

How Queer is America?

PREVIEW BY RICH BENNETT

Though audiences have welcomed the feel-good comic exploits of *Will & Grace* into their living rooms, the acceptance of gay lifestyles on American television get a test on December 3 when Showtime premieres its drama series *Queer as Folk*.

To get a sense of what the show will be like, imagine *Will & Grace* at its funniest and bitchiest, add more gay and lesbian characters, toss out all the well-intentioned politically correct dialog, and graphically show Jack doing all the things he only talks about.

Adapted from a controversial British series, *Queer as Folk* promises to be a flash-point for both ends of the political spectrum. If reaction in the UK is any guide, the right will be shocked and appalled, and the left will criticize the show for perpetuating stereotypes of urban, image-conscious gay men who live for sex.

In the original series, the show focused on the relationship between a pair of 29-year-old friends, Stuart and Vince, living in Manchester, England. Stuart is a successful advertising executive whose life revolves around his libido, and Vince is a self-effacing grocery manager who has carried a torch for Stuart since they were school-mates. That relationship undergoes upheaval as two new people enter their lives: Nathan, a teenager who has just come out, and Alfred, a child Stuart has fathered for a lesbian couple, Lisa and Romey.

The show's frank depiction of homosexuality garnered lots of attention. There was abundant nudity and plenty of outrageous encounters, but nothing we haven't seen before between heterosexual couples in an R-rated film. But that in-your-face sexuality and Nathan's age (15) had many up in arms.

Despite all the controversy, the show became a hit, primarily due to the strength and intelligence of its scripts. Russell Davies, the show's writer and co-producer, created characters who felt no

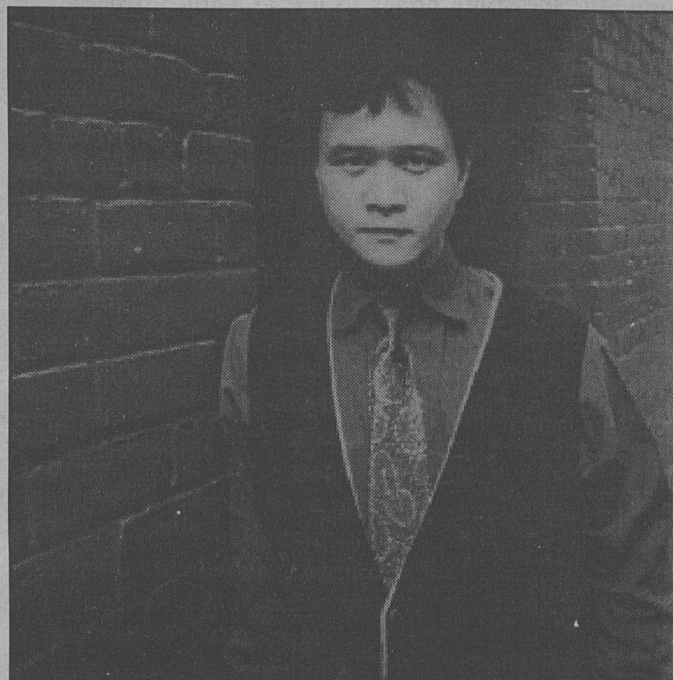
need to apologize for their lives or justify themselves, no compulsion to spell out exactly what they are feeling and why. It is left to the audience to figure out the 'why' for themselves. Invariably, people interject a bit of themselves into the motivations of the characters, thus making the drama more compelling.

As with many gay-themed dramas, the scathing remarks of the characters are among its highlights. When Stuart arrives at the maternity ward with Nathan to see his new son, Lisa snipes to Stuart and Romey, "So, you've both had a child on the same night." On his ever-present cell phone, Vince describes a straight bar he has just entered, "It's all true. Everything we've ever been told. Oh my God, flock wallpaper... Can you believe it, they've got toilets in which no one's ever had sex."

Though Showtime is making alterations to Americanize the series (Nathan will be 17, the action takes place in Pittsburgh, and all the characters are being renamed), there's no doubt there will be

Queer as Folk

Premiere episode
- December 3, 2000
- Showtime



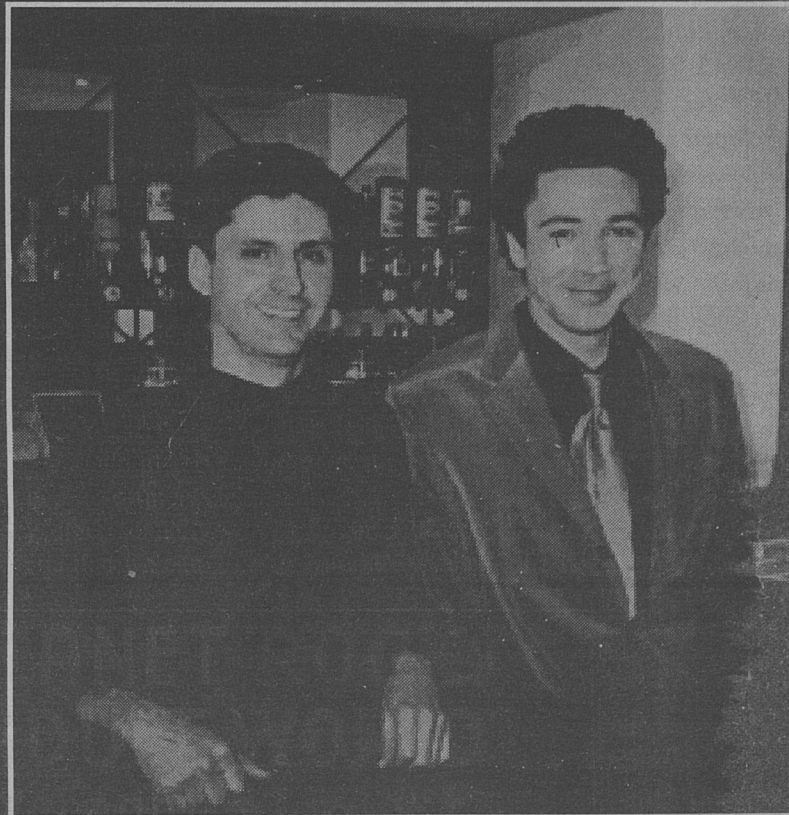
controversy.

In Britain, the controversial nature of the show led the show's sponsor, Beck's Beer, to pull out. Things are no different here, where even the suggestion of what *Queer as Folk* might air has led a slew of companies to shun lucrative product placement opportunities. *New York* magazine has reported that major brands, including Versace, Ralph Lauren, Perry Ellis, Old Navy, and Abercrombie & Fitch, have refused to be associated with the show. The NFL was so concerned that its name or that of the Pittsburgh Steelers would be mentioned on the show that its marketing director wrote to the producer demanding the removal of any such references from the

script.

The controversy has created good word of mouth for the show. That, combined with the posting of video clips on the Internet, has whetted American appetites. Anticipation was further heightened when GLBT television newsmagazine *In the Life* produced a documentary about the show. Though the series has been available in England for some time, European videotape and DVD format incompatibility with American players mean

the Showtime version will be the first chance for most people to see what all the fuss is about. C1TV, a small cable television network, controls distribution rights to the British version in the U.S. It did air the series in a number of markets, but cut much of the sexual content. (The only way to see the original series in its uncut form is to order VHS tapes from the C1TV Web site or through PlanetOut.)



RELATED WEB SITES

Showtime - queer.sho.com

In the Life - inthelifetv.org

C1TV - www.c1tv.com

PlanetOut - planetout.com

American fan site - geocities.com/queerasfolkfan/

British fan site - queerasfolk.virtualave.net/