



## Men Who Love Men Deserve Better Than ‘Bohemian Rhapsody’

Posted on November 6, 2018November 9, 2018 by Tyler ‘Llewyn’

The Freddie Mercury biopic has been cooking up since 2010. Originally meant to be a Sacha Baron Cohen and David Fincher collaboration, the biopic’s direction had shifted into the hands of the remaining members of Queen. This led to Baron Cohen leaving the project due to artistic disagreements, envisioning a much more adult version of *Bohemian Rhapsody*. Eventually, Anthony McCarten’s screenplay was green-lit with Bryan Singer (ugh) attached to direct. Soon they found Mercury in Rami Malek, as well as some reforms after Singer was fired from the project, some backlash for the lack of inclusion of the AIDs crisis, and accusations of “de-queering” Mercury’s depiction the film (more ugh)! It’s almost impressive that a project with such an infamously-controversial development stage could amount to a film this dull.



*Rami Malek's performance is valiant, the filmmaking is not.*

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But here we are. *Bohemian Rhapsody*, despite a mixed critical reception, hit the #1 spot of the box office, making an estimated \$50 million dollar earning. Somehow, this has only sparked more controversy as a quite irritating critics-versus-audiences conversation has formed once again. I think we have bigger things to worry about, considering the director credit has gone to an accused pedophile (<https://variety.com/2017/film/news/bryan-singer-cesar-sanchez-guzman-1202633573/>) (he is currently being campaigned for by Fox for best director (<https://twitter.com/Ceilidhann/status/1059548673003212801>)) as part of the upcoming awards season). Simply put, this film already gave me a headache before I even got the chance to see it. Dubbed the “unseasoned chicken” of cinema by our editor-in-chief, Dilara, and writer, Iana, *Bohemian Rhapsody* is not only the blandest on-screen version of Mercury’s extravagant life possible, but it also does a major disservice to the gay and bi men who have looked up to the idol since the 80s. While the “de-queering” criticism may be slightly hyperbolic as Mercury’s sexuality is a large thread within the film, it is not handled with the amount of care to be worthy of high praise.

It is a pretty bold choice to include so much dialogue where Mercury declares that “formulas are a waste of time” and then proceed to follow the same old musical biopic structure to a tee. While Malek’s embodiment of the rock-and-roll icon certainly is the best thing the film has to offer, the writing and the direction does not know how to properly showcase him. His onstage hip thrusts and seductive physicality do resemble the legend, but the camerawork and editing fail to provide the same energy. After a slew of unenthusiastically-shot concert sequences and irritatingly coy winks to the audience in behind-the-scenes production of Queen’s greatest hits, it becomes apparent that *Bohemian Rhapsody* has a habit of saying one thing and then showing the exact opposite in its filmmaking.

“[Americans are] Puritans in public, perverts in private,” a band member quips while discussing the overtness of their music. Ironically, in this moment, the screenplay accidentally describes this film’s relationship with Mercury’s hypersexuality perfectly. Intimacy with women is portrayed as one always expects: the innocent romantic beats, the large narrative presence, the half-naked moments of tenderness

all belong to Mary Austin. Gay clubs, BDSM culture, even male life partners are all examined from a distance. Freddie Mercury was not one to define himself by labels. His sexuality has always remained a mystery, even to those who worked closest to him (<http://ultimateclassicrock.com/freddie-mercury-sexuality/>). He did, however, make it clear that two people were the greatest loves of his life: Mary Austin and Jim Hutton (<https://www.vanityfair.com/hollywood/2018/11/freddie-mercury-true-story-relationships-mary-austin-jim-hutton>) — a woman, a man. There is a significant disparity between the biopic's approach to both.

Nothing has been butchered more in *Bohemian Rhapsody* than Mercury's relationship with his second lover, Jim Hutton. Disgustingly, Singer has altered their meeting at a bar to Hutton cleaning up after Mercury's wild party (an instance in which self-destructiveness is associated with gayness, more on that later). Awkwardness ensues as Mercury gropes Hutton without his consent, which is quickly met with an apology. Knowing Singer's history, this is an unnecessary move that diluted the only scene close to an authentic moment of gay intimacy. Hutton then disappears from the narrative entirely until the last act of the film, telling Mercury to seek him once he finds himself. In real life, Hutton became Mercury's gardener and they slowly built a relationship together. The handling of Hutton is a choice for more forced narrative drama but does a lot to erase Hutton's impact on Mercury even further. It begins to feel as if the film is allergic to happiness for men who love men.



