

A Gay Soap (and Soapbox) in the Bronx



James Estrin/The New York Times

Kitt Holiday, in back at left, and Michael Lynch in a funeral scene for the "Strange Fruits" show. The actor playing the corpse was filling in for a missing cast member. [More Photos >](#)

By **MANNY FERNANDEZ**
Published: May 7, 2006

It's tough being a drag queen. It's even tougher being a drag queen in the Bronx. You get no respect. You can count the gay-friendly bars on one hand. But at least one night a week, at precisely 11 p.m., you have one thing to call your own.

A soap opera.

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Every Saturday evening, one of the longest-running programs on Bronx public access television entertains and confounds viewers with a 30-minute burst of gender-bending camp and low-budget intrigue. The television show is called "Strange Fruits," and it is everything the Bronx is not — flamboyantly irreverent, unabashedly gay and teeming with men in high heels and pantyhose. It is like "Dynasty," if "Dynasty" starred mostly untrained, unpaid actors and followed the exploits of a transsexual Southern belle turned Bronxite with a knack for stealing babies, poisoning people and

cursing.

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Eric Booth, the show's director, has created a convoluted soap opera universe by writing outlandish parts for his friends and acquaintances.

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"Strange Fruits," which first went on the air in 1997, has become one of the few public displays of homosexuality in a blue-collar borough that is a bastion of Latin machismo. None of the borough's movie theaters bothered showing "Brokeback Mountain." There has not been a gay pride parade here in years. Yet, each Saturday on Channel 68 on BronxNet, the public-access station, "Strange Fruits" pops up on television screens, courtesy of Eric Stephen Booth.

Mr. Booth, the show's director, writes outlandish parts for his straight, gay, lesbian and transsexual friends and acquaintances, creating a convoluted soap opera universe that, almost by accident, has given the borough's small gay

population its zaniest, boldest advertisement for itself. Some gay communities have produced vibrant neighborhood enclaves, cultural organizations and nightclubs. The Bronx, for the most part, has "Strange Fruits."

"It's about crazy drag-queen, transgender, gay people, straight people, living in the Bronx," said Mr. Booth, 54, a gay Bronx playwright and actor who videotapes and edits the show in his off-hours, when he's not doing marketing research for two Connecticut newspapers.

"The 'Strange Fruit' world has no gender. Miss Onassis, who had the baby, is a drag queen. But in 'Strange Fruit,' she can get pregnant and have babies. There's no logic. The reality is really weird."

The main star is Billie M. Nelson, a transsexual Bronx resident and mental health counselor who plays Miss Bebe Montana, a seductive villainess with a Southern drawl on the prowl for a man and money. The previous star was James Monaghan, 49, a former Dolly Parton and Bette Midler impersonator who lives in the Bronx. His character, Miss Brandy Alexander, was killed off the show so he could spend more time with his ailing mother. Now Mr. Monaghan has a smaller role, the streetwise "baby detective" named Jeffrey (as in Dahmer, the serial killer and cannibal) Cunanan (as in Andrew, who murdered [Gianni Versace](#)).

"We just have a ball," said Mr. Monaghan, a records clerk for a city agency. "It's ours. If people don't like it, we don't care."

There have been dozens of other supporting and cameo roles over the show's 40-episode run. Vampira is played by a boisterous drag queen named Jaimee L. Sommers ("I stole the name from the Bionic Woman," he explained). Robert Preston, a coffee bar manager and Bronx resident who stars as the black-wig-and-eye-patch-wearing Cockney Dai, said television — specifically, the 1970's series "Welcome Back, Kotter" — was crucial to his sexual awakening. "I had a crush on Travolta," he said.

Viewers never know what — or who — might turn up on "Strange Fruits." Paul Lipson is well known in the borough as the chief of staff for José E. Serrano, the Bronx congressman; as the former executive director of the Point, a community group; and as his "Strange Fruits"

alter ego, the corrupt Councilman Mark Davenport. Majora Carter, executive director of the environmental group Sustainable South Bronx, has also been on the show.

"He is our Fellini," Mr. Lipson, one of a handful of straight people involved in the show, said of Mr. Booth. "He had this burning desire to do this, with no money and no resources and with people who are his friends. It's a great little snapshot of a moment in the history of the Bronx."

