

**EXPORTING AMERICA:
THEATRE, GAY MALE IDENTITY, AND ANTI-AMERICANISM IN
DENMARK AND WEST GERMANY**

by

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Abstract

EXPORTING AMERICA:
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By

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As a second generation gay theatre history, *Exporting America* offers an analysis of how US American plays concerning male homosexuality were performed and received in Western Europe, exemplified by Denmark and West Germany. Through analysis of *The Boys in the Band*, *Bent*, *Torch Song Trilogy*, and *Angels in America* as text and in performance, this dissertation argues that it is necessary to understand US plays in light of intercultural performance rather than as plays expressing universal desires, dreams, anxieties, and identities. In stressing the particularity of local cultures—employing a method of radical contextualization—*Exporting America* discusses how meanings travel across borders and how international reception adds to or subtracts from meaning, determined as a set of consequences for the individual and the society in which the production and reception of the original production takes place. Focusing on a specific identity, that of gay men, I offer a discussion of how gay male identity is performed theatrically and how a particular construction of this identity initially emanating from the USA arises in particular Western European countries. In the first chapter I offer a discussion of the theoretical framework informing the dissertation. Building on Raymond Williams, I argue that operating analytically with “structure of feeling” allows the theatre

historian to reevaluate the construction of gay identity in the theatre. Furthermore, the first chapter argues that the Danish and West German reception of these plays must be understood as informed by a cultural anti-Americanism. Chapter two offers an analysis of performances of Mart Crowley's *The Boys in the Band* and Harvey Fierstein's *Torch Song Trilogy* as examples of a domestication of the gay man in relation to discourses of gay sexual liberation in the United States and in Denmark. In chapter three I analyze the reception of Martin Sherman's *Bent* in England, Denmark, and, in particular, West Germany. The chapter argues for a particular relationship between gay identity and the performance of history and points out the ways in which the reception of the gay holocaust as performed in *Bent* must be understood in relation to the West German broadcast of *Holocaust*, the miniseries. The US genesis of Tony Kushner's *Angels in America* is discussed in chapter four, and the fundamental American nature of the play is highlighted by an analysis of the Danish and German reception.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This project is—as most dissertations probably are—quite personal to me. I came to it through a personal journey: that deeply US American narrative of migration. As a European foreigner in New York City, I faced obstacles, but I have also been blessed with a slanted way of looking at both my new adopted home and at the field to which I am hoping to make a contribution with this dissertation. I am in that precarious position of being an insider/outsider. In his book *Performing History*, Freddie Rokem writes:

Today, at the turn of the millennium, United States hegemony in the world has become a fact. This creates both curiosity and suspicion for a relatively informed outsider like myself, after having spent several years in the United States both as a student and on sabbaticals. [...] By looking at phenomena which previous academic research has left unexplored I hope to be able to point out something which perhaps has not been seen “over there.”¹

In essence, this is what I have done in these pages. I have tried to illuminate that which “perhaps has not been seen ‘over there.’” The project took me on a research journey of corners of Europe I thought I knew and understood, and, yet, as research does, it took me to new insights about the relationship between “here” and “there.” I embody both these worlds—I have been gay in all of them—and though I disagree with the personal nature of many prefaces, I must admit that I have changed how I think about the performance of sexuality. Much of this dissertation turned out to be about the performance and construction of history and heritage within a cold war structure in which every change seemed ideological. I am part of that heritage. I attempt in here, as in life, to straddle two

¹ Freddie Rokem, *Performing History: Theatrical Representations of the Past in Contemporary Theatre* (University of Iowa Press, Iowa City: 2000), 2.

worlds that do not always like each other, but who are bound to one another through history and, yes, heritage.

Without my committee and the help, support, and intellectual encouragement I have received from its members, this project would not exist. I sincerely thank David Savran, Judith Milhous, and Marvin Carlson for their dedication to theatre scholarship, engagement with my projects, and patience with me.

I want to thank the staff at the Dramatic Library under the Royal Library in Copenhagen, the staff at the Theatre Museum in Copenhagen, the staff in the archive and library of the Schwules Museum in Berlin (in particular Dr. Karl-Heinz Steinle for taking the time to discuss contemporary gay German culture with me), the staff at the Lesbian and Gay Newsmedia Archive at the University of Bristol in London, and finally the volunteers who run the Library and Archive under Landsforeningen for Bøsser og Lesbiske in Copenhagen.

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transformative powers of writing. Thank you to Lisbet Jørgensen, who was my early teacher and remains my friend. Thank you to Janelle Reinelt, who will always be a mentor and a friend and who set me on this journey to begin with. And, not least, thank you to my comrade in life, David Smedley, for his patience and ability to love interculturally.

Frequently cited Archives:

KB: Kongelige Bibliotek (the Dramatic Library of the Royal Library in Copenhagen).

LAGNA: The Lesbian and Gay News Archive, University of Bristol, London.

Schwul: The library and archive of the Schwules Museum, Berlin.

TheaM: The Theatre Museum, Copenhagen.

Translations:

Unless otherwise noted, all translations from the Danish and German are by me. Sascha Just kindly assisted me on translation from the German.

Table of Content:

Introduction:	1
Chapter One: A Unique Experience with the Past	13
Chapter Two: Domestic Trouble: <i>The Boys in the Band</i> and <i>Torch Song Trilogy</i>	56
Chapter Three: Gay Heritage: Imagining Germany and the Holocaust as Metaphor	132
Chapter Four: Flying Backwards Through Space: <i>Angels in America in the US</i> and Western Europe	185
Conclusion:	246
Bibliography:	251

INTRODUCTION

There is no position except in fantasy where one can merely examine what others are inscribing.

Raymond Williams, interviewed for *Red Shift* in 1977.

The purpose of this dissertation is twofold. As a Foucaultian genealogy it represents a continuation and an investigation of historical practices; it searches for meanings in the cracks or breaks of the “traditional” history, meanings that can only be revealed by a study of the making of history itself. It problematizes the readily accepted, what passes for truth in any given academic field (in this case, gay theatre history), in an attempt to provide what Foucault called the “history of the present.”¹ In these pages, I take performances from the by now established canon of gay theatre—*The Boys in the Band*, *Bent*, *Torch Song Trilogy*, and *Angels in America*—and discuss them in light of intercultural production rather than plays expressing universal desires, dreams, anxieties, and identities. In doing so, I discuss how meaning(s) travel across borders and how international reception adds to or subtracts from meaning, determined as a set of consequences for the individual and the society in which the production and reception of the original production takes place. Focusing on a specific identity, that of gay men, I offer a discussion of how gay male identity is performed theatrically and how a particular construction of this identity initially emanating from the USA arises in Western theatre and society.

¹ Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: the Birth of the Prison*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Pantheon, 1978), 31.

The discussion offered here is part traditional writing of history: describing and assessing the American, British, Danish, and German productions of four specific plays, all with major popular successes and large popular audiences. By describing and analyzing the European reception I also include these performances in our collective knowledge of gay theatre, and in doing so I shine a light on gay theatre outside of New York and London, which are all too often assumed to be the universal cities in the production of theatrical representation and meaning. However, the discussion offered here is also part critical theoretical analysis of that very same history, in keeping with the Foucaultian paradigm described above. All current major gay theatre histories discuss American and British productions of my chosen productions as emblematic of the meaning of gay theatre in the Western world. I believe this is a dubious claim and, as this dissertation asserts, one that needs to be seriously modified through cultural specificity. The gay men represented in *The Boys in the Band*, for example, may be recognizable from Cologne to Copenhagen, but they are perceived in Europe through a constructed notion of what America means; a meaning that is not necessarily recognizable in New York, where, after all, the play is set. In Denmark, which is used here as one example of the importance of the extreme local nature of identity, as the reader will see, *The Boys in the Band* is recognized and understood as essentially (and I use that word deliberately) American which, often, is not a positive descriptor.

A study such as this is by necessity interdisciplinary, and this dissertation makes use of different schools of theory in its reassessment of gay theatre history: theories of intercultural exchange, cultural imperialism, cold war history, queer theory, gay historiography, feminist theories of representation, and diverging theories of anti-

Americanism. Though I am constantly aware of the dangers in picking elements of theories and using them as tools for a given project, I am convinced that none is superfluous in a project such as this. Though all these different strands of theory are the underlying bedrock of the argument put forth within these pages, one essential element in understanding the Danish and West German reception and meaning of these performances is the contested concept of anti-Americanism. Western European anti-Americanism, which I will later define as a structure of feeling in Raymond Williams's definition of the term, functions here as the umbrella under which all the other strands of theory combine. Or, to use a quintessentially American metaphor, the theories come together as separate elements in a melting pot! This dissertation thus operates in a mode of simultaneity in terms of theories, nationalities, languages, and sexualities. Though this simultaneity is necessary (and an ideological point in and of itself), the very nature of scholarly writing requires structure. Throughout this project I therefore attempt to structure an unruly multilingual subject and let the chaos inherent in an intercultural study such as this exist and determine the writing itself.

*

Structures of imperialism were crucial to the socio-cultural development of the cold war. The cold war instigated new—yet strangely familiar—structures of empire, while simultaneously a de-colonization of the third world occurred. John Lewis Gaddis has argued that despite the dangerously real threat of nuclear annihilation the cold war was, in significant ways, a cultural war fought via “symbolic imperialism.”² A central claim in this dissertation is that theatre, as arbiter of middlebrow taste and anxiety, played

² John Lewis Gaddis, *We Now Know: Rethinking Cold War History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 1-53.

an important role in this imperial struggle for cold war cultural hegemony. The American theatre, as David Savran succinctly argues in *A Queer Sort of Materialism* (particularly in the chapter “Middlebrow Anxiety”) is inherently middlebrow in its ideological position and function.³ This is an important notion for the overarching argument in this dissertation, linking, as it does, theatre, history, sociology, and identity formation. The middlebrow is forever anxious, in between, not quite, and thus it shares similarities with the dangerously unstable position of liminal sexualities and identity formations such as male homosexuality. This homology, the similar liminal structures and political functions of the middlebrow theatre and gay male sexuality, is explored further within these pages, as the theatrical reproduction / representation of late cold war gay identity is a perfect site for this analysis. It also functions as an underlying paradigm for the discussion of theatre, taste, and sexual identity.

Cultural imperialism (and the process and economy of this often invisible imperialism) is central to the analysis offered here. I investigate the extent to which the gay character in middlebrow drama can be said to function as a colonized subject—internalizing the individual culture’s homophobia or bourgeois notions of liberation through which difference is established as recognizable and thus containable, mirroring the cold war real-politic strategy of containment as developed by George Kennan. Analyzing the international reception of these plays allows me read the extent to which similarities and differences in cultural identity formation are highlighted by the fictionality of the theatre. Gay male sexuality destabilizes norms of Western masculinity (be it US or Western European), and by doing so, it also threatens one of the essential

³ On theatre as bearer of middlebrow values and anxiety see David Savran, *A Queer Sort of Materialism: Recontextualizing American Theater* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2003), 3-55.

cornerstones in cold war culture, the nuclear family unit.⁴ Through the theatrical construction of gay male sexuality, the theatre, through the consequences of performance and reception, reveals the enormous anxiety Western cold war societies harbored towards themselves and their fragility as nation states in an unstable and dangerous world, that of the cold war binarism. This dissertation proposes that sexuality, theatre, and cultural imperialism were closely interwoven in late cold war American and Western European (here exemplified by Danish and West German) theatre.

This dissertation, as a queer kind of American studies, takes a critical look at how the American theatre constructed (and continues to do so) a version of commodified, fictitiously liberated, gay male sexuality and how this particular (and particularly) theatrical identity constructed a specific image of the United States of America in two Western European countries, an image that, to some degree, was preexistent and thus cyclically reinforced by performance. This cultural construction of sexuality was (and is) used in a process of cultural imperialism, which as Edward Said points out, works in many and subtle ways.⁵

*

The discussion offered in this dissertation takes its cue from the New York and Copenhagen openings of Mart Crowley's *The Boys in the Band* (1968/1969), and moves on through theatrical productions of four more plays spanning a little more than two

⁴ A family consisting of two heterosexual parents and their children is of course not a construction of the cold war. Yet, as Elaine Tyler May points out in *Homeward Bound: American Families in the Cold War*, the early cold war saw an explosion of cultural representations of the nuclear family. This is different from the previous decades' experimentation in family structures partly necessitated by the Depression and WWII. Also, according to the Merriam-Webster Dictionary the term "nuclear family" was coined in 1947. This links the "nuclear family" as a new, safe, family configuration to the new, unsafe, nuclear age.

⁵ Edward Said, *Culture and Imperialism* (New York: Vintage Books, 1994), xvii. Said describes in his introduction "North America's particular way of influencing conditions in a decisive yet barely visible way."

decades. These are productions of Martin Sherman's *Bent* (London and Broadway productions, 1979), Harvey Fierstein's *Torch Song Trilogy* (Broadway production, 1982), and Tony Kushner's *Angels in America* (there are several production dates of the two plays from the first workshop production of *Millennium Approaches* in 1990, but in 1993 both *Millennium Approaches* and *Perestroika* played at the Walter Kerr Theatre in New York City. Chapter four discusses the production process of *Angels in America* as an example of the "middlebrowing" of the play).

At the center of this dissertation are these four examples. The selection of these performances is based on criteria of visibility and popularity. Arguing, as I am, that the performances of these US-American plays both reflect and create the politics and economy of gay masculinity and sexuality in different Western European cultures, visibility in terms of exposure and a place in middlebrow imagination must be a criteria for selection. My four examples all received high profile performances on Broadway or Off Broadway (and their equivalents in Europe) and were much discussed in the mainstream press, which is important for the analysis of public discourse.⁶ Arriving at a number of examples is of course not a random process. In this case it has been important to have examples spanning at least two decades in order to be able to analyze the increasing self-referentiality of gay theatre, commodification, changes in perception of politics and sexuality, and changes in cold war history determining levels of anti-American sentiment in specific European countries developing through these twenty

⁶ Performances of all plays took place in England, Denmark and Germany except *The Boys in the Band*, which was not, to my knowledge, performed initially in what was then West Germany. Germany has proven harder to research in terms of repertoire, as, to the best of my knowledge, no monograph on homosexual theatre in Germany exists (no Danish monograph exists either apart from my, as of yet, unpublished first generation treatment of Danish gay theatre history available only through the Royal Library in Copenhagen). Obviously an absence of performance is significant in its own right.

some years. Furthermore the three chapters of analysis of these case studies highlight the need for contextualizing the performance differently. *The Boys in the Band* and *Torch Song Trilogy* are contextualized in relation to concepts of gay liberation and concepts of domestication. *Bent* is primarily contextualized in relation to issues of history and heritage. And, finally, *Angels in America* is primarily contextualized in relation to Kushner's embodiment of his play and the extended production process of the play.

Productions in primarily Germany and Denmark have been selected for this investigation due to their different positions within cold war Europe: Germany was, obviously, the loser of the War and literally divided into capitalist and communist by the Allied powers while Denmark was trying to forget its politics of collaboration with the Nazis and build a social democratic welfare system as a balance between communist East and capitalist West. The position and construction of gay male sexuality are different in these societies, as are the theatrical representations of that identity. More important, though, are the vastly different positions of the countries in relation to the United States of America as imperial ally (highlighting the volatile processes of imperialism). Based on these performances and particularly their reception, this dissertation theorizes the development of gay male identities in specific Western cold war societies and these nation states' different self-perceptions. The work is a critical analysis of the construction of "the American" and particularly "the American gay man" through the public discourse surrounding theatrical performances of US male homosexuality in two European countries. It is important to point out that though this dissertation is concerned with primarily US-American theatrical constructions of male homosexuality, and the cultural and political consequences of an inter-western exchange of these constructions, I am

naturally aware that the millions of gay men in the United States of America, England, Denmark, and Germany, who have consumed, rejected, acknowledged, adopted, mirrored, and taken on the theatricalized identities they saw performed on stage, are men of flesh and blood and not merely discursive constructions. In fact, though I use reviews and other artifacts of public discourse as a means of analyzing exactly how these theatrical constructions functioned, I do so knowing that only by also analyzing the material reality and historical conditions under which male homosexuality was lived and practiced, can I hope to understand the intricate dialectic between discursive construction and lived identity. Also, within these pages I never assume that there is a “right” “true” or “real” representation of male homosexuality. There are representations that might reflect more or less truthfully the concerns, lives, challenges, sexual, and socioeconomic realities of living gay men, and there are those that seem not to. It has always seemed to me a moot point to discuss whether or not a theatrical representation of identity is “true,” when by its very nature it is a fiction. We can discuss the value of a given reflection of an identity on stage, but to deride it as false borders on the silly, when the fictional nature of performance is exactly why we go immerse ourselves in the dark for hours to begin with.

*

Following this introduction, the dissertation is divided into four chapters and a conclusion. This introduction presents the structure of the dissertation, the central argument, and stressed the position of genealogy; the dissertation as a critical interrogation of what we have come to know as gay theatre history—laying out the ground for a second generation gay theatre history.

The first chapter serves as theoretical introduction to the analyses offered in the dissertation; it is the bedrock on which the readings will be built. It offers a discussion of the production of gay history, in particular gay theatre history. This historical discussion is necessary for the following chapters' more in-depth reading of the later decades. Also, this chapter briefly discusses the position of the theatre within the localized cold war cultures of the analyzed countries. However, most of the contextualization takes place within the analyses.

This historiographic argument is followed by a discussion of the three main strands of theory with which I engage throughout the dissertation: Marxist inspired cultural theory (primarily as described by Raymond Williams), gay and feminist theory (particularly as relating to the commodification and globalization of gay identities), and intercultural theory concerning systems of cultural exchange and imperialism (particularly as it relates to theories about the exchange of sexual). While this chapter is intended as an introduction to the theories that inform the readings of theatre later in the dissertation, it is important to point out that these theories are thoroughly integrated throughout the analyses and that this chapter is not conceived as the "necessary" theoretical chapter. I return to the metaphor of the bedrock of theory on which the analysis rests. But, more than that, the theoretical faultlines offered here constitute a discussion of the necessity of combining disparate bodies of theory in order to understand the complications of cold war gay theatre.

The three following chapters (two, three, and four) are analytical case studies. These case studies shed light on the development of gay drama in performance at a particular time in a particular place. I find the use of emblematic examples to be a

practical alternative to the strategy of what I call first generation histories of gay theatre, with their long lists of examples. Methodologically, however, the use of case studies necessitates careful selection of material. The particular performances analyzed in the dissertation are emblematic because of the changes in the perception of self and others that they institute—changes that can be verified and deduced from the public discourse surrounding the performances. In these plays/performances, we can see a recurrent production of American heteronormative values in a homosexual context in, I believe, an attempt to instigate political and cultural changes in the perception of American male sexuality and masculinity. The plays help a new homosexual normality become revolutionary by constructing “the homosexual” relationally, not oppositionally. Seeing the production of normality through this lens ties it to the economy of (symbolic) imperialism in the way that “the normal” colonizes “the extraordinary” in the performances of *The Boys in the Band*, and *Torch Song Trilogy*, but is then critiqued in *Bent* and more prominently in *Angels in America*, the last play to be discussed in these pages. The reproduction of this US-American cultural “normality” in specific Western Europe countries further complicates the relationship between the normal and the extraordinary, as these terms are, obviously, culturally specific. In short, I analyze the historical process of how mainstream theatrical representations of American homosexuality / gayness / queerness develop from heterodoxy to orthodoxy.

In conclusion, in these pages I offer a new mode of analysis to the study of gay theatre history. I analyze the cross-cultural export of male homosexual characters from one theatrical Western culture to another, or what we could call a unilateral imposition of culture. By analyzing this nexus I also analyze the economy of national change and the

creation of national identities through the theatre in relation to Western societies in a constant state of cold war crisis. Analyzing these economies of exchange from one Western culture to the other, I am able to look at the central position of cultural practices (that are more than the play, the performance, and the sum of those) and the economy of sexuality as produced through the theatre.

*

Finally, allow me a short personal digression. My dissertation has its source in two different experiences: one is personal and the other is more scholarly (though in so many ways in the human sciences the distinction between the scholarly and the personal is a slippery one—especially in questions of affiliation and identity). To take the personal first: I have experienced cultural differences in gay male sexuality between Western Europe and North America and that the stereotypical New York City—North American—gay pride sexuality of waving rainbow flags and *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy* is not completely mine. I know gay men with such identities (take a look around), but some fundamental part of the social fabric in these friends' and lovers' rainbow curtain is not mine. Charges will, of course, be brought against me here for stating the obvious, but when one looks deeper into much discourse surrounding the development of this progress narrative—as we could call it—it becomes obvious that we too in North American academia to a large degree operate with a categorical notion of Western gay male sexuality.

On the scholarly level, I have doubts as to whether or not the existing—now canonical—gay theatre history really represents the full picture of what the performance of American gay male identity in Europe in the last part of the cold war meant in terms of

theatricality, ideology, and public discourse. Much of the existing gay theatre history is devoted to progress (in an Enlightenment sense of historical progress) toward increasing liberation. The early histories, besides uncovering material and claiming historical presence, focus on the development of gay drama, primarily in terms of providing images of gay men for gay men. We need to complicate this narrative and analyze how productions of theatrical reproductions of gay men also serve as commodities to be consumed by a more extensive middlebrow theatre audience.

CHAPTER ONE A UNIQUE EXPERIENCE WITH THE PAST

A historical materialist cannot do without the notion of a present which is not a transition, but in which time stands still and has come to a stop. For this notion defines the present in which he himself is writing history. Historicism gives the 'eternal' image of the past; historical materialism supplies a unique experience with the past. The historical materialist leaves it to others to be drained by the whore called "Once upon a time" in historicism's bordello. He remains in control of his powers, man enough to blast open the continuum of history.

