"Kind of a Drag…": Gender-Bending in Early 1970s American Sitcoms and Comedy Programs (with special focus on NBC's *The Flip Wilson* Show, ABC's *The Odd Couple* and CBS's *M*A*S*H*)

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American television comedies, be they in the traditional sitcom format or more recent comedy-drama hybrids, have always been, to some degree, a mirror of the dominant cultural and social issues of their times, in spite of the fact that they are and have generally been viewed as light-hearted escapism. One of the most striking features of today's television landscape in the United States is without a doubt the more open treatment and greatly increased visibility of a broad spectrum of LGBT characters and issues on primetime network and cable programming, a phenomenon that has risen in crescendo in recent years and has thus mirrored the American public's growing acceptance of LGBT lifestyles and hot-button issues such as marriage equality or same-sex adoption. This current wave of transition started perhaps with Ellen DeGeneres coming out as a lesbian on the April 30, 1997, episode of her popular sitcom *Ellen* (ABC, 1994-98), followed by NBC's sitcom *Will & Grace* (1998-2006) the following year, the situational humor of which was based on the madcap antics that ensue when a gay lawyer, Will Truman (Eric McCormack), begins sharing his New York apartment with his straight best friend, Grace Adler (Debra Messing). Showtime would then go far beyond this initially somewhat cliché

representation of homosexual dating and lifestyles with two hard-hitting and sexually explicit dramas: *Queer as Folk* (2000-2005) and *The L-Word* (2004-2009). In the past five years or so, however, new and vastly popular comedies have brought other LGBT issues into American living rooms and thereby into broader acceptance, such as same-sex adoption through *Modern Family*'s endearing characters Mitchel (Jesse Tyler Ferguson) and Cameron (Eric Stonestreet) (ABC, 2009-present), or teenage homosexuality and bisexuality through the musical sitcom *Glee* (Fox, 2009-2015). Similarly, specifically transgender issues, which seemed to first make their mark through over-the-top "drag-queen make-over" reality shows of the likes of *RuPaul's Drag Race* (Logo, 2009-present) or Laverne Cox's *TRANSform ME* (VH1, 2010), are now given more complex and mature treatment on current sitcoms, including the aforementioned *Glee*, which introduced its transgender character Unique to the main cast in 2012. However, it has been through primetime dramas that real headway has been made. There was the breakthrough performance of Candis Cayne, a popular New York City drag performer in the 1990s, who played Carmelita Rainer, Patrick Darling's (William Baldwin) mistress on ABC's *Dirty Sexy Money* for both of the show's two seasons (2007-2009), earning Cayne recognition as the first recurring transgender actress on American primetime (though, as this study will show, she may not have been the first). More recently, Netflix's *Orange Is the New Black* (2013-present) has showcased Laverne Cox, who plays transsexual inmate Sophia Burset in a program that provides starkly open treatment of a wide and complex array of female sexuality. The following year, Amazon Prime began its award-winning *Transparent* (2014-present), which has several male and female trans characters but mainly, and quite movingly, deals with Mort, a middle-aged father played by Jeffrey Tambor, who is coming out to his adult children as female-identifying Maura—a premise that was strikingly mirrored just a few months later on reality television and in the news media when Bruce Jenner, former Olympic star and member of the Kardashian reality-show family, came out to journalist Barbara Walters as transgender and thereafter became Caitlyn Jenner.

However, as recent as this remarkable trend of increased awareness and acceptance of transgender and broader LGBT issues may be, it should be seen as the strongest but only the most recent wave of gender-bending and of treatment of LGBT issues and lifestyles on American sitcoms, and when one looks for a period in which hard-hitting and once-uncomfortable social issues penetrated American living

rooms through the Trojan horse of situation comedy, the 1970s would seem like the ideal period to which to turn one's attention. The early 1970s are well-known as a key transition period in American television, notably for sitcoms, a shift for which CBS seemed to lead the charge through its "rural purge of 1971," in which harmless and politically correct sitcoms appealing to an older, more conservative and generally rural audience were suddenly dropped in exchange for what was termed "relevance programming"—comedies that took on the most controversial issues of the day head-on, that openly mocked conservative prejudices, and that appealed to a younger and more urban demographic, all helping to reshape America's identity and heretofore decidedly traditionalist values. Programming spearheaded by the likes of Neil Simon, Mary Tyler Moore, Gene Reynolds and most of all Norman Lear would indeed drastically change the face of the American sitcom, going from the comparatively bland, conformist and conservative fare of the 1960s to programs that focused on controversial issues like divorce, diversity, racism, feminism, anti-war protest, anti-establishment sentiment and scores of other topics. To what extent were gender-bending and budding LGBT issues a part of this new cultural revolution? Were LGBT issues at all a part of this surprisingly new landscape?

If we were to turn back the clocks and tune into a few of the top-rated comedy programs in, say, September of 1972, when the "relevancy" movement had just begun, we might be surprised at the blatant gender-bending already going on—on all three networks. On a Thursday night, we would have tuned into NBC's *The Flip Wilson Show*, a popular variety program featuring an African-American comic cross-dressing as his most famous alter-ego, feisty and streetwise Geraldine Jones. The following evening, we would turn to ABC to watch the antics of two divorced men sharing an apartment in New York City—one of the pair being a misogynist slob (Oscar Madison) and the other a more effeminate neat-freak (Felix Unger)—who would have yet another domestic dispute over Oscar's lack of consideration for the meal Felix had slaved over in the kitchen—on *The Odd Couple* (a series based on the 1968 film, itself based on the 1965 hit play by Neil Simon). Then, on Sunday night, we would tune in to CBS's new hard-hitting military sitcom, *M*A*S*H*, which included both cross-dressing Corporal Klinger (Jamie Farr), who always dresses in drag in a futile effort to obtain a Section 8 discharge out of the army, as well as Major Margaret "Hot Lips" Houlihan (Loretta Swit), a female officer who tries to put up a masculine façade in an army that then had very few women officers, suppressing her

feminine side to such a point that she is often addressed, notably by camp administrator Radar, as “Sir”. With such a line-up over a single weekend, one might very well think that the revolution in representation of gender-bent characters and alternative lifestyles had already begun (see Plate 1).

Plate 1—Showcasing Gender-Bending on All Three Networks in the Early 1970s:
Flip Wilson as Geraldine Jones on *The Flip Wilson Show* (NBC, 1970-74), Tony Randall and Jack Klugman as Felix and Oscar on *The Odd Couple* (ABC, 1970-75), and Jamie Farr and Loretta Swit as Corporal Klinger and Major Houlihan on *M*A*S*H* (CBS, 1972-83).

Thus, this paper will analyze the ways in which these comedy programs played with notions of gender at the time and will explore to what extent they may have allowed audiences to rethink its own identity and its views on sexuality. Was it harmless burlesque or a countercultural swipe at traditional notions of gender? Was it an attempt to use television comedy as a vehicle for rising social awareness of transgender and homosexual issues, or rather a light-hearted side-stepping of addressing such issues head-on? In addition, as two of these key shows were adaptations, it is important to see how the sitcoms compare to the plays, novels and films from which they were adapted on these matters. In which cases was the treatment of cross-gender issues given more focus for television, and in which cases was it given less? It is also important to try to put these representations of the early 1970s into their historical and televisual context, to see, for example, if there were any similar models on television before this noted change, and to ask, perhaps more importantly, if and how these programs may have first opened the closet-door to the more unabashed and complex portrayals of gender-bending and homosexuality that we find on television today.

I. *The Flip Wilson Show*: "What you see is what you get?"

Taking the three popular comedy programs in the order of their broadcast on that sample weekend in 1972, the first we would tune into would be *The Flip Wilson Show* (NBC, 1970-74, 94 ep.), one of the most popular variety and comedy sketch programs of the era, starring the African-American stand-up comic Clerow Wilson, Jr., better known by his stage name "Flip" Wilson. Of his many regular sketch characters, feisty Geraldine Jones was by far his most popular, and was without a doubt America's "favorite transvestite alter-ego" of the 1970s (Garber 298). Geraldine was a sassy, liberated African-American girl who was as coquettish and flirtatious as she was streetwise and uncouth, and as verbally abusive to other characters and guests as she was endearing to audiences.

