

THE SECRET LIFE OF KATHARINE HEPBURN

The Advocate

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How the Fab 5 from *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy* helped spark the current frenzy over gay rights

EXCLUSIVE
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Queer Eye

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Queer Eye executive producers David Collins (in caps) and David Metzler with the Fab 5



Queer eye

CONFIDENTIAL

The firings! The budgets! The filthy bathtub! *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy's* Fab 5 and their two equally fab producers spill the beans on how reality TV's queerest twist turned into the hottest show of the summer **By Michael Giltz**

Have you ever wondered what it's like to live in a whirlwind? Just spend the afternoon in New York's Chelsea district with the stars of the summer's biggest hit show, *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy*.

It debuted to record numbers on Bravo (where it airs Tuesdays at 10 P.M.), was immediately picked up by NBC to air in a special edition in the plum Thursday night lineup, and quickly received an order for seven more episodes to go with the initial 12.

E! Entertainment Television is sending a crew to follow the show's Fab 5 around for a special. They're scheduled to make over Jay Leno and *The Tonight Show*. And the *New York Post* ran a huge Sunday fea-

ture on the quip-ready fashion guru Carson Kressley that called him the "Queen of Mean." And Clinique called interior design expert Thom Filicia to basically say it wanted to send grooming guy Kyan Douglas every product it has ever made or ever will make in hopes he'll use some of them on the air.

Their phones never stop ringing; some of them have day jobs to attend to. And of course, with the five of them together at the restaurant Elmo, it's no surprise that people on Seventh Avenue stare and smile, sometimes walking over to offer kudos. Three diners even recognize the show's cultural expert, Jai Rodriguez, from his other identity as an actor whose starring



roles include the recently closed off-Broadway musical *Zanna, Don't!*

As they all share stories about being stopped on the street or on Fire Island by well-wishers, food-and-wine guy Ted Allen spills a little something on his shirt. A waiter quickly whips off his periwinkle-blue polo so Ted—the only coupled man among the Fab 5, marking 10 years with his partner—can be properly attired for the photographer. And this, by the way, is their day off. Welcome to their world.

CASTING CONUNDRUMS

Casting the Fab 5, admits executive producer David Collins, "was a very long event." He and fellow executive producer David Metzler looked at "300 to 400 guys, maybe 500," says Collins, who is 36 and has been in a relationship for 14 years with the man he met on the set of *Little Man Tate*.

"It felt like we'd met every gay man in New York," adds Metzler, who is 31, single, and straight.

"The sensibility for it was finding credible professionals who had amazing personalities and could work together," says Collins. "We were putting together groups of five and putting them together and pulling them apart again."

One person who got pulled was original cast member Blair Boone, who appears in two early episodes as

the "guest culture expert" in place of Jai. "It was Jai's energy that we really needed for the culture category in terms of being a performer," says Metzler. "We sort of found him in the middle of the first episode."

The switch was a shock to the remaining cast members. "We had absolutely no clue up until the moment," says Thom, who like everyone else speaks warmly about Blair.

Their initial reaction, adds Ted, was "We could be fired at any moment!"

"It could easily have been me," Thom insists.

MAKEOVER SECRETS

So, truth be told, do the Fab 5 really work all that magic on the straight guys in one day?

"No, that's gay time," Collins quips.

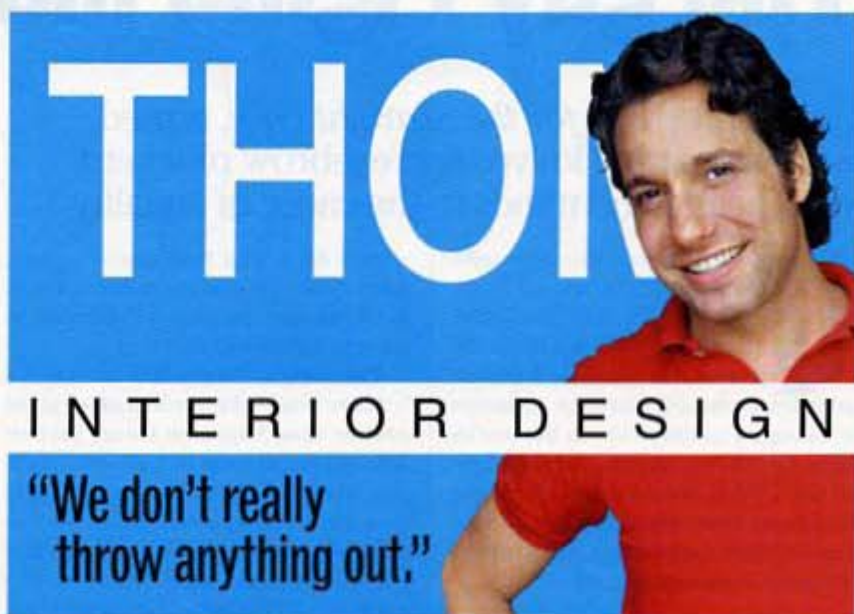
"It takes four days to shoot an episode," Metzler says.

