

Film

Chemsex exposed

William Fairman and Max Gogarty's documentary *Chemsex* (video) is about the culture of drug-fuelled sex parties on London's gay scene. Group hookups, or chillouts, have been made very easy through smartphone apps such as Grindr and Scruff. They are a form of social relaxation and provide access to the safety of tribe membership in a homophobic world. The drugs used at these parties are chiefly γ -hydroxybutyrate (GHB) and γ -butyrolactone (GBL), or G, crystallised methamphetamine, and mephedrone. But some participants find themselves drawn increasingly into compulsive sexual and self-medicating behaviours, exposing themselves to health risks that are both physical and mental.

As with anti-smoking adverts that are designed to discourage smoking, no matter how scary the imagery used to put you off it, if you don't want to stop, you won't. This echoes throughout Fairman and Gogarty's affecting exploration of the potent relationship between drugs, sex, and the stress of living with a minority identity. When gay clubbing took off in the 1990s, some accused the scene of betraying grassroots politics in favour of consumerist hedonism. The scene responded with two fingers—the pink pound is, after all, political in itself—and argued that everyone, not just the mainstream, should have the right to a good time. Nowadays the drugs have evolved, and a more intense form of social bonding has become normalised. Several men in *Chemsex* speak of days-long wild and blissful sexual highs. London is, according to one, “the best place to be gay in the world”.

And who could begrudge anyone this escapism? Despite social progress in terms of legal and workplace protections and marriage rights, homophobic hate crime has not stopped. And “gay” is still an insult used by children. David Stuart, Substance Abuse Lead (GUM/HIV) at

London's leading sexual health and HIV clinic 56 Dean Street, which features heavily in the film, speaks about the internalised homophobia and shame that he and other gay men grew up with. “There is no textbook on how to be a gay man”, he says. Growing up learning to hide your sexuality is a normality for many people from sexual and gender minorities. Hypervigilance starts early and can become second nature. Until you get on top of those feelings, sex and drugs can be ways to make them go away.

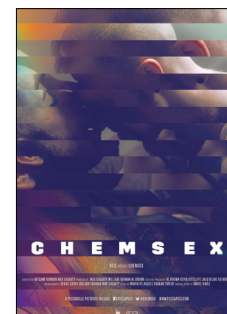
“...*Chemsex* is a timely and important film”

But submitting to consciousness-altering chemicals such as crystal meth can make the user feel invincible, and thus expose themselves to risk. Deliberate HIV infection, drink spiking, and rape are all issues that are raised in this film—several men in the film speak of the non-consensual activities they might have been exposed or subjected to after passing out on a G overdose. As *Chemsex* highlights, G is popular and is also the most worrying because you only need a tiny amount for an effect, and just a bit more will kill you. As Stuart points out, when someone dies of a “cocktail of drugs” the unnamed fatal ingredient is likely

to be G. Intravenous injecting of crystal meth and mephedrone is becoming more prevalent at parties and the film begins with an injecting scene. Yet there is a sense in the film that, for some, this is still not proper drug addiction. The denial is expressed in the language: “pins” for needles, and “slamming” for injecting. But we are perhaps not really so far from the heroin territory of the 1980s.

When discussing the behaviours of a stigmatised minority, there is always a risk that someone will use the information for the purposes of moral panic, only increasing the stigma. Founder of Pink Therapy Dominic Davies, who is the only other professional voice to feature in the film, points out that the world always seems to divide people into “good gays” and “bad gays”. Some may object to *Chemsex* on the grounds that it is washing the scene's dirty linen in public. But the public health concerns here are important—about five men a day in London are being diagnosed with HIV, according to the film. As Public Health England's *HIV in the UK—Situation Report 2015* indicated, 14% of men who have sex with men were unaware of their HIV positive status in 2014.

