



British Television

by Keith G. Howes

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Television has been inadequately rendered as part of gay and lesbian artistic and cultural history. Many important milestones continue to be dismissed or ignored by lesbian and gay academics and cultural commentators. Unlike the study of gay and lesbian cinema, the discussion of television is predicated on ill-informed and historically naïve viewpoints that would be unacceptable if applied to other art forms.

Early Television History

A large proportion of early television productions in Britain (1936-1960) no longer exists, and what remains is often imperfectly preserved on crude technology. However, this does not mean either that gays and lesbians were not represented in the ebb and flow of programming during this time or that fugitive details of their existence are not available.

Until September 1955 there was only one channel: the license-funded, politically neutral British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC), or "Aunty" as she was affectionately or slightly known.

The BBC offered a relatively broad-based range of choices: while stuck in traditional, white, middle-class values, the Corporation employed enough oddballs and eccentrics to spice up the most conservative fare. Carrying on the quality-first philosophy of the Corporation's first director-general, John Reith, the BBC believed in diversity: of talent, culture, geography, and even--though this had to be masked--of sexuality.

In glorious fuzzy black and white, with frequent breaks in transmission and hilarious glitches because most of the shows went out "live," British television provided a number of regular "queer" sightings in the 1950s: a "mannish" policewoman, based on a real lesbian police officer, and an intellectual tramp disowned by his family in the enormously popular bobby-on-the-beat drama series *Dixon of Dock Green*. The tramp, Duffy Clayton, was based on a gay man who was a mentor for the show's creator and principal writer, Ted Willis.

Real-life lesbian, journalist Nancy Spain, with her close-cropped hair, cravat and trousers was often seen on the small screen, as was gruff and ungracious Gilbert Harding, with whom she was, for a time, "romantically linked."

A panelist on the quiz show *What's My Line?*, Harding specialized in rude outbursts to contestants who were not quick on the uptake or who were syntactically challenged. His zingers were the talk of the nation the next day. The first British small screen superstar, his private life remained publicly asexual. Maybe a word to the wise was being sent when an aging character actress based her role of a querulous fairy godmother in a 1955 children's television play, *Pots of Money*, upon this titan of tactlessness.

Gilbert Harding's lifelong attraction to males was masked by a façade of the snapping bulldog that prevented too many questions being asked by a post-war British public that, anyway, was officially ignorant of homosexuality. Indeed the very word could not be spoken, let alone its meaning discussed in a direct manner. Television, nevertheless, was awash with clipped male poodles and sturdy female stallions: British

culture's acceptance of eccentricity was their protection and their potting mix.

Homosexuality Rises to the Surface

It was the very rigidity of British society, its cap-doffing deference to royals and aristocrats still in place despite two devastating world wars and the destruction of an empire, that eventually forced homosexuality to rise to the surface, making it a television staple without which no viewing week would be complete.

With the arrest in 1953 of the esteemed and recently knighted actor John Gielgud and a high profile court case a year later involving a lord and a boy scout or two, the establishment, that interbred, intermarried coterie without which the status quo could not be maintained or even slightly adjusted, decided to act.

Suddenly, certain realities were faced. There were men who were attracted to other men. Their natures led them to be prey for blackmailers and the law courts. Some were imprisoned for loving. Some didn't get that far: they just killed themselves.

A committee, significantly on homosexuality and prostitution, was set up under the chairmanship of John Wolfenden. The publication of his report, recommending the partial decriminalization of male homosexuality in private, was the Open Sesame! for the discussion of homosexuality, male and female, as well as other unacceptable facts of intimate human contact.

The relatively new and untried commercial network, which took the form of regionally based companies under the overall banner of Independent Television (ITV), took Wolfenden's findings--which were finally published late in 1957--and presented dramatizations of Oscar Wilde's trials, as well as adaptations of stage plays such as *South* in which television heart-throb Peter Wyngarde risked his reputation if not his career by playing an unmistakable, if repressed, homosexual.

The actor revealed many years later that the day after the play had aired in 1959 he was set upon by a group of elderly women on the top of a London bus. They attacked him with their handbags for daring to play a "queer" and in so doing to sully forever their image of him as a real man.

The BBC responded with some original plays and episodes of popular series, such as *Z Cars* set in Liverpool. In *Summer, Autumn, Winter, Spring* (1961) the homo-emotional story of David and Jonathan was updated: safely, the protagonists become brothers not friends and one dies early in the piece. In John Hopkins' play *Horror of Darkness* (1965), a character played by Nicol Williamson tells another male, ostensibly straight, that he loves him. A few scenes later, however, the gay man slits his throat and dies. Off-screen.

Throughout the 1960s, both before the 1967 Act decriminalizing male homosexuality and immediately after, homosexuality was an inescapable topic of television drama and documentary. It was a sure-fire way to provoke the right-wing press to foaming fury if the depiction was in any way sympathetic or encouraging.

