

CULTURE

THE L WORD IS BACK: WHAT CAN YOU EXPECT FROM THE BOUNDARY-SMASHING TV SHOW IN 2020?

The original show inspired feverish adoration and put lesbians centre stage on mainstream TV for the first time. As a reboot heads to our screens, Lotte Jeffs asks what kind of impact it can have in 2020

Lotte Jeffs | Sunday January 12 2020, 12.01am, The Sunday Times



Shane (Kate Moennig), Bette (Jennifer Beals) and Alice (Leisha Hailey) are back
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June 2010. In a bland business hotel on the outskirts of Birmingham, hundreds of lesbian and bisexual women were beside themselves with anticipation, waiting for the actresses Kate Moennig and Leisha Hailey to arrive. They had paid £95 for a ticket to The L Word Convention, three days of fervent fandom celebrating the hit show about the glamorous lives of queer women in LA, which ran for six series, from 2004-09, on the US network Showtime. This was their chance to meet its stars. I was there to report on the event, and while a fan of The L Word myself (name a gay woman who wasn't), the rampant fawning that greeted Moennig, who played sexy heartbreaker Shane, and Hailey, who played goofy but lovable Alice, when they stepped onto a small stage in the hotel's conference room was terrifying. There was screaming and crying, and at the meet-and-greet photo op later in the day I saw one woman literally throw herself at their feet. The actresses looked overwhelmed.

In the queer community, they were superstars commanding Madonna-level mania — never mind that Hailey was the only “out” woman in the main cast and Moennig refused to discuss her personal life. The other core cast members were all openly straight. It was the first time I'd ever seen glamorous, sexy, successful gay women depicted on screen, and that was transformative in a way that's hard to explain to a heterosexual person who takes culture's constant validation of their lifestyle for granted. Now, after a decade-long hiatus during which gay marriage was legalised in 28 countries, including America and Britain, The L Word is back, renamed for a new decade as The L Word: Generation Q.


I still remember the rush of pride and excitement I felt when I first saw the adverts for the original show on the side of London buses. Beautiful women were holding hands and looking suggestively at each other. Being a lesbian seemed really cool, for the first time ever. Until The L Word, which featured incredibly attractive characters living affluent lives in LA, gay women on TV made for grim viewing. They were often miserable, persecuted and killed off before you could get too attached.


The L Word was fun and fluffy. There were some deaths — poor Dana! — but on the whole it was an upbeat drama, the lesbian Sex and the City. And it was as influential in our community as Carrie and her crew were for straight women in the early Noughties. It spawned cultish devotion; fashion trends (white shirt, blazer, skinny black tie); in-jokes (“who killed Jenny Schecter?”); references (“Betty!” “The chart”); and even haircuts (the “Shane”). If you know, you know.

Carrie Lyell is the editor-in-chief of Diva, the UK's only newsstand magazine for queer women. “For years we'd foraged for crumbs of representation in other TV programmes and films, so to be given not just a slice, but the whole cake, was quite incredible,” she says. “The show holds a special place in our hearts.”

And what of the new version? Three of the original cast members — Moennig (now happy to talk about being queer), Hailey and Jennifer Beals, who played iconic power lesbian Bette, are joined by a new ensemble of characters, including a Chinese trans gay man, a Latina couple and a masculine-of-centre white lesbian, better reflecting today's diversity of LGBTQIA+ identities.

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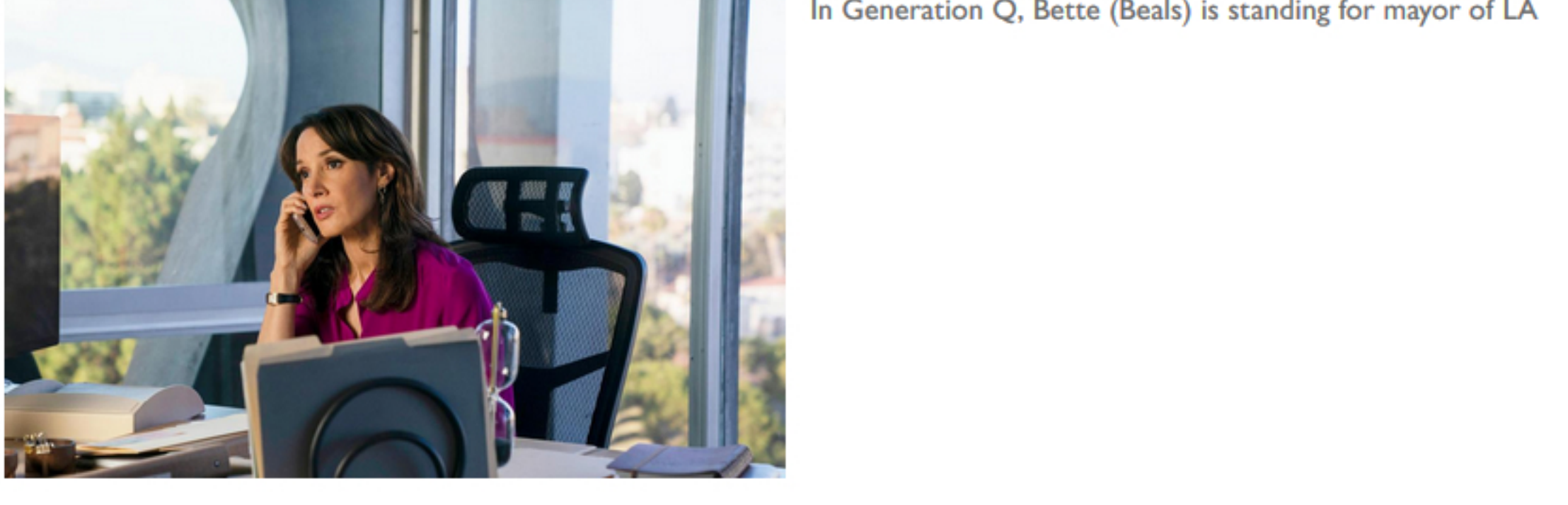
The original L Word, with Mia Kirshner (second left); the death of her character, Jenny Schecter, will finally be resolved

