



Queer TV

Glyn Davis and Gary Needham

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Theories, Histories, Politics

Edited by Glyn Davis and
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Chapter 4

One queen and his screen

Lesbian and gay television

Andy Medhurst

A 2008 preamble

When the editors of this book contacted me to say they wanted to include ‘One Queen and His Screen’, I was simultaneously flattered and alarmed; flattered because it was considered interesting enough to be worth unearthing and reprinting, but alarmed because it is not a piece written with a standard academic voice or swathed in the usual methodological accoutrements. It has, for example, no footnotes, and makes only the slightest, glancing references to other writers who have tackled this topic, so compared with some other pieces in this book, it could well look flimsy, whimsical and distressingly deficient in theoretical muscle. Yet I don’t want to apologise for how it was written, since it was originally commissioned for a book aimed not at an academic audience, but at a wider public interested in the social and cultural history of non-heterosexual life in Britain. As such, it sat in that book alongside a batch of similar overview pieces surveying lesbian and/or gay perspectives on other cultural fields (film, literature, theatre, fashion), a range of autobiographical accounts that considered the personal journeys of individuals (both celebrities and non-celebrities) and a small and only slightly poisonous bouquet of political polemics. Consequently, the tone used here deliberately minimised the usual academic trappings, and it would be disingenuous to deny the relief I felt in removing those manacles before squaring up to the keyboard. (There is a wider issue that could be debated here, if space permitted, namely the question of why so many working in what I fear I must in shorthand terms call the ‘queer academy’ remain so oddly, staunchly determined to make their writing as reader-unfriendly as possible.)

This chapter was written as a history – a brazenly selective one, undeniably, but nonetheless an attempt to trace some lines across the terrain of the cultural past. Years later, looked at in a different century, three things have happened to that history. First, the expansion (would it be too tacky to say ‘explosion?’) of representations on television of non-heterosexual characters and themes has meant that writing a single chapter of this type is probably all but impossible today. I was pushing my luck writing this survey in the first half of the 1990s, as the essay itself acknowledges, but where could one start now? How could I find room for

Big Brother's predilection for camp men (and its almost phobic paucity of lesbians); John Paul's doe-eyed tribulations in *Hollyoaks* (if only he'd found solace with Justin, as he did inside my head ...); the post-queer, pan-sexual perv-fest of *Torchwood*; and the flirtatious gay/straight buddy-shenanigans of Alan Carr and Justin Lee Collins? Would there be space to reflect on the conundrum that the two most plausibly gay men in *Will and Grace* are Grace and Karen, or to tease out the power-dynamics of the drag queen special editions of *The Weakest Link*, where the only woman we see, quizmistress Anne Robinson, is the most masculine person on screen?

The second, related development in how television history has skewed the history of television I quixotically tried to sketch is that in the face of this recently unleashed army of images, a curious historical amnesia has set in among some viewers. One sometimes feels that for many audiences, televised homosexuality only began with *Queer as Folk* (a series worshipped as holy writ by many, but stubbornly loathed by grumpy old me), before which there was nothing but an arid expanse of unacceptable stereotyping. If my chapter does nothing else, it may point out the limitations of that view, even if some of the names and titles I cite are baffling in their obscurity to some readers. (Dare I hope that bright young things will scamper off to Google for *Gems*?) Third, this history has in itself become a historical artefact, one link in the chain of how those of us living gay or queer lives (personally, I fluctuate) have tried to make sense of what the small screen has said to us, for us, despite us and about us. And yes, I know that 'small screen' might look anachronistic in an era of wide-screen high-definition plasma, and that any even half-reputable sexual-political academic should never use the word 'us' without a screeching flurry of disclaimers, but they are just two more of the reasons why I'm happy to stand by this essay, for all its flaws. It is a period piece, but I like to think that some of it may still resonate, even now.

– Andy Medhurst, 2008

ONE QUEEN AND HIS SCREEN

There are two stories that this chapter needs to tell. One is a story of industries, policies and institutions, while the other deals in a currency of dreams, hopes and feelings. This is as it should be, because television, more than any other cultural form, is where the public and the private merge and mesh. Simultaneously global and domestic, television is the medium that most envelops and informs our social lives while maintaining a direct hotline to the thoughts and fantasies that we hardly dare disclose even to ourselves. We watch collectively but we always watch alone – and it seems to me that lesbians and gay men have felt that tension with a particular intensity, developing our own devious, furious, poignant and scandalous strategies for negotiating its twists and turns.

