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TELEVISION

The fruited plains

God bless America's *Queer as Folk*, but England remains the home of the brave

BY JIM RADOSTA

The most notable U.K. import to hit the airwaves since Regis Philbin first asked, "Is that your final answer?" last year, the U.S. version of *Queer as Folk* debuts Dec. 3.

Showtime has stretched 1999's controversial 5 1/2-hour cult Brit hit into a daring 22-episode series. Once again, those Limeys were way ahead of us.

In the United States, for every *Will & Grace* that's out there, we're stuck with a *Normal, Ohio*. John Goodman's new Fox sitcom is a particularly insidious scourge, for it pretends to be laughing with us, when in actuality it's laughing AT us—of course, that assumes it's funny, which it's not.

To give you an idea of how radical *Queer as Folk* is, think back to what black entertainment was like circa 1975—*The Jeffersons* era. Now imagine if the networks skipped right over *The Cosby Show* transition and created a program along the lines of, say, *Do the Right Thing*.

OK, so *Queer as Folk* lacks the political punch of Spike Lee, but you get the idea. This is edgy, raunchy material.

The title comes from the saying "There's naught so queer as folk." In other words, there's nothing as strange as people.

The characters in *Queer as Folk* aren't odd so much as brutally honest. A wide array of politically incorrect gay faces are on full display here—flamers, players and druggies among them—with no shame.

Loser in love Michael (Hal Sparks, a former *Talk Soup* host) has an unrequited crush on his best friend, Brian (newcomer Gale Harold), a promiscuous predator pushing 30. Justin (Randy Harrison, one of only two openly gay cast members) is a high school student who's completely new to the scene.

Brian has plenty on his mind: He filled the turkey baster for Melanie (Michelle Clunie) and Lindsay (Thea Gill), who just gave birth to a baby boy, Gus. Can he mend his philandering ways now that he's a father?

Meanwhile, Michael is trying to stitch together a social life while remaining hidden in the closet at work. Will he break his love-struck female co-worker's heart and endanger his promotion?

Justin has hooked up with Brian, who has no idea he's jailbait but wouldn't give a rat's ass anyway. When will this kid realize it was nothing but a one-night stand?

The premiere episode immediately reveals what was lost and gained in translating the setting from Manchester to Pittsburgh. The production values are slicker; the lesbian subplot is beefier.

