



**AS SYDNEY'S GAY AND LESBIAN MARDI GRAS CELEBRATES ITS 40TH ANNIVERSARY, *RIOT* RECREATES THE DRAMA AND VIOLENCE OF THE FIRST 1978 MARCH. MATT MYERS PREVIEWS THE TELE-FILM AND TALKS TO AN ORIGINAL '78ER.**

**IN 1978**, Space Invaders filled video arcades, *Grease* was the word, and an intriguing new song called *Wuthering Heights* hit #1. For one group of Australians, though, it was a year of profound change, with challenges that would shape their lives and the lives of the following generations of what we now call the LGBTIQ community.

On June 24, 1978, a peaceful and legal street parade turned ugly when New South Wales Police revoked the march permit midway through the event and began assaulting the participants.

Gays and lesbians had organised the march to commemorate International Stonewall Day and call for the decriminalisation of homosexual sex in NSW. The violent night that ensued and its aftermath are regarded as Australia's own Stonewall and the commemoration of that event we now call Mardi Gras. An ABC telemovie, *Riot* dramatises the story through the recollections of those who were there – the '78ers.

*Riot* provides a graphic, firsthand account of the Australian gay and lesbian rights movement in its infancy. It spans 1972 to 1978, focusing on the individual stories of actual people. There's Lance Gowland, a spirited, union-bred activist living at the Gay Liberation commune and his partner Jim Walker, a conservative doctor. There's university students Peter Murphy and Jeremy Fisher, and Marg McMann and her lover Robyn Plaister. While *Riot* depicts Marg and Lance as natural leaders of the emerging movement, it also reveals the difficulties they faced being gay parents at a time when there was very little sympathy for

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such families. Marg's case is particularly poignant as she fights the Family Court and its bigotry towards lesbian mothers. It was a time when it was common for openly gay people to lose their jobs or their rental accommodation on the basis of their sexuality, and *Riot* depicts these everyday concerns of the characters.

Historic activist groups such as Gay Liberation and CAMP (Campaign Against Moral Persecution) are portrayed. CAMP's founders, couple Peter de Waal and Peter 'Bon' Bonsall-Boone featured in a 1972 edition of the ABC's *Chequerboard* – a precursor to *Australian Story*. The program depicted the couple's ordinary home life but the footage of two men kissing and discussing their love for one another was a first for Australian TV.

Now, at 79, Peter de Waal recalls participating in the program and the effect it had.

“Appearing on *Chequerboard* was most certainly a positive,” he says. “Over the years we've had feedback from many people who watched it. When Bon and I celebrated our 50th anniversary in 2016, there was a person at the party who recalled how he was living in the country when the program went to air. He was a teenager feeling very isolated and saw these two people... providing a very positive image, and from that point on he felt better about himself.

“The other thing to come out of that program was the acknowledgment of an enduring entity, which began in our house in 1973 and is still around today – the Gay And Lesbian Counselling Service. But also, after that program aired, Bon lost his job, which wasn't very positive.”

At the time *Riot* is set, homosexual sex between consenting adults was still a crime in NSW. Fifty-three of the original marchers were arrested. They were taken to Darlinghurst Police Station, held in cells, and many were beaten by the police.

“I wasn't arrested, but I did witness the beatings at the El Alamein fountain,” says Peter de Waal. “It started off being a very joyous and happy march down Oxford Street and then at the end [in Kings Cross] the police started using their batons. It went from a very joyful evening to the most miserable... well, a riot! Those arrested were taken to Darlinghurst Police Station, which, at the time, was notorious with suspected corruption amongst the police.

“We stood outside the station chanting to make sure those arrested could hear us. We wanted them to know they had support on the outside. The following week they had to appear in court and the police... tried to stop the solicitors representing [those arrested] from entering the court. There was a huge police presence but also a huge number of the community there to support those who'd been charged.”

Peter Murphy was one who was specifically targeted for bashing by the police and he has labelled his abuse a political crime.

Following the night of the riot there was a very public shaming the next day when *The Sydney Morning Herald* published the names of all those taken into custody, effectively outing them.

People were sacked, and families destroyed.

To understand the '78er characters and backstories, *Riot* producers sourced material from documentaries and YouTube interviews, including some conducted by The Sydney Pride History Group. They also met with surviving '78ers such as Peter de Waal, Peter Murphy, Ron Austin and Robyn Plaister, as well as talking to the children of Marg McMann and Lance Gowland, who are now deceased.

The filmmakers also drew on research from Gavin Harris and John Witte who wrote the Mardi Gras histories *It Was A Riot!* and *New Day Dawning*.

