



Saucy stuff: (clockwise from above) Vincent Franklin and Rufus Hound on the set of 'Cucumber'; Freddie Fox in 'Cucumber'; Fisayo Akinade, Zoe Nallovu, Laurietta Essien and Steve Toussaint in 'Banana'

MAD ABOUT THE BOYS



Sixteen years after his controversial drama 'Queer as Folk', Russell T Davies (left) returns to his 'life's work' – the modern gay experience – with 'Banana' and 'Cucumber'. He'd love the shows to be seen in Russia, he tells **GERARD GILBERT**

In a freezing-cold brick warehouse in central Manchester, the comedian and actor Rufus Hound is stark naked and pretending to be drunk. Hound plays a man picked up in a gay bar by Henry, the middle-aged protagonist of a new eight-part drama written by *Queer as Folk* creator (and *Doctor Who* regenerator) Russell T Davies. "If I can drop my trousers for a laugh at Glastonbury, I can sure as hell do it for one of the best British screenwriters of our generation," says Hound, when I ask him about being undressed as the rest of the cast and crew go nonchalantly about their business.

Cucumber, the name of Davies's new Channel 4 series, and *Banana*, *Cucumber's* complementary but also stand-alone E4 drama following many of the same characters (as well as *Tofu*, an online tie-documentary about sex and sexuality) take their titles from the various stages of the male erection – as Henry (played by Vincent Franklin from *The Thick of It* and *Twenty Twelve*), explains in an opening sequence in which he eyes up other men in a supermarket.

And if this sounds like a rerun of *Queer as Folk*, whose fearlessly unabashed approach to gay sex provoked equal measures of outrage and delight when it first screened in 1999, then that would be partially misleading. Because if some of the characters, especially the younger ones, in *Cucumber* are still ripping their clothes off with furious abandon, Henry himself is fearful of sex.

"Culturally we are seen as men who fuck," says Davies. "It's fascinating that when someone is homophobic that's the thing they're homophobic about, the physical act. There's far more to gay men than that, and there's far more to gay sex than that."

Henry works in insurance, shares a companionable long-term relationship and a double bed with a similarly middle-aged Lance, but takes his pleasures onanistically. "He's a client services director at an insurance company... a

world that protects you," says Franklin. "It's a very natural world for Henry to go into – putting things between you and risk."

"Hopefully, it's going into areas of the gay experience that haven't been covered," says Davies. "We're still at an early stage of visible gay popular culture, and I suppose our culture at the moment is rather 'pretty' – we love our handsome young men. I hate to say this about Vincent Franklin because I think he's gorgeous, but he kind of knows he's not going to be asked to go shirtless on the front of *Gay Times*."

There are however other actors in *Cucumber* and its overlapping E4 series *Banana* who might be invited on a photo-shoot, including newcomer Fisayo Akinade as Dean, a post-boy at Henry's workplace, and Freddie Fox as a floppy-haired bisexual who entrances Henry. "He's Northern and a mad, nymphomaniac party boy," says Fox, son of Edward Fox, speaking in a slightly disconcerting Mancunian voice that he picked up (along with a smattering of science) by listening to tapes of Professor Brian Cox. Fox keeps up the accent between takes, even when on weekend leave back in London. "I find that if I go home for three or four days and don't do it, I then come back and all I can think about is the accent as opposed to what I'm saying."

"Casting this was easier than it was 16 years ago with *Queer as Folk* and asking people 'will you play gay?'" says Davies. "That didn't crop up at all this time. People like Freddie just threw themselves into it with literally gay abandon."

"Henry was the toughest part to cast. The process was endless and we were getting very tense and knotted about it, and I was even thinking 'Should I change this character's age? Shall I make him 35?'; and then Vincent walked in the door. He literally did one audition."

Both *Cucumber* and *Banana* come with Davies' trademark lightness of touch, and with his usual punchy dialogue and storytelling prowess. Davies is eager to stress that he



is attempting to break free from gay drama's history of waving the rainbow flag – "shouting 'here we are'", as he puts it.

