

Cartoon misadventures with a gay twist

Short film Happy and Gay puts LGBTI characters in the spotlight



Cartoon misadventures with a gay twist. Image courtesy of Lorelei Pepi

The animated musical cartoons of the 1930s have been given a revisionist twist by filmmaker Lorelei Pepi with *Happy and Gay*.

Animation during the 1930s was influenced heavily by censorship, prejudice, and negative stereotypes, and Pepi responds to that by inserting positive representation of LGBTI characters into the narrative.

We spoke with writer and director Lorelei Pepi for a behind-the-scenes look at the short:

What was your inspiration for this story?

As an American, I was heavily influenced by the experience of the USA's religious extremists fighting against LGBT people's health during the AIDS crisis, civil rights, and same-sex marriage. My rising frustration, sadness and anger motivated me into taking on a creative project as a response.

I'm an animator, and it's my art form for putting my sense of self and language into a form that expresses it outwardly and effectively. I've always had a devotion to the earliest forms of animation from the 1930s, with cartoons that came from The Fleischer Brothers like Betty Boop, and the early Walt Disney animation that featured Mickey Mouse.

Ironically, a DVD release of old material revealed some problematic gay-bashing material that came from someone that I greatly admired. This was Ub Iwerks, who was Disney's right-hand man and was responsible for bringing Mickey Mouse into existence. It turned out that his own studio's cartoons showed a significant disdain and belittling of gay men. Cartoon shorts of this time-period showcased the social-cultural attitudes of the time, and there were many cartoon studios that included awful stereotypes depicting numerous types of people and cultures.

I decided that I wanted to create a historically revised 1930s cartoon, one that gave a positive portrayal of LGBT characters. I felt like it would be a really amazing and rewarding response to an otherwise pretty miserable and painful situation.

What was the production process like?

My goal was to create a revisionist history document. The production process involved significant research for historical cultural information, as well as closely studying the animation production methods and results. I learned all about the Pansy Craze that took place in NYC during the Harlem Renaissance, as well as an important, yet mysterious Pansy character in Ub Iwerk's films.

For animation purposes, I initially tested the process for shooting to film because that would be the most authentic method to work, but it was way too laborious and expensive. I then developed digital methods that would allow me to do it completely digitally, but achieve the hand-drawn quality and old film look.

The fastest part was the script and storyboard, and the main elements came together in a few weeks. The entire process took a long time, as the idea first came to me in 2004, production began in 2005, and I released the film in 2014. To add context, I had to carry various paying jobs, and other life stuff happened along the way, so I wasn't working full time on this through those years. It was a labour of intense proportions, but it needed to be done.

The music plays a key role in the story, what was the process for creating the music and songs for the film?

The music is brilliantly inspiring, and fully the responsibility of Brian Carpenter, who is an amazing composer and musician. I found him through the Cambridge, MA music scene that was into theatrical, Weimar Cabaret styled music.

Brian and I worked together right away, before any animation was done. Our work relied heavily on all the old cartoons and musical research materials for influencing the music and production style. An example of a historical method that we employed was a visual bouncing ball within my animatic storyboard, to indicate the exact rhythmic pacing, allowing Brian and I to exactly synch the rhythms and tempos in the animation and music. This process originated with Carl Stalling, an important figure in the history of animation music. Stalling's music composition approaches were also very influential, because he incorporated both musical accompaniment as well as musical sounds that generated narrative information. We also pulled inspiration from early ragtime jazz, which honours the films that came out of the Fleischer Studios.

What does the film have to say about the representation of same-sex relationships?

The film is a mix of historical and contemporary attitudes on same-sex relationships, because the old problems are still relevant and resonate today. During the time period that this film is echoing, the Motion Picture Production Code was actively censoring representations of homosexuality in Hollywood films. The homosexual could be depicted as wicked and deserving of punishment or death, but never be shown as normal or worthy of admiration. There were certainly real same-sex relationships at that time, but they were deeply hidden and repressed because of anti-homosexuality laws and cultural condemnations. Having these two couples in my film be in same-sex relationships would be 100 percent impossible to depict in the era of the 1930s. It makes my film something that could not have been made or shown at the time it represents.

What do you hope that audiences feel when watching this film?

I intentionally wanted the film to be able to reach out to audiences through the experience of entertainment and humour, and for the film to be something accessible for a general audience. I was hoping that there would initially be a positive feeling surrounding the portrayal of my main characters and their experiences, but that it would become increasingly problematic for the audience. The conflicting emotions would come from seeing the gradual inclusion of the old cartoon stereotyped characters, which I intentionally place in the film as historical memories and reminders. There's also the problematic responses of the man on the street, the police, and religious groups to the LGBT characters, which brings conflicting emotions as well.

What has the response to the film been like so far?

The response has been excellent. I've had very enthusiastic appreciation for the film. It's been able to be involved in festival screenings, as well as social and humanitarian education activities, bringing community conversation about the topics of representation.

What next for Lorelei Pepi?

I'm in production with an animation installation project. I'm taking up the subject of the virtual female body through a feminist's perspective. It's not exactly a light topic, and the approach will be much more serious, but I feel quite compelled by it.

Happy and Gay is distributed by Peccadillo Pictures as part of its compilation Boys On Film 17: Love Is The Drug.

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