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# POLICE

## WOMEN'S BATHHOUSE PARTY

Toronto's queer community is buzzing with questions after the first women's bathhouse event in more than a year was disrupted by five police men who entered under the guise of either responding to a complaint or checking for liquor licence violations — they can't seem to decide which. But police spent enough time inside the bath house to make women very uncomfortable, checking ID's and staring at breasts. If there was any doubt that the entire queer community is at risk for police harassment at bathhouses, it's gone.

On Thursday, September 14th the fourth Pussy Palace took place at Club Toronto (which usually operates as a men's bathhouse). The event was run by a volunteer committee who wanted to provide a space where women could relax, play together, and enjoy the same sexual privileges as gay men. Bar receipts go

to the Bill 7 charity, which gives queer youth grants to pursue post-secondary education. Advance tickets for the event sold out in eleven minutes and there was a line up at the door before the party opened at 6 pm.

When the police arrived at 12:45 am, the party was in full swing. The outdoor swimming pool and indoor hot tub were in constant use. Women wandered the four floors wearing everything from regular clothes to lingerie. Pizza was served, as were coffee and beer. And the sounds of women moaning and coming was like a chorus heard through the halls. More than anything, it was a delightful party — so questions about why the police chose this particular day to "visit" anger many. After apparently sitting outside in cruisers for an hour, five male police officers entered the premises and stayed for an hour and a half, effectively shutting down the event.

I was lounging in a third floor room when I first heard the news. "Police are here" echoed throughout the house as women warned each other of the presence of men, to put clothes on, and to be sure that all sex was behind closed doors (bathhouses have private cubicle sized rooms containing a single mattress and just enough room to manoeuvre between one side of it and the door). The police were expected to wander through and

leave. Bathhouse committee members circulated every fifteen minutes or so, assuring us of our safety. Videos had been shut off, as my friend and I discovered when we went to the TV room to socialize. Some pretty hard core porn is shown on video monitors at leather bars around town, but our videos were shut off to avoid giving the police any excuse to cause problems. We hung out and waited as the crowd thinned. Finally, a volunteer came through asking us to please not leave - which is what she felt the cops wanted. Many women were scared and left shortly after the police arrived. One friend explained to me that she had to be at band practice at 10:30 the next morning, and that it wouldn't be good for her to be in jail at the time. That was the last I saw of her that night.

A friend and I discussed doing a flogging, but thought it best not to, given the police presence. At some time, one of us is going to have to take BDSM interests to court and fight to change the archaic federal decency laws, but we didn't want to involve the bathhouse committee or other women attending in our personal political battles. Instead, we left toys in bags and chatted about female ejaculation — who started when, who could squirt the farthest, and what a mess it can make on a feather bed. We compared footwear, sexy high heel shoes, and lovely lace up black high heeled boots.

Eventually the police left, but by that time most of the women had too. By our watches, it took the police an hour and a half to circulate through the place five times, sticking their heads in open rooms and knocking on doors of private rooms, looking out on balconies, checking out women in the sauna and hot tub rooms, then wandering out by the pool. Somewhere between ten and fifteen women were asked by the police to provide ID, leaving many of them feeling violated.

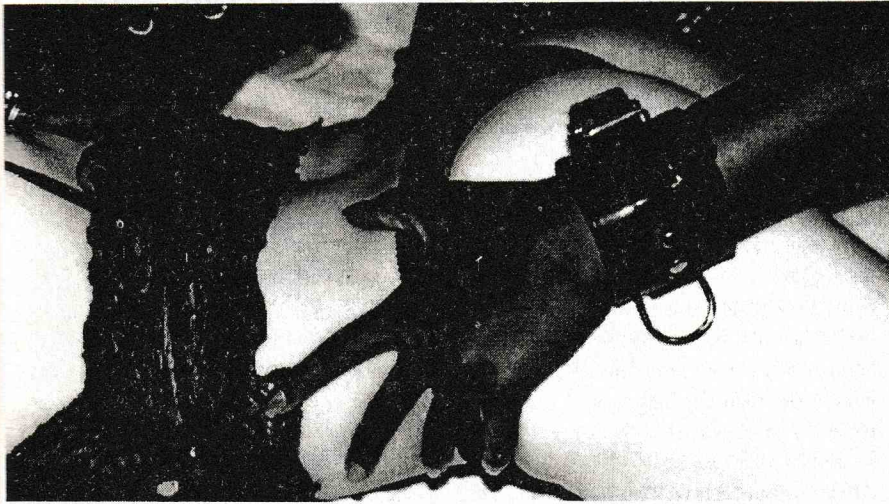
T'hayla, had to ask an officer who was frozen in a stare at her uncovered breasts if



