaters that are handled by this company are theaters that I do not own. We simply handle the administrative end of it.”

Profits soared for Continental’s arthouses, yet what contributed most to their success was not so much the high-class trappings of European art cinema, but rather the risqué connotations of the films from countries like France and Sweden. By the early 1960s, sexual subject matter and nudity in motion pictures were increasingly permissible due to high court decisions such as the above-mentioned *Kingsley Int’l Pictures Corp. v. Regents*, as well as a New York Court of Appeals case, *Excelsior Pictures Corp. v. Regents of Univ. of State of N.Y.*, 3 N.Y.2d 237 (1957), in which it was ruled that “nudity in itself and without lewdness or dirtiness is not obscenity in law or in common sense.” To satisfy a growing demand for such films and to save costs on importing European fare American art cinemas began to program independently produced American films of the so-called “nudie-cutie” and sexploitation variety. Continental was at the forefront of this strategy and by the mid-1960s its flagship trio, the Apollo, the Paris, and the Vista-Continental, had all shifted to American produced sexploitation pictures. For some time, the Paris and the Vista-Continental primarily programmed silent nudie features produced in-house, which increased profits because it eliminated the expenses accrued when renting outside productions from a distributor.

In the latter half of the 1960s, Continental began to curate programming for the area’s gay audiences that had been frequenting their theaters for a number of years. During this time when same-sex intimacy was met with extreme homophobic censure in the public sphere, movie theaters provided one of the few places where queer men could cruise, meet-up, or have sexual contact with a reduced risk of arrest or harassment. The Paris had run-ins with law enforcement even before it was acquired by Continental because it became known as a haven for gay men. Because of the theater’s gay patronage, the Los Angeles County Board of Supervisors attempted to close it throughout the 1950s, but was ulti-



April 1966 Grand Opening of the Park after it was acquired by Continental Theatres.



December 1968 advertisement for a Park Theatre Christmas program of AMG films.

mately unsuccessful when its censorial actions were ruled arbitrary and unwarranted by a California intermediate appellate court in 1958. As early as 1966, Continental began catering to the area’s gay theatergoers by initiating programs of physique films, swishy spoofs, and camp icon retrospectives. In October the Apollo Arts Theatre presented “M-U-S-C-L-E-R-A-M-A: An Evening of Physique Films,” which featured famous body builders from Canada and the England and a picture entitled *Beefcookie*. This was followed by several other programs at the Apollo Arts, which started with “The World’s First Camp-Out!” in December that included Herb Danforth’s camp feature *Why the West Was Fun*, a European sword-and-sandal film, physique shorts, and documentary footage of a homophile activist event from earlier that year. Perhaps one of the earliest instances of popular press advertising of motion pictures that openly employed the word “gay” to address homosexual male consumers, ads for the “Camp-Out” program in the *Los Angeles Times* proclaimed, “Gay Colorful Films for the Mature Male!!”

Sayles’ early ventures into gay programming are often forgotten in existing histories of gay pornography, largely overshadowed by Continental’s later and more famous transition of the Park theater on Alvarado Boulevard to a gay film policy. In early 1966 Continental purchased the Alvarado Theatre in MacArthur Park and *Daily Variety* reported that this was its tenth acquisition. On April 6, the theater reopened as the “New Luxurious” Park with a double-feature of the Hollywood studio films *Flight of the Phoenix* (1965) and *What a Way to Go* (1964). The Park initially operated as a subsequent run grindhouse, showing past Hollywood fare at cheap prices around the clock. Like Continental’s flagship trio, it soon transitioned to exploitation films. Beginning in early 1967, the Park acquired the moniker “Home of the Sun-Camp Films” when it exclusively featured nudist films for several months. Now a legendary event in the history of gay cinema, Sayles shifted the Park to a gay film policy in late June 1968 with its “First Gay Film Festival” as advertised in a two-page spread in the *Los Angeles Advocate*. This first gay program featured underground films by Kenneth Anger, the Mekas brothers, Andy Warhol, Jack Smith, and Shirley Clark, alongside erotic shorts by Pat Rocco and Andy Milligan. In the coming months, the theater continued to exhibit gay shorts from local studios including those of Pat Rocco and Bob Mizer, and would eventually commission feature-length

productions.

