

Queer I Can't Pick the Straight Guys

Gay "reality" TV may be too earnest to be entertaining. Except Carson.

BY BENNETT LAW

David Daniels seems to be just about the hottest thing going in the world of classical singing these days. Besides being a true countertenor — which is sometimes known as a falsetto — he is unique because he is openly gay and has been with his current boyfriend since college. He is handsome in a burly, yet boyish way and looks like a milk-fed David Duchovny, which has not hurt his rise to stardom, such as it is. He has packed Carnegie Hall, gets all the best opera roles written for his type of voice, and has released several well-received cds.

Queer Eye for the Straight Guy may have been the breakout show of the season, but this past summer television came completely out of the closet all over the place. While lesbians remained invisible, gay men were suddenly the newest staple of reality television.

The producers of Bravo's *Boy Meets Boy* gave sweet, earnest James and his gangly straight gal-pal Andra the opportunity to choose a suitor for James from among 15 attractive men. What James and Andra didn't know until he had narrowed the field to three finalists was that some of these men were actually straight. Seven of the original fifteen, in fact.

We all knew, of course, and that's why we watched. More interesting than who James ultimately selected were our own couch potato contests to see if we could correctly weed out the straights from the gays.

I proved hopeless at this challenge. I swore that if Robb was straight I would turn in my badge (whew!), but beyond that I wasn't absolutely sure of anyone. I immediately thought that Sean was straight (I hoped that Sean was straight) and that Franklin was gay (purely wishful thinking here). But I managed to convince myself that any one of the others could be gay or straight — I couldn't tell.

While it wasn't a great reality show (that honor goes to *The Amazing Race*), without this hook, *Boy Meets Boy* might have been called *Boring Meets Boring*. Whose idea was it that James and his mates were to be perpetually chaste? The absolute lowest point on the show came when Andra gushed "I'm so proud of you" to James when he reported he had landed a tepid social kiss on another man. James is in his early 30's, and by my count he should have kissed a few hundred men by now. *And meant it.*

OK, so the point of all this was to expand America's impression of gay men beyond stereotypes. All gay men aren't dogs who are ready, willing, and able to go down on the first boy to smile at them (unfortunately, if you ask me). But all this stereotype bashing can be a drag, and it makes for boring tv.

Chip and Reichen, the victorious "married" couple in *The Amazing Race*, declared that they were motivated to excel as a way of asserting Gay America's equality with straights (anything you can do, we can do better). Their idea of non-stereotypical behavior, unfortunately, was to be ceaselessly earnest and determined. Chip and Reichen were a couple of hunky hot-bods, but they may as well have had "do not enter" signs taped over their butts. Their straight competitors Kellie and John were completely politically incorrect and enormously more entertaining.

In contrast, the Fab 5 on *Queer Eye* gleefully serve up a sideshow of gay stereotypes (one friend likened it to a gay minstrel show) — the hairdresser, the interior designer, the fashionista, etc. Some younger gays — those folks who bristle at being "labeled" gay — resent the show because they don't want to be associated with its stereotypes. Older friends of mine (60's and up) tend to experience it more as a celebration of gays, a welcome cultural development. These folks remember when you couldn't even hear the word "gay" on TV, let alone enjoy a program that focuses on gay men.

And here I've touched on another apparently objectionable aspect: a friend complained that the problem with *Queer Eye* is that the real focus is on the straight guy. From his perspective, five gay men literally race across the city to dote on a straight guy, tending to all his needs — grooming, dressing, decorating, culinary, and social (made worse yet, no doubt, by Carson's recurring offers to tend to any unattended sexual needs, too). The stereotype this friend sees is the straight-centric world.

All this political correctness got me to worrying. Could it be possible that the Earnest Gay is the gay stereotype for the new millennium? Will we be better off to replace the ascerbic, witty, catty, charming fag in the American consciousness with the chaste, Earnest Gay? Has Gay America completely abandoned sexual (and sexual identity) liberation for political correctness? Forget middle America: is Carson too gay for us?

How we respond to *Queer Eye* says more about how each of us relates to the lgbt community than about the show. For me, just as the show succeeds in re-appropriating the word "queer," *Queer Eye* wins the day precisely because no one backs away from the stereotypes. It's balls-to-the-wall television: Carson isn't dialing it down for public consumption. Bring it on! While listening to friends tie themselves in knots bemoaning the image of gay men that *Queer Eye* presents to middle-America, I tend to think to myself that it would be far more fun to have Carson as my dinner companion — please.

All of this angst seems after-the-fact, anyway. We have won the cultural war — these shows wouldn't be on television at all if they weren't making money. The first episode of *Queer Eye* brought Bravo its highest ratings ever, and each successive episode only improves on the previous outing's numbers.

So television presented us two views of Gay America this summer. *Boy Meets Boy* and *The Amazing Race* offered us the beautiful, but unrecognizably chaste, Earnest

Gay. Add Will Truman and you've got your own All Boring Boy Band. But *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy* provided the summer antidote I needed. Give me Graham Norton, Jack McFarland, and the Fab Five any day.