We're fond of complaining that television either ignores us completely or gets us all wrong, but the grain of truth inside that bitter generalisation shouldn't be allowed to obscure the fact that there have nonetheless been thousands of images

purporting to depict us, in every available genre and at all points of the schedule, from well-meaning liberal drama to crassly reductive sitcom, from *Kilroy* debates on lesbian motherhood to Hinge and Bracket appearing on the women's team in *Give Us a Clue*. To try and make sense of this dauntingly diverse output, to avoid producing nothing more than a shopping list of titles, I need to find a perspective, and so I want to relate the broader cultural history of these representations to another history which interests me even more: my own.

That sounds like a recipe for hopeless self-indulgence, but even the most shamelessly autobiographical account of television cannot avoid reflecting on the wider social and public characteristics of the medium. So while the story I want to tell is in some ways nothing more than that of 'One Queen and His Screen', its narrative will be informed by and integrated into the contexts within which my own viewing history must be located. I make no pretence of speaking for everybody, but isn't objectivity a heterosexual conspiracy anyway?

When I press the rewind button on my television recollections, it's never whole programmes that are conjured up, but moments and instants, snatched glances illicitly stored away for future reference. Friends I've talked to while writing this essay confirm this belief that what we learnt to cultivate in those benighted pre-video days were two specifically attuned senses: first a lightning-fast freeze-frame memory that glued key images into our minds, and second a keen nose for scenting out which programmes would be likely to deliver such treasures. Perhaps this was where we learnt to cruise, scavenging through the schedules, scouring and decoding the *Radio Times* for the slight but telling clue. Our quarry? Well, it would be comforting to report that we were seeking programmes that concerned themselves with responsible explorations of the homosexual world, but the truth is gloriously grubbier.

We were looking for men, men as naked as possible, fuel for our fantasies, sights and sounds that spoke to the feelings we probably hadn't yet learnt to articulate in any language that emanated from above the waistline. Whether it was two men kissing in a BBC2 dramatisation of Angus Wilson's *Late Call* or a documentary about the Liverpool team that revealed the truth beneath the football shorts, *The High Chaparral* or *Play for Today*, modern dance or rugby league, the ostensible content was irrelevant. I remember sitting through countless episodes of a particularly tedious 1970s naval drama series called *Warship* (that may not even be its correct title – such are the fickle filters of television memory) just for those moments when the sailors shed their uniforms and marched right off the screen and into my febrile queer imaginings.

Television's potential as an erotic resource was invaluable because it could be consumed, with due and daring surreptitiousness, in the unsuspecting midst of family life. No need to sneak off to forbidden films at the cinema or furtively visit a newsagent sufficiently distant from your usual high street; TV images were beamed straight into your expectant lap, provided your choice of images could be justified by an excuse plausible enough to fool the parents. Programmes directly concerned with gay matters were another issue entirely, which is why it's important

to insist that television's relationship with its homosexual audiences should never be reduced to only those texts demarcated as being 'about homosexuality'. For the young queer at home, such programmes were off-limits, since to nominate them as part of the evening's entertainment would be far too risky, except of course as a handy opening gambit to pave the way for coming out. Those of us still to take that plunge (and without the benefit of a bedroom TV set) could only regard gay-themed shows as exotic, impossible temptations languishing in the listings.

Yet could they ever have lived up to their mystique? In the case most dear to my heart, the answer is one big screaming yes. Call it fate, or synchronicity, or just the ministering care of a good fairy watching over me, but the fact remains that the first evening I can recall my parents attending a family function without requiring me to accompany them was the evening that Thames TV first transmitted *The Naked Civil Servant*.

Dazed by this ridiculous stroke of luck, and conscious that they might return at any minute, I sat about six inches from the screen with one finger on the 'off' button, drinking in every second as if my life depended on it – which, of course, it did. Miraculously, the parental key wasn't turned in the lock until ten minutes after the film had ended, by which time I was sitting back amid my homework, the surface of fake studiousness stretched taut across the delirious cauldron of discovery beneath. No, *The Naked Civil Servant* did not 'turn me into' a homosexual (at 16, I had long been sure that I never had been or ever would be anything else), but its celebration of Quentin Crisp's unrepentant queenliness filled me with an elated, vertiginous sense of identification, belonging and defiant pride. His loneliness, lovelessness and the scorn and violence poured upon him were elements I either edited out or accepted as the price that lipsticked pioneers must pay. Although the film was set in the past, I had seen the future – and it minced.