Walter Benjamin, "Theses on the Philosophy of History"

Gay theatre has a long history. The writing of gay theatre history on the other hand remains a fairly new endeavor, with little more than 25 years to its name, and yet those years have seen a blossoming field of study devoted to analyzing the theatrical and performative representations of lesbian, gay, and queer identities.

What we could call the first generation of gay theatre historians collected evidence that theatrical representation of gay male sexuality was far more widespread and common than anybody would think reading mainstream theatrical histories. At the conference of the *International Federation of Theatre Research* in Helsinki in 2006, Swedish feminist and scholar of queer theory Tiina Rosenberg objected to this division into a first and second generation and suggested instead that with the advance of queer theory, we, as gay, lesbian, and queer theatre scholars, had moved beyond generational divides. I maintain my division for the following reason: With the use of "generation" I do not necessarily describe age or time issues. Rather, I am talking about methodological approaches defining generations. First and second generation gay theatre histories exist

side by side and do not necessarily supercede one another in a chronological fashion.¹ I agree with Rosenberg that queer theory has changed the way we do gay theatre history—that is why I, in these pages, repeatedly stress the relationship between the two kinds of gay theatre history, but with a focus on the differences. In the conclusion to her book *Queerfeministisk Agenda* Rosenberg writes:

Queer theory stresses differences, but not differences between categories arranged as dichotomies, but rather within the categories themselves. The important issue is, the way I see it, to learn both-and-thinking: humans are *both alike and different*.²

In these pages, and as a second-generation writer of gay theatre history, I am constantly investigating the differences within the category of the Western gay male. Rather than creating a universalized Western identity or producing such an identity in relation to a heterosexual other, I am posing localized Western European versions of the identity against the US-produced theatrical character. They are, at the same time, alike and different.

By critically analyzing the performances uncovered by these first generation historians—performances that have by now entered the (gay) theatre canon—we can complicate the notion of a stable gay male identity in the West during the cold war that is assumed in much first generation scholarship on gay theatre history. I believe that it is appropriate to consider this the time a new generation of historians of gay theatre can

¹ Metaphorical uses of the concept of generation are always somewhat arbitrary. Some scholars of queer theatre might very well consider themselves a third generation removed from the “traditional” foundation of history.

² Queerteorin betonar olikheter mellan dikotoma kategorier utan snarare inom kategorierna. Det viktiga är, som jag ser det, att lära sig ett både-och-tänkande: människor är både lika och olika. It is important to mention that “likheter” (and olikheter) can mean equal and unequal, which means that the text also speaks not just about sameness and differences in the human being but also about social inequalities. Tiina Rosenberg, *Queerfeministisk Agenda* (Stockholm: Atlas, 2002), 164.

emerge. The first generation of gay theatre historians documented presence, and a second generation of historians of gay theatre must now take the territory claimed by the gay theatre history pioneers and complicate their conclusions and thereby our understanding of where we have been and where we can go. Utilizing Brecht's concept of *Verfremdung* (or what we could call Rosenberg's "both-and thinking"), we can make the familiar seem strange in all its familiarity. We can turn our eye on the representations of our lives that shaped the stage on which we stand and, we hope, take the opportunity to, through a *queering*, de-familiarize our real, yet theatrical, identity. This dissertation is such a second generation gay theatre history. Critiquing the analysis of gay theatre history and displacing it from its primarily US American bubble is also part of this undertaking.³

As the gay theatre histories that appeared in the 1990s prove, gay men had been part of the theatre—as fictional characters and real-life producers—for decades, some claim for centuries. Carl Miller's account *Stages of Desire: Gay Theatre's Hidden History* is the best example of this in its trans-historical narrative of gay theatre from Bum-Boys to Oscar Wilde, though by far the majority of the book is spent on analysis of the English medieval, Shakespearean, and Restoration stages.⁴ These projects of reclamation were necessary undertakings.

To claim presence in history is to claim agency; it is to reject erasure from the world, and this is obviously a project those on the margins of representation (such as

³ Alan Sinfield, who is British, is naturally an example of a scholar who has utilized queer theory on non-American subject matter. Yet, I believe, we need to take his approach even further and complicate the fundamentally US foundation of queer studies, which Sinfield does not do. Also, of the countries discussed in my dissertation, England is, in both cultural and socio-economic terms, closest to the USA.

⁴ Carl Miller, *Stages of Desire* (London: Cassel, 1996). The title reveals very well that to Miller homosexuality is something immanent that is constantly in existence prior to its being revealed. I am not arguing as much with his sometimes inaccurate readings of the specific rituals, plays, and carnivalistic performances, as with his strategy of outing, his a-historical conception of gayness, and consequentially his application of gayness to any text that may relate to homoeroticism.

women, people of color, lesbians, and gay men) have had to undertake to claim historical agency for themselves. These histories are primarily narrative—I will discuss the examples in greater detail in the part of this chapter that discusses existing scholarship—and function as celebrations of a presence in the past that had been sanitized, forgotten, or at best relinquished to the dark corners of myth making.⁵ Yet by claiming a continued presence of gay men in the theatre from Oscar Wilde to Tim Miller, these histories also create a notion of unified Western gay male sexuality with a stable meaning throughout Western culture. This dissertation questions and critiques this notion of a sexuality that is both universal and stable. It also questions and critiques the inclusion of this presumable stable and universal identity as a foundational element in the construction of gay theatre history in which it serves as a specter of difference that marks liberation from heteronormativity without ever being questioned on the basis of cultural specificity.

The separate histories of lesbians and gay men in the twentieth century are at once unique and similar, singular and interdependent which present methodological problems for the historian who can try either to write one of them and only acknowledge the other, thereby privileging one over the other, or write both simultaneously and risk undoing their specificity. I come down on the side of specificity in this dissertation and hence can only acknowledge and appreciate the presence of the real and lived experiences of

⁵ It is important to me to include a personal disclosure here. My description of the existing gay theatre histories is determined by a critical and historical distance from them. I am aware that I could not perform the work that I do if previous historians had not written their histories. I am building on the work of these men and their effort in claiming a history that is also mine and that allows me to go further. That said, I remain critical of the work that some of them do in their inculcation of accepted truths about plays and performances without questioning the implications that these representations have in the light of contemporary theory on identity, spectatorship, and sexuality. Some of these histories appeared simultaneous with the rapid shifts in theory throughout the 1990s and early 2000s, yet paid no attention to this development. More critical, though, is the way the histories are cited repeatedly and uncritically in later scholarship and utilized in the classroom (to the extent that gay theatre is being taught) simply because no second-generation gay theatre history exists.

lesbians and contributions to the making of theatre history while analyzing the theatrical representation of gay men.

In the introduction, “In Defense of Historicism,” to his collection of essays, *How to Do the History of Homosexuality*, David Halperin, US scholar of gay history, reflects on his previous groundbreaking work, *One Hundred Years of Homosexuality*. He meditates on the purpose of the essays at hand and concludes that throughout the 1990s he found himself drawn to a certain set of historiographical questions. He writes:

I call those historiographical rather than historical because they have to do with questions of evidence, method, strategy, politics, and identity in the writing of history. The essays collected here cannot claim to be contributions to the history of homosexuality as such. Rather, they are attempts to think through specific issues connected with writing the history of homosexuality.⁶

My goal with *Exporting America* mirrors Halperin’s. Though I do offer new evidence of the Western European performance and reception of central plays about gay male sexuality never collected and analyzed comparatively before, I am equally invested in approaching the material from a historiographical point of inquiry. What does it tell us about the writing of gay male history? What can the material tell us about the way gay male identity is fathomed in the frozen moment of the theatre review? What can the history of the theatre tell us about the lived identities of gay men in Western Europe? Through the historical artifacts presented and analyzed within the parameters of this

⁶ David M. Halperin, *How To Do the History of Homosexuality* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002), 2.

dissertation, I also hope to participate in a discussion of how an inclusive gay theatre history might be written and to participate in the construction of such a history.

Describing his work on sexuality in ancient Greece and what he learned from working on the subject, Halperin observes that:

One of the most distinctive features of the current regime under which we live is the prominence of heterosexuality and homosexuality as central organizing categories of thought, behavior, and erotic subjectivity. The rise to dominance of those categories represents a relatively recent and culturally specific development, yet it has left little trace in our consciousness of its novelty.⁷

Though this is hardly a revelation, Halperin goes on to point out that what truly perplexes us about other cultures' (past and present) different organization of sexuality and gender is really our own inability to understand that we cannot understand them. Despite the novelty of our own current binary organization of sexuality, we seem incapable of fathoming that a different system is possible. This could also be described as "the heterosexual matrix" that Judith Butler famously creates as an analytical category in *Gender Trouble*. She says that it is:

That grid of cultural intelligibility through which bodies, genders, and desires are naturalized. [it] categorizes[s] a hegemonic discursive/epistemic model of gender intelligibility that assumes that for bodies to cohere and make sense there must be a stable sex expressed through a stable gender (masculine expresses male,

⁷ Ibid., 3.

feminine expresses female) that is oppositionally and hierarchically defined through the compulsory practice of heterosexuality.⁸

Since his early work on ancient sexuality, Halperin foregrounds the fact that ancient Greek sexuality was essentially different and a historical construction, that Greek sexuality was no stranger to the Greeks than modern sexuality is to us, and that both must, essentially speaking (pun intended), constantly be analyzed as what they are: historically and socially specific creations. If we can succeed in using the *Verfremdung* effect as an analytical tool—thereby making our present matrix of sexuality (which would be the heterosexual matrix) as strange to us as it would be to the Greeks—we will be a step closer to understanding its effects on our lived historical yet contemporary identities.

In “Forgetting Foucault,” from Halperin’s collection of essays *Saint Foucault*, in which he sets out to rescue the French thinker from the widespread misuse, misunderstanding, and co-opting of his work, he also reminds us that Foucault in actuality never made the clear-cut distinction between sexual acts and sexual identities that is so often credited to him from his book *History of Sexuality*. Though Foucault does investigate how these social constructions came into being through different channels, the most important being the judicial and penal system along with medicine and the burgeoning interest in psychiatry, he never claimed, Halperin asserts, that there was no such thing as sexual identities prior to the Victorian age and the invention of modern day

⁸ Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble* (New York: Routledge, 1990), 151 n6. Butler presents this definition in a footnote to her first chapter in which she also credits Monique Wittig’s idea of a “heterosexual contract” and Adrienne Rich’s idea of “compulsory heterosexuality.” The concept of the heterosexual matrix obviously owes much to the two previous concepts.

homosexuality. What Foucault demands from us is not a clear-cut, reductive distinction between the two, but rather that we pay close attention to the fine and fragile connections between the two. Halperin writes:

Foucault did not mean to reduce sexuality to discourse, to claim that sexuality was a discourse, or to situate historical change in discourse rather than in sexuality. One effect of (mis)understanding the history of sexuality as a history of the discourses of sexuality has been to preserve the notion of sexuality as a timeless and ahistorical dimension of human experience, while preserving a notion of discourse as a neutral medium of representation. A second effect has been to draw a deceptively simple and very old-fashioned division between representations, conceived as socially specific and historically variable products of human culture, and realities (sexual desire, in this case, or human nature), conceived as something static and unchanging. Foucault, I argue, was up to something much more novel, a radically holistic approach that was designed to avoid such hoary metaphysical binarisms. His aim was to foreground the historicity of desire itself and of human beings as subjects of desire.⁹

Halperin here defends Foucault by rescuing him to a place where historical specificity and materiality matter and is demanded in critical analysis of sexualities. This dissertation takes seriously Halperin's charge to foreground "the historicity of desire itself," thereby making sexuality itself subject to the forces of history. Through doing so,

⁹ Halperin, 9.

I also attempt to undo the concept of “discourse as a neutral medium of representation.” Though plays are by nature rhetorical constructions, i.e. examples of discourse, the performances of them, due to their embodied representation, are grounded in lived practices and living bodies. Theatrical performance represents, I argue, a perfect example of a “radically holistic approach” in which our lived realities (tainted as our identities are by gender, sex, race, nationality, and class) begin to blur with the discursive embodied world that is the theatrical performance.

*

Within feminist and sexuality studies there is a long tradition of paying close attention to the words with which we designate identities. Subtle (and not so subtle) changes in formulation or intonation will change the meaning of a sentence. Given that the title of this dissertation is *Exporting America: Theatre, Gay Identity, and anti-Americanism in Western Europe* maintains “gay” as operative rather than “queer,” I find it necessary to clarify how I understand the relationship between gayness and queerness, and how the continuum between them operates within the parameters of this work. Both concepts—and the historically determined bodies of theories and beliefs that have informed the scholarly practice of gay and lesbian studies and queer studies—are at work in this dissertation. In short, I am writing a queer kind of gay theatre history. *Exporting America* is an argument (and clarification of previous paradigms of gay theatre history) with historians of sexuality and scholars and historians of queer theatre. I do not believe that “queer” can or should “just” be used as another synonym for what is, in this case, a male/male sexual relationship (real or fictional)—neither for purposes of hip-value nor for the political implications of destabilizing an accepted hierarchical system of sexuality

with gayness as the decided Other to both queer and straight. “Queer” is a historical formation (just like “gay” is) and must be recognized, developed, and utilized as such in both political practice and scholarly theory formation. Of the four primary plays and performances with which I am concerned in this dissertation, three exist within the historical paradigm of gayness (*The Boys in the Band*, *Bent*, *Torch Song Trilogy*), while the remaining one (*Angels in America*) develops out of a gay paradigm into a paradigm of queerness. The historical development of all the plays must be read in relation to the development of theories of dissident sexuality. They must be read in the space or continuum between gay and queer.

Queer should not function as a mere replacement of gay, but the two must be seen as incorporated into each other, and gay theatre history can illustrate this. Instead, gay and queer, as lived identities and theoretical constructions, exist—or rather are often constructed as existing—at opposite ends of a spectrum, as binaries. There are obvious differences in the approaches to reality, politics, and identity between gay and queer, but for analytical purposes we must consider the occurrence of both theories and identities as existing in a continuum. Not wanting to continue the divide between queer and gay, I find it necessary to incorporate (instead of eradicating) the historicity of gay theory into the poststructuralist mirror-hall of queer theory and take seriously the simultaneity of identities and histories.¹⁰

In *Epistemology of the Closet*, Eve Sedgwick famously argues that categories of sexuality do not necessarily supersede or mechanically replace each other so much as

¹⁰ Alan Sinfield, *Gay and After* (London: Serpent’s Tail, 1998), presents one discussion of the relationship between gay and queer modes of analysis.

exist simultaneously and, thus, that the formulation of “homosexuality as we know it today” is anachronistic. Halperin writes about Sedgwick’s critique of his work:

Rather than attempt to reassert the terms of the essentialist–constructivist debate in opposition to Sedgwick, however, I try here to re-animate the constructionist historical project in a more self-aware and theoretical spirit, so as to bring the Foucauldian historical and narrativ critique of homosexual essentialism into greater harmony with the denarrativizing and performative critique advocated by Sedgwick.¹¹

This stance relates to what I mean when I say in this work that “gay” and “queer” exist in a historical continuum and must be analyzed and understood as such to be operative for analytical (and I would add, political) purposes. There is a categorical indefinition at work in this debate that renders any stable definition of sexuality impossible both in terms of private desires and public political action. Viewed in this light, sexuality is no longer the thing that dares not speak its name; rather it is the thing that dares defy definition.

Having clarified the central crossroads of gay history and theory, we can move on to describe the field of gay theatre history and its relation to theory, before connecting these to theories related to the sociology of culture.

For the sake of argument, I will sweepingly claim that all four major existing narrative histories of gay male theatre stay within an under-theorized framework of realism and universalism. These are, in order of publication: Kaier Curtin, *We Can Always Call them Bulgarians: The Emergence of Lesbians and Gay Men on the American*

¹¹ Halperin, 12.

Stage (1987); Nicholas de Jongh, *Not In Front of the Audience* (1992); John M. Clum, *Acting Gay* (1992); and finally Alan Sinfield, *Out on Stage* (1999). These are the four main accounts of theatrical representations of gay male sexuality and the accounts with which my dissertation is in critical conversation. The methodology of the books remains—with some modifications—basically the same: an under-theorized presentation (arranged either chronologically or thematically) of a large number of performances in England and the USA.

In Sinfield's narrativization of gay theatre history (which is the best and most theoretically aware of the four), he works within the methodological approach of queer materialism, while paying some attention to both the socio-economic parameters for (and consequences of) the production of gay male homosexuality in the theatre and in North American and Western European societies. This is also the theoretical and methodological frame for my proposed dissertation. I admire Sinfield's attempt in *Cultural Politics—Queer Reading* to develop a queer reading (or a dissident reading) based in materialism. Sinfield has been very influential (together with, among others, David Savran) in his attempt to free queer theory and analysis from its bubble of utopia and incorporate it into the realm of living people, by his combination of Marxist and deconstructive modes of analysis.¹²

Sinfield's mode of analysis is close to mine (as outlined above), but my dissertation focuses on case studies (or key examples) in an over-arching trans-cultural

¹² See Alan Sinfield, *Cultural Politics-Queer Reading* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1994) and his *Faultlines: Cultural Materialism and the Politics of Dissident Reading* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992).

narrative of the commodified representation of sexuality.¹³ In his work, however, Sinfield continues the established narrative (Curtin, de Jongh, and Clum) and takes the same strategy of inclusiveness. This procedure contrasts with the in-depth of analysis of selected plays and performances, which is much used by feminists and later queer theatre scholars, and seen, for example, in Alisa Solomon and Framji Minwalla, *The Queerest Art*, and Solomon, *Redressing the Canon*.¹⁴ In the existing gay theatre histories the specificity called for in materialist analysis is sacrificed on the altar of creating an stable history of gay and lesbian presence on the London and New York City stages. Clum's narrative of gay theatre is exemplary of this sort of generalization. He opens his narrative with the following assertion:

The history of the representation of homosexual desire onstage is a series of moves from nothing, to innuendo and gesture, to discussion without any physical signs of attraction and affection, to, finally, showing. The continuing shock value of open demonstrations of homosexual affection or desire shows not only the continuity of heterosexism but also the theatrical principle that bodies contain the greatest potential danger for a contemporary audience, and theater's power stems from its danger.¹⁵

¹³ I am writing a theatre history and am thus creating a new narrative of history. It is not the narrative as a genre, but the notion of eternal progress that is problematic to me. For a discussion of narrative as a genre for historians see for example John Lewis Gaddis, *The Landscape of History: How Historians Map the Past* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002). Gaddis's work on the cold war is foundational for my understanding of cold war history in this dissertation.

¹⁴ See Alisa Solomon, *Redressing the Canon: Essays on Theater and Gender* (New York: Routledge, 1997) and Alisa Solomon and Framji Minwalla, *The Queerest Art: Essays on Lesbian and Gay Theater* (New York: New York University Press, 2002). Notice the use of queer alongside Lesbian and Gay in the title; Solomon and Minwalla's use of these concepts is akin to my understanding of the three existing alongside each other and not to be understood as a queer erasure of lesbian and gay.

¹⁵ Clum, 3.

Clum envisions the development of gay drama as the slow blooming of a flower. The plant of gay theatre develops from seed (the nothing) to full bloom (showing) through a series of moves. Inherent in this interpretation is that “gayness” exists in and of itself outside of theatrical representation. Gayness by this logic becomes something immanent, ever-present, and just waiting to be discovered and liberated by progression toward the front of the stage. This is a general premise in gay theatre narratives.

To *Sinfield*, on the other hand, stage representations of gay men and lesbians are important and influential because they become part of public discourse by virtue of the legitimacy accorded them by the fact of representation itself. In a somewhat crude simplification, we can say that in these books representation equals progress, and *The Boys in the Band* must then, naturally, be seen as one of the highpoints, followed by the visibility of *Torch Song Trilogy* and *Angels in America*. But, unlike previous gay theatre historians, I am not so sure that universalized representations necessarily equal local progress, and my reading of the history of these performances is vastly more complicated by the notion of national identity and material history than theirs.

*

As we have already seen, a crucial part of this dissertation’s genealogical methodology is to locate the creation of history in the specificity of cultures defined by the lived lives of its citizens. This chapter starts with Walter Benjamin in which he writes of the necessary “present” that the historical materialist cannot be without—the moment in which I am writing this history, describing a unique experience with the past. I have argued against the existence of a universal Western gay male identity as all sexual identities (contemporary or historical) are, and must be analyzed as, historically and

socially specific creations. I have also argued, based on Halperin, that we need to situate the consequences of performance in terms of social and cultural change within the local lived identities of gay men instead of in discourse, though discourse remains a crucial gauge for whether or not progressive, regressive, or any change at all takes place. In order to fulfill my own demands of cultural and social specificity as outlined above, it is necessary to turn to a discussion of theories and materialities related to the cultures in question. Constructing the bedrock for the analyses in the following chapters, I will lay out in the following pages how theories of cultural imperialism, anti-Americanism, queer identities, and cold war cultural imperialism must all be considered in an analysis of the intercultural exchange of theatrical representations of gay male sexuality.

Before entering a discussion of the roots and function of anti-Americanism, however, I find it helpful to discuss two other theoretical concepts that might help us understand not what anti-Americanism is per se, but rather how it operates in the relationship between Western Europe and the USA. I believe that the concepts of hegemony and “structure of feeling,” as described in the works of Raymond Williams, allow us to theorize anti-Americanism not only as a given prejudice but as an organic part of a resistance towards the USA and, particularly for the parameters of this work, its culture.

