



EDITOR'S NOTE

Disney's *The Little Mermaid* was my favourite film growing up. I would watch that film on repeat daily, memorising lines and songs to the point where I still know them by rote now. When I later came out as transgender aged 14, I explained it through Ariel's burning desire to become human - to become "part of their world" and feel finally myself. To me, this is the power of film. The act of recognition, of subtext and insinuation, lies at the heart of queer cinema. I felt recognised by this film in ways I couldn't understand, yet later formed a seminal part of how I understood my identity. Home can be found in unexpected places; as an adult I know that Disney is

unsympathetic to queer characters, yet this tale of transformation and survival will forever be dear to me as the first time I felt seen on screen.

Many of us grew up hearing that phrase full of untested hope and hedonism, that "home is where the heart is". As if just by wanting and desiring, you will be granted claim over your preferred domains in life, whether in the realm of material things or emotion. That whatever, whoever and however you love, it will be acknowledged and respected. As time passes, we'll soon realise the phrase omitted certain conditions, starting with "if" or "when" or "as long

as": if parents approve; when the world treats you fairly; as long as the social climate isn't in your way. Although these side plots aren't invincible obstacles, they've made us wary of using self-assured present tense when talking about where we belong.

John le Carré once came up with an alternative phrasing, that "home's where you go when you run out of homes". The home each of us is assigned to often isn't willing enough to accommodate who we are. A family that promises unconditional love but kicks you out the moment you come out as queer. A school system that doesn't provide every child with

equally good education. A show business that features some but underrepresents others. And each of us finds ways to seek refuge, to approach things close to our hearts but not yet obtainable - often by watching films and TV shows with our doors closed and lights out. In these alternative realities, we encounter places and things whose significance isn't yet revealed to us. Places that aren't real but feel like sanctuaries whenever we think of them. Things that lend us strength and shelter our vulnerability, even at times when the rest of our so-called homes fail to do so.

WRITERS:

HARRIET MACDONALD
ELIOTT THOMPSON
STEPHEN TURTON

EDITORS:

ELEANOR ZHANG
MILLIE BUTLER GALLIE
ELIOTT ROSE

DIRECTOR:

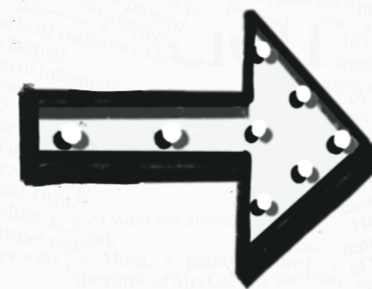
NINA JURKOVIĆ

DESIGNER:

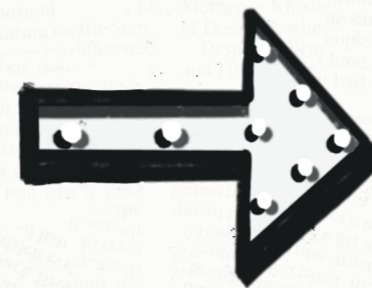
HARRY ANDREWS



BEHIND THE SEAMS: HOLLYWOOD'S GOLDEN GIRLS AND THEIR SEDUCTIVE SEWING CIRCLE
PAGE 3



"I AM MUD AND FLAME": PENDA'S FEN AND THE RECLAMATION OF PAGAN QUEERNESS
PAGE 6



FOUNDERED: ON WOUNDS AND WANTING IN MOFFIE
PAGE 9

BEHIND THE SEAMS

HOLLYWOOD'S GOLDEN GIRLS AND THEIR SEDUCTIVE SEWING CIRCLE

When finding implications of female homosexuality in golden age cinema, two scenes come to mind. The first is in *Rebecca* (1940), where the haunting Ms. Danvers (Judith Anderson) gives the new Mrs. De Winter (Joan Fontaine) an uncomfortably intimate tour of her former mistress' bedroom, including a perusal of her lingerie drawer. The second, in *Morocco* (1930), is a more jovial scene, where the female protagonist (Marlene Dietrich) performs a cabaret, dressed in top hat and tailcoat, during which she boldly

kisses another woman. Despite these two atmospheres differing greatly, they share one key observation about society and sexuality. The horror genre, which *Rebecca* fits into, often explores what is considered perverse at the time, and transfixes us with that perversion. Amy Jolly's (Dietrich's) cabaret resulted in the emasculation of one lover and the enticement of another. Both films highlight a conflict between repulsion and attraction towards female sexuality causing it thus to become a forbidden fascination.

