



Spring 2014

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Recommended Citation

Bigelow, Brittnie, "Jodie Dallas Has Left the Closet: Television's First Regularly Occurring Gay Male Character and What He Had to Say About His Time" (2014). *WWU Honors Program Senior Projects*. 3.

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Jodie Dallas Has Left the Closet: Television's First Regularly Occurring Gay Male Character and What He Had to Say About His Time

Brittnie Bigelow
Honors Senior Thesis
June 2014

Susan Harris's first significant role as a television scriptwriter was when she was hired to be a part of the writing team for *All in the Family*, and eventually the lead writer for the infamous spin-off *Maude*. These television shows served as the springboard for Harris's particular brand of feminism and left-wing politics within the landscape of television, but ultimately these were not actually her shows. She was writing about someone else's creation, and that limited the kinds of political and social topics she could take on. Following her experience with these ground-breaking shows, Susan Harris was given the opportunity as a lead writer for a new show that would again allow her a platform for political and social topics, but now as the head writer and creator.

When creating the show *Soap*, writer Susan Harris decided the major plot points that she wanted to hit in five seasons, and wrote them down. This was referred to as the *Soap Bible*. It was relatively short, but it outlined every single thing the author wanted to do in the show. When *Soap* then needed to be approved by ABC and the executives for its content, Harris sent a copy of the Bible along for approval. The response was handed down in the form of a memo. The memo was then leaked to the L.A. Times, who published a full version of the document.

Parts of the memo are the kinds of notes you would expect from the show's executives at ABC during the seventies. For example, "Please ensure that Peter and Jessica [a married couple in the show] are adequately covered in this bedroom sequence."¹ Many of the other notes have to do with curtailing some of the cursing on the show, making sure they would not get in the trouble with the censors for indecency. The problems really came from three separate notes, two of which were about one specific character. "In order to treat

¹ Taming A Lusty Show, LA times (Los Angeles), June 1977.

Jodie as a gay character, his portrayal must at all times be handled without “limp-wristed” actions or other negative stereotyping.”², “The relationship between Jodie and the football player should be handled in such a manner that explicit or intimate aspects of homosexuality are avoided entirely.”³

Unbeknownst to many people who were a part of the watchdog community in the seventies, Jodie Dallas, the first regularly appearing gay character on a television series, had been approved to appear on ABC. His appearance, along with the other parts of the memo dealing with sexually overt dialogue and themes, caused many people to rise up in arms, and protests happened in front of the ABC offices in both L.A. and New York, making *Soap* the first show ever protested against before it even aired.

The stir following the *Soap* Memo, and the resulting protests and threats, gave evidence to the reality of changing times and need for a platform to challenge old ideas and beliefs. Susan Harris found that platform, television, and her new show, *Soap*. *Soap* was, above all else, a parody, usually of the soap opera genre, though the show was not afraid to reach beyond that. The characters, then, became parodies of easily identifiable television stereotypes. The glaring exception was Jodie. Jodie, as a gay character, had no stereotypes to work off of that existed within the space of television. While there had been gay characters on television before Jodie, they were one-shot characters, or guest stars, with no character development. Jodie’s situation had to be a parody of something else. Jodie’s relationships with his family became a political parody, a stage for airing the bases and stereotypes, especially of the right, during this time. Susan Harris accomplished the task of bringing to life, on television, these varied viewpoints on homosexuality through Jodie’s

² Taming a Lusty Show.

³ Taming a Lusty Show.

interactions with other characters and events, such as Burt (his stepfather), Chuck and Bob. However, this did not mean that Jodie, himself, was a parody character.