Cablevision, the cable provider that hosts BronxNet, reaches about 270,000 households in the borough. But it is anyone's guess as to how many watch Mr. Booth's show, because BronxNet has no way of tracking a program's viewership. The show's cast members say they are occasionally recognized by strangers, and Mr. Booth, whose show won two BronxNet awards in 2001, said he had received a number of comments and phone calls over the years from random fans. Nonfans, too.

Mr. Booth was at home one Saturday night a few years ago when his phone rang, he said. "You should be ashamed of yourself," the caller said.

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"Strange Fruits" is also broadcast the first Friday of the month on the Manhattan Neighborhood Network and the third Wednesday of the month on Queens Public Television. In the Bronx, the program has lately been in reruns, shown in no particular order, making it almost impossible for new viewers to make sense of a rather complicated plot line of double-crossings and dalliances, one more reason the show is a kind of brilliant mess.

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Slide Show: A Gay Soap in the Bronx

One of the reasons the plot has taken so many twists is not because of Mr. Booth's love of melodrama, but because he uses ordinary people instead of actors.

Some have moved away, some have been too busy to make a taping and some have just been hard to reach. Many of the show's characters are members of Gay Men of the Bronx, a group founded in 1990.

Mr. Booth describes his soap opera as community theater on video, in the style of "The Benny Hill Show." Indeed, his dialogue is peppered with enough sexual innuendo to make the girls from "Sex and the City" blush. There is also crotch-grabbing, man-to-man French kissing, anatomical insults and drag-queen screaming matches.

The man responsible for all this outrageousness is not very outrageous a soft-spoken Brooklyn native who also directs a Spanish and English gay-themed talk show on BronxNet, "Fruta Extraña," Spanish for "Strange Fruit." himself. Mr. Booth is

He used to work on Wall Street, on the trading floor of the American Stock Exchange. He has never been one to cause a scene, other than the time he drank too much at the Exchange, was dragged out by the police and woke up the next day in Bellevue Hospital Center, tied to a bed. He went through rehab and was allowed to keep his job.

One recent Sunday afternoon, Mr. Booth and his cast met at the Bronx Academy of Arts and

Dance in Hunts Point, a performing arts center that is a hub for the gay community in the Bronx. It felt more like a family reunion than a soap opera set. Madame Zelda made chocolate cake.

Miss Bebe, in keeping with being the star, showed up late and took forever to get dressed. She sat in a back room of the dance studio, as Miss Onassis, a buff and tattooed Christopher Jones, applied makeup to her face.

Ms. Nelson, the transsexual who plays Miss Bebe, enjoys improvising her dialogue, especially the parts that call for clever R-rated insults. She is not from the South, but she is from the South Bronx. "I tried to play it virginal," Ms. Nelson said of Miss Bebe. "I really did."

Mr. Booth forgot to e-mail the script to one of his actresses. He had a funeral scene to tape, but the actor who played Miss Bebe's deceased fourth husband was not around, so he persuaded a friend to fill in, and had him lie down on some tables, since a coffin was out of the question.

He had to reshoot a scene several times because one cross-dressing diva was having trouble being a mere extra. Mr. Monaghan, or Jeffrey Cunanan, sat back on a chair, taking it all in, waiting for his big scene, which called for him to rough up Cockney Dai in the hallway.

"This," he said with a sigh, "is very strange."



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Kitt Holiday, in back at left, and Michael Lynch in a funeral scene for the "Strange Fruits" show. The actor playing the corpse was filling in for a missing cast member.

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Kitt Holiday applies makeup before a taping. "Strange Fruits" stars mostly untrained, unpaid actors.

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Eric Booth, the show's director, has created a convoluted soap opera universe by writing outlandish parts for his friends and acquaintances.

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As Kitt Holiday adjusts pantyhose, Christopher Jones applies makeup to Billie Nelson, the show's main star, who plays a seductive villainess with a Southern drawl.

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The show is one of the few public displays of homosexuality in the Bronx.

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Kitt Holiday, left, and Michael Lynch rehearse their lines between the taping sessions of "Strange Fruits." The dialogue is often peppered with sexual innuendo.

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Mr. Booth ties up actress Isabel Gonzalez, who plays Madame Zelda, before a scene is filmed. He describes his soap opera as community theater on video.

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Jaimee L. Sommers plays the role of Vampira. The show is one of the longest-running programs on Bronx public access television.

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