This intrigue was not limited to fictional characters but seeped into the lives of the stars who played them. In 1994, journalist Boze Hadleigh published two exposés titled *Hollywood Gays* and *Hollywood Lesbians*, with the crude motivation of persuading celebrities to out themselves or their contemporaries. Most women featured in the latter book were rumored to be part of 'the Sewing Circle', a term coined by actress Alla Nazimova, to describe the hidden club of Hollywood women who engaged in lesbian

and bisexual activity. Some, such as Dietrich and director Dorothy Arzner, were more open (as much as they could be) about their sexuality. Others required greater speculation - which journalists and audiences alike demonstrated an unnecessary concern for.

The allure of celebrity sexuality was, of course, a double-edged sword. With its appeal came a socially ingrained duty to suppress any sexual divergency. Hollywood itself was keen in asserting this duty and took many safety measures to soften any risk of scandal. One popular precaution was that of the 'lavender marriage', where heteronormative marriages took place to conceal the sexuality of one or both members. Celebrities who undertook this sort of marriage included Barbara Stanwyck and Robert Taylor; Elsa Lanchester and Charles Laughton; and Judy Garland and Vincent Minelli. These spouses were platonic protectors, rather than romantic love interests, and provided

the veil to conceal their counterparts from the hateful lash of society.

Yet the taboo made knowledge of homosexuality that more tantalizing, to the point where the press teased out stories about illicit sexuality from limited substantial material. This is true for one of Old Hollywood's most speculative romances; that between Marlene Dietrich and Claudette Colbert. The rumor was aroused by a picture taken of them, where Dietrich's daring, short-clad legs wrapped around the more timidly dressed Colbert on a slide. The image was deliberately fashioned to cause a sex scandal, as audiences later recognized that the actresses were not moving. Furthermore,

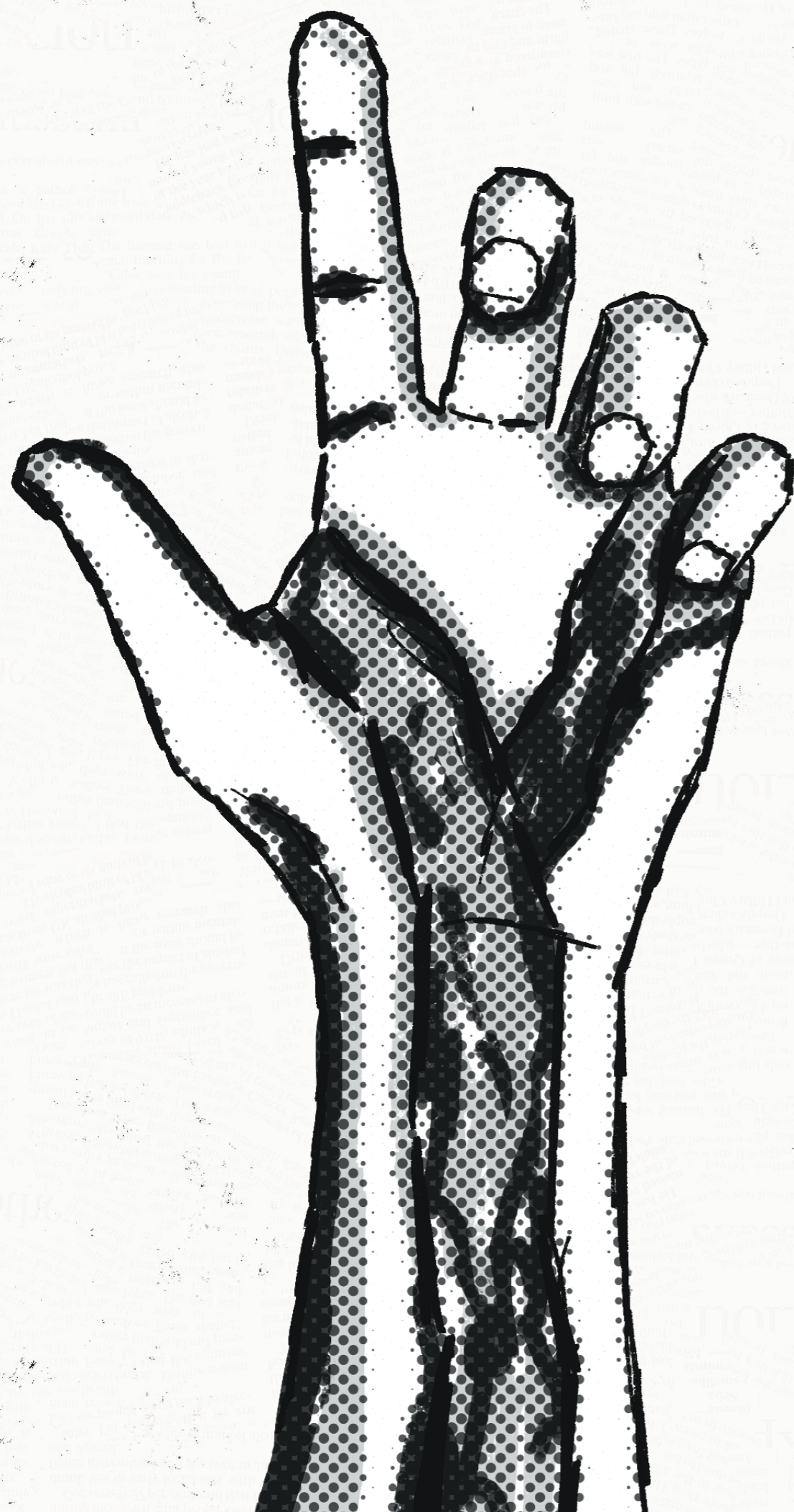
the claims that the image was based on were tenuous. Claudette's sexuality was a controversial topic as many claimed she never had any homoerotic encounters, while Dietrich is reported to have disliked her and her 'French shopgirl' mannerisms. It was clear that the press used their sexual repression, and potential risk for social persecution as a form of entertainment.

