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# Generations of love

DAVID SMITH reports from PRIDE '94

IN LONDON on June 18th, the 25th anniversary celebration of New York's Stonewall Riots saw the biggest, most diverse and best-organised Lesbian and Gay Pride festival ever. Organisers claim that as many as 70,000 people took part in the pre-festival march which had secured the most high-profile central London route in Pride's history. And the afternoon festival crowds in south London's Brockwell Park were swelled to a record 160,000 by an influx of thousands of heterosexual supporters and a remarkably high number of lesbians and gay men attending Pride for the first time in their lives.

The main stage in the park had the most star-studded line-up ever, and as the dense crowds also packed the satellite events around the main stage audience, the festival seemed already to be outgrowing Brockwell Park, its home for the past three years. This was the largest gathering of lesbians and gay men in European history and confirms London as the continent's gay capital.

Buoyed up by their success, the organisers, the Pride Trust, are already making plans for next year, but they are faced with difficult decisions concerning the size, the public profile, the diversity, the cost and the commercialisation of the event. More space, more sponsorship and more back-up services are certain to be required, and there is already a suggestion that the event may need to be spread over more than one day. It is clear that the event has tapped into the growth in visibility and diversity of the lesbian and gay community which has characterised the 1990s so far. The only lingering reservation is that in the midst of the exponential growth and diversification of this central event in the gay calendar, some barely conceptualised central concept of solidarity and togetherness might be lost

forever.

One message of the day was clear however. In 1969 at the time of the Stonewall Riots, such a large, public and confident gathering of lesbians and gay men would have been "unimaginable". This was the word used by radio DJ Paul Gambaccini, as he – along with film stars, drag queens, MPs, playwrights and members of the House of Lords – declared the start of the parade from Hyde Park. Much has been made in the past few months of the Stonewall Riots, when customers of the Stonewall Inn initiated a new and violent response to New York Police Department harassment of their bar. But, Paul Gambaccini added, we need to be aware of our own achievement. "In 25 or 50 years time," he said, "people will be looking back at us and remembering what we have done. We have come a long way."

As the parade proceeded from Hyde Park through Park Lane, Piccadilly Circus, Regent Street, Trafalgar Square, Whitehall and Parliament Square – all lined with cheering and waving supporters and well-wishers – the numbers were swelled by thousands of late arrivals.

The parade was led by disabled lesbians and gay men in wheelchairs and three groups of panels from the Aids memorial quilts, followed by OutRage and Stonewall complete with a 30-strong Scottish women's marching drum band. In memory of that seminal day in New York a quarter of a century ago, the lead banner proclaimed us to be "25 years out and proud" and, in recognition of the struggles still to come, demanded "Freedom and equality now".

The banner was painted the colours of the rainbow, confirming this symbol's rising pre-eminence on the British lesbian and gay scene. Everywhere you turned there were rainbow flags, banners, balloons and T-shirts, rainbow badges and ribbons, rainbow dresses and

waistcoats, even rainbow-painted faces. There was even a rainbow bus among the floats which follow the parade.

The pink triangle is not forgotten however. As part of a series of political tableaux organised by OutRage in different sections of the parade and at significant points on the route, two gay men stood at the Cenotaph war memorial with pink triangles – one of pink roses and one bearing the legend "Never Forget" – in memory of gay men and lesbians who died in the Nazi Holocaust. In Parliament Square a simple arrow-shaped placard pointing at the Palace of Westminster read "Shame" in reference to MPs' refusal earlier this year to equalise the gay age of consent at 16.

As in previous years, when the march ended, buses, trains and tubes took on their own carnival atmosphere with crowds of lesbians and gay men heading south to Brockwell Park.

Even before the first marchers arrived, the park with its funfair, market stalls and music and entertainment tents was already filling up with carnival-goers, and the Pride organisers estimate that up to 160,000 passed through the park on the day. (The police estimate was 120,000, but officials for Lambeth council said the numbers could have been as high as 200,000.)

