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***What We Do in the Shadows – Season 3*, Tig Fong, Yana Gorskaya and Kyle Newacheck (dirs) (2021), USA: FX**

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In 2019, the *What We Do in the Shadows* franchise (2005–present) expanded its queer-inclusive fantastical universe with a comedy-horror television series of the same name, *What We Do in the Shadows (WWDITS)* (2019–present, USA: FXP, Two Canoes Pictures and 343 Incorporated). Set in modern-day Staten Island, the series follows the nocturnal lives of four vampire roommates and their familiar-turned-vampire-killer bodyguard – Nandor the Relentless, Laszlo, Nadja, Colin Robinson and Guillermo de la Cruz (performed by, respectively, Kayvan Novak, Matt Berry, Natasia Demetriou, Mark Proksch and Harvey Guillén). Through a celebratory approach towards otherness and the reappropriation of heterosexual romance tropes, the third season of Jemaine Clement’s creation enriches its pre-established queerness and, more overtly than previous seasons, interrogates the chosen family model.

Of course, there is a rich literary history of association between queerness and the vampire, from Sheridan Le Fanu’s lesbian vampire novella *Carmilla* to the homoerotic overtones of Anne Rice’s *The Vampire Chronicles*. Such association is often reflected on silver and small screens. Critiquing Francis Ford Coppola’s approach to *Bram Stoker’s Dracula*, for example, Christopher McGunnigle argues that ‘any attempts to reduce the innate homoeroticism of vampire lore to dust will only result in rising from the grave in the next

generation' (2005: 172). It might not be the grave, but the cold open of *WWDITS*'s pilot episode sees homoeroticism and queerness at large rise from the coffin in the form of vampire Nandor. The mockumentary style allows him to take pride in who he is, to consciously exhibit himself to the cameras. By rejecting the conventional vampire narrative that evokes suspense through the concealment of identity, the series immediately foregoes any sense of shame. In Season 3's 'The Wellness Center', that well-worn shame is even satirized, with Nandor persuaded to join an all-singing, all-dancing cult that rejects vampirism in pursuit of being human. This approach counters William Hughes's proposal that, 'the narrating, as opposed to the narrated, vampire often suggests an at-best ambiguous, and at worst guilty, reflection upon one's identity' (2011: 142). *WWDITS* uses the narrating vampire and the mockumentary style to showcase identity and blend the banal and the fantastical in a way that normalizes this queer figure. The stylistic choice resolves the traditional issue of a villainous, guilt-ridden inclination for blood being a coded representation of the experience of queer identity. Instead, the series centralizes those marginalized by society, living in the shadows, with acceptance and joy.

Indeed, Gina Wisker contends that vampires as '[f]igures of horror, of the abject, are ideally placed to be reimagined and rescripted as positive celebrations of otherness' (2011: 124). Whether it is Laszlo musing on the beauty of sex in various forms, a typically brown-suited Colin Robinson belly dancing in sequined loincloth and fez and making drag and pop culture references or the inclusion of cameos that merge this queer-inclusive universe with other vampire worlds, the third season of *WWDITS* continues to grow its positive celebration of otherness and queerness specifically. Episode 2, 'The Cloak of Duplication', is a standout. In this episode, the vampires acquire the title's forbidden cloak from the Vampiric Council's Chamber of Curiosities and use it to take on Nandor's form. For instance, Nadja wears the cloak and propositions partner Laszlo with the 'thing' he has always wanted to try (which

reminds viewers that Laszlo and Nandor have already been intimate with one another). Laszlo, Colin Robinson and Guillermo, too, wear the cloak to help Nandor court Meg, a woman who works at his gym. In particular, a cloaked Guillermo tells Meg about his and Nandor's close working relationship and she thinks that the two may have feelings for each other, offering recognition of the potential romance between the characters. Finally, when Nandor himself speaks with Meg and finds out that she is a lesbian, he acknowledges his own attraction to women and men. The conclusion to the courting denies the expected heterosexual rom-com narrative climax and, in its place, celebrates other sexual identities. Still, in a non-judgmental way, Nandor struggles to understand that Meg likes only women. He struggles in the same way that he does earlier in the episode, not understanding why men at the gym do not notice and admire each other's bodies as they did when he commanded an army hundreds of years ago. Nandor's long life of multitudinous experiences has negated society's defined categories and the restricted appreciation of the human form. In fact, the queerness of each vampire suggests that living long enough outside of day-to-day social conditioning moves one towards a liberated state of unlabelled sexuality.

As well as celebrating this eternal, marginal nightlife and unlabelled sexuality, *WWDITS* foregrounds the vampiric representation of chosen family in order to simulate and examine queer life. As Kimberley J. Lau clarifies, 'a fantastic immortality and a decidedly queer life/time' means that the vampire 'confounds assumptions about the worthy life predicated on dominant ideologies of temporality and invites a consideration of other ways of living, other ways of being' (Lau 2018: 3-4). Episode 4, 'The Casino', really contributes to and plays with the development of this theme, as the vampires try to accept Nandor's former familiar as an equal part of the team. On a trip to Atlantic City, Nandor confronts the vampires about their treatment of Guillermo, who they continue to make unreasonable demands of despite his promotion to bodyguard. When Colin Robinson agrees and says that

they are all a big family, nonetheless, he aligns that idea with office motivational talk that leads workers to neglect their real families and be degraded by their work. The dialogue recognizes how the concept of chosen family might be understood differently by individual viewers, depending on their lifestyle or personal experience of the phrase. To some, it might be considered as corny or false if it has been encountered only in the workplace or some contrived environment. By predicting and addressing such reactions earlier in the season, *WWDITS* can then focus on presenting the concept on the series' own queer terms, inviting viewers to consider other ways of living and being that challenge the common tropes of family – that is, heteronormative pairings and having children.

