

**AUSTRALIA**

Lucy Lawless, star of *Xena: Warrior Princess*, was among the 700,000 revelers who turned out for the Sydney Gay and Lesbian Mardi Gras Grand Parade Feb. 27.

"It's bigger than I ever expected," Lawless said. "We are having a fantastic time. I haven't yet met anyone who isn't smart or sassy. I love it."

More than 200 floats rode down Oxford Street in the two-hour procession. Favorite contingents included the Monica Lewinskies—smoking cigars and wearing stained blue dresses—and the characters from the television show *South Park*.



Mardi Gras attracted a record \$800,000 (U.S. \$503,000) in corporate sponsorship this year from, among other giants, Coca-Cola, Qantas Airways, Stolichnaya Vodka and the Telstra phone company.

Telstra produced a phone card featuring Ms. Candee, the company's official drag queen spokesperson, while Coke took out full-page ads in gay papers featuring local transvestite Verushka Darling. Stoli sold bottles of its Lemon Ruski wrapped in tiny pink feather boas.

Australia's Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission is teaming up with the Australian Youth Foundation to create a network for rural gay and lesbian youth.

"What we want to do is break down the isolation that young gay men and lesbians face in the country [and] put them in contact with each other [to] make them feel like they are being supported," says Human Rights Commissioner Chris Sidoti.

"They have terrible problems with isolation, with self-esteem, with bullying and harassment in their schools and their towns—and to give them the support of other people who are in the same situation is the first step," he said. "The second step is to put that network in close contact with community service organizations."

**BRITAIN**

A new dramatic series that contains the most explicit gay sex scenes ever seen on television in the United Kingdom is provoking controversy.

*Queer as Folk*, which debuted on the Channel 4 network Feb. 23 at 10:30 p.m., follows the lives of three 20-something gay men in Manchester's gay neighborhood.

The first episode, which depicts the seduction of a 15-year-old gay boy by a promiscuous 29-year-old man, drew fire from the National Viewers and Listeners Association and other "morality" activists, as well as from gay groups.

"This is Channel 4 attempting to influence public opinion at a time when there's a debate in Parliament about the age of consent for homosexuals," says NVLA General Secretary John Beyer.

The House of Commons has twice voted to lower the age of consent for gay sex from 18 to 16, in line with that for straight sex, but the matter faces continuing opposition in the House of Lords.

Angela Mason, head of Stonewall, Britain's leading gay lobby group, says the program certainly didn't challenge any stereotypes.

"All the gay men wanted to have nonstop sex and all the lesbians wanted babies," she says. "I thought the explicit sex scenes with a youthful 15-year-old did smack of sensationalism."

A spokesman for the direct-action group OutRage! comments: "They put in a lot that was controversial for the commercial reason that people will want to keep watching it."

In response to the brouhaha, Channel 4 spokesman Gub Neal noted: "There are three explicit sex scenes in the entire eight episodes. The program goes out with a clear warning at 10:30 at night when viewers are well aware that Channel 4 sometimes broadcasts stronger material. Would we be having this discussion if the characters were a man and a woman rather than two men?"

**CANADA**

American Express' Canadian arm is targeting gay men and lesbians with a toll-free number that connects to gay and lesbian travel specialists, the company announced Feb. 15.

"Our research indicates the gay and lesbian community are higher-than-average income earners who tend to travel a lot, with 60 percent taking one or two pleasure trips a year and more than 25 percent taking three or four," said James Grundy, director of consumer travel for Amex Canada Inc.

"There is a market out there and we have found that the gay and lesbian community is looking for this type of service," said spokeswoman Martha McNair.

She added: "There are always going to be people who will be extreme in their opposition to gay and lesbian issues, but I would feel that the number who would feel so strong as to take their business elsewhere would be very few. It is presently not a concern."

**DENMARK**

On Feb. 15, Australia's new ambassador, Stephen Brady, 39, presented his lover, Peter Stevens, to Queen Margrethe II, the Danish foreign ministry reported Feb. 25.

"It is a first in the history of Danish diplomacy, but it was neither problematic nor a sensational event for us," said Soeren Haslund, the ministry's chief of protocol. "Homosexual couples in Denmark are invited to official ceremonies as are heterosexual couples, even by the royal palace."

In 1989, Denmark became the first country to legalize same-sex civil marriages. Registered same-sex partners have all the rights of matrimony except access to church weddings, adoption and artificial insemination technology.

Brady, who is based in Stockholm, is also ambassador to Finland, Iceland, Latvia, Lithuania, Norway and Sweden.



**INDIA**

The lesbian-themed film *Fire* will return to Indian movie theaters without any cuts, the Censor Board said Feb. 14.

The film was recalled in December after radical members of the right-wing Shiv Sena political party vandalized at least 15 cinemas where the movie was playing.

A party spokesman warned that theaters can look forward to more of the same.

"Shiv Sena will launch popular agitation against cinemas which screen vulgar films," said Jai Bhagwan Goyal, the party's Delhi leader. "This is a well-planned conspiracy to destroy the Indian culture."

