

# Talking Bivisibility in HOLLYWOOD

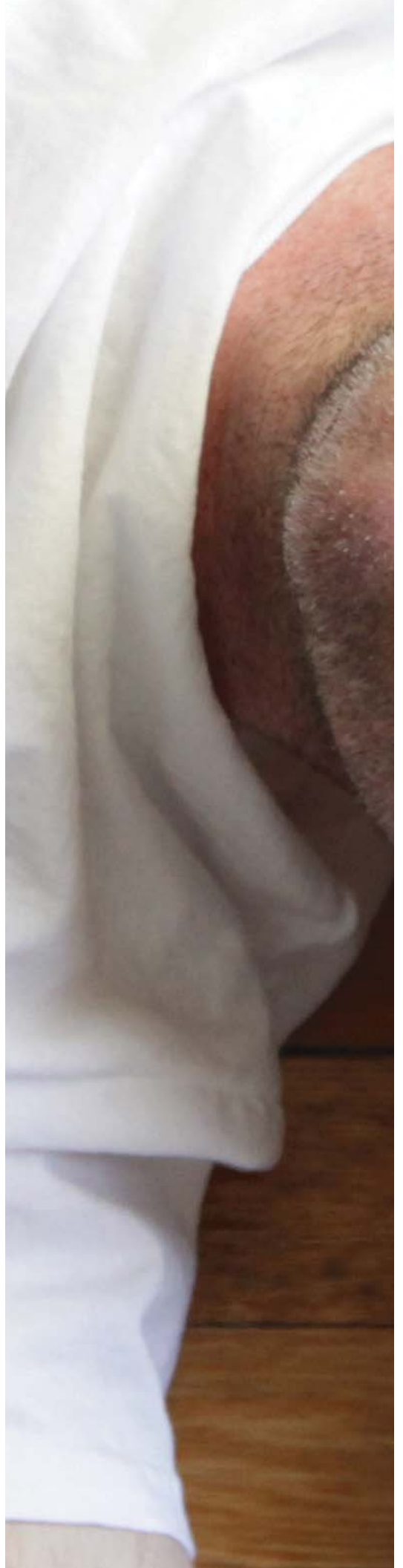
COVER STORY: Actor, Paul Fitzgerald

BY ADRIENNE WILLIAMS

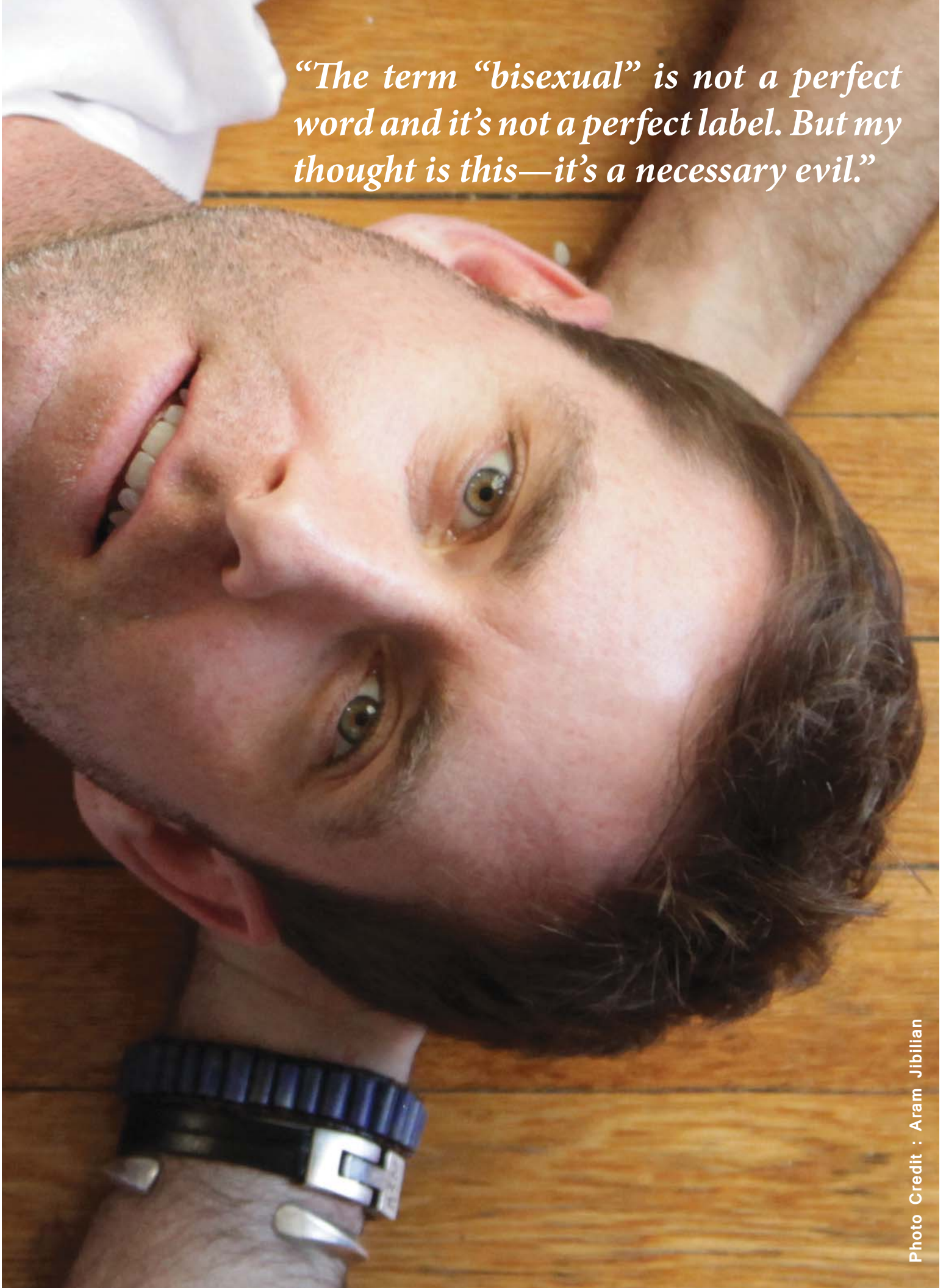
PHOTOS BY ARAM JIBILIAN

In the latter part of 2010, I received an email from a man by the named Paul Fitzgerald. At the time, I couldn't have even dreamt of that fateful day and how our lives would intertwine in the cause of bivisibility. On that day, all I knew was that a bisexual man, who was searching for bi content for a project he was working on, had stumbled upon *Bi Social Network*. After that introduction, *Fitzgerald* wanted to help in any way he could to share the message that bisexuality really did exist in Hollywood.

We interviewed Fitzgerald back in January 2011 on Bi Talk radio, in the heyday of our early podcast programming. What I found that day, was a man who believed in and was passionate about the cause as much as we were. Fitzgerald has a warm, good natured guy next door vibe to him. Born and raised in South-west Virginia, he went to Northwestern University in Chicago—one of the many things we have in common. He now lives in Brooklyn, in his beloved city New York. His face glows with pride as he is videoed riding through the neighborhood. It was easy to get him to sign up as our first poster boy for the "I am Visible" campaign. Fitzgerald stated in an interview that he was more comfortable using the term "bisexual" to describe who he was and that he had "come to terms" with it. He felt the bisexual community as a whole needed more visibility to be free to become what the gay and lesbian community is now.



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One of the many things I like about him is his sensibility. In some ways, he is a male version of me. I came to like the honesty with which he approaches the social issues surrounding increased visibility in the bi community. Not only has he reached out to *Bi Social Network*, but he has never stopped supporting other pro bi projects we have done, joining in whenever they come up.

Fitzgerald has been an actor in shows like *The Mentalist*, *Fringe*, *Eleventh Hour*, *John Adams*, *Nip/Tuck*. More recently, he has acted in *Helena from the Wedding*, *the Good Wife* and HBO's *Treme*, in which he now has a regular role, shooting on location in New Orleans. He also has directed a film called *Forgiven* which was featured in the Sundance

Film Festival back in 2006.

Having already met several times via Skype®, we met here in Chicago for the first time in real life, giving out bear hugs, so excited at finally being face to face. Due to our busy schedules, we did this interview for the special introduction edition of *Bi Social's* via email.