Jodie

Jodie Dallas is introduced in such a way to make it obvious to the audience who he is supposed to be. Or, perhaps more importantly, what he is supposed to be. He sings “Oh what a beautiful morning” as he enters, purposely trying to incite a response from his stepfather, who will shortly reveal himself to be homophobic.⁴ It is the kind of introduction you would expect from a show that was a parody, throwing the viewer’s perception one direction, for reaction, while building his character in another direction in the following episodes. Jodie is possibly one of the most realistic characters on the entire show. Jodie himself is portrayed as normal, and his storylines are written more seriously. Susan Harris wanted to bring forth a political agenda that had never had the time to grow before on television—that gay men are people, too, and unlike heterosexuals, have additional societal burdens and pressures that can become so difficult to carry. Susan Harris made those storylines more serious, to make his character more sympathetic, as well as more relatable at some level. Jodie’s character was created to convince audiences that gay men were not perverted sinners the religious right claimed they were.

The paramount goal for Susan Harris was to prove that gay men had the same kind of humanity as any man, and the right wing’s political verbiage of fear and condemnation of the gay community had robbed them of this respect. Earlier that same year, for example, Anita Bryant had openly called homosexuals “human garbage.”⁵ The best example of

⁴ *Soap*. DVD. Created by Susan Harris. 1977-1981; Los Angeles, California; Witt/Thomas/Harris Productions, 2012; Season 1, Episode 1.

⁵ Thomas Borstelmann, *The 1970s: A New Global History From Civil Rights to Economic Inequality*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2011), Kindle Edition, 161.

Harris's attempts happened almost immediately in the first season. Jodie is a commercial director, and it is revealed that he met his boyfriend, football star Dennis Phillips, while filming a commercial for cologne. After some short back and forth, Dennis tells Jodie that he has been dating women to keep up the tough guy image that is important in football.

Jodie: "A woman. Does she know?"

Dennis: "I haven't told her yet."

Jodie: "Well Dennis, when you touch her and throw up, I think she's going to be suspicious."⁶

The discussion that the two of them go through is a very familiar conversation, something that gay men who did not want to come out of the closet probably had many times in their life time. The two of them are talking about Dennis's beard, the woman that he was dating in an attempt to hide his sexuality from the rest of the world. Jodie does not want Dennis to suffer. His solution, however, is rather extreme. He chooses to get a sex change operation so that Dennis will not have to worry about being seen with a man anymore.

To be clear: Jodie is not a transsexual. He had never expressed an interest in switching his gender identity before this time, and after this plot line ends, his need to become a woman is never mentioned again. What he is doing is trying, desperately, to find a solution to the problem that he and Dennis currently have in their relationship, namely that Dennis cannot and will not come out to the public because it will jeopardize his future earnings once he leaves the NFL. Jodie believes he has found the only solution that will save the relationship, to become a woman. Despite the extreme circumstances, Jodie is doing what a lot of people do in relationships. They are going as far as they feel they need

⁶ *Soap*, Season 1, Episode 4.

to in order to stay in the relationship, whether the other person agrees with their solution or not. It is a sympathetic moment.

That plot line comes to a head a few episodes later, when Jodie is already in the hospital, being prepped for surgery with the hormone treatments he would need. Dennis breaks off the relationship, as he cannot handle the idea of Jodie going through the surgery for him, the responsibility being too great. “Boy I can really pick ‘em. No sense being a girl now. Actually, there’s no sense in being. It’s checkout time. Make life a lot easier for me. Mom. Burt. Anita Bryant.”⁷ This moment is so poignant because, finally, the pressures of what Jodie is feeling have become too much to bear for him. His relationship has been broken, and he is seeing his life for what it is at the time. Sadly, Jodie does, indeed, take the pills, though he is rescued in time.

This storyline, despite how short it is, is very lugubrious. Jodie is a very likable man who was trying to keep his relationship alive, a relationship that he genuinely wanted to work out because he loved him. When it did not, he was shattered. As most people have experienced a devastating break up, where even momentary thoughts of not wanting to continue on with life were entertained, Jodie’s pain was relatable to his audience. Jodie’s reference to Anita Bryant, however, gives the audience a reminder of the unsympathetic side and the deeper struggle of his mind. Bryant was a person who thought that gay men were perverted aberrations, and believed they should all repent for their “evil” lives. The audience from this time period knew the kind of pressure the religious right brought to homosexual’s life and the huge psychological challenges they had to face. Susan Harris wanted her audience to see and feel that pressure through Jodie.

