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WHERE THE BOYS ARE

The gay fantasia of “Cucumber” and “Banana.”

BY EMILY NUSSBAUM

“Cucumber” focusses on the breakup of middle-aged Henry Best and his boyfriend, Lance.

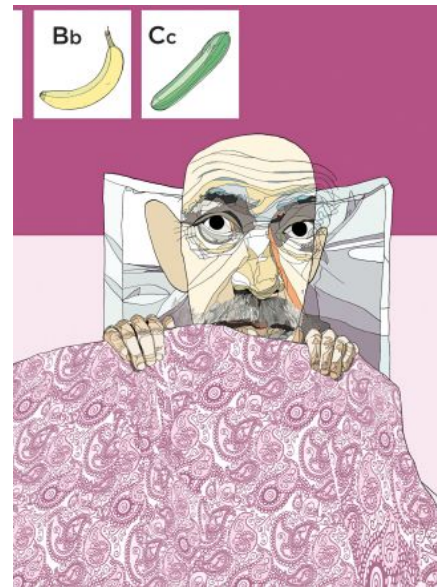
ILLUSTRATION BY CONOR LANGTON

In his 1992 collection, “The Man with Night Sweats,” Thom Gunn included a wry poem titled “Lines for My 55th Birthday”: “The love of old men is not worth a lot, / Desperate and dry even when it is hot. / You cannot tell what is enthusiasm / And what involuntary spasm.”

At the precocious age of forty-six, Henry Best is already mid-spasm: within a week, he’s fled his devoted partner, been suspended from his job, shackled up in a loft with some Grindr-surfing youngsters, and begun mooning after one of them, Freddie, a bisexual with the frigid prettiness of a Hitler Youth. A short, bald voyeur in a sexual marketplace ruled by youth, Best (played with rancid brio by Vincent Franklin) is the uneasy center of the British series “Cucumber” (airing in the U.S. on Logo), which was created by the showrunner Russell T. Davies as, he has said, a “spiritual sequel” to his beloved drama “Queer as Folk.” Both shows are set in Manchester’s gay district, Canal Street, but “Cucumber” examines what’s happened in that milieu since “Queer as Folk” ended, more than a decade ago. In the same bars, older men gaze at younger ones, bewitched by a generation whose members came out in their teens.

“Cucumber”’s eight hour-long episodes are interwoven with those of two other series, “Banana” and “Tofu,” the titles cheeky references to a urological scale for rating men’s erections. While “Cucumber” focusses on Henry’s breakup, the half-hour “Banana” (fittingly, the sweetest and the most palatable of the bunch) tells the stories of the younger people in Henry’s circle, one per episode. “Tofu” is a Web-based documentary series, in which the shows’ actors and others dish, with graphic bonhomie, about their sexual habits.

“Cucumber,” which Davies also wrote, is the toughest series to take, but it’s also the most ambitious—and, at its heights, it is emotionally wrenching and acridly funny, an audacious and original expression of Davies’s challenging, often critical ideas about gay



male identity. In the pilot, Henry's gentle longtime boyfriend, an aquarium administrator named Lance (Cyril Nri, a consistent standout, in a quietly difficult role), insists that they have a date night. Over a fancy meal, Lance proposes marriage. Henry recoils in disgust. And then the couple's evening degenerates further. There's a revenge threesome, followed by a violent arrest; eventually, the two men find themselves shouting in front of their straight neighbors, nearly spitting with rage, as police lights pulse on their quiet street. "You should learn to swim!" Henry screams. "You should learn to fuck!" Lance screams.

As in any midlife breakup, the men's history splits like a piñata, spilling secrets. As Lance begins telling the world, the couple's sex life consists of separate "wanks," in separate rooms, to separate porn, owing to Henry's stonewalling. He is essentially a gay virgin: like the lilies of the field, he does not top, neither does he bottom. His inner life is another matter. The show's central metaphor is the supermarket, where Henry wanders repeatedly, seething with fantasies, like Walter Mitty by way of Philip Larkin. As he rates strangers, cucumbers thwack percussively against disembodied palms.