Thom—who has the most labor-intensive job—has a small staff that helps him with the painting, carpeting, tiling, or whatever else needs doing. "After we're done with our initial de-straightening," he says, "which is when we go into someone's home and rip everything apart, I have a big meeting with them in the space and we pick the colors and really fine-tune exactly what it is we're going to do, what it is we're going to keep, what we put in storage for them. We don't really throw anything out."

As Carson says, "We don't throw it away; we tuck it away."

Unlike other makeover shows, *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy* never discloses its budgets. "It's not about what you can do with an amount of money," says Metzler. "It's about giving the straight guy a starter kit he can move on from. A really nice starter kit."

The Fab 5's endorsement of particular brands is genuine: No company can pay for placement on the show without their approval. "We will not work with a company or a line we don't feel is right," says Kyan. ▶





GROOMING



"I enjoy my relationship with straight men."

Carson cuts in: "Remember when they wanted to use K-Y jelly as a hair product?" he jokes.

Getting products wasn't easy at first. With just a concept and the daring title Collins had selected, companies were not clamoring to participate.

"My wardrobe person and I really had to call in a lot of favors," says Carson. "Nobody knew what the show was

about, and nobody had seen anything, and people like Marc Jacobs and Roberto Cavalli and Etro really went out on a limb. They just opened their doors and said, "Take what you want. Shoot it and bring it back. We appreciate the PR."

Admittedly, the show's title may have put off the timid. When trying to win over an advertiser before the show debuted, Jai says, "our product placement

person would save the title until after she had explained the whole show."

"There are a lot of people in the rest of the world that aren't even familiar with the word *queer* being a positive word for us now," Ted says. "And being an inclusive word. We've had to explain that to so many straight reporters."

SCARY STRAIGHT GUYS

Wondering where *Queer Eye* gets its straight guys? Fliers went up in New York City. Casting directors put out a call for straight men who could "stand up to the transformation," says Scout Productions spokesman Ron Hofmann.

"Each [guy] is a total surprise," says Ted. "We do get a little bit of a dossier on what he's like. But they want our reaction to be real. So we don't get to see the inside of the apartment until the first day of shooting. And it's a fresh hell each time."

"Week before last," Kyan says with a shudder, "I actually carved the guy's name in the bottom of his tub with a knife. That was an all-time low for me."

Everyone agrees that a big key to the show's success is that the Fab 5 don't mock or belittle the clueless schlub. "From the beginning, when we pitched it

COMMENTARY

The gay rights makeover

How *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy*, armed with just paring knives and eyebrow pluckers, wins hearts and minds to the cause of equality

Queer Eye for the Straight Guy debuted just 19 days after the U.S. Supreme Court abolished sodomy laws, 28 days after Canada's prime minister promised marriage to same-sex couples countrywide. In the weeks since the show's launch, the president of the United States drew a straight line from homosexuality to sin, and the Vatican lashed out at "gravely immoral" homosexual couples.

And so it was that Bravo's sleek party boat of a makeover show found itself made over: into a battleship in the war for gay rights.

The antigay forces like to call it a "culture war"—the emotionally loaded phrase that Supreme Court justice Antonin Scalia used in his bitter, partisan dissent in the *Lawrence v. Texas* case. His screechy prediction of the collapse of traditional morality was the first rallying cry in the latest onslaught. The

drumbeat from Fox News and talk radio has since been deafening: The timeless puritan paradise called America is under attack by sinners and sex addicts and child molesters—people whom no good citizen would want for a neighbor.

Problem is, America's favorite new neighbors are a team of loud, opinionated gay men: *Queer Eye's* Fab 5. Welcomed into a different hetero home each week, they're asked to put their queer sensibility to work to fix what's wrong with straight guys. And they do.

As fundamentalist preachers and right-wing politicians demonize and divide, the Fab 5 are doing the Lord's own work with rubber gloves, natural

to Bravo," Metzler says, "the story of the friendship of the Fab 5 and the straight guy was at the heart of the pitch."

"We started with not being mean-spirited," adds Collins.

As they began shooting, "it's something that evolved," says Ted, who worked on the unbroadcast pilot with Carson—making them the two "oldest" *Queer Eye*s. "But I think it was probably important to Dave and Dave all along that the show had a heart to it. It just sort of came naturally. When you ask us to come into somebody's life and try to help them out, we're going to sincerely do that. I think that's why the show appeals to such a cross section of people."

"Certainly, that [casting] process was about finding people who weren't catty and jaded and bitchy," Jai says.

"Some of my best friends are straight," Ted offers. "And there's nothing wrong with them."