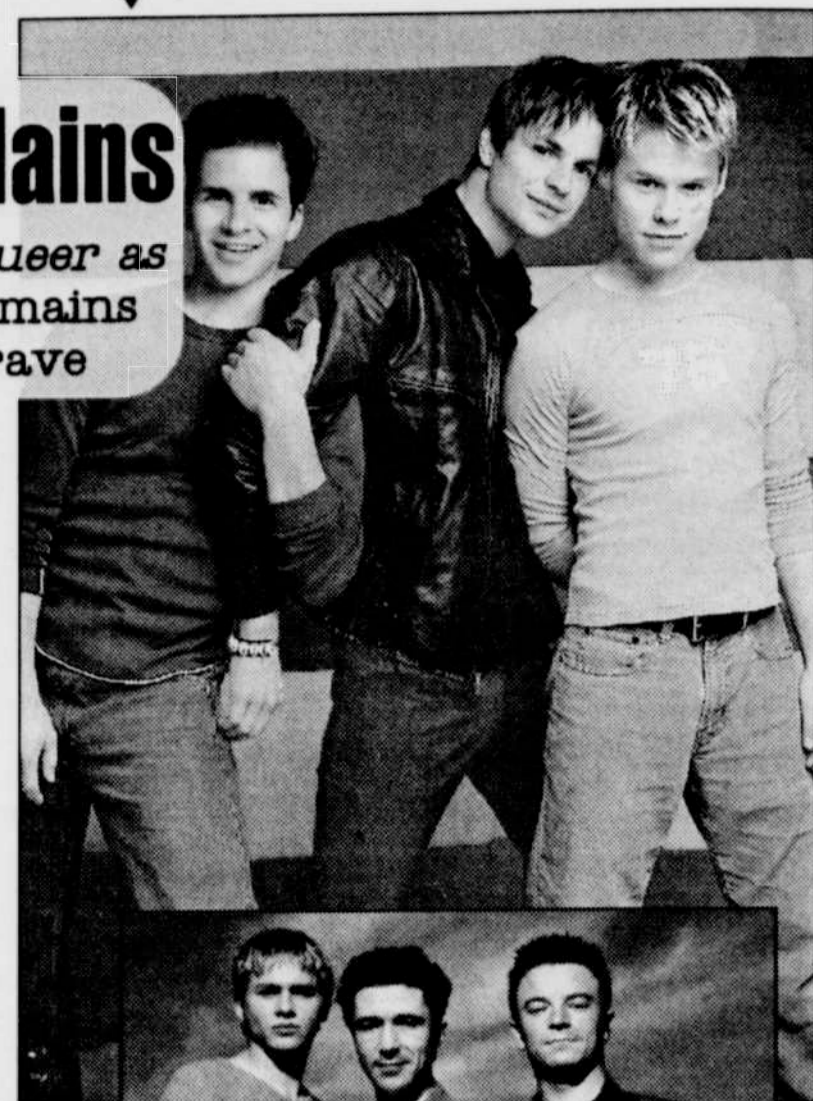
Executive producers and co-writers Ron Cowen and Daniel Lipman remain loyal to the U.K. plot but sprinkle U.S. pop culture references throughout: *Tomb Raider*, *Dirty Dancing*, *Dawson's Creek*. At the same time, recognizing how crude Yanks can be, they aged Justin from 15 to a more palatable 17.

The words are a bit weak, too. Michael introduces us to all of his friends in an awkward voice-over that borders on cliché.

"Emmett can be a little campy—OK, a lot campy," he says. "But you've gotta admit it takes real guts to be a queen in a world of commoners."

Some of the dialogue comes off like a vocabulary lesson for straight viewers.

"Are you a top or a bottom?" Brian asks the



From left: Yanks Hal Sparks, Gale Harold and Randy Harrison take on roles originated (below) by Brits Charlie Hunnam, Aidan Gillen and Craig Kelly

virginal Justin. "Do you like to rim?"

Still, a strong supporting cast rounds out the ensemble. Sharon Gless of *Cagney & Lacey* fame plays Michael's beyond-open-minded mother, Debbie, who is part PFLAG poster parent, part fag hag.

"I've always said it isn't who you love, it's how you love," she says. "Genitalia is simply God's way of accessorizing."

Her character, however, displays another script shortcoming: inconsistent quality. Within the same scene, Debbie is uttering lines seemingly ripped right out of some made-for-television movie.

"It's not a joke, you know," she says. "Gay teens have a very high suicide rate."

Giving two of the lead characters an underlying romantic subtext—the "blue balls" structure—is nothing new. It fueled the chemistry on *Moonlighting*, *The X-Files* and even *Who's the Boss?*

But something is missing here. Gale Harold portrays Brian with such a cold, steely exterior, one wonders why all of his friends put up with his shit.

"If he's such a selfish prick, how come you're always following him around?" Justin asks Michael at one point. Good question.

In the U.K. version, Aidan Gillen was also a selfish prick, but he was able to let down his guard long enough to prove some humanity existed underneath. Perhaps comparing the two programs is unfair, but it's hard to ignore the original when it set such a high standard.

Regardless, even a watered-down version of *Queer as Folk* is groundbreaking television. **JR**

The U.S. version of *QUEER AS FOLK* premieres at 10 p.m. Dec. 3 on Showtime. Call 800-883-2744, ext. 267, to order the premium channel.

The U.K. version of *QUEER AS FOLK* can be seen censored on CITV and can be purchased uncensored at the Internet site www.planetout.com.

Copy Editor JIM RADOSTA gave proof through the night that our fag was still there. He can be reached at jim@justout.com.