



Channel this!

Television's gayest season brightens the airwaves

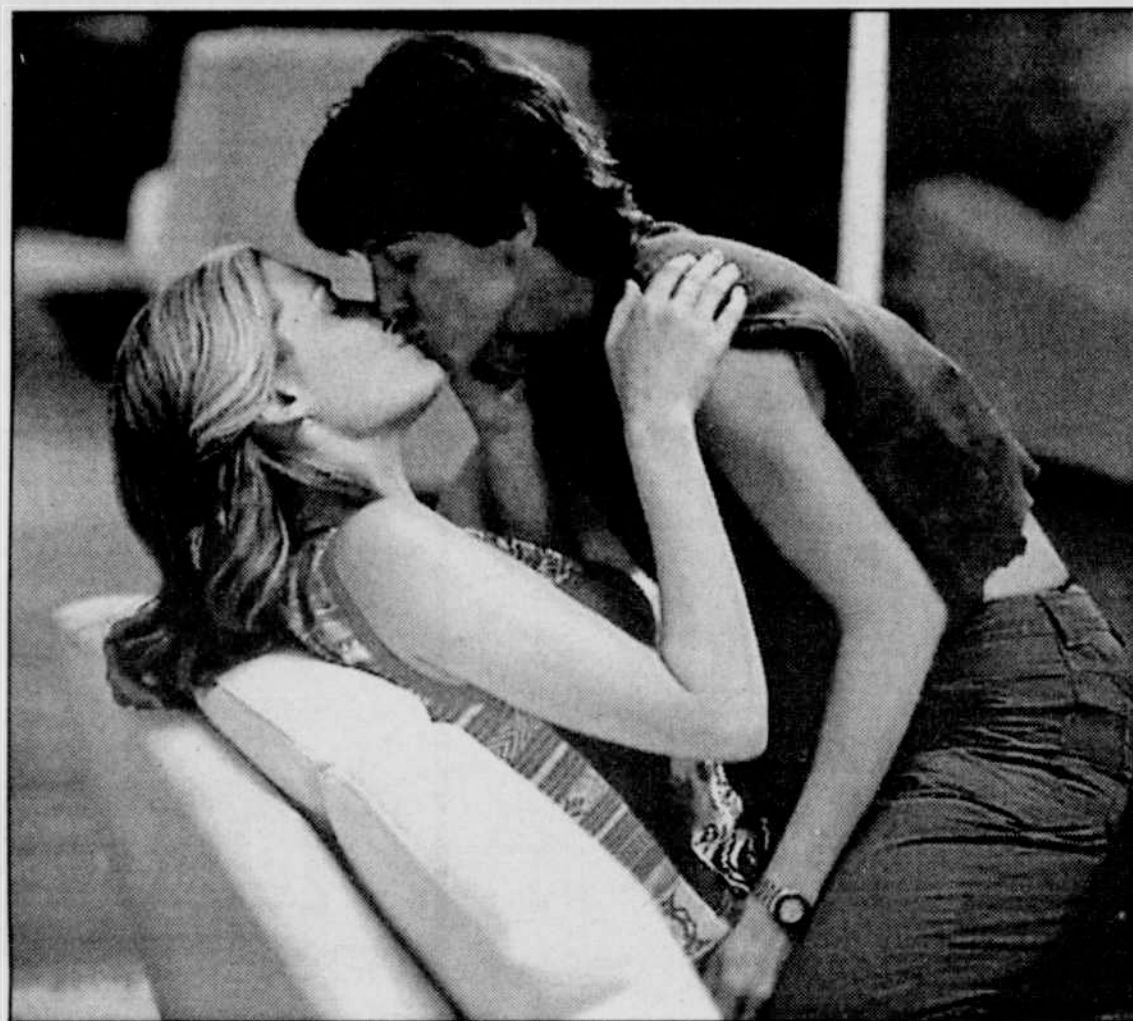
by Andy Mangels

If your television set is to be believed, 2001 might be the year the cries of "I Want My Gay TV" finally have been heard by network executives.

In 1977, *Soap* became the first series to feature a gay recurring character. About 20 years later, Ellen DeGeneres made magazine covers by publicly outing both her fictional persona and herself. The gay sitcom *Will & Grace* debuted in 1998, snatching up Emmy Awards as quickly as they could be handed out.

This year, across the airwaves, all of the major networks have gay characters populating their fall series, while cable channels HBO and Showtime push edgy and explicit gay content. Many of the shows are created by gay men and lesbians who have gained power in Hollywood, including award-winning writers, directors and producers.

Flipping through the channels today you'll



Although it's primarily a gay guy gig (above), *Queer as Folk* does have its lesbo moments

find a transsexual as a major character on CBS, lovely lesbian witches on UPN, a gay frat boy on WB, an African American dyke on Fox and, yes, Ellen is back—and she's still gay—in a funny new sitcom. And as an antidote for the sexless and queeny antics on *Will & Grace*, three shows feature the butch boyfriend du jour: a cop.

