

# THEY SHOOT BARE BACKERS, DON'T THEY?

Tony Valenzuela is AIDS activism's  
most misunderstood man

BY STEPHEN GENDIN

PHOTOS BY BLAKE LITTLE FOR POZ



*Trojan-less  
Horse: "I placed  
myself in the  
middle of HIV  
anarchy," Tony  
Valenzuela says.  
HIV anarchy?  
"I was trying  
to be poetic."*

ony Valenzuela never intended to be the Poster Boy of Unsafe Sex. Yet virtually overnight, after an impromptu speech about his sex life at the November 1997 Creating Change Conference in San Diego, this rising star of gay activism was reborn as a pariah of the movement. Creating Change is the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force (NGLTF)'s annual love-fest of hard-core politicos that Valenzuela, a local leader, had helped bring to his hometown. That he served as the event co-chair only added insult to injury. After his talk, Valenzuela was condemned in the press and by longtime allies. The then-29-year-old HIV positive Valenzuela, who had it all—beauty, brains, a soft-spoken but steely charisma and a proud half-Mexican, half-Italian heritage—became the sacrificial lamb at the altar of AIDS angst and anger.

His sin? He not only confessed to loving anal sex without condoms but did so to a standing-room-only crowd of 2,000 gay and lesbian bonchos, many of whom were veterans of the good fight at barricades and in boardrooms since the '70s. The incident was a microcosm of community sex wars: Two hours before the confab, a speaker dropped out and at the request of NGLTF leaders, Valenzuela agreed to fill in, frantically cobbling together a speech. That evening's town-hall meeting—convened to discuss recent attacks on public sex and promiscuity by gay marriage-and-monogamy neo-cons—was guaranteed high theater. The rhetorical battles and personal attacks between the SexPanic! activists (including me, a cofounder) and gay journalists such as Michelangelo Signorile and Andrew Sullivan had all the civility of sniper fire. The last to take the podium, Valenzuela nervously gritted his teeth and proceeded to give an intensely personal talk that no one was likely to forget.

Valenzuela spoke about his work in the sex industry as an escort and as the first openly HIV positive porn actor in the United States, but all that anyone seemed to hear was the sex scenes. While he said, "I entered my sexual identity, coming of age in AIDS, and forming a relationship to HIV that is unlikely to be shared by the architects of HIV prevention," he also said, "The level of erotic charge and intimacy I feel when a man comes inside me is transformational, especially in a climate which so completely disregards its importance." His cautionary caveat—"When I talk about having unprotected sex, I am speaking for myself, and not as a proponent of condomless sex for all"—was undercut by his defiant assertions—"I am a sex gourmet in a community serving sexual TV dinners...and I have placed myself in the middle of HIV anarchy." Even I still feel a chill up my spine when I recall his words. It was too much information, too fast. The personal had become more political than he could have imagined.

Now, a year and another Creating Change later, Valenzuela admits to having made mistakes. We're sitting in his room in Pittsburgh's William Penn Westin Hotel, and the halls practically hum with the words *race, class and gender* and lesbian and gay activists gossiping and flirting, debating the Millennium March and the Matthew Shepard murder.

But Valenzuela isn't humming. He's looking as we start the interview, and he still seems a bit shell-shocked by last year's debacle. "I realize I failed to acknowledge the huge amounts of loss people have gone through," he says quietly. "So it was shocking for many of them to hear about a be-

havior that essentially wiped out a generation of men they had loved." He pauses. "I should have let the audience know that I feel that loss too, painfully and directly." Yet as the founder of a San Diego group for young HIV positive men, Twentysomething Positives, Valenzuela was used to uncensored discussions about raw sex and semen-sharing as intense pleasure, deep intimacy, spiritual release, the ultimate taboo and more. "There's an established and careful discourse among many young gay men," he says. "They wouldn't have blinked an eye if they'd been in the audience."

But the 1997 NGLTF crowd did more than blink an eye—it went through the roof. One after another, community leaders stood up in outrage. Yelling matches rocked the hall as Valenzuela's few defenders countered the furor, the moderator struggled unsuccessfully to keep order. Robin Tyler, a longtime lesbian activist, fully to keep order. Robin Tyler, a longtime lesbian activist, summed up the anger at Valenzuela with a comment that was loudly applauded and later widely quoted: "Lesbians have been, in a way, the wife of the gay male movement. You've been, in a way, the wife of the gay male movement. You've got sick, and we were there. I'm not saying, 'We did this for you, and therefore you've got to be a good boy.' But you wonder why we're so upset. Because 15 years later, when we're facing breast cancer [and other problems], we're hearing 'I want to do what I want.' Well, *do what you want*. But I'm not going to be there to clean up after you this time. I have too much pain." In the weeks and months after the event, blistering opinion pieces and editorials rati, and by last summer the vote was in: Tony was toxic.