In tandem with the generally liberal viewpoints and relatively diverse characterizations were the endless comic queens with flapping wrists and piping voices whose one-note coy rapaciousness found their apogee in Clarence, whose gushing come-on ("Hello, honky tonks!") to a straight man each week on *The Dick Emery Show* became a late 1960s national catchphrase and shorthand for queer-baiting until Larry Grayson's "What a gay day!" on *The Larry Grayson Show* and John Inman's "I'm free!" on *Are You Being Served?* in the following decade.

Homosexuality with a Political Edge

It was not until the advent of *Monty Python's Flying Circus* in 1969 that any kind of political edge was given to gay or camp humor. Owing something to BBC Radio's anarchic *The Goon Show* (1951-1960) and also to the virtually unrestrained "campy" of *Round the Horne* (1965-1969) with its two very "bold" gay characters,

Julian and Sandy, Python put the boot into all kinds of establishment stupidity, including its hypocritical stance over homosexuality, no matter that it was now--in certain circumstances--legal.

One of the Python team, Graham Chapman, became the first popular entertainer to talk openly about his gayness, being interviewed with his lover in the inaugural edition of the fortnightly newspaper *Gay News* (London).

Chapman would remain the exception for quite a few years, despite the inroads made by the United States import, gay liberation. This wave of political consciousness manifested itself in various "access" slots. These featured gays and lesbians talking about their lives without the mediation of interviewers, biased editing, and shadowy lighting.

Mainstream television followed the gay liberation lead slowly and--doubtless because the dramatic possibilities of victimhood were being eroded by the philosophy of personal politics and "coming out"--reluctantly. Singer Tom Robinson's gay anthem "(Sing If You're) Glad To Be Gay" received its first public performance on a Sunday afternoon show for teenagers in 1977; and a comedy series, inspired by the success of *Soap* in the United States, called *Agony* (1979-1981) featured a very out and--in contrast to the other characters--very well adjusted pair of gay men.

The real breakthrough had occurred in 1975 with the broadcast, on commercial television (the BBC had turned down the project), of the life of "effeminate homosexual" Quentin Crisp. This was victimhood with a gay lib message: to your own self be true. The public response to *The Naked Civil Servant*, in the United Kingdom and in many other countries, was overwhelmingly positive.

The Naked Civil Servant earned awards for its star John Hurt and enduring fame on the talk show circuit for its subject Quentin Crisp. Its prestige did not, however, lead to other productions in which an openly gay or lesbian person was the lead character, save for modestly produced "single plays" of which *Only Connect* (1979) remains the most provocative and compelling.

This short play by Noel Greig and Drew Griffiths, former members of the Gay Sweatshop Theatre Company, centers upon the brief encounter between a gay student researching early gay rights activist Edward Carpenter and an elderly man, once a bed partner of Carpenter, with whom the young man sleeps.

The 1980s and 1990s

Big budget mini-series in the 1980s such as *Brideshead Revisited* and *The Jewel in the Crown* did include homosexual characters--as adolescent crushes, aristocratic decadents, or pathological villains.

But the lives of gay people and the culture they were developing went largely unreported on mainstream television. Two series of *Gay Life*--"about homosexuals"--came and went around midnight in the London area in 1980-1981, but it would be another eight years before television--in the shape of ITV's pioneering Channel 4--would open the airwaves to a series "by and for" gay men and lesbians: *Out on Tuesday*.

Two huge blockades were placed in front of the free flow of non-problematic representations and depictions in the 1980s. The advent of AIDS once again drove homosexuality back into its medical-psychiatric problem box. The hysterical climate engendered by the disease and by increasing media-stoked fears about "recruitment" and "promotion" led to the enactment of legislation prohibiting local authorities from in any way positively promoting homosexuality in its schools or other services. This outrage--known as Section 28--inspired a group of lesbians to invade the BBC's *Six O'Clock News* to protest: a most un-BBC thing to do.

Despite its being created by a gay man (Tony Warren, who based at least one of its beloved female characters on himself), Britain's most enduring and beloved drama serial, the Manchester-located

Coronation Street, has never had--and at time of this writing still does not have--a gay or lesbian "Street" resident or even a regular visitor.

The soaps that followed, notably Channel 4's *Brookside* and the BBC's *EastEnders*--both gutsy and relatively fearless-- presented a gay couple apiece in the 1980s: not always to the liking of the gay community or to the rabidly homophobic tabloid press. Questions were even asked in parliament when *EastEnders'* Colin kissed an admirer for a few seconds.

Gay men were not easy for British television. Most soaps were scheduled during family viewing hours, thus ensuring that any display of physical affection came under strict scrutiny. Such restrictions on natural, spontaneous behavior rendered any true exploration of character and emotion virtually impossible.

Lesbians, on the other hand, were much more to 1990s television's liking, especially in the wake of the Madonna-led "lipstick lesbian" phenomenon. As well as two well received literary adaptations in 1990, *Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit* (based on the Jeannette Winterson novel) and *Portrait of a Marriage* (which includes the story of Vita Sackville-West and Violet Trefussis), female couples appeared on both *Brookside* and *EastEnders*.