"A lot of gay dramas are representative, they're seen as part of the argument for equality," he says. "But if you kind of assume that you can put the equality argument to one side for the moment – public opinion is more or less on our side at the moment (with huge caveats) – then it should now be doing what straight drama has been doing for 2,000 years. We can catch up and say 'we don't need to wear a placard any more.'"

One of several fascinating subtexts to *Cucumber* is the difference between the older generation of gay men – Davies's contemporaries – and the coming, seemingly more carefree younger one. "I'm over 50 now and you look at what it is to be a gay boy now," he says. "It's an eternal story for the old to be jealous of the young... every writer writes *Death in Venice* in the end, and I shall set mine in Manchester."

"There are new pressures – all the sex apps on their phone and all that – but that's only a condensed version of the problems we used to have... of looking good when you walked into a bar, of being judged visually. When I wrote *Queer as Folk*, I had a 15-year-old out gay schoolboy called Nathan (played by the then 18-year-old Charlie Hunnam), which was quite radical and caused quite a stir. It's amazing now you come to write this 16 years later and actually a 15-year-old out gay schoolboy is no longer abnormal."

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"My sister is a teacher and she was telling me all about the gay children at her school. She was asking me if I can tell the gay kids in her Welsh comprehensive school if when *Banana* is on, so they can watch it. You couldn't have had that conversation 16 years ago."

Between *Queer as Folk* and *Cucumber* and *Banana*, Davies of course rebirthed *Doctor Who* in 2005. "Who would have thought that *Doctor Who* would have become such an empire?" he asks. "I began *Doctor Who* thinking 'Oh, that will see me through till 2006' (Davies finally handed over the reins of the show to Steven Moffat in 2010). However, he says artistic ambition is not to breathe new life into sci-fi classics but to chronicle the modern gay experience. "I think I should start planning the one about 70-year-old gay men because that's probably what I'll do next," he says. "That's singularly my life's work... I'm not kidding saying that. It literally is what I do."

The original series of *Queer as Folk* came out right at the start of the new golden age of television, along with shows like *The Sopranos* and *Sex and the City*, although Davies thinks it gets rather overlooked now in histories of the TV revolution. "When you read articles about British shows in America they never mention *Queer as Folk* – [the US re-make of] *Queer as Folk* ran for five years over there... five years." He never mentioned. We're kind of niched... it's seen as a gay drama and not as a drama.

"But who cares about America? I hope this travels to Russia. That's where I would like it to be seen. And you know what, it will be; it will be downloaded, it will be bootlegged... it'll be found. Gay minds find gay material everywhere however dark the world they live in. Welcome Russia... enjoy!"

'Cucumber' begins on 22 January at 9pm on Channel 4, and *'Banana'* on 22 January at 10pm on E4

A DEAD-END STREET FOR ROCK'N'ROLL

The Kinks musical 'Sunny Afternoon' is a huge hit, but, asks **SIMON HARDEMAN**, is the theatre killing off rock's raw appeal?

Wannabe rock-musical stars have been queuing for auditions this week in New York. They're all hoping for a part in Andrew Lloyd Webber's theatrical version of the Jack Black film, *School of Rock* – the latest stage show aiming to bottle the essence of rock'n'roll and put it in the script to be released in a predictable fashion, night after night, matinee after matinee. You don't have to look far for other examples of theatre co-opting rock. The Kinks sing-along-a-story, *Sunny Afternoon*, is packing in the punters in the West End, to where The Beatles' "theatrical concert" *Let It Be* is about to return. And Queen's *We Will Rock You* may have recently ended its 1,000-year run there, but there are still plenty of jukebox shows pumping out baby-boomer-friendly ear-worms and musicals making free use of rock'n'roll clichés to pack in the punters.

Leaving aside whether Baron Lloyd-Webber of Sydmonton and his book writer Baron (Julian) (*Downton Abbey*) Fellowes of West Stafford are really the right people to handle a tale of rock'n'roll salvation, can *any* theatre ever capture the magic of the music? From stage productions of The Who's *Tommy* to Green Day's *American Idiot* to *Sunny Afternoon*, through to jukebox blasts like *Rock of Ages*, hasn't theatre always sanitised away the essence of rock when it has tried to profit from its power?