For a study of culture attempting to be historical or materialist, such as this, Raymond Williams’s scholarship is of course a guiding light. Williams’s oeuvre as a scholar of theatre, literature, and Marxist cultural theory has been tremendously influential, but two concepts are primary to this project: the concepts of “hegemony” and “structure of feeling.” In his seminal work *Marxism and Literature*, in what amounts to a

redefinition of culture as lived practice, Williams undertakes an attempt to outline the elements of Marxist cultural analysis. Building on Antonio Gramsci's thinking regarding the function of culture in a bourgeois society Williams develops Gramsci's critical notion of hegemony. Noting that the traditional use of hegemony views hegemony as "domination" or "political rule," particularly between states, Williams describes how in traditional Marxist theory this domination was extended to function not only-between sovereign states, but also between social classes. Gramsci contributed to the concept by describing how hegemony, particularly between social classes, but also on a geo-political scale, as the cold war proved, functions not only and always as a direct demonstration of domination or political power, but also in the subtle struggles between social groups and classes. Williams writes that "hegemony" goes "beyond culture," as previously defined, in its insistence on relating the "whole social process" to specific distributions of power and influence.¹⁶ By taking the concept of the "whole social process," which rejected the idea that people shape and create their lives in complete autonomy from social structures such as class, and including in it the specifics of a given society, such as the distribution of power, Gramsci (and by extension Williams) manage to take hegemony as a concept out of a rigid binary structure of the exercise of power through class domination and make it into a dynamic theory of the function of culture. Williams goes on to write:

It is in just this recognition of the *wholeness* of the process that the concept of "hegemony" goes beyond "ideology." What is decisive is not only the conscious system of ideas and beliefs, but the whole

¹⁶ Raymond Williams, *Marxism and Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), 108.

lived social process as practically organized by specific and dominant meanings and values.¹⁷

Hegemony is, in this use, a much more fluid concept than ideology, which remains static and recognizable for the historian of a given period. Ideology then, defined as “the conscious system of ideas and beliefs,” will remain imbedded in hegemony but does not construct it entirely. Hegemony thus becomes a lived process relating to culture as a lived entity experienced by an individual or the group-formations with which this individual identifies. For the purpose of this dissertation, those formations would be defined by class, sexual and gender identity, and national identity. Opposed to ideology, then, hegemony is not consciously forced upon the subordinate classes by the dominant, but should be viewed as a non-articulated struggle between different ways of life: “the whole social process.” When I set out to describe the complicated relationship between Western European nations and the reception of very specific plays about male homosexuality coming out of the United States, the concept of an ongoing struggle of hegemonies becomes crucial. The reception can be seen as at once longing for the liberated version of US gay male sexuality of which the plays offer theatrical representations, and on the other hand rejecting what is perceived as an obvious attempt at US world domination through culture during the cold war. However, before I too neatly utilize hegemony as an analytical tool, Williams reminds us that:

A lived hegemony is always a process. It is not, except analytically, a system or a structure. It is a realized complex of experiences, relationships, and activities, with specific and changing pressures and limits. In practice, that is, hegemony can

¹⁷ Ibid., 109.

never be singular. Its internal structures are highly complex, as can readily be seen in any concrete analysis. Moreover [...] it does not just passively exist as a form of dominance. It has continually to be renewed, recreated, defended, and modified. It is also continually resisted, limited, altered, challenged by pressures not at all its own.¹⁸

Keeping in mind that hegemony remains eternally a process that can only be fixed for analytical purposes, the analyses put forth here do not attempt to establish any given fixed position of the relationship (culturally and politically) between Western Europe and the USA as a relationship between a base and a superstructure, between the subaltern and the dominant. To do so would be to undo the essential productive fluidity of the definition in which hegemony only exists as a result of a constant process of negotiation. The Western European simultaneous embrace and rejection of the gay male characters in the four plays offered in these analyses is only part of such a negotiation and must always be read and understood within the larger context of socio-economics and historical change. To be able to do so, I will use William's concept of "structure of feeling."

The concept of "the structure of feeling" is a crucial one in the later works of Raymond Williams. In order to understand it we need to comprehend Williams's reformulation of Marxist cultural analysis as he came to recognize it in the 1970s. Throughout his prolific oeuvre as educator, thinker, and writer, Williams was devoted to social change based in a Marxist understanding of the world. However, he had for years struggled with the usefulness of orthodox Marxism and its focus on economics in a rather rigid base/superstructure paradigm. As his cultural analysis and studies grew stronger

¹⁸ Ibid., 109.

throughout the early 1970s, Williams came to see Marxism in a different light, particularly as he studied the continental European Marxist tradition exemplified by theorists such as Lukács, Gramsci, Brecht, Benjamin, Goldmann, and Sartre.¹⁹ A meeting with this “alternative tradition,” as he dubbed it, fostered a new understanding in Williams of the crucial relationship between class, culture, and consciousness. Culture in this understanding cannot remain a product of the forces of production in society but must be viewed as a constitutive force on par with material production. In classic Marxist theory the economic base determines the ideological superstructure. However, as John Higgins explains, this is a more rigid understanding of the relationship between the two than Marx intended. Marx understood that the process of production itself is a highly volatile and active process that cannot be as static as a more orthodox understanding of the base/superstructure model necessitates.²⁰ In reconceptualizing the relationship between the two in his own thinking, Williams rejected culture as a merely reflective product and made it a constitutive force in the creation of a society. In doing so his understanding of Gramsci is necessarily crucial, and eventually it led him to the formation of a theoretical category he called “the structure of feeling,” a category he describes in *Marxism and Literature*.

“As a specification of the basic element of the social process of culture it [Marxism] was a recovery of the wholeness of history,” William writes there.²¹ “The wholeness of history” here relates to two different elements in Williams’s thinking. First, it relates to the notion of including in the writing of history those who had traditionally

¹⁹ John Higgins, *Raymond Williams: Literature, Marxism, and Cultural Materialism* (London: Routledge, 1999), 100-124.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 112.

²¹ Williams, *Marxism and Literature*, 19.

been excluded, such as, for example, the working class, and secondly, it relates to his renewed interest in the function of culture in the formation and creation of history as more than a mere ideologically reflective glimmer of the base. Conceptualizing the wholeness of history this way allows us to insist that culture is a crucial part of the everyday, a founding principle in the ideological life of individuals and collectives, a lived experience of men and women at all levels of society, and at the same time realize that history is also the sum of those everydays, the collective production of material and cultural goods over time. However, as an analytical term, culture remained unsatisfying to Williams as he attempted to meet the specificity called for in cultural materialist analysis.

The structure of feeling, then, is Williams's attempt to grasp what escapes grasping in traditional cultural materialist analysis. It is an elusive and fluid concept that has been much discussed among both admirers and critics of Williams's work. I would argue that the concept of anti-Americanism, as it is found in the reception of the plays analyzed in this dissertation, is essentially operating as a structure of feeling.

In the 1970s it became obvious to Raymond Williams that the traditional Marxist approach had severe limitations. In two rarely discussed interviews with the magazine *Red Shift*, Williams criticized the traditional Marxist position (which he found Terry Eagleton, among others, to hold). He claimed that the central flaw in formalist Marxist analysis is that:

It assumes that by an act of intellectual abstraction you can place yourself above the lived contradictions both of the society and of

the individual that you choose to analyze, and that you are not yourself in question.²²

With the last two decades' focus on the subjective identity of the scholar and its influence on what gets studied, described, talked about, and claimed, Williams's observation might seem trite to the point of being unproductive. Yet, in a study such as this, analyzing the formation of the United States and particularly a gay United States through theatrical productions in Western Europe, how could we talk of an intercultural analysis without investigating the biases inscribed in those specific cultures? After all, behind every review, behind every editorial, behind every letter to the editor is an individual who is immersed in the quagmire of daily life. I, as a theatre historian, must constantly negotiate my own biases and preferences while undertaking this study. As a Danish gay man, having lived in New York City and traveled the USA for the better part of a decade, I obviously have particular "lived contradictions" that I bring to the subject. Nowhere is this as clear as in the topic of anti-Americanism. Nevertheless, by historicizing anti-Americanism as a phenomenon, I believe that I can reduce the impact of my own biases or, at least, honestly represent them under the critical light of theory.

A Danish comic strip published in one of the nation's leading liberal daily newspapers, *Politiken*, humorously pinpoints a governing European anti-American sentiment: the self-obsession of the United States. Published on 27 November, 2007, the strip portrays a geography lesson in America; the grade school teacher has pulled down a map of the world, and the only country shown, square and center, is the part of the American continents constituting the USA. The caption reads "Geography lesson in an

²² Higgins, 5.

American public school.”²³ This piece of satire speaks volumes in and of itself about the perceived ignorance and insularity of America, but on the creators’ website one also finds, as I write this, 490 comments from people all over the world, with a majority of comments from Danes and Americans, argue about the merits of the strip. The comments construct a complete discussion of the state of world relations, ranging from positions on the far-left, criticizing the United States for everything, to strongly worded anti-European defenses of the United States.

In the eight years of the George W. Bush administration, 2001-2009, the relationships between the USA and the rest of the world deteriorated (the Danish cartoon is just one minor example of this), as the administration increasingly framed international conflicts in terms of “them vs. us” and “with us or against us.” In that process the US administration divided the United States’ closest allies into Old Europe and New Europe (particularly previously Eastern European countries) agreeing to become part of “the Coalition of the Willing” that participated in the Iraq War. In his “Address to a Joint Session of Congress and the American People” on 20 September, 2001, a mere nine days after the terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center, newly elected President George W. Bush defined the attack as an attack not only on the United States but on “Freedom” and declared the “War on Terror.” In a particularly striking part of the speech the President said: “Americans are asking, why do they hate us? They hate what we see right here in this chamber—a democratically elected government.” And, he continued, “They hate our freedoms—our freedom of religion, our freedom of speech, our freedom to vote and assemble and disagree with each other.” And, finally the speech draws up the conflict in religious terms, when the President said that: “They want to drive Israel out of the Middle

²³ <http://www.wulffmorgenthaler.com/strip.aspx?id=656c268e-ff70-43a3-9e52-b4923c42e1f2>.

East. They want to drive Christians and Jews out of vast regions of Asia and Africa.”²⁴ Obviously, this statement can never be taken out of the stark context of the immediate shock, terror, and anger of the event preceding it. However, what we do see coming through clearly in the statement read by the President is the framing of the United States as an innocent victim of an act that is aimed at “what America is” instead of “what America does” and its use, if not rhetorical construction, of a global threat against “us” with all our so-called “freedoms” and the potential genocide or displacement of “us” (Jews and Christians) from “vast regions” of the world.

In the days immediately after the attack on the World Trade Center on 11 September, 2001, much of the world sympathized with the stricken nation, a sentiment famously expressed by Jean-Marie Colombani, who wrote on the front page of the leading French newspaper, *Le Monde*, that “Nous sommes tous Américains.”²⁵ The phrase “We are all Americans” resonated throughout Western Europe in the days and weeks following the attack and, though there is no doubt that the sympathy with the United States and Americans was real in many quarters in the immediate aftermath, Western European public opinion would soon turn against the USA, culminating in the month leading up to the US-led invasion of Iraq in March 2003, when thousands of demonstrators took the streets in European capitals under the banners “not in our name” and “no blood for oil.”²⁶ However, the history of anti-Americanism and its intellectual historiography reaches far back and must be seen paradoxically as both a real global phenomenon (along the lines of any prejudice held by one nation or region towards another) and a specifically US fantasy primarily held by right wing groups, neo-

²⁴ Quoted from << <http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2001/09/20010920-8.html>>>.

²⁵ Jean-Marie Colombani, “Nous sommes tous Américains” *Le Monde*, September 12, 2001.

²⁶ The anti-American sentiment in Europe remained strong throughout the tenure of President G. W. Bush.

conservatives, and conservative intellectuals. Anti-Americanism operates as a “structure of feeling” on both sides of the Atlantic Ocean, in both the new and the old world. In Europe it primarily works as a defense against a perceived imperialism (hence words and expressions such as “Americanization” and “American conditions”) and, at times, an overly critical stance towards US policies and actions (primarily as these policies relate to foreign policy), though perceptions of the United States as a racist, materialist, homophobic, and self-absorbed nation are also easily found. In the United States, as I shall show, the specter of anti-Americanism (domestic or international) is often primarily invoked in an effort to deflect criticism and perform patriotism through self-inflicted victimization.

In 1941 Henry R. Luce famously predicted in *Life* magazine that the twentieth century was to be “The American Century.”²⁷ US politics, economy, and culture achieved world domination following the massive military interventions in the First and Second World Wars through which a formerly isolationist nation, the USA, became one of the two leading superpowers locked in a constant struggle with its nemesis the Soviet Union. Following a discussion of the necessity of US intervention in WWII, simply due to the fact that isolationism was an illusion in an escalating global war, Luce claims that the only solution to the US malaise of isolationism was “to accept wholeheartedly our duty and our opportunity as the most powerful and vital nation in the world.”²⁸ The religious foundation of the United States public thought shines through Luce’s concept of duty in action. Luce certainly promotes the idea that the US, once it has accepted its newfound duty to act on the world-stage, acts with force and “in consequence to exert

²⁷ Henry Robinson Luce, *The American Century* (New York: Farrar and Rhinehart, 1944). Also reprinted in *Diplomatic History* Vol. 23, No. 2 (Spring 1999): 159-171. All quotes are from the latter.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 165.

upon the world the full impact of our influence, for such purposes as we see fit and by such means as we see fit.”²⁹ Considering that Luce is inherently optimistic about the prospects of US influence in the world and the defeat of Fascism in Europe, his insistence that the United States “exert upon the world the full impact of our influence” by whatever means deemed fit by a US administration would prove to create resistance in the countries upon whom that mighty influence was exerted. For the domestic critics, the remaining isolationists fighting what Luce called “American internationalism” (as opposed, obviously, to Marxist or communist Internationalism), Luce had one message, that “there is already an immense American internationalism.” Explaining this position, he pointed out that “American jazz, Hollywood movies, American slang, American machines and patented products, are in fact the only things every community in the world, from Zanzibar to Hamburg, recognizes in common.”³⁰ Luce then, in one deft move, points out how, if not the most powerful (considering the possibility of armed intervention), then the most lasting influence that the United States can exercise on the world is one of cultural and material influence. In one brief statement we are presented with the clash between Europe’s perception of itself as the authentic and deep culture and its perception of (and deeply rooted skepticism towards) US popular culture, signified as it is by a Fordist approach to production, superficial glamour, and Coca Cola.³¹ As it turns out, Luce was correct in his 1941 prediction. The United States was poised to become the world’s leading superpower for the very reasons he described. However, if

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Ibid., 169.

³¹ In the first chapter of his book *Not Like US* (New York: Basic Books, 1997), Richard Pells concisely outlines the massive influence of US popular culture on Western Europe starting in the 1910s with increased overseas travel by Americans, export of American jazz to Europe, American foundations sponsoring American professors in Europe, and most importantly the export of movies from Hollywood’s dream factories.

we accept that the twentieth century to a large degree was “the American century,” it was simultaneously the anti-American century.³² Again, we are faced with the both/and dialectic fundamental to understanding the relationship between Western Europe and the United States, and between local gay identities and their performed US counterparts. This both/and predicament is described by Richard Pells in the following way: “For Americans and Europeans alike the problem is how to live in two different worlds—one global, the other local or regional—while reaping the benefits of both.”³³ The similarities between the cultures, being both the same and different simultaneously, leads to an ever repeated process of resistance and modification (a process we could call the formation of hegemony) in which criticism of the United States (what would in US lingo be called anti-Americanism) becomes part of a defense. Criticism of the United States in Europe during the cold war functions as the antivirus to the American disease, and that particular pathologization of the United States combines with the discourse of disease in all the plays and writings about their reception analyzed in this dissertation.

The concept of anti-Americanism has a long and complicated history. Different schools of thought have defined the concept differently; differences that can often be explained by the contrasting ideological positions of those who do the defining. In this case, much US scholarship on the topic is conservative, and it constructs the specter of anti-American sentiment in a victimized defense of the nation. As Andrei S. Markovits outlines in his book, *Uncouth Nation: Why Europe Dislikes America*, historical anti-Americanism reaches back to colonial ambitions in Europe and the sense of having

³² Ivan Krastev has theorized that the twentyfirst century might be the anti-American century in an insightful analysis of the current world situation. Ivan Krastev, “The Anti-American Century,” *Journal of Democracy* 12.2 (April 2004): 5-16.

³³ Pells, xvi.

created a bastard nation that usurped its master.³⁴ Though aware of the historical reasons for, and presence of, older anti-American sentiments in Europe, I focus here on anti-Americanism as it has developed since World War II.

In the now discontinued quarterly conservative magazine *The Public Interest*, James W. Ceaser constructs a genealogy of anti-Americanism, which he theorizes as “one of the most powerful modes of thought in the world today.”³⁵ Writing in the years immediately following the attack on the World Trade Center and the ensuing so-called “War on Terror” initiated by the Bush Administration, Ceaser inculcates the ideology of fear through which the core of the United States (who we are, not what we do) is perceived to be under attack. He thereby displaces any discussion of consequences of previous and current policies with ideological key-words such as “freedom,” “god-loving,” and “evil,” utilizing the same strategy that defined the President’s 20 September address. The perception of an irrational international hostility towards the United States feeds into this dichotomic world-view and is used to legitimize a neo-conservative foreign policy and political philosophy. Ceaser constructs a simple, yet encompassing, definition of anti-Americanism when he writes that: “Anti-Americanism rests on the singular idea that something associated with the United States, something at the core of

³⁴ Andrei S. Markovits, *Uncouth Nation: Why Europe Dislikes America* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007), 27-80. Markovits’s book is the most recent, thorough, and insightful book on anti-Americanism. Though far from ideologically neutral—Markovits is clearly pro-American and pro-Israel (the book aligns anti-Americanism with anti-Semitism and claims that the two are intertwined in criticism of the United States on the European)—his book is an interesting study of the mechanisms of anti-Americanism(s).

³⁵ James W. Ceaser, “A genealogy of anti-Americanism” *The Public Interest* / Summer 2003. P.4. *The Public Interest* was a quarterly journal devoted to discussing politics and culture from an ideologically conservative point of view. Conservative and neo-Conservative thinkers like William Kristol, Francis Fukuyama, and Charles Murray served on its publication board. Hence, articles on anti-Americanism, a popular topic in the journal, must be read keeping in mind the ideological foundation of the journal. Anti-Americanism within the pages of the journal is primarily debunked as an almost pathological condition that, unfairly, resists the United States.

American life, is deeply wrong and threatening to the rest of the world.”³⁶ The notion that anti-Americanism rests in a perception of the United States as deeply flawed, not just in its actions but in its way of life, in the very identity of the people living in the nation itself, is a common conservative definition. It creates and maintains the notion (or rather illusion) that one can neatly separate what the United States is from what the United States does.

Paul Hollander, whose 1992 book *Anti-Americanism: Critiques at Home and Abroad 1965-1990* is a key volume on the subject, offers the following definition of anti-Americanism:

that term has been employed to denote a particular mind-set, an attitude of distaste, an aversion, or intense hostility the roots of which may be found in matters unrelated to the actual qualities or attributes of American society or the foreign policies of the United States. In short [...] anti-Americanism refers to a negative predisposition, a type of bias which is to varying degrees unfounded.³⁷

The book is an example of what happens when world events change what we as intellectuals do. Hollander had been working on his book throughout the 1980s, when the world was still firmly in the fierce binary grip of the cold war with the Soviet Union, and Soviet style or Soviet friendly states in the third world and Latin America opposing the USA through international propaganda aimed at creating hostility towards a supposedly innocent United States. With the rapid decomposition of the Soviet Union in the early

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Paul Hollander, *Anti-Americanism: Critiques at Home and Abroad 1965-1990* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), viii.

1990s, an official outlet for anti-Americanism disappeared. However, as Hollander notes, the main purpose of his historical study, and the theory of anti-Americanism that he deduced from history, was not to study the official propaganda against the USA in communist news media but rather to see anti-Americanism as:

a more or less spontaneous sentiment, or one easy to arouse, a sense of grievance and apprehension when originating abroad, and a profound sense of alienation and readiness to moral indignation as experienced by the native critics.³⁸

Hollander makes two crucial observations in these two quotes. First, he recognizes that anti-Americanism is not solely a foreign concept, but that domestic critics can harbor strong anti-Americanism. Second, he describes anti-Americanism primarily as something psychologically determined, as revealed through the language used to describe the phenomenon: mind-set, attitude of distaste, aversion, hostility, negative predisposition, unfounded bias, spontaneous sentiment, sense of grievance and apprehension, sense of alienation, and so forth. Hollander thus pathologizes anti-Americanism and consequentially constructs criticism of the United States (of “what it is not what it does,” the constant unseparables separated in US scholarship on anti-Americanism) as irrational, emotional and, I suggest, gay. The pathologization of the United States, that Hollander considers anti-Americanism to be, can, I argue, be productively understood as almost homologous to the way gay male sexuality was discussed throughout the last half of the twentieth century. By pathologizing anti-Americanism as if it were a nervous condition,

³⁸ Ibid., x.

the domestic American critics succeed in gendering the phenomenon, posing the nervous irrational nelly (Europe) against the more masculine rational man (the USA).³⁹

As an explanation of anti-Americanism, Hollander, like others before and after him, views anti-Americanism as resistance against not just the policies and culture of the USA but as a resistance towards modernity itself, which, again is perceived as being masculine in its belief in progress, speed, and the rational. Hollander writes:

It has become increasingly clear that to the extent
“Americanization” is a form of modernization, the process can
inspire understandable apprehension and anguish among those who
seek to preserve a more stable and traditional way of life in various
parts of the world. As to those who reject this social system with
great passion at home, I have come to the conclusion that they too
feel, deep down, victimized by modernity and they confuse
American capitalism (a major target of their critiques) with
modernity and what it stands for in the realm of values and human
relationships.⁴⁰

The condescending rhetoric aside, Hollander reveals the extent to which he equates anti-Americanism with the irrational and the reactionary (the resistance against modernity,

³⁹ This can also be seen in an absurd way in the conservative writer Roger Kaplan’s defend-America article “Americanism, Un-Americanism, Anti-Americanism,” *Human Rights Review*, April-June 2003: 63-71. In the article he claims that Americanism and anti-Americanism (and in particular domestic anti-Americanism) has always been a fight for “the idea, and for the soul, of America.”(66) In a somewhat rambling defense of, among others, Joe McCarthy (who was not nearly as bad as the Europeans have made him out to be, Kaplan says,) Kaplan attacks the 1960s generation (perversely mixed with levels of narcissism and egotism scarcely seen in the history of manners) and in particular “the so-called ‘gay’ movement” for leveling sordid attacks against the soul of the United States because it “confuses claims to public privileges with desires that ought to remain private.”(69) I wonder if straight marriage could not then also be considered a representation of desire that ought to remain private?

