

Attitude Award Winner
ALLY AWARD

Reggie Yates

This year, BBC3 screened a documentary series that shed light on what life is like in 21st century Russia. The second episode of *Extreme Russia* exposed the hatred and violence that the country's LGBT citizens face following the introduction of anti-LGBT laws in 2013. Presenter and Attitude Ally Award winner Reggie Yates discusses what it was like filming the documentary series, his personal connection to the LGBT community and what comes next...

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When I speak to Reggie Yates over the phone he is overjoyed and surprised at being named the recipient of the Ally Award at this year's Attitude Awards. "I'm so proud and excited," the 32-year-old north Londoner exclaims. "It's an incredible honour to receive this award. To make programmes that matter is one thing, but to make programmes that resonate with the audience that you're discussing is the most


gratifying aspect."

He should be pleased. His most recent documentary series for BBC Three, *Extreme Russia*, garnered much buzz in the press and on social media after shedding light on modern day Russian society, culture and politics and showed a new side to the DJ and presenter. The three-part series focused on everything from the country's extreme nationalism and xenophobia, to its teen modelling industry,

to its appalling treatment of the LGBT community. The latter in particular made for distressing viewing.

Despite perceptions of Russia as a cold, stark landscape which Western modernity has yet to reach, in reality it's much like a European metropolis, with pretty streets decorated with quaint cafes, bookshops and bars. In nearly every aspect, Moscow is much like Berlin, London or Prague, yet when it comes to social attitudes it's

Reggie wears tuxedo by Gieves & Hawkes at Mr Porter, shirt by Brioni at Mr Porter, bow tie by M&S Collection



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glaringly different. “I was not in some backend, third-world country; I was in an incredibly modern place, in a big city full of young people connected to the rest of the world through social media,” says Reggie. “You have this hope that young people are forward thinking and of a much broader view than the people who came before them, but sadly that was not the case in Russia.”

In the episode entitled ‘Gay and Under Attack’, the country’s fear and hostility towards anything ‘nontraditional’ is apparent in the violence and hatred directed towards its LGBT citizens. We witness everything; from the mild but petty letting off of a pungent stink bomb at a queer arts festival, Queerfest, to a lesbian who was victim to a vicious knife attack.

For Reggie, the priority here was to try and understand why homophobia still lingers in the post-Soviet era. During the documentary, he speaks to a young man named Victor

who equates homophobia with patriotism and what it means to be a true Russian. “There is this blurring of cultural views and quite scary archaic views, and that’s what Victor is; someone who is entrenched in this idea of what it means to be a real Russian man. He’s also desperate to preserve Russian culture, and for him part of that is not to be a homosexual.”

At another stage during the episode, we meet three members of a pressure group named God’s Will. They’re all young, in their early-to-mid twenties, yet they display a shockingly poisonous attitude towards gay men. Their perception of homosexuality is ‘standing for having someone’s penis in your anus’. As Reggie desperately tries to understand why they feel the way they do, the conversation continues to spiral down as the trio casually agree to stoning homosexuals to death if the law allowed it.

But why is Russia so far behind the West when it comes to LGBT equality? “I think Russia’s fear of the Western world definitely plays a part,” says Reggie. “The attitudes towards anything from the West are that it’s totally not in keeping with anything that is Russian. Unfortunately from their point of view, homosexuality is part of that. It’s something that is accepted in the West, so therefore it becomes a Western thing that has no place in Russian society.” This attitude feeds into the current frosty relations between Russia and the rest of the world. Under Putin’s grip, the country has continued to be subservient to the almost God-like sense of authority that its leading figures are granted.



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Reggie agrees. “I think it would be a very different scenario if Putin wasn’t in charge. Politics and culture merge, and to be a supporter of Putin you are just as traditional as you are political. The way the media is delivered and the amount of control the government has over it directly affects the way people

think.”

Extreme Russia documented the effect of the introduction of the laws in late 2013 that made it illegal to promote ‘non traditional sexual relations’ to minors. It has propelled homophobia in the country and forced same-sex couples to hide their relationships.

We’re introduced to Vanya and Nusrella during the documentary, a young gay couple that wouldn’t look out of place walking the streets of Soho in London. When Reggie speaks to them he learns of how Russia’s harsh LGBT climate has forced them into inventing fake girlfriends on their social media accounts to deter any suspicion towards their true identities. “It was heartbreaking talking to those two. They were really sweet and reminded me of some of my friends here in London, from the way they dressed to their cultural references.” It is here that Reggie touches on what made the documentary so successful with viewers and stirred discussion online. “I can’t imagine living in a world where you can’t be who you are. It was difficult to see as had Vanya and Nusrella been born in a different country, their lives would have been a lot different. And that’s the sad truth of it all.”

Through their story, and the stories of all the other brave people featured, *Extreme Russia* brought the kind of emotion and humanity to the plight of Russia’s LGBT community that’s lacking in media reports. It reached beyond the young demographic of BBC Three, following repeats on BBC One right after the 10pm news. “There is massive condescension when it comes to programmes catered towards younger audiences. But if you’re making something for young people and you talk straight and provide context, it will resonate with a broader audience,” he affirms.

For Reggie, who has been in the entertainment industry

for the best part of twenty-five years already, the *Extreme* series showcased just how versatile his presenting talents are. His natural magnetism and friendly demeanour has seen him become something of a stalwart for the BBC, who have commissioned another addition to the series to air sometime next year, though this time it will document the UK. "The first episode is on misogyny, feminism and this idea of the 'manosphere' and how that fits into what it means to be a man," says Reggie. "The playing field is massively different now for this generation of men, especially when it comes to relationships with women. We explore that with some very interesting characters - from pick up artists, to trolls, to men who are completely redefining masculinity in 2015."

The next series will also explore what it's like to be black, British and gay. "It's the whole idea of Afro-Caribbean communities and their acceptance and non-acceptance of it, and the role of religion in shaping views. As a West African man with a gay brother, I can definitely speak from personal experience on what it means to be that. It's going to be a fantastic one to watch."

It's not the first time Reggie has covered race. He visited Ferguson a year on after the death of Michael Brown in *Race Riots UK* for BBC Three.

Does he ever experience

doubt before diving into such controversial topics? "I'm not the bravest man in the world; I'm not a superhero, but I am someone who believes that if there's something to bring awareness to, I have the platform to do that. For me, it's all about getting to the truth of why someone thinks and acts the way they do. And that's the case across the *Extreme* documentaries. Behaviour is learned, and if you're going to behave in a way that's shocking and extreme what I'm interested in is where that behaviour comes from."

Whether or not focusing on homosexuality in the UK will pack the same punch as the Russia series, the episode will undoubtedly provoke discussion around the contentious relationship between religion and homosexuality, and the greater difficulty some black men and women have in coming out as gay, bisexual, lesbian or transgender. "I just really hope that these series will continue to inspire some really interesting conversations between young people and their parents, whether it's about sexuality or violence or misogyny or whatever. That's what it's all about for me. The programmes that I'm making are challenging people and opening people's minds up to a different way of life, or a life that they haven't been aware of. That's what I've always wanted to do."



Extreme UK will air in 2016. See Reggie on ITV2's game show *Release the Hounds*, Wednesdays at 10pm.

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