The final word on the stereotypes embedded in *Boy Meets Boy* and *Queer Eye*, however, should be reserved for The New York Times staff writer Alessandra Stanley, who wrote in a September 2nd column that these shows and others "reinforce all the male stereotypes: gay men are sweet, self-deprecating and caring while heterosexual men are crudely childish." Self-deprecating? Who, me?

Upcoming! (Find an Airsickness Bag, Quick)

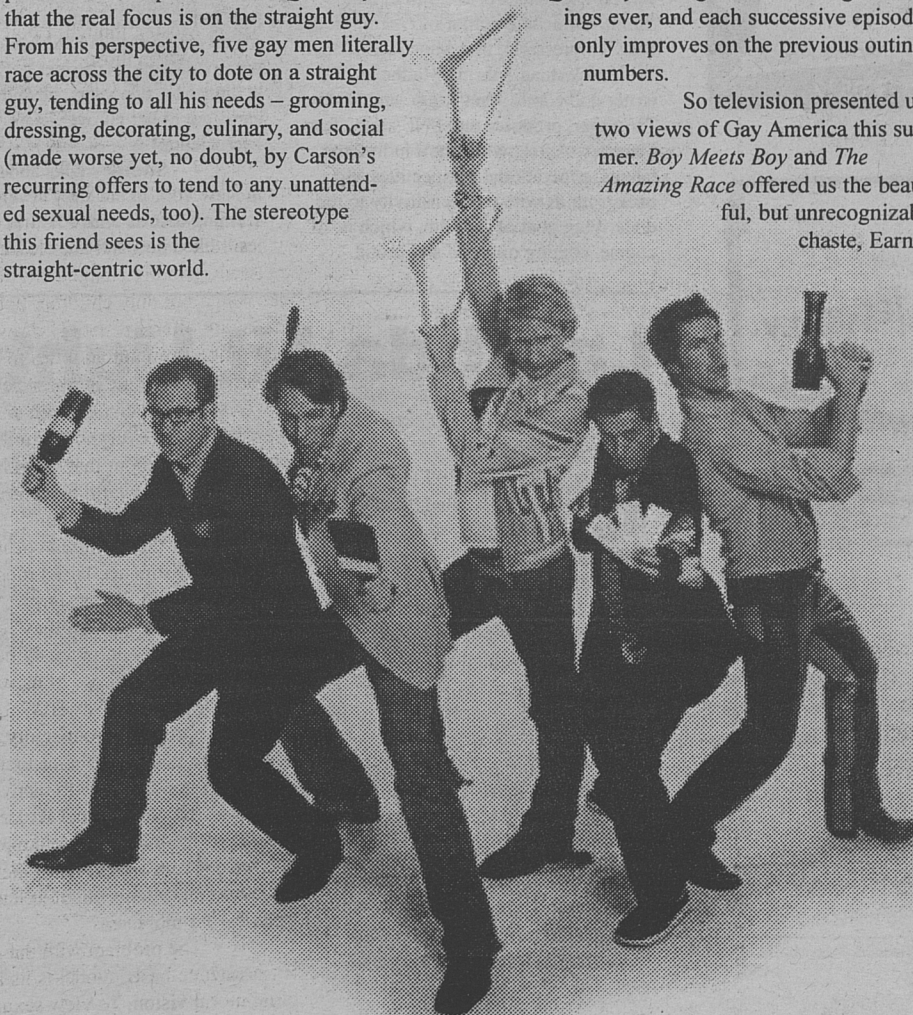
On October 1st ABC will shame itself in the fall ratings sweepstakes with its entry *It's All Relative*, a situation "comedy" that promises "familial fireworks" when "an 'Archie Bunker-ish' Brooklyn bar owner discovers that his only son is marrying a girl who was raised by two dads." Though it advertises itself as "from the writers of *Frasier*", it is devoid of any deftness or creativity. *It fails on all counts: it will disgust anyone with any sensitivity whatsoever to stereotypes of any kind, but even worse — it's not funny.*

Their gay couple is the prissy art gallery owner and the prissy 3rd grade teacher (whom we meet for the first time in an apron in the kitchen). No stereotypes there, huh! They are white-white-white and rich-rich-rich ("You guys have a guest house? We don't even have guest towels!" Har har har goes the laugh track).

Then the two men trade off being the prissy one in scene after scene. They quote *Casablanca* — not once but twice — and make references to *Funny Girl*. And when the straight boy announces that his fiancé's parents are gay, his mother replies, "Whatever happened to that nice black girl you were dating?" Ugh.

I think fabulous can be funny (Jack McFarland is a riot), but this isn't funny stuff. *It's All Relative* would have been groundbreaking in 1973, not 2003. Is it gay parenting when the "child" is getting married? Seems a bit out of the danger zone, wouldn't you say? And, of course, this child is now enrolled at Harvard. Can they hit you over the head any harder with how successful these gay parents must have been? ▼

Bennett Law is an acknowledged Earnest Gay who is deeply immersed in a 12-channel recovery program: Bravo, Showtime, BBC America, HBO ...



Left, it's the Fab Five from *Queer Eye For The Straight Guy*