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, xi.

and his aligning Americanization with modernization). To Hollander, then anti-Americanism is primarily an emotion based in a, primarily, irrational feeling of victimization.⁴¹ The domestic critics' feeling of anti-Americanism Hollander also terms "anti-Americanism as a crisis of meaning."⁴² This crisis of meaning, according to Hollander, is at heart an anti-modernity sentiment based on a feeling of alienation from a knowable community, which can be seen as a reaction against an increasingly fragmented world in which the individual and individualism is valued on behalf of community and collective responsibility. By defining anti-Americanism as a crisis of meaning, an emotion, Hollander in a critical move imbues the concept with a certain gendered nostalgia for times past, in an attempt to delegitimize and effeminize the critique itself.

Markovits as well to a large degree agrees with Hollander's and others' definition of anti-Americanism when he says, "I see anti-Americanism as a generalized and normative dislike of America and things American that often lacks distinct reasons or concrete causes."⁴³ It seems clear then that a general agreement exists that anti-Americanism operates as a sense, a sense of dislike (normative or not), a predisposition, and a feeling. I believe that what Hollander, Ceaser, Markovits, and others describe in vague terms of subjectivity can actually be argued to operate under Raymond Williams's concept of "the structure of feeling." If we remove anti-Americanism from residing in the dark corners of the individual's emotions (which is where the American ideological invention of the concept has relegated it) and stop pathologizing it in an attempt to delegitimize criticism and resistance towards the United States, and instead for the purpose of analysis, categorize it as a structure of feeling, then we can start to outline the

⁴¹ See also *ibid.*, 7.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 444.

⁴³ Markovits, 17.

precise functions of the feeling of anti-Americanism as it occurs in both European and US versions. Keeping in mind that the structure of feeling along with hegemony does not operate on the rational and conscious level of a culture, anti-Americanism, likewise, is not (at least not always) a conscious ideological position. What, however, still needs to be described here before anti-Americanism can become a functional analytical entity is the universality of the concept.

While explaining how anti-Americanism has always been part of the European intellectual world, Markovits describes how, to many European intellectuals, the United States is and was:

nothing but a parvenu from its very inception to this day. In the eyes of these critics, America's essence consisted of venality, vulgarity, mediocrity, and—most important of all—a palpable and ubiquitous inauthenticity that, in the eyes of Europeans, permeates every aspect of American life. Add to this a sense of danger and attraction, and the irritating and intimidating mix of America the Beguiling emerged.⁴⁴

This is the symbolic, or felt, nation of the United States that anti-Americanism is founded in. Ceaser describes a common set of characteristics when he describes the United States through the eyes of the anti-American European intellectual. He writes that “America, from this point of view, is a symbol for all that is grotesque, obscene, monstrous, stultifying, stunted, leveling, deadening, deracinating, deforming, and rootless.”⁴⁵

⁴⁴ Ibid., 27.

⁴⁵ Ceaser, 4.

From these paragraphs it is possible to construct a list of keywords, in Raymond Williams's sense of that word, that will serve as references for understanding the public reception of the performances discussed in this dissertation. We will see that the charges leveled above against US culture as evidence of anti-Americanism do exist. However, it is assumed within the paragraphs above that these are universal in the minds of the anti-Americans. Markovits and Hollander, then, though to varying degrees, locate the very heart of anti-Americanism to be the same in general. Robert Stam and Ella Shohat in their article "Variations on an Anti-American Theme" argue the opposite when they write in the opening to their study of anti-Americanism in France and Brazil that, "Anti-Americanism is not an invariant essence; it is conjunctural and context-specific. [...] anti-Americanism has distinct historical origins and serves distinct sociopolitical and even psychological functions."⁴⁶ As was the case with sexual identity, discussed above, I believe, along with Stam and Shohat, that anti-Americanism should always be located in the specifics of a given culture. The relationships between Denmark and the USA, and Germany and the USA, for example, have widely different historical backgrounds coming out of World War II. Though both countries profited from the Marshall Plan and were NATO allies of the USA during the cold war, the acceptance or resistance of US culture was different from nation to nation. Similarities obviously exist and cannot be

⁴⁶ Robert Stam and Ella Shohat, "Variations on an Anti-American Theme," *New Centennial Review* 5, No. 1 (Spring 2005): 141. Stam and Shohat, who would undoubtedly be labeled anti-American by some, argue against the Bush administration's policies and show how these have bred anti-American sentiment around the globe. Though this is not the topic of this discussion, I find it important to mention that Stam and Shohat offer a critique of the term anti-American in and of itself. According to them anti-Americanism is a genuinely misleading term as it allows entry to a "paradigmatic club" with the primary model being anti-Semitism. Unlike Markovits, who deliberately draws this connection, Stam and Shohat argues that this is a flawed comparison as it implies that America can be compared to the victimization of the Jewish people during the Holocaust. America, the most powerful nation on earth, cannot be compared to "a helpless victim of an irrational, even pathological hatred or prejudice."

ignored, but keeping our crucial both/and thinking in mind, it would be faulty to assume a generalized collective anti-Americanism in Western Europe.

In order to understand the political function of plays like *The Boys in the Band*, *Bent*, *Torch Song Trilogy*, and *Angels in America* as performed in Denmark, England, and Germany (or on Broadway for that matter), we need to look at the context in which these cultural products are being consumed and by whom. It is crucial then to understand the Western European performances of the United States in these performances in relation to the specific culture and in connection to the structures of empire created by the cold war.

Debating when the cold war ended is in many ways a moot point when discussing the theoretical influences and hegemonic consequences of it. Often the end of the cold war is determined to be the spectacular fall of the Berlin Wall on November 9, 1989, but I believe that it is necessary to go into the early 1990s to find a perhaps less spectacular, but ultimately more useful, way to engage in the question of when the US and Western Europe politically entered a post-cold war period. The reconfiguration of the former USSR into the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) in 1991 is a useful divider, making the early to mid-1990s the beginning of the post-cold war era.⁴⁷ However, the fact that the geopolitical realities of the world changed does not mean that the thought structures (or structures of feeling) produced by those circumstances did. Just because empires such as the Soviet Union cease to exist, we as citizens, humans, cultural

⁴⁷ The question of the end of the cold war and the consequences of it is highly contentious and has been widely debated in cold war scholarship. For an insight to the question the following survey essays and discussions are helpful. Jeremi Suri, "Explaining the End of the Cold War: a New Historical Consensus?," *Journal of Cold War Studies* Vol. 4, No. 4 (Fall 2002): 60-92; Lynn Eden, "The End of U.S. Cold War History?," *International Security* Vol. 18, No. 1 (Summer 1993): 174-207; Ted Hopf and John Lewis Gaddis, "Getting the End of the Cold War Wrong," *International Security* Vol. 18, No. 2 (Autumn 1993): 202-210.

consumers and producers, and the politicians we elect do not cease to think within the structures that we have previously relied on to make sense of the world. Just because the iron curtain turned out to be made of cotton does not mean that thinking within cold war structures ended. It also, of course, means that the struggle for cultural domination continued with unlimited force. Over and over again through his practice Raymond Williams reminded us of the necessity of locating culture in the specifics, in the local, in individual's writings, and in context. To understand the way gay identity is performed as particularly "American" in Western Europe in the late part of the cold war, and how this specific identity is perceived and takes on potential political functions in Western European societies, we need to look at the local performance in relation to issues of cultural economy and cultural imperialism.

John Lewis Gaddis has argued in his reassessment of the cold war and his own previous work on containment, *We Now Know: Rethinking Cold War History*, that the cold war was primarily, and surprisingly so, a struggle based on what he terms symbolic imperialism. Gaddis defines symbolic imperialism as: "a situation in which a single state shapes the behavior of others, whether directly, partially or completely, by means that can range from the outright use of force through intimidation, dependency, inducements, and even inspiration."⁴⁸

For most of the cold war and in much cold war scholarship, the war was, of course, assumed to have been fought over geopolitical and arms race issues. This is obviously true. However, Gaddis's observation remains fascinating as we investigate the cultural consequences of the cold war struggle over world hegemony and its—more or

⁴⁸ John Lewis Gaddis, *We Now Know: Rethinking Cold War History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 27.

less conscious—use of culture in that struggle. Gaddis’s work correlates well with what Norwegian cold war scholar Geir Lundestad has called “Empire by Invitation.”⁴⁹

Lundestad argues that the USA only reluctantly became an imperial power after the Second World War and that its empire was primarily an empire by invitation. Such a configuration is not an empire in the sense that a nation forces itself on other nations, but rather a much more subtle over-taking of the local culture, understanding, and hegemony. This culturally defined empire (with culture used in its broad definition of both art and lived every-day experience) did not end with the end of the cold war. On the contrary, American domination of Europe continued with full force. Lundestad writes that “In the 1990s Europe remained as culturally attached to the United States as it had ever been, as measured in everything from the popularity of US movies and television programs to the increase in sales of Coke in Central and Eastern Europe.”⁵⁰ As we shall see in chapter four, *Angels in America*, for example, as a triumphant American meditation on the cold war played into this establishment of a post-cold war American hegemony in Western Europe though, in many ways, that function is sadly ironic seen in relation to the play’s criticism of America itself.

In discussing the cultural export of theatre to Western Europe from the United States, we are obviously dealing with the influence of behavior and very often, at least on the surface, of the inspirational kind that Gaddis points out. The influence of social norms and behaviors, the center of culture defined as everyday practice, is at the heart of

⁴⁹ Geir Lundestad, “Empire by Invitation: in the American Century,” *Diplomatic History* 23.2 (Spring 1999): 189-217. Lundestad has made the observation in a number of publications on this issue, but most recently in his *The United States and Western Europe since 1945* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005). Obviously Lundestad is also playing with Henry R. Luce’s observation from 1941 that the twentieth century would be the American century.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.* 205. Lundestad also points out that though the military cold war was presumably over, more than 100,000 American soldiers remained in Western Europe.

cultural (or symbolic) imperialism. The theatre is central to symbolic imperialism because of its representation of lived identities (at least in the case of the plays discussed here, based as they are in American realism). At the end of the cold war, for example, when the European continent was redefining itself and trying to come to terms with a changed world order, *Angels in America* seemed like an American gift to a confused world. However, thinking of these plays in relation to the consequences of their performance we also need to move from these political/historical definitions of imperialism to a more direct cultural imperialism as it was theorized by Edward Said. Being a literature scholar, Said, to a degree unreachable by the political historians mentioned above because of their lack of specific cultural knowledge and methodology, analyzes particular works for their relationship to imperialism in terms of both function and subject matter.⁵¹ Said's project is to suggest a paradigm shift through which it becomes normative to regard the West as constituted in a very fundamental way by its (real and cultural) imperial undertakings. Understanding the West then becomes unthinkable without thinking of imperialism. This imperialism is primarily a first world/third world imperialism in which English novels in the vein of *Heart of Darkness*, *Passage to India* et al. are crucial. However, I would argue that this imperialism, though obviously in a different form, might as well take place within the Northern or Western hemisphere itself. There is a clear Western European/North American divide that is as based on, and grounded in, cultural imperialism as the first world/third world divide. This

⁵¹ Edward Said, *Culture and Imperialism* (New York: Vintage Books, 1994). In his introduction Said describes "North America's particular way of influencing conditions in a decisive yet barely visible way." This language obviously mirrors Gaddis's in significant ways.

cultural imperialism, however, was heightened throughout the cold war with its ongoing struggle over ideological supremacy between the East and the West.

From these overall theories of the relation between culture, imperialism, and US/Western European relations, I now move into looking at one subject position, one identity category, that of gay male identity.

In *Gender Trouble*, Judith Butler warned practitioners of feminist scholarship of drawing universal conclusions. She argued that those feminists arguing that patriarchy as an oppressive force should align the struggle against gender oppression in all cultures with the anti-colonial and anti-racist struggles (note the absence of class struggles in her description) missed the cultural specificity of these struggles. Butler writes:

As feminism has sought to become integrally related to struggles against racial and colonialist oppression, it has become increasingly important to resist the colonizing epistemological strategy that would subordinate different configurations of domination under the rubric of a transcultural notion of patriarchy.⁵²

Butler's warning serves us well when trying to establish a body of theory that can support an intercultural analysis of the functions and politics (what I call the consequences of performance of US plays in Europe) of intercultural export of cultural production. In Butler's analysis, feminism had misguidedly universalized the oppressive force of patriarchy in order to show solidarity with oppressed women around the globe and in doing so had, in fact, undone the liberating powers of the Western feminist project.

⁵² Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* 10th Anniversary Edition (New York: Routledge, 1999), 35.

Universalizing patriarchy, created as it is in a Western mold, subjugated non-Western women to a Western idea of oppression. In a similar fashion universalizing historical narratives regarding male homosexuality—even within an inter-Western exchange—creates a colonized subject in what was indeed meant as a liberation strategy.

Recent scholarship has looked at how images of gay and/or queer liberation spread through popular culture from North America to the rest of the world, particularly underdeveloped nations, and how this North American concept of gay or Queer identity supposedly creates a tidal wave of freedom of sexual expression and liberated, if non-local, identities.

In order to be able to analyze the construction of sexual and gendered identities, I need aspects of queer and feminist theory, and since no art or discourse can exist outside a social order, I need to engage theories of the interconnectedness of the two. Finally, since I am basing my dissertation on the claim that previous gay theatre histories simplified the relationship between North America and Western Europe, I need theories that will allow me to support this more complex argument. Finding a theory that allows me to do just this has proven somewhat difficult. Most transcultural theory discusses systems of cultural exchange between the first and the third worlds. There are very interesting elements of postcolonial theory—the theory and practice of the consequences of “real” imperialism—that I can utilize in my analysis of the “symbolic” imperialism taking place throughout the cold war. The specificity called for in material (and much post-colonial) theory and analysis is now inspiring—and challenging—the grossly universalizing tendency in much queer theory. Eng-Beng Lim, for example, writes in a thought provoking, yet quite problematic, article in *Theatre Journal*:

The global propagation of Western gay culture is generally perceived as a progressive development that is liberating sexual minorities in third world countries. Called “global queering” by some theorists, the neoliberal model of free market transmission, by which an emancipatory and often glamorized Western gay culture is transforming the rest of the world, presumes a primarily North American and secondarily European standard constituting what we think of as “‘modern’ homosexuality.” In every modern capitalist society, then, global queer boys are perceived to come out within a universal gay identity that both distinguishes and sets them free within a transitional Gay Pride world.⁵³

I have quoted this opening paragraph from Lim’s article at some length because it points to two current streams in gay theatre research that both inform my dissertation. The first is the notion of Western progress that is influencing our analysis of how the performativity of gayness in the West is spreading and liberating Asia. This is the notion of global queering.⁵⁴ Global queering as a strategy is different, obviously, than the transfer of cultural products that I am analyzing in this dissertation. The mechanism at heart is the same, though, and the concept of “global queering” can be seen in the progress narratives of gay theatre history discussed above. Secondly, the gay identity that

⁵³ Eng-Beng Lim, “Glocalqueering in New Asia: The Politics of Performing Gay in Singapore,” *Theatre Journal* 57. 3 (October 2005): 383.

⁵⁴ An aside: it might be interesting as an experiment to consider that to many, at least in Europe, until 1989 “the East” started at the border between West and East Germany, with the Western part of Berlin being an insulated island of Western hope, or optimism, within Eastern Germany—in relation to the pessimism / optimism divide between East and West. The East / West divide then could be considered to exist not so much between Asia and the West as between the Soviet dominated Eastern Europe and the Western Europe / North American alliance. This is of course a vastly different “East” than the one glorified, orientalized, and exoticized in works such as *Madama Butterfly*, *The King and I*, *South Pacific*, and *Miss Saigon*. But like East Asia, Eastern Europe had its very own mythology in Western culture.

the new “queer boys” are coming out into is a unified and fully liberated capitalist identity—aligning capitalism with freedom. Western gay male identity is dependent on the structures of capitalism, which is why it remains at the forefront of “symbolic” imperialism.⁵⁵ This dissertation then links the increasing commodification of gay male sexuality with gay men as consumers.⁵⁶ We just need to look to relatively new developments on North American cable TV to see that this remains true with shows such as *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy*, the concept for which is being widely exported to European countries for local productions. In comparison to the local productions, the US versions then take on new dimensions of authentic artifacts of US culture.⁵⁷

Lim continues later in his article:

the politics of queer representation and encounter in trans/national contexts are often obscured by the prominence of Western modalities of queerness. Consequently, queer cross-cultural exchanges are invariably reduced to a quandary around ahistorical identity claims and focused on the iconicity of the white gay male.

There is thus a sense of epistemic narcissism in which global

⁵⁵ John D’Emilio, “Capitalism and Gay Identity,” in Henry Abelove, Michele Barale, and David Halperin eds., *The Lesbian and Gay Studies Reader* (New York: Routledge, 1993), 467-76. D’Emilio theorizes the interconnected nature between capitalism and the development and existence of a gay and lesbian identity. D’Emilio’s insistence on the necessity of looking at and theorizing on the basis of economies remains inspirational.

⁵⁶ I find a link here to John Seabrook, *Nobrow: The Culture of Marketing: The Marketing of Culture* (New York: Vintage Books, 2000). Seabrook’s discussion of consumerism and cultural hierarchies is inspirational in my discussion of the function of gay men as cultural consumers. See also Naomi Klein, *No Logo: No Space, No Choice, No Jobs* (Picador: New York, 2002).

⁵⁷ By September 2003, *Queer Eye* had been sold to Iceland, Sweden, the UK, Australia, Finland, and New Zealand, with local versions being produced in UK and Sweden. Denmark has had its own version since August 2005.

<<http://tv.zap2it.com/tveditorial/tve_main/1%2C1002%2C271%7C83410%7C1%7C%2C00.html>>.

The phenomenon of *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy* and the presence of gay characters on cable TV is the focus of a section called “Queer TV Style” in *GLQ* vol.11.1 (2005): 95-117.

queering is all about or only happening in relation to white men or the Western gay male gaze.⁵⁸

I am aware that in my dissertation I run the risk of “epistemic narcissism” by staying within the parameters of the Western world. But I find it crucial that we historicize our own past in terms of this schism, aware of the danger of privileging our own histories over those of the subaltern. Lim’s answer to the problem presented by this work of global queering is “glocalqueering” which he defines as:

A glocalqueering understanding works within the milieu of queer globalizations and diasporas while attending to the ways in which non-Western homoerotics are racialized by (auto)exotic and (neo)colonial epistemologies, ethnographies, histories, and contradictions of pragmatic local practices that exploit the currency of queer globalism in myriad ways, it asks how we know what we think we know about the global transmission and formation of queerness in the face on national heterosexism, intercultural modernities, neoliberal regimes, and other critical contexts.⁵⁹

Here I see a relation to Samir Amin’s critique of postmodernism.⁶⁰ I too am skeptical of postmodernism and poststructuralism in their seeming transnational proclamation of the end of modernity. I think that we need to “glocalqueer” our own perception and

⁵⁸ Lim, 386.

⁵⁹ Ibid., 387.

⁶⁰ Samir Amin, *Spectres of Capitalism: A Critique of Current Intellectual Fashion* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1998), 93-121. Amin’s book is seven years old at the time that I am writing this, but I believe that his critique of postmodernism as being a “neoliberal utopia in disguise” is provings tronger with time.

construction of “Western homoerotics” in relation to the utopian quality of queer theory. We need to turn the searchlight on our own historicity and ourselves. We must understand and acknowledge that just as Asia is now being queered through a seemingly positive globalism, Western Europe was once part of a post-WWII ideological front conquered by symbolic imperialism from both sides of the Iron Curtain. Without simplifying the post-WWII struggle over Europe, it is important to see for example the Marshall Plan, cultural exchange programs, Voice of America, Olympic Games, World Exhibitions (which were really sales pitches by Western industry), etc. as elements in a struggle to “win the peace” in Europe.⁶¹ The strategy of what Lim calls “glocalqueering” can be used in the project of applying cultural and geographical specificity to gay theatre history without necessarily buying Lim’s particular neologism or his specific politics of the both queer and racialized other. Imperialism and the struggle over world hegemony is not over, but has been displaced onto questions of globalization, global economy, promotion of democracy, and wars on terror. By shedding light on how “glocalqueering” as a strategy of containable difference happened earlier in the last century in post WWII Western Europe, I can contribute to an awareness of how this happens now—thereby showing how we live in a world of continued (symbolic) imperialism.