The most durable lesbian has proved to be veterinarian Zoe Tate (played by Leah Bracknell) in *Emmerdale*. Bracknell first appeared in the role in 1993 and is still going strong, winning television audience awards for the character.

EastEnders tried again with gays: bisexual Tony Hills and his lover Simon Raymond debuted in 1996; the results were mixed and after a year or so they were written out.

With the relative easing of the AIDS epidemic in Britain, renewed pressure came from sections of the gay and lesbian community to depict homosexuals honestly. To fill the gap came a loud and proud late-night BBC series called *Gaytime TV*: commercially oriented, youthful, fast and flashy. The show was not to everybody's liking but it was sufficiently appealing to run for four summers.

The End of the Twentieth Century

By the end of the century, homosexuality was a staple in every British drama and comedy series. Every night somebody or other was either saying they were gay or denying they were; pundits and politicians were for and against; the issue and a whole raft of sub-issues were on every discussion program or talk show. Achingly predictable most of it and, ultimately, unenlightening because of the rigid parameters in which queer lives were set.

Like a comet roaring across a night sky came Channel 4's *Queer as Folk* (1999), a rambunctious comedy-drama set in Manchester's Gay Village. Unapologetic, taboo-tweaking, and uncaring about presenting a good public face, its mainly gay characters played havoc with previously acceptable notions of "homosexual TV drama." Written by Russell T. Davies, it was the *Naked Civil Servant* of the late twentieth century, spawning a sequel and a successful United States version.

The New Century

With *Queer as Folk* many gay men, though by no means all, felt that, at last, they had a television drama series designed for them: sexy, confrontational, and presenting complex moral issues in an entertaining way. To date, however, only one series peopled almost entirely by gays has subsequently surfaced: *Metrosexuality* (2001), also from Channel 4.

Nevertheless, *Queer as Folk's* influence can be seen in the refreshing approach a series such as the revamped *Crossroads* (2001-) has taken to its queer incumbents, who are involved in all aspects of the

plot-lines, not just those dealing with homosexuality.

With the new century a strong gay and lesbian presence is making itself felt. Openly gay and lesbian people present a range of faces, voices, attitudes, and opinions. These include comics Julian Clary, Graham Norton, and Rhona Cameron; drag queen Lily Savage, aka Paul O'Grady; political analysts Matthew Parris and Bea Campbell; actors Sir Ian McKellen and Stephen Fry; and pop stars Elton John, George Michael, Boy George, and Stephen Gately.

In popular drama series, a gay or a lesbian regular character is almost essential for a good conduct medal. In 2001 even the cop series *The Bill* began employing a gay police officer in its Sun Hill police station, sixteen years after the show began. *Coronation Street* is the only holdout: no gay or lesbian sightings in its forty plus years of existence. However, the series does feature a transgender (male to female) character who was recently granted that ultimate soap opera accolade: the big wedding.

Not just one but two gay men were included in the second British edition of the wildly successful reality TV show *Big Brother* (2001), one of whom won the contest by a substantial margin; a lesbian had been a "housemate" in the first one.

Conclusion

British television's nearly 80-year history has, until recently, embraced lesbians and gays as Them rather than Us. With the rise of "niche television," a much more demanding gay and lesbian audience, and many more openly gay and lesbian people working in all aspects of television, an appetite for a more diversified and nuanced approach to all kinds of sexuality is surely about to be satisfied.

While, for some, British television has assiduously opened up dialogue and debate since the 1960s, for others the medium remains one dimensional and sensationalist, with gays and lesbians presented mainly as figures of fun, or mad, bad, and dangerous to know.

In truth, British television has consistently worked to broaden knowledge of the human condition. Many talented people, of all sexual hues, have labored--sometimes at considerable risk--to present a balanced view of a marginalized sexuality.

Television's contribution to gay culture has still not been properly researched or promoted, despite the best efforts of Keith Howes (whose thousand-page, three thousand-entry encyclopaedia of gay television and radio, *Broadcasting It*, was published in 1993) and of Stephen Bourne, who has presented gay and lesbian plays, variety shows, soap opera tributes and documentaries each July at London's National Film Theatre since 1992.

Despite the teeming and relatively welcoming queer landscape at present on display on British television, the innate insularity and knee-jerk conservatism of the British Isles should never be underestimated. For more than a few diehard Little Englanders, queers remain resolutely mired in the mirthful piping of *Are You Being Served?* and the dangerous depths of political agitation for more "recruitment" of children and teenagers as represented by the ubiquitous activist Peter Tatchell on news flashes and discussion programs.

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About the Author

Keith G. Howes has been researching, writing, and speaking about gay film, radio, and television for 25 years. He lives in Sydney, Australia where he is employed as a bush regenerator, helping to restore native flora and fauna.