**Bi Social Network:** First off, I want to thank you for joining *Bi Social* magazine's debut *Men's Edition*, and also for joining our 'I am Visible' campaign last year. My first question is: Why did you join the 'I am Visible' campaign? Why was the message so important to you?

**Paul Fitzgerald:** I joined the campaign because it was the first time I'd seen a conception of "bi activism" that made complete sense to me. I think the central struggle within the community of persons who don't feel that identifying as gay or straight is an authentic option for them, is twofold: visibility and embracing the word "bisexual"—and I think those two pieces are inextricably linked together.

The term "bisexual" is not a perfect word and it's not a perfect label. But my thought is this: it's a necessary evil. My capacity to be attracted and aroused by a person irrespective of their gender is kind of a mystery and miracle that I don't fully understand—but one that I accept and appreciate. And in my gut, that word "bisexual" doesn't perfectly match up with my sense of my inner orientation because the 'bi' implies that there are two partitioned sexualities at work—one for men and one for women—as opposed to one unified sexuality that responds to individual people, which is how I experience my sexuality.



That being said, there will never be a place in the public consciousness or conversation for people who don't identify as gay or straight if people who don't identify as gay or straight don't identify *as something*. That's the brass tacks of the matter. The bi brand is and has long been in the toilet because nobody wants to touch it. We're the ultimate non-conformers, so to consolidate our various pan-omni-queer-flex-etc.-etc. selves into a label is a complete anathema. But if you don't have a brand in America you truly don't have a pot to piss in—just asks the good folks trying to carry the mostly righteous but incredibly disparate litany of grievances forward in the Occupy Wall Street movement. If that movement is to take its game to the next level—and personally I hope it does—at some point they'll have to emerge with a unified accessible brand that expresses who they are and what they want.

I joined the 'I am visible' campaign 'cause I finally woke up and realized: the world isn't ever gonna be a place where I feel more at home until I make it that way. And that starts with being clear about what I want. And what I want is to be visible. And, for me, the best way to be visible is to stand up and be counted as a bisexual man.

**BS:** What do you think it'll take to have Hol-

lywood and the entertainment and media industry as a whole, move forward with a leading character like Torchwood's Captain Jack? We need more bi role models.

**PF:** It's hard to say with Hollywood. But I will say that I think the space where movement will happen when it happens is television, as you mentioned with Torchwood. The question with TV, however, somewhat like with politics, is the delicate dance both institutions have with the public—as to who is leading who. On the one hand, TV producers and networks in particular need to feel comfortable that the fare they're serving up is something the public wants or will accept. Rarely does TV in this country lead, though it certainly has and can. But mostly the folks making TV want to make sure the ground has already been seeded.

I do think the ground is being seeded culturally in this country for the emergence of more bi characters. And, obvious to anyone who tracks these things, bi women characters will lead the way, as there are already some out there. But the tipping point will be when we have a bi male character. And in general the idea of the male bi identity is so obtuse for most people to digest, you can't just make the character a runner on the side. You'd have to make him central and deal

head on with the content of his sexual identity. And people would have to tune in!

**BS:** As a male actor who happens to be an out bisexual in Hollywood, do you think the idea of a leading bi male character on American TV or in film in the near future is a possibility?

**PF:** I do. I hope it happens soon. And very candidly, I have a script I've written for TV in the development phase which I hope is just the show of which you speak. I think I'm dealing with the subject matter in a way that

debt of appreciation. I truly believe the last two decades can be divided into a pre and post *Will & Grace* era with regards to how the ball has moved forward on gay rights. In terms of inclusion at the table of conversation and cultural consciousness, I'd like for my show to do for bisexuals and bisexuality what *W&G* did for gay people—that's my greatest artistic and personal aspiration at the moment.

**BS:** Bisexuals seem to be at a crossroads, still stuck at poor characterization on a lot of popular gay friendly shows, just like the gays

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is accessible and lends a certain universal appeal, humor, self-deprecation and humanity to the main character. We'll see. The initial response has been very good. But there is an enormously long line of cooks in the kitchen of making television, so you have to get a lot of heads on the same page. And ultimately you have to have a character and a show that's so damn entertaining it provides an irresistible dose of sugar around what might otherwise be difficult for the public to swallow. We'll leave that analogy there before it becomes untoward, eh?

