



American Television, Situation Comedies

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Even though the presence of gay and lesbian characters in dramatic television shows has fluctuated with each television season, American situation comedies (known more popularly as sitcoms) have consistently featured a wide array of queer characters in both "guest" appearances and as recurring ensemble members.

Indeed, comedy seems particularly suited for queer portrayals such as those seen in hit television series ranging from late-1970s soap opera spoof *Soap* to the mid-1990s lesbian phenomenon *Ellen* to the offbeat, "new nuclear" family dynamic of *Modern Family*. Gay men and lesbians have also been prominently featured (or their presence keenly felt) in series including the queerly inflected sitcom *Frasier*, the openly queer *Will and Grace*, and the sprightly musical *Glee*.

Although historically television sitcoms have shared with their dramatic television counterparts "stock" stereotypical characterizations of queer characters--alternately as wispy and effeminate or gossipy and ruthlessly backstabbing men or flannel-shirt-wearing, humorless women--these representations are by no means uniform. These stereotyped roles have, in fact, undergone a positive shift concurrent with both a change in social attitudes and a rise in openly queer television comedy writers and sitcom stars.

Hiding in Plain Sight: The 1960s

Although most television sitcoms in the 1960s revolved around the well-established nuclear family motif, a discernible gay sensibility began making its presence known, however subtly, on the small screen. At a time when depictions of openly gay characters on television were unheard of, many identifiably queer characters nevertheless did appear in varying guises. These characters included oddball uncles, wicked mothers-in-law, or fey neighbors whose visits to the otherwise normative home usually caused no small amount of uproar. One show notable for its queerly inflected cast was the magically successful sitcom *Bewitched*, which debuted on ABC in 1964.

While the show itself was based on the antic interaction between Samantha (Elizabeth Montgomery), a witch who doubled as a suburban Connecticut housewife, and her mortal husband Darrin Stephens (Dick York from 1964 to 1966 and Dick Sargent from 1966 to 1972), many of its recurring supporting characters had definite queer overtones.

Agnes Moorehead, widely rumored to be a lesbian, portrayed Samantha's worldly, witty, and bitchy mother Endora, while "confirmed bachelor" Paul Lynde played Samantha's affected, practical-joking Uncle Arthur. In 1994 the series' leads reunited when Elizabeth Montgomery stood beside the "second Darrin," Dick Sargent, as he announced that he was gay. That same year the pair also served as Grand Marshals for the Los Angeles Gay Pride Parade.

Another queer presence surfaced on television the year after the debut of *Bewitched*. In 1965 the variety program *The Steve Lawrence Show* featured, as part of its ensemble, the comic talents of Charles Nelson

Reilly. Reilly's extensive career, which began in the early 1960s, featured Broadway appearances in such shows as *Bye Bye Birdie* (in which he was understudy to Paul Lynde) and a Tony Award-winning turn in *How to Succeed in Business Without Really Trying* in 1961 as the nasty "corporate nephew" Bud Frump.

After similar award-winning success in the 1964 hit musical *Hello, Dolly!* Reilly nosed his way into television on Lawrence's short-lived show. He quickly followed his success by securing a part in the memorably offbeat 1969 children's show *H. R. Pufnstuf* and its spinoff, the 1971 series *Lidsville*, before becoming a celebrity panelist on the long-running game show, *The Match Game*, which first appeared in 1973. Much of *The Match Game's* popularity derived from Reilly's outrageously sissified persona and his snappy put-downs of the other panelists.

In many ways Paul Lynde's career trajectory and biting, sarcastic wit mirrored that of Reilly's. While he achieved recognition for his role on *Bewitched*, Lynde--like Reilly--garnered a fan following through his recurring appearances on a game show. From 1968 to 1979 and again from 1980 to 1981, Lynde occupied "center square" on the long-running TV celebrity quiz show *Hollywood Squares*, and his wisecracking, quick-witted answers to host Peter Marshall's questions became a trademark of the show.

The center square became notorious because, after Lynde's tenure, subsequent guests occupying the center square followed Lynde's example and tended to be extravagantly flamboyant, if not openly gay. Celebrities occupying the center square included Wayland Flowers and his drag queen-esque puppet Madame, and Charles Nelson Reilly made frequent guest appearances. When *Squares* was revived as *The New Hollywood Squares* from 1986 to 1989, comedian Jim Jay Bullock took the center square and acted as the show's "sub-host." The show returned again in 1998 under its original name, and this time openly gay Hollywood columnist Bruce Vilanch ruled the square, thus leading many critics to dub the spot "the gay square."

Lynde's television appearances were not, however, limited to *Hollywood Squares*. After stints on *The Phyllis Diller Show* (1967), *The Jonathan Winters Show* (1967), *Dean Martin Presents the Golddiggers* (1968-1969), and two *Gidget* TV movies (1969 and 1972), Lynde starred in his own sitcom, *The Paul Lynde Show*. The show debuted on ABC in 1972 and featured Lynde as Paul Simms, a respectable attorney who lives a quiet life with his wife and two daughters. However, when Howie, the new husband of Simms' eldest daughter, takes up residence in the Simms household, Paul is driven to distraction.

