“Don’t Dream It, Be It”: The Rocky Horror Picture Show’s Impact on Queer Communities in the 1970s

Jackie Roach

Abstract
This essay examines the cultural conditions surrounding The Rocky Horror Picture Show to examine its ties to the LGBTQ+ community by tracing the post-war growth of queer communities in cities like New York and San Francisco to the boiling-point of the Stonewall Riot. The film’s queer themes, aesthetic motifs, and LGBTQ+ representation are detailed to understand what made it a hit amongst working-class queer audiences of the 1970s and 1980s. This paper explores how the film spawned phenomena such as shadowcasting and continues to create space for working-class queer sexual liberation and individuality decades after its release.

The Rocky Horror Picture Show has a massive cultural legacy, from bringing fishnets and glitter back into fashion to popularizing glam rock music, but its greatest impact certainly has to be on the LGBTQ+ community. Queer communities across the United States identified with the film’s themes as well as the journeys of the Transylvanians and those of the main characters, Brad and Janet. This began a wide celebration of the film throughout the 1970s with working-class queer people coming together to celebrate individuality and sexual liberation, a celebration that we can still see today.

During the Second World War many young soldiers and nurses were away from home in unfamiliar environments getting to know new people for the first time. This led to the beginnings of their queer exploration and a lot of small local queer groups were formed during this time (D’Emilio). Once everyone was shipped home, however, it took a little while for larger-
scale queer groups to form in the United States. In 1950, New York was the first state in the country to reduce the crime of sodomy to a misdemeanor. The Mattachine Society, the first homosexual group, was established in Los Angeles during this year. In 1955, they would expand to a New York branch. These groups thrived behind the closed doors of small gay-only bars and nightclubs, which were often raided by plain-clothes police trying to prevent homosexuals from gathering. In 1969 gay icon Judy Garland passed away fueling queer frustration and rage. Five days later, plain-clothes police officers raided the Stonewall Inn in New York City in an attempt to arrest the bar owners over their liquor license. This led to a night of protest and violence by the local working-class queer community that went early into the next morning led by the brave trans women and drag queens that would be the unsung heroes of their community.

Meanwhile, young gender-nonconforming British actor Richard O’Brien couldn’t stop writing songs. Inspired by the cheap science fiction films of the 1950s, O’Brien crafted the stage musical *The Rocky Horror Show*, a story of one fateful night in which a transvestite alien rocks the sexual world of the bright-eyed Brad and Janet. With the help of colleague and director Jim Sharman, O’Brien brought his musical to the West End stage, premiering in 1973 and bringing queer joy to shocked British audiences. The musical had a small but mighty fanbase and soon enough, 20th Century Fox signed on to create the legendary film adaptation of the musical. With the help of costume designer Sue Blane and set designer Brian Thomson, Sharman and O’Brien got to work creating the film. However, due to their decision to steer away from casting celebrities they had to do so as quickly and cheaply as possible. By the end the duo believed they had done right by the show and adapted it well. They hoped that audiences would enjoy it just the same.

Adapted into a film a few years later, *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* bombed at the box office as the mainstream culture was growing more and more homophobic by the 1970s and thus spurned such outright depictions
of queer activity. However, despite adversity, the film’s depiction of queer people on screen, as well as themes of sexual liberation and outsiders finding community attracted LGBTQ+ people to the film in droves in the years that followed its release. The film begins with a boring heterosexual couple, Brad and Janet, losing their way on their travels to an old friend to whom they were going to announce their engagement. They seek refuge at a nearby castle that they would soon find was not exactly what it seemed. In a Frankenstein-style tale the couple meets transsexual scientist Dr. Frank-N-Furter on the night of the Annual Transylvanian Convention where he is set to unveil his newest creation: a muscular man by the name of Rocky, made to be Frank's personal sex slave. Hijinks ensue and by the end of the night Brad and Janet's virginities are no more, and the castle has blasted into outer space, leaving the pair to cope with their newfound sexual identities in a world they no longer understand.