Photos: Chiöe Brushwood-Rose

# RAID

BY NANCY IRWIN



she could 'help him with something.' That broke his concentration, and he said "no", then left. Sabrina, a smaller woman standing nearby reported that "he was leering at her. The three officers were big guys and we were standing at the edge of the stairs. They were intimidating us. I felt scared, and I've never been in a position to fear the police before. I've heard older gay men and lesbians speak of this. It felt really awful. I just stood there hoping they'd go away." The three men eventually moved on.

Lynda witnessed the police knocking loudly on a closed door, which was opened to reveal fully clothed women standing in a room. She saw one officer barge into the room and another two officers block the doorway. The women in the room were questioned in such a way that Lynda thought they were being arrested; they were asked for ID and addresses, but were eventually left alone. Barb was angry. "One police officer tried to stare me down. They blocked the stairs. I saw cops try to get ID from women wearing nothing but bathing suits. I watched them pull messages off the bulletin board, read them, then put them back."

There are many other tales from women who were less than pleased with the police-

men's unacceptable behaviour. No one could figure out why a team of male police officers were sent to investigate an all women's bathhouse party — unless it was just for kicks. The term harassment comes quickly to mind.

Lynda was deeply impressed with how the organizers handled themselves and how they made every attempt to keep women informed and assure them of their safety. Organizers (and one Globe and Mail reporter) followed cops around as best they could, but the cops split up, making it difficult to account for everything they did.

Terri left the party shortly after the cops arrived, but as she walked to her parking spot, she passed what appeared to be another undercover cop sitting in a car. When she drove back down the street, he was chatting with two women whom Terri had seen in the bathhouse earlier. Terri described the women as "dyke look alikes wearing pale faded jeans and bad haircuts, not sexy at all". It appears that there were undercover officers inside before the five men arrived.

I contacted Kyle Rae's office at about 10:15 on the morning after the Pussy Palace raid, expecting to have been the umpteenth caller, but I was the first to tell assistant Chris Phibbs about the night's events. By the end of the day,

## UPDATES

September 21 -

A well-attended and boisterous information meeting is held at the 519 Community Centre. Later, a noisy crowd of women and men protest the police harassment of LGBTQ communities by marching to Police Headquarters and holding an impromptu kiss-in.

For up to the minute information, check out <http://www.pussypalacetoronto.com>

The Toronto Women's Bathhouse Committee would like to hear your complaints or suggestions at (416) 340-8484 x319 or by email at [info@www.pussypalacetoronto.com](mailto:info@www.pussypalacetoronto.com)

To make a donation to the legal defence fund send your pledge to:  
Women's Bath House Defense Fund  
175 Harbord Street  
Toronto, M5S 1H3

To complain about police misconduct:

- drop by any police station if you feel safe in doing so
- call the Police Division's senior officer on desk duty
- or contact the police's self-regulatory group:

The Ontario Civilian Commission  
of Police Services  
25 Grosvenor St, 1st floor,  
Toronto ON M7A 1Y6 (416) 314-3004

Kyle Rae's statement to the press was one of outrage (and even the mainstream press were paying attention).

The next day we learned that the officer in charge of the visit was the same undercover Detective Dave Wilson who was responsible for the recent Bijou and Barn busts. The Bijou Theatre had been operating for 3 years and was raided a year ago on June 13th, just before Pride Day. A bust on the Barn's Sunday TNT men's naked dances followed. Other officers from 55 Division went in to the Tool Box some months back and effectively interfered with the fun there.

Drop by drop, the police are targeting our community, and Police Chief Julian Fantino's promise of equal treatment for lesbians and gays is leaking badly. Plans for a liaison committee between the LGBTQ community and the police were nearly derailed over this issue. It's hard to plan on cooperating with the police when you feel that you're being targeted by them.

"I think the climate's horrific right now for people who are marginalized," states Janet, a

## WHAT ELSE CAN YOU DO TO HELP?

If you want to take action, members of the Women's bathhouse Organizing committee are suggesting that you contact the police and ask them questions below. Let them know that we won't back off from demanding answers.