⁷ *Soap*, Season 1, Episode 10.

All of Jodie's storylines are written to force the audience to experience the prejudice and pain through Jodie's eyes, though the circumstances are never as extreme as his brush with suicide. Jodie gets a woman pregnant and has to fight for custody of the child. He has to deal with various ups and downs in his love life. All of these events and people are relatable to the normal viewer. The issues were the same as those experienced by the audience, except that Jodie was gay. Jodie is a completely normal character, going through relatively normal life struggles. And that is very purposeful.

The other characters on *Soap* are, at the very least, exaggerations of stereotypes that make them unreal. With Jodie out of the room, *Soap* feels much more devoid of real human beings, replaced with these odd almost-humans that populate the rest of the cast, reminiscent of the Stepford wives. Amongst the women, for example, the cast has the dumb one (Jessica), the black widow (Eunice), the hippie girl who is punished for not conforming (Corinne), and the audience surrogate (Mary). These are the characters that are saying something directly about the television space, rather than anything about the real world, or the political space, like Jodie is. Because of their surreal nature, each of them is not quite as relatable and important politically as Jodie. Jodie is a real person that the audience either knows or wants to know. Everyone else could only exist behind a television screen. Making Jodie as real as she did allowed Susan Harris to make his troubles real, and his character real, which made her political agenda easier to argue in the long run. A sympathetic character would win popularity in this regard, an important strategy in Susan Harris's writing to promote conversation and debate.

With the audience firmly behind Jodie's character, Susan Harris had built the platform needed to bring focus to her political arguments. The characters in Jodie's scene

were used for this purpose. The three biggest culprits for these awkward moments and extreme reactions were Chuck, Bob, and Burt.

Chuck and Bob

Chuck is Jodie's stepbrother, and he comes to live with the family after he reconnects with Burt, Jodie's step-father and Chuck's father. Chuck does not talk much, but Bob does. Bob is Chuck's ventriloquist dummy, and is a menace to society. Many people who watched the show back when it first aired talk about Chuck and Bob as their favorite characters, but that is usually after a quick reminder that they existed. Chuck and Bob had no great affect on the existing story. On the surface, the characters only really seem to exist for comic relief. In reality, though, Chuck and Bob were created to serve a metaphorical function, especially in regards to Jodie. Bob is a metaphorical representation of the intolerant policies that the new right was touting as something that would save the American family, Chuck being his opposite that represents the rest of the party. *Soap* transitions into a parody of the conservatives' vast intolerances and hatreds of the time.

The introduction of Bob's character was clearly meant to elicit shock, pushing the political and social envelope even further than had been done. One of the first things that Bob says to Jodie is, "I love Anita Bryant."⁸ In 1977, that was the worst thing that a person could say to any homosexual, especially since Anita Bryant started the rumor that gay men recruited young boys into the lifestyle.⁹ This was the bar that was set for Bob. While Chuck is polite, perhaps even quietly repressed, the dummy Bob is the opposite and seems to have the unique ability to find the topics and issues that will most embarrass or upset any individual and say them, with no filters, Jodie is the only character who responds by openly

⁸ *Soap*, Season 1, Episode 8.

⁹ *The 1970s*, 116.

fighting with Bob, a response that seemed to push Bob to his worst. Bob's favorite topic to throw at Jodie was the Anita Bryant and the Miami-Dade fight that made her so famous within homosexual political circles, especially since Bryant's supporters and peers claimed that homosexuals would "kill you as quick as look at you."¹⁰

There's a woman named Alice that Jodie meets in later seasons that becomes his best friend and confidant for a short while. They also enter into a romantic relationship, though the relationship is explicitly asexual. Alice, after all, is a lesbian, and one that had recently been rejected by her parents for coming out of the closet. Alice and Jodie were seeing each other for support more than anything else. So, after they had known each other for a while, Jodie decided to bring Alice home with him for dinner. The Campbell's decide to warn Bob to be on his best behavior.