As Brad and Janet are on the drive to announce their engagement their car radio is playing Richard Nixon’s infamous resignation speech live, given on August 8, 1974. Nixon was openly homophobic, specifically about homosexuality depicted in popular media (“Tapes Reveal Nixon's Prejudices Again”). The presence of his speech in the car sets the world of the film, one that is openly hostile toward queerness of any kind. The outside world is windy, rainy, and dark. This sharply contrasts the world that Brad and Janet experience inside Frank's castle, one that allows them to explore their identities in bright color and warmth. This is a strong parallel to the two worlds in which queer people existed during this period: the homophobic world of Nixon and popular conservatism, and the warmth and safety of the queer spaces that they found.

Many queer people identified with the storyline of the hero and heroine of the film, Brad and Janet. The two spend the night in the castle coming to terms with their own sexual desires and learning to brazenly celebrate their sensuality. This is incredibly similar to the coming-out journeys that queer individuals face, and many people could relate to that.
Brad and Janet come to accept the identities of the castle's residents and reject the Nixon-age conservatism they started the film with. However, the film ends with Brad and Janet in the ashes of where the castle once was, a parallel to the uprooting of many queer communities by police raids. They crawl around the rubble aimlessly as the screen spins, dizzyingly signifying the way LGBTQ+ people were forced to face the world after homophobia continued to destroy their communities.

The film also features the representation of numerous same-sex couples in the film, which was very uncommon given the new-wave conservatism during the era. Though the narration frames Brad and Janet's adultery as being morally reprehensible, it never frames homosexuality itself as wrong. Instead, sequences like Frank and Rocky's wedding are scored with jubilant background music and cheers from onlooking Transylvanians. Additionally, it was one of the first films to have a character self-identify as "transsexual," and to do so proudly. Though the plot clearly ties his name back to Dr. Frankenstein, it is also possible that the character of Dr. Frank-N-Furter was somewhat inspired by the January 10, 1970, discovery of disintegrating parts of the brain to reduce homosexual tendencies in Frankfurt, Germany (Rutledge).

Having a "transsexual" person be the leader of this group of visibly queer misfits also parallels the leading roles many transgender women and drag queens took in the fight against homophobia, though cisgender individuals made up the masses. He is killed in the film when the house is taken over by Magenta and Riff Raff for having a lifestyle "too extreme," which sadly reflects the reality that many of these trans women were overshadowed by cis people who pushed them out of their own communities.

The Transylvanians in the film are quite literally aliens, having a distinct and colorful fashion sense and eccentric sensibilities. They behave in a way that is gauche and over-the-top. Many LGBTQ+ people during this period were enthusiasts for “camp” and aestheticism in the same way
that the Transylvanians were. Furthermore, many gay people saw themselves in the Transylvanians as they too were outsiders that found community within each other.

In addition to the clearly present queer themes in the film, there are also a number of queer motifs found in the film’s visual storytelling. Throughout the film, there is a clearly present rainbow motif in the costuming and set design. Before Brad and Janet arrive at the castle, the color palette contains mostly beige, black, white, and pastels. However, inside the Frankenstein place, an explosion of color is to be found. Within the costume design we see the ensemble Transylvanian cast decked out in coordinating multicolor suit costumes complete with vibrant bowties, sunglasses, and party hats, as well as tap dancer Columbia (played by Nell Campbell) in a rainbow-sequined bustier. The film also includes shots of multicolored stained glass in Dr. Frank-N-Furter’s bedroom as well as a rainbow that shines over the Frankenstein Place at the end of the film.

Furthermore, it has been speculated that the rainbow pride flag, originally created by Gilbert Baker and adopted in 1978, was inspired by the film's rainbow motif. The flag contains pink, red, orange, yellow, green, turquoise, blue, and violet stripes presented in a rainbow order (Leifheit). This parallels the creation scene, in which Dr. Frank-N-Furter uses spouts of colored liquid to create rainbow stripes seen on the glass sides of the tank, which ultimately brings Rocky to life. Though we may never know if the two are linked, it seems like a plausible connection as TRHPS was one of the first pieces of media to associate the rainbow with queerness. In addition to this there are other examples of subtle queer motifs throughout the film. Frank-N-Furter's laboratory walls and floors are covered in pink tile, which is a color commonly used in gay activism fliers and was even the color used to denote homosexuals in concentration camps during the Holocaust (“Kennzeichen für Schutzhäftlinge”). Furthermore, Frank's surgeon scrubs have a pink triangle sewn to the front, a clear reference to the symbols used in concentration camps. The pink triangle symbolism
would be reclaimed by the gay community during the 1970s and would be used into the ‘80s and ‘90s on various different gay rights posters (ONE National Gay and Lesbian Archives).