⁶¹ I am aware that the struggle over Europe was led not just by the United States. The USSR tried very hard after WWII to maintain its cultural image as the camp of optimism and peace, with the West cast as the villain and promoter of pessimism, greed, and war. This fight led to the discussion, for example, within the European communist parties between workers and intellectuals.

CHAPTER TWO

A HISTORY OF DOMESTIC TROUBLE: *THE BOYS IN THE BAND* AND *TORCH SONG TRILOGY*

In general individual love relationships in this society are an ideology of the petty bourgeoisie. But it is ridiculous to speak of an individual relationship as an “ideology.” Sexual relationships exist and will exist in all societies, primitive, feudal, capitalist, communist. What is true is that such relationships will be marked by the ruling ideology of that society. Homosexuality is no more an ideology than heterosexuality is.¹

The Los Angeles Research Group

Mart Crowley’s *The Boys in the Band* and Harvey Fierstein’s *Torch Song Trilogy* both imagine American male homosexuality as an ongoing process of socialization that takes place through a complicated relationship of resistance and acceptance. Both operate with domestication of the gay man as a central metaphor for socialization into a heteronormative society that relies on homosexual tolerance to pacify a radical, or queer, critique. Both become examples of the ability of middlebrow theatre to partake in, if not instigate, this socialization process by the middlebrow theatre’s appeal to large audiences in the United States and in at least parts of Western Europe. Both utilize allusion and analogy as key structural dramatic elements in their political struggle for socialization through acceptance (or self-acceptance): *The Boys in the Band* creates allusions to an older fictional camp universe—a different, more magical, world of performance—through a series of intertextual references, and *Torch Song Trilogy* analogizes homo- and heteronormativity. By reinforcing heteronormativity on homosexual subjects, both illustrate the homology between the inherent anxiety of the middlebrow theatre and male

¹ The Los Angeles Research Group, “Toward a Scientific Analysis of the Gay Question,” in *Pink Triangles: Radical Perspectives on Gay Liberation*, ed. Pam Mitchell (Boston, Alyson, Inc., 1980), 121.

homosexuality. Finally, both, though presented and perceived as radical due to the plays' sexualized subject matter, ultimately conform to American realism: the problem play in which homosexuality becomes the problem that needs solving. This chapter offers twofold analyses of *The Boys in the Band* and *Torch Song Trilogy* by reading the plays into US and Western European cold war structures of feeling.

Heterosexuality, or rather the process of heteronormativity, is a process constantly re-inscribed as a naturalized truth. One example of this is the constant use of the trope of heterosexual marriage as representing a trans-historical truth, as the cornerstone of any possible civilization. This is a blunt misconception of history and a clear re-instating of being heterosexual as privileged and anything else as “othered” or subaltern.² US critic and gay theorist, Michael Warner, urges resistance to this understanding of history when he writes:

They [heterosexuals] want marriage to remain a privilege, a mark that they are special. Often they are willing to grant all (or nearly all) the benefits of marriage to gay people, as long as they don't have to give up the word “marriage.” They need some token, however magical, of superiority.³

The magical token, marriage, which separates “them” from “us” is a key concept in the dialectic process of constructing and maintaining normality. Both *The Boys in the*

² Jonathan Ned Katz in his book *The Invention of Heterosexuality* points out that just as homosexuality became an identity through a process of discourse and medicalization, so did heterosexuality become dictatorially inscribed as normality through a process of differentiation from its opposite, homosexuality. I bring both into this conversation to discuss the fundamental historical specificity of the production, conception, and understanding of sexualities as (national) identities.

³ Michael Warner, *The Trouble With Normal: Sex, Politics, and the Ethics of Queer Life* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003), 82.

Band and Torch Song Trilogy maintain US and Western European hegemonic normality—with the heterosexual coupling in monogamous marriage as ideal—through a heterosexualization of homosexuality, and both utilize a heterosexual imaginary through recurring structures of domesticity.⁴ As I discussed in chapter one, it is the task of the queer organic intellectual to challenge this normalization process, which the French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu calls “symbolic inculcation.” In his essay “The Myth of Globalization and the European Welfare State” Bourdieu writes:

Everyday we hear it said, all day long – and this is what gives the dominant discourse its strength – that there is nothing to put forward in opposition to the neo-liberal view, that it has succeeded in presenting itself as self-evident, that there is no alternative.⁵

This process Bourdieu coins “symbolic inculcation,” and we all take part in the process of neo-liberal truth making, which is primarily a heterosexual production of truth, unless we actively resist it.⁶ The reinculcation of marriage as normality, and its use for political purposes in these two particular performances as the ultimate symbol of gay

⁴This chapter’s understanding of domesticity and American family culture in the cold war owes much to the work of Elaine Tyler May, *Homeward Bound: American Families in the Cold War Era* (New York: Basic Books, 1988). Elaine Tyler May’s important social history of the cold war family operates with the notion of “domestic containment,” making use of the George Kennan strategy of containment in dealing with the Soviet Union, to highlight how the nuclear family becomes central not only to the individual lives of US women and men, but to national security. The nuclear family then is a phenomenon of postwar Western society and its absolute centrality is one of construction not one of nature; it is, in other words, a historical formation. In this chapter I make use of Tyler May’s thinking on family and containment when I talk about “double others” and “containable difference.”

⁵ Pierre Bourdieu, “The Myth of Globalization and the European Welfare State” in *Acts of Resistance: Against the Tyranny of the Market* (The New Press: New York, 1998), 29.

⁶ Note on “Truth:” I am not concerned about the “truth” of the representations of gay identity created by these plays. I am solely concerned with them as representations of cultural constructions revealing deep-seated cultural anxieties about US American masculinity and male homosexuality in both the US itself and in cold war Western Europe.

domestication, can then be seen as part of an attempt to domesticate the gay man in order to liberate him (a strategy that has been remarkably successful commercially but also, I believe, remarkably damaging as political strategy in its adoption of “normality” as “liberation”). Theatrical representation has played a significant part in inculcating “normality as liberation” into so-called progressive understandings of male homosexuality and the politics springing from these understandings.⁷

One way to show resistance to this symbolic inculcation is to “analyze the production and circulation of this discourse.”⁸ Randal Johnson, in his editor’s introduction to a seminal collection of Bourdieu’s essays, *The Field of Cultural Production*, suggests that Bourdieu’s work generally calls for a “radical contextualization”—locating the specificity of any kind of cultural production in the material conditions surrounding the production of culture and in the ideological, political, and historically determined superstructure of this production, including “structures of feeling.”⁹ Based on my theoretical discussions in chapter one and Bourdieu’s theory of radical contextualization in this chapter, I locate *The Boys in the Band* and *Torch Song Trilogy* in their cultural and national specificities in relation to European productions, with the Danish production as a specific locus.¹⁰ I also here take my cue from Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick when she in “axiom 4” of *Epistemology of the Closet* proposes “that

⁷ The parallel relationship between anti-Americanism in Western Europe and in the U.S.A., one in which each pole imagines each other through a series of imaginaries, as discussed in chapter one, is also symbolically inculcated into these societies as an evident “truth”; one that presumably exists outside cultural production. I argued above for the necessity of understanding the inter-cultural relationship as such and for the usefulness of utilizing it as a “structure of feeling” akin to Bourdieu’s concept of “symbolic inculcation.”

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Randal Johnson, “Editor’s Introduction to *The Field of Cultural Production: Essays on Art and Literature*, by Pierre Bourdieu (Columbia University Press: New York, 1993), 9.

¹⁰ As it will become clear, I pay closer attention to some countries than others depending on what the specific reception can teach us about the faultlines, to use Alan Sinfield’s phrase, between the local and the US production / reception.

gay-affirmative work does well when it aims to minimize its reliance on any particular account of the origin of sexual preference and identity in individuals.”¹¹ Bourdieu’s insistence that everything is particular and must be considered in relation to particulars like taste, class, and nationality etc.—in short a “radical contextualization”—corresponds with Sedgwick’s warning that we need to do away with our easy assumptions of trans-historical recognizable gender and sexual identities. Part of radically contextualizing these plays is looking at them in relation to gay theatre in general before the late 1960s.

By no stretch of the imagination was *The Boys in the Band* the first gay play to be performed in New York City. Mae West famously attempted to perform her play, *The Drag*, in 1927 with threat of imprisonment and the closing of the play while in out-of-town try-outs as consequences.¹² As Kaier Kurtin showed in the first history of gay and lesbian characters on the American stage, *We Can Always Call Them Bulgarians*, plenty of performances containing gay and lesbian characters (sometimes openly gay, but more often than not only showing signs that if decoded correctly would localize the character as gay) had crossed the boards in New York. In his groundbreaking early work, Kurtin found that between 1927 and 1967 “more than a hundred Broadway shows featuring gay or lesbian roles” were seen in New York.¹³ He astutely observed that “in the United States, it was not the gay liberation of the ‘70s, but rather the stage liberation of the ‘30s and ‘40s, which ended the legal restrictions on Broadway’s portrayal of gay people” and

¹¹ Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990), 41.

¹² In his unpublished dissertation, “The Emergence of Lesbians and Gay Men as Characters in Plays Produced on the American Stage 1922 to 1954,” (CUNY Graduate Center, 1981), Joseph Lieberman chronicles the early gay theatre history of the US.

¹³ Kaier Curtin, *We Can Always Call Them Bulgarians: The Emergence of Lesbians and Gay Men on the American Stage* (Boston: Alyson Publications, 1987), 11.

in this relationship between liberation per se (or, rather, legal sociological, legal, and political liberation) and stage liberation we find the importance of representation.¹⁴ Though Kurtin employs the tired metaphor of something emerging from the darkness—thus making visible an already and always inherent homosexuality—his observation makes clear that the much-repeated perception of total silence and darkness surrounding gay male sexuality on stage and in society is, indeed, a myth. From the beginning of the 1920s the homosexual man—and to a lesser degree the lesbian—was never far removed from the stage. Rarely was he or she the central character, but representations of homosexuals were plentiful through the 1920s and 1930s.¹⁵ Following the social upheavals of the Second World War and the establishment of heterosexual marriage in the United States and Western Europe as absolutely central to the nations during 1940s and 1950s, homosexual theatrical characters hurriedly moved back into the safer, yet darker, space of the closet.¹⁶ The “closet plays,” to use John M. Clum’s phrase, of the 1940-1960s include works by US playwrights such as Tennessee Williams, Arthur Miller, William Inge, Lillian Hellman, and Edward Albee, and much speculation was put into the true gender and sexual identity of characters such as Blanche Dubois, George and Martha, Biff Loman, and Maggie and Brick. Following the cultural and ideological pattern of the cold war, a fear of quiet subversion of American values by the portrayal of deviant and dysfunctional heterosexuals became pronounced. Particularly Williams, Albee, and Inge were accused of portraying a world of “fading southern belles lost in a

¹⁴ Ibid., 12. To support the argument regarding the important part that representation plays in the imagining of a different world and thus in political change, see Jill Dolan, “Performance, Utopia, and the “Utopian Performative,”” *Theatre Journal* 53 (2001): 455-79.

¹⁵ See Lieberman.

¹⁶ See, for example, Elaine Tyler May in *Homeward Bound: American Families in the Cold War Era*. For an analysis of the relation between sexual and gender anxiety and post-War US society see David Savran, *Communists, Cowboys, and Queers: the Politics of Masculinity in the Work of Arthur Miller and Tennessee Williams* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1992).

haze of liquor and anonymous sex, the glorification of the stud, incestuous families and suburban lust, role-playing and dissipation, and bitter brittle humor.” This, John Loughery continues, “was gay life or gay fantasy, but not American life.”¹⁷ Loughery here identifies a particular anxiety in American culture by the mid-1960s: a sense that the nation was on the wrong track. In the theatre, in particular, critics and commentators worried about the decline of audiences, the rise of production costs, and the death of American playwriting with the exodus of writers to Hollywood. This general cultural anxiety is, I believe, related to the notion of a gay stranglehold on American realist drama, as I will discuss later when describing the homosexual panic at the *New York Times*. In *Acting Gay: Male Homosexuality in Modern Drama*, John Clum posits that “when homosexuality was invoked in pre-Stonewall American drama, it was related to the American concern with “manliness,” with a model of masculinity and male bonding that homosexuality endangered.”¹⁸ The critique of Williams, Albee, and Inge and the critical pre-occupation with their perceived dislocation of homosexual critique onto heterosexual relations fits with this understanding. In *Epistemology of the Closet*, Sedgwick utilizes the concept of “homosexual panic” to describe the bind of the male bachelor in Victorian literature who realizes that society prescribes close male bonding while simultaneously proscribing the sexual and erotic consequences (or possibilities) of the very same bonding.¹⁹ It is, however, exactly this homosociality among men that can

¹⁷ John Loughery, *The Other Side of Silence: Men’s Lives and Gay Identities: a Twentieth Century History* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1998), 292-3.

¹⁸ John Clum, *Acting Gay: Male Homosexuality in Modern Drama* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1992), 139.

¹⁹ For a discussion of how “homosexual panic” can function in a twentieth century play see Douglas Arrell, “Homosexual Panic in *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*,” *Modern Drama* 51.1 (spring 2008): 6-72. See also David Savran’s discussion of homosexuality and its dramatic and ideological function in the same play in *Communists, Cowboys, and Queers: the Politics of Masculinity in the Work of Arthur Miller and Tennessee Williams*, 99-110.

be potentially disruptive of heteronormative power structures; the heterosexual anxiety and fear of displacement so clearly on display in the critique of 1950s and 60s American theatre illustrates this. It can be argued then that structures of homosociality continually exist perfectly comfortably as structures of feeling within the governing structure of heteronormativity, and that only when homosociality becomes homoerotic (or decidedly homosexual) does it become disruptive. Part of the explanation then why *The Boys in the Band* could become so successful can be found in two interconnected reasons: the relegation of sexuality to off-stage actions and the reinstatement of homosociality as the guiding principle for the men's community.

The homosexual panic of Broadway (or, rather, of its critics) in the 1960s was not unprecedented, however. As early as 1948 with the publication of Alfred Kinsey's report, *Sexual Behavior in the Human Male*, in which he famously attempted to quantify the number of homosexual men and men with prior homosexual experiences (and found a large number of men to have had such experiences), the United States of America entered a regular homosexual panic. Kinsey allowed homosexuality to enter the popular American imaginary as more than simply a perversity and a crime. While Broadway dramas such as *The Children's Hour*, *Tea and Sympathy*, *A Streetcar Named Desire*, *View From a Bridge*, *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*, and *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf*—accepting the analysis that even if they are indeed not specifically about male homosexuality, the plays reveal deep-seated cultural anxieties about American masculinity and male sexuality—may not have developed many openly gay characters,

gay theatre blossomed off- and off- off-Broadway.²⁰ Gay theatre particularly found a home at small performance spaces in the New York City's Greenwich Village (and later in the East Village) such as at the legendary Caffe Cino. While smaller production spaces continued to show and develop gay centered drama throughout the 1970s, it was *The Boys in the Band* that opened up off-Broadway to gay drama.²¹

The Boys in the Band was a tremendous financial success in the US and abroad—first as theater and later as cinema. Developed through the last half of the 1960s, the play ironically ended up almost an anachronistic artifact the moment it was produced. Crowley apparently was not consciously trying to revolutionize the representation of gay male sexuality but rather to “get a lot of resentment off his chest.”²² Disregarding Crowley's stated need to free himself of resentment—manifest in the play in the characters' ever present self-hatred—the play did revolutionize the representation of gay men in Western theatre. The play presented, as a first, a full-blown image of the homosexual man in his own environment on the popular stage. Suddenly a middlebrow New York (and later US, Danish, and British) audience could, at least for a night, see how they, the other half, lived.²³ However, the self-hating gay man wistfully longing for

²⁰ David Savran in *Communists, Cowboys, and Queers* explores the cultural anxieties produced in and by the works of Arthur Miller and Tennessee Williams. Savran's work amounts to a recontextualization and, more importantly, radicalization of the works of these two canonized American playwrights.

²¹ There is a parallel to the development of gay drama in the 1960s and 1970s: while off-Broadway theatres such as Caffe Cino develops playwrights like Lanford Wilson, Robert Patrick, and Doric Wilson working in fairly traditional theatrical forms, more experimental theatre such as Charles Ludlam and the Ridiculous Theatrical Company develop a more radical queer theatre. This development becomes even more pronounced in into the 1990s with the development of downtown queer performance and uptown Broadway productions.

²² Mart Crowley, in interview with Jon Fraser. See Fraser's entry in Billy J. Harbin, Kim Marra, and Robert A. Schanke, *The Gay and Lesbian Theatrical Legacy: a Biographical Dictionary of Major Figures in American Stage History in the Pre-Stonewall Era* (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 2005), 114-18.

²³ In much feminist theory from the 1980s and 1990s, realism is inherently an ideological form forcing portraits of women into a patriarchal exploitative form. Realism can never, the claim goes, represent women and other exploited peoples and minorities outside of patriarchy in any fair or balanced way.

respectability, was on his way out as a cultural trope, soon to be replaced by other tropes, such as, the stone-throwing drag queen from the Stonewall Riots and the free-loving, sex-crazed, and liberally loving effeminate or macho gay man.

To critics the play felt immensely realistic, and the performance entered the public discourse on sexuality as a fairly authentic slice of life, seeming to represent the gay man in an honest way. Writing in the *New York Times*, for example, Clive Barnes, besides claiming that the performance would make *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf* look like a "vicarage tea party," expressed his opinion that the performance was "by far the frankest treatment of homosexuality I have ever seen on the stage." And, he continued, "Thus it is a homosexual play, not a play about homosexuality."²⁴ Walter Kerr, likewise in the *New York Times*, called it "a very good, very funny play."²⁵

All the characters are unhappy and there does not seem to be much hope for any of them—except perhaps for Alan, who is straight, of course, and in the end returns from the dangerous city to small town America, where his wife presumably waits with open arms. Don Shewey, in an article in *Lavender Culture*, supplies a definition of homosexual theatre as any performance in which a gay character or a gay lifestyle has visibility.²⁶ Shewey's definition seems potentially at odds with Barnes's *New York Times* definition in which it is not only the visibility of deviant sexuality in the play, but the production of this sexuality from a decidedly homosexual point of view that makes the play

Realism was too steeped in the male gaze and patriarchal symbolic inculcation, to use Bourdieu. See for example Jill Dolan, *The Feminist Spectator as Critic* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1991) and Elin Diamond, *Unmaking Mimesis: Essays on Feminism and Theater* (New York: Routledge, 1997). Jill Dolan has later modified her critique of Wasserstein and realism in "Feminist Performance Criticism and the Popular: Reviewing Wendy Wasserstein," *Theatre Journal* 60.3 (October 2008): 433-57.

²⁴ Clive Barnes, "'Theater: Boys in the Band' Opens Off Broadway," *New York Times*, April 15, 1968.

²⁵ Walter Kerr, "To Laugh at Oneself-Or Cry," *New York Times*, April 28, 1968.

²⁶ Don Shewey, "Gays in the Marketplace vs. Gays for Themselves," in *Lavender Culture*, ed. Karla Jay and Allen Young (New York: New York University Press, 1978), 230-45.

homosexual. Stefan Brecht in an early attempt at defining queer theatre defines it as purposefully low and derisive comedy that through laughter containing “a core or nuance of despair and dejection” reveals “love as the supreme lie.”²⁷ In a later attempt at defining the ever-fleeting and ontologically unstable genre, Laurence Senelick regards it an insider art form drawing meaning from the Queer status of its producers. It is also, Senelick writes, “expressive of unorthodox sexuality or gender identity, antiestablishment and confrontational in tone, experimental and unconventional in format” and generally found in opposition to the middlebrow, be it culture, political opinion, or choice of life-style. In fact, Senelick argues, what we have come to think of as queer theatre really has much more to do with the origins (and original function) of theatre itself than the realism and naturalism that had taken complete control of the American middlebrow stage by the 1950s, turning it into “a constricted, gray, clinic for post-Freudian problem solving.”²⁸ Clearly, all three of these definitions are historically determined, but their differences are productive. Where Shewey argues for the sheer visibility as a defining characteristic, Brecht and Senelick, each in his own way, arrives at a definition assuming subversive strategies and qualities for a sexualized theatre in opposition to the very middlebrowness of middlebrow theatre or, as Senelick called it, the “clinic for post-Freudian problem solving.” *The Boys in the Band* and *Torch Song Trilogy* both operate with different elements of these definitions in relation to visibility, comedy, laughter, and the notion of “love as the supreme lie.”

²⁷ Stefan Brecht, *Queer Theatre* (New York and London: Methuen, 1986), 9. Originally published by Suhrkamp Verlag, Frankfurt am Main, BRD, 1978.

²⁸ Laurence Senelick, “The Queer Root of Theater” in *The Queerest Art: Essays on Gay and Lesbian Theater*, ed. Alisa Solomon and Framji Minwalla (New York: New York University Press, 2002), 24.