Mary: "Chuck, Jodie's bringing home a girl—"

Bob: "A girl. What's he trying to see how the other half lives?"

Danny: "She's gay."

Bob: "Oh, then I guess I can't tell my joke about Holland."¹¹

During the Miami-Dade County fight of which Anita Bryant was a part, civil rights advocates, as well as foreign officials from Holland, ran an ad that said, "We, from the land of Anne Frank, know where prejudices and discrimination can lead to."¹² Because of that advertisement, Holland had marked itself as an ally to the gay right's movement, as well as a distinct opponent of Anita Bryant. We can assume the jokes about Holland were going

¹⁰ *The 1970s*, 116.

¹¹ *Soap*, Season 2, Episode 20.

¹² Fred Fejes, *Gay Rights and Moral Panic: The Origins of America's Debate over Homosexuality*, (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2011), 125-126.

to be disparaging, as well. Thus, Bob had just made another Miami-Dade, Anita Bryant reference.

Chuck's words constantly needled at Jodie's homosexuality, and in such a way that would have been infuriating to him. The Anita Bryant references, though, were much more obvious in their intent. By allying himself with Anita Bryant, he was allying himself with the conservative movement that hated homosexuals and characterized them as deviants. The religious right was a relatively new development in American history, but by the time that 1977 had come around, the movement had largely found its identity. There were many people who became leaders of the religious right, and one of the most prominent was Pat Robertson, who "denounced feminism and homosexuality as scourges of modern American life."¹³ The Religious Right have always been a small part of the Republican Party, but they have always been vocal, and many of their leaders are still in power to this day. Bob uses these leaders to try and terrorize the people around him, evoking both them and their language to intimidate the show's characters by picking at the aspects of their lives that can be used to discriminate, but Jodie's homosexuality in his primary target. Bob might not be a representation of all the Republican Party, but he is certainly a representation of the religious right. To someone like Susan Harris, a person who is known for her left-wing political view points, these groups who thrived off of hatred for minority groups were perfect fodder for creating Bob's dialogue.

This, of course, begs a question. Why did Bob have to be a doll? Chuck, his puppet-master, does not feel comfortable saying these things himself, and thus he uses Bob to express himself in ways that he would normally never be able to. There's a scene where

¹³ *The 1970s*, 252.

Jodie, completely fed up with “Bob” sending him hate mail, steals Bob while Chuck is not looking, and hides him in the refrigerator. Chuck comes in, frantic, and Jodie promises he can have Bob back after they talk. Chuck, however, cannot function without Bob and in desperation, starts grabbing fruit off of the kitchen table and gouging out faces to recreate Bob.¹⁴

The scene is incredibly odd to watch, but with Bob in mind, Chuck’s role becomes clear. Chuck is supposed to be the rest of the Republican Party, the kinds of people who might have the same feelings as Anita Bryant, but are more concerned about other issues. The Republican Party was trying to attract people who were afraid of a drastically changing status quo, and they needed charming people who could appeal to Nixon’s “silent majority”, a group that was becoming much more prevalent. But the hate speech still brought many people to the Republican side, so the Party needed both.

Chuck needs Bob in order to survive, and Bob obviously also needs Chuck to survive. It is a symbiotic relationship that allows man and puppet to succeed in the world, and allows Chuck to express his innermost thoughts without catching any of the flack for the fallout. These are the two sides of the right wing. On the one hand, there are the perfectly charming ones who would never say a bad word about anyone, those being your fiscal conservatives. And then there are the others, those who feed off of people’s fear and ignorance to get what they want, and accomplish their goal through hate speech. That’s Bob. He’s a crotchety, reactionary character who hates everyone, but Jodie becomes his favorite target. As the show continues, Bob calls him every slur that the writers could get away with, including “fruit”, “Tinkerbell”, and “fairy”.

