Michael Greer, as 'Queenie' in "Fortune and Men's Eyes."

QQ TALKS WITH MICHAEL GREER

INTERVIEW & CANDID PHOTOS BY DONALD ROBERTSON

THE name of Michael Greer was unfamiliar to many gay people until "Fortune and Men's Eyes" introduced Queenie to the stage of the Coronet Theatre in Los Angeles. His spectacular success there and in the New York and Honolulu productions was followed closely by a hilarious performance as Malcolm in "The Gay Deceivers," by a little-publicized role as Danny in "The Magic Garden of Stanley Sweetheart," and by the much-emphasized starring role in the movie version of "Fortune," a Cannes Film Festival nominee.

Actually, Michael Greer has been performing professionally since the age of ten and was well-known to audiences at the Purple Onion, Arthur's, and The Bitter End, as well as the Redwood Room in Los Angeles where, as he says, he brought talkies to the gay bars. TV audiences have seen his starring role on "Ironside" and campuses throughout the nation have reverberated to the clever humor and expert timing of this popular singer, writer and comedian.

Our interview sessions took place over a two-month period, interrupted by trips to Canada in connection with the movie "Fortune," a session at The Bitter End in New York, phone calls from MGM and Columbia, a query concerning an interview with Earle Wilson, a recording session, and rehearsals and performances in Los Angeles nightclubs, campuses and coffee houses.

It wasn't difficult establishing a fine rapport with this serious, intense and warm entertainer who has given us a frank insight into the sensitivity and personality of the real Michael Greer.

QQ: Michael, with no visible advertising you've been playing to full houses at the Bla Bla Cafe in North Hollywood. What led to your selection of this relatively unknown coffee house as a showcase for your talents?

Greer: Well, I've just come back from Canada and the filming of "Fortune" and I'm kind of in a limbo. The singing group The Rest of Our Lives plays there and I like their work very much and thought that it would be a good place for us to put some things together, audition some new material, and see how we worked together in preparation for the college thing which we recently did. We went to Redwood City and it was an unmitigated disaster because of lack of publicity and general disorganization, including my own, and then to Utah State which was really a fine success. But the Bla Bla has a nice atmosphere to it; the crowd is kind of mixed in that you really don't know or care what anyone is: they're just good people. Besides, the owner lets me have free coffee.

QQ: Were you surprised by your success on the Mormon campus?

Greer: Not really. I was curious as to whether anyone's material would go over. I envisioned oxen, Conestoga wagons and polygamy, but I found that the kids were pretty much interested in the same things as elsewhere. My humor didn't strike them as being abnormal; it just struck them as being funny, so it worked very nicely.

Mr. Greer checks the QQ interview while enjoying the sun in the author's Hollywood backyard.

QQ: On the other hand, how do you account for the poor turnout that you got at USC?

Greer: Man, the girls are afraid to go out on that campus at night for fear of getting raped, and the guys are afraid to go out for fear of getting caught.

QQ: I know that you have tremendous appeal with the under-thirty crowd; do you feel that you are establishing the same rapport with older audiences?

Greer: In different ways. I've had about twelve years of experience in every conceivable kind of club, with gay bars providing a tremendous breakthrough for me. Initially, I went to a few of the so-called straight clubs in California and naturally they weren't interested because I was totally unknown at the time and besides, they wanted a chick with big boobs. The gay bars had their drag shows but drag, for any reason other than humor, has never appealed to me. I've never had a desire at any time to pass myself off as a woman or even to feel attractive in a feminine way. To put on a funny hat or a wig to get a laugh has great appeal for me. But I could go to a few of the gay bars in town that had shows and they would take a chance with me. The fact that I could open my mouth was a breakthrough because everyone was doing record pantomime. Several friends have told me that I brought talkies to the gay bars. What was the question?

QQ: I was questioning your rapport with older audiences.

Greer: Oh, right. I try to gear my material to the audience, considering their age and environment as well as any ethnical preponderance. For instance, if I play the Catskills I try a

ON GROWING UP: ". . . when you're living on a farm near a small town in Illinois there doesn't seem to be any way for a kid to get to Hollywood—or even grow up."

ON HOMOSEXUALS: "Sixty or seventy percent of the world's culture has been maintained, enhanced and glorified by homosexuals."

ON SAN FRANCISCO: "If I could . . . have everything else going for me, I would like to be able to top it all by saying that I had been born in San Francisco."

lot of Jewish humor. I've always been able to bridge gaps because I really do have an intuitive understanding of people. All my life I've wanted to entertain, and this involvement develops an instinctive ability to make broad changes that will give appeal and laughter to older people.

QQ: We've seen you use practically the same material for essentially straight and essentially gay audiences, suggesting a universality in your material. Is this the case?