If you phone, you should to know that the police may have call display, and they may want your name, address and/or phone number. And please remember to be strong yet polite and respectful.

1. Why was the women's bathhouse night targeted by the police, given that it happened in a city licensed and regulated space and that thousands of liquor licenses are handed out every year?

2. Did the officers consult with, or seek approval from any superior officers? Is this type of action now police policy?
3. Why were five officers sent and why were they all men?
4. What were the officer's reasons for staying so long in the bathhouse?
5. We know from the press that Chief Fantino has requested a report from the officers involved. We believe that these reports should be released to the community. Will this happen?
6. (For the Police Services Board) What is the Police Services Board going to do to ensure that the police are accountable to the communities that are being targeted and harassed by this police force?

The following are the people you might wish to contact:

Mr. Aidan Maher at 52 Division  
ph: (416) 808-5214 / fax: (416) 808-5202  
255 Dundas Street West,  
Toronto, ON M5T 2W5

Police Chief Julian Fantino at Police Headquarters  
ph: (416) 808-8113 / fax: (416) 808-8002  
40 College Street,  
Toronto, ON M5G 2J3

Mr. Norman Gardner at the Police Services Board  
ph: (416) 808-8080 / fax: (416) 808-8082  
40 College Street,  
Toronto M5G 2J3

bathhouse committee member who followed the cops around Club Toronto. "This is not a coincidence that this is happening and we need to be clear about that. We're really clear that this was harassment. Right now it's the bathhouses, other days it's street youth, sex trade workers..."

Like the rest of us, Kyle Rae is waiting to hear an account of why police did what they did. According to the Police Chief, an investigation is underway. Rae is expecting Fantino, who apparently knew nothing about the planned visit until it hit the news, to direct his officers to lay off harassing the gay community. Charges related to liquor violations are still pending, although no criminal charges (related to indecency) were laid. When I suggested to

Rae that the bathhouse could have avoided police attendance by forgoing alcohol, his response was that "we shouldn't have to do that in order to feel safe."

According to Kyle Rae, the day following the bathhouse raid, Superintendent Aidan Maher, supervisor of the plain clothes unit, had no idea what his officers were doing the night before. Even Chief Fantino's office was calling Rae to find out what happened. This lack of internal communication may be one result of the ongoing battle between the police union and management.

Later, Maher explained to me that the Special Events Permit for alcohol gave the police the right to inspect, and that his officers were responding to a complaint made after a previous bathhouse event as well as one from this event. When asked about why men were sent in to such a women only space, he said that in fact there were police women, confirming Terri's above mentioned sighting of female undercover officers.

Superintendent Bill Blair, who is responsible for community policing and involved with the LGBTQ community-police liaison committee, was quoted in the press as saying "we don't have the luxury of picking the gender of our officers to attend calls." However, in a conversation I had with Blair later, he expressed his gratitude that the liaison committee survived the trauma of the Pussy Palace raid, and explained that he was "impressed with the courage and commitment of the community to hang in with this process." Blair has been working for months to form the liaison commit-

tee, which he describes as a huge step for the community and police. As for the invasion by men of the women's bathhouse party, he assured me that "it's my job to make sure this doesn't happen again."

Bathhouse raids are significant in Toronto's gay political scene. It was a massive bathhouse raid in 1981 that politicized the local gay community. At midnight on February 6th of that year, police raided five bathhouses, doing over 3 million dollars in damage and leaving two establishments unable to re-open. Local leather man John Marshall was friends with the owner of the Richmond Street Health Emporium, which was one of the worse hit. "It had a glass enclosed pool and weight room. Police pushed a universal gym system through the glass wall and into the pool. They threw potted plants in the pool. They opened unlocked doors with sledge hammers. They axed bed platforms. It was absurd, the amount of damage."

The next day 5,000 queers marched in protest. Instead of pushing us into the closet, numerous political and social groups formed in response to the harassment. It was our Stonewall, and Toronto's first ever gay pride celebration took place later that same year. The rest is our history.

There was never any accountability on the part of the police, but after that raid there was an agreement that the police would leave the bathhouses alone. As John Burch, President of Mr Leather Toronto stated, "there is an expectation of privacy behind closed doors." That held for almost twenty years. What went wrong on the night that women had their first bathhouse party of the new millennium?