¹⁴ *Soap*, Season 1, Episode 14.

Burt

Burt is Jodie's stepfather, and to say the relationship is strained from the get go is putting it lightly. Burt is openly homophobic towards Jodie, and to everyone he meets who is also homosexual. Over time, however, he appears to become a bit less homophobic, though the evidence goes towards the absence of comments rather than positive comments. Burt comes to represent the old guard in America, those who are afraid of homosexuals or creeped out by them, and cannot imagine accepting or understanding their choices. Harris comes to argue, then, that these people can be just as harmful to homosexuals as the equal opportunity offenders that Bob came to represent, because their oppressiveness is based on ignorance, and later, silence.

As mentioned before, Jodie has a rather provocative opening onto the show. It is the kind of opening that is put there to get people's attention, and to make it clear that this person is going to be something special in the case of the show. Jodie's entrance is staged in the Campbell's kitchen, where he walks in singing "What a Beautiful Morning", deliberately, to get a rise out of Burt. Burt responds by calling Jodie a "fruit".¹⁵ The scene is played over and over most mornings. Mary, finally, forces a confrontation between the two of them so that they can clear the air and actually be a family again.

Jodie: "It's because I'm gay, right Burt? I mean you hate me because I'm gay, right?"

Mary: "Well?"

Burt: "I guess if you need a reason, that's a good one."¹⁶

That confrontation sets the stage for Jodie and Burt's relationship through the

¹⁵ *Soap*, Season 1, Episode 1.

¹⁶ *Soap*, Season 1, Episode 3.

rest of the show. Burt never really tries to understand. When confronted with a gay person, he has a tendency to shutter and move away, which is exactly his reaction to Jodie in the first season, and for a long time after, until he can get to know him better. Burt has established himself as openly homophobic. The audience also is given hints of other issues in this scene, specifically why he is homophobic. Burt claims that it is because he is from a different generation, and while that is part of the reason, it is not the way in which Burt himself assumes. The reason becomes more obvious as Burt is exposed to more gay characters, and responds to Jodie's life throughout the episodes. For example, Dennis Phillips, Jodie's boyfriend, makes a return in season two when he tries to win Jodie back. He shows up at Jodie's new apartment as a surprise, and Burt recognizes him. "You have Dennis Phillips as a neighbor. Dennis Phillips is your neighbor."¹⁷ They go, they shake hands, and Burt is incredibly excited the whole time. And then, Dennis lets the other shoe drop. He was there to see Jodie. Burt sputters a bit, trying to wrap his head around the idea that Dennis Phillips could very well be gay. After it is confirmed, he starts having the same reaction to Dennis, his football hero, as he does to Jodie. He suddenly cannot look the man in the eye, and he shuddered at Dennis in the same way he shuddered at Jodie. With Dennis, his reactions seem that much worse, and that much more exaggerated, because he was not expecting it. Dennis, being a football player, had to be a man's man in Burt's mind. Gay men were sexual deviant who had a tendency to act more feminine and "limp-wristed", but Dennis certainly did not fit that mold.

In another episode, where Burt again has a similar reaction, Jodie has just moved in with a woman, named Alice, who was mentioned earlier. He's depressed, she's

¹⁷ *Soap*, Season 2, Episode 2.

depressed, and they've both recently been very hurt because of their sexuality. When Burt meets Alice, he does not seem able to compute what he is seeing in front of him, "A gay girl! Where does he meet these people? Next there will be a gay dog! ...I've never met a gay girl before..."¹⁸ Burt had been taught that being gay was something that a specific kind of man did, so when confronted with a woman who was gay, he did not know how to react. During Alice's tenure, Burt never seems to be able to remove himself from his daze about her being a lesbian.