It is, of course, the very exceptional status of that evening that made it such a swoon at the time and such a fond memory now. In the general run of events, all I could hope for was to cop the occasional eyeful of thigh and try not to wince too hard when the rest of the living room delightedly lapped up a homophobic joke spat out by some pig-ugly heterosexual comedian. This underlines the negative side of television's shared domestic context, since for every secret tingle I pilfered from the screen there were dozens more moments when thoughtless stereotypes reminded me of my isolation and vulnerability. These wounds hurt all the more because they were inflicted so routinely, part of that blithe, mundane, everyday arrogance through which heterosexual culture presumes its universality. Perhaps it is in such memories and in our consequent desire to spare others the pain we felt that the roots lie of the calls for 'positive images' that so regularly feature in discussions of representation.

These calls are deeply felt and well-intentioned. They demand that the media show some responsibility by providing supportive, balanced portrayals of minority groups, thereby catering for both the self-esteem of the group in question and the information and education of the wider public. One obvious way of facilitating this has been for politicised lesbians and gay men to become more involved in

writing and producing for television. In 1979, an American gay writer called Len Richmond co-wrote a new British sitcom, *Agony*, in which the central heroine's best friends were a gay couple whose sexuality was an uncomplicated fact of life rather than any kind of 'issue'. This approach, Richmond hoped, would empower gay viewers and enlighten straight ones. He somewhat romantically speculated that 'some little gay boy in Scotland on a farm somewhere will see the show and realise that everyone who is gay isn't a neurotic weirdo' (*Evening Standard*, 9 March 1979).

The couple Richmond created, Rob and Michael, were certainly free of neuroses. They were admirably credible and impeccably respectable, white professional 30-something with non-effeminate facial hair yet non-macho table manners, rounded and likeable and unfussily tactile with each other, cracking gags about the ridiculousness of straight men, light-years ahead of the cardboard pansies which many other sitcoms wheeled on as one-joke disposables. They were positive images without a single shred of doubt, and at the time I was profoundly grateful for them, which is why I feel rather guilty for pointing out now that they seem really rather dull, their matey house-trained politeness crying out for an injection of flamboyance and scandal. They exemplify my fear that a 'positive image' means 'an image that won't upset heterosexuals'.

Rob and Michael, you see, were part of that breed of homosexual who 'just happens to be gay', a formula much admired and advocated by the proponents of positive images – let's have gay people doing ordinary things: going shopping, washing the car, boiling an egg, reading the papers; run-of-the-mill folk who just happen to be gay. This viewpoint would restrict homosexuality to a discourse of the bedroom, reducing it to nothing more than an occasionally deployed configuration of genitalia. It's a genial, liberal framework that sees sexuality as a relatively minor signifier of difference that shouldn't be overstressed – people are all the same, really – and the textual manifestations of this argument are those most likely to be awarded the label of 'positive image'. Close your eyes and he (because on British television the positive image is almost invariably male) will gradually materialise like someone beamed down in *Star Trek* – here he comes, taking shape, kind and caring, tasteful and tidy, not-at-all-camp and not-at-all-horny, he's Colin from *Eastenders* and he bores me beyond description.

There again, he wasn't written for me, because by the time *Eastenders* began (February 1985) I didn't need him. He was written for gay men's anxious parents and for A-level media studies teachers to show their students that there are some perfectly nice men who, hey, just happen to be gay. Despite my sarcasm, I'd never deny the importance of reaching those constituencies, nor the most vital group of all: those for whom Colin was created – the mid-1980s equivalents of Len Richmond's hypothesised Scots boy. The problem with Colins, however, is that their shoulder-to-cry-on sexlessness, their don't-frighten-the-horses ordinariness, is too frequently elevated into a paradigm towards which all homosexual representations should aspire. They have a value as a starting point, a focus for initial recognition and identification, but to be satisfied with them is to adopt a position of mewling

gratitude which has no place in my conception of queerness. Blame my early exposure to Quentin Crisp.

The just-happen-to-be-gay version of homosexuality is also a coded plea for a particular televisual style, a pallid, cautious naturalism in which texts with points to make function as a kind of social work. Much of popular culture, however, depends on more vulgar and downmarket genres, where gently shaded psychological credibility is rejected in favour of schematic, polarised, unapologetically two-dimensional characterisations that allow audiences a more full-blooded involvement. After all, *The Terminator* would be a bit of a bore if we were asked to accept Arnold Schwarzenegger as a fully rounded sensitive individual who just happened to be a ruthless twenty-first century cyborg killing machine. Melodramas don't obey careful political agendas, they let us revel in excessively heightened emotional states. Any sober and rational account of Joan 'The Freak' Ferguson in *Prisoner: Cell Block H* would sorrowfully have to conclude that she was not a 'positive image' of lesbianism; but queer audiences rapturously took her to their hearts, her lying, cheating, sneering, fondling, gravel-voiced, hatchet-faced, up-yours bulldykerly a bracing refusal of the condescensions of heterosexual tolerance.