But seriously, I think that's what *Will & Grace* accomplished and I believe therein we all owe the creators of that show a huge

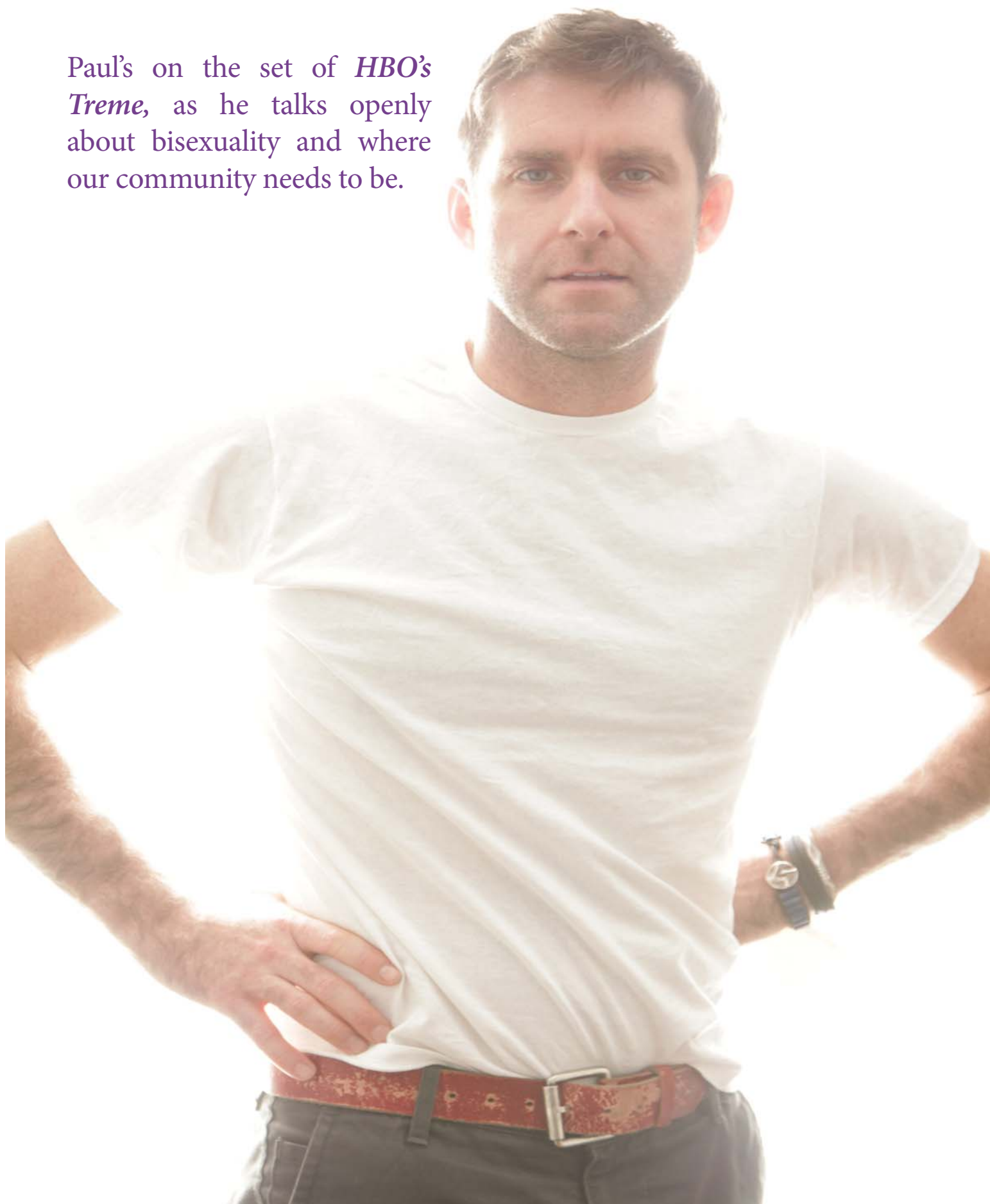
and lesbians were back in the 70s. What are your thoughts about this internal biphobia and bi-erasure in our own community?