"As long as they act gay in public," Carson snaps, "I'm fine with it."

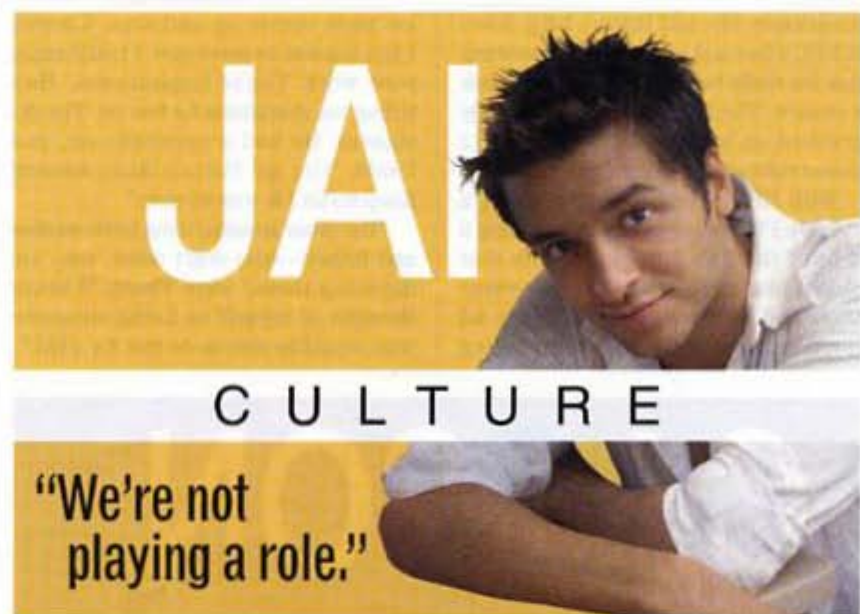
"I enjoy my relationship with straight men," Kyan says. "It's very nurturing. It's very validating to hang out with straight guys and be accepted. So many of us, we were not accepted when we were younger by straight persons in high school."

fabrics, and pre-shave oils: Strengthening the family. Abolishing chaos. Fostering fellowship. Cleaning house.

No wonder Kyan, Jai, Ted, Thom, and, of course, Carson have far-right flacks so beside themselves with fury. "The media is not a mirror of the culture," inequality advocate Phyllis Schlafly fumed, nonsensically and ungrammatically, when asked about the popularity of shows like *Queer Eye*. "The media is trying to create culture."

Hardly. It's been an untrumpeted truism for millennia that gays have been the trendsetters and style gurus of Western culture, from Alexander the Great to Michelangelo to Andy Warhol. But our sexuality has always been pushed to the background; it's our taste, not our touch, people have sought. Straight men could steal gays' style and still slander our flamboyance.

Queer Eye says goodbye to all that. By playing into gay stereotypes, the Fab



SELLING THE STEREOTYPES

Bravo loved the *Queer Eye* concept from the get-go. "When we threw out this idea and the straight guys were more excited than the gay guys," Collins says, "you knew the timing was right."

The cable channel received the pilot in September 2002, and the show

tested well. Then NBC suddenly purchased the channel, which meant winning over a whole new bevy of bosses. "We thought for sure it was all over," Collins says. "We thought, *OK, that was fun. We got to make a pilot, and it's going to stay on the shelf.*"

Instead, a gracious executive intervened, he recalls: "Frances Berwick at Bravo really did something quite ▶

5, paradoxically, lay them to rest. They're so personable and sharp and real that the clichés they embody are magically reconstructed as richly human, without the tiniest swatch of shame. They even effortlessly refute the canard of the predatory gay man hankering for some straight booty: They slap and tickle, and everyone gets the joke. Flirting is just good fun, not a sexual assault. In a way that must drive Scalia crazy, the Fab 5 are both aggressively sexual and nonthreatening. They play well with others.

Winning gay and lesbian marriage rights in the United States will be an uphill effort for years to come, but in a few short weeks *Queer Eye* has high-glossed over centuries of prejudice

and fear. It's "We're here, we're queer" with a sensible dose of altruism. In place of the confrontational "Get used to it!" is a brotherly "May we help you?"

And one of the ultimate joys of *Queer Eye* is this: The Fab 5 are reshaping how America sees gay people not

because they chose to be overt activists but because they chose to be designers and gourmets and groomers—to straight eyes, the gayest jobs on the planet. They don't even seem to know or care that they're fighting the good fight, which makes them elusive targets for our enemies.

Who would have thought throw pillows and chocolate mousse could be among the most powerful weapons of social change?

—Bruce C. Steele

THE ADVOCATE POLL

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Is *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy* a step forward for the gay rights movement?

Sign on to The Advocate's Web site before September 2 to cast your vote and leave your comments. Results will appear in the September 30 issue.

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