Sunny Afternoon director Edward Hall doesn't think it has: "Every night the [*Sunny Afternoon*] audience get on their feet and I feel then that [we've] harnessed something and it does give a high that you can get from a gig." But doesn't the unpredictability, the danger, of a real gig get lost in theatre? After all, as he says: "The audience are going on an emotional and narrative journey that is very different to what you see at a gig. The actors are playing characters and the songs move from being internal to consciously performed."

Well, the show's musical director, Elliott Ware, makes a bold claim. Ware, who has worked on The Who's *Quadrophenia* and on *We Will Rock You*, agrees there has to be a greater degree of control, but says he can "build the spontaneity into it... make it appear more random." He explains: "A lot of rehearsal goes into rock'n'roll, even though it seems spontaneous, and a lot of rehearsal goes in to musical theatre and it may not seem so spontaneous. They're not a million miles apart."

This kind of artificial spontaneity isn't easy, though. Reviewing chart-topping US punksters Green Day's 2010 musical-theatre version of *American Idiot*, the critic Jim Harrington described how the music sounded "processed

and stale, handled with kid gloves by way too many players and sung by more than a dozen actors that have rehearsed the original fire right out of the songs..." But what did Harrington know? The show was a huge success, winning two Tony Awards, and grossing \$4.0m in its first year-long run on Broadway alone.

But Harrington was a music reviewer (theatre reviewers mostly loved the show), on one side of the ideological divide between the perceived superficiality of commercial theatre and rock's "association with discourses of authenticity", as US academic Elizabeth Wollman puts it in the recent book *Bad Music*. She says theatre is often seen as killing "the raw energy and excitement that makes rock appealing in the first place".

Ironically, one theatre visionary tried to move towards rock performance before rock even existed. In the 1930s French iconoclast Antonin Artaud proposed his Theatre of Cruelty, and envisaged the invention of new instruments that could "attain a new range and compass, producing sounds or noises that are unbearably piercing" while words could be replaced by unintelligible screams. If that doesn't sound like a rock concert then I don't know what does. Patti Smith is one who has acknowledged Artaud's influence.

'Sunny Afternoon', Harold Pinter Theatre, London SW1 (0844 871 7622) to 23 May. *'School of Rock'* is set to open on Broadway later this year

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Sunny Afternoon composer/lyricist and the Kinks leader, Ray Davies, also has a lot of previous in experimenting with the stage (rather than merely being theatrical in performance, like many rockers). In the early 1970s he created a mini TV rock opera, *Starmaker*, and toured several Kinks albums as musical plays within Kinks concerts. But his journey since then is instructive – collaborating on steadily more mainstream theatrical projects, culminating in the current hit show, which unashamedly massages Kinks songs and history into a relatively conventional musical-theatre format.

Davies and Elliott Ware got the right sound for *Sunny Afternoon's* take on the primal "You Really Got Me" by sourcing period guitars and amplifiers, and in the show they certainly sound fantastic. But you can't source context. Their use is still scripted and cued.

Or have we now accepted that, in the age of click-track cues for musicians, a gig is just as predictable as theatre? Perhaps that's what people want now. Edward Hall says: "The thousands and thousands of people who go to see rock music in theatre shows are living testament to the appetite that people have to listen to music in a different context." Well, maybe.

It's no mean feat to produce a genuine mainstream rock musical hit like *Sunny Afternoon*, as Hall has done. US stage historian John Kenrick tells me how, when Gower Champion, the award-winning director of *Hello, Dolly!* and *42nd Street*, staged the rock musical *Rockabye Hamlet*, "it was one of the worst disasters in Broadway history". Audiences laughed when Ophelia sang the title song and strangled herself with her microphone cord. It's a salutary image. Rock music is in danger whenever it gets into a theatre. Lloyd Webber take note.



Well-respected man: John Dagleish as Ray Davies in 'Sunny Afternoon' KEVIN CUMMINS