Unfortunately *The Paul Lynde Show* had little chance to succeed. It was scheduled against formidable competition from NBC's police drama *Adam-12* and Carol Burnett's comedy-variety show on CBS. Moreover, viewers were also uncomfortable with Lynde's over-the-top outrageous onscreen behavior and wholly unbelievable portrayal of a "family man." The show lasted one season before being cancelled.

While these queer stars did not play openly gay characters, nevertheless their presence in notable sitcoms and variety shows lent to television a palpable queer sensibility that audiences could see and tacitly accept, if not completely understand. This "covert openness" would, indeed, ultimately lead to more open portrayals of queer sitcom characters in subsequent decades.

First Sightings: The 1970s

In 1970, one year after the Stonewall riots in New York City that heralded the advent of the gay liberation movement, the NBC comedy show *Rowan and Martin's Laugh-In* first acknowledged the subject of gay men and their lifestyle openly. As Kyo-Patrick R. Hart has pointed out, *Laugh-In* created the stereotypically effeminate character named Bruce, who was subjected to long strings of anti-gay jokes about gay men and gay liberation. The distinctly unfunny "Bruce" remained a part of the show's repertoire until *Laugh-In's* demise in 1973.

In 1979 *Laugh-In* was revived and the show's writers replaced the outdated "Bruce" character with the campy comic duo of gay ventriloquist Wayland Flowers and his Phyllis Diller/Tallulah Bankhead-esque

puppet "Madame," who dressed like a drag queen. By providing salacious show business gossip and hilarious sexual double entendres to *Laugh-In's* viewers, she was an instant hit and went on to host "her" own show, *Madame's Place* in 1982. However, despite Flowers' self-evident (if backgrounded) homosexuality, much of "Madame's" routines typically relied heavily on bitchy gay repartee and thus, for viewers, "her" humor implicitly reinforced stereotypical representations of queers, even as it also often satirized heterosexual duplicity and hypocrisy.

But even while queers were being played primarily for laughs, several sitcoms were quietly striving to move beyond stereotyped representations of homosexuals. In 1971, during its first season, *All in the Family* featured the bigoted Archie Bunker (Carroll O'Connor) learning that one of his best drinking buddies (and a retired professional athlete) was a happily well-adjusted gay man.

In 1973 *The Mary Tyler Moore Show* episode "My Brother's Keeper" revealed that the brother of Mary's longtime friend Phyllis Lindstrom (Cloris Leachman) was gay.

In the 1975 episode "Archie the Hero," *All in the Family* again featured a gay character, female impersonator Beverly LaSalle (Lori Shannon), whose life Archie saved before he realized that "classy dame" Beverly was really a male. Shannon twice reprised his/her role, first in the 1976 episode "Beverly Rides Again" and then in the memorable two-part 1977 episode "Edith's Crisis of Faith."

"Edith's Crisis of Faith" was both daring and disturbing because of its handling of homophobia and violence against gays. In the episode's first part, Beverly drops in to visit the Bunkers and invite them to her revue at Madison Square Garden. Archie is, predictably, uncomfortable attending a show featuring Beverly's "kind of people," but following some good-natured cajoling from Edith (Jean Stapleton) and Beverly, he grudgingly agrees to go. Flush with triumph, Beverly rushes out to get some celebratory champagne, but on the way to the liquor store she is attacked and killed by muggers.

Beverly's sudden, shocking death triggers Edith's crisis of faith, and the segment ends as Edith angrily asks God how He could allow a sweet and gentle soul like Beverly to die so needlessly and violently. Edith's obvious affection for and unblinking acceptance of Beverly give this episode special poignancy; it was nominated for an Emmy Award for Outstanding Writing in 1977.

For better or worse, 1977 was a watershed year for queer or queer-appearing sitcom characters. *Three's Company*, a comedy series about a man who pretended to be gay so he could share an apartment with two women, premiered on ABC. Some of the show's humor stemmed from banter between Jack Tripper (John Ritter) and landlord Stanley Roper (Norman Fell) that relied on stereotypical gay attributes, including lascivious, leering stares, and epithets such as "Tinkerbelle."

The underlying homophobia of *Three's Company* was only slightly counterbalanced by the rise of bisexual Jodie Dallas (Billy Crystal) on another ABC show, the absurdist soap opera spoof *Soap*.

Jodie began his run on *Soap* by dating professional football player Dennis Phillips (Bob Seagren) before discovering that Dennis was also dating women for image purposes. Distressed by this news, Jodie decided to have a sex change but was dissuaded from this decision by seductive nurse Nancy Darwin (Udana Power), who was the impetus of Jodie's first foray into heterosexuality.

Jodie's apparent switch from gay man to transgendered person to straight man elicited considerable controversy from queer television viewers, forcing the show's producers to respond that Jodie did not convert to heterosexuality but was, instead, merely going through a very tumultuous time.

Although Jodie did not follow through with his gender reassignment, during the same year the "Once a Friend" episode of the popular *All in the Family* spinoff *The Jeffersons* showed George Jefferson (Sherman Hemsley) reuniting with Eddie Stokes (Veronica Redd), an old Navy buddy who had become Edie, a female.

While this episode contained a great deal of stereotyping, it was among the first sensitive portrayals of a transgendered person on network television.