Greer: I've never tried to write in the kind of jokes that a good number of gay performers are guilty of using. It doesn't impress me to hear a comic who finds humor only in the most obvious entendre: you know, the physical jokes and 'Mary this' and 'Mary that'. It's unfair to an audience. Even at the 524, the Redwood Room, the Fantasy and many of the other fine gay clubs that I have worked, I was doing pretty much what I'm doing now: strictly humor, not straight, not gay, just funny, although naturally I'd add an emphasis if the room were especially heterosexual or homosexual. I've never tried to strictly separate the two; there isn't that much separation anyway. I just look at everyone as people. Does that make sense?

QQ: Very much so. Do you write all your own material?

Greer: Yes, I do. In the late 50s and early 60s when I was very green I wasn't against lifting someone else's material. I wanted so much to succeed as a performer that I was ready to try anything, but I haven't done that in ten or twelve years. There's no need; fortunately, I am able to write.

QQ: Your facial expressions and physical gestures are a performance in themselves; did you really pick them up from a campy mother, as you claim?

Greer: Actually, all mothers are campy, but my mother has a fine sense of humor and a great feel for things theatrical. In fact, most of my family, who are Irish, are crazy, comic characters and I'm proud to be one. My facial expressions, however, are just there and I'm not aware of them most of the time. They do help to punch a line or give some accent to a take, a monologue or a joke. Besides, it's really not me who is performing: it's a professional me. I haven't analyzed the onstage and offstage me's; they're the same person and yet offstage I'm easily embarrassed by a great many things and really kind of naive, which I'm sure is going to be difficult for anyone to believe because onstage or on camera I'm able to do outrageous things with complete freedom. I think the difference is that I don't have to be responsible for Malcolm in "The Gay Deceivers," although a great portion of the public tries to make me responsible. I'm not like Malcolm. I liked him; I liked him very much; I thought he was a funny person and a good queen, but personally it would embarrass the shit out of me if I

ON HIS SEXUALITY: ". . . I cannot truthfully say whether I'm heterosexual or homosexual: I just don't know myself. I've experienced both . . . ."

ON BEING TYPED: "Any actor worth his salt is different (in private life) or he isn't acting. When they assume that I'm a 24-hour faggot . . . it really pisses me off . . . ."

ON BAD TRIPS: "You get a good look at what you've allowed yourself to become and all those bugaboos start creaping out and staring at you from the medicine cabinet."

ON POT: "Marijuana, I love; it's fabulous and so much better than booze, and it has become as common as hors d'oeuvres in California."

ON JUDY GARLAND: ". . . (she) was made a legend by the gays; they were the ones who forgave her and made all of those comebacks possible."

ON USC: "Man, the girls are afraid to go out on the campus at night for fear of getting raped, and the guys are afraid to go out for fear of getting caught."

walked around like that. It's just not where my head is at. I can do it professionally to amuse, but that's about it.

QQ: Do you think that Malcolm was representative of a good many homosexuals?

Greer: Well, certainly not the majority, but he was representative of a type of homosexual just as certain straight people are representative of, let's say, a Clint Eastwood type of man. Actually, the Malcolm I created was a composite of many people, some whom I'd known and others whom I'd seen. Again, Man, people have asked me if I was embarrassed to do it or was I worried about hurting my image. It seems that there are a lot of people that I'm never going to convince that I'm not Malcolm, that I'm not a mad queen who spends her time face down in a flower bed. I can't worry about those people as long as I know that there is a difference, and the only people who get typed are those who can't do anything else or who don't want to do anything else. I want to play all sorts of people, including, as I've already done, characters that other actors are afraid to try.

QQ: What has been your family's reaction to your performances as Queenie and Malcolm?

Greer: It's been one of complete understanding and pride. Not pride that I played this character or that, simply pride that I am succeeding as an actor. They know me, you see, so they don't see any marked change. When they see me on the stage they just laugh like anyone else. They know that it's just a job and that I do it well.

QQ: Has family support been a big factor in the success of your career?

Greer: No, not really: if anything, they didn't take much of it too seriously. When I was a kid of three or four I was telling everyone that I was going to be in the movies, but when you're living on a farm near a small town in Illinois there doesn't seem to be any way for a kid to get to Hollywood—or even grow up. It's now that my family is really starting to get behind me. It pisses me off in a way: It's like "we knew it all along" and they never did. I had a hard time getting them to stop laughing long enough for me to prove that I could do it.

QQ: Behind the comic's mask there is often a sad or tragic undertone. Are you implying that this generalization applies to you?

Greer: It's difficult to talk about sadness and loneliness because they're almost cliches. My parents both married and divorced three times and I grew up in a lot of States and families, feeling something of a pawn. I bitched about it and hated it, Man, especially going to two schools in a year. When I would finally fit into a group of friends someone would get a divorce and we would move again. It made me very *(Continued on page 39)*

ON POPPERS: "I've heard doctors say that each sniff takes a minute off your life but I wasn't looking forward to the last twenty minutes of my life anyway."

ON TELEVISION: ". . . I don't like the censorship involved. I don't like to work that way; I like to speak out and not hide anything."

ON GAY LIBERATION: "I admire Reverend Troy Perry and the people who are really working at it but the queens who jump on for the ride are a pain in the ass."