The *Riot* location shoots naturally feature Sydney's Oxford Street, Taylor Square and Kings Cross, with additional period facades created at Fox Studios. Interestingly, the original CAMP headquarters building in Balmain is vacant and proved perfect for recreating the site. Kings Cross was temporarily shut down for the filming and saw 200 extras with arms linked chanting, "Stop police attacks on gays, women and blacks!"

For the real '78ers visiting the set, there were "time tripping" memories and strong emotions.

"It was fascinating, in particular, to go back to 1970 when CAMP had its headquarters in Darling Street, Balmain," says de Waal. "The night I was there they were filming everyone watching the *Chequerboard* program that Bon and I were on, and it was quite emotional.

"I must say I was very happy with my alter-ego Luke Mullins ( *Holding The Man* ), and Bon's as well. They came to our house for a few hours where we chatted about our history. It was a bit surreal particularly seeing Eden Falk (*The Great Gatsby*) as Bon. When he came to the house he had the familiar beard, but wasn't wearing the black-rimmed glasses. Then when I saw him on set I was shocked as he looked so much like Bon!"

"Every single one of the people involved in that first Mardi Gras has an individual story," says Producer, Joanna Werner, "and the events of that night have had an incredible impact on their lives. It was important for us not to presume that we were trying to tell everybody's story."

But, Werner reveals, the location shoots were almost scuttled by an intriguing real-life irony.

"A few days before we were going to film, these wonderful, enormous rainbow banners were installed [along Oxford Street], in support of same-sex marriage," she says. "They were all over our key re-enactment locations and, as much as we wanted those banners to be there, we obviously couldn't have them in the background of our scenes. The City Of Sydney were wonderfully supportive and took the banners down at their own expense and put them back up when we'd finished. Having support like that was amazing."

The Summary Offences Act Of NSW was repealed in 1979, and decriminalisation followed in 1984, but it took near 40 years for an official apology from the NSW Parliament, police and *The Sydney Morning Herald*. How do the apologies sit with Peter de Waal?

"I think it was a bit tokenistic," he says. "I was



(ABOVE INSET) ROBYN PLAISTER BEING ARRESTED AT THE FIRST MARDI GRAS. THE IMAGE WAS PUBLISHED IN *THE DAILY TELEGRAPH* IN JUNE 1978; (MAIN IMAGE) ROBYN'S ARREST RECREATED FOR *RIOT*.



(TOP) A MOMENT OF TENDERNESS FROM *RIOT*; (ABOVE) AT CAMP HEADQUARTERS, THE ACTIVISTS WATCH PETER AND BON ON THE TV SHOW *CHEQUERBOARD*.

in parliament on the day that the so-called police apology was given, and very few members of the government were present in the chamber. Some of the police from that night are still around. If they had been there, perhaps there could have been some sort of conversation, or we could have asked questions like, how do they feel about things now? Would they still be as eager to arrest us today? Those kinds of things, on a personal level, would have been more satisfying."

Today, the Sydney Gay And Lesbian Mardi Gras is a national cultural treasure and a major tourist draw card, reportedly, pumping around \$30 million into the economy. But for those '78er pioneers, who kick-started the change in law, whose activism enhanced the civil rights of all Australian LGBTIQ people, it holds a personal significance that we can only imagine.

For Peter de Waal, the same-sex marriage win is bittersweet. He and Bon had planned to marry at their 50th anniversary, but Bon died five months prior to the passing of the new law, but de Waal sees the positive.

"It's a wonderful thing to happen for our community," he says. "That they can now take the option of a legal contract, because that's what marriage is; it's a wonderful achievement. But I think it's also important to keep an eye on history because we can always learn from it. What we did back then certainly galvanised the much smaller LGBTIQ community, and we became focused on working towards equal rights. I'm quite sure of that."

For the LGBTIQ community *Riot* will be a welcome recognition of the determination, dignity and humanity of our activist forefathers and foremothers, to whom we are indebted.

**MORE:** *Riot*, the tele-movie screens during February on ABC1 and on iView.

# THE CHEAT'S GUIDE TO THE HISTORY OF MARDI GRAS!

**1978** The first Mardi Gras parade begins peacefully with up to 500 participants, only to be violently interrupted by New South Wales police who arrest 53 and bash many on the streets and later in the cells.

**1979** The second Mardi Gras, themed *Power In The Darkness*, pays tribute to the previous year's riot and those arrested. Participants increase to 3,000 with no arrests.