Another sitcom that routinely offered queer portrayals that rose above stereotypes was ABC's wry police comedy *Barney Miller*, which ran from 1975 to 1982. The show involved the day-to-day interactions between the detectives of New York City's 12th Precinct. The precinct was based in Greenwich Village, and through this location passed an unending array of colorful characters, among them two gay men, Marty (Jack DeLeon) and Daryl Driscoll (Ray Stewart), who made semi-regular appearances on the show.

Barney Miller was also one of the first sitcoms to feature an on-screen coming out. The "Inquisition" episode (air date September 13, 1979) featured the 12th Precinct receiving an anonymous letter that threatened to expose the homosexuality of one of its officers. The letter attracts attention at Headquarters and the by-the-book Lieutenant Scanlon arrives at the 12th and begins a "witch hunt" in order to uncover the gay officer. In the midst of Scanlon's investigation, Officer Zitelli (Dino Natali) confides to Miller that he is gay, but Barney does not reveal this information to Scanlon. The show subsequently received critical praise for the respectful and discreet way in which Zitelli's declaration was handled.

As the 1970s drew to a close, broadly defined queer characters became more and more visible on the small screen. With this increased frequency came a discernible increase in audience acceptance. In fact, viewers began tuning in not merely to see gay stereotypes but to watch for the alternative forms of comedy that queer characters provided on various sitcoms. Indeed, armed with this sense of acceptance, many sitcom writers began fortifying queer roles by incorporating into these characters a marked awareness of current social issues. With the alarming rise of AIDS in the mid-1980s, this social awareness would become an integral part of many queer sitcom characters.

The Politics of Comedy: The 1980s

With the appearance of two transvestites on ABC's quirky 1980 sitcom *Bosom Buddies*, the 1980s began on an auspicious note. *Bosom Buddies* featured two friends, Kip (Tom Hanks) and Henry (Peter Scolari) who, after moving to New York, secured a great and cheap apartment that also happened to be in a hotel for women. In order to keep the apartment, Kip and Henry make a "slight adjustment": they dress in drag and take on female personas, Buffy and Hildegarde.

Although a few critics derided the show's flimsy premise, the chemistry, camaraderie, and comic timing shared between Hanks and Scolari surprised and delighted viewers, who gave the show high Nielsen [television viewership] ratings. After a few weeks, however, ABC inexplicably took the show off the air for a network hiatus and, when the show returned, the viewers did not. *Bosom Buddies* was renewed for a second season but, even in the face of over 35,000 letters of protest, ABC cancelled the show in 1982.

While the queerness of *Bosom Buddies* derived from its explorations of men in drag, in 1981 NBC presented a made-for-television movie revolving around the life of an openly gay man. *Sidney Shorr: A Girl's Best Friend* was a serio-comic feature starring Tony Randall as the eponymous Sidney, an openly gay man who befriends a troubled single mother and her young daughter. NBC quickly adapted the movie into the sitcom series *Love, Sidney* but, because of pressure from conservative religious groups, just as quickly downplayed Sidney's homosexuality.

Larry Gross has noted that, as a result of this backpedaling, Sidney's sexuality tended to be so subtly coded that innocent viewers could readily misunderstand it. In fact, according to Gross, the only clues to Sidney's homosexuality were his crying at old Greta Garbo movies and having a photo of his dead lover, Martin, on the mantelpiece. Despite the network's attempts to conceal Sidney's sexual orientation, however, the show's writers continued alluding to it coyly in almost every episode. Precisely because of the show's clever writing, *Love, Sidney* also became a favorite of television critics, although it failed to garner sizable audience ratings and was cancelled in 1983.

Somewhat surprisingly, *Sidney's* demise ushered in a new openness for queer sitcom characters. In 1984 subscriber network Showtime debuted *Brothers*, a comedy about three brothers, one of whom, Cliff Waters (Paul Regina), was unapologetically gay. *Brothers*, which ran for eight seasons, was the first weekly series on either cable or network television to showcase an openly gay recurring character portrayed sympathetically and non-stereotypically. The show was among the first to deal honestly with queer issues such as social prejudice, coming out, and self-acceptance. *Brothers* also addressed AIDS in the early years of the epidemic, and its sensitive handling of the disease in a comedic setting became a touchstone for later cable and network shows.

In television comedy as a whole, AIDS had a resoundingly profound effect. However, more often than not sitcoms encouraged the perception that gays were to blame for AIDS. Moreover, they frequently suggested that by spreading AIDS gay men were ruining the lives of everyone else.

In 1987, as part of its second season, CBS's Southern woman-centered sitcom *Designing Women* explicitly drew the connection between heterosexual problem and homosexual culpability. The episode entitled "Killing All the Right People" had, as part of its dual storyline, twenty-four-year-old Kendall Dobbs (Tony Goldwyn) dying of AIDS and asking the women to plan his funeral. Kendall's disease tied in neatly with the second plot, in which series regular Mary Jo Shively (Annie Potts) has to defend condom distribution to the PTA of a local school.

However, Mary Jo argued for condoms only as a means of protecting children, not as a way to stop the spread of AIDS, which the episode tacitly connected with promiscuous homosexual behavior. Thus, as Emile Netzhammer and Scott Shamp observe, even though Kendall is portrayed as sweet, well adjusted, and sympathetic, the episode subtly blames his homosexuality for his fatal condition.