The film focuses on two sisters-in-law who, unhappy in their marriages, fall in love with each other. It has won 14 awards at various international film festivals.

**IRELAND**

Gay author Robert Drake, 36, remains in critical condition in a Dublin hospital after being beaten by two men Jan. 31 in Sligo, a town of 23,000 on the northwestern shore.

Drake was living in the town and writing a novel.

Police arrested Ian Monaghan, 21, and Glen Mahon, 22, for the attack, charging them with violating the Non-Fatal Offenses Against the Person Act.

The pair told police Drake made a pass at one of them during a night of drinking, smoking cigars and listening to music, provoking them to punch and kick him.

Drake wrote the novel *The Man: A Hero for Our Time* and edited the anthology *The Gay Canon: Great Books Every Gay Man Should Read*.

**ROMANIA**

Orthodox Christians in Bucharest have threatened staff and destroyed posters at the Nottara Theater in protest against the gay-themed play *Angels in America*, police said Feb. 13.

Police have been posted inside and outside the theater to prevent disruptions.

"Romania is among the last bastions against homosexuality, but it has to fall in the end," the play's director, Theodor-Cristian Popescu, told reporters.

The nation's Chamber of Deputies rejected full legalization of homosexuality last June, creating a rift with the Council of Europe and imperiling Romania's hopes of joining the European Union and NATO.

Current law states: "Same-sex relations taking place in public or resulting in a public scandal shall be punished by one to five years imprisonment. Enticing or seducing a person to practice same-sex relations as well as propaganda, association or other forms of proselytizing with the same aim shall be punished by one to five years imprisonment."



**SOUTH AFRICA**

The government recently distributed thousands of condoms that had been perforated when they were stapled to safe-sex pamphlets, newspapers reported Feb. 13. The AIDS awareness drive was part of National Condom Week.

Officials blamed a packaging company but did not rule out sabotage by anti-condom activists.

**SPAIN**

Spanish gay men and lesbians have become a niche market. Nearly 930 businesses have been created in Spain in the past two years by and for the gay and lesbian community, according to a study by Rainbow Consultants.

Additional polling shows that most of Spain's estimated 2 million lesbian and gay adults have higher-than-average incomes and no children to support. In some age groups, gay and lesbian incomes are 40 percent higher than those of the general population.

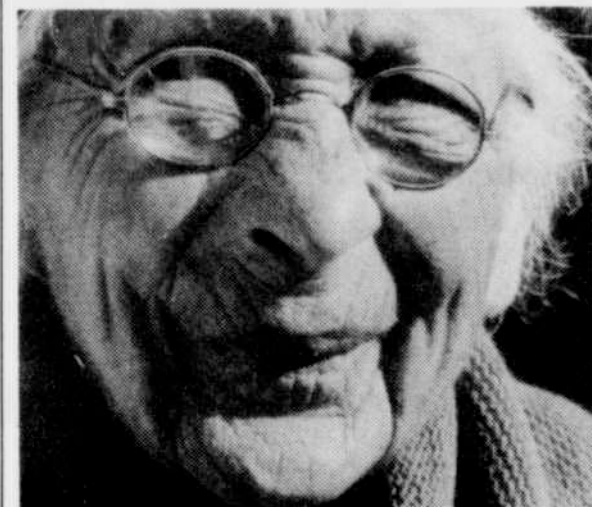
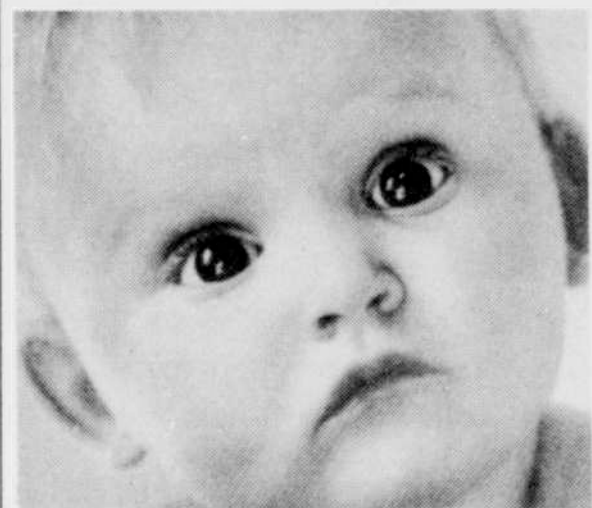
Rainbow Consultants tabulated data from 900 people—90 percent male—who filled out questionnaires inserted in gay magazines.

Typical of the findings: 57 percent of those polled have a computer and 22 percent are online, compared with 26 percent and 7 percent, respectively, of the population as a whole.

A writer for Spain's respected *El Pais* newspaper says: "Because gays are considered to be on the cutting edge of culture, the rest of the population rapidly picks up on trends that start in the gay community.... Once only gay guys were bleaching their hair and now lots of young men are going blond. Another example, the *chochi* style of music, which began about three years ago in gay bars, is now heard throughout the country in discotheques."

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