Wilson had in fact begun doing female voices on his comedy albums of the 1960s, most notably on his 1967 *Cowboys and Colored People*, which included an anachronistic and urbanized sketch entitled "Columbus", in which the explorer had to first ask permission from Spanish Queen "Isabel Johnson" (whom he voiced in contemporary black urban slang) to sail for the New World and then, on his arrival, deal with West Indian women, whom he also stereotyped as they were in the 1960s. It was the voice of Queen Isabel Johnson that he would choose to rework when creating Geraldine Jones for television, a voice that would in the end be combined with that of the character of Sapphire Stevens, Kingfish's long-suffering wife, as she was played by Ernestine Wade on the *Amos n' Andy Show* (radio: 1928-60; TV: CBS, 1951-53), as well as an impersonation of the voice of Butterfly McQueen, who had played Scarlet O'Hara's maid in *Gone with the Wind* (Garber 299; Sutherland 63-74). However, if the voice was an amalgam of all of these cliché representations of Southern black women, the vocabulary and the attitude were straight from the urban ghettoes of the late 1960s. What she lacked in formal education she made up for in quick-witted comebacks and excessive self-confidence, and some of her sassiest catch-phrases would become so popular that they would be picked up by black and white viewers alike for over a decade. These included her coy excuse "The devil made me do it!" and her proud affirmation of her sex appeal (to the detriment of those around her), "When you're hot, you're hot… And when you're not, you're not!"—as well as her trademark claim that "What you see is what you get!" (of course rather ironic when coming from a cross-dresser).

Despite the clear stereotyping of urban black women, rife with uneducated malapropisms and inappropriate behavior, Wilson prided himself on Geraldine's universal appeal as a strong woman. As he explained, "The secret of my success with Geraldine is that she's not a put-down of women […]. She's smart, she's trustful, she's loyal, she's sassy. Most drag impersonations are a drag. But women can like Geraldine, men can like Geraldine, everyone can like Geraldine" (Corwin). And indeed everyone did. The character became extremely popular with audiences of all colors, to such a point that Geraldine's appearance in sketches was highly anticipated on every episode, and Wilson would even begin interviewing guest stars as Geraldine so as to satisfy the ever-growing demand. In an interview in *Ebony* magazine in 1970, Wilson himself put the unprecedented appeal of the character down to her attitude and pride, which allowed both black and white audiences to identify with the character and also allowed the comic himself to make controversial social statements, notably about racism and women's rights, that he would have been too uncomfortable to make out of character (Robinson 182).

Thus, Wilson's cross-dressing had far more to do with bringing black urban culture to white and black audiences than it did in trying to draw attention to any LGBT issues, on which the character could be said to have had little or no impact. In spite of the social issues it did vehicle, Wilson's cross-dressing was merely gender disguise for a given sketch character, a form of burlesque comic relief that was basically part of a long lineage of cross-dressing male comedians on American variety television dating back to Milton Berle in the late 1940s and early 1950s. On his number one variety show *Texaco Star Theater* (ABC then NBC, 1948-55), Berle had a bevy of female characters he impersonated and was so popular he often guest-starred on other, later shows (such as *I Love Lucy*) in drag as well—always playing the straight "ugly girl" with too much make-up, a burlesque shtick perfectly in line with his heavy-handed slapstick humor and pratfalls. Similarly, the 1960s would see a few other popular American comics in gender disguise, such as comedic actor Harvey Corman's occasional appearances on *The Carol Burnett Show* (CBS, 1967-78) as a stereotypical Jewish mother, Mother Marcus, or more importantly stand-up comic Jonathan Winter's character "Maude Frickert", the sharp-tongued "dirty old lady" who also first appeared on his comedy albums and who would make regular appearances on television variety programs throughout the 1960s, such as *The Dean Martin Show* and *The Tonight Show*. Wilson's Geraldine Jones seems to admittedly

follow directly from Winters's Frickert in this lineage of cross-dressing comic personae, so much so that it was indeed guest Jonathan Winters, as Maude Frickert, who introduced American audiences to Geraldine Jones for the first time during the show's highly successful pilot, *The Flip Wilson Special*, on September 1, 1969 (see Plate 2). One should also note that this trend of cross-dressing comic personae has continued on American television since the days of Maude Frickert and Geraldine Jones. In the late 1980s and early 1990s, *Saturday Night Live*'s Dana Carvey gave us "The Church Lady," clearly a modern version of Winters and Corman's "grumpy old lady" personae of the 1960s, while traces of Geraldine Jones can be found in the many African-American comics who have opted for the gender disguise. In the 1990s there was FOX's hip, urban sketch program *In Living Color* (1990-94), with Jamie Foxx regularly cross-dressing as "Wanda the Massage Therapist" (the "ugly girl" who thinks she is a catch), as well Martin Lawrence's sitcom *Martin* (FOX, 1992-97), in which he played several characters, including the tough-talking ghetto girl "Shenenah Jones" (clearly a modern rewrite of and tribute to Wilson's ground-breaking Geraldine Jones). Similarly, we have seen Eddy Murphy cross-dress as Granny and Mama Klump in *The Nutty Professor* film series, Tyler Perry's recurring appearances as his Madea character (1999-2005), Martin Lawrence's eponymous role in his *Big Mamma* film series (2000, 2006, 2011), or the innumerable female characters embodied regularly on *Saturday Night Live* by African-American comic Kenan Thompson. In addition, the Wayan brothers, who helped start the trend with *In Living Color*, would take the shtick one step further with their comedy *White Chicks* in 2004, in which Shawn and Marlon Wayans play black men cross-dressing as white women, thus adding the theme of "passing as white" to that of comedic cross-dressing.

Plate 2—Early Cross-Dressing Sketch Comics on American Television:
Milton Berle as one of his many trademark female personae on *Texaco Star Theater* (ABC/NBC, 1948-55,), Jonathan Winters as Maude Frickert on NBC variety programs in the late 1960s, Harvey Corman as Mother Marcus on *The Carol Burnett Show* (CBS, 1967-78), and Geraldine Jones, beginning in 1970.

However, the Geraldine Jones character stands out in this long lineage in terms of social impact, even by today's standards, confirming that *The Flip Wilson Show* was indeed an integral part of the new trend of hard-hitting "relevancy programming" of the early 1970s. Though the show and character did not make any strides in terms of LGBT issues (none of these cross-dressing comics have, for that matter), Geraldine was truly ground-breaking in two other key areas. The first would be dealing with and fighting against racism through a comedy program. Geraldine, though an over-the-top cliché, nevertheless introduced white audiences to black urban culture, to its slang, its high-fives and its hip-bumps, all the while drawing sympathy for the plight of urban blacks in general. Thus Geraldine became an icon for black culture, making the cover of African-American magazines such as *Ebony* in December of 1970 and *Jet* both in January of 1971 and January of 1983, but also in scores of magazines, journals and even ads for popular consumer products that addressed a predominantly white audience (see Plate 3). For many white Americans at this time, *The Flip Wilson Show* was their first and only access to authentic (if exaggerated) black culture, as Geraldine had clearly, as critic Geraldine Garber has pointed out, "opened the door

for blacks to mainstream comedy" on American television (250), long before Bill Cosby would successfully make his mark in the TV comedy genre.