Villain is an unlikely role for Valenzuela. Having not seen him for a while, I'd almost forgotten how appealing he is—downright sexy, really. Although he describes himself as femme, with his clear, strong gaze, self-assured movements and form-fitting shirts, he has a snappy masculine image. I first met Valenzuela in 1995, when he approached me with

questions about a speech I'd just given on the shutting down of New York City's commercial sex venues. We spent a few hours together, chatting about sexual politics (what else?), and we were on the brink of a kiss when his roommate showed up. Valenzuela was enthusiastic and brimming with plans for work to be done back in San Diego. Even then he came across as more than the typical activist. His intense interest in sex and his willingness to talk openly about it were, to say the least, unusual.

Since then life as a self-described sex radical has taken its toll. With his reputation so damaged, last August Valenzuela moved from San Diego to Los Angeles. Though he'd been a best-and-brightest member of the San Diego gay scene, with two years' work at the community center under his belt and many hours with PFLAG and the Latino organization GLOW, now his name was mud. "Someone put a threatening note on my car saying, 'We're watching you, AIDS motherfucker,'" he tells me. "I was ostracized all over town. People I'd worked with wouldn't meet eyes with me." He has hunkered down, cutting back on gay activism to concentrate on other interests—all of which are, characteristically, likely to raise eyebrows: his thriving escort business, a new porn movie called *Something About Larry* from Hollywood Video, and his writing, which has appeared in *Genre* and *Gay Community News*.

It's humbling to interview someone I know. I see how limited my understanding of that person can be. Back in 1995 while I was finding Tony so bright and alluring, it turns out that he was "going through a dark time."

That was the year he tested positive. "The first thing I did when I found out I was positive was get fucked by my boyfriend without a condom," Valenzuela says. "It was the first time I ever had the sensation of another's man's come inside me." He and his then-boyfriend had planned to celebrate the results with a romantic weekend in Palm Springs. Whether the news was good or bad, at least it would put an end to Valenzuela's chronic fear. "For years and years, all of my sexual experiences were cut with this sheer terror of HIV," he says. "It was to the point where I was almost a hypochondriac about it"—even though he says he had only had unsafe sex a few times.

Like many gay men, Valenzuela recalls a sense of relief at finally getting the virus—the flip side of terror. While the first few months after his seroconversion were easy, life soon soured. He broke up with his boyfriend, and the reality of his HIV status set in. Then he contracted hepatitis A and B. Meantime, he was dutifully disclosing that he was positive to his family and friends. Some expressed sympathy, while others—fellow activists, specifically—were working from a different script. "I found a lot of attacks and judgment," he says. "I was being pathologized, told I had a death wish." It stunned him that people were lashing out, as though by letting himself get infected, he had betrayed their trust.

Disclosing his status opened his eyes to the "hypocrisy and lying" among gay men when the subject turns to sex. Like many of his peers, he had long been disenchanted with what he was hearing from HIV organizations because they didn't begin to acknowledge what gay men were really doing. "There's no space or safety to explore desire—like talking about semen exchange and how in moments of lust, moments of intimacy, a different set of priorities rushes through your body," he says. "And now I was being blamed for

not staying uninfected. I got depressed," he tells me. "Finally I had this fantasy of getting in a car accident, so I wouldn't have to deal. I just wanted to quit everything."

Near desperation, in November 1996 he moved back to his parents' house in Tijuana, Mexico, for three months. "I'm a momma's boy," Valenzuela says with a laugh. He proudly describes how his mother ardently follows all of his activities. While she is overwhelmingly supportive, there are "points of tension."

Is it the escort business? The porn career? The barebacking?

"My mom gets worried about reinfection," he says then. "By the time of his 1997 speech, Valenzuela had more than recuperated: He was on a mission. "When I took the podium, I see now, I was trying to send a message to other gay men: 'Don't let them call you crazy for wanting to bareback,'" he says. "I wanted to get rid of shame by being vocal about the things so many positive men do silently. I certainly wasn't out to encourage anyone not to use condoms."

