

What Does Pride Mean To Us Now?

by Jez Dolan

On the 11th of November this year, I will be celebrating 29 years with my husband; 29 years, more than half my life with this man. I still on some days find this fact difficult to believe. I distinctly remember watching an episode on the documentary series *Whickers World* (in 1973, when I was 7) which filmed a 'gay wedding' in San Francisco. Crouched in front of the TV, my finger on the button to change the channel if my parents walked into the room. I knew, even then that this was something as essential to me as the colour of my eyes, but something about it was wrong, shameful or even dirty.

If you had told that little boy crouching in fear and excitement in front of the TV, that he would be married to a wonderful man and have the most incredible family of people most of whom are L, G, B, T, or otherwise he would have laughed with disbelief. Growing up with newspapers like the *News of the World* and the *Sunday People*, John Inman's camp shriek of 'I'm free!' didn't provide this small boy with anything even approaching a role model to aspire to.

My first Pride event, in London (maybe 1987?) saw Sandie Shaw performing on the main stage under a banner which said: 'Swirling in a cesspit of our own making', the opinion of gay men taken from 'God's Cop' James Anderton, then Manchester's Chief of Police. In 2018 the Pride parade in Manchester has a huge presence of Police, Firefighters, NHS workers and many more taking ownership of our streets, proud and open about who they are, and who they love.

A few days ago it was the 20th anniversary of the murder in Laramie, Wyoming USA, of 20 year old student Matthew Shepard. Driven to remote countryside, robbed, pistol whipped, tortured, tied to a fence and left to die. He died six days later. The story made headlines around the world.

In Chechnya last year the authorities began a 'purge' against gay men in the country. In scenes that would not have been out of place in Nazi Germany, innocent men perceived to be gay or bisexual were rounded up, abducted and held, beaten, starved, tortured and killed in illegal, and hidden detention centres. Zelim Bakaev a popular young Russian Chechen singer was abducted in Grozny where he was attending his sister's wedding on the 8th of August 2017. He has not been seen since. He was 25.

Pride - what does it mean to us now? In the UK we have marriage equality, adoption rights, pension and employment rights, and most LGBTQI+ people can go about our daily lives with little or no harassment or hatred. Most. But not all. As an artist making defiantly queer work, I'm often asked why this is still necessary, still important. Those of us who have the freedom to demonstrate, to agitate, to instigate or just to be joyfully visible, owe it to those people who do not have that freedom, and those people who fought before us, who never knew what that freedom tasted like.

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