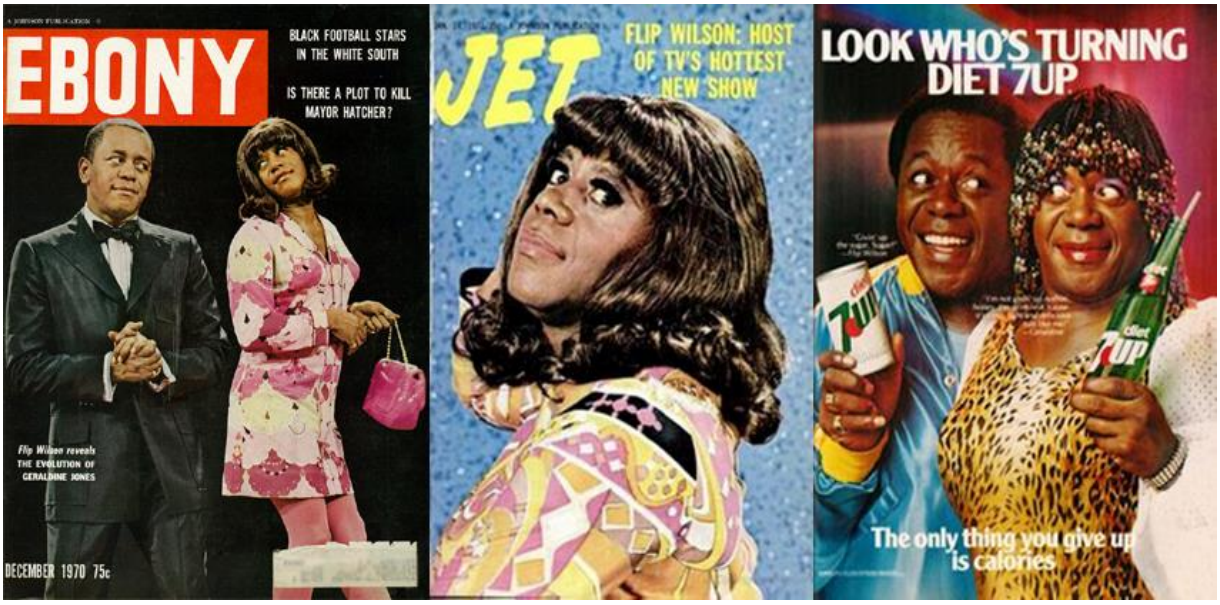

Plate 3—Geraldine Jones's Broad Appeal:

The covers of *Ebony* magazine (December 1970) and *Jet* magazine (January 1971), along with a popular ad campaign for 7-Up that ran later in the 1970s, all featuring comic Flip Wilson as his feisty alter-ego, Geraldine Jones

The second area in which Geraldine Jones was ground-breaking was, somewhat ironically, the character's growth into a *feminist* icon. Wilson had indeed provided a new stereotype of black women as tough, proud and endearing, in a landscape where there were few if any other examples of black women on television, let alone in comedy. Compare for example Geraldine to the character of Julia Baker on the first black American sitcom *Julia* (NBC, 1968-71), which aired concurrently. Julia, played by Diahann Carroll, was a quiet and soft-spoken single mother whose appearance and general attitude were more aligned to that of white suburban mothers, in a show that came under harsh criticism at the time by African-American associations for the way black culture seemed to have been drained from all the black characters so as to make them fit into a white sitcom mold that mainstream audiences would be more comfortable with (Hamamoto 91; Dominick and Greenberg 27). In addition, Geraldine came at a time when there were very few proud and strong female characters—of any color—on American television, putting the cross-dressed persona on a par with ground-breaking feminist characters of the period, such as Mary Richards (Mary Tyler Moore) or Anne Romano (Bonnie Franklin).

Thus, even if transgender or broader LGBT issues were never part of the act, the Geraldine Jones character did advance the cause of several key social issues of the time related to discrimination and inequality. It was thus nevertheless hard-hitting "relevancy programming," even though the self-confident and no-nonsense African American girl was transgender in appearance only.

II. *The Odd Couple*: "Felix, this is no time to have a domestic quarrel!"

Turning to the second popular gender-bending comedy program we would come across on that fateful weekend of 1972, we find *The Odd Couple* (ABC, 1970-75, 114 episodes), a sitcom adaptation of the 1968 film by Gene Saks, itself a very faithful adaptation of the hugely successful 1965 play by Neil Simon. Unlike the previous example, the story of two divorced men living together as a "couple" would seem to be a case of gender-bending that would be more likely to bring in some kind of treatment of LGBT issues, particularly when one considers the original source material.

Neil "Doc" Simon, who had started his writing career as head storywriter on the popular sitcom *You'll Never Get Rich* (a.k.a. *The Phil Silvers Show,* a.k.a. *Sgt. Bilko*, CBS, 1955-59), had written a string of extremely popular plays throughout the early 1960s, so much so that in 1963, Paramount gave him an open contract and bought the rights to whatever his next play would be. He would have *carte blanche* and they only asked for a brief outline of the premise. All he gave them were these forty words: "Two men—one divorced and one estranged and neither quite sure why their marriages fell apart—move in together to save money for alimony and suddenly discover they're having the same conflicts and fights they had in their marriages" (Stock 5). This premise, along with the title itself, (*The Odd Couple*), seemed to point to a controversial "two men in a mock (gay) marriage" subtext, but Paramount simply paid Simon $600,000 upfront and agreed to 10% of the Broadway gross, even though not a word of the play had been written yet (Stock 5-6). The play itself was then directed by Mike Nichols and was indeed a huge success on Broadway, with Art Carney as the finicky Felix Ungar and Walter Matthau as the slovenly Oscar Madison, running for over 1,200 performances and grossing over six million dollars. While the play was still selling out in 1968, and with Simon's next play, *Barefoot in the Park*, breaking new records, Paramount released the film version, directed by Gene Saks—though many critics complained the film too closely followed Mike

Nichol's Broadway stage directions rather than better exploiting the new medium (Stock 9-10). Rather than Art Carney, though, Paramount went with Jack Lemmon for Felix, and as the movie poster shows, with the Felix character in an apron and holding both a feather duster and a soup ladle, pseudo-cross-dressing and gender-bending was a patent feature for Felix (see Plate 4)—Paramount was obviously capitalizing on Jack Lemmon's notoriety in that domain from Billy Wilder's 1959 *Some Like It Hot*.

The film, like the play from which it was so faithfully adapted, did indeed include a clear gay-couple subtext, and the dialogues addressing the relationship between the two friends are often those one would hear in a heterosexual love affair. For example, early in the film, when the two divorced friends decide to move in together, there's a declaration of "love" on a park bench (Oscar: "I can talk to you this way because I love you nearly as much as you do…") and finally a "proposal" to live together (Oscar: "I'm proposing… What do you want, a ring?"). Similarly, once they share the apartment, the two men quickly slip into a marriage mindset, with Oscar jokingly bellowing "I'm home, dear" when he comes in the front door, and Felix mistakenly calling Oscar "Frances," his ex-wife's name, when they say good-night.

In this mock marriage between two men, neat-freak Felix quickly becomes the ostensible "wife" figure, replete with all the clichés about housewives at the time: from pestering the husband about what to make for dinner, to whining about "slaving in the kitchen all day" and being taken for granted, to bothering the boys during their manly weekly poker game, to even refusing to go out one evening because he needs to "scrub the pots and wash [his] hair." In addition, the entire plot of the play and film is structured around a series of three lengthy arguments—or what Oscar coyly calls "domestic quarrels"—including one in which Felix throws dishes and uses what was supposedly a wife's secret weapon, "pouting," rather than fighting; another with Felix whining that Oscar had not called ahead to say he'd be late for dinner; and a third, on the night of a much anticipated double-date, in which Felix breaks down and cries over his lost love, eliciting the sympathy and solidarity of the Pigeon sisters, who team up with Felix against the bullying husband figure, Oscar. The final act that follows then has all the earmarks of a big break-up and the end of wedded bliss, with Oscar shouting, "This marriage is over! I want an annulment!" (see Plate 4), with him bidding Felix farewell by using his ex-wife's first name, and by Oscar's emotional cry

of post-break-up regret once his 'spouse' has left him: "Felix, come back! Don't leave me like this!"