**PF:** Ooh, hot potato! Adrienne, you know I have to count to ten every time the topic of intra-community bi hostility comes up! Nothing gets my Irish up more! (Counting to ten...)

Ok. Yeah. What are you gonna do? It's a hard one to talk about. It's incredibly painful to be rejected by people you consider part of your family, your community—gno doubt. And a lot of these gay-friendly shows of which you speak are created and driven by gay people, mostly gay men. And I know more than a few of them personally! So it's particularly



Paul's on the set of *HBO's Treme*, as he talks openly about bisexuality and where our community needs to be.



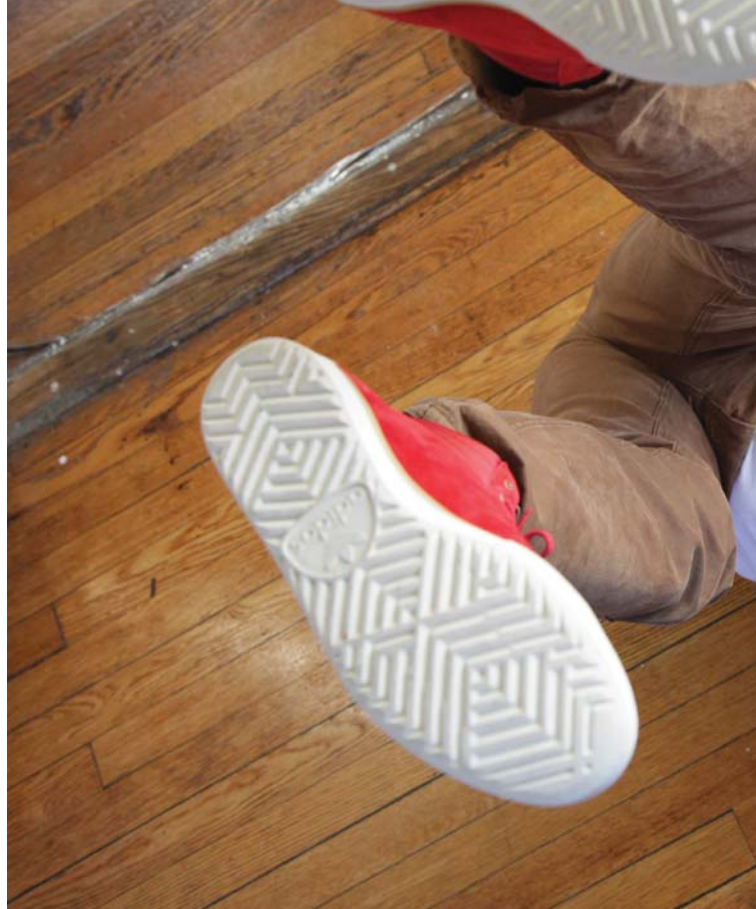
hard. It's hard to get down the other side of the mountain to love. But I'm more there than I used to be, so I can speak to this.

Look, it's a just moment in time. And you very aptly point out the moment in the timeline of cultural progression back in the 70s, when shows, predominantly created and run by straight people, portrayed gays in an uber one-dimensional and what we think of now as offensive and clownish light. For that matter, there are still plenty of shows that do that. But point is, the gays put their time in, and like the Jefferson's of TV fame who moved on up to the East Side, eventually, the gays moved on up to where they are now largely running the show in Hollywood TV-land—and to the winner goes the spoils.

Is it sad that part of those spoils include, for a lot—but not all—gay men writing in TV, diminishing bisexual people and bisexuality as a way fortifying their own brand and identity? Yes. But the reality is there are a lot of complicated growing pains involved with being gay in our society and a lot of those growing pains get articulated as insecurities—and when people are insecure they lash out and attack others. It's just human nature.

I predict that when this current generation of a “folk in power”, if you will, passes and the younger bucks who are coming up now get the reigns, you'll see a much more inclusive vibe towards bi and non gay-straight conforming characters in shows—cause the young folks coming up these days just straight up “get it”—they're past all the pettiness.