The popularity of the film amongst queer people in the 1970s led to regular midnight showings of the film, and LGBTQ+ people were able to build a nationwide community where they were free to express themselves and celebrate their sexuality with those who understood their struggles. The *Rocky Horror* community started small in 1976 as gay and lesbian people in New York attended weekly midnight showings at the Waverly Theater. This is where the official fan club began with openly gay president Sal Piro taking up the role of the master of ceremonies every week, along with Dori Hartley. As Piro states, “Back at the Waverly before the participation began the audience was mostly gay. It was seen as kinda underground and camp and gay before it went widespread” (Knight). Piro would found and distribute *The Transylvanian*, a *Rocky Horror*-themed newsletter to members of the fan club (“The Transylvanian”). Another fan club sprung up sometime before 1979 under the name The Rocky Horror International Fan Club, which distributed its own magazines (“Rocky Horror Picture Show Official Magazine”). The International Fan Club would merge with Piro’s original Fan Club in 1980. With the newsletters and magazines, the excitement surrounding the film was able to be spread nationwide, furthering the growth of the community.

Piro and Hartley began the time-honored tradition of dressing as the characters in the film and acting out the movie in a “shadowcast” manner. The idea brought audience participation to a new level and when fans heard about the idea, they loved it. The same few people kept returning to participate and soon, small shadow-casting groups began to form across the country. This opened the door for numerous working-class LGBTQ+ people to express themselves artistically and sexually. As Hartley states, “It was fantastic for all people; for heterosexual, for homosexual. It was so great in that way because it allowed for everybody to just be” (“Rocky
Horror Picture Show”). The community uplifted its performers, whether they were straight or gay, cis, or trans. It allowed for these theaters to become safe-havens for queer people to celebrate themselves without the intrusion of homophobia or transphobia.

From the beginning shadowcasts were unafraid to gender bend casting their characters with women playing Dr. Frank-N-Furter and Rocky. TRHPS also provided a unique opportunity for trans people to openly express their true gender identities. This includes infamous performer and trans woman D. Garrett Gafford who gave spectacular shadow-cast performances from 1978 to 1981 as Dr. Frank-N-Furter at The Tiffany Troupe in West Hollywood while saving up funds to medically transition (“Garrett Gafford”).

Not only did shadow-casting allow for queer self-expression, but it was also a place for the working-class to find queer community outside of bar and club culture. Because many blue-collar queer people spent evenings at the bar, many communities were formed within those spaces. However, many queer adults did not wish to drink or found them inaccessible due to a number of different reasons including the poor sensory experience provided to neurodivergent people in clubs (flashing lights, loud music, etc.). In addition, police officers were still often raiding bars and clubs, and Rocky allowed for safety from that kind of a hostile environment. Within the TRHPS community, bonding over common interests was easy, the movie theater was a familiar and safe space, and people were able to let loose in an environment where they weren't socially pressured to drink or do drugs.

Shadowcasting also allowed for a form of queer performance art that was incredibly accessible compared to other forms of theater. Rehearsals were typically minimal, and screenings were also held at midnight, allowing for performers to maintain their day jobs without having to take time off. Costuming was do-it-yourself which allowed for everything from the quick and cheap methods to the completely screen-accurate work of legends like
Ruth Fink-Winter, Mina Credeur, and Becky Milanio. These elements, combined with the low prices of the movie tickets allowed for many working-class LGBTQ+ individuals to both participate in shows or attend.

Since the beginnings of the shadowcasting phenomenon in 1977 numerous groups have formed (and since dissolved) all across America uniting under the common ground of TRHPS. Many people found themselves growing closer to individuals they met through Rocky than they were with their own families. Some saw the midnight screenings as their own weekly pride parade while others saw it as being akin to family dinner: a ritualistic gathering of the ones you love. Either way, TRHPS allowed for LGBTQ+ people to find community during a time where society was overtly trying to prevent it.