If the mock marriage subtext is the vehicle for most of the physical humor and comic banter of the film, not to forget its very structure, Simon had also included several tongue-in-cheek references to homosexuality. Indeed, much of Oscar's name-calling and verbal "spousal" abuse borders on gay-bashing, including calling Felix "Mary Poppins" behind his back, or "a fruitcake" to his face (see Plate 4), or even telling him squarely to stay "in the closet" (though this double entendre is given in a literal context, as Oscar chides Felix here for not wanting to go out and try to have a good time). Even more risqué, perhaps, are other verbal and visual puns pointing to a gay relationship between the two "bachelors," such as when Felix realizes, "It's funny. I haven't thought about women in weeks" while they are out bowling, or the most unusual back massage that Oscar gives Felix on their first night together, even before he "pops the question." With his hands off-camera and on Felix's lower back, Oscar says, "OK, bend forward… If this hurts, Felix, let me know, 'cause I don't know what the hell I'm doing!" It is thus obvious that Simon had gone to great lengths to create an edgy comedy for his time, and one that, though mockingly, brought in a great deal of homosexual references and themes.

Plate 4—Gender-bending Felix Ungar:

The film poster for Gene Saks 1968 adaptation of Neil Simon's 1965 play, *The Odd Couple*, and two screen captures from the film.

The television show, however, would attempt to downplay, if not completely suppress, all of these elements, leaving only the show's title as a possible allusion to the two friends living as a married "couple." When Paramount decided to make the TV series, which first aired in September of 1970 (along with *The Flip Wilson Show* that same month), the film was still in theaters. However, Simon's initial deal with Paramount waived his rights and left him no say in the making of the series. Instead, ABC chose producer-director Garry Marshall and his head writer Jerry Belson as show-runners (Stock 11). The basic premise was of course roughly the same as the play/film, and many plot elements in early episodes (dating the Pigeon Sisters, problems during the weekly poker game, etc.) were borrowed directly from the play and film. The series does, however, quite drastically change the last act of the film, in which their relationship lasts only three weeks and they separate for irreconcilable differences; when the series begins Oscar and Felix are said to have already been living together for some time and will remain together for another five years. For television, however, Jack Klugman took on the role of sloppy sports-writer Oscar Madison (Klugman had occasionally stood in for Matthau in the Broadway version), and he only agreed to do the show when Tony Randall was signed on as pesky neat-freak Felix Unger (now spelled with an 'e', possible to sound less "foreign"), cast this time not as a news writer but as a New York photographer, "portraits a specialty". Randall had played Felix in Chicago showings of the play and was already well known to the public as a quirky but endearing character actor from a series of films in the late 1950s and 1960s with Rock Hudson and Doris Day, including *Pillow Talk* (Michael Gordon, 1959) and *Send Me No Flowers* (Norman Jewison, 1964), in which he played an affected and somewhat sexually ambiguous third-wheel to the star duo of Grant and Day. One scene in the later film by Jewison seemed to make Randall a natural for the role of Felix *as conceived by Simon*: the two men (that is, Grant and Randall) have to share a bed for a night after being kicked out of their homes by their wives, and the angry pillow banter is indeed that of a mock husband and wife (Hudson: "You're feet are cold!"; Randall: "Complaints, complaints! Do you ever cut your toenails?").

Although the series is a late-night rerun favorite in the US to this day and had three Emmy nominations for best comedy as well as three Emmy wins for Best Actor (two for Klugman in 1971 and 1973; one for Randall in 1975), it had mediocre ratings during its five-year run and never made it into the top 25 shows. After a disastrous

first season, things improved slightly when Klugman and Randall convinced Garry Marshall to both use a three-camera set-up and drop the laugh track in exchange for a live studio audience (Stock 12)—a technique that rival CBS was already using for its hit shows *All in the Family* and *The Mary Tyler Moore Show*. Although this improved the program's popularity slightly, and the long lines of people queuing up to watch the live shooting of the show were second only to those for *All in the Family*, it was still threatened with cancellation at the end of each season, only to be renewed at the last minute in light of the success of summer reruns (Sullivan). It was in fact in later syndication [By 1977, it was in 90 domestic markets, including 29 of the top 30, as well as in 100 foreign countries, second at the time only to *I Love Lucy* (Stock 12)] that the series would become the cult phenomenon that we think of today.

However, the main differences between the series and the film are nearly all related to the latter's pervading gender-bending and pseudo-gay subtext as described above. If such allusions to homosexuality worked in hip New York theatres and in movie theatres in major U.S. cities, the conservative television landscape in which the series was to be aired would not allow such innuendo. At that time, on television, identifiable gay characters were still a non-entity, though some 1950s and 1960s characters could be considered as pseudo-gay presences *in hindsight*, such as Ernie Kovac's effeminate and affected Greenwich Village poet sketch-character in the 1950s (*The Ernie Kovacs Show*: NBC/DuMont/ABC, 1952-62). Similarly, in the 1960s, *Lost in Space*'s (CBS, 1965-68, 83 ep) Dr. Zachary Smith (Jonathan Harris) or *The Beverly Hillbillies'* (CBS, 1962-71, 284 ep) Jane Hathaway (Nancy Kulp) characters—one an affected older single man and the other a somewhat masculine old maid—could be seen retroactively as gay prototypes, though they have only been "outed" by bloggers in recent years. By the late sixties, the first treatment of gays on comedy shows made homosexuality itself the joke and propagated widely held clichés in which a lack of masculinity necessarily meant risible homosexuality. Such coy gay-bashing could most often be found on late-night talk-shows, which were presumed to have an adult audience. This was particularly the case with *The Tonight Show's* Johnny Carson, who would occasionally throw a coy allusion into his opening monologue, most often using "Greenwich Village" as the code word for the gay community (*e.g.,* on ticker tape parades "When a hero moves along Wall Street […], executives throw memoranda out the windows; when he moves on to Greenwich Village, executives there throw kisses!" Capsuto 47-48). Similarly, adult comedy-

hours had recurring characters and guests who were coded as gay and were always the butt of the joke when they appeared. For example, the incredibly popular *Rowan & Martin's Laugh-In* (NBC, 1968-73, 140 ep) comedy sketch show had its over-the-top, limp-wristed character "Bruce" as well as its regular guest star Tiny Tim—an effeminate, falsetto ukulele player billed as "the toast of Greenwich Village" (but who would marry a woman, Victoria Mae Budinger, live on *The Tonight Show* in December of 1969, as if to prove to the world he was a heterosexual in spite of the running jokes).

The TV environment at the time of *The Odd Couple*'s TV pilot was thus very hostile to any positive or sympathetic portrayal of homosexuality or even effeminate males. For the series, creator-producer Garry Marshall thus took great precautions to avoid including the gender-bending and gay marriage subtext that had made the source play and film such a success. Marshall and the network were particularly worried by the reactions registered by mid-western focus groups before the series first aired, many of whom dismissed the show out of hand as a series "they thought was about homosexuals," as well as fear of the reaction from conservative lobbies (Stevens). Thus the relationship between Felix and Oscar was no longer coded, and the main dynamics of the comedic contrast would wholly rely on that of neat vs. sloppy, of manic efficiency vs. laziness, and of high culture (opera, literature, etc.) vs. low culture (team sports, poker, etc.). Of the two main characters, Felix underwent the most drastic modification. Unlike in the film, he is never seen as a household cross-dresser, never in five years wears a woman's apron or holds a feather duster, and instead becomes the dapper, well-groomed and chic New Yorker—considered by many to have been the first "Metrosexual" on television (Stevens). In addition to his wardrobe (see Plate 5), Felix was also "butched up" in many other ways for the TV series. For example, as in the film, Felix constantly pines away for his ex-wife, renamed Gloria for the series, but he is no longer the sniveling, whining "cry-baby" that we had in the film. In addition, he professes his never-ending love for Gloria (and thereby his heterosexuality) regularly throughout the 5-year run and even remarries her in the series finale. In spite of this devotion, he also successively dates scores of women throughout the series, from the divorcée Cecily Pigeon, to perky and cultured Miriam, to Madeline the single actress, to Melanie, the wife of a professional football player, to Doris Atkins, a successful doctor—thereby further reaffirming his unwavering heterosexuality. As a final tweak, Felix was also made to be a far better

athlete than lazy Oscar, in everything from push-ups to team sports, a case of masculine one-upmanship surely designed to counter his love of cooking, cleaning and the opera.