In another series of episodes meant to dig deeper into the complexity of being a gay man, Jodie announces that he got a girl pregnant. He went home to announce to his family that Carol was pregnant, finding his family's response to be a mix of confused and happy. In that episode, Burt crows, "I knew you could do it! I knew you weren't a pansy!"¹⁹ Jodie had done something that, to Burt, was very manly—being able to impregnate a woman was something that meant you had fulfilled some sort of manly destiny. By both sleeping with Carol, and then impregnating her, that had reversed any "fruitiness" on Jodie's part and made him into a straight man, though obviously that was not the case.

Burt's character continued to show the extent of his prejudices. On top of being homophobic, Burt is sexist. There are certain attributes that define what a man is to him, and there are certain characteristics that define a woman. Some of Burt's definitions are random and do not make sense (being gay is something only men can do) but these defining characteristics still very much exist within his mind. To Burt, Jodie is a feminine entity, which contributes to the fact that he is gay. Dennis was not obviously gay, but once Burt

¹⁸ *Soap*, Season 2, Episode 20.

¹⁹ *Soap*, Season 2, Episode 3.

knew he was gay, he could not separate Dennis the football player from Dennis the “gay man” and backed away shuttering.

Burt grew up in a time where men were men, and women were women, and both ended up staying in the closet if they felt anything towards the same sex. His sexism feeds into his homophobia, causing a chain reaction of ignorance for the character, a reaction that he never seems to care to correct. While the subject is simply eventually dropped, that does not mean that Burt’s feelings actually change. He is constantly around Jodie, and begins to build a relationship with him under pain of punishment from Mary. Susan Harris’s storyline suggests that it is like that Burt would always be creeped out by homosexuals and homosexuality.

Burt was not the first homophobic and sexist character that had appeared on television. Susan Harris had worked on an infamous show, *All in the Family*, where the character Archie Bunker, was in many ways the much more out-spoken version of Burt. “I’m white, I’m male, I’m Protestant... Where’s the law to protect me?”²⁰ Bunker’s character was known for his outrageous statements, statements that were often the catalyst for dialogue about sensitive topics. However, Bunker was popular just as a bigot himself. When Nixon ran for office, he talked about the idea of the “silent majority”. The idea had merit, but Nixon was about ten years too early with his rhetoric. It was the silent majority types who really enjoyed Bunker. Burt was Harris’s version of Bunker.

Burt was the kind of person that would have been most attractive to this new political and religious right that was in the midst of gaining power during the era that *Soap* ran, much in the same way that Archie Bunker would have. Burt was a very typical man

²⁰ Thomas Hine, *The Great Funk: Falling Apart and Coming Together (On a Shag rug) in the Seventies*, (New York: Sarah Crichton Books, 2007), 70.

that grew up with a specific set of values, and he was not comfortable with those ideas being challenged, especially not on a regular basis. Burt Campbell may very well have gone over to the Republican Party as a typical conservative member. Susan Harris used Burt to highlight the ignorance of so many in society during this era.

Conclusion

Soap has enjoyed something of a renaissance since Susan Harris was inducted into the Television Hall of Fame in 2008. Due to the show's sudden modern increase in popularity, there have been numerous magazine articles and blog posts about the show, some from contemporaries, some not, and a few that cover interviews with Billy Crystal. Many of these articles say the same thing: Jodie Dallas had an impact on them in one way or another. *Soap* successfully changed people's minds about what being gay meant, and what being gay looked like. Billy Crystal even reported that, during the custody battle between Jodie and Carol for their daughter, fans wrote in overwhelmingly to support Jodie.²¹ The show made an impact in a way that other shows at the time did not.

²¹ Did TV Change America's Mind on Gay Marriage? , Salon.com, accessed January 28, 2014, http://www.salon.com/2013/03/30/did_tv_change_americas_mind_on_gay_marriage/ .

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