Hepatitis C is also rising as a result of unsafe injecting practices or sharing lube for fisting. And the more intoxicated



Chemsex
Directed by William Fairman and Max Gogarty. A Peccadillo Pictures Release, 2015
<https://www.peccapills.com/product/chemsex/#ad-image-0>
See Online for video

For **56 Dean Street** see <http://www.chelwest.nhs.uk/services/hiv-sexual-health/clinics/56-dean-street>

For **Pink Therapy** see <http://www.pinktherapy.com/en-gb/home.aspx>

For **HIV in the UK—Situation Report 2015** see <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/hiv-in-the-united-kingdom>

For **Antidote at London Friend** see <http://londonfriend.org.uk/get-support/drugsandalcohol/>



VICE/Peccadillo Pictures

you are, the more risks you are likely to take. However, a paradox lies within. *Chemsex* explores how at “bareback” (condomless) chillouts, positive or undetectable HIV status is sometimes an entry requirement, and there is a sense at times from the film that men who are not infected with HIV might feel left out in some settings. To help protect themselves from HIV infection, many men who are not infected with HIV take pre-exposure prophylaxis.

In response, some far-sighted health-care professionals have evolved a support system that can help users

of health services very efficiently, with extensive testing for sexually transmitted infections, advice, and drug counselling. But despite the endless advice available, and the bad things that can happen, one huge disincentive to sobering up is that, after experiencing chemical highs, sober sex becomes intolerably dull. It might have been good if the film had offered more solutions to this issue. Also, 56 Dean Street, which is part of Chelsea & Westminster NHS Foundation Trust, is heavily represented—for obvious reasons

given its pioneering focus—but it might have been interesting to also mention more about what other services, such as Antidote at London Friend, are doing. But overall *Chemsex* is a timely and important film that provides a valuable opportunity to look beyond this particular demographic and reflect on the balance between hedonism for the sake of pleasure, and hedonism as a potentially endangering refuge from an intolerant society.

Tania Glyde

Theatre

Sex, scandal, and politics



Photo: Johan Persson

Abortion makes people jittery. When, a few years ago, I submitted my novel about a woman doctor who ends up doing these controversial procedures for a living, there was dissent among the publishers. The editors liked it but the marketing team said there was absolutely no way they'd be able to sell such a book. And their predictions weren't far off the mark.

So it's no wonder that Harley Granville-Barker's play *Waste* was considered to be too incendiary to be put on the stage when he first wrote it well over a century ago in 1907. It was banned by the Lord Chamberlain and didn't end up reaching its first full audience until 1936, by which time it had been rewritten by its author.

The play enacts the rise and fall of Henry Trebell, an independent politician in a hung-parliament who is co-opted by the Conservative government to push through a disestablishment bill,

“It had been an interesting evening at the theatre. And it still feels really good to be a doctor.”

which aims to separate state affairs from those of the Church of England. And the catalyst for the precocious Trebell's career turning from meteoric ascendancy into abject defeat is the scandal he causes by having a casual affair with a married woman who becomes pregnant by him and ends up dying from her botched abortion.

Roger Michell's slick production, now showing at the UK's National Theatre, draws on both versions of the play and manages to honour the contemporary milieu of Edwardian England while also feeling chillingly modern in its portrayal of the hypocrisy of political life. True to Granville-Barker's predilection for metaphorical and minimal set design, the stage is uncluttered, serenely lit, and with a series of screens which frame each scene as well as emphasise the writer's concern with the cruel separation between personal and political action.

Granville-Barker is known for his virtuosic scripting and, with so many speaking characters, it is not possible to compliment each cast member in turn. Suffice it to say that the acting is consistently first-class. Notably though, Olivia Williams gives a moving performance as the hapless Amy O'Connell, a woman whose flirtatious confidence is only skin-deep, and who is treated as a plaything by the entitled political set only to be reviled once they discover she has brought scandal on the party. And Charles Edwards is absolutely convincing in his portrayal of the vigorous but cold Trebell, a man whose political enterprise is so all-consuming



Photo: Johan Persson