Clearly, when we consider the definitional crisis of homosexual/queer theatre, *The Boys in the Band* falls between the cracks: it is produced by a homosexual man, it uses camp humor as its main mode of dialogue, it creates visibility, but it does so in the constricting form of realism, “the post-Freudian clinic.” However, Shewey is right; with the Off-Broadway production male homosexuality acquired a visibility hitherto unknown in the American middlebrow theatre, and Shewey correctly marks *The Boys in the Band* as the beginning of a truly gay theatre because it opened the closet.²⁹ Following *The Boys in the Band* the popular theatre suddenly had the potential to allow the openly gay man on stage—marking a difference from the previous period following World War II, where representations of male homosexuality were ever present and ever closeted. *The Boys in the Band*, pre-dating the actual events of Stonewall, was the Stonewall of Off-Broadway and in many ways commodified the gay male existence in a similar way—making gayness if not attractive, then marketable for sure.³⁰ *The Boys in the Band*, in fact, has entered our current understanding of gay theatre history with such force that it is often thought to have received a Broadway production. James Fisher, as one example, writes that “with the popular and commercial success of Mart Crowley’s *The Boys in the Band* on Broadway in 1968, gay male characters (soon to be followed by lesbians) moved to center stage;” he continues that “*The Boys in the Band* introduced Broadway audiences to homosexual life and the dilemmas facing gay men living within the American family;”

²⁹ John M. Clum operates with the notion of “closet plays” to describe plays with gay content / character prior to the open performance of homosexuality. The concept captures the early plays’ reliance on the structure of the open secret as opposed to spectacularized homosexuality in *The Boys in the Band*. In his article on Teaching *The Boys in the Band*, “Teaching the “Boys”: Mart Crowley in the Millennial Classroom” *Modern Language Studies* 31.2 (Autumn 2001): 75-90, Michael R. Schiavi calls the play “the linch-pin of modern gay male drama and, possibly, sensibility.” See also Schiavi’s unpublished dissertation “Staging Effeminacy in America” (Ph.D. dissertation: New York University, 1998).

³⁰ That Gay male identity (as any identity) is closely related to the developments of economic structures is clearly outlined in John D’Emilio “Capitalism and Gay Identity” in *The Lesbian and Gay Studies Reader*, ed. (New York: Routledge, 1993), 467-476.

and finally states that “the public’s acceptance of gay-themed plays ... undoubtedly began with the Broadway [sic] success of *The Boys in the Band*.”³¹ In our cultural legacy then, *The Boys in the Band* has achieved cultural capital usually only accumulated by Broadway productions. And, in the American middlebrow theatre with Broadway cultural capital comes automatic cultural legitimacy.

Shewey, writing from his position in the middle to late 1970s, sees all visibility as positive. Gay intellectuals and scholars of sexuality have later come to argue with the politics of gay visibility and the particular merits of the negative visibility of *The Boys in the Band*, but whether we like *Boys* or not, there is no way to deny the visibility it created. John Clum comes close to dismissing the play, particularly because of the visibility it created, when he writes that “it is one thing to show a gay audience the dark side of its life; it’s quite another to profit by parading this before a mainstream audience.”³² Though Clum’s assumption that a gay audience would automatically see “the dark side of its life” reduces the complexity of possible gay communities to one, it also rightly points to the commodification of exotization that is the consequence of the middlebrow production and realist trappings of *The Boys in the Band*. Writing on the play today, second-generation historians of gay theatre need to be aware that the historical moment of the performance was in fact pre-Stonewall and pre-Gay Liberation. In that connection I specify that in this chapter I use “homosexual” describing both pre- and post-Stonewall sexualities, but use “gay” to specify a post-Stonewall sexual identity.

The first part of this chapter analyzes the production of *The Boys in the Band* primarily on the Danish stage in order to locate and exemplify the specificity of the

³¹ James Fisher, *We Will Be Citizens: New Essays on Gay and Lesbian Theatre* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, Inc. Publishers, 2008), 2-8.

³² Clum, 254.

representation of homosexuality in the move from one cultural sphere to another. I am particularly interested in analyzing the process of the double other. The men in *The Boys in the Band* are marked as others in US society in the play itself and definitely in the US and European reception of the performances. They might be insiders in their own community, as shown by the birthday party, but are now staged for the first time as definitely “othered” in relation to the heterosexual (or presumed heterosexual) man who crashes their party. The export of these others, and hence the representation of an exoticized gay identity, to another culture produces a second layer of otherness in Denmark and, one can theorize, other parts of Western Europe.³³ *The Boys in the Band* as performed in Denmark is a good case study of the process of the double other. Furthermore the translation process of the double other complicates the idea of transnational identity politics and the question of a policy of visibility.

As Foucault pointed out in *The History of Sexuality*, sexual history is partly constructed discourse—and theatre history is no exception. Theatre history is a revealing example of how the stronger the presence of deviant sexuality (or the perception of this) is in a localized reality, the stronger the silence is as well. Gay male sexuality was for a long time one strong reason for the prevailing anti-theatrical prejudice—the ideology of the sinful theatre. Though critics seemed to share a collective knowledge (or perhaps rather assumption) of the presence of homoerotic and homosexual desire in the theatre, a collective silence also existed.³⁴ The analysis of this discourse offered here is then

³³ I find it appropriate to use the lingo of international trade for the sale of representations of deviant sexuality of which the performance is one early example.

³⁴ See for example Alan Sinfield’s discussion of censorship and the theatre as a queer space in Alan Sinfield, *Out on Stage: Lesbian and Gay Theatre in the Twentieth Century* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999), 1-25; and Nicholas de Jongh’s brief overview of the pre-twentieth century view of the theatre as a potentially subversive space in Nicholas de Jongh, *Not In Front of the Audience: Homosexuality on Stage* (New York: Routledge, 1992), 1-15.

followed by an analysis of the performance—focusing on how the play relates homosexuality to the realm of disease and how it links the discourse of homosexuality in a dialectical relationship to society. In analyzing the Danish performance I especially emphasize the reviews—the public discourse concerning male homosexuality and its American otherness—which this performance of homosexual America generated. I propose that in the rhetoric in which the production was discussed we can identify the ideology of *the other* inside and outside hetero- and homonormativity. The title itself is an example of the fundamental othering of the characters; by naming the characters “boys” the author infantilizes them and thus exorcizes them from a heteronormative US American masculinity.

The Boys in the Band opened on April 14 1968 Off-Broadway at Theatre Four in New York City, where it played for 1002 performances.³⁵ Less than a year and a half later the play-opened in Denmark. In Denmark, the performance played 147 times and was thus a major success.³⁶ With the *Boys in the Band* it became manifest that a performance representing homosexual men could become a commercial success in the US as well as in Denmark. With the notorious filming of the play in 1970 with the American cast from Off Broadway, directed by William Friedkin, Crowley’s staging of homosexuality reached a very large Western audience and thus influenced the public vision of the American, urban, and self-loathing, gay male.

³⁵ All above mentioned books mention this but see for example Clum p.259. Clum has the number as 1001 but judging by a note in the *New York Times* on August 14, 1970 the number is 1002. The *New York Times*, August 14 1970: 17. Again, much criticism has *The Boys in the Band* playing on Broadway and the performance has achieved an almost mythical status in much gay theatre history scholarship.

³⁶ See *Teater i Danmark, ITI. (Theatre in Denmark)*. Annual publication listing factual informations on the performances of the last season. 147 performances is a very long run in a Danish context where shows have a normal run of about 40/60 performances. In this analysis only the Copenhagen production is counted. The following year a much less successful performance (partly with the same cast) was performed at a regional theatre in Odense (Denmark’s third largest city).

The Danish title was *Bøsserne* or, rather, it was *Bøsserne: The Boys in the Band*. The Danish word “bøsse” is equivalent to the American “gay,” making the Danish title into *The Gays*. In the late sixties this term still had derogatory connotations in Danish and was only in 1971 chosen by the Gay Liberation Front (Bøssernes Befrielsesfront) to serve as a self-defining term. Only in 1980 did the original homosexual movement, founded in 1948, choose to change from the historical “homophile” to “gay,” thereby attempting to radicalize the then somewhat dormant movement.³⁷ Calling a performance *Bøsserne* in 1969 was definitely provocative. However, it turned out to be a successful marketing strategy, giving the majority of the population the possibility of saying the b-word by simply referring to a title. A heightened visibility was also a consequence of the choice of title—suddenly the word appeared in newspaper ads and on billboards outside the theatre. In this way the Danish title is more direct than the American, but it loses the poetic allusion to community in its translation. It also loses the reference to the movie *A Star is Born*, in which James Mason tells Judy Garland, who has become a famous chanteuse, but is suddenly too nervous to sing in front of her audience, to “relax. It’s three a.m. at the Downbeat Club and you’re singing for yourself and the boys in the band.” However, in translation the title also loses its camp importance and, not least, the allusion to a secret gay history consisting of Hollywood movies and female icons.

The play takes place in the upscale apartment of Michael, Mart Crowley’s anti-hero, in the East Fifties in New York City, where he is celebrating his friend Harold’s birthday together with “the boys.” Two unexpected guests appear at this celebration, the hustler Cowboy, bought as a present for Harold and thereby literally highlighting the

³⁷ No complete account of the modern Danish homosexual history exists except for several sketches of gay history published in the Danish gay paper *Pan Bladet* over the years. See also my MA thesis *Gennem Maske og Ensomhed (Through Mask and Loneliness)* available through the Royal Library in Copenhagen.

commodification of gay sex, and the heterosexual Alan, who is an old college friend of Michael's. No women are let in to disturb this all male cast in the portrayal of the agony of femininity in men—equating the effeminate man with homosexuality, leading a female spectator to write in a letter to the editor:

I can see that I might be outnumbered by the imitative homosexuals that abound amongst young people, especially in New York City and Hollywood, with their silly long hair and feminine garb. Instead of glorifying them, sympathizing and making them feel they are “in style,” a little more mockery and derision might help a lot toward turning some of them back to normal channels.³⁸

Katherine Vandegrift admits in her letter that she has not seen the performance (nor has she any intention of doing so), but she has no problem talking about a performance that she has not seen, because she already knows the dangers that lurk within the homosexual culture: long hair, femininity, and the seduction of the young and impressionable. Her reaction speaks volumes about the power of the stereotypical image of the gay male—and of the subversive powers of male homosexuality—prevailing in the American consciousness in 1968; a consciousness into which the performance of *The Boys in the Band* socializes the characters, who really do not match Katherine Vandegrift's descriptions, as already existing examples of lived experience. Little could Katherine Vandegrift know that a year later her nightmares, her example of the enormous American cultural anxiety in the late 1960s, would reinforce themselves at the riots of the Stonewall Inn. Ironically, the effeminate men that Katherine Vandegrift refuses to pay to see on

³⁸ Katherine Vandegrift “What Reason,” *New York Times*, June 2 1968, D6.

stage are far from glorified in the play. What she reacts so strongly to then is not the actual representation, but rather the sheer visibility and the instability they present in her strictly gendered and structured sexualized environment.

The play opens with a long conversation between Michael and an old trick turned friend called Donald. The conversation is a tour de force in the Freudian explanation of homosexuality, blaming it all on “good old Evelyn and Walt,” the incarnation of the American parents. This conversation is an odd combination of sincerity and irony—that Susan Sontag realized was at the heart of camp as a style.³⁹ The other characters, Emory, Bernard, Larry, and Hank, arrive, and their conversation is fast, witty, bitchy, and campy, interrupted only by the arrival of the Cowboy, who represents the fantasy of the stupid but happy whore.⁴⁰ Obviously, Cowboy is also a reference to the works of US playwrights Tennessee Williams, and, especially, to the Kansas sensibilities and adoration of the US stud-masculinity in the plays of William Inge. The party continues and the boys are caught in the subversive (and in Denmark and Germany in the late 1960s still illegal) act of dancing together when, suddenly, the presumably heterosexual Alan appears. He is duly surprised, but the band plays on until Alan violently attacks the outrageously effeminate Emory at the first act’s curtain-fall. The second act opens exactly where we left off. Peace is somewhat restored as the masculine Hank, previously straight and married (again, the ultimate evidence of heterosexuality), helps the likewise masculine, if violent, Alan upstairs, as if he were the victim. Michael, who has now

³⁹ Susan Sontag, “Notes on Camp,” in *Against Interpretation* (New York: Anchor Books, 1966), 275-292.

⁴⁰ The cowboy is (together with for example the marine, the sailor, the construction worker, the police man) an iconic figure in the gay subculture – especially in early gay male pornography. They are examples of a fetishized masculinity. See for example Henning Bech, *When Men Meet: Homosexuality and Modernity* (Cambridge, Polity Press, 1997) and Joe A. Thomas, “Gay Male Video Pornography: Past, Present, and Future,” in *Sex for Sale: Prostitution, Pornography, and the Sex Industry* ed. Ronald Weitzer (New York: Routledge, 2000), 49-66.

started drinking heavily, suggests that they play a game, in which everyone is to call the one person they have loved the most—conjuring up the image that gay men because of their promiscuity are not really capable of true love, with “true love” defined in strictly heteronormative terms.⁴¹ His secret, though not very well hidden, plan is to reveal Alan as homosexual. He does not succeed. He only succeeds in revealing himself and the other men as sad homosexuals. Suddenly the party is over, and the guests leave the celebration guilt-ridden and unhappy. The characters represent all sides of the stereotypical middle-class homosexual character in 1968: the effeminate interior decorator, the masculine (code for passing) couple, the preppy black man, and the bitchy, overly psychoanalyzed man. Ultimately, they represent the public discourse through which male homosexuality was understood, which the letter to the *New York Times* so clearly underlined.

There are references to psychoanalysis throughout the play, and the characters impress the audience with their knowledge of the psychoanalytical explanation of their pathologized homosexuality—a pathology that has been internalized. The Freudian frame of understanding sexuality is displayed through the presence of the characters Donald, Harold, and especially the guilt ridden Michael. And it is particularly through these three characters’ dialogue that we can see the discourse of disease re-enacted, internalized, and performed. In the opening dialogue between Michael and Donald, Donald says:

“Naturally, it all goes back to Evelyn and Walt” expressing the view that the root of homosexuality is found in childhood—symbolically incarnated by the eternal Evelyn and

⁴¹ This scene obviously refers back to Edward Albee’s *Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf* with its party games of “hump the hostess.” *The Boys in the Band* shares many similarities with Albee’s play as many critics have pointed out. The play was also developed at The Playwright’s Unit, which was run by Albarwild Theater Arts Incorporated, the producing entity run by Edward Albee, Clinton Wilder, and Richard Barr.

Walt.⁴² Donald's mom spoiled him, and Michael's mom treated him like a girl, which exemplifies just how lethal the apron strings were considered to be to American heterosexual masculinity. Michael's ability to quote American gay icons like Bette Davis and Judy Garland stems from his mother's taking him to the cinema. Through Michael's imitation of these grand ladies of the silver screen another part of the gay culture is performed: the love for divas and the use of camp. Both Michael and the effeminate Emory cite movies from the 1940s, references that must have passed over the heads of a Danish audience in the late sixties. Through the characters' relations to actresses, Crowley stages the male homosexuals' identification with the opposite sex as not just an external construction, but as an integrated part of the homosexual subculture. It also reinforces the commodified nature of gay identity in a capitalist society in which identity formation is based in commodified cultural products. But whereas Michael's identification is positioned as learned, achieved, constructed through his childhood, Emory seems to think he was born that way. By playing both cards (essentialist / social constructionist), the performance resists deciding whether homosexuality is essential or constructed and simply presents both discourses—coming down on the side of the side of essentialism, taking the responsibility strategically away from the individual. The reluctance to take a stand could be read positively as openness to different discourses. On the other hand, if viewed negatively, it could be regarded as fear of disrupting any hegemonic understanding, knowing very well that disruption and middlebrow

⁴² Mart Crowley, *The Boys in the Band* (New York: Samuel French inc., 1968). For this dissertation I am using both the Danish translation and the original Samuel French print. The Danish translation is located in the Dramatic Library under the Royal Library in Copenhagen.

commodification do not typically go hand in hand.⁴³ Both the psychoanalytical discourse and the discourse of inborn degeneracy were hegemonic in 1968. With some right, then, the performance can claim a liberating function in its sheer visibility—even if the visible sexual characters are not attractive role models for gay existence. Psychoanalysis is staged directly again later in the play and is linked to extreme self-hatred and internalized homophobia, which the performance views as the root of the unhappiness fundamental to any homosexual existence. At the very end of the play, when the party is over, Harold tells Michael the essential truth that Michael dares not see. He says:

Now it's my turn. And ready or not, Michael, here goes. (A beat) You are a sad and pathetic man. You're a homosexual and you don't want to be. But there is nothing you can do to change it. – Not all your prayers to your God, not all the analysis you can buy in the years you've got left to live. You may very well one day be able to know a heterosexual life if you want it desperately enough – if you pursue it with the fervor you annihilate—but you will always be homosexual as well. Always, Michael. Always. Until the day you die.⁴⁴

Not all the psychoanalysis in the world can cure Michael of his homosexuality because his sexuality is essential in him (and to him), and all he can do is accept his fate, Crowley seems to say. Michael might escape from his homosexuality into heterosexuality, the construction that he might “be able” to take on some day if he works hard enough, but he

⁴³ For a more thorough discussion of this seeming paradox see my discussion of what David Savran identifies as ambivalence in relation to *Angels in America* in chapter four of this dissertation.

⁴⁴ Crowley, 99.

will always, and essentially, be homosexual.⁴⁵ Harold is no better. He hates himself just as much, but he is conscious about it and in the good Freudian way, consciousness is partly the cure. He is aware that he is “a thirty-two year old, ugly, pock-marked Jew fairy” (notice the equal weight of the stigmas), and his only way to face the world is through the soothing fogs of smoking marihuana.⁴⁶ The pathologizing discourse, and its discouraging answer that there is no cure, was so strong in the play that it prompted the *New York Times* to publish a front page article two and a half years later referencing the performance while informing the public that that notion was now disputed by medical experts. Indeed, the *Times* happily reported, a cure might be possible through therapy and medicine combined.⁴⁷

We are also told, by Michael, that Harold is considering the final escape, suicide, when he reveals that Harold collects pills. Through this revelation, Crowley draws on the theatrical convention of letting the homosexual die before the final curtain, as in Mae West’s *The Drag*, Tennessee William’s *Suddenly Last Summer*, and Mourdant Shairp’s *The Green Bay Tree*. Michael expresses this convention in a moment of meta-theatrical awareness when he says, “It’s not always like it happens in plays, not all faggots bump themselves off at the end of the story,”⁴⁸ which reveals a campy awareness of contemporary theatrical convention. But Michael’s response here is certainly not the only

⁴⁵ Ironically this positions heterosexuality as just another construction. For a discussion of heterosexuality as construction see Jonathan Ned Katz, *The Invention of Heterosexuality* (New York: Plume Books, 1996).

⁴⁶ Harold’s Jewishness adds a third layer of otherness to his character in Denmark and Germany as both countries, like all European countries in the postwar era, have particularly painful histories with their Jewish population. For a discussion of Jewish characters and the function and politics of representation see David Lyle Solomon, “A Stage for Bima: American Jewish Theater and the Politics of Representation.” (Ph.D. Dissertation, The University of Maryland, College Park, 2004). In my discussions of Larry Kramer and Tony Kushner in chapters three and four of this dissertation I also draw on Solomon’s analysis.

⁴⁷ Jane E. Brody, “More Homosexuals Aided to Become Heterosexual” *New York Times* 28 February, 1971, 1.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*,65.

intertextual reference in the play: in general it flies through the air with references to Williams, Inge, and Albee and through these to a notion of a special particularized American homosexual culture that the play in a self-fulfilling prophesy becomes part of. Cowboy, as the working class hustler, does not get these references and has to have them explained by the middle class men buying themselves a moment of youth through the hustler's hunky, yet campy, masculinity. I think it is reasonable to position the average continental European audience member in Cowboy's position. Certainly, we can have reasonable doubts that the average audience would get all the intertextual references and the importance of psychoanalysis, unless they had a very wide, and particularly American, horizon of expectation.⁴⁹

In this performance no "faggot is bumped off" literally, but throughout the play the characters more or less all kill each other through psychological warfare. In the end, when the guests are gone and the lights are almost out, Michael and Donald are alone on stage as in the opening. They have come full circle when Michael says the famous lines:

If we...If we...if we could just... learn not to hate ourselves so much. That's it you know. If we could just not hate ourselves just quite so very, very much.⁵⁰

So this is what all the psychoanalysis has to teach the boys: give up the self-hatred. But hope seems fragile, when viewed in relation to the overall impression of the play, which does not exactly seem to encourage greater self-esteem among gay men.

⁴⁹ Obviously not all American audience members would be deeply familiar with psychoanalysis. That said, it is a common belief in Western Europe that all Americans are in some sort of psycho-analysis. This, in itself, is obviously a cultural production.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 102.

The Boys in the Band is the first performance in the history of middlebrow theatre to stage the internal struggles within a homosexual subculture as these struggles are carried out primarily through language. Language is a crucial part in the discursive frame within which gender and sexuality is negotiated, constructed, and performed.⁵¹ The performance offers descriptors like faggot, gay, homosexual, fairy, and queer. In the multiple uses of the different terms the performance seems to attempt a differentiation of identity models, but it does not succeed. Instead the language becomes a strategy of shock. How many different names can these men call each other? As the writer of American gay history Jonathan Ned Katz describes the appropriation of the term “gay” in the early seventies by the gay liberation movement, it meant freedom to take on a derogatory term and thereby transform its meaning, but is that what happens among the characters here? Again, I believe, Crowley wants it both ways, and the outcome is dependent on the audience. We can imagine gay audience positions that found it liberating that the characters dare call each other (in mocking love) names that heterosexual society hitherto had used to reinforce its hegemonic power. On the other hand we can just as well imagine heterosexual audience positions finding their own use of these slurs legitimized through the performance’s repeated use of them. Two things are clear, the discursive nature of signifiers is staged, and most of the gay characters feel no equal right to be part of the American society because of their internalized hate.