*Freddie Mercury with his lover, Jim Hutton.*

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In a thoughtless attempt at relationship drama near the midpoint of the film, Malek's Mercury confesses to Lucy Boynton's Mary, "I think I'm bisexual." Freddie loved Mary. Freddie loved Jim. While both are true, there is a more substantial journey to sexual identity than simply loving both a woman and a man. The anecdotes and statements we know do not give us a solid answer on how to view Freddie Mercury, or how the man thought of himself. Applying a label to him post-mortem in a biopic meant to honor him is a disrespectful move and speaks to the film's heteronormative lens. Singer does not have the authority, perspective, or education, to define who Mercury was.

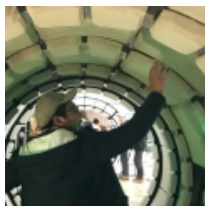


Perhaps the biggest issue with *Bohemian Rhapsody* seems to actually be Queen's involvement in the film. You can see their footprints underlying Mercury's journey of identity all over it. Paul Prenter, Mercury's abusive boyfriend at the time, is rightly one of the antagonists of the film. Prenter's outing Mercury's sex life on live TV is a malicious action that shrouded the lead singer in unwarranted controversy for a very long time. The concept? Fine. *Bohemian Rhapsody*'s handling of this concept? Distasteful. In an attempt to protect Queen's legacy, it handles Mercury's life with Prenter with little nuance; as a result, it antagonizes all those gay and bi men who looked up to Mercury during that image. Prenter never loved Mercury, but his fans did. He is a gay icon for a damn reason, regardless of his non-specific label.

This movie looks down upon Mercury's lavish exploration of the pleasures of life and dismisses how important it was for his own and countless other men's pride. The last-minute shoving of the AIDS subplot into a film that goes out of its way to reduce male sexuality feels especially ignorant. It shows a misunderstanding of the contraction of AIDS, reinforces a stereotypical association of AIDS with gayness, and ties together Mercury's exploration of sexuality with his self-destructive habits. Narratively, it feels like a punishment, and consequence, for the artificial plot conflict in turning against the band. This is not a good look for a movie that initially sought to leave these topics on the cutting room floor in the first place.

Whether out of an attempt to make his story palatable to straight audiences, to define the man, or out of just problematic creative choices from the studio, it's clear to me that Freddie Mercury deserves better than *Bohemian Rhapsody*. The gay and bi men who have looked up to Mercury forever deserve better than *Bohemian Rhapsody*. Representation is more than inclusion, it's also how minorities are also treated within their narratives. As my good friend wrote in his [Letterboxd review](https://boxd.it/ymBwN) (<https://boxd.it/ymBwN>), "When I die, I want everyone to know how fucking gay I was. And I want that to be broadcast. I want my obituary to talk about how much I loved my queer brothers and sisters. I don't want it to be like this movie." No matter which of the many factors are responsible, Mercury's sexuality has been immortalized in *Bohemian Rhapsody* as a character flaw. **That** is puritanism.

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## Published by Tyler 'Llewyn'

Tyler "Llewyn" Taing is an aspiring filmmaker and student based in California. He is a lover of science fiction, and can be found seeing indie movies on weekends with old people. [View all posts by Tyler 'Llewyn'](#)

## 3 thoughts on “Men Who Love Men Deserve Better Than ‘Bohemian Rhapsody’”

1. **Carolyn** [November 8, 2018](#) [Reply](#) [Edit](#)

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To be “convicted” of a crime means that a court of law has to find you guilty of a crime. Bryan Singer’s a piece of shit, but he’s never actually been convicted of a crime. Just wanted to point that out! Great article, though!

**Llewyn** [November 8, 2018](#) [Reply](#) [Edit](#)

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Thank you for the correction! I’ll change the wording right now.

2. **Bishop** [November 8, 2018](#) [Reply](#) [Edit](#)

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Totally agree with you. Everyone who loves Freddie Mercury deserves better. Most of all Freddie Mercury deserves better. I wish they had read Jim Hutton’s book, and one of them must have read it. I think the “consultants” were only interested in their own gain and twisted things to make themselves look good; Absolutely disgraceful that they would be so disloyal to a person who was loyal and generous to all. I hope somebody with integrity will make the true story of his life.

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