Plate 5—Felix, the Dapper Metrosexual:
Jack Klugman as slovenly Oscar Madison and Tony Randall as the well-groomed Felix Unger on *The Odd Couple* (CBS, 1970-75)

As if this were not enough to erase any traces of a gay-friendly subtext, Marshall added an opening narrative in voice-over to every episode of the first two seasons, one designed to remind viewers that these heterosexual males were only living together because their wives had thrown them out. This thinly disguised disclaimer began with "On November 13th, Felix Unger was asked to remove himself from his place of residence… That request came from his *wife*," and ended with the question "Can two divorced men share an apartment without driving each other crazy?!", thus emphasizing both their heterosexuality and the overwhelming neat vs. sloppy dynamic. In addition, for the pilot episode in particular, the writers added a few coy "us vs. them" gay-bashing jokes so as to further distance the two characters from any homosexual undertones. For example, only two minutes into the pilot, while convincing Felix to go on a double-date with the Pigeon sisters, Oscar reminds him, "All over the world, *man* pursues wo*man*… except on a few Polynesian islands and a couple of bars in Greenwich Village!"—thus practically declaring "we're hetero-sexuals!" to the audience from the get-go.

However, it is interesting to note that the actors would have fun on the live set with this chronic fear of perceived homosexuality in the characters, and they would regularly tease the crew and network by *purposely* acting too gay-friendly (going off-

script to kiss and hug, for example), knowing that the take would end up on the cutting room floor, but nevertheless eliciting belly-laughs from a studio audience that was obviously more open to the idea than the network or the national audience as a whole (Klugman). In spite of all of these preventive measures, Tony Randall should still be lauded for his astute liminal performance between masculine and feminine clichés and straight/gay stereotypes. In the end, there was still a good deal of gender-bending in Felix's persona, though it may have been a case of folding both ends towards the middle. And one should also note that a decade later, in 1981, Randall would indeed become a bona fide LGBT icon when he starred as the first openly gay character in a leading, eponymous role on an American sitcom, with *Love, Sidney* (NBC, 1981-83, 44 ep), the story of a single gay man who takes a down-on-her-luck heterosexual woman and her young child into his home.

The TV series *The Odd Couple* was thus, in the end, a missed opportunity to make even peripheral LGBT issues a part of the spectrum of "relevancy programming" that hit the airwaves at that time. This could be at least partly explained by the fact that this was ABC and not CBS, and because Garry Marshall was no Norman Lear. While Marshall was side-stepping the issue with this program, Lear was already dedicating certain episodes of his ground-breaking *All in the Family* to the topics of homosexual awareness and masculine/feminine stereotyping. For example, in only the fifth episode of the first season, entitled "Judging Books by Covers," Archie mocks the effeminate and cultured "Roger the fairy" character as gay, only to later learn that Roger is in fact straight and that Archie's burly All-American drinking buddy Steve, an ex-football player, is in fact gay—an episode that famously sent President Richard Nixon into a 20-minute sputtering homophobic rage over the episode, caught on Watergate Tape #498-005 (May 13, 1971)[1]. Not surprisingly, throughout the early seventies, while Lear would go on to produce dozens of controversial and hard-hitting shows, Garry Marshall, lest we forget, would achieve far more fame with his sugar-coated visions of America's conservative past in series like *Happy Days* (ABC, 1974-84, 255 ep) and its spin-off and female *Odd Couple* wannabe, *Laverne and Shirley* (ABC, 1976-83, 178 ep)—earning him the

[1] For an in-depth study of this and other controversial episodes of *All in the Family*, as well as details on the reactions from Nixon and conservative groups, see my article "'Those Were the Days…': *All in the Family* and the 'Primetiming' of U.S. Diversity and Counterculture." *Expressions artistiques et politiques de la contre-culture : La Contestation en images, 1955-1975.* Revue E.O.L.L.E. Vol. II, n°4 (Dec. 2012). https://gric.univ-lehavre.fr/IMG/pdf/tredy.pdf

fitting nickname "the Norman Rockwell of sitcoms" (Stevens). Nonetheless, what was a missed opportunity on one issue was indeed a vehicle for bringing a separate taboo topic into America's living rooms. Indeed, just as Flip Wilson's Geraldine helped fight racism and raise African-American awareness, TV's Felix and Oscar spearheaded the first direct treatment of *divorce* on American comedies—and although it focused on divorced men, TV's first divorced women often paraded through their door as either ex-wives or new love-interests. It was still, therefore, "relevancy programming" in at least one respect.[2]

III. *M*A*S*H*: "If anything happens, bury me in blue chiffon!"

If, of these three popular comedy programs that featured gender-bent main characters, *The Flip Wilson Show* and *The Odd Couple* missed key opportunities to bring in a more mature discussion of gender or any LGBT issues, one would think that the third program under study, *M*A*S*H* (CBS, 1972-83), would be far more likely to focus on such topics. It was after all one of the strongest vectors of "serious comedy" and "relevancy programming" during the 1970s, on a par only with *All in the Family* and a few other Lear projects in terms of their relentless exploration of taboo social issues and liberal causes.

The award-winning TV series, the brainchild of creator and producer Gene Reynolds, along with his head writer Larry Gelbart and head of casting Burt Metcalf, was of course a television remake of Robert Altman's extremely popular 1970 film, itself an adaptation the 1968 novel by Richard Hornberger (under the pen-name Richard Hooker). The novel, Hornberger's fictional autobiography on three skirt-chasing and anti-authoritarian doctors stationed at a Mobile Army Surgical Hospital during the Korean War, was a relatively apolitical series of amusing anecdotes and odd-ball characters—especially if one compares it to far more disturbing war satires of the period, such as Joseph Heller's *Catch-22*. What truly made the novel the best-seller it was to become was the success of Altman's film adaptation, and the subsequent popularity of Reynold's TV series, which would last a record eleven

[2] Note that CBS has very recently launched a reboot of *The Odd* Couple (2015), with Matthew Perry as both showrunner and in the role of Oscar, and with comic actor Thomas Lennon as Felix Ungar. Though early episodes merely updated iconic scenes from the older franchise, such as the disrupted poker night and the flirtatious neighbors, the subject of Felix's sexuality was dealt with upfront in the pilot episode, when one of Oscar's poker buddies learns that Felix is *not* gay and is disappointed, as having a gay friend would make him seem more "evolved." Perry has claimed in interviews that they wanted to make his sexuality clear from the first episode, so as not to have to deal with it throughout the series. That said, he claimed there would be very frank treatment of sexuality, including LGBT issues, on the new sitcom (Kenneally).

seasons and 256 episodes, not including the short-lived sequel in the 1980s, *AfterMASH* (CBS, 1983-85), and which boasted the most widely watched TV series finale in American history (with a 77% audience share). Not surprisingly, when Americans hear the term "M*A*S*H" today, it is most certainly the TV series that comes to mind first, followed by Altman's film.

Altman did indeed enhance certain anecdotes from the novel so as to make a stronger political statement, as well as more blatantly vehicle contemporary disgust and dismay over the Vietnam War through a story set in the earlier, less controversial Korean War. The series would of course perpetuate this "anachronistic shell game," again taking the anti-war, anti-establishment, anti-authority themes even further, not only through its more persistent treatment of them over its eleven-year run, but also through more overt anti-war and anti-military dialogue throughout the show. Altman's film had relied more on the mere stark contrast between the bloody horror of war and the main characters' giddy skirt-chasing and college-boy antics, rather than on the recurring anti-government and anti-military speeches by main characters that we find in the series. In addition, the long-running series, perfectly in sync with the mission of CBS's "serious comedy" campaign, would be a platform for regular or semi-regular treatment of other American social ills and left-wing causes, such as religious hypocrisy, white-black racism, white-Asian racism and new feminism, among others—and this added barrage of often moralizing liberal messages that Hornberger never sought to promote in his novel may explain why the author had so vocally disapproved of the series, while praising Altman's film (Kich).