I spoke to Beals, perhaps best known outside lesbian culture as the lead in 1980s classic Flashdance, who is also one of the producers of Generation Q, about how much has changed since we last saw Bette on screen. “When we went off air, there were no conversations in pop culture about this tectonic rerendering of gender identification and sexual orientation,” she says. “Now the language of self is so different. With the introduction of they/them pronouns, the lexicon of beingness in the realm of sexuality is ripping at the seams as it tries to keep up with people's experience.”

One of the big criticisms of the original show was that it didn't represent enough LGBTQIA+ diversity. But, back in 2004, there was a limited vocabulary for being a lesbian. You were either “butch” or “femme”. Like Shane, my icon, I was something in between: boyish swagger, androgynous fashion, partial to a bit of smoky black eyeliner. My girlfriend and I had been refused entry to lesbian bars for looking too feminine. The L Word made us feel seen, as never before. We devoured every episode and bought each series on DVD so we could watch it again and again. But some gay women and trans people felt less well served by the show.

The problem was, without enough gay stories across media, there was an unreasonable pressure on a single piece of work to represent everyone. Now queer voices and narratives are ever more prevalent, creating space for every iteration of otherness to coexist in art and culture. And Generation Q is doing its best to bring together as many of these identities as it can. This time around it also features more queer and trans actors. I ask Beals if this was a deliberate response to disappointment that the original series' cast was predominantly straight. “When someone comes in to audition,” she says, “it is not your place to ask them if they are gay. It is also illegal.”

I ask Beals why this is the right time to bring back The L Word. “When we went off the air, we expected something to take its place right away,” she says. “Orange Is the New Black occupied some of that space really beautifully, but nothing was a lesbian-centric show. Then, after the 2016 election, we realised we had to do something, because with such a divisive administration the LGBTQ community would be attacked. It was important not only to give the community visibility and therefore agency and a sense of self-worth, but also to give people who are not a part of the community a different lens for viewing LGBTQ issues.”



In Generation Q, Bette (Beals) is standing for mayor of LA

My life has changed immeasurably since I watched the last episode in 2009. I left a decade-long relationship with one woman, fell in love with another, got married, had a child with her and built a successful career. I went from a Shane to a Bette. The returning characters in the show have equally had a lot of “life” happen to them. Bette is mother to a teenager and running for mayor, Shane has made a ton of money and flies in on a private jet, bedding the air hostess en route, obviously, and Alice is the host of her own chat show. “We wanted to maintain the aspirational aspect,” Beals says. “It's more like a rebel yell than a reboot. It's not just, ‘Let's have a nostalgic reacquaintance with these old characters.’”

This season opens with a sex scene depicting something I certainly have never seen in such a context on screen before (periods). It's shocking, but The L Word always was. The pilot opened with Bette and her “life partner” Tina making a baby with a random man's sperm. Such a thing felt impossibly daring in 2004; now all my friends are at it. So, to continue to push boundaries, the new show had to address our last remaining taboos.

Generation Q crams a lot of issues into its first three episodes: from racism to the opioid crisis, Time's Up to the menopause. It would feel a bit like homework if it wasn't for the sex and the LA glamour and fabulous trouser suits. It must be said that the show has finally found its fashion sense, or maybe it's more that, since 2004, we all have.

I wonder if the show will mean as much to young LGBTQIA+ women as it did to my generation. Probably not, because we now live in a world in which lesbian love stories are winning Oscars, supermodels and Hollywood actresses walk the red carpet with their girlfriends, one of the world's biggest-selling pop stars (Sam Smith) identifies as non-binary, and social media gives a platform to every underrepresented community to tell their own story. But I'll be eagerly watching and probably rewatching every episode of The L Word: Generation Q with my wife, both of us still secretly swooning over Shane.

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The L Word: Generation Q launches on February 4 on Sky Atlantic and Now TV, with all episodes available on demand

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