



MARK GATISS

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ACTOR/WRITER

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ark Gatiss has come to occupy a unique position in the gayscape of British culture.

Since *The League of Gentlemen* crossed over in 1999, he's been a constant on our stages and screens, enjoying a rich and varied career as an actor and writer, which has taken him up to his current golden boy status as a star and co-creator of *BBC One's Sherlock*. He's managed to be 'visible' but never quite 'famous', and kept one foot in the subversive, even as his success has pushed him into ever-luvvier circles.

Yet neither has there ever been any kind of 'coming out' moment. Gatiss is gay and everybody has just always sort of known it. It's a quietly revolutionary place to be.

"I've never been 'in' in terms of the rest of the world," says Mark, as we sit down for coffee in a theatre cafe in his North London shire. "All my friends knew [even before I told my parents] and I've never been 'in' as a writer or actor, which I'm pleased with, really. I've never intended to make any political capital out of it, but I've never disguised the fact, as remarkably people do to this day, because they're advised by their agents.

"I was in America only last week, and they sometimes talk about you going and doing something out there, and I always give the same answer, rather unfashionably, that I just want to be happy. The thing I'd say, especially to actors struggling with the idea that unless they stay in the closet they'll fuck up their Hollywood careers or potential, is really what's more important? It's difficult for people to wrestle with sometimes, but what could possibly be worth fucking yourself for to that extent?

Nothing really."

As more prominent US actors emerge from the closet, like Zachary Quinto and Matt Bomer, does Mark think the assumption that Hollywood is reluctant to cast out gay men in straight leading roles still holds water?

"I'm sure people will be crossed off lists that they might have been on. But do you want to live a lie for the rest of your life? I think it's fair to say that if you're a leading man, it's still very difficult."

Which brings us to the thorny issue of representation. Do high profile homos have a responsibility to be open?

"I'm rather torn about this, I always have been. There's something slightly scary and fascistic about trying to force people out, because I think everybody's story is different and it's impossible to judge from an outside perspective what might have led someone to be very closeted. I mean, I'd rather people talked about it and found a way they were happy with, rather than the sort of militant ejecting people out of closets like torpedoes, which has kind of gone away now.

"And it's equally difficult thinking about being a role model... it's very nice. It's good to think about because I wish there'd been more people when I was growing up, but at the same time, it's difficult to take on responsibility for other people in that sort of way."

Gatiss himself represents a quite atypically gay sensibility. Sure, he cast Diana Rigg as a Victorian crone with a red leech monster protruding from her bosom in an episode of *Doctor Who* last year, but with an equally prominent obsession with war movies and Bond films, he also cuts an alternative sort of figure who might well prove useful for young kids struggling with sexuality.

"I get a lot of tweets and things from teenagers who see me and Ian [Hallard, Mark's civil partner]

as positive role models and I think that's wonderful. But at the same time, I'm very wary of taking on a sort of mantle, because it's not for me to do it. It's also not for people to project much onto you, because that's unfair too."

Now that there's a semblance of equality under the law at least, does gay need to be a person's defining characteristic in the way it's perhaps needed to be in the past?

"I think it's very dangerous to assume that all the battles are won, although we live in an incredibly different world. I remember going on the equality marches outside Parliament 20 years ago and it feels like a lifetime ago. So the world is very different, but you also have to be aware that one lives in a



Mark as Joan Crawford with Frances Barber in Psychobitches >

dangerously metropolitan bubble, and it's not the same outside of London or outside the big cities, or even in some of the big cities. It's dangerous to assume that everything's fine just because it feels like gay people can get in touch with each other so easily. What it actually means is that a lot of vulnerable people might be more easily exploitable. So I think it's the same, but different."

One triumph of Mark's work though is that he's an out and active gay man who's sidestepped these arguments about representation.

Look at the vitriol directed to, say, Corrie's Antony Cotton, whose row-of-tents character Sean Tully is accused of setting the cause back 20 years.

"You see, that's the danger of somehow having to be emblematic. Obviously Corrie is the most famous and popular soap in the country, so there's a responsibility there, but to pretend that there aren't very, very camp gay men would be a lie. For my taste, I preferred Corrie when all the gay men were basically old women. That's how it was written, there were definitely gay characters from 1960 onwards – but they were all old battle-axes!"

Arguments continue to rage about our representation on TV, though.

"The danger is, if any minority is under-represented, the moment you have representation it accumulates, like a magnet, the expectations of an entire generation. It's like British films. If we made enough of them, we'd be allowed to make more that were just OK. But if there's a breakthrough British film then suddenly it has to be the one, and if it isn't then we think we've failed again.

"If you had a broader spectrum of gay characters, you'd have no problem with one of them being an annoying dick, or one of them being a psycho, or one of them being beautiful and one of them not being."

Or even one of them being fat.

"Yes, but I don't want to see that," he says with a dramatic – and quite obviously sarcastic – flourish.

These days, of course, Mark is one of the lead writers and public ambassadors for Doctor Who, a show not without its share of bendy aficionados. Think-pieces will be written as to why this is the case until the end of time, but what's Mark's take?

"In the old days, I'd have said it was something about the idea of being slightly outside of everything. From its inception, the Doctor is not a conventional hero and that's how it should always be, so I suppose there's some kind of identification there on a very deep level. But part of it's just the fun, isn't it? The

monsters, at certain times in its history, have had a certain camp value – and then the opposite, quite strangely.

"I think as well there's something about the TARDIS, a home you could always take with you was kind of like the ultimate gay man's fantasy. You have all the things that comfort you, but you can also get to all these exotic places and meet strange people."

And as for his other show – whole swathes of the internet are determined to believe that Sherlock and John are shagging, and this can extend to the rest of the cast. It was even suggested recently to Moriarty actor Andrew Scott that the character is a 'frustrated power bottom.' So where does Mark think Mycroft might sit on the sexual spectrum?

"Well in the end it's the question that remains, not the answer. That's what's intriguing. We filmed episode three of series one first, and at the very last minute I decided to put a ring on [his little] finger. I get asked at least once a week, is Mycroft married? Well no, it's on the wrong finger, except in some parts of the world where it's the correct finger. No, it's just a ring. People speculate wildly – I say let them. That's much more interesting than filling in detail.

"Personally, I think Mycroft and Sherlock are like Niles and Frasier Crane, and Mycroft is definitely the Niles in that situation. And whatever Sherlock wrestles with, I think Mycroft sees as a purely intellectual problem."

Mark gives one of his trademark cackles before disappearing off into the bustle of London to dream up more adventures.

"So I wouldn't say anything definitive, but I think such matters might be beneath his dignity!" ■

Mark Gatiss was photographed by Matt Crockett exclusively for the book 50 Comics, @mrmattcrockett, mattcrockett.com. Hair and makeup by Najat Johnson, @markgatiss