By the end of the 1960s Continental had formed its own production and distribution arm, Signature Films. Legendary director Tom DeSimone and Nick Grippo were involved with Signature's early operations. Signature released Tom DeSimone's *The Collection* (1970), an all-male adaptation of William Wyler's *The Collector* (1965). Signature also released notorious gay roughies like *Pledgemasters* (1971) an expose of fraternity hazing, and *Highway Hustler* (1971) a rough trade narrative, which Wakefield Poole considered "degrading" and that prompted him to develop *Boys in the Sand* (1971). Signature also released the film adaptation of the pulp frontier novel *Song of the Loon*, which was coproduced by Sayles and Sawyer under the corporate name Sawyer Productions. *Loon* had a vexed production that initially involved Schuyler Robbins and Joe Tiffenbach who had previously collaborated on an experimental short called *The Closet* (1969). As Russell Moore told *Manshots* in 1996, Monroe Beehler picked up the reigns of *Song of the Loon* and finished the film. In addition to *Song of the Loon*, Beehler worked on Signature Films' productions including *Inside A.M.G.* (1970), a documentary on Bob Mizer's Athletic Model Guild that was ultimately completed by Tom DeSimone. As reported by *Daily Variety* in June 1970, Beehler worked his way up to advertising director before exiting Sayles' firm to form his own company, Jaguar.

Shan Sayles was extremely successful, and his endeavors proved that gay audiences were a viable market, hungry for positive films that expressed their experiences. Yet more than the films he produced, Sayles should be remembered for how his businesses provided space for local gay community formations. He was perhaps the first entrepreneur to conscientiously hire gay men to perform in, direct, write, and edit gay films. Sayles would later open other legendary gay adult theaters such as the Nob Hill in San Francisco and the Park-Miller in New York. His expert advertising techniques propelled Continental's theaters into the public view as open spaces of gay affirmation. Yet because of widespread homophobia this visibility threatened the heterosexual status quo. Throughout the 1970s, Sayles fought first amendment battles on both the local and the federal levels. In the struggles against arbitrary obscenity laws and unjustified raids, Sayles and his associates vigorously defended our rights as LGBTQ peoples to produced and consume sex-affirmative media, and to gather in communitarian venues absent from homophobic harassment.

Shan Sayles should be remembered as a champion of LGBTQ public life. He passed away in Pacific Grove, California on December 21, 2016.

The following is an alphabetical list for reference and commemoration of those mentioned above and known to have passed:

Monroe Christian Beehler (October 3, 1933—May 5, 2018)
Eugene Berchin (February 21, 1923—April 15, 2002)
Alex (Alx) Cooperman (December 14, 1917—October 1998)
Samuel Decker (June 22, 1901—June 15, 1988)
Nicolas (Nick) Joseph Grippo (December 17, 1938—May 9, 2003)
Brian John King aka Barry Knight (September 27, 1945—June 16, 2005)
Robert (Bob) Henry Mizer (March 27, 1922—May 12, 1992)
Violet (Vi) Irene Sawyer (December 17, 1910—June 29, 1979)
Shan Vincent Sayles (December 22, 1934—December 21, 2016)
Pasquale Vincent Serrapico aka Pat Rocco (February 9, 1934—November 28, 2018)
Joseph (Joe) William Tiffenbach Jr. (December 31, 1923—January 27, 1992)

Bio: Finley Freibert is a Ph.D. Candidate in Visual Studies at University of California, Irvine. His current research is on queer film history in Southern California and bisexual community history. This article draws from insights distilled from primary source research from Finley's dissertation, and it is a revised expansion of the 2018 article "Commemorating Two Forgotten Figures of Stonewall Era Gay Film." Finley is extremely grateful to Tom DeSimone for the generosity and informative discussion of this early period of gay film history.