

The Boys in the Band play on...

On the occasion of its 30th anniversary, the classic gay film deserves another look

Part of me is tempted to believe the type of debate over the last three decades concerning the film *The Boys in the Band* is a unique occurrence in the queer community. I'm not really sure why I would ever believe that. The ultimate reality of our society is that our perceptions are shaped by our experiences growing up. Based on how we perceive the world, some of us believe the proverbial glass is either half empty or half full. Given that the film is one of my all-time favorite guilty pleasures, I do tend to think of it in a positive light. But of course there are those who let the negative aspects of the film prevent them from seeing the writing itself as a milestone in American cinema.

OUT LOUD
BY RUPERT KINNARD

Much of the controversy surrounding the film resurfaced recently when a brand new print of the film was released nationally. Though it has since breezed through Portland via the Hollywood Theater, one still has the opportunity to rent it at larger video stores.

Mart Crowley wrote the play *The Boys in the Band* in 1967—the summer when, he says, life “came crashing down” around his ears. He managed to get his play to Broadway producers Richard Barr and Clinton Wilder, who in turn passed the work to another popular playwright who had written the Broadway sensation of 1963. (The theatrical sensation in question was *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* and, not surprisingly, the playwright, Edward Albee, became interested in *Boys*, which has since been—very understandably—compared to *Woolf*.)

Eventually *The Boys in the Band* became enough of a hit on Broadway that it was made into a film in 1970. It was directed by William Friedkin, a little-known director who followed *Boys* with *The French Connection*, *The Exorcist* and *Cruising*, which also caused great controversy in the queer community with its rancid portrayal of the gay leather scene in New York.

There are three popular reactions to *The Boys in the Band* among many gay men. First, there is the overwhelming opinion that the film is depressing and it shows gay men in an unsympathetic light. Secondly, it supports negative stereotypes. Lastly, the extent to which the play airs the dirty laundry of “gay male culture” makes even the most liberal amongst us squeamish.

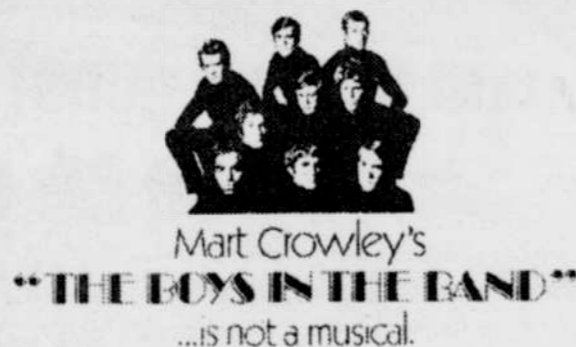
The way my perceptions of the film were formed by my experiences growing up involves my seeing the film the year it was released—as I was in the midst of dealing with my identity as a young man who was attracted to other men. I must've been about 16, and I remember the almost unexplainable desire I had to see this film, which I knew I wasn't supposed to see because of my age. I felt like an undercover agent who had to sneak into the theater.

Instead of the horror and disdain that so many other gay men seem to have experienced as they viewed the film, I watched in awe at the different types of gay men parading in front of my eyes. (The film follows what happens during a single evening when a group of nine gay men get together to celebrate a birthday and are infiltrated by a supposedly straight friend of the party's host.)

As a young African American male, I was especially drawn to the fact that the film featured what seemed to me to be a fairly well-adjusted, well-educated, handsome black gay man among the group. There didn't seem to me to be anything stereotypical about Bernard. Though one might argue whether Larry and



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Hank are the models of coupledom, the depiction of them dealing with an issue that concerns gay men even today—to boink or not to boink outside the confines of a committed relationship—is still impressive some 30 years later.

Even as a teen I was able to look beyond the heavy handed direction by Friedkin to appreciate Crowley's writing and his fairly complex cast of characters. I was too fascinated by the “boys” to think of them as unsympathetic, and too engrossed by the story line to find the film depressing. One would have to be from the ostrich school of reality to dismiss the film's negative aspects as an unrealistic portrayal of what does indeed occur in our community. Certainly, dirty linen doesn't tend to be pretty, but within the context of this film much of it is honest.

The Boys in the Band is a kaleidoscope of gay wit (by which I mean biting humor at the expense of others), mystery and melodrama. I've been impressed with the number of young men who have been able to see the historic value of such a film instead of viewing it as a relic of days gone by.

For those who have never seen it, I suggest you rent it. For those who have, I suggest you revisit it. It may not be pretty, but this band plays some sobering tunes.

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