In this day-by-day guide, we'll give you a rundown on most of the homorific characters and shows on television and tell you what you can look for in the future. Keep those remotes handy!

• **King of the Hill** (7:30 p.m. Sunday, Fox)

An upcoming episode of this animated series' sixth season has Dale's father visiting Arlen, Texas, for the Gay Rodeo. Charles Nelson Reilly was to do the voice but couldn't because of other commitments.

• **The Education of Max Bickford** (8 p.m. Sunday, CBS)

In this drama series about a college professor (Richard Dreyfuss) facing a midlife crisis, the character is thrown a curveball when his best friend, Steve, returns after a long absence—as a woman. Mirroring the show itself—in which some characters have issues adjusting to the change—the press generally has tiptoed around the politically important issue. Trans activists have praised the series, although some have complained because Erica is portrayed by a woman who was born a woman (Helen Shaver).

Co-creator Nicole Yorkin says the character was cast with a female actor for a reason. Male-to-female "transsexuals are women after they have their sex-

change operation. So we knew we always wanted to cast a woman."

The inspiration for the character came from the show's UCLA adviser, who remembered a famous historian who had become a woman and asked her colleagues to accept her new identity. "CBS was very supportive of it and asked us to actually enlarge the character," Yorkin notes.

Looking toward the future, she adds, "At a certain point, once we get past some of the gender issues, we will be dealing with Erica as a person and as a professor, and it won't just be about the fact that she's a transgendered person."

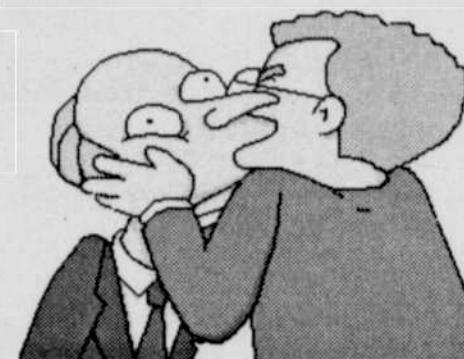
Dreyfuss suggested Shaver for the role both because of her acting abilities and her looks. "This is someone who will be immensely creative in this strange role and who will not falter," he says. "And she has this interesting look. You know, she's a very strong-featured woman. She is completely and utterly a woman, and yet you can make that leap with her."

• **The Simpsons** (8 p.m. Sunday, Fox)

Although he's not quite "out," Montgomery Burns' right-hand man, Waylon Smithers, is clearly in love with his boss. Will the series' 13th (!) season see him finally express his love?

• **Queer as Folk** (10 p.m. Sunday, Showtime)

Showtime is rerunning the first season of its



Simpsons closet case Mr. Smithers plants one on Mr. Burns

oh-so-homo hit series, and a DVD and video set will be offered Jan. 8, 2002. Meanwhile, production is under way on a 20-episode second season, which will begin airing in January. Robert Gant (*Popular*) will be a new regular, playing a college professor who teaches gay studies—and who romances Hal Sparks' character on the side.

• **Leap Years** (10:45 p.m. Sunday, Showtime)

With a diverse cast, this series shows the same group of friends at three different points in their lives: 1993, 2001 and 2008. Gregory Paget (Garret Dillahunt) is a man who begins as straight, then turns bisexual, then comes out as gay. (In that latter incarnation his boyfriend is a cop.)

• **Absolutely Fabulous** (9 p.m. Monday, Comedy Central)

Although they said they never would reunite, bitchy English duo Patsy and Edina (Joanna Lumley and Jennifer Saunders) have come back for a fourth season, older but no wiser or more sober. The six new episodes debut Nov. 12, with encores Saturday afternoons. Look for an "Ab Fab Relapse Sunday" marathon Nov. 11, and catch the behind-the-scenes special *How to Be Absolutely Fabulous* throughout the month.

• **Buff, the Vampire Slayer** (8 p.m. Tuesday, UPN)

A new network for the sixth season of *Buff*

hasn't slowed down the lesbian relationship between young witches Willow (Alyson Hannigan) and Tara (Amber Benson), but trouble is looming on the horizon. Willow has been straying from Wicca and dabbling in black magic, and the evil forces she's awakened within herself could cause trouble for everyone on the show.

Meanwhile, the series has shown both women sleeping together in the same bed multiple times, and their physical affection is constant and realistic. Plus, every now and then a character will utter a great lesbian line, such as when Willow asks for some chicken at the dinner table: "I'm a breast girl myself, but then again, you knew that."

Executive producer/writer Marti Noxon tells *Just Out* the relationship came organically, from the characters. "We didn't really plan for Willow to have a love affair with a woman, but we knew that she was going to have a relationship with a girl that was based around magic



Will & Grace is all wet this season



Oh-so-gay Brandon of *Survivor* doesn't look this good anymore