Queer characters were not, however, always brought on expressly to incorporate social awareness into a comedic setting. NBC's *The Golden Girls*, another woman-centered sitcom, included an episode dealing with lesbianism. The 1986 episode "Isn't It Romantic" featured Jean (Lois Nettleton), a gay college friend of Dorothy's (Bea Arthur) who drops in for a visit and subsequently falls in love with dimwitted series regular Rose (Betty White). Rose, who has no idea that Jean is a lesbian, is flattered when Jean reveals the nature of her affection. After some discussion, however, the two women decide that their friendship is sufficient.

A similar brush with lesbianism also took place on *Designing Women* in the 1990 episode "Suzanne Goes Looking For a Friend." The episode centers on ditsy Suzanne Sugarbaker (Delta Burke) who, with no one to accompany her to a charity benefit, digs through old beauty pageant memorabilia in search of her "best girlfriend," Eugenia Weeks (Karen Kopins). After reuniting with Suzanne, Eugenia tells her about coming out, which Suzanne misinterprets as a debutante presentation to society. Only after a fun evening with Eugenia at the charity benefit does Suzanne discover that the aforementioned "coming out" was out of the closet rather than out in high society.

Even though these episodes contained substantial amounts of broad humor and were generally well-meaning and sympathetic in their portrayals of gay men and lesbians, they tended to become formulaic, as they spawned many variations well into the 1990s. A standard episode would feature a heterosexual recurring character having trouble accepting a person who had just come out. Inevitably, however, by the end of the show, the straight character would do something magnanimous and, in so doing, overcome his or her homophobia.

Before long audiences tired of these essentially monolithic portrayals of gay/straight interactions, and television writers began to explore new approaches to queer television representations.

Expressions of Openness: The Early 1990s

As Hart has noted, in the 1990s glbtq people achieved wider recognition and greater levels of social tolerance than in the past, and the major network primetime shows began increasingly to represent diverse and inclusive characters who reflected the wide range of roles that queers occupy in American society.

In 1990, for example, CBS debuted the quirky dramatic comedy *Northern Exposure*, a show that followed the lives and loves of Cicely, Alaska's eccentric residents. While most of the relationships on *Northern Exposure* were heterosexual, the show was notable for its "just folks" portrayal of queer characters. The 1992 episode "Cicely" explained that the town was named after one of the lesbian founders who, along with her lover Roslyn, transformed the backwater mud hole into what they termed the "Paris of the West."

In 1994, the episode "I Feel the Earth Move" presented television's first-ever gay wedding; characteristically, most of Cicely's residents found nothing unusual about the nuptials.

Although there was a slight controversy surrounding *Northern Exposure's* gay wedding, in late 1995 another gay wedding on the popular ABC sitcom *Roseanne* was the center of a firestorm of protest. Queer viewers objected not to the episode, but to the network's decision to delay the episode's airing from prime time to a later, "adult" time period.

Leon (Martin Mull) and Scott's (Fred Willard) gay wedding on *Roseanne* was followed almost immediately by a lesbian wedding on the hit show *Friends*. In January 1996, the episode "The One With the Lesbian Wedding" showcased the marriage of Ross's ex-wife Carol (Jane Sibbett) and her partner Susan (Jessica Hecht). Candace Gingrich, the lesbian half-sister of conservative former Speaker of the United States House of Representatives Newt Gingrich, played the minister who presided over the ceremony. Unlike *Roseanne's* gay wedding, however, the *Friends* episode generated little controversy. This was due in large part to the absence of any same-sex kisses.

You May Now (Not) Kiss the Bride

Although in the 1990s queer characters and queer situations in television comedies began to be more accepted by mainstream viewers, same-sex affection was rare and kissing was practically nonexistent. ABC executives refused to allow *Roseanne's* gay couple, Leon and his lover Scott, to kiss because of boycott threats. This came as no surprise to the show's creator, Roseanne Barr, who had weathered similar protests over a same-sex kiss with Mariel Hemingway in the 1994 episode "Don't Ask, Don't Tell."

As a publicly funded entity, PBS found itself vulnerable to conservative criticism and pressure when, also in 1994, it aired the hugely popular miniseries *Tales of the City*. Based on gay author Armistead Maupin's fictional accounts of freewheeling 1970s San Francisco, *Tales* featured a fair amount of adult language, nudity, and sexual situations, both heterosexual and homosexual. The series' ratings soared predictably but, as Rodney Buxton has remarked, *Tales of the City* generated enough controversy that conservative forces were able to pressure CPB (The Corporation for Public Broadcasting) to withdraw funding for the sequel, *More Tales of the City*, which finally aired in 2001 on subscriber network Showtime.

In the wake of the conservative backlash, Maupin commented in a *New York Times* article that letting the series' characters show affection was important. He had come to resent profoundly the way that the universal symbol of love, the kiss, had been reserved exclusively for heterosexuals on the television screen. Indeed, it would be six more years before viewers would witness, on the February 22, 2000 episode of NBC's *Will and Grace*, two gay male characters kissing in prime time.

However, as website columnist Alan Foster has noted, even though a same-sex male kiss occurred between Will (Eric McCormack) and Jack (Sean P. Hayes), the world hardly noticed, because NBC failed to give advance media notice for this gay milestone.