Luckily, Henry's misery is embedded in a more varied set of stories, among them a powerful, slow-building plot about Lance, who, hurt and betrayed after the breakup, begins a flirtation with a co-worker who appears to be a fantasy top—a muscleman who alternates between homophobic insults and come-ons. For comic relief, there's the puppyish Dean (the endearing newcomer Fisayo Akinade), whose habit of premature ejaculation doesn't get in the way of his kinky adventures. (Dean also gets a great episode of "Banana," in which it turns out that he's made up a story about parental rejection just to seem interesting.) Then, there's Henry's sister Cleo and her Bieber-haired teen son, who exists in a fluid post-gay universe, where boys mess around with one another but suffer few repercussions. All these characters are united by their compulsive cell-phone use, a phenomenon that barely existed when "Queer as Folk" ended.

In one of the show's best episodes, Henry goes on a date with a man he's met online, to whom he's been described—by Freddie, acting as his digital Cyrano—as a "power bottom," a submissive who controls the action. Terrified that he might have to follow through, Henry brilliantly mind-games his date, ducking the sex yet somehow leaving the man gasping, "You're the most powerful bottom I ever met!" In the aftermath, in a brightly lit burger joint, Henry finds himself drawn into a more intimate exchange, with a friendly stranger named Leigh. The two men talk about how AIDS shaped sex in their twenties ("as if sex isn't scary enough"); gripe about porn ("It makes me think that sex is for *sexy* people"); and engage in a hilariously manic denunciation of gay culture's focus on the ass ("What happened to the front?" Henry complains. "I like the front," Leigh sighs). It's refreshing, blunt stuff—an exchange that hints at a different route to liberation, one based in erotic generosity and playfulness, not competition. Naturally, it doesn't take.

“Cucumber” is hardly the first gay art work to diagnose a dank streak in urban hedonism, the way that self-loathing and self-love can meet like storm fronts inside one man’s psyche. (The first thing we hear Henry say aloud is “I hate gay men.”) In its more searing moments, the show echoes Larry Kramer’s apocalyptic view of promiscuity or the work of the experimental novelist Dennis Cooper, who is fascinated by the vampiric aspect of older men’s craving for young ones. Visually, “Cucumber” is puckishly content to have it both ways, with its disco musical cues and witty quick-cut editing. It discerns something toxic in beauty fascism, but also lets the camera linger on Freddie, with his damaged Lolita smirk and his tendency to lounge around in tighty whities.

And yet Davies’s vision is not, in the end, cruel—it just refuses to look away from cruelty. The single best episode, the sixth, is like nothing else I’ve seen this year; I won’t spoil it, but will say that it made me sob. It begins with a dazzling set of montages, which sum up decades in one gay man’s life, a life that at once resists politics and is inevitably shaped by it. We see his first attraction, first porn, first shame, first family rejection, first love, first loss. We see him dance, smiling, alone in his house. Then, in the episode’s second half, we’re privy to a frightening encounter, one that we know will end badly. It’s the kind of hookup the world regards as tabloid pathology, but Davies’s series makes us feel the cost of it deeply—and helps us understand, with radical empathy, why the longing for freedom might feel worth the risk.

“**B**anana” is a more accessible production, with multiple voices—only three of the episodes are written by Davies. As in “Black Mirror,” the stories feel like polished fables, not precisely realistic. The characters are younger and more diverse than those in “Cucumber,” although both series express their racial politics in interestingly contradictory ways. (On “Cucumber,” Henry is white and Lance is black, Freddie is white and Dean is black, and the fraught question of how racial identity overlaps with “what’s hot” is left unspoken—and, for anyone who finds Dean cuter than Freddie, somewhat baffling.) There’s also a striking gender divide in “Banana”: the gay men’s stories are more sexual, the lesbians’ primarily romantic.

But no demographic analysis can explain the charm and the delicacy of “Banana”’s approach, its smart use of the one-off anthology structure, which allows for real endings, many of them sweet, a few bittersweet. In one sly, O. Henry-esque setup, a young black woman’s adoration of an ordinary middle-aged white woman looks like stalking; then, in the blink of an eye, it becomes the key to the older woman’s liberation. In another, a trans woman—played by the trans comedian Bethany Black, indelible in the role—is tormented by revenge porn, then forced to fall back on her family for support. “Cucumber” can be alienating; “Banana” is imperfect, too. But, together, the shows feel bracing, a door kicked open to reveal untold stories. ♦

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