The features of this anecdote exhibit elements that still resonate in pseudo-journalism today. There is a disturbing, all too prominent, willingness to falsely accuse noted individuals of damning actions, putting them at the risk of societal excommunication, so that audiences can be

temporarily entertained. The women of the Sewing Circle were no strangers to blood-thirsty reporters, who helped popularize the misconception that they were simply a group of famous lesbians. A more accurate description of the Sewing Circle is that it was a collection of famous women, who went beyond heteronormative ideas on sex to explore their individual sexual spectrums. These women were merely trying to find and understand their sexual identities, despite the harsh glare of the spotlight always following them, and always trying to capture their most private angles.

By Harriet MacDonald

HOLLYWOOD



"I AM MUD AND FLAME"

PENDA'S FEN AND THE RECLAMATION OF PAGAN QUEERNESS

Opening scene: The quiet countryside around Pinvin (formerly Penda's Fen) is gently portrayed whilst Elgar's 'The Dream of Gerontius' plays in the background. As a crescendo is reached - "consumed, yet quickened, by the glance of God!" - the music distorts into a cacophony, the scenery fades as barbed wire is superimposed, and a thin, scarred arm emerges to point upwards. This establishes the core themes the film seeks to explore: the instability of national identity, the brutality of organised religion and self sacrifice - yet, the hope of a revolution from below, centred in the valleys of England. The subsequent narrative of a queer coming-of-age, thus, are entirely rooted in these notions - homosexuality and

paganism are inherently intertwined through a mutual rejection of capitalism.

A 'Play for Today' BBC play, *Penda's Fen* (1974) has become a low-level classic, recognised both by *Vertigo* and *Time Out* magazines in the last decade. It stands apart from the other output of the director, Alan Clarke, whose most famous output is the socialist realism of *Scum* (1979) and *Made in Britain* (1982). The film centres on Stephen, a precocious and deeply conservative sixth former who undergoes a spiritual journey upon discovering his homosexuality and the elusive King Penda (606-655) - the "last Pagan King of England." Stephen transforms from an ideologue homophobe and nationalist -

"there is something of the unnatural in [homosexuality]!" - to accepting his "mixed" identity and decrying narratives of purity: "My sex is mixed. I am woman and man. Mud and flame. Light with darkness. Nothing 'pure'!" His encounters with the occult shatter the structures that had been built around him since birth. His fervent Catholicism, his belief in the nuclear family, and his self-hatred for his "unnatural" feelings. His comment to his school master that "he had always looked up to him as an English norm" serves as a subtle rejection of these structures: the "English norm" is one of rigid, unyielding and unquestioning compliance - of which one must seek to break free from.

