

Reality Check: Oh Those Summer Nights - Drive-in Punditry

By Mike Fitzpatrick

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Although it still has six weeks to go, the Wisconsin summer of 2003 is likely to be remembered fondly. Blissfully warm and sunny days have given way to perfectly cool sleeping weather throughout most of late June and July. Even weekends that weather wizards had threatened were to be rainy often proved otherwise. Extremes of heat or humidity and violently turbulent storms have been rare.

For the LGBT community, the political and cultural summer has mirrored the meteorology. From Canada to Washington, DC, the good news on our march for equality seems as abundant as the sunshine. Storm clouds may be on the horizon, but with so much good news it seems almost silly to bring along those activist umbrellas.

This kind of climate seems a perfect time to pack the keyboard in the Cruiser and head for the punditry drive-in for a double feature or two. Since I physically resemble Roger Ebert anyway, why not review some of the recent political and entertainment news releases?

In a summer of real movie sequels, there are two tired new chapters in the "Grumpy Old Preacher" series. First up, "The Heavenly Hillbillies". Crotchety cracker cleric Pat Robertson prays for God to smote the liberals on the Supreme Court. Not all of 'em mind you, just two or three. Pat doesn't want to appear too extreme.

Second, there's an ornate Italian import featuring another aging actor, John Paul II. Best titled "The Agony Over Our Ecstasy", the Vatican stirs up more political intrigue by issuing a decree that Catholic politicians must heed the papal line on opposing same-sex unions.

I'm old enough to remember that this recent decree is but a gay twist on the exact general scenario American Catholics poo-pooed when Protestants expressed fears about the election of John F. Kennedy. Maybe that's why conservative Mormon Senator Orrin Hatch brought right-wing appellate court nominee William Pryor out of his Catholic closet in the Judiciary committee last week.

However, if you know anything about behavioral science, there's a phenomenon known as "extinction behavior". Once scientists trained the pigeons to peck a lever to obtain food pellets, they subsequently delayed the food's delivery until the pigeons pecked the levers in ever increasing numbers of times.

When the scientists stopped giving out pellets all together, the pigeons first went wild, pecking the levers relentlessly. Then they stopped. Just as the behaviorists thought it was all over and were ready to report their findings, the pigeons started pecking again, more desperately than ever. Then the birds really stopped, forever.

Pat and John Paul's recent, over-the-top pronouncements sure look like extinction behavior to me. They're also a good reminder as to the reason why prelates refer to the faithful as flocks. Sheep, pigeons; tomato, to-mah-to.

But on to lighter fare and yet another double bill. It seems the reason that Showtime and Viacom pushed the pause button on their all-gay cable channel may have been the summer schedule now running on Bravo: *Queer Eye For the Straight Guy* and *Boy Meets Boy*.

Bravo's announcement of the programs' debut led Traditional Values Coalition spokesbigot Andrea Lafferty to whine, "Just when you think programming can't get any worse, it drops another 100 feet to an even darker place. Clearly they've hit a new low."

“What’s next after ‘Boy Meets Boy?’” Lafferty droned on. “‘Boy Meets Sheep?’” What is it with these religious fanatics constantly equating homosexuality with bestiality? Where is the requisite consenting adult factor? I’m sure if asked, the sheep would negatively reply “baa”. So here’s a fashion tip not from the Fab Five: when encountering religious wingnuts, avoid wearing wool.

After viewing both the Bravo programs, I would have hazarded a guess that Andrea and her ilk had served as cultural consultants on both shows - the stereotypes in both shows are that offensive.

The premise for Queer Eye is every Southern Baptist’s ultimate nightmare: screaming queens invade your home and turn you gay. The first ten minutes of each program looks like a raid by Attila the Nun. Everything mainstream goes in less than a day: grooming, interior design, clothing, cuisine, and culture. The finale to this personal assault on your lifestyle? Everyone hugs.

In one particularly ironic scene Carson, the cattiest fashion queen ever to diss a runway, picks through the tops in a straight artist’s closet (with barbecue tongs, no less). As he tosses out a decade of no longer fashionable colors “from The Gap”, he inadvertently reveals the ultimate absurdity of anyone ever trying to keep up with high fashion.

Queer Eye’s product placement department has to work overtime to fill the Fab Five’s need to plug brand names and trendy salons. These girls give hedonism a bad name. The only place to see greater gushing over useless products is on a late night infomercial.

Meanwhile, throughout the program the most noxious of all gay stereotypes is acted out over and over again: the supposed goal of every gay male to seduce a straight guy. The constant peeking, pawing, caressing and outright groping mixed with the de reguir shots of the makeover victims in their underwear only proves that this is not reality TV, its gay fantasy football.

The straight seduction theme is a core premise of “Boy Meets Boy” as well. It’s the super sized version of that 70’s kitschy game show, “The Dating Game”. Thirty-two year old uberhunk James is presented with a Baskin-Robbins worth of delectable boy flavors, including a token taste of chocolate. But, as Aussie host Dani Behr salaciously whispers to the audience in a sotto voce voiceover, some of James’ dates are straight!

As the show progresses, more gay male stereotypes emerge: there’s a nerdy, haircut-impaired romantic, a virginal, just-out-of-the-closet twentysomething, a buzzcut, repressed military type (a submariner no less, can the subtext get any more phallic?) and so on. During James’ questioning of the candidates, one hunk reveals that he’s already in a relationship but it’s okay because the boyfriend lives on the other side of the continent. The cheater makes the final cut to date another day. So much for James’ early protestations about looking for monogamy.

The debut show’s tropical theme of course means that everyone gets lei-ed. Wink, wink, nudge, nudge. Oh yes, also along for the ride is every gay man’s indispensable travel companion: his very own fag hag. Oh, for but one second of subtlety!

As one might now suspect, these two programs were cooked up by straight folks and signal yet another kind of extinction behavior - the drowning of the gay community in America’s melting pot. We’re accepted because we’re marketable, just any other niche such as Latinos, African Americans or senior citizens.

Just as I suspect Martin Luther king’s dream did not include gangsta rap or “the hood” as modern expressions of black pride that make Steppin Fetchit or Amos ‘n Andy look quaint, I doubt Harry Hay’s vision of gay equality included broadcast images of modern day culture queens and gym bunnies that only bluntly retread the sly portrayals of 30’s film sissies like Edward Everett Horton and Franklin Pangborn. Even in their second-banana roles, those two

actors showed more complex, queer soul than the entire casts of the Bravo shows combined.

So, Ebert-like, I have to give “thumbs down” to Pat, John Paul, the Fab Five and cute-as-a-button James. Oh, I suspect I’ll continue to occasionally catch the 700 Club or EWTN while I’m channel surfing over to Bravo just to “stay in the loop”. But I’ll allow none of you to sap my own unique gay spirit, even as I burden the unfashionable, oversized yet perfectly normal body it lives in with another mouthful of Pop Secret. Real equality means that much to me.