**BS:** Bi women are starting to come out in the entertainment industry. Where are the bi men? Without naming names, have you heard from bisexual men who have wanted



to come out, but just didn't know what kind of reception they would get?

**PF:** I know more than a few gay actors who behaviorally I would consider bisexual, some very well known. And I can't say I've had extensive conversations about why they would or wouldn't come out as bisexual. But my sense, circling back to my response to your first question, is that the contours of their reticence are not a lot different than my own have been. On a personal level, there isn't a real public space to come out to—on the other side of a bi person's coming out is not a big welcome banner and a White Party or second date and a U-Haul like it's been for gays and lesbians respectively. To come out as bi is to be greeted by a gigantic fart sound of: Huh?

So you amplify that many times over, the way being a very well known or full-on famous actor tends to amplify one's presence in the days of our lives, so to speak—and that is a very, very loud fart sound. And who





needs that?

Seriously, I'd like to see more such guys come out as bi—but I don't think doing so is a parallel equation to having gay male or female actors come out. I think the ground needs to be seeded and I think that seeding is best done in the good old fashioned way: one by one, as bi folks everywhere make themselves more visible, more of a presence in the "kitchen table" conversation of the country, as it were. Going back to the *W&G* example, the public led that show into being. That show and those folks who created it picked up the torch in a graceful, beautiful and hilarious way and moved the story forward; but that show came on the heels of a decade of increased visibility of the gay community in our country, driven by the community's response to the AIDS crisis.

Let's hope it doesn't take a damn crisis to get bi folks to sing out Louise, etc.

**BS:** Re being out in Hollywood, what are

some of the issues that you feel are specific for bisexuals and not really an issue for gay or lesbian actors?

**PF:** Well, like I said above: there's just the enormous "huh?" factor. John Q Public may be against gay rights or gay people or gay picnics; but he sure in hell knows what gay is, and then some. Most people don't even know what to make of bisexuality. So having to educate is something that goes hand in hand—but now that I write it on the page—I think gay actors have their own education battles to fight as well—like the idea that a gay male actor can convincingly play opposite a female love interest.

So the issue becomes being an actor-activist/educator. And that's just not everybody's calling. And as an actor myself, I certainly don't begrudge other professional artists who want to draw boundaries around their professional and personal lives.

I think the more useful answer here is probably that until we have a big time name actor decide to come out and identify as bisexual—we won't know what the issues are!

**BS:** I want to talk about your acting career. You've been getting some great attention on cable and television series like *The Good Wife*, *The Mentalist*, *The Practice* and *Treme* on *HBO*, just to name a few. Tell us what it was like working with *Alan Cumming* and on a major featured series.

**PF:** Alan was lovely to work with, as were all the actors on *The Good Wife*. Being a guest actor on a show is a little like jumping on a moving train—and the people who are there day in and out definitely can make the experience if they're welcoming. And I've just been fortunate that more often than not, I've worked with great folks.



*The Good Wife* was an experience I'll never forget because it involved me simulating giving Santa Claus a blowjob in front of a green screen—and really, how often do you get to do that as an actor, bisexual or otherwise? Throw in Mrs. Claus and it's a party. *Treme* has been wonderful, too, because I did an arc on that last season and I'm going back to do another arc in the upcoming third season. You get to settle in and know the crew and the other actors better—*Kim Dickens* is a complete sweetheart—it's a family vibe. TV is great that way—working insane hours in this little bubble, with everyone directing their energies to the same task.

**BS:** I have to confess I sort of have a little crush on *Simon Baker* from the *Mentalist*.

**PF:** Simon is Australian surfer hot, for sure.

**BS:** How is working on a production in NY or LA different from working in New Orleans on *Treme*?

**PF:** Actually, each city does have its own vibe work-wise. NY production is down and dirty, just like the city itself, not a lot of frills. In LA you get pampered. And in New Orleans you just can't wait to wrap so you can go out and eat and drink your face off!