The film is unsettling. A genuine low-budget 1970s indie film, the special effects are not spectacular, but that hardly registers. In the most infamous sequence, Stephen has an erotic and bizarre dream about his male classmate bully, awaking suddenly to find a demon sat on his chest - saying nothing, just staring. In a dream sequence, he wanders round a country manor to discover a cult: smiling, silent, willing, they skip towards a robed figure who cuts off their hands. The use of dreams in particular unsettle the lines between reality and dreamscapes - does Stephen get a music lesson from Elgar in an abandoned shelter, does he induce cracks in the earth in which demons escape, and does he really see angels? The

viewer is never certain.

The anticapitalist messages of *Penda's Fen* are impossible to overlook and have been much written about - but, I contend, they are impossible to disentangle from the film's narrative of queer awakenings and rurality. In themselves, the anticapitalist messages - especially from the character Arne, an enigmatic writer - remain ever pertinent for the modern day, especially in times of climate disaster and dissolved trade unions: "It is not strikers who pillage our Earth, ransack it, drain it, drive for quick gain to hand on nothing but dust to the children of tomorrow." In particular, Arne speaks of the death of the countryside - the "technocrats" against which he rages

build on the beautifully isolated countryside, the "sick laboratories" that "bottle the primal genie of the Earth." In this context, the film's rural setting becomes an act of rebellion. The countryside becomes not a "hideous angel of technocratic death", but instead the site of a reemergence of something ancient, something pagan. *Penda's Fen* thus cannot isolate the queer coming of age. Homosexuality and the English countryside are inextricably conjoined, both reclaimed as acts of revolution away from restrictive traditions.

In the final scene, the elusive King Penda returns from the dead to warn Stephen of the challenges he now faces. "Your land and mine goes down into darkness

now", and Stephen, "our sacred demon of ungovernableness", is tasked with "cherish[ing] the flame" until such time when the countryside can rise again. "Child, be strange. Our dawn shall come." Many interpretations of this ending exist. Myself a queer person, I have always read this as the promise of queer liberation, as something to aspire towards; broadcast in 1974, *Penda's Fen* was amidst the first waves of gay and lesbian activism. Emerging into a hostile, aggressive world, early gay activism was monsterfied and Othered as agents of destruction to the heterosexual way of life. Penda's comfort that a "dawn shall come" acknowledges the current struggle and gives hope for an age of liberation. In *Penda's Fen*, I see a call for overt, unapologetic and intense queerness

- a call to arms for those "demon[s] of ungovernableness" who feel lost amidst the hostility, and a hesitant, potential 'solution': through embracing the pagan and the rural, queerness can forge an identity in defiance against a world that seeks to destroy it. Queerness only exists as anticapitalism.

This remains one of the most powerful queer films I've ever seen, and one which I think has especial importance in the 21st century. Stephen's rejection of "technocratic" society in favour of a society focussed on rural spirituality mirrors the conversations we find ourselves having now. Pride, the marketisation of queerness, and the performative nature of corporate allyship brings with it frustration at words over actions; Nestle tweeting "Trans Lives Matter" doesn't mean they still aren't the world's most unethical company, repeatedly violating labour laws and exploiting the resources

of the global south. Queer identities defined away from this, away from the maelstrom of corporate nothingness that profit off of queer struggle. Instead of prepackaged and family-friendly, queerness is ungovernable, monstrous, struggling - and above all, unapologetic. The director, Clarke, himself admitted that he never fully understood the film. The themes were complex, it was layered in history and mythology, and the multi-layered attack rendered it difficult to unpack. Yet, Clarke persevered as he saw something in this deconstruction, something far better than the current world of "technocratic" expansion. Perhaps, as viewers, we too should embrace the ancient unknown.