The question, of course, is whether any early LBGT issues were a part of that liberal-minded campaign, and if so, to what extent the two main gender-bent characters, Corporal Maxwell Q. Klinger (Jamie Farr) and Major Margaret "Hot Lips" Houlihan (Loretta Swit), may have allowed for them. Though both characters are perceived as dabbling in gender disguise out of necessity, Major Houlihan's reasons for it appear far nobler. As the sole female officer at the 4077th, she feels the need to put on a no-nonsense, masculine façade, both in terms of her demeanor and her wardrobe, to such a point that her being accidentally called "Sir" becomes a running joke on the series. Her true feminine side is only revealed in private—notwithstanding efforts by the prankster doctors to make it public. However, in spite of her masculine, "regular army" air being constantly pointed to, from the pilot onwards, as a mere façade (she is not-so-secretly having a passionate affair with Major Frank Burns), she

maintains her stoic, no-nonsense air for the duration of the series, and could be seen as the best and most efficient officer in the camp. Her TV story-line clearly sought to underscore the efforts women had to make to succeed in a misogynist army setting. Unlike the other nurses at the 4077th, who too easily allow themselves to be treated as sex objects by the incorrigible skirt-chasers and ladies' men who were the main protagonists, Houlihan publicly suppresses her feminine side and seeks to be recognized on her professional merits alone. Thus she goes from being Hawkeye and Trapper's main adversary and foil in early seasons (she cannot tolerate their childish antics) to being their most respected colleague, from being mockingly called "Hot Lips" early on to respectfully being called "Margaret" for nearly all of the series. In the end, she was a strong feminist icon on the show, showing that a woman could indeed be a respected leader in "this man's army," thereby making her a breakthrough embodiment of female strength and independence on a par with the character Mary Richards on her network's concurrent and openly feminist series, *The Mary Tyler Moore Show* (CBS, 1970-77).

This proto-feminist version of the Houlihan character is indeed a far cry from the one Robert Altman had given us in the film, or that Hornberger had penned in his novel. In the latter, she is only a *very* minor character, appearing on only a few pages, while in the film adaptation she becomes a key secondary character and one of the protagonists' main foils, one whose attempt to hide her feminine side is quickly cut short by the "boys will be boys" antics at the 4077th. These include Trapper hiding the camp's PA microphone under her bed while she has sex with Frank Burns, earning her humiliating nickname, as well as a bet between Duke and Trapper on whether she is a natural blonde, which leads to a prank in which she is exposed to the entire camp naked in the shower. Broken, Altman's Houlihan literally becomes a bouncing and brainless cheerleader cliché by the end of the film, giving into a condescending view of women that will allow her to gain acceptance into the misogynist group. It would thus only be on the TV series that Margaret Houlihan would patently suppress her feminine side so as to prove a woman's worth and become a feminist icon of the 1970s—though this would be the only liberal social cause for which she would be a vehicle.

Though TV's Margaret Houlihan is in the end a very subtle case of gender-bending, the sitcom's Corporal Klinger character, who appears regularly in drag throughout the series in a failed effort to obtain a Section 8 discharge, is a case of in-

your-face transvestitism that would seem to be a more likely vehicle for LGBT issues, or at least, for the treatment gay or transgender individuals in the military service. Klinger, one must remember, was a character created specifically for the 1971 TV series, and is nowhere to be found in the novel or film. What is most interesting about the Klinger character is that he was indeed initially written by Larry Gelbart as an effeminate gay man struggling in a misogynist and homophobic American military environment (Wittebols 29), boldly adding the fight against anti-gay discrimination to the arsenal of the network's "relevancy programming." Unfortunately, as Larry Gelbart has explained in a televised interview, the showrunners felt that such a character would be far too controversial and opted instead to make Klinger burlesque comic relief for the darker topics of the program, borrowing the character's new profile from the oft-cited military background of the controversial comic Lenny Bruce, who had actually dressed as a WAVE—a female sailor—in a failed attempt to be drummed out of the Navy during World War II (*M*A*S*H 30th*).

Thus, redesigned as a heterosexual male who was only cross-dressing as a ruse to get out of the army, and as a vehicle for burlesque comic relief, the Klinger character became instead part of a long lineage of innocuous *situational humor* on American television in which a traditional heterosexual male finds himself *forced* to cross-dress as a disguise, a plot-driven variation of the burlesque cross-dresser comics such as Flip Wilson's Geraldine Jones. This comic device can be traced back notably to Billy Wilder's 1959 *Some Like it Hot*, starring the above-mentioned Jack Lemmon along with Tony Curtis, as witnesses to a mob hit hiding out as members of an all-female jazz ensemble. This was followed a decade later by a short-lived ABC sitcom in 1968, *The Ugliest Girl in Town*, which was cancelled after only 17 episodes and in which Peter Kastner plays Hollywood talent agent Timothy Blair, whose only means of going to London and being with his fiancée Julie is by pretending to become a female fashion model named "Timmie". Similarly, following *M*A*S*H*, later sitcoms would famously employ the same type of working premise, along with landmark films such as *Tootsie* (1982) and *Mrs. Doubtfire* (1993). Among the most notable on television were *Bosom Buddies* (NBC, 1980-82), in which newcomer Tom Hanks and Peter Scolari play Kip and Henry, two young men who cross-dress as "Buffy and Hildegarde" in order to get low-rent deluxe accommodations in an all-girl hotel in Manhattan, or the more recent but short-lived 2012 ABC sitcom *Work It!*, in

which two men cross-dress as female pharmaceutical sales reps in order to keep their jobs in a flailing economy.

Plate 6—The Necessary Gender Disguise:
Peter Kastern as Timothy/Timmie Blair in *The Ugliest Girl in Town* (ABC, 1968), Jamie Farr as Corporal Maxwell Q. Klinger on *M*A*S*H* (CBS, 1972-83), and Peter Scolari and Tom Hanks as Henry/Hildegarde and Kip/Buffy on *Bosom Buddies* (NBC, 1980-82).

In spite of Gelbart and Reynold's decision to completely drop the gay storyline for the character, they did nevertheless decide to also eliminate the anti-gay story-lines and unrepentant gay-bashing that could be found in the film. It is interesting to note that when Altman first read the source novel, he was offended by what he saw as its "racist" overtones (Altman 45)—such as the character Duke the Southerner's treatment of a black doctor, "Spear-chucker Jones," and other free-flying racist comments in the dialogues—so much so that the director modified both characters to eliminate those racist overtones and even added an anti-racist subplot to the final football game between two military camps. However, Altman seemed to go the other way in terms of anti-gay discrimination, adding quite a few anti-gay jokes and modifying one of the story's key subplots, that concerning Cpt. "Painless" Waldowski, DDS (a.k.a. "The Painless Pole", a.k.a. "Jaw-Breaker"). In the novel, the camp dentist and renowned well-endowed ladies' man, cannot "perform" with a woman one night and falls into deep depression. Rather than leave it at a bout of impotence, the character in the film then assumes he has turned into a "fairy" and a "latent homosexual," openly asking for the help of all of his doctor-buddies in camp to commit suicide. They in turn gay-bash and bond as they organize a mock "last supper" to administer a fake suicide pill, and Painless lies down to die while a black

soldier sings what would be the film and TV show's famous theme song, "Suicide is Painless." This goes on until Hawkeye sends in a comely nurse, who will be shipped stateside in the morning, to have sex with him on her last night and "cure him" (also absent from the novel), and the next day it is as if nothing had ever happened. To the TV show's credit, the homophobic character of the Painless Pole is completely omitted, as is Altman's "oh-my-God-I'm-turning-gay" storyline.

Even with the anti-gay jokes and storyline cut, Gelbart and Reynolds's decision to change Klinger from a gay to a straight character was clearly a missed opportunity to deal with the mistreatment of homosexuals head-on. Though designed for comic relief, Klinger became yet another of the show's many vectors for its barrage of anti-war and anti-establishment sentiment for the entire series, and in later seasons he would additionally become a vector for the show's attack on White-Asian racism, through his dating and then marrying a Korean girl named Soon Hee. However, the showrunners decided nevertheless to attack the mistreatment of gays in the military on the program, if only very occasionally, with specific episodes devoted to the subject. For example, in one such episode in 1974, entitled "George" (S02E22), Hawkeye and Trapper treat two American soldiers (one black, one gay) who were not wounded by the enemy but viciously attacked by their racist and homophobic comrades in arms; the doctors not only save the two men from their persecutors but they save Pvt. George Weston from being given a dishonorable discharge on account of his homosexuality. It seemed that to the network and show creators, the American viewing audience was not yet ready for more persistent and complex treatment of the subject through a homosexual and/or transgender main character.