The couple, Hank and Larry, is presented as the exception to the self-hatred and its discursive consequences. In the second act they admit that they love each other, and

⁵¹ This idea is of course famously expressed by Judith Butler in both *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* and modified further in her *Excitable Speech: a Politics of the Performative* (New York: Routledge, 1997).

through making phone calls out of the queer limbo constituted by Michael's apartment, they admit it to the world. Suddenly, their love dares speak its name. They supply the hope for change in the play. They supply the hope that gay men can find their own different way of living in a world where the only acceptable normality is constituted by the heteronormativity of the monogamous nuclear family. Hank and Larry agree on trying a non-monogamous relationship and leave the party by going to Michael's bedroom, conveniently located off-stage. In this way, we can consider Hank and Larry as figures of emancipation. Yet, I believe they remain within the frames of the early homophile strategy of peaceful co-existence and assimilation. Feelings, discretion, and co-existence seem to constitute the frames within which their experiment has to take place—and of course it ultimately takes place off stage, outside the heterosexual glance—embodying the classic Greek tradition that atrocities should not be shown on stage. The love might dare speak its name, but it dares not show its face. A happy gay non-monogamous relationship remains a rhetorical strategy. They tellingly leave separately; their experiment is thereby theatrically undone by the embodiment of the undoing of the twosome on stage.

Ultimately, it is the heterosexual Alan who performs the discourse of heteronormativity through his entrance on this battlefield of homosexuality. He provides the heterosexual glance in which the performance is mirrored. The mere announcement of Alan's entrance makes Michael ask his friends to turn down the volume on their camp behavior, which leads into a discussion between Michael and Donald. Donald tries to argue that they need to confront society with their homosexuality, but Michael argues that "it's much simpler to deal with the world according to its rules and then go right ahead

and do what you damn well please.”⁵² Through this line, and the other characters’ acceptance of its reasoning, the performance ends up showing its ultimately repressive tolerance. Hegemony can only accept homosexuality as long as it is not made obvious or insistent. In 1968/69 this clearly was a legitimate policy. The homosexual organizations in Denmark, the UK, Germany, and the US all relied heavily on civilized co-existence. The ruling ideology demanded that homosexuals try to look and act as discretely as possible. They accepted the straight tolerance based on “passing” and internalized repressive tolerance as a political strategy.⁵³ Heterosexual hegemony’s view of homosexuality is made explicit in a conversation between Alan and Michael. Alan expresses the policy of privacy by saying that he “couldn’t care less what people do – as long as they don’t do it in public – or – or try to force their ways on the whole damned world.”⁵⁴ What is not visible is tolerable, and Alan does not see that what the hegemonic struggle constantly tries to do is to reinforce its heterosexual way “on the whole damned world.” The homosexual who wants to live in peace needs to pass as straight, that is, cannot flash his deviant sexuality. It is exactly the visual homosexuality Alan attacks at the end of the first act, when he beats up Emory, the stereotypical interior designer queen. His verbal and physical abuse of Emory is aggressive and violent. Alan lets it all out in the words “Faggot, Fairy, pansy, queer, cocksucker. I’ll kill you, you goddamn little

⁵² Crowley, 22. It should be mentioned that what Michael asks his friends to do is stop being so camp, which the Danish translators translated into “stop camping,” which means something very different. Camp did (and does) not exist as a term in Danish and we can imagine that the average audience member in 1969 must have been quite perplexed.

⁵³ See for example David F. Greenberg, *The Construction of Homosexuality* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988), 455-499 and John D’Emilio, *Sexual Politics, Sexual Communities: the Making of a Homosexual Minority in the United States, 1940-1970* 2nd edition (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998). Re. the Danish movement, I have had access to all issues of their publications (1948-2001) *Vennen* (*The Friend*) and *Pan* at the archive of the Danish gay organization. Reading through all of these issues the development in the assimilationist policies of the movement become very clear.

⁵⁴ Crowley, 44.

mincing swish! You goddamn freak! Freak! Freak!”⁵⁵ The Danish translation furthermore includes the word “pervert” and substitutes “freak” with “butt-fucker” repeated thrice.

There is no doubt that these lines were effective in both the United States of America and Denmark. This was a strong line spoken live in a theatre at the end of the 1960s, and it rather accurately stages the verbal oppression gay men were exposed to pre-Stonewall (though the Stonewall Riots obviously did not change this overnight). By letting Emory, by far the most effeminate character, be the punching-bag for the straight Alan, the performance ultimately justifies the attack. Emory certainly wears the signifying codes on his silk sleeve, and this theatrical representation of gay bashing is literally not condemned. Alan, on the other hand, is the one represented as suffering, and the audience is supposed to sympathize with the perpetrator, not the victim. This becomes painfully clear later, when Emory actually accepts the attack as both justified and forgivable. This clearly indicates an internalization of homophobia in the swishing queen. In the Danish performance Emory was played by Christoffer Bro, a stocky actor, whose body, as we shall see, held endless fascination for the Danish critics.

When the show opened in New York on April 14, 1968, the Stonewall Riots of June 27, 1969, were more than a year in the future. When the show opened in Denmark on September 1st, 1969, only two months had passed since the riots kick-started the modern Western gay liberation.⁵⁶ The Stonewall Riots were to a large extent carried out

⁵⁵ Ibid., 45. In his article “Unacceptable Mannerisms: Gender Anxieties, Homosexual Activism, and Swish in the United States, 1945-1965” Craig M. Loftin outlines the way “swish,” used here as a derogatory against Emory, was used as self-definition, a code that made recognition possible, and as a challenge to hegemonic US masculinity in the early cold war era. Craig M. Loftin, “Unacceptable Mannerisms: Gender Anxieties, Homosexual Activism, and Swish in the United States, 1945-1965,” *Journal of Social History* 40.3 (spring 2007): 577-96.

⁵⁶ The Stonewall Riots are the roots of a whole mythology in gay culture from which late twentieth century historians created the myth of invisibility that I addressed earlier. Doric Wilson’s *Street Theater* is an

by effeminate gay men, men of color, and drag queens who had just simply had enough. The riots were not widely reported in the Danish media, but the gay papers, *Vennen* and *Pan*, reported on them, so we can safely assume that subgroups of the gay audience knew they had taken place. In a way then, the performance in America preempts the riots by letting the effeminate Emory be the one who will not (or perhaps rather cannot) let himself be forced into a heteronormative masculinity that is not his. The Danish performance thus parallels the Stonewall Riots through the fight between Emory and Alan. The sex-war ending the first act is a fight between heterosexual society's repressive tolerance and a fragile homosexual milieu's insistence on its right to be exemplified by the effeminate and vulnerable Emory. This is both a timely and historical struggle. In the performance, Alan wins, and if he was wondering about his sexuality, "the boys in the band" only succeed in sending him back into the secure arms of heteronormativity as symbolized by a longing wife and small town America.

Throughout the sixties the critics, and especially those of the *New York Times*, were aware of the possibility for staging homosexuality in the theatre. In 1961 the *New York Times* critic Howard Taubman wrote an article warning a supposedly unsuspecting heterosexual audience that sometimes in the theatre they were exposed to homosexual playwrights' homosexual interpretation of the homosexual life disguised in heterosexual clothes and characters.⁵⁷ Taubman lists several points that the astute audience member can use to decode homosexuality, such as: the husband who does not touch his wife, the terrible wife who makes marriage a living hell, the promiscuous wife, the young virile

example of a theatrical treatment of the riots, and in the play we find two characters from *The Boys in the Band* as passive bystanders to the riots.

⁵⁷ Howard Taubman, "Not what It Seems: Homosexual Motif Gets Heterosexual Guise," *New York Times*, November 5, 1961.

man, and finally negative visions of the man/woman relationship. In 1966 Stanley Kauffman, Taubman's successor, wrote a similar article on how homosexual playwrights, directors, actors, and choreographers in a conspiracy painted ugly theatrical pictures of heterosexual society incarnated in marriage, because their hatred of heterosexuality was boundless. Performances like Edward Albee's *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf* are brought up as an example of a gay play clearly trying to corrupt heterosexuality. The idea of a homosexual mafia breaks the silence about homosexuality and its connection to theatre.⁵⁸

The reception *The Boys in the Band* in Copenhagen was mixed.⁵⁹ The critics seemed confused about both the character and the moral message of the play. All reviews, except the one in the homosexual press, which I will discuss below, apply a language that clearly reveals a traditional hegemonic understanding of homosexuality. Homosexuals are described with words like: abnormal, wrong hormone balance, the third sex, tragic situation, neurotic, and weird. The challenge for the critics, most of whom sincerely believe and proclaim that they are card-carrying liberals, is that they cannot find a language without an inherent, pre-existing meaning or bias.⁶⁰ They of course cannot

⁵⁸ It is of course necessary to argue with this silence. As pointed out previously, except for a few decades in the twentieth century there was no silence regarding gay men in theatre. In a way these critics are as engaged with the construction of homosexuality through speech as the Victorians were according to Foucault. They are discursively producing normality by creating its ultimate counterpoint. This is the same mechanism that furthers the notion of anti-Americanism. In Denmark the influential critic Jens Kistrup wrote a similar article called "Hvem tør svare? Spørgsmålet om homoseksualiteten i kunsten," *Berlingske Tidende* July 25, 1985. ("Who Dares Answer? The Question of Homosexuality in the Arts.") The reason for his article was, according to him, a growing tendency to destroy heterosexuality and demolish the nuclear family in performances. It is very likely that he was inspired by watching the Danish performance of *Torch Song Trilogy*, which played the seasons 1983/1984 and 1984/1985. The cultural anxiety that spawned the *New York Times* debate in the 1960s can then be seen mirrored in Danish culture in the mid 1980s.

⁵⁹ Based on the reviews and debates in *Land og Folk*, *Politiken*, *Jyllandsposten*, *Aktuelt*, *BT*, *Information*, *Ekstra Bladet*, and *Berlingske Tidende*.

⁶⁰ Raymond Williams addresses this problem in *Keywords* (London: Fontana Press, 1988). Williams's analyses of different words and their ideological function have been actively used in many cultural analyses. An excellent example is David Roman's account of the theatrical response to the AIDS crisis.

transgress discourse because, as Raymond Williams points out, nothing exists outside of society. This can be seen in the critics' concern as to whether or not the performance is fair to the gay men it portrays. All critics begin their reviews by commenting on homosexuality as taboo and end by stating that thankfully homosexuals do not have to be closeted anymore and that homosexuality can now be experienced as something "normal" (which is quite literally paradoxical). Though homosexuality is now out of the closet, it clearly is still a privileged, if contradictory, secret. Anne Katrine Gudme writes in the socialist newspaper *Information*:

The writer and his characters paradoxically find the subject stranger and more fascinating in and of itself than one does sitting in one's seat. To be amused by these reversed signs and gender-terms requires that one also finds these things fundamentally abnormal.⁶¹

This is the paradoxical view: the conventional view of homosexuality that gets expressed more or less implicitly in all reviews collides with the performance's even more conventional view. The Danish critics could declare their liberal views on sexuality because of the (perceived American) conservatism of the play. Meanwhile, all critics air their suspicion that the performance harms the homosexual struggle in Denmark instead of supporting it, yet, simultaneously, they all think that the performance is very "real." The characters felt real and the actors are praised in the reviews for their ability to seem "authentically American." Especially Christoffer Bro in the part of the effeminate Emory

David Roman, *Acts of Intervention: Performance, Gay Culture, and AIDS* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1998). Both books inform my reading here of the inherent meaning in the critics's description of homosexuality.

⁶¹ Paradoksalt nok synes forfatteren og hans personer at finde emnet mere mærkværdigt og fascinerende i sig selv, end man gør nede på sin stol. At more sig over de omvendte fortegn og kønsbegreber forudsætter at man oplever disse ting som fundamentalt anormale. Anne Katrine Gudme, *Information*, 7 September, 1969. *Bøsseerne* clippings file, TheaM.

gets critical acclaim (as was the case in the US where Cliff Gorman, as Emory, received accolades for taking on such a difficult part), but it seems, judging from the reviews, that Bro exploited Emory instead of defending the character. Emory is the most photographed and drawn character from the performance, and he figures prominently in almost all the visual material from the performance. Especially the photography from the scene where he dances the flamenco with a rose in his teeth attracted the newspapers and was used as illustration for the reviews. This photo was also used by the theatre in print ads, reprinted here. These ads resemble ads for porn movies or freak-shows, as published in the papers of the time, and it is thus the most obvious and traditional view of homosexuality that is utilized to sell tickets. In other words, a commodification of expectations, which positions the characters as fundamental others because of their sexuality and their sexually determined identity, is taking place.

Judging by the reviews, in the Danish production it is Emory who steals the show. In her review, with the titillating title “A Homo Sex Party with Tragedy and Involuntary Comedy” in *BT*, the critic Inge Dam writes:

The writer portrays a line of types of homosexuals. The domestic Emory, whom Christoffer Bro creates so hilariously, is close to stealing the show, which is not the intention.⁶²

The description of Emory as domestic can of course be related to Emory’s being called “Connie Casserole” (just as Harvey Fierstein’s alter ego, Arnold, is called Virginia

⁶² Forfatteren skildrer en række typer af homoseksuelle. Den huslige Emory, som Christoffer Bro gør så grinagtig, at han er nær ved at stjæle stykket, og det er nu ikke meningen. Inge Dam, *BT* September 17, 1969. *Bøsserne* clippings file, TheaM.

Hamm when in drag). However, I would posit that the size of Christoffer Bro influences Dam's choice of words.

Unlike in the American production, Emory, in the shape of Christoffer Bro, was fat. The fat American white man—particularly in Europe where Americans have always been seen as consumed by consumption: fat being the example of uncontrollable materialism and consumption—serves a particular purpose in relation to constructions of masculinity. In his article, “Setting Free the Bears: Reconfiguring Fat Men on Television,” Jerry Mosher discusses the construction of fat men in American popular culture, exemplified by television from *All in the Family* to *Roseanne*. In reading Archie Bunker of the US sit-com *All in the Family* as the pater-with-a-paunch (though in this age of televised fat, Archie is hardly heavy), Mosher writes: “In Bunker’s paunch—a corporeal display of deviance easily translatable to the small screen—fat was established as a televisual symbol of white heterosexual masculinity losing its definition, rendered soft and impotent.”⁶³ Male white fat, in other words, indicates a categorical crisis and reveals cultural anxieties concerning masculinity and its relation to a nation losing its direction. In Denmark, then, Christoffer Bro theatrically represents the breakdown of a certain brand of traditional theatrical masculinity and read in a Danish context becomes another example of the excess of America. His fat male body becomes a symbol of an unattractive American excess that threatens masculinity. Emory is gay, because he is fat. Mosher continues: “The fat and flaccid male body proved to be a handy visual metaphor for the impotence of the patriarchal power and masculinity under siege: large and

⁶³ Jerry Mosher, “Setting Free the Bears: Reconfiguring Fat Men on Television,” in *Bodies out of Bounds: Fatness and Transgression* ed. Jana Evans Braziel and Kathleen LeBesco (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001), 169.

vulnerable, the fat male body became a recognizable symbol of insecure male performativity, its phallic potential buried under folds of flesh.”⁶⁴

Dam’s critique of the performance and Christoffer Bro as its central character shows that rather than focusing on the struggle to accept oneself as gay, the fight over hegemonic heteronormative masculinity (symbolized in the literal fight between Alan and Emory) becomes the central theme. Contrary to Cliff Gorman’s performance in the American performance of *The Boys in the Band*, Bro’s exploitatively effeminate performance and the size of his body unmasks the central vilification of effeminate masculinity in the Danish performance and the positioning of this as particularly American.⁶⁵ Inge Dam goes on to describe those of the other characters she finds interesting, but can conclude that:

The writer writes without softness on a painful subject, shows us its tragedy, its seriousness, its half involuntary comedy. Christoffer Bro took care of the last—he was harsh—but honestly, it was rather liberating in the middle of all that misery [or, whining].⁶⁶

Emory then functioned as comic relief in the middle of the staging of homosexual self-hatred and its consequences in self-suppression, which indicates that the homosexual is still only welcome on stage if he is recognizable. The subversive homosexuality however—even if it is not pretty—is unacceptable. In that case homosexuality is, and

⁶⁴ Ibid., 171.

⁶⁵ Regarding the relationship between the cultural construction of men’s bodies, culture, and American masculinity see also: Susan M. Alexander, “Stylish Hard Bodies: Branded Masculinity in *Men’s Health Magazine*,” *Sociological Perspectives* 46.4 (2003): 535-554; and Jesse Berrett “Feeding the Organization Man: Diet and Masculinity in Postwar America,” *Journal of Social History* 30.4 (summer 1997): 805-825.

⁶⁶ Forfatteren tager uden omsvøb om et ømtåleligt emne, viser os dets tragik, dets alvor, dets halv ufrivillige komik. Den sidste del sørgede Christoffer Bro for – han var stærk, men oprigtig talt, det var temmelig befriende midt i al den jammer. Inge Dam, *BT* September 17, 1969. *Bøsserne* clippings file, TheaM.

must remain, a misery. Inge Dam is correct when she claims that the characters moan and grieve through two long acts because of the undesirability of being homosexual, but her seeing Emory as a positive alternative to this is indeed an extreme (and maybe involuntarily queer) interpretation. Emory is exactly as unhappy as all the other characters—he just hides it in the role as the witty, fat, and lethal-tongued queen. It is the heterosexual gaze manifesting itself by finding the American Emory a relief, because he is recognizable, yet different and therefore containable, and pitiful.

The critic in *Berlingske Tidende*, Jens Kistrup (who later wrote the article on “Homosexuality in the Arts”), finds that Christoffer Bro gained a big personal success in the part as “the girly Emory,” but also that it is “queen-ness driven into caricature.”⁶⁷ He agrees with Inge Dam in the positive evaluation of the actors, but thinks they merely presented the figures instead of identifying with them. With his remarks Kistrup points to an interesting discussion as to whether the performance is art or entertainment—as if it could not possibly be both—and thereby reveals a fundamental assumption about the “entertainment” nature of American popular culture. According to Kistrup the milieu, the characters, and the language is genuinely homosexual, but the performance is not. It just looks like it. And in the same way the actors present the characters, but they do not identify with them and thereby defend them, which at this time seems to be his criteria for “real” art. He writes:

It is not enough to show the characters, every one of the actors must *be* the role they play. Only through that does the “special milieu” become real and not just an ethnographic curiosity, a

⁶⁷ “Den tøsede emory” and “bøsseriet drevet ud i karrikaturen.” Jens Kistrup, *Berlingske Tidende* September 17, 1969. *Bøsserne* clippings file, TheaM.

night in the secret society of sexual deviants. [...] The performance lacked identification; perhaps the play can only be performed by born homosexual actors, even considering the much stronger emphasis that would put on the already considerable exhibitionism inherent in the text.⁶⁸

Epistemologically one can question the definition of acting that the quote implies; it is indeed a very naturalistic theatre ideal that Kistrup describes with his demands of total identification. That one has to be one to play one undoes the very core of theatricality itself and completely does away with the transgressive potential of gender/sex/sexuality subversion in the theatre.⁶⁹ Sketching out why he is disappointed, he reaches a common challenge for the critics. Does the performance defend or exploit its characters? Does it have something serious to say or is it sheer commercial speculation on a hot topic to entertain and mildly shock the primarily Danish and American middleclass audiences? Kistrup has, in spite of all the problems in his argumentation and his roots in a hegemonic heterosexuality, a clear idea of the double gaze of the Danish performance.

Discourses, as shown earlier, collide in the performance and in its reception.

Nobody can figure out if they are to accept the conclusion of the performance or, instead,

⁶⁸ Det er ikke nok at forevise figurene, hver eneste af de optrædende må være den rolle de spiller. Kun derved bliver det specielle miljø en realitet og ikke bare en etnografisk kuriositet, en aften i de seksuelle afvigelsers hemmelige frimurerloge. [...] Det kneb med identifikationen, måske kan stykket kun spilles af fødte homoseksuelle skuespillere, hvor stærkt det end vil fremhæve det præg af ekshibitionisme, som allerede er til stede i teksten. Ibid. *Bøsserne* clippings file, TheaM.

⁶⁹ The idea that one has to be one to play one was debunked in an interview with Cliff Gorman, who played Emory, in the *New York Times* titled "You Don't Have to Be One to Play One." The article is a hilarious study of the performance of masculinity whose sole purpose is to let the world know of the heterosexual masculinity of the actor who, during the interview, drinks cans of Schlitz, has a "very butch, real-life voice," whose "incredibly beautiful wife, Gayle, tiptoes across the room and pours Cliff's beer into a glass," who knew how to do the required lisp because he had "been telling gay jokes since [he] was a kid," and who "want[s] to have four kids and a stereo and a boat and move to Baja California, and fish" Judy Klemesrud, "You Don't Have to Be One to Play One," *New York Times*, September 29, 1968: D1.

oppose the internalized homophobia with which the performance strategically operates, through the centrality of self-hatred as phenomenon, without offering another explanation than an internalized psychoanalytical one. Kistrup finds the performance realistic if not elegant because of the actors' "presenting" instead of "being." He ends his review with a sharply formulated sentence about the performance's quasi-character. It is almost naturalism, almost liberal, almost successful.