The above scene goes on to detail such alternative lifestyles, as queerness permeates a conversation about sexuality between the vampires and Guillermo. Laszlo and Nadja's open relationship is discussed and encouraged, for example. Often depicted with the same balance of adoration and bickering as most monogamous heterosexual married couples, the two demonstrate that a long, loving relationship can exist outside of such a structure. Guillermo, too, confides to the vampires that things were difficult as a child and is seemingly on the cusp of coming out when the conversation is comically interrupted. After an example of struggle and build of nervous anticipation, the interruption disrupts the formulaic script of a coming-out scene – in the same way that Nandor's rom-com ending and the suspense of secret identities also are discarded. Through this disruption, the moment implicitly questions whether an overt coming-out scene is needed and, in turn, confronts a society that still necessitates the act of coming out. So, *WWDITS* does not just use the queer life of vampires to invite consideration of other ways of living, it advocates for such otherness to be unreservedly accepted, to attain a quality of everydayness that means a moment of identity revelation is no longer compulsory. Nevertheless, coming-out scenes do remain an important part of representation as long as they realize the journey of many queer people today and

perhaps such a scene will happen in an upcoming season. At the very least though, the fact that Guillermo is comfortable enough to share his sexual identity with the vampires exemplifies how the chosen family model provides the safety to be oneself, regardless of the pressures of biological family or society in general.

What is more, throughout this scene, Nandor's reactions – his body language and facial expressions – enhance the homoerotic tension that imbues the relationship between the vampire and his former familiar. When a dejected Guillermo is forced to leave the table to fulfil the other vampires' demands, Nandor reaches out his hand to him then pulls away; when Guillermo returns, Nandor's sideways glances towards him reveal his interest in the subject of his sexuality. Such subtlety counterbalances Laszlo and Nadja's more explicit approach to sex. Moreover, in a series that does depict and discuss LGBTQ+ relationships, rather than queerbaiting, this quiet tension between the pair reappropriates the 'will they, won't they' television trope that is so often assigned to heterosexual couples (from *Friends*'s Ross and Rachel to *The X-Files*'s Scully and Mulder). Elsewhere in the season, Guillermo declares himself to be Nandor's 'heartguard' and shows jealousy towards his master's romantic relationship with a woman named Gail; speaking with Laszlo, human neighbour Sean identifies the pair as boyfriends and the label is not corrected; and, in the episode in which Nandor joins a cult, he tells Guillermo that he cares for him too much to burden him with vampirism, then bops him on the nose and compliments his smile. These are just several of many examples that fuel the as yet unresolved sexual tension of their relationship that inspires fans to root for the couple. Indeed, Kayvan Novak has said that he is 'constantly' asked whether 'Nandor [is] finally gonna have sex with Guillermo' (The Paley Center for Media 2022).

This inducement of 'shipping' means that Nandor and Guillermo's relationship exhibits a level of what Henry Jenkins terms convergence culture. As Jenkins explains, this

culture can ‘emerge bottom up from various sites of participatory culture and [get] pulled into the mainstream’ (2008: 268). On social media, hashtags like #nandormo and #wwditsfanart are full of online conversation and fan-made creations – from Valentine’s Day cards to keychains – that envision Nandor and Guillermo as a couple. Harvey Guillén, who is openly queer, regularly shares fans’ romantic artwork on his social media pages too. By employing the ‘will they, won’t they’ strategy, the series increases its visibility through this online presence and memorabilia and may, as a result, secure higher television ratings and more money. Yet, despite the cynical but valid recognition of the importance of profit to media industries, Jenkins also stresses the distinct power of the participating fans and the importance of the flow that exists within convergence culture:

The power of grassroots media is that it diversifies; the power of broadcast media is that it amplifies. That’s why we should be concerned with the flow between the two: expanding the potentials for participation represents the greatest opportunity for cultural diversity. (Jenkins 2008: 268)

The queerness of Nandor and Guillermo, and the homoerotic tension that exists between them, contributes to the cultural diversity that *WWDITS* has achieved, both on its own merits and through its fans. With Guillermo moving out of his closet-cum-bedroom and a thrilling fight sequence between the vampire and vampire killer, the Season 3 finale shifts the power dynamics and establishes a new phase of this relationship for Season 4.

In GLAAD’s *Where We Are on TV Report 2021-2022*, *WWDITS* is recognized for its queer characters, which support FX’s position as the third-most LGBTQ-inclusive cable network in America (Deerwater and Townsend 2022: 14). In addition to that important distinction, the series veers from the tragic narrative that is commonly given to queer people

on-screen and indulges in a casual, joyful depiction of progressive queerness. With Colin Robinson's dull interpretation of chosen family retained as a running joke, Season 3 deftly balances such humour alongside a genuine growth in the characters' care and respect for one another. When the threat of disbanding looms in the final episode, Guillermo stresses to the vampires how rare it is to have a chosen family like they do. Ultimately, *WWDTIS* accomplishes the unique feat of showing why humans of our world should be a little more like the vampires of its fictional universe. For them, being queer is just a part of nightly life.

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