That said, one could argue that the character of Corporal Klinger did nevertheless indirectly point to discrimination against gays and cross-dressers in the military, as visiting brass often raise homophobic eyebrows at his swarthy, hairy but feminine-clad appearance, just as the very Section 8 he is seeking out is a constant reminder of the army's open rejection of LGBT-identifying people. In addition, Klinger continues to cross-dress, or at least wear earrings and high heels, for the entire run of the series, long after he realizes that it will not get him out of the army. It clearly becomes a part of his personality and his personal preference, to such a point that one might wonder if in the end the character's penchant might not be better labeled as "heterosexual transvestic fetishism"… but to most viewers, it was just a running gag that worked.

IV. If Not Circa 1972, Then When?

Thus, it seems that these three comedy programs of the early 1970s showcasing gender-bent characters did not serve as the vehicles for early treatment of LGBT causes that we had hoped to find. Instead, characters were drastically changed from their original profile or source character so as to nearly completely erase any ties to a gay subtext or story-line (as with both Felix Unger and Corporal Klinger), and the protagonists were reduced to more traditional forms of burlesque comic relief, though the seemingly innocuous characters nevertheless brought other controversial social issues—including racism, divorce, feminism and anti-establishment sentiment—into America's living rooms and public discourse as part of the networks' new "relevancy programming." It seems that, due to the inherent conservatism that had long plagued network television and fear of a conservative backlash, LGBT issues were relegated, for the time being, to one-off episode topics, if not to off-screen references that only studio audiences would benefit from. Given the cultural climate of the time in terms of taboo subjects related to sexuality, a time when topics that are perfectly harmless today—such as divorce, adultery or single working women—were still a source of violent protest from the "Moral Majority" and conservative audiences, it may be understandable that the networks did not yet opt for more direct treatment of LGBT issues as well.

That said, however small these early steps may have been, the 1970s would nevertheless benefit from a growing presence of LGBT-identifying characters throughout the decade, though it would take several years before the topic would be dealt with as directly as the other items on the period's liberal agenda were, and it would be a slow and somewhat haphazard progression of positive and negative representations—much like a movement of two steps forward, one step back—that would eventually break through the glass ceiling, or break down the closet door, as it were.

Thus, the first half of the decade would feature a series of important "firsts" in terms of LGBT visibility, though not all were designed to advance the cause and many occurred on unsuccessful programs. As we have seen, while the three programs discussed above were playing rather timid games with gender-bending, Norman Lear's *All in the Family* devoted a landmark 1971 episode, "Judging Books by Covers" (S01E05) to the topic, giving audiences their first openly gay non-recurring character and first frank discussion of homosexuality on an American

sitcom. Then, in 1972, ABC aired a sitcom entitled *The Corner Bar*, an early forerunner to the later *Cheers* premise, set in Grant's Tomb, a New York bar filled with eccentric regulars, one of whom was Peter Panama (played by Vincent Schiavelli), a lisping, limp-wristed sissy-boy from Greenwich Village and nothing more than the manifestation of 1960s late-night clichés on homosexuality. The character was more than offensive, and was cut from the cast after the first season due to protests from Gay Rights groups, protests led by Rich Wendel, president of the New York-based Gay Activists' Alliance (Capsuto 75-77), yet Panama will go down in history as the first openly gay *regular* cast member on an American sitcom. This apparent step backward was then countered the following year, though not on a sitcom. In one of the very first reality shows aired on PBS, *An American Family*, the cameras followed the Loud family at home, school and work in Santa Barbara, California, for an entire year. One of most popular real-life characters in the family was the eldest son, Lance Loud, who wore lipstick at home and tried on dresses long before Sam Mallory did the same in the 2000 FX series *The Riches*. Those willing to watch PBS were then introduced to the first non-stereotypical and sympathetic treatment of a transgender character on U.S. TV. By 1974, Norman Lear was back with a new sitcom for ABC, an adaptation of an off-Broadway play entitled *Hot L Baltimore* (set in a run-down hotel, hence the neon "e" in the word "hotel" is broken). It followed the lives of two female prostitutes (one an illegal immigrant) and the first openly gay male couple on television—the quiet and meek George (Lee Begere) and the surly activist Gordon (Henry Calvert). Though this was ABC's attempt to steal Lear away from CBS and have a relevancy show of their own (they had in fact given him *carte blanche* on the subject-matter to get him to their network), the series was cancelled due to low ratings after only 13 episodes, because of outrage over the four main characters and despite the show's opening "mature content warning" (a first for ABC but a staple for early Lear productions). Far more successful was the addition of a gay couple to the recurring cast of the very popular ABC "squad-room" sitcom *Barney Miller* (1975-82), seemingly a must as the 12th precinct was set in notoriously gay-friendly Greenwich Village. Show creator Danny Arnold thus gave viewers an apparent "odd (gay) couple," as one character was a positively presented "mainstream" gay man named Darryl (Ray Stewart), while his partner was a flamboyant "queen" named Marty (Jack De Leon)—basically an Americanized version of Renato and Albin from the 1973 play *La Cage aux folles*. What is most

interesting is that Arnold actually worked closely with the Gay Media Task Force and other gay rights groups on the character of Darryl to make sure he was a more endearing and realistic representation of a gay New-Yorker, while allowing himself to fall into burlesque clichés and stereotypes with his partner, Marty (Capsuto 123, 148-49)[3].

Plate 7—LGBT visibility in the early 1970s:

Anthony Geary as "Roger the Fairy" on CBS's *All in the Family* in 1971 (S01E05), Vincent Schiavelli as Peter Panama on ABC's *The Corner Bar* in 1972 (S01), Lance Loud as himself on PBS's *An American Family* in 1973, Lee Bergere and Henry Calvert as George and Gordon on ABC's *Hot L. Baltimore* in 1974, and Ray Stewart and Jack De Leon as Darryl and Marty on ABC's *Barney Miller* in 1975.

Slowly but surely, progress was being made, and the true watershed year for LGBT visibility would finally come in 1977, nearly seven years after the campaign for "relevancy programming" had begun. As one might expect, Norman Lear played a major role in this breakthrough. First, he again used his number-one hit *All in the Family* as a vehicle for new controversy, by creating a three-episode subplot, one a

[3] Note that a few years later, Danny Arnold would go one step further, "outing" a semi-regular cast member, Officer Zitelli (Dino Natali), as a closeted homosexual and the sympathetic victim of an anti-gay witch-hunt among the detectives throughout the 1979 season. Captain Miller will step in to protect his officer and give much-needed lectures to his precinct on accepting differences. Also note that in 1979, Danny Arnold would unsuccessfully try to produce an American remake of *La Cage aux Folles* as an ABC sitcom entitled *Adam and Yves*, hoping to go even further than he had done with his Darryl and Marty characters. The project was unfortunately abandoned after eighteen months of preparation, with Arnold caving to mounting pressure from the network and conservative groups (Capsuto 151-52).

