

Breaking out of the glass closet

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"I am not a leather daddy. I am not a twink boy. But hey, I'm always up for adventure," says Charlie David, his perfect grin flashing.

A twink boy is a barely legal gay boy. (I had to look it up.) The gay world has long had its own lingo. But who knew it had its own travel show, too?

Many people, it turns out. According to its publicists, *Bump!* is "the world's most watched gay and lesbian travel series and Canada's most successful gay TV show export." Its third season launched in February on the Canadian digital cable channel OUTtv, as well as international outlets. It is also available on DVD.

Not that the pursuit of sexual fetishes is a big part of the show. Sex shops around the world are passé, it seems. "We're veering away from that," says Mr. David, the show's co-host for the second and third seasons, who is from Yorkton, Sask. (population: 17,000). (The lesbian counterpart co-host is Shannon McDonough, also Canadian.)



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The third season of *Bump!* with Charlie David launched this February. (*Fred Lum/The Globe and Mail*)



"We did that in the first season," Mr. David, 27, continues. "Honestly, to me, a sex shop is a sex shop is a sex shop. You could be in London, Brussels, you know, Regina. What's so interesting about that?"

Still, the show attempts to be inclusive of all the subcultures in the gay and lesbian community, which has led Mr. David to some places that he finds a bit shocking. "I went to one [hotel],

Black Tulip in Amsterdam, where they have [sexual] equipment in the rooms and the comforters on the bed are leather." His pretty face makes a grimace. "I am very vanilla," he protests. "So, I walk into some of these places and take a deep breath and go, 'Okay, here we go!' "

The show's implicit purpose - at least, its family-rated vanilla mission - is to help same-sex couples find gay-positive travel destinations. "It's important, because when you're part of a society that identifies as being different ... you want to make sure that you know what you're getting into," he explains. "Areas of some cities and some countries are potentially dangerous for you and your partner."

He takes viewers into shops and clubs and to events around the world that the show's producers consider of interest to the community. Calgary is one such destination. "It's famous worldwide for the stampede, but there's also a gay rodeo that happens just before," Mr. David says brightly. "And the athleticism of the men and women is exactly the same," he adds fulsomely. If the wearing of leather chaps is a draw, he is not saying.

Mr. David's enthusiastic embrace of all things gay is part of his job, but also a reflection of his philosophy. "I am an actor, so to come out, it makes a statement," he explains, noting that he lives with his partner of a year and a half in Los Angeles, a city renowned for its glass closet.

He inhabited the glass closet for a long time as he tried to find his way in Hollywood. Three years ago, he was cast as Toby Moraitis on *Dante's Cove*, a steamy soap on here!, the leading American network for gays and lesbians. "I got the job without them knowing whether I was gay or not. Well, they may have guessed," he adds after a pause. But the opportunity caused him to reconsider his secrecy about his sexuality. "I was tired of the lying. It's a lot of pressure. That's what got me to the breaking point."

He understands the power, and the limitations, of being an openly gay actor. "The trend has been to come out when you have made it and you no longer care. Like

Rosie O'Donnell or Sir Ian McKellen.

"But for me to do it in my 20s, you have the potential to do leading man stuff, and when you do this, that's not going to happen."

At the time, in the first season of *Dante's Cove*, he was the only gay actor on the series, he says. Now in its third season, seven actors are either gay or lesbian, he says.

If coming out to Hollywood was difficult, it could not have compared with telling his parents when he was 16. Second eldest in a "very strong Catholic" family of five, he attended a high school of which his father was principal. His mother worked as a teacher for special needs children. "In all of Saskatchewan, I didn't know anyone gay. Also, I grew up before and during the advent of the Internet, so I didn't have the benefit that kids now have, where you can go, 'Okay, I am like that.' "

His only reference point was the popular TV show *Melrose Place*. "I was 13, and they had the first gay kiss, and it was, like, what was that?" One night at the dinner table, his mother complained about how much he watched "garbage TV."

"Mom, you don't understand," he wailed. "My life is *Melrose Place*." He had a friend in drug rehab. Another friend was considering an abortion. "I felt this huge generational gap between my parents and me, compounded with, 'I think I like boys.' " He ran to his room in tears. His parents thought the problem was that he had a pregnant girlfriend. When he told them the truth, his father consoled him by saying that the teenage years are confusing. "You may think you're gay, but you're probably not gay," he recalls his father said. The next day, his mother had indexed all the references to homosexuality in his Bible.

To their credit, he says, his parents, who have been married for 30 years, eventually accepted his choice full-heartedly.

Last Christmas, he brought his partner home to meet them. Recently, his mother stood up at her Catholic Women's League to say she would not sign a letter to the federal government to oppose gay marriage.

From small-town Saskatchewan to the Black Tulip in Amsterdam, Mr. David has travelled a long way.

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