But in many people's eyes, that's exactly what he was doing. Linda Bessemer, the president of the San Diego PFLAG chapter, put it bluntly in a letter to local gay papers: "Tony is responsible for speaking out to a room full of young students, parents and community members with the words *It is OK to have unprotected sex whether you or your partner is HIV infected or not because it is the only way you can experience the spiritual aspect of sexuality.*"

Valenzuela disagrees. "Telling my experience doesn't cancel out the message of prevention," he says. "I wish everyone was as specific about their desires and fantasies. It

**"Someone put a note on my car saying, 'We're watching you, AIDS motherfucker.'"**

would open up discussion and demonstrate thousands of ways that people enjoy sex." If he sees himself as a role model, it is for his advocacy of the raw truth rather than raw sex. And he calls it "ironic" that in attacking his message, these dyed-in-the-wool progressives took a line similar to the one that their opponents use against sex ed and condom distribution in schools. That it will promote the behavior. "We need to trust that young gay men will be wise in their decisions," he says. "They're not passive victims or mindless consumers who can be told to do something, and they do it. It's a huge disrespect to do otherwise."

Valenzuela has won some public support, and his second-biggest defender is Eric Rofes, a longtime activist and the author of two books on the psychological effects of AIDS on gay men. "By discussing anal sex as a valuable, meaningful act for many gay men, Valenzuela shattered a powerful taboo that had taken root during the crisis years of the AIDS epidemic," Rofes said in a keynote speech in

(continued on page 69)

An HIV negative prevention activist goes through the latex looking glass to discover who's doing it raw, and why

# A Ride on the Wild Side

BY MICHAEL SCARCE

**E**very Thursday through Sunday night in San Francisco's Castro district, someone named Marshall uses his house to host a party for other gay men who share a similar sexual interest: no condoms. Admission is \$8, and after I pay, Marshall hands me a piece of

paper. "This is a bare-back party," the house rules read. "It is assumed all guests are HIV+ or have made the decision to attend this kind of party.

Therefore, there will be no discussion of status, illness or medicine." Partygoers must also sign a statement of their intention not to infect anyone with HIV. Whether or not they mean it, this relieves the host of any responsibility under the new California law that criminalizes HIV transmission. After signing in, I peel off my clothes, stuff them into a white trash bag labeled "Michael S." in black magic marker and, with a sense of

trepidation, proceed downstairs into a large bedroom occupied by a dozen naked men in various positions of sexual activity. A red bulb provides the only light, casting an eerie glow over the room. A TV screen flickers with a porn video. The men are a diverse group, running the gamut in age, ethnicity and body type. Moving between the bodies, I take a seat and watch the center of the action—two tops take turns with a bottom. The sex is silent, serious and very intense. It continues for what seems like an hour, finally culminating with the two tops each getting off inside the bottom. Afterward, he remains on his hands and knees, waiting for others to mount him. During this pause, I find myself, as a 28-year-old gay man, wondering if this is what carefree sex was like in the '70s. No one here but me betrays anxiety.

**RUBBERS**



of why some men choose to eliminate condoms, I've found it enormously helpful to consider barebacking in a different framework: like safer sex, on a continuum of "un-safety" with varying degrees of protection and danger (pulling out before ejaculation is less "unsafe" than not). It's worth noting that as the risk of HIV infection escalates, so do moral judgments. This is why raw sex between positive men is often merely frowned upon, but when the partners are serodiscordant, words like *murder* and *suicide* enter the discussion. It also explains the notion that an HIVer who tops is more "guilty" than one who bottoms.

Zach, who is HIV negative, barebacks only as a top when he has sex with positive men—in his mind, an act relatively low on the "unsafest" continuum. He arrived at skin-to-skin sex through the practice of negotiated risk (a harm-reduction strategy common outside the United States): He'd been in a series of relationships with men where they both repeatedly tested negative and finally dispensed with condoms. "After a few of those relationships, I decided not to use condoms at all anymore," he says. "Barebacking is an incredible experience, and it's tremendously difficult to go back to latex."

But the decision to abandon condom use is not always a one-way street. Dave, an HIV negative man who once threw himself into the latex-free life for several months, is one example: "I decided to stop barebacking because of the potential health risks—and not just HIV—although I definitely feel that latex negatively affects my sex life." But he says he is still very much drawn to raw sex—"somewhat like a moth to a flame." Health concerns that drive guys like Dave back to condoms include such STDs as herpes, hepatitis, gonorrhea and anal warts. And for positive barebackers, these STDs can significantly impair the immune system, accelerating the progression of HIV disease. The risk that has placed barebacking at the center of national debates on gay sexual mores, of course, is that of HIV. Many HIV negative men are barebacking, and while some attempt to do it only with other negative men, it's impossible to be *absolutely* sure of a partner's serostatus.