**BS:** Let's talk about your directorial debut of *Forgiven*, which was featured at film festivals across the world back in 2006. What was it like as an actor to shift from the role of the director to that of actor in the same film, not to mention writer, producer, etc? It had to be a juggling act with many hats?

**PF:** Yeah, it's a hat trick going the writer-director-actor route. I wouldn't jump into it again without a lot of consideration. But that script, that character—what I had in my mind for the final product—there was a unity of vision there that I felt I had to chase

after, as challenging as it was. The hardest thing is as an actor, to really stop thinking about how the scene is looking as a whole while you're acting within it. You really just have to go take by take and go for it, look at the playback and then adjust and do it again. But you have to let go when you're in it or your performance will reflect that distraction – and that I found difficult.

I think it was when we premiered at Sundance, one of our first Q&A's someone stood up and said: "I can't decide whether I love this movie or hate it—but I know I'm not gonna be able to stop thinking about it for a long time." And that pretty much made it all worth it.

**BS:** Are you working on anything else as a director that you can talk about?

**PF:** I'm working on the aforementioned TV pilot; have two feature scripts in the early development phase; my first attempt at an original stage play, which is currently kicking my ass; and a documentary project, which is similarly kicking my ass. Basically work is kicking my ass at present—but if it doesn't hurt to make I guess it's not art. Or something like that.

**BS:** How I understand the ass kicking with starting *Bi Social Network*! As an actor, have you worked on Broadway before? If so, tell us, if not, what would you like to sink your teeth into?

**PF:** I have worked on the *Great White Way*. I was in the most recent revival of *Noises Off* on Broadway several years back, playing opposite *Jane Curtin*—her boyfriend, no less. And that was about as much fun as you can have in life. To have gotten paid for it was really just a hat on a hat. Phenomenal cast of New York actors, so much fun. It was prob-

ably my first surviving childhood memory of wanting to be in show business—being in a Broadway show. Me and my sisters saw *Annie* when I was eight years old and after I recovered from the realization that there were no little boys in the cast and that I would never be a workhouse brat belting out “It’s A Hard Knock Life” – I set my sights on getting onto a Broadway stage somehow, someday. So...

The only other play I have designs on at the moment is this fairly obscure Tennessee Williams’ play called *Period of Adjustment*, which I just did up at the *Berkshire Theatre Festival* over the summer. If that were to come to Broadway I would kill for hire.

**BS:** You might hate this question, but I’ll ask it anyway. You’ve been a director, actor and writer. Which of the three do you love the most?

**PF:** Oh I’m sorry, did you ask me if I really like men or women most? No, I’m kidding. It’s a fair question! I like them each in turn—men, women, acting, writing, directing. I haven’t directed much since *Forgiven*, so I probably have the least experience doing that and don’t have intense aspirations to direct material other than my own—but I certainly do love it.

As for acting and writing—two totally different ways of animation manifestation, if you will. You really can’t say what you want to as an actor. You’re bound to what you’ve been given to say—and act. And that’s expressive and fulfilling at times, those times for me being specifically when the material coincides with something I want to express, like it happened to be in this play I mentioned, *Period of Adjustment*. But lots of times I’m must acting for a buck, particularly in TV. There’s not a great deal of variation required or wanted

from the lines as they’ve been laid out.

Writing...writing is a killer for me, but when I finally get it out and get it right...well, looking at and re-reading the script is a little like how they make poor Narcissus sound staring at himself in that pond: it’s damn dreamy.

**BS:** Is there anything that you want to do in film or on television that’s on your bucket list?

**PF:** I would like to do a shoot ‘em up movie or TV show. I know it’s terrible to play so loose with guns, desensitization to violence etc etc...but you know?

**BS:** One last question, are there any questions you continue to have to answer as a bi male? Our readers are always interested in someone understanding what they are going through regarding bi-visibility.

**PF:** Yeah, always have to answer: Which do you like more? How does that work? What does that mean? Are you serious? and Are you free tonight?

**BS:** Thanks Paul for spending time with us and turning the spotlight on the bi experience in Hollywood. ■

*To check out more of Paul Fitzgerald’s work, please see the upcoming hit show **Treme** on HBO to see more of this amazing man. Check your local listings for times and dates.*