The Freak's strength and impact reside precisely in her 'negativeness'; it was her loathsomeness that made her so queerly lovable. The bold, broad strokes of her villainy have not been matched in British soaps, where gay characters still tend to be the Bobby Ewings rather than the JRs. Before Colin brought tea, sympathy and the Filofax to Albert Square, there had been Gordon in *Brookside*, the vehicle for a thoughtful, if timid, coming-out narrative and predictably a member of the most middle-class household in the serial.

Even earlier, and often overlooked, two daytime ITV soaps had risked the inclusion of gay men. With its setting of a Covent Garden fashion house, *Gems* was almost duty bound to supply at least one temperamentally creative queen, and generously provided three (my favourite being Paul the petulant pattern-cutter). *Together*, based around a relatively well-to-do block of flats, was under no obvious obligation, so the presence of gay couple Pete and Trevor was a laudable step, particularly for 1980. Nonetheless, their living together was the subject of great debate among their neighbours, one concluding that she didn't mind 'because there weren't any kiddies living in the block'. Thirteen years later the 'kiddies' were deemed to be ready for a gay man taking up residence in their own most popular soap, with one storyline in the 1993 series of *Grange Hill* dealing with the repercussions of a teacher's homosexuality (inevitably, perhaps, he was the art teacher) becoming public knowledge all over the school. Given the age group of its target audience, *Grange Hill's* decision to handle the story with a didactically liberal 'tolerance' slant was excusable – the problem is that when it comes to queers, all British soaps still tend to assume they're watched by surly teenagers in need of education.

Occasional plot lines aside, the British soap had been a lesbian-free zone until *Emmerdale* (of all unlikely candidates) took the plunge in the summer of 1993.

Encouragingly, the woman in question wasn't a specially imported exotic but an established member of the existing soap community. Of course, a small village in the Yorkshire Dales isn't exactly throbbing with lesbian nightlife, so Zoe the vet has had to venture into Leeds (*Emmerdale's* preferred location for anything vaguely twentieth century) but at the time of writing she has met a lecturer from the university (note, yet again, that equation of queerness with the professional classes) and hands have been held. By the time this book is published heaven knows what might have happened down on the farm. *Brookside*, too, is reputedly limbering up for its first lesbian affair. It would be churlish to find too much fault with the gentle, gradual expansion of soap homosexualities, but perhaps they could risk a little less niceness.

For rare glimpses of lesbian explicitness, viewers have had to rely on other genres, particularly the literary adaptation. Mandy Merck's apt aphorism that if lesbianism didn't exist, art cinema would have to invent it, can equally be applied to 'art television'. Later-evening scheduling, minority channel location and the all-purpose cloak of cultural respectability have meant that programme makers can actually show lesbians between the sheets, provided it all originated between the covers of a book. In 1990, both the National Trust deviance of *Portrait of a Marriage* (where the lesbianism was not so much depicted as landscaped) and the spiky, spunky coming-of-age story of *Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit* benefited from this strategy, though in other ways they could hardly have been more different. More interesting, perhaps, than either was the achievement of Debbie Horsfield's extraordinary *Making Out*, a raucous, gutsy, moving comedy drama about a group of female friends working in a Manchester electronics factory. In its third series, one of the principal characters was seen not only at home but gleefully sharing a bath with her female lover; all this on BBC1, in a prime-time programme with a large and loyal popular following.

Television comedy is a notoriously contentious area, since humour seems particularly troubling to the guardians of political correctness, understandably so when one remembers all the times when jokes provided the neatest parcels in which to wrap homophobic abuse. When I and my student contemporaries used to gather together in the late 1970s for what in retrospect look like endearingly pompous discussions of 'gays and the media' we had one taken-for-granted benchmark starting point: comic stereotypes of camp, queenly men were A Bad Thing. There were two reasons for this – first, we were not like that (except of course after we'd finished our GaySoc meetings and went out to the bars to scream our tits off); and second, it gave straight people the wrong impression. Yet again, we were measuring our own culture with imported and inappropriate yardsticks, policing ourselves with the anxious wish not to offend.