Even the most conservative of estimates confirm that the festival has tripled in size in the past four years, and Brockwell Park, which just two years ago at EuroPride seemed to offer endless acres of open space, now appears to be full to capacity.

Almost every section of the festival was busier than ever. The Rainbow Disco Tent with DJs from London's gay clubland became so crowded in the early evening it had to be closed for fear of injuries in the crush.

The size of the crowds is already causing concern to the Pride Trust. Brockwell Park is considered to be the "perfect" place for the festival, but Pride secretary and festival director Teddy Witherington confirmed to *Gay Times* that thought will have to be given to whether extra space in the park can be used or indeed whether the festival could or should be spread over two days.

While causing logistical problems for organisers and stewards however, the extra crowds failed to dampen the enthusiasm of those enjoying the day. And while recent years have seen increasing commercialisation and professionalisation of the festival, politics was not entirely absent from the day.

Giving what has been hailed as the keynote speech of the day from the main stage, lesbian activist Lisa Power reminded the crowd that we didn't just have the Stonewall Riots to celebrate. This year was also the 25th birthday of London Lesbian and Gay Switchboard for which she has been a leading volunteer for many years.

"We have seen a lot of changes in the past 25 years," she said. "We have lost a lot of people to Aids, but we have also gained a lot of people because of the anger that is felt at the way we are treated. The criminal law has not changed in 25 years; the law still makes us second class citizens... And the living embodiment of the law's



● Photographs by BILL SHORT





Julian Clary



Carol Leeming

Regina Fong



contempt for us is the age of consent for gay men." People in power will expect us to be grateful for reducing the age of consent to 18, she said. But in response to her question "Are you grateful?" the crowd roared "No".

"Everybody keeps saying we are fighting for equality," she continued. "I hope we are also fighting for individuality, not fighting for the right to be the same but the right to be ourselves. And we never got anywhere by waiting. We got it by getting up and fighting for what we believe in."

In a fitting counterpoint to the memory of the Stonewall Riots, she was followed on stage by journalist Barrie Redfern, one of the men arrested in a much more recent heavy-handed police raid on a gay bar – the Mineshaft in Manchester just two months earlier.

Thereafter it was entertainment all the way. The most star-studded main stage line-up ever received a rapturous welcome, with notably crowd-pleasing performances coming from Holly Johnson, Peter Dinklage, Danii Minogue, Bjorn Again and Boy George.

The level of arm-raising and cheers increases, it seems, in direct proportion to the emotional and political significance of a singer's lyric – Holly Johnson's "Relax... when you wanna come", Bjorn Again's "Dancing Queen", Boy George's "Generations of love" and Dinklage's "Things can only get better". And it was perhaps the indisputably heterosexual Peter Dinklage, lead singer of Dinklage, who stole the show with his humbly ecstatic declaration that as a straight performer he was "proud" to be part of the experience.

Carried away by the scope and success of the day, Boy George announced – possibly more in hope than conviction – that next year could see performances from George Michael and Madonna. Whether such huge stars will be permitted to play the festival remains to

be seen. There is already a suggestion that Lambeth council vetoed a mooted performance by Elton John and RuPaul this year on the grounds that there might be a dangerous crowd surge towards the stage when they were introduced.

As the magnificently triumphant fireworks and the final chorus of "All you need is love" faded in the air and the crowds made their way home or onwards to dozens of the capital pubs and clubs, there was one final sour twist to the day.

Four men were injured in a nearby road by a gang of youths wielding baseball bats and shouting anti-gay abuse. Numerous other incidents of homophobic aggression and taunts were reported from the park and nearby areas. Even the Pride organisers themselves had been a target, but it has done nothing to undermine their confidence. Teddy Witherington said: "The violence strengthens my resolve to go on to even bigger and better things."

- Drag queens to boycott Pride, News 28-31
- House of Lords age of consent debate, News 28-31
- Pride and the rainbow, see 78-80