**1980** The event moves from the winter to summer and officially becomes the Sydney Gay Mardi Gras. The parade draws a crowd of 5,000.

**1981** The Mardi Gras is postponed due to rain.

**1982** Mardi Gras makes a profit of \$4,000, while the first major after-party is held at the Sydney Showgrounds.

**1983** The Australia Council provides \$6,000 funding, and Sydney City Council places flags along Oxford Street. The parade (which includes ET and Mary Magdalene) attracts 20,000 people.

**1984** Footage from the parade is used in Cold Chisel's *Saturday Night* video. Mardi Gras makes a profit of \$42,000.

**1985** Almost cancelled due to the AIDS crisis, the year's theme is *Fighting For Our Lives*.

**1987** 100,000 spectators watch the Parade. New Zealanders officially join.

**1988** Indigenous Australian, Malcolm Cole dressed as Captain Cook leads an Aboriginal float at the head of the Parade. Dykes On Bikes join for the first time and the event is renamed Sydney Gay And Lesbian Mardi Gras.

**1989** Crowd size dramatically reaches 200,000.

**1990** The first Fair Day happens as part of the expanding Mardi Gras Festival. Fair Day is the second most-attended Mardi Gras event, only beaten by the Parade.

**1991** The Parade becomes the largest ever in Australia's history.

**1992** The festival now lasts four weeks, making it the largest of its kind in the world.

**1993** Mardi Gras rejects a \$33,000 *Playboy* condom sponsorship deal. The Parade crowd size reaches 500,000, making it the biggest night-time outdoor parade in the world.

**1994** The year's theme is *We Are Family*. 137 floats enter the Parade, watched by 600,000 spectators. The broadcast on the ABC earns the channel its highest ratings ever. Kylie Minogue performs at her first Mardi Gras Party.

**1995** Madonna dedicates her world premiere video *Bedtime Stories* to Mardi Gras. Boy George performs at the Party.

**1996** The organisation faces criticism over bisexuals and heterosexuals taking part. Telstra becomes the first major corporate sponsor. Thelma Houston performs.

**1997** Televised coverage moves to the commercial Network Ten. Party performers include Tina Arena, Chaka Khan and The Village People.

**1998** For the 20th anniversary, 220 original '78ers are invited to lead the parade, with New South Wales police marching for the first time - a sign of reconciliation. An estimated \$99 million is contributed into the economy. The Parade is webcast. Kylie and Dannii both perform, as does Jimmy Somerville.

**2000** The Festival is launched with the lighting of an Olympic-themed ceremonial flame at the Sydney Opera House.

**2001** The Party includes Chrissie Amphlett (The Divinyls) performing with 24 lesbian vampires and 24 demonic male dancers.



PHOTOGRAPHY BY JEFFREY FENG.

**2002** Mardi Gras goes into receivership with a \$500,000 loss, but is saved by community organisations and becomes New Mardi Gras.

**2003** The Parade is back on track, and former rugby star Ian Roberts is Chief Of Parade.

**2006** Gaydar provides a \$1.5 million sponsorship deal. *Brokeback Mountain* inspires the marching Brokeback Boys Parade entry.

**2007** Actor Rupert Everett is Chief Of Parade and Boy George DJs the Party.

**2008** The 30th anniversary sees 100 ministers of religion marching to apologise for Christianity's treatment of gay people. Olivia Newton-John and Cyndi Lauper perform.

**2009** Olympic gold medalist Matthew Mitcham is Chief Of Parade.

**2010** Adam Lambert, Kelly Rowland and George Michael all perform. George stays on in Sydney for several weeks.

**2011** Intersex is added into the Mardi Gras organisation remit extending the acronym to LGBTIQ and there are eight Chiefs Of Parade including Lily Tomlin and Peter Tatchell.

**2012** The Parade includes 10,000 participants and honours Kylie Minogue's 25-year career and support of the community. RuPaul, Sam Sparro and Sneaky Sound System also perform.

**2013** The Australian Armed Forces march for the first time (in uniform) and the famous rainbow crossing appears on Oxford Street. Police are accused of brutality after a video of a Parade bystander being handcuffed and thrown to the ground appears on social media.

**2014** The People With Disabilities Australia group enters the Parade for the first time.

**2015** Mardi Gras stages a Freddie Mercury flash mob, *Are You Ready 4 Freddie?* on a Darling Harbour footbridge.

**2017** The City Of Sydney's *Say Yes To Love* float highlights the year's same-sex marriage debate. The Veronicas and Steve Grand sex-up the Party performances.