year from 1975 to 1977, showcasing a gay cross-dresser and nightclub performer named Beverly LaSalle, played by real-life drag queen Lori Shannon. The first two episodes in the trio provided rather burlesque treatment of the Beverly character (In "Archie the Hero" (S06E04), Archie Bunker gives Beverly CPR in his cab, thinking he is a woman, while in "Beverly Rides Again" (S07E06), Archie later plays a prank on his buddy Pinky Peterson by setting him up on a "date" with Beverly). However, the third in the series, entitled "Edith's Crisis of Faith" (S08E11-12), would be far more groundbreaking. By now Beverly had grown to be a cherished friend of the family, especially of Edith's, and in this episode Beverly, out of drag, is killed by a street gang in an anti-gay hate crime, leaving devout Edith so inconsolable that she loses her faith in God. She cannot understand how God could allow something so horrible to happen to someone so kind and generous, just because "she" was different. Norman Lear strikes again—and the fact that this was shown as a two-episode special on Christmas Day made the message even more poignant, and effective[4]. This episode was nominated for an Emmy for Best Writing in 1977, and though it did not win, it was another episode of *All in the Family*, one dealing with a separate LGBT issue, that did take home the statuette. In "Cousin Liz" (S08E02), the Bunkers attend the funeral of Edith's cousin Liz, where they meet her long-time roommate, Veronica, and soon learn that she was in fact Liz's lesbian life-partner. Once again it is Edith who empathizes with her and helps Archie understand that she needs to be recognized as Liz's mourning widow. Remarkably, this was the first open and sympathetic treatment of lesbianism on American TV, on which, as we have seen, LGBT visibility in the 1970s was decidedly and nearly exclusively male. That same year, Lear also used his successful African-American spin-off of *All in the Family*, *The Jeffersons* (CBS, 1975-85), to break new ground. In the episode "Once a Friend" (S04E03), George meets up with an Old Navy buddie named Eddie, who to his surprise has had a sex-change operation and is now the very attractive Edie. In spite of the show's rather slapstick "he"-is-now-"she" antics, it does end with George accepting Eddy's life-change and lifestyle—making the episode the first sympathetic treatment of transgender issues among African-American characters. If all of this were not enough, Lear rounded off the year with a new and very experimental

[4] Even though today's Candis Cayne is often hailed as the first recurring transgender actress/character on primetime American television, for her role as Carmelita in the drama series *Dirty Sexy Money* (ABC, 2007-2009), this title seems to belong to Lori Shannon for her recurring role as Beverly LaSalle on *All in the Family* thirty years earlier. One should note the similarity between the two transgender actresses, as both had been extremely popular drag performers in New York City before taking on their provocative acting roles on the small screen.

program, a mock soap opera entitled *All That Glitters* (1977, 65 episodes) that was set in a parallel world, an America where women are dominant, men are submissive subordinates, and transgender women and cross-dressers occupy some envious middle ground between the two castes, as seen through the character Linda Murkland, a successful transgender fashion model, played by Linda Gray, long before she became a household name thanks to the series *Dallas* (see plate 8).

Plate 8—LGBT visibility in 1977:
Lori Shannon as Beverly LaSalle and K. Callan as Veronica on *All in the Family* (S08E11-12; S08E02), Veronica Red as Eddy/Edie on *The Jeffersons* (S04E03), Linda Gray as Linda Murkland on *All That Glitters* (CBS, 1977), and Billy Crystal as Jodie Dallas on *Soap* (NBC, 1977-81).

Finally, in addition to Lear's vast contribution, 1977 was also the year that other sitcom producers jumped on the bandwagon. For example, Susan Harris gave us a different type of mock soap opera, a sitcom simply entitled *Soap* (NBC, 1977-81), a program with a mockingly convoluted plot and an ensemble cast that included the main character Jodie Dallas (played by Billy Crystal), an openly gay man who, during the first season, first attempts suicide when his boyfriend breaks up with him and then seeks a sex change operation. However, he is then seduced by a woman and gets her pregnant, later turns bisexual, and then fights for custody of his child and has to stop living with a lesbian roommate in order to win custody in court. The series even ends with a failed "hypnotherapy session" that, rather than turning him straight, convinces him that he is an old Jewish man named Julius Kassendorf—a somewhat

prescient parody of the ongoing problem of so-called gay conversion therapy. In spite of these wild Jodie-related storylines (so typical of the show), the character himself was never presented as a derogatory stereotype but instead as the only voice of reason in a large cast of lunatics (see Plate 8). Still, the show was protested both by pro-Gay groups for too stereotypically making the character want a sex change to cross one way and then hypnotherapy to cross to the other, and by conservative groups for the very presence of Jodie as a sympathetic and reasonable gay character (Warta 32; Capsuto 140-41). Simultaneous, the writing-producing trio known as NRW (Don Nicholl, Michael Ross and Bernie West) adapted a British sitcom, *Man about the House* (ITV, 1973-76), for ABC, where the slapstick sitcom *Three's Company* began its long 8-season run. The situation comedy was based on the premise that a straight man, Jack Tripper (John Ritter), had to pretend to be gay so as to be allowed to share an apartment with two young women, the clever brunette Janet (Joyce DeWitt) and the beautiful dumb blonde Chrissy (Suzanne Somers), as their landlord Mr. Roper (Norman Fell), though homophobic, was far more worried about any "funny stuff" going on between unmarried tenants. Some may see the show as a step backwards, as much of the humor involved ladies-man Jack feigning over-the-top gay clichés and limp-wristed gestures in front of Mr. Roper, yet at the same time Mr. Roper's gay-bashing and anti-gay remarks were a key part of his buffoonish and out-of-touch persona. In addition, Jack and his young friends were seen as not caring if he was incorrectly labeled as "gay," implying a more accepting view of homosexuality among the younger generation. Viewers did indeed identify with the hip trio of tenants and *not* with the reactionary landlord.

By 1980, the movement could be said to have come full circle, as Tony Randall, who had started the previous decade as ambiguous Felix Unger, would return to television for his last sitcom, NBC's *Love, Sidney* (a 1980 pilot and a two-year series, 1981-83). In it, Randall played Sidney Shorr, a discreet but openly gay man who takes in a struggling single mother (Swoosie Kurtz) and her young daughter (Kaleena Kiff). For many, this was first truly sympathetic and non-cliché depiction of homosexuality on American television and was indeed its first eponymous gay TV character. The program had to play down Sidney's homosexuality after the initial episodes, due to protest and outrage from the Moral Majority and other conservative groups, but the program was popular with more urban and less conservative audiences and was praised by Gay Rights groups for its lack of stereotyping

(Cooper). Boosted by this praise, the producers for the second season (Rod Parker and Hal Cooper) decided to be less discreet about his homosexuality at the end of the season, and indeed the last three episodes more openly discuss Sidney's sexuality. However, ratings in broader, rural and conservative America were so low that the show was cancelled after that (Randall).

* * *

Thus, the first wave of LGBT visibility did indeed come in the 1970s, though it was through a slow and somewhat irregular line of development throughout the decade, and one that began remarkably timidly with a showcasing of gender-bent characters on comedy programs that were stripped of their gay-friendly subtext, rewritten to appease conservative audiences, and/or reduced to more innocuous and traditional figures of burlesque slapstick—but that in all cases were still key actors in the movement towards "relevancy programming" as they were instead used as vehicles for other controversial, liberal-minded causes. Thus, *The Odd Couple* brought divorced men (and peripherally divorced women) squarely to the small screen for the first time, *The Flip Wilson Show* battled racism and was a vector for both pride and awareness of African-American culture and heritage, and *M*A*S*H* boldly touted anti-war and anti-establishment sentiment with themes of new feminism, anti-racism, and half a dozen others firmly in tow. The sitcoms of the early 1970s thus opted for an intermittent and piecemeal approach to dealing with LGBT themes, devoting an occasional episode to such topics and allowing for both positive and negative representations of gay, lesbian and transgender characters, and with either representation triggering the fury and indignation of either gay-friendly or conservative groups—if not both at once. However, even the more offensive and cliché representations of LGBT characters during this slow period of development may nevertheless have inadvertently helped the cause to advance, for indeed negative exposure is still exposure, is still visibility, and still generates public debate and the possibility of increased awareness. It may have taken seven years longer for LGBT issues to fully join the ranks of the decade's main liberal causes within the new "relevancy programming" mindset, but the change did indeed come, and finally went beyond discussion of homosexual males to bring lesbian, bisexual and transgender characters center stage as well. And though a far cry from our current wave of more

open acceptance and far more mature, nuanced portrayals of LGBT-identifying characters on sitcoms, the progress made in the 1970s, given the cultural climate of the time, is nothing short of remarkable.

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