

Nowt so Queer as Folk

As the BBC takes a look at how gays, lesbians and bisexuals are portrayed on television, radio and online (see X-Tracts, page 32), **XAV JUDD** recalls how a decade on from its first broadcast, the seminal TV series 'Queer as Folk' affected his perception of his own gay identity...



NOT SO LONG AGO in the decade that fashion forgot, the 1970s, something else sadly absent was a well-rounded gay character on British television. I had an excuse for wearing chocolate-brown flares and a fluffy cardigan which looked as if it had just been yanked off a llama – my mum dressed me; but why was John Inman's camp star turn in *Are You Being Served?* just about the only portrayal of a non-straight person on the box?

Of course, his stereotypical limp-wristed she-nigans and exclamations of 'I'm free' were fabulous entertainment, yet they came nowhere near being a fair representation of our diverse and varied homosexual community. Despite a few other shows' odd flirtations with a token 'poof' during the next two decades, it wasn't really until 1999's *Queer as Folk* that a series depicted a slice of gay life as it really was. It's now over ten years after the series first debuted.

When this imaginative drama - written by Dr. Who scribe Russell T. Davies - exploded onto our screens, a part of me still believed that I was straight. But even observing it as a twenty-something who hadn't yet slept with a guy, I could still see that this was a production about gay culture that broke all of the rules. Gone were the one-dimensional mincing cardboard cut-outs who wobbled more than the cheap sets, and whom I'd often witnessed in comedies, soaps and other homegrown programmes. Instead, 'Folk revolved around what seemed to be real people who had the usual contrasting *mélange* of hopes, dreams, dilemmas and fears.

We may not have liked all three or even any of the main protagonists, nonetheless, there was something exciting and concrete about each of these complex figures to which we could probably relate. There was the egotistical, pushy, irresponsible Stuart (Aidan Gillen), who seemingly didn't give a sod about anything but getting his leg over; mild-mannered, sensitive Vince (Craig Kelly) could also play the game, however,

deep down it appeared that he was looking for something long-term. And lastly, who could ever forget the blond bombshell that was Nathan (Charlie Hunnam). Controversially only 15, and caught up in the whirl of his earliest gay experiences; initially he was as sweet and innocent as an angel in a Botticelli.

Channel 4's ensemble, then, was a revelation because it almost entirely, and literally, followed the 'comings' and goings of this trio, rather than having a gay character tagged onto a storyline with about as much effect as an afterbirth. Added to which, it gave us a glimpse into a hitherto unseen world, partly by focusing on an almost exclusively gay enclave, Manchester's village in Canal Street. And also because it highlighted the profundity and delights of sexual practices that most heteros' didn't even know existed, such as rimming. More fool them! But why did the twists and turns of such a narrative play a fundamental role in the development of a repressed homosexual like me?

Mainly because it was the first time I'd seen a gay person as not being the utterly objectionable other. (Remember this was a time when the internet was in its infancy and contact with a wider gay world for a closeted gay guy was limited to the mainstream media, i.e. the national newspapers and (then mostly) terrestrial television channels.) If you think Jan Moir's recent unsubstantiated Daily Mail article on Stephen Gately was plain nasty, it was nothing compared to the bigotry spewed out by the popular press in my formative years.

Indeed, in the early 1980s, there was a full-blown media frenzy when AIDS was initially recognised. Tabloids instantly linked its spread to non-straight men as headlines about 'The Gay Plague' screamed out at you on an almost daily basis. And the public flagellation continued with media stories that left one in no doubt about the issue of morality: 'AIDS is the wrath of God, says vicar' (*The Sun*).

As a dewy-eyed kid, it's no surprise that I was indoctrinated and believed all of this bullshit: homosexuals were to blame for the virus and they were being punished by a higher being for their abominable behaviour. Indeed, I saw them as bigger freaks or monsters than you'd find creeping around the edges of the Marianas Trench.

It didn't help, therefore, for someone who was desperately struggling with their sexual identity, that there weren't any recognisable 'out' gay figures. Positive role models might have helped to dispel much of the scandalous claptrap that was being put about by the media. Of course, although I realised that certain pop stars might not be straight, a lot of them seemed to be quite bitchy individuals who had plastic faces with plastic smiles.

Consequently, I didn't feel like I could connect with this bunch, especially as I was more liable to be playing football or tennis than getting lost in my mother's wardrobe and make-up box.

'Folk changed everything! Not only did I feel I had something in common with Nathan, Stuart and Vince, perhaps a part of me even wanted to be like them. Subconsciously, I'm pretty sure this made it easier for me to accept who I really was. In fact, after only the second episode, I slept with another guy for the first time.

In a way, since 'Folk's two-part special finale that was screened a decade ago now, in the year 2000, the TV landscape seems to have taken a *Gulliverish* backwards with regards to the embodiment of the gay persona.

OK, credit where credit's due; soaps such as *Doctors*, *Emmerdale* and *EastEnders* (see page 36) have made an effort to picture us in all our multi-faceted glory. Nevertheless, for every favourable image, terrestrial channels still abound with the same trite homosexual representation from the 1970s and 1980s. Just witness Little Britain's 'the only gay in the village' or Jonathan Ross's 'Four Poofs and a Piano', for instance. And, unfortunately, there doesn't seem to be much hope that things will change anytime soon, in telly la-la-land.