By Elliott Thompson



FOUNDERED

ON WOUNDS AND WANTING IN *MOFFIE*

Moffie is a word from Afrikaans, an offshoot of Dutch that took root at the southern tip of Africa after the first European colony was founded there in 1652. The language spread through the land with the colonizers, so that to read the placenames on a map of South Africa today is, as the poet Jeremy Cronin put it, 'To trace with the tongue wagon-trails / Saying the suffix of their aches'. The 2019 film *Moffie*—directed by Oliver Hermanus and based on a novel by André Carl van der Merwe—swaps the wagon-trails for train tracks, but it still trades heavily on aches. The film opens with the journey of a young man, Nicholas van der Swart, to an army training camp in 1981. Internally, South Africa is fragmented under the apartheid regime. Externally, it is waging a border war in South West Africa (present-day Namibia), trying to retain its hold on the country against

local revolutionaries. Like most white South African men aged between 17 and 65, Nicholas has been drafted into the military for two years of active service.

Amid the arid scrubland of their training camp, the drilling that Nick and his fellow recruits undergo is as brutal as in any other war film: withheld rations, sit-ups with cinderblocks, digging trenches, forced marching at night, standing to attention in the scorching midday heat. Any soldier who shows signs of weakness is degraded with every insult to hegemonic masculinity that Afrikaans and English have to offer: *scab*, *animal*, *girl*, *pussy*, *commie*, and—of course—*moffie*. The last is a slur for a gay man, a shortening of Afrikaans *hermafrodit* that betrays the age-old conflation of sexuality and gender: a man who loves other men is not a 'real' man at all. The word *moffie*

carries a heightened charge at the training camp, which like many intensely homosocial spaces is hellbent on eliminating any trace of homosexuality among its residents. When two recruits are caught kissing in the toilets, they are viciously beaten by the rest of their troop at the command of their sergeant, who threatens them with transfer to Ward 22: the all-too-real psychiatric wing of South Africa's chief military hospital. Nick does his best to keep his head down—avoiding the sergeant's sadistic gaze, staying out of the other soldiers' racist and misogynistic banter—for fear that his troop might realize that he has more in common with the men headed to Ward 22 than he would like.

Yet in the midst of this savage fever dream, Nick finds stray moments of pleasure and companionship. He plays volleyball with his bunkmates (his

eyes more often on their bodies than the ball). He bonds with the smart-mouthed Michael, and they sing a wry duet of Rodriguez's 1969 track 'Sugar Man' while cleaning their guns ('Sugar man, won't you hurry / 'Cause I'm tired of these scenes'). Nick's connection with the soft-spoken Dylan grows more slowly. At first, they share a blanket in a rain-sodden trench; later, a kiss in an empty barrack. But these quiet spells are inevitably broken by violence. The volleyball game ends when one of the two men sentenced to Ward 22 heads off his departure, quite literally, by shooting himself in the skull. Nick and Dylan are forced to fight each other when their comrades drag them into a game of spin the bottle in which players must trade punches instead of kisses. After being granted a week of leave, Nick returns to the camp to discover that Dylan is gone, another detainee of Ward 22.

When the recruits finally wake from the nightmare of training to face the reality of frontier warfare, they shift from being victims of the state to its aggressors—though the brutalities committed by the white soldiers against the black men, women, and children they encounter is largely left implicit rather than portrayed on screen. Whether Hermanus's turning away at these moments is an act of dignity or an avoidance of responsibility will depend on the viewer's perspective. For better or worse, war is not the subject of the film so

much as a backdrop for the inner conflict of its protagonist.

Nick reaches the end of his service and returns home, where he is indifferent to the pride his family expresses at his having become a man. We do not see him smile again until some time later, when he is able to reunite with Dylan after his old friend is also discharged from the military (whether honourably or dishonourably goes unsaid). The film ends with another journey—this time on tarmac, not train-tracks—as the two men drive down

to the sea so that Nick can swim in it for the first time in his life. Yet neither man speaks of what he has endured since they last saw each other, and the silence is an open wound between them. Under the water, Nick reaches for Dylan's hand. Dylan pulls away. Sitting uneasily on the shore together, they look less like beachgoers than survivors of a foundered ship, surrounded by wreckage that nobody else can see.

As a South African watching *Moffie* forty years after it's set, I was surprised by how alien the world it portrays

felt. The border war ended in 1990, and the apartheid regime fell four years later. Sexual activity between men was decriminalized in 1997, and same-sex marriage was legalized in 2006 (has any other country had such a tight turnaround?). South Africa's past casts a long shadow over its present, but that past has always been told and taught selectively. Films like *Moffie* force us to trace the aches of our history. We may not like what we find, but we owe it to the ones who went before.

By Stephen Turton

