

FROM THE DESK OF THE DRAMATURG

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LGBT HISTORY IN THE UNITED KINGDOM

1957: The Wolfenden Report is published. It advises that homosexual acts between consenting adults older than 21 be made legal, and that the penalty for buggery be reduced.

1967: The Sexual Offences Bill sets the age of consent for homosexuals at 21 in England and Wales. However, sex cannot take place in public, and only two partners may be present.

1969: The Campaign for Homosexual Equality is established. It is the first gay rights group in the UK.

1972: The Gay Liberation Front organises the first London Pride Rally on July 1st. About 2000 men and women march down Oxford Street to Hyde Park.

1973: Homosexuality is removed from the DSM. It is later replaced by “ego-dystonic homosexuality,” which focuses more on the effects of internalised homophobia.

1988: Section 28 of the Local Government Act is passed, stating that a local authority “shall not intentionally promote homosexuality” or “promote the teaching in any maintained school of the acceptability of homosexuality as a pretended family relationship.”

1996: Highly Active Antiretroviral Therapy (HAART) is found to significantly delay the onset of AIDS in people living with HIV. The treatment is made available on the National Health Service.

1997: Tony Blair’s cabinet has the first openly gay minister in British history.

1999: The Admiral Duncan, a gay pub in Soho, is bombed by former British National Party member David Copeland, killing three people and wounding at least 70.

2001: The age of consent is lowered to sixteen to match that of heterosexual couples; and group homosexual sex is decriminalised.

2003: Section 28 (1988) is repealed in England and Wales and Northern Ireland. Employment Equality Regulations made it illegal to discriminate against lesbians, gays or bisexuals at work.

2004: The Civil Partnership Act 2004 is passed, giving same-sex couples the same rights and responsibilities as married heterosexual couples.

GAY IN LONDON IN 1958

In the wake of the Second World War, homosexuality is seen as a foreign vice. Now that the war effort is over, Britons ought to focus on traditional family values. To act on homosexual impulses is to be unpatriotic. The grip of McCarthyism in the United States can be felt on this side of the Atlantic, as the chief commissioner of the Metropolitan Police Force sends officers to masquerade as gay men in popular cruising spots. The first half of the decade sees up to a thousand men arrested for buggery each year. With the advent of television, media becomes less euphemistic in discussing the constant outings of public figures. All this has led to the creation of the Wolfenden Report in 1957, the findings of an investigation into reforming laws about homosexuality. It advised that homosexual acts be legalised as long as there are only two consenting participants, both over the age of 21. While the government will not act on these findings for another decade, the report gets a huge amount of press. Of the major newspapers, only the two most right-wing publications (*The Express* and *The Mail*) are concerned about the report's advice; the rest are far more supportive. Even the Church of England supports this step towards legalisation - its authorities argue that the sin of homosexuality is more palatable than the high suicide rate among victims of outing.

Being gay is equated with being urban, and so London (as well as Brighton) is a sort of mecca for gay men. The most popular cruising spots are the West End (the bathrooms in Victoria Station are notorious) and open green spaces such as Hampstead Heath or Hyde Park. There were markers on other interested men - silk scarves, pinkie rings - but obvious physical markers make you more likely to be targeted by plainclothes policemen. More often, men know each other by a look or a manner. If possible, it is preferable to bring your partner back to a private residence to avoid arrest; if not, public restrooms, saunas, and bathing ponds are all viable places to have sex.

GAY IN LONDON IN 2008

The LGBT community has made huge advances. Since the turn of the century, the age of consent for same-sex couples has been lowered to 16 to match that of hetero couples; group homosexual sex has been decriminalised; same-sex couples are given equal legal rights to adopt as the UK is deemed the best place to be a gay parent; and gay couples are allowed to enter into Civil Partnerships. The highest numbers of people identifying as gay or bisexual remain in London, Brighton, and other urban centers, but queer pockets in more rural counties are beginning to emerge. With the release of the gay dating website *Gaydar* in 1999 and the creation of legal LGBTQ+ spaces cruising culture has been drastically reduced throughout the UK. Old Compton Street in Soho, next to the West End, has become the center of London's LGBTQ+ scene. By the late 90s, around a fifth of patrons of gay clubs are straight, suggesting a growing acceptance of queer lifestyles.

However, many legal rights are still lacking. Though civil partners can take on all the responsibilities of a spouse, gay men and women are still denied the right to marry. Moreover, civil partners lack the right to a divorce on the grounds of adultery, something granted to straight married couples for centuries. Gay marriage will not be legal until 2013. Conversion therapy, still offered by the NHS, will not be officially banned until 2018. Despite the overturning of homophobic laws, it will not be until 2017 that the Alan Turing Law will pardon everyone convicted of homosexual acts that had since been legalised. Until then, each of these fifteen thousand people will remain convicted criminals.

VIOLENCE IN LGBTQ+ RELATIONSHIPS

Violence in same-sex relationships is rarely discussed for many reasons. To begin with, people in these relationships are far less likely to report abuse because they have significantly more to lose by doing so. Their abuser might threaten to out them, or the victim may feel that, should they report the abuse, others will think worse of the LGBTQ+ community. This is a community that has to demand validation on a daily basis, and so needs to put its best foot forward when fighting for its rights. When there are calls for better networks for handling abuse, it is an admission that some members of this community can be cruel or violent or manipulative. The same, of course, can be said of any community. However, as a minority group, the LGBTQ+ community will suffer far more backlash for its most common of flaws. According to a 2010 study on Intimate Partner Violence, "Lesbian women and gay men reported levels of intimate partner violence and sexual violence equal to or higher than those of heterosexuals." Yet there is no system to support this group of victims. Shelters and helplines for victims of domestic abuse are mostly targeted towards women, specifically cisgender women. Those who identify as male, trans, or genderqueer can struggle to find a place to go.

One of many reasons that we struggle with this topic is that our ideas of abuse stem from a heteronormative history where men had legal and physical power over their wives. We see the abuse of a man towards a woman as the most serious of all forms of abuse because we see it as an attempt to entrench old gender norms, because the man will most often be physically larger than his partner, but also because we know about it. A young boy may be told that he should never hit a woman, but that it is okay to roughhouse with other boys; when a man backhands a woman on TV, it's a sign that she should leave him, but if a woman slaps another woman, it is standard female "cattiness." But when someone enters into a relationship where the gender divide does not exist, these lessons can have violent consequences. Ultimately, abuse is abuse: whether a relationship is platonic or romantic, sexual or abstinent, same-sex or hetero, it cannot stand. If we want everyone to be safe, we must acknowledge that every identity needs support.