As the 1970s ended conservatism in young people was beginning to wane and the Rocky Horror fan phenomenon kept growing to the point where the mainstream could no longer ignore it. The young teens that once parroted the Nixon-age homophobia of the era were now young adults who wanted to see raunchy movies and yell obscenities at the screen. Because of this the fervor surrounding TRHPS continued bringing in new heterosexual audiences. Piro explains that “when the straight audiences started coming in, they saw Dr. Frank-N-Furter as a hero … I think Rocky Horror did a lot amongst the younger people for the acceptance of the gay and lesbian lifestyle” (Knight). Not only was acceptance being promoted amongst the heterosexual audiences, this was also one of the earliest instances in queer history of straight people willingly entering queer spaces and bonding with LGBTQ+ people without a desire to change them or turn them away from their identities. Everyone was allowed to be who they were, a message that would continue in the Rocky fandom for years to come.

The Rocky Horror Picture Show fan community still exists in large numbers today, as queer people across the United States all find inspiration in the film's message of self-expression. Currently there are 79 locations
that regularly show *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* across the United States with shadowcast participation. These groups are also mainly composed of working-class queer individuals. LGBTQ+ members find an uplifting environment within Rocky casts encouraging one another to live freely and pleasurably (“TRHPS Official Fan Site”).

The fan community still holds true to the values expressed by that of the community in the 1970s with acceptance and self-expression being priorities to members across the nation. However, some noticeable shifts have occurred within the community in the time that has passed. For instance, many of the current shadowcasting groups have members of all ages while this was uncommon in the 1970s. Many of the original members mentioned throughout this paper are still active in the community today mentoring new members as they begin their TRHPS journey. The opportunity to connect young members of the community with elders has allowed for an intergenerational LGBTQ+ bond within the community, something that is not often seen due to the losses caused by the HIV/AIDS crisis of the 1990s. In addition to this, the wide acceptance of Rocky by mainstream culture has only grown since the 1970s with the characters becoming popular Halloween costumes in the fall months. Countless shows and movies contain references to Rocky Horror and its fan community including 1980’s *Fame* (Parker) and 2012’s *The Perks of Being a Wallflower* (Chbosky). Shadowcast members continue to gender bend their characters and castings, with people of all identities taking over different roles in the show. Because of this many young performers like myself are able to explore their gender identity and presentation without the threat of outside interruption. Additionally, the queer burlesque community has intertwined itself with Rocky Horror, as many stages have a striptease performance during the introduction sequence of the film. The inclusion of different forms of queer art into the Rocky community is exciting, and I’m excited to see how that continues in the future.
The *Rocky Horror Picture Show* has had an incredible and wide-ranging impact on queer communities throughout the United States, one that exploded amidst Nixon-era conservatism and encouraged LGBTQ+ people to gather, express themselves, and platform their art in a world that was actively trying to stop them. The fan community flourished and continues to do so even today. As a member of the community and a shadowcast performer myself I am tempted to leave it there, to end on a pleasant note about how queer self-expression and acceptance is widespread now. However, I don’t think it would do my research justice not to mention that the new wave of conservatism spreading in the United States is a threat to *Rocky Horror* fans and to the queer community as a whole.

I, like many who found the *Rocky* community in the 1970s, spent my childhood dreaming I could express myself in a way that felt true to who I was. I, like the 1970s members, saw this film and related to its characters. I, like everyone before me, decided that I needed to take a leap and follow the film’s motto, “Don’t dream it, be it,” and join my local shadowcasting organization. Yet sadly I also face the unfortunate truth that the earliest members had to grapple with: that queerness, drag, and unapologetic self-expression are not welcome in a conservative world. If the currently proposed anti-drag bills in the United States are passed, thousands of working-class queer people like me will lose their opportunity for authenticity and a community that has been a place for queer solace for almost 50 years. We cannot allow for a Nixon-like revival of hatred to kill one of the largest queer communities in the United States. Instead we must put on our fishnets, lace up our corsets, and fight to save our dream.
Works Cited


ONE National Gay and Lesbian Archives, digitallibrary.usc.edu/