**E**ighteen years into the HIV holocaust, a gay man—regardless of serostatus—is likely to have an immensely complex relationship not only to unsafe sex but to the virus itself. Barebackers like Zach focus on the positive values of semen exchange: "There's no better way to bond with a man than to give or receive sperm. A lot of bottoms take it into their bodies and keep it there as a way of remembering the sex. They want to feel it inside them and keep experiencing that closeness. It's a physical expression of intimacy."

Yet as Walt Odets, William Johnston and other experts on the psychology of HIV negative men have documented, there are also other emotions drawing them to the virus, including survivor guilt, a sense of inevitability about the prospect of seroconversion, an identification of AIDS with gayness, an association of seroconversion with a positive life transformation and more. Pete, a 33-year-old gay man, expresses this ambivalence. "I was so afraid of becoming positive for such a long time," he says, "and once that happened, I felt relief. I also decided I didn't want to spend my whole life going without the sex I love the most." For many, liberation from the necessity of condom use with other positive men presents a certain appeal. A popular and ironic barebacking

(continued on page 70)

## Safer Barebacking Considerations

BY MICHAEL SCARGE

**T**his is not a set of HIV prevention guidelines. Intended only for gay men who have already decided not to use condoms for anal sex, these strategies may help reduce the harm associated with barebacking, some advocates believe. Here, harm should be interpreted more broadly than HIV infection; these tips may also help reduce the risk of other STDs. Bear in mind that much of this information is anecdotal and debated by researchers.

**1. POPPERS AND VIAGRA** Dilated blood vessels in the rectum caused by sniffing poppers make it easier for viruses to enter your bloodstream, so if your partner ejaculates inside you, you're wide open for infection. Viagra works similarly—increasing blood flow to the pelvic region (facilitates erection) and to the rectum—and poses similar risks.

**2. LUBRICANT** Use it generously to help prevent tears that allow infection. Don't rely on saliva. Nonoxonyl-9 may afford limited protection against some STDs; however, by irritating them, it may increase the urethral or rectal tissues' susceptibility. One study of N-9 use in gay men's rectums found it didn't create irritation that would significantly increase risk of infection, but the medical literature yields conflicting data. An over-the-counter contraceptive gel, like Advantage 24, is unlikely to fully coat the rectum and provide complete protection.

**3. EARLY WITHDRAWAL** Pulling out before ejaculation may reduce risk. But since HIV and other infectious agents are in pre-come, this method still poses a risk.

**4. RATIONING** Limiting your barebacking over time can reduce exposures and sex partners—which may decrease the risk of harm—and allows time for healing of tears or trauma in the rectum, urethra and outer skin of the penis.

**5. NEGOTIATION** Try to talk with partners about STD status, including HIV, herpes, hepatitis and human papilloma virus (causes anal and genital warts). If talk isn't part of your sex, you may be able to see or feel warts, lesions, discharge or other physical signs of STDs. But one may be asymptomatic yet still infectious. Decide ahead of time if you're willing to come in your partner or allow him to come in you, then assess your ability to trust your mutual adherence to that agreement.

**6. BEFORE- AND AFTER-CARE** Douching or using enemas with harsh detergents can strip away protective cells in the rectum. If you use an enema before sex, try warm water. Be careful not to create tears inside or around the anus.

Some believe lubes, especially oil- and silicon-based, can trap germs against the skin, increasing likelihood of infection. Douching with a spermicidal foam or homemade vinegar-and-water solution after sex may render some infectious agents inactive, but little research has been conducted. If having sex with multiple partners over a short time, don't douche until after the last one. Try to urinate right after sex: Urine's acidity can help clean out the urethra.

**7. IMMUNITY** The more stressed, under the influence of alcohol or drugs, tired or ill you are, the higher the chance that an exposure will result in infection. If you have HIV and another STD, you're more likely to transmit HIV. If you're HIV negative with an STD, you're more likely to become infected.

**8. VACCINATIONS** Get vaccinated for hepatitis A and B. Barebacking exposes you to fecal matter and other hepatitis-carrying fluids.