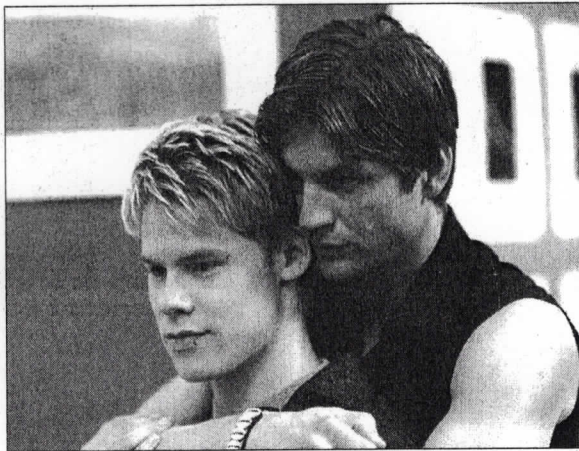


TELEVISION EUNY HONG-KORAL

Like bonding in a beer advert



Randy Harrison (left) and Gale Harold in 'Queer as Folk' Showtime

different from anyone else, or force the audience to confront its squeamishness head-on, unabashedly playing up those attributes of the gay lifestyle that make the public most uneasy.

A controversial new dramatic series on Showtime, *Queer as Folk* (based on the British drama of the same name), takes both approaches simultaneously, at turns presenting the familiar and the shocking. (Showtime, Sundays at 10pm ET/PT.)

A scene might begin with a man coddling a baby or bawling over a severed relationship, giving off the audience-friendly message that people are all the same, gay or straight. Then the scene might switch abruptly to rear-end contests or encounters with strangers in the sauna. The message is provocative and proud: this is a package deal, take it or leave it.

I've seen only excerpts of the original British Channel 4 version of this series, which seemed stylised and romantically fatal, almost like an Italian opera crossed with a roller-disco movie. Meanwhile, the Showtime version is a bit too palsy-walsy and heavy on the male bonding, reminiscent of a beer commercial.

The original series was set in the industrial city of Manchester, England; the US version is set in the steel town of Pittsburgh. The characters and script are largely similar – identical at times – and I'm not sure why it was thought necessary to re-cast and re-shoot the series.

That puzzle notwithstanding, the Showtime programme is good storytelling. It observes the ways in which a gay man's social standing determines the sorts of difficulties he might face: Brian (played by Gale Harold), an advertising executive, is in an industry that has come to value gay men as a high-consuming target demographic. Thus his "gay perspective" makes him valued and exploited at his company.

Meanwhile, his best friend Michael (played by Hal Sparks) works as a convenience store clerk, keeping his personal life a secret. His fellow clerks elbow him inclusively as they point and laugh at same-sex couples.

The invisible albatross that any member of a minority group faces is the cheery advocate: friends and loved ones who offer unflagging, condescending support in exchange for

She even follows him to gay bars, pointing out good-looking men for her son to approach. "You know I approve of your lifestyle," she says. Michael snaps: "Maybe I don't want you to approve. Maybe I want you to go home and cry."

For some reason, the advertisements for this programme boast that "it's like *Sex and the City*", which is like advertising a soda by comparing it to a powerful emetic.

Nonetheless, the two shows do have one thing in common. Neither seems to have figured out that night-club pick-up scenes are deathly dull except for the person directly involved. *Queer as Folk* seems to average about three such pick-ups an episode. Do you enjoy going out for drinks with a friend, only for them to hit on a stranger and leave you there by yourself? If not, then why would you ever like watching such a thing on television?

This programme's strongest suit is its first-rate performances. Hal Sparks is

Never before has there been a US TV series with the power to make heterosexuals feel marginalised

winsome as the repressed Michael, who has secretly loved Brian for years – a longing he conveys with a convincingly quiet agony. Fresh-faced Randy Harrison is immediately likable as Justin, a high-school boy newly exploring his sexual identity and, unable to find acceptance among his peers, becomes a ragtag to Brian.

What is most interesting about this series is the marginal role that heterosexual people play. Except for Michael's mother, straight people are hardly a blip on the radar screen. Even when the programme's lesbian couple has a baby, the sperm has been donated by a gay male. As one of the mother's relatives points out: "What for do you need a [straight] man anyway?"

From a political perspective, this film takes a stance of passive resistance: it doesn't combat homophobia, it doesn't exactly advocate gay rights. It simply ignores heterosexuals.

It's important to recognise just how powerful a tool that can be in raising awareness. Never before has there been a US television