Although network television executives shied away from depicting overt expressions of queer affection,

television viewers were nevertheless treated to an ever-increasing array of same-sex embraces, including numerous male-male kisses. Because they mostly occurred within the boundaries of farce or satire, however, these displays of affection were explained away as "joke kisses." Still, it was impossible to ignore the increasingly affectionate nature of queerly inflected, if problematic, characters in both sitcoms and sketch comedy shows.

All the World's a Stage

In terms of queer portrayals in television comedy, sketch comedy shows such as NBC's long-running *Saturday Night Live* and Fox's urban showcase *In Living Color* have aired numerous depictions of hilariously bizarre queer characters (though too often the point seemed to be that being queer was itself hilariously bizarre).

Since its debut in 1975, *Saturday Night Live* has provided such recurring sketches as the cartoon superhero send-up "The Ambiguously Gay Duo," the weightlifting pair of "Hans and Franz" (Dana Carvey and Kevin Nealon) who promised to "pump you up," and the sexuality-challenged, genderless being "Pat" (Julia Sweeney). Sweeney's sketch "It's Pat!" ran from 1990 to 1994, and much of its humor derived from speculation about Pat's gender and sexuality. By tacitly extolling the acceptance of androgyny, the sketch's theme jingle added further fuel to speculation over Pat's gender identity.

Many cast members also appeared regularly in drag for such popular sketches as the organized religion spoof "The Church Lady" (Dana Carvey) and the Jewish chat show segment "Coffee Talk" (Mike Myers).

During the 1986-1987 season *Saturday Night Live* boasted as part of its complement comic Terry Sweeney who, by virtue of his recurring role on the show, became the first openly gay regular performer on network television.

Sweeney's stint, however, was short-lived. Speaking to *Advocate* columnist Mike Goodridge, Sweeney's partner and former *SNL* writer Lanier Laney remarked that the show had a very straight, homophobic atmosphere, and it was quickly apparent that, even though Terry was one of the most popular performers in the 1986 season, he was not going to last long.

A homophobic atmosphere can also be discerned in the troublesome broad sketch humor of Fox network's *In Living Color*. Flamboyant black queens Blaine Edwards (Damon Wayans) and Antoine Marywether (David Alan Grier) appeared in a recurring series of sketches titled simply "Men On . . ." and discussed topics ranging from film to art to vacation to football. Although the sketches were often very funny, the stereotyped depiction of two gay men as bitchy, mincing, and effeminate struck many viewers as offensive.

Still, *In Living Color* was one of the first television shows that featured openly gay black men and, paradoxically, paved the way for the appearance of "normal queer" Carter Heywood (Michael Boatman) on ABC's sitcom *Spin City*.

In contrast to the problematic queer portrayals seen on *Saturday Night Live* and *In Living Color*, the Canadian sketch show *Kids in the Hall* was filled with a positive mixture of broad satire and thoughtful, if subversive, humor. Formed in 1985 in Toronto, the *Kids* troupe consisted of five Canadian improvisational comics (Dave Foley, Bruce McCulloch, Kevin McDonald, Mark McKinney, and openly-gay Scott Thompson) whose humor, according to *MacLean's* columnist Diane Turbide, routinely targeted middle-class suburban blandness, shark-like businessmen, and homophobia.

After four years playing comedy clubs in Toronto, the Kids moved to television with their eponymous weekly half-hour sketch series. From 1989 to 1994 *Kids in the Hall* aired simultaneously on the CBC (Canadian Broadcasting Channel) and subscriber network HBO, and it was later picked up by CBS and cable network Comedy Central.

Although the show was acclaimed for its irreverent humor, its notable trademark was the characters' use of drag. The joke, though, never came from them being in drag but, rather, from the situations in which they placed their characters. The Kids, in fact, made a conscious effort to be accurate and convincing in their portrayals of women, relying on the sketch's overall humor and their appearances as *females* rather than using drag as parody.

The cast members also routinely portrayed a variety of characters with differing sexual orientations, and although the characterizations were sometimes offensive, the troupe's verbal delivery, body language, and sheer comic momentum made up for occasional lapses into bad taste. Indeed, with an emphasis on more "normal" comic portrayals, *Kids in the Hall* signaled a new approach to queer comedy that would become commonplace by the late 1990s.

We're Here, We're Queer, We're Just Like You!

As the 1990s drew to a close, appearances by queer sitcom characters became more frequent and, gradually, more normalized. Rather than relying on stereotypes, television comedies began to portray queers more positively and more complexly.

In 1997 Michael Boatman's portrayal of openly gay mayoral aide Carter Heywood won particular praise from GLAAD, the Gay and Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation, who recognized Boatman's conscious efforts at steering Carter's character away from one-dimensionality and stereotype. Boatman's achievement in 1997, however, was overshadowed by one of the single most defining moments in television history.

On April 30, 1997, millions of viewers tuned in to the ABC sitcom *Ellen* to witness the first "real-life," television coming out--that of comedian Ellen DeGeneres. In a star-studded "coming out" episode that combined elements of comedy and "reality TV," the eponymous Ellen acknowledged that she was a lesbian. Culminating months of media speculation sparked by DeGeneres's teasing on- and off-screen innuendoes about her sexuality, her coming-out was predictably greeted with a mixture of harsh criticism from conservative groups and warm praise from the gay and lesbian community.

