



Cellblock lovers—and fighters—Chris Keller (Christopher Meloni, left) and Tobias Beecher (Lee Tergesen)

t e l e v i s i o n

Prisoners of love

The men behind HBO's gritty, sexy *Oz* talk about the controversial show as it plows through its final season **By Lawrence Ferber**

The gates are finally closing on *Oz*. HBO's mesmerizing, no-holds-barred dramatic series about an experimental men's prison block, well into its sixth season, runs through February 23, when the show caps off with a 100-minute finale. Gays have been tuning in to *Oz* fervently—besides the hot men, omnipresent nudity, and queer characters, we've been following the twisted, tortured, yet deeply loving romance between inmates Chris Keller and Tobias Beecher. Today on the set in Bayonne, N.J., the actors who fill those roles—Christopher Meloni and **Lee Tergesen**, respectively—relax between scenes at a table within the 120,000-square-foot Emerald City prison complex.

The pair needle each other like real-life (and less dysfunctional) lovers in between recollections. Tergesen laments the terrible drag he was forced to don as bitch to diabolical white supremacist Schillinger (*Spider-Man*'s J.K. Simmons) during the first season. "That fucking bullshit, two ripped T-shirts for a dress and those fucking gold heels," he grouches. "Give me something higher up that's going to show off my butt a little more." More fondly recalled are the numerous on-screen French kisses, which Tergesen and Meloni took off-set with playful lip-locks at the 2000 GLAAD Media Awards.

"It made perfect sense to me that they would kiss," proffers series creator Tom Fontana. "Here are these

two happily married guys kissing at the gay awards and letting it be photographed because their attitude is, 'If people don't understand, fuck 'em.' Those guys in particular have been incredibly ballsy in doing anything I asked them to do."

In fact, Meloni and Tergesen have had to push for even more explicitly gay content. While shooting a scene that ended with a show of affection, the director of that episode grew uncomfortable, calling "Cut!" early and giggling. "Finally we were like, 'Hey, can you just let it run for a minute?' which they always do on these scenes," Tergesen recalls. "And the director goes, 'Why, are you going to blow him?' The truth was, a real moment was happening."

"And you called him out," Meloni recalls proudly. "Lee goes, 'Look, just because you're uncomfortable with the sexuality going on here doesn't mean you have to rain on our fucking parade.'"

Also tough to negotiate are the show's plethora of nude scenes. Practically every *Oz* character has shown all for the cameras, but Fontana reveals why some actors show more than others. "The truth is," he says, "every actor who said they couldn't [do frontal]—and they go into elaborate 'I'm protecting my family' excuses—just have the smallest penises! When you see their butts but not their fronts, you know the story."

And while Tergesen and Meloni aren't gay, a number of gay actors have appeared on the program. Charles Busch portrayed a gay murderer two seasons ago, Tony-winner B.D. Wong has inhabited the sexually ambiguous Father Ray Mukada since the beginning, and James Pelacio—*a.k.a.* Fiona St. James, ex-empress of the Imperial Court of New York—has played a gender-bending *Oz* gay gang member since season 2. Pelacio credits the show for breaking new ground before *Queer as Folk*, bringing homoeroticism home even if the characters weren't outwardly gay. "*Oz* definitely was one of a kind, and I think it broke the mold," he nods.

Oz's final season boasts Broadway legends Joel Grey and Patti LuPone as well as a new queer character that Fontana calls "kind of a cross between Peter Gattien and Michael Alig." As for that long-strained Beecher-Keller romance—will it go out with a smile, a shanking, or Keller's execution? "Oh, it's *Oz*," observes Fontana, laughing sardonically. "I don't want to make any false promises. It's another year in *Oz* is all I can say."

For their part, Meloni and Tergesen are sad their sentence together has finally ended. Or has it? "It's sad, but I'm excited," says Tergesen, sighing. "I am going to miss working with Chris. He and I went to see Tool on Halloween night. We just went out as ourselves, which I guess you can interpret however you like." ■

Ferber has also written for Entertainment Weekly and Time Out New York.

Inside the Emerald City

If you're catching *Oz* for the first time on HBO (or on the season 1 and 2 DVDs), here's a useful guide to who's who—and who's gay



Facing the end of their sentences on *Oz* are (from left) Lee Tergesen as Tobias Beecher, J.K. Simmons as Vern Schillinger, Christopher Meloni as Chris Keller, and R.E. Rodgers as James Robson.

A Tobias Beecher (played by Lee Tergesen): A lawyer jailed for killing a girl while driving drunk, Beecher has been with us since the show's beginning. At first, Schillinger turned him into his "prag" (bitch)—branding a swastika on his ass, raping him, and forcing him to cross-dress. Having fought back since, today's Beecher prefers to be Keller's consensual lover and is fighting to get him off death row.

B Vern Schillinger (played by J.K. Simmons): Head of the neo-Nazi Aryan Brotherhood and a perpetual thorn in Beecher's side. He's responsible for the murder of one of Beecher's children and suffered the loss of his own two teen sons—all casualties of their war.

C Chris Keller (played by Christopher Meloni): When introduced in season 2, Keller appeared to be Beecher's adoring guardian angel. It was a ruse; Schillinger had enlisted him to break Beecher's arms and legs. Secretly endeared, however, Keller spent the next several seasons in a fierce love-hate struggle to win Beecher's heart, at one point famously showing what Genet would call his "bronze eye" in taunting flirtation. "To me, it was never a 'gay' relationship per se," says series creator Fontana. "It's two men or two people struggling to find and maintain love in an environment that completely works against them."

D James Robson (played by R.E. Rodgers): An exiled member of the Aryan Brotherhood—rejected after re-

ceiving a black man's gums in a transplant—he's currently reduced to prag and taking spoons up the rear. Yes, spoons.

Francis Winthrop (played by Andy Powers): Schillinger's latest prag, seen in the season premiere spitting out a mouthful of you-know-what. He'll do—and does—anything to become a full-fledged Aryan Brother.

Fiona (played by James Pelacio): The Gays' literal cheerleader, he's always safely on the sidelines with several other queens, including Tony (Steve Wishnoff) and Kiki (Rohan Quine).

Timmy Kirk (played by Sean Dugan): Fiery, evil redhead who flirts with Father Mukada (B.D. Wong), mainly to torment him.

Alonzo Torquemada (played by Bobby Cannavale): A new gay prisoner who resembles Marilyn Manson. Oh, the fantasies that'll stir up!

Nat/Natalie Ginzburg (played by Charles Busch): A cross-dressing killer with AIDS, Ginzburg was hired to assassinate his cell mate, Antonio Nappa, an Italian who had been maliciously infected with HIV by another prisoner, Adebisi. Humanitarians all.

Billie Keane (played by Derrick Simmons): Openly gay Homeboy. Made a pass at a short-lived Italian and was beaten horribly.

James Cramer (played by Rob Bogue): Fought in season 3 boxing matches—something the Gays excel at on *Oz*.

—Lawrence Ferber