One figure can be taken as emblematic of those arguments: Larry Grayson. A one-time drag act from the less glamorous reaches of the variety theatre circuit, Grayson achieved sudden, dizzying fame in the early 1970s with a stand-up comedy routine that basically consisted of fey innuendo, acrobatic eyebrows and the limpest of wrists. The more successful he became, however, the greater the fury of the gay

political intelligentsia of the time. When he became host of the BBC's *Generation Game*, *Gay News* moved in for the kill, labelling this:

the worst possible thing that could happen to gay rights on British television ... as far as we are concerned they do not come much lower than Larry Grayson ... He will earn many thousands of pounds at our expense. He will become a 'superstar' while he confuses and distresses our young teenage brothers.
(*Gay News*, 143, 1978)

What was it about Grayson that prompted such a self-righteous tizzy? On one level, *Gay News* was making a useful point about the lack of range of available representations – if Grayson's persona was the only image of homosexuality given mass circulation, the picture created would undeniably be a distorted one – but underneath there is a more complex question of class. To *Gay News*, Grayson stood for an embarrassingly persistent tradition of working-class queer culture that refused to take its lead from the well-bred radicals of the 1960s (note the give-away use of the term 'brothers'). Beyond the campuses, camp thrived, the survival humour of the subculture. To look back at Grayson in full flow is to understand why – if straight audiences thought they were mocking his pitiful poofery, then more fool them; he was getting away with murder, hardly able to believe his luck, asserting the splendiddness of not being normal by deploying the effrontery of effeminacy.

One of the most exciting aspects of the queer politics of the early 1990s has been its upsetting of historical appplecart, its insistence that the gay world did not begin in 1969, that there were older, richer, more diverse histories with which we could connect ourselves. The reclaiming of Grayson might be taken as one small symptomatic example of this. We have, I trust, now reached a stage where the importance of camp to gay male culture could be denied only by those sad folk who put 'no effems' in their personal ads; and that 1970s *Gay News* paranoia about queens now looks, with hindsight, like a brief defensive blip. Camp is one of the weapons we can use to make the world more amenable to our needs and perspectives; it's a language in which we're particularly and deliciously fluent, a notably witty example of its effectiveness being the way in which Channel 4's *Out* series spiced up an item comparing the laws pertaining to homosexuality in the countries that make up the European Community. A worthy topic, but potentially dry as dust, so *Out* turned it into a mock-up of the Eurovision Song Contest and (this being the little pink twist of camp that made all the difference) persuaded Katie Boyle herself to introduce it.

In many ways, the high-profile existence of *Out* was an indisputable landmark in the saga of television and homosexuality, yet it would be rash to imply that these programmes received an unequalled welcome. Indeed, some of the most entrenched, curdled and bitter arguments I have ever had about television have centred on the merits or otherwise of particular items from that series, but this in itself is a healthy sign, an index of how *Out*'s lack of a party line, its irreverence and its glitziness and

its argumentativeness and its anger, fed on and into the multiple homosexualities of recent years, demonstrating an increased confidence, a welcoming of diversity and a long overdue shedding of any need to 'justify' who and what we variously are. By contrast, the short-lived, London-only, graveyard-scheduled *Gay Life*, made by London Weekend Television in 1979, was still rooted in a model of explanation rather than celebration, stylistically unadventurous and ponderously even-handed. In other words, like any television programme, it was a text of its times, exciting and crucial by the sheer fact of its being there ('At last!' cried the cover headline of *Gay News* when the series began) but inevitably cramped and compromised. In the context of British broadcasting at that historical moment, how could it have been otherwise?

There are, of course, so many more titles to name and issues to explore – I haven't even mentioned Freddie from *Eldorado*, the lesbian and gay plots in *Casualty* or Channel 4's magical, perfectly pitched adaptation of *Tales of the City* – but the spectre of the shopping list looms large. It would be satisfying to find one final example, one sweeping rhetorical flourish, to encapsulate all the narrative strands and political tensions sketched so hurriedly above, but television isn't like that. Endlessly proliferating, it always resists definitive summary. Besides, audiences change even more rapidly than the programmes they consume: I've watched television as a secretive homosexual, a sanctimoniously right-on gay man, a screaming queen and now (just look at how they waste tax-payers' money) a queer academic, and the four of me are still fighting over the remote control – how could we ever agree on selecting a single representative image from all the thousands that we've seen? It's impossible, though the sight of Julian Clary (our wisened-up, postmodern Larry Grayson) in all his take-no-prisoners, flagrant finery, descending the stairs to usher us into his *Sticky Moments* comes very, very, very close.