As Lynn Joyrich has noted, because of the self-conscious referentiality of the prolonged coming-out, queer-themed "inside" jokes were available to all viewers even before the character actually came out. However, after "The Episode" aired, *Ellen's* humor was seemingly replaced by an increasing amount of political commentary, leading many viewers to seek out other comedic venues.

In an interview with *Mediaweek* columnist Alan James Frutkin, television producer Jeffrey Richman stated that once Ellen embraced the subject of homosexuality, the show seemed to hammer home the issue constantly, and all the stories became about the character of Ellen Morgan and her evident, identifiable gayness. Thus, while Ellen's coming out was a milestone for queers on television, it simply did not make for good television comedy. *Ellen's* open expression of homosexuality, however, paved the way for NBC's *Will and Grace*.

Speaking to *Advocate* interviewer Lori Kaye, *Friends* co-creator David Crane noted that *Ellen* not only opened the closet door for *Will and Grace* but also helped identify the formula that fueled its success. *Will and Grace's* formula for success was to go slow and come out of the gate funny rather than emotional. By combining clever--if uneven--writing and a genuinely likeable cast, the formula worked.

Co-created and co-written by openly gay writer Max Mutchnick and David Kohan, *Will and Grace* debuted in 1998 and showcased the innocuously codependent relationship between gay lawyer Will Truman (Eric McCormack) and straight interior designer Grace Adler (Debra Messing).

Much of the show's real humor, however, came from its supporting cast: shallow, self-centered queen Jack McFarland (Sean P. Hayes) and ultra-bitch Karen Walker (Megan Mullally), whose biting banter often

threatened to overshadow the show's main characters. *Will and Grace* also deployed many time-honored comedic methods such as slapstick and screwball comedy, leading gay author Andrew Holleran to complain that he thought the show was in danger of becoming a bad episode of *I Love Lucy*.

However uneven and silly the show sometimes got, it deserves credit for not shying away from topical issues. For example, in the episode "Girls, Interrupted" (air date May 2, 2000), Jack joins a gay-to-straight conversion group in order to meet the group leader, Bill (Neil Patrick Harris). After Bill gives Jack a sharply earnest speech chastising Jack's brazen attempts at seduction, he acquiesces to Jack's suggestion of a shower rendezvous, thus hilariously exposing the hypocrisy and absurdity of "conversion therapy."

The homophobic Christian organization "Focus on the Family" objected to this episode, stating that it made a mockery of the struggles of "ex-gay" men and women. Their protest gives credence to Andrew Holleran's declaration that *Will and Grace* is more than just a sitcom; it is *our* gay sitcom, fearless and tacky and lewd.

Laughing Gay-ly into the Twenty-first Century

The success of *Will and Grace* spawned three more queer sitcoms, though none captured the loyalty of glbtq viewers.

Fox's *Normal, Ohio* appeared in 2000 and starred John Goodman as William "Butch" Gamble. Goodman tossed aside the popular "body beautiful" gay television stereotype by appearing as a burly, beer-drinking, football-game-watching, almost stereotypically heterosexual man who just happened to be gay. Unfortunately, the show's writing depended too much on characters ridiculing Goodman's antics and dancing around complicated issues such as coming out and homophobia rather than confronting them directly. *Normal, Ohio* disappeared from television screens after its initial 13-episode run.

The second progeny of *Will and Grace* was the CBS sitcom *Some of My Best Friends*, which premiered in February, 2001 and starred Jason Bateman as Warren Fairbanks, a gay writer who needs someone to share his Greenwich Village apartment after his boyfriend moves out. The show was based on Tony Vitale's 1997 movie *Kiss Me, Guido*, and follows the movie's plot fairly closely. Warren places an advertisement in the local paper for a GWM (Gay White Male) roommate, and Bronx Italian hunk Frankie (Danny Nucci) responds--only he thinks that GWM stands for "Guy With Money."

Jason Bateman described the show as a contemporary *Odd Couple* and, although the show featured no shortage of stereotypes (the flamboyant Vern, played by Alec Mapa, and the dimwitted macho Italian Pino, played by Michael DeLuise), the lead actors consciously attempted to give their characters a sense of normalcy. After a midseason start, however, *Some of My Best Friends* was given a summer hiatus and never returned.

In fall 2003, amidst the clamor of political pundits debating the pros and cons of same-sex marriage, ABC, the former home of TV's pathbreaking *Ellen*, launched *It's All Relative*, the network's version of *Will and Grace* with a twist.

It's All Relative centered around a long-term committed gay couple whose highly intelligent, Harvard-educated daughter, is determined to marry her working-class bartender boyfriend. Her boyfriend's father does not take kindly to gays, but for the sake of the kids, the future in-laws must figure out a way to get along. Craig Zadan, one of the show's co-executive producers, noted that the show's humor came from the conflict between blue-collar and snooty people, rather than from the conflict between gays and straights.

