

ALL EYES ON QUEER EYE

Bravo's unlikely hit ushers in 'gay heat wave,' sparks reactions among sectors

By Rusty Shackelford
THE BATTALION

Not long ago, homosexual lead characters and gay-themed programming were unheard of in popular culture. However, since the 1998 debut of NBC's "Will & Grace," homosexual representations have settled into the mainstream.

Television programs focusing on the characteristics and whims of the often misunderstood sexual orientation were once again brought to national attention this summer when "Queer Eye for the Straight Guy" debuted on Bravo with a network record of 2.8 million viewers. Since then, NBC, which owns Bravo, has aired many episodes after the series' successful trial run. It even boasts a soundtrack that includes new material from Duran Duran and remixes by Sting and Elton John.

The before-and-after hit features a troupe of gay men who guide a clueless straight man to aesthetic success. During the transformation — what the gay panel describes as "manscaping" — the schlub is brought up to standard in grooming, attire, interior decor, food and wine and relationships. After his appearance and behavior are trimmed and updated, the culture team steps back to the giddy approval of girlfriends and spouses. While "Queer Eye for the Straight Guy" has garnered a huge following, it has also provoked a variety of reactions.

Senior economics major Dacyl Armendariz is a longtime fan of "Queer Eye." She and her roommate catch the show every week.

"I love it," Armendariz said. "I think it's funny and fun to watch. Ten years ago you would have never seen a show with gay people on it. They are our reality in the world, why not on TV?"

Brighter production company co-founder Remy Blumenfeld in "The Financial Times (London)" said there are two types of homosexual programming.

"There are literally hundreds of gay-oriented programs now doing the rounds," Blumenfeld said. "There are two very distinct areas: programs for gay men — who are now confident enough to laugh at themselves — and programs for increasingly sophisticated mainstream audiences who realize that gay people live amongst us and are comfortable with that."

Amy Tintera, a junior journalism major and vice president of the Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual and Transgendered Aggies, has seen "Queer Eye" a few times.

"I think that any gay representation is a good thing," Tintera said. "I enjoy watching gay-themed shows even if the characters are stereotypical. I just hope that in the future, characters will be closer to reality."

Although gay-themed programming remains a favorite among some circles, many critics maintain that what "Vanity Fair" dubbed the "gay heat wave" has done little more than reinforce narrow stereotypes.

"Will & Grace" and "Queer Eye for the Straight Guy" are essentially homosexual minstrel shows, in which gay men excel at being 'the best friend' and 'the style-maker' but are stripped of sexuality,"

a Los Angeles Times article recently reported. "The handsome and successful Will of 'Will & Grace' rarely has a date, let alone sex, and is presented as incapable of having a relationship with anyone other than his straight girlfriends. The 'buddies' of 'Queer Eye' mince in front of their straight objects of affection, carefully stroking their arms and offering up non-threatening style tips that are presented as the core of gay culture."

Aside from making a new category of TV shows, programs such as "Queer Eye" have coined of a new term: metrosexual.

A word that had been in relative seclusion for a decade, metrosexual has become a standard label in the past year. Its new-found pop status can be traced back to "Queer Eye," according to a Boston Globe article covering the American Dialect Society's top 10 words of the year 2003.

Senior accounting major Erin Malone defines metrosexual as a style-savvy straight guy in touch with his feminine side.

"I know a few guys who are definitely metrosexual, but they won't ... come out," she said. "They should watch 'Queer Eye for the Straight Guy.'"

Allison Cunningham, a senior kinesiology major, watches the show semi-regularly.

"The personalities of the homosexual guys are so entertaining, like with 'Will & Grace.' The shows take their talents — not necessarily gay talents — and boosts straight guys' confidence," she said.

"Queer Eye's" formula of coupling a trendy makeover show with the "gay charm" and wit of the Will & Grace school of thought has fostered wide appeal. NBC has sold the show's format to more than 30 countries.

According to Entertainment Weekly magazine, the show's Kyan Douglas, Carson Kressley, Thom Filicia, Jai Rodriguez and Ted Allen, also referred to by media moguls as the "Fab Five," are set for book deals and committed to a host of promotional activities. Barbara Walters named them among her "10 Most Fascinating People of 2003." Indeed, they're becoming regular fixtures in media culture.

In a recent article in Entertainment Weekly, Kyan Douglass recalled a surprising exchange with Nicole Kidman: "My friend said, 'Kyan's on the show 'Queer Eye for the Straight Guy.' And she goes, 'Oh my God, you're huge!' I was like, 'Did Nicole Kidman just say I was huge?'"

In their search for the next ratings winner, broadcast and cable



PHOTO COURTESY OF BRAVO NETWORK

(from left to right) Kyan Douglas, Ted Allen, Carson Kressley, Jai Rodriguez and Thom Filicia, the cast of Bravo's breakout hit "Queer Eye for the Straight Guy" have spearheaded the new wave of homosexual-themed shows.

networks are counting on the "gay heat wave" to deliver. According to Entertainment Weekly, Fox will air "Playing It Straight," "Bachelorette" spin-off that throws in the hidden challenge of covering one's sexual orientation, in the upcoming spring season. MTV.com reports that the network is considering a cable network calls "Outlet," which would feature all gay-themed programming. The first show featuring lesbian lead characters, "The L Word," is set to debut Jan. 18 on Showtime.

For all those closet metrosexuals, several upcoming "Queer Eye" parodies present an inverse of the show's teacher-student arrangement. In Bravo's "Straight Eye for the Queer Guy," five straight men tutor a gay man in power tools and sporting event etiquette. On Feb. 23, Comedy Central will air a three-episode series, "Straight Play for the Gay Man," which will likewise apply "typical" heterosexual male attributes to "typical" homosexual men.

Ultimately, Malone said gay-themed programs help bridge the gap between straight society and the homosexual population.

"Will & Grace helped lighten the attitude towards homosexual so people aren't so afraid of them," Malone said.

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