According to the show's co-creator and co-writer Chuck Ranberg, *It's All Relative* traded in some degree of stereotyping for both gay and straight parents, but as Zadan noted in an *Advocate* interview, the goal of *It's All Relative* was to use stereotypes and break them down, all the while making sure that these stereotypes

were blended with corresponding amounts of humanity. In fact one of the show's revolutionary qualities stemmed directly from breaking a powerful television stereotype by presenting a committed gay relationship normally and matter-of-factly, as an average, middle-class couple who cook, work, and pay the bills.

The show was also revolutionary for its casting of two openly gay actors, Christopher Sieber and John Benjamin Hickey, in the roles of the gay couple. Hickey remarked to *The Advocate* that the fact both men are gay really added to the on-set chemistry. Unfortunately, and despite its promise, *It's All Relative* suffered from low ratings and was not renewed for a second season.

ABC quickly followed the cancellation of *It's All Relative* by debuting the serio-comic nighttime soap opera *Desperate Housewives* in fall 2004. Although originally premised around the lives of five upper middle class suburban women: three married housewives, one divorcee, and one "slut," *Desperate Housewives* nevertheless had a decidedly queer sensibility.

Not only was the show created by openly gay writer and producer Marc Cherry, its ensemble included Lee McDermott (Kevin Rahm) and his partner Bob Hunter (Tuc Watkins), a gay couple who moved on to Wisteria Lane in 2007. But perhaps the most prominent gay character on the series was Andrew Van de Camp (Shawn Pyfrom).

According to Samuel Chambers, Andrew--the son of Martha Stewart-clone Bree Van de Camp--finds himself in the strictest, most uptight family on Wisteria Lane, making him the character perhaps most likely to be caught naked and kissing a male friend. This is precisely what transpired in the "Impossible" episode (air date February 20, 2005), when divorcee housewife Susan (Teri Hatcher) discovers Andrew making out in a swimming pool with teen gardener Justin (Ryan Carnes). As Sarah Warn has pointed out, the steamy but brief makeout session between Andrew and Justin marked only the sixth male-male kiss in network television history, compared with over 30 network television shows airing kisses between women.

In short order, ABC followed Andrew's outing on *Desperate Housewives* with the appearance of gay personal assistant Marc St. James (Michael Urie), tap-dancing and show-tune-loving teenager Justin Suarez (Mark Indelicato), gossipy gay fashionista Suzuki St. Pierre (Alec Mapa), and the scheming transgendered character Alexis Meade (Rebecca Romijn) on the Emmy Award-winning hit comedy *Ugly Betty*, which aired from 2006-2010.

In a 2011 interview with the *Huffington Post*, out actor Michael Urie stated that when he looked at the things the cast was doing on *Ugly Betty*, it amazed him to see how far society had come, not just on TV, but as a society generally. Urie's character Marc, for instance, was a fashion-loving, unashamedly flamboyant gay man, while Justin Suarez's coming out of the closet paved the way for a recurring array of out primetime gay characters. In fact, after suggestively tiptoeing around Justin's sexuality since the beginning of the series, *Ugly Betty* creator Silvio Horta told *The Advocate* that Justin's coming out was only the beginning of his story, a story culminating in a memorable kiss with classmate Austin (Ryan McGinnis).

In addition to winning Emmy and Golden Globe awards, *Ugly Betty* also received the GLAAD Media Award for Outstanding Comedy Series in 2007 and 2008. As Eric Deggans has noted, *Ugly Betty* was packaged like a glitzy, fashion-fueled soap opera that merged Latino, gay, and geek cultures into a percolating tale of an underdog's struggle.

Karman Kregloe observed that what made *Ugly Betty* so pathbreaking was not merely its extraordinary gay-friendliness, but also that it consistently delivered messages of self-acceptance and of the need to be true to oneself. It reminded viewers that mere tolerance is not enough. Moreover, each of the show's queer characters were fully fleshed-out rather than being shown as stereotypes, with their sexuality not being deployed as a punch line or as something used to make other characters (or the viewing audience) feel uncomfortable.

Although the cancellation of *Ugly Betty* in 2010 was mourned by many viewers, these same viewers quickly found solace in *Glee*, the frothy high school musical series that debuted in 2009 on Fox. Like *Ugly Betty*, *Glee*'s cast features a wide assortment of outsider characters.

According to openly gay co-creator and executive producer Ryan Murphy, *Glee* talks about the underdog element in society: the pregnant girl, the gay kid, the kid in the wheelchair, and the African-American girl who is one of only five black kids in their school. Murphy added that he wanted to give voices to people who do not have voices.

In addition to out lesbian Jane Lynch as the malevolent cheerleading coach Sue Sylvester, *Glee*'s ensemble also includes the musically gifted, fashion-conscious Kurt Hummel (Chris Colfer), whose burgeoning romance with Blaine Anderson (Darren Criss) has been an ongoing storyline. *Glee* has also showcased the coming-out of cheerleaders Santana Lopez (Naya Rivera) and Brittany Pierce (Heather Morris) as a lesbian couple in 2011 and, in a further shocking surprise twist, the show's burly football player cum Slurpee-flinging homophobic bully Dave Karofsky (Max Adler) also surreptitiously outed himself in the "Never Been Kissed" episode (air date November 9, 2010) by kissing Kurt on the lips following a heated, threatening exchange.

Because of its upfront tackling of thorny issues such as homophobia, bullying, and coming out, *Glee* has also endured criticism from activist groups like the Parents Television Council for foregrounding controversial subjects such as premarital and gay sex. For example, in the "Sexy" episode (air date March 9, 2011), Kurt's father Burt (Mike O'Malley) provides Kurt with gay-specific pamphlets covering the mechanics of sex. What is impressive about this episode, however, is the way in which teenage gay sex is handled, with Burt also pointing out to Kurt the role emotions and self-esteem play in sex.

Kurt and Blaine subsequently lose their virginity to each other in "The First Time" episode (air date November 8, 2011). Chris Colfer has remarked that he expected opposition to and apprehension about the sex-themed episode. In fact, the Parents Television Council called the show "reprehensible" and accused the Fox network of recklessly celebrating teen sex. As Colfer has argued, however, the sex scene was actually handled very sweetly and very emotionally, and that the episode's critics ignore the reality that teens are having sex. Furthermore, Colfer added, *Glee* makes it a point to address teen sex (whether heterosexual or homosexual) responsibly by actively promoting safe teen sex.

While *Glee* was exploring the treacherous terrain of teens, ABC's Emmy-winning comedy *Modern Family* gave viewers a satirical look at the trials and tribulations of three radically different, yet comically interrelated dysfunctional families. Like *Glee*, *Modern Family* also premiered in 2009, and introduced viewers to gay couple Cameron Tucker (Eric Stonestreet) and Mitchell Pritchett (out actor Jesse Tyler Ferguson), who are adoptive parents of Vietnamese infant Lily.

Although network television had shown gay parents before (*Will and Grace*'s Jack, for instance, learned in the show's third season that he was the father of a teenager, and in 2003 *It's All Relative* featured Christopher Sieber and John Benjamin Hickey as adoptive parents of a teenage girl), *Modern Family* is the first to feature two gay men raising an infant.

Interestingly, though, the show's gay adoption did not raise as much controversy as did the noticeable lack of affection shown between Cameron and Mitchell, which provoked a Facebook campaign demanding that the network allow Mitchell and Cameron to kiss. The *Modern Family* episode "The Kiss" (air date September 29, 2010) was the response to the controversy, but while the episode certainly addressed male-male kissing, it also stuck to the show's overarching theme of inherited emotional issues (Mitchell's character is portrayed as famously uptight about public displays of affection, especially around other people and couples). According to James Poniewozik, "The Kiss" functioned in such a way that it pointed out that a male-male kiss should not be a bigger deal than any other type of kiss.

While *Modern Family* and *Glee* continue to generate enormous and loyal viewership, other shows featuring prominent queer characters and/or out actors have had mixed success. For example, in 2009, ABC's *Better Off Ted* showcased two out gay and lesbian actors in its ensemble: Portia de Rossi--the spouse of Ellen DeGeneres--and Jonathan Slavin. Slavin portrayed geeky laboratory scientist Dr. Phil Myman who, despite being married, was nonetheless involved in a comically intimate "bromance" with fellow scientist Dr. Lem Hewitt (Malcolm Barrett), while de Rossi was featured in the role of fierce, uncompromising Veridian Dynamics supervisor Veronica Palmer.

Better Off Ted was warmly received critically but drew consistently low viewer ratings, and ABC cancelled the show in 2010 after two seasons. In an interview with the *Advocate* website, Jonathan Slavin raised eyebrows when he discussed Hollywood's continued internalized homophobia. Slavin noted that even in auditioning for gay roles, he had often been told "It's not that kind of gay; we want Brokeback Mountain gay, so we're only seeing straight guys."

Interestingly, another recent show on cable has used this internalized homophobia as a vehicle for successful comedy. TV Land's third original scripted series *Happily Divorced*, which premiered in 2011, was created by and starred Fran Drescher. Drescher, along with co-creator--and eventual former husband Peter Marc Jacobson--developed a devoted gay following in the mid-to-late 1990s with their campy hit sitcom *The Nanny* that ran on CBS from 1993-1999. However, for *Happily Divorced* Drescher and Jacobson drew on experiences from their own life, with Drescher playing Los Angeles florist Fran Lovett who, because of dire economic circumstances, continues to live with now-gay ex-husband Peter (John Michael Higgins).

Jacobson and Drescher were married for 21 years before Jacobson came out as homosexual in 1999 and, as Jacobson explained to the *Advocate* in 2011, the idea for the sitcom came about during a vacation to Paris when he and Drescher found themselves falling back into their old ways of being married. In a subsequent meeting with TV Land executives, Fran pitched the sitcom by saying, "Well, our story is that my husband came out, blah blah," and the executives replied "You don't have to tell us anymore, because we just bought that. We love it."

Conclusion

Throughout their history television sitcoms have held a mirror up to society, and in that mirror they have reflected the presence of gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgendered people, often in distorted and unflattering ways, but occasionally in ways that acknowledge our humanity and complexity. Although sitcoms have long relied on problematic stereotypes for their humor, as the decades have progressed television viewers in general and queer viewers in particular have demanded a more varied palette of characters. By watching "classic TV" reruns alongside current television offerings, viewers can easily perceive crucial shifts in the representation of homosexuality and homosexuals. In the future, increasingly funny and honest queer portrayals in television sitcoms are likely.

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