Because how is one to relate seriously to something one at the same time exploits and admires? How is one to do away with prejudice, which is outrage and curiosity, when one counts on it?⁷⁰

Crowley has a seemingly emancipatory project by putting eight homosexual men center stage, creating a homosexual space, but he does it through a heterosexual optical lens. The traditional understanding of homosexuality is reinforced because it is the heterosexual Alan through whom the audience experiences the performance. Through the presence of the heterosexual male, the homosexual men are brought into their traditional theatrical role—performing their sexuality like monkeys in a zoo. Alan catches the boys dancing with each other, and his very presence brings an end to this subversive action. Normality is restored, even if the characters keep performing homosexuality for the heterosexual guest. This is a central part of the double strategy of the performance: a double strategy reinforced by the displacement of the play from a US to a Danish context.

⁷⁰ For hvordan skal man forholde sig sagligt til noget, man på en gang udleverer og snobber for? Hvordan skal man få udryddet fordomme – det vil sige forargelsen og nyfikenheden – når det er den man kalkulerer med? Ibid. *Bøsseerne* clippings file, TheaM.

A curious thing: several of the critics seem to know more about the homosexual subculture than the playwright and, in the Danish case, the director, actors, and producers. This is a rhetorical strategy that Clive Barnes also used in the *New York Times*, when he repeatedly referred to his very close homosexual friends. This is an example of an assumed knowledge of homosexuality, homosexuality as a structure of feeling, or an accepted given idea of the performed (or culturally constructed) notion of “real” homosexuality. In the tabloid *Ekstra Bladet*, Knud Schønberg writes:

The Gays could have been played further out in terms of comedy in the first act and further out in the rough in the second act. It is a rough play, but the homophiles are rough on themselves. But I can see the sense in Palle Wolfberg’s [the director] disposition: He has wanted to eliminate any suspicion of speculation and avoid making *The Gays* into gay comedy and the characters into caricatures. I believe that Harold’s birthday party is extraordinarily tame in relation to the gay balls I have been told about! I guess that it is performed as it is from the judgment that the audience would believe it was wildly exaggerated if one had tried to make the atmosphere truly authentic. Oh well, I guess gays also have their dead parties.⁷¹

⁷¹ Bøsseerne kunne godt spilles længere ud i det komiske i 1. akt og længere ud i det rå i 2. akt. Det er et groft stykke, de homofile rå mod sig selv. Men jeg kan godt se meningen med Palle Wolfbergs disposition: Han har villet fjerne enhver mistanke om spekulation og undgå at gøre *Bøsseerne* til bøssekomedie og personerne til karikaturer. Jeg tror nok at Harold’s fødselsdagsselskab er usædvanligt tamt i forhold til de bøsseballe, jeg har fået referat fra! Jeg gætter på, at det er lavet som det er ud fra en vurdering om at publikum ville tro det var vild overdrivelse, hvis man havde prøvet på at lave atmosfæren autentisk. Nå, bøsser har vel også deres døde fester. Knud Schønberg, *Ekstra Bladet* September 17, 1969. *Bøsseerne* clippings file, TheaM.

Schønberg's review can be considered representative in its formulations of the prevalent understanding of homosexuality—homosexuality understood as a structure of feeling—which the critics brought with them to the performance. Schønberg claims knowledge of the homosexual life, though received secondhand—he hasn't been there, or so he says—and thereby reassures the readers of his own normality in relation to the characters' otherness. This second-hand homosexuality thus makes him perfectly able, according to him, to evaluate the accuracy of the performance. His assumed knowledge of the homosexual life shows us that collective notions of Danish and American homosexuality exist and that they are conflated here, but Schønberg is alone in the Danish press in asserting that the milieu seems inauthentic. All other critics find it authentic, even if, as they all point out, it takes place in New York, that is to say, not here, not in Denmark, which maintains the difference that Michael Warner theorizes constitutes the process of normalcy in *The Trouble with Normal*, as discussed previously. Schønberg's notion that the director has tried to tone down the performance so as not to make the characters caricatures, and thus make them acceptable to a middlebrow Danish audience, is truly curious in its twofoldness. Schønberg articulates here that the Danish homosexuals are worse in all respects than we see them in the performance; that *The Boys in the Band* represents a tamed version, created for a perceived squeamish, sexually narrow minded, American audience. In Schønberg's view it is thus the conformist American boys crossing the stage in the Danish version of *The Boys in the Band*.

Next to Schønberg's review, *Ekstra Bladet* printed a vox populi. Six people were asked what they thought about the performance. They were all thrilled. They found it

Note his use of the term homophile which was still the official, liberal, political correct term for homosexual men: a term clearly aligned with assimilationist strategies.

well-acted, hilarious, thoughtful, engaged, wonderful, fine, and beautiful. The nurse Else Kristiansen even thinks that the performance helps clear away prejudices concerning homophile men. Her term “homophile” was, as I pointed out, the politically correct term in the late sixties, utilized by the homosexual movement in its stressing of the fundamental decency of homosexual men in an attempt to de-sexualize homosexuality. But the performance itself characterizes its characters as gays already in its title, which probably created a distance for some homophile men, who could then from the safe position in their seat see the gays on stage and be reassured in their own Danish and decent homophilia. In the homosexual magazine *Pan*, published by the Danish homosexual movement Foreningen af 1948, the production was reviewed by Elsa Gress. Gress was Denmark’s number one female writer on sociological issues at this time, and her fame might help explain why she, as a heterosexual woman, was asked to review the performance in *Pan* even though she didn’t usually write for the magazine, which usually stressed the importance of the homosexuality of its writers. Alongside her review, the magazine published a round table discussion among four homosexual people – two of each sex. This roundtable discussion offers us a rare insight into what homosexual people thought and felt regarding the performance—even if four people obviously represent a limited amount of evidence.

Gress does not find that there is anything special to say about the play (yet she writes a long review). She finds it “conventional” and only radical in the way it shows the homosexuals’ discrimination against the one heterosexual, who accidentally crashes their party. Once more Alan is constructed as the victim. That Gress does not understand Alan’s function in shedding light on the internalized hatred of anything homosexual is a

shame. She simply uses the other characters' treatment of Alan to bring attention to the widespread hatred of normality that she "positively" knows exists in homosexual circles. Her rhetoric at this point sounds like Kauffmann's and Taubman's and is surprisingly homophobic considering that she is, after all, writing in a homosexual newspaper. It is not the performance that she finds interesting at all. Instead she finds the reception interesting. She claims that the critics misunderstand their role by pretending that they know everything about the milieu of the play, even if their knowledge is always reported to be second hand, and therefore are able to judge whether or not it is realistically portrayed. The biggest problem to Gress is not the performance itself, but the way different audiences attempt to take control of its meaning as being either accurate and thus positive (the reviewers) or American, wrong, insulting, and degrading (different homosexual groups and certain individuals asked in the vox populi). Gress describes how the audience kept giggling throughout the performance except in the scenes in which Alan speaks.⁷² This confirms my earlier claim that the whole performance is a staging of homosexuality seen through the eye of the heterosexual guest. Gress actually describes and becomes part of the mechanism in the double strategy of the performance, as she wants to maintain that Alan is a victim of homosexual discrimination and reverse stigmatization. Once again the American straight man is cast in the part of the victim with the homosexual subculture cast in the role of the villain.

As wrong, to Gress, as the critics' pretending to know anything about the homosexual life, are the homosexual complaints that the performance is an ugly picture of homosexuality. As she says:

⁷² Elsa Gress, *Pan* 8 (September 1969). Interestingly, Gress constructs Alan as Crowley's hero.

Because why on earth should the homophiles be presented in a better light than how they really are and how they present themselves in the performance?⁷³

Again the performance is considered to be realistic both within its own parameters (its American nature) and outside the play (its Danish reception). This, according to Gress, is how homosexuals “really are.” She spends the rest of her review writing on the moral right to portray unsympathetic homosexual characters on stage, just like unsympathetic heterosexuals are represented on stage. The fact that hegemonic and subversive sexuality is treated as equally weighed seems to be considered emancipation for Gress and necessary for any kind of equality. It is true that men like the characters in *The Boys in the Band* existed, but the problem is that they were the only ones represented on stage, whereas for every vicious Lady Macbeth there is also a Juliet. This is of no consideration to Elsa Gress. Several things indicate that the gay audience agreed.

The four gay people, whose roundtable discussion is printed after Gress’s review in *Pan*, do not agree that sheer visibility is always a positive.⁷⁴ Curiously it is the two lesbians that are most insulted by the representation of homosexuality. Aage, a gay man, finds that the Danish performance is less campy than both the American performance and the text, which he bought in New York.⁷⁵ The translation used for the performance is kept at the Royal Library in Copenhagen and is a very literal, almost word for word, translation of the English text. Only the most sexually explicit lines like for example

⁷³ For hvorfor i alverden skulle de homofile præsenteres i et bedre lys end de virkeligt er og hvordan de præsenterer sig selv i forestillingen. Ibid.,

⁷⁴ The four are: two lesbians Mette and Kirsten and two gay men Per and Aage. They are only identified in the magazine by their first names, which, the magazine claims, are their real names.

⁷⁵ This is before the kind of mass-tourism from Western Europe to the US that today constitutes its own brand of Queer migration. That Aage is able to travel on vacation to the US is an indication of his social class.

“You look like you have been rimming a snowman” are changed. This particular one becomes “You look like you have been kissing a snowman,” which indeed is a different action.⁷⁶ There do not seem to be major cuts in the text, so the difference in the camp qualities of the performance must stem from a different style of acting, characterization, and pace. Because of the generally quite terrible translation, much of the play with language does not come through to a Danish audience, and as Sontag points out in “Notes on Camp,” camp is a style, “a certain mode of aestheticism,” a sensibility expressed through language in which everything is in quotation marks.⁷⁷ This explains why, to many audiences, it felt like the play was less camp. It was not style anymore; it was just bad performance. What these four people identify as a toned-down acting style, they also interpret as an attempt to bring the performance closer to a Danish gayness, which they characterize as being “less hysterical” and “less psychological” than the American. They stress repeatedly that the performance takes place in the American gay subculture, which they view as being much more “hysterical” and “infiltrated” by psychoanalysis than the, to them, discrete assimilated Danish subculture. Through this strategy they create a distance between themselves and the American characters which, again, helps constructs “a double other.” The very American quality of the characters in Crowley’s play makes it possible for a Danish audience to take a different position and actually “other” and avoid identification with the characters in the play.⁷⁸ However, the doubled other does not

⁷⁶ Another one is where Bernard explains that old ladies like poodles because “they go down on them,” which is translated into “because they dive,” which is not an understandable expression in Danish unlike the American expression “to go down on” to describe oral sex. Crowley, 48, 71.

⁷⁷ Susan Sontag, “Notes on Camp,” in *Against Interpretation, and Other Essays* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1961), 275-313.

⁷⁸ For a discussion of potential lesbian and gay audience positions see Jill Dolan, *The Feminist Spectator as Critic* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1991). See also Stacy Wolf, *A Problem Like Maria: Gender and Sexuality in the American Musical* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2002) particularly the introduction and her lesbian spectator position / reading of Ethel Merman.

totally render some identification impossible, because as Aage says: “Regarding the group feeling and the self-hatred Mart Crawley [sic] is right enough, and it is also fair to show these things.”⁷⁹ The group-feeling that Aage indicates is what Crowley describes in the play as a community solely defined by a shared queer sexuality.

That the homosexual characters in the performance would have no reason to see each other if they were not forced together by their being homosexual is an obvious premise of the play. Simply, sexuality is what keeps the group of friends together, which is why they also have to keep performing it, and when they stop, they must leave the stage to love as in the case of Larry and Hank. The characters’ never ending performance of their sexuality is part of the social construction of their environment and is, due to the heterosexual gaze for whom it is literally performed in the play, part of what Bourdieu labeled symbolic inculcation. This performance of American sexuality then becomes part of heterosexual truth-making. Per, the other gay man in the conversation, agrees with Aage on this, whereas the lesbians do not find any validity in any of the representations on stage. Another part of the conversation illustrates this:

Per: Yes, I think that some of the things done in the play
.... I’ve spoken to several whose reaction have been: but
this is just exactly how we are.

Kirsten: Yes, but then they also get the possibility to see that
mirror image, to hear the audience laugh at them, right,
and then they can transform their burn-mark to a caste-
mark.⁸⁰

⁷⁹ *Pan* 8 (September 1969).

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*

Kirsten displays a clear sense of what I have called the double strategy of the performance, and at the same time the quote indicates that there were homosexual men for whom identification was a real possibility. Kirsten finds this identification unfruitful, because, according to her, it does not liberate its audience. The only thing altered is the collectivization of stigma. In earlier plays such as *The Green Bay Tree* and *Tea and Sympathy* the individual homosexual character was stigmatized, whereas *The Boys in the Band* stigmatizes a group. It transforms the individual sign, the burn-mark, into a collective sign, the caste-mark, and thereby it marks the homosexual as different, a lower class within the frames of a Western class society based in capitalism. This is a chillingly insightful remark. And as Per says, "it is Emory people remember afterwards," which makes the caste-mark all the more visible. Furthermore, the remark, if we accept its probability, serves as proof that in Denmark Emory really was the central figure, and his recognizable, non-threatening, hysterical, othered, effeminate, and American way of being homosexual became the ultimate staging of sexuality. The theatricalized effeminate man is the reaffirmation of difference on which heteronormativity is constructed and makes the othered and American gay character fundamentally containable and/or rejectable for certain Danish audience positions.

All four participants reject that the performance could potentially have liberatory qualities. Simultaneously, however, they express the opinion that the very visibility the performance creates, though it is primarily negative, might be important in the way it breaks the silence. They express hopes that the performance might start a debate about the conditions of homosexual life in Denmark and that this first drama, that they all

believe to be American and not about them, can lead to better and truer plays dealing with their localized sexuality.⁸¹

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The import to Denmark of American plays explicitly concerning homosexuality takes its beginning in 1953 with the first Danish performance of Lillian Hellman's *The Children's Hour*, in Danish called *Sladder (Gossip)*; is continued with Robert Anderson's *Tea and Sympathy* (literally translated into *Te og Sympati*) in 1955; and reaches its first peak with the success of *The Boys in the Band* in 1969. Whereas the two first performances deal with the question of homosexuality through rumors and negations, the latter becomes explicit. All three were considered to be essentially American and were considered reflections of American society. In none of the performances did the producers attempt to localize or transplant the conflicts—on the contrary, it seems that it was important strategically not to represent homosexuality as Danish: it had to remain essentially American. It was important to keep the other in a double liminal position in order to produce normality. The other could be here, but he is not. He is almost Danish, but only almost. He remains queerly the double other.

The Boys in the Band shares many (and surprising) similarities with Harvey Fierstein's play *Torch Song Trilogy*, which is the second play analyzed in this chapter. Both plays thematize domestication of gay men, the challenge of defining gay relationships, the reliance on camp as a historical marker of gayness and frame of reference, assimilation, as well as the reliance on a basically realist frame.

⁸¹ Their hopes were vain in a Danish context as no major Danish drama about homosexuality has emerged on the popular stage since *The Boys in the Band* in 1969. Indeed, they have all been British or American imports.

In the following I read the 1983 Danish production of *Torch Song Trilogy* against the production of *The Boys in the Band* in an attempt to sketch out historical differences and similarities of the themes.

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In her review of *Torch Song Trilogy* in Copenhagen critic Birgitte Grue of *Søndagsaktuelt*, writes that “the play is in many ways a trial: for how long and how much can one stand to hear about gay men.”⁸² She answers her rhetorical question with a “not very long and not very much.” Her review reveals a deep-seated ambivalence about the nature of the play—its content and its form—and, as was the case with *The Boys in the Band* in Copenhagen, the critic seems to think that this might be a play necessary for the United States of America, but not for Denmark. She implicitly maintains the distinction between the liberated Denmark and the presumably backwaterish North America. Grue immediately categorizes *Torch Song Trilogy* as a deeply American play to which a Danish audience is, she believes, essentially foreign. Though the performance opened 14 years after the Danish opening of *The Boys in the Band*, the nature of the critical discourse surrounding the performance remains similarly US-centered and imbued with a certain sense of anti-Americanism or skepticism.

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In Copenhagen, on the evening of June 27, 1971, a group of men involved in the Danish gay organization (at that point using the discrete name “The Organization of 1948”)⁸³ held a meeting. It had been two years since Stonewall, almost to the day, and

⁸² Stykket er på mange måder en prøve for hvor længe og hvor meget kan man holde ud at høre om bøsser. Birgitte Grue, *Søndagsaktuelt*, December 11, 1983. Bøsserne clippings file, TheaM.

⁸³ The Organization of 1948 is called so, because it was founded in 1948, at which point a homosexual organization would have been illegal and so in an act of precaution the founders decided to use the cryptic,

the men met to plan a protest in support of victims of gay bashing in the United States of America. In one account, a number of the men found that the strategies and non-confrontational approaches of their organization were too conservative and created a splinter organization, the BBF, based in Marxist revolutionary politics along the lines of the American and UK organizations. In a differing and somewhat less colorful account of the founding, the BBF splintered off from a sub-group to the Organization of 1948, the Homophile Action Committee.⁸⁴ However the BBF was founded, it focused on liberating gay men and women from, in their opinion, the heterosexual, capitalist, patriarchal, and male chauvinist Danish society. One way to achieve this, the group believed, was to adopt female names for men and to wear feminine garb without wanting to become transvestites. As with American organizations like Harry Hay's Radical Fairies, the goal was to clearly be men, albeit in women's clothes; to theatrically stage gender and sexual differences and thereby challenge hegemonic and heteronormative notions of masculinity and sexuality. Founding members of the Danish organization had names such as Nelly Nylon, Wanda Liszt, and Queen Surrowa. The organization's protests were always theatrical in their demonstrative visibility of gayness. Wanda Liszt said:

The idea about women's clothes was that it freed us from
having to say anything. When we put on women's clothes and

though discrete, Organization of 1948 as its name. Only in the early 1980s did the organization change its name to The Organization for Gay Men and Lesbians, its current name.

⁸⁴ The first account is from Eva Bøggild, "Tissemand, Tissemand—Whauw, Whauw, Whauw" in *Flot, fræk og forførende : 18 uundværlige historier fra pressens mest banebrydende magasin*, Flemming Andersen, Eva Bøggild, Erik Valeur eds., (Copenhagen: Haas, 1994), 22-36. The second account is printed in the magazine published by the Organization of 1948, *Pan International*, Spring 1980: 4. The article is written anonymously.

loosened our wrists and got on the bus it was just as effective
as wearing a sign on our stomachs saying “I am gay.”⁸⁵

It is thus the very visibility of the gay man as a deviant man (i.e. not a heterosexual-looking man) that is the ultimate struggle for the BBF.

The use of the word “bøsse” (as opposed to the then standard politically correct “homophile”) was a radical break with the established homosexual movement and was a likewise radical reclamation of the word (along the lines of the later American reclamation of queer). As mentioned above *The Boys in the Band* was called *Bøsserne* and clearly used the word for sensational purposes, rather than political purposes. The established movement, the Organization of 1948, worked, much like the Mattachine Society in the North America, for assimilation of gay people into heterosexual society.⁸⁶ By reclaiming the word “bøsse,” the BBF attempted to free gay men from a pathological discourse of gay men as victims who should be tolerated because, after all, their homosexuality was not their fault or choice. By choosing the word “bøsse,” the new movement claimed responsibility for being homosexual and, more importantly, rejected homosexuality as safe for heterosexual society. Being gay became part of a revolution.

The BBF organization wanted gay men to be the avantgarde (in its original French military meaning) in a sexual revolution of society that would ultimately lead to a new world order and a redefinition of sexual practices in a socialist society. The older organization had worked for decades to establish the concept of homosexuality as

⁸⁵ Bøggild, 25.

⁸⁶ For an excellent history of the formation of early gay organizations in the USA see John D’Emilio, *Sexual Politics, Sexual Communities: The Making of a Homosexual Minority in the United States, 1940-1970*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2nd Ed. 1998). D’Emilio tracks the development from the formation of The Mattachine Society to the early days of gay liberation organizations and re-instates it the Mattachine to its early radical and communist inspired roots.

something non-threatening to heterosexual society by continuously emphasizing the productive qualities of gay men in relation to the existing social structure or hegemony. The movement's two magazines, *Vennen (The Friend)* and *Pan*, frequently printed articles about how much gay men contributed to society—particularly as artists, actors, writers (in short, the creative classes) and, not least, lawyers.⁸⁷ With the emergence of a more radical organization, older members of the established movement felt threatened, and a fierce debate erupted concerning how the new movement destroyed the hard won respectability and tolerance achieved by the original movement. What the older members failed to understand at that historical moment, understandably perhaps, was that the new movement rejected the notions of respectability and tolerance altogether. To the new organization, tolerance was simply a less noticeable—if kinder—form of oppression. Historically speaking, BBF, alongside its American parent organization the Gay Liberation Front, was revolting against the self-hatred represented so successfully only a few years earlier on stage by *The Boys in the Band*.

The new radical gay sexual liberation movements blossoming in Denmark, Germany, and the UK in the 1970s were all greatly (and outspokenly) inspired by the gay movement in the United States of America despite the European political movements' otherwise generally anti-American stance. It can thus be argued, that it is not only the theatrical representations of gay male sexuality that get exported to from the United States of America but rather a complete identity formation. The gay men in BBF did not only get inspired by the theatrical representations of homosexuality on stage; rather, they

⁸⁷ I have had access to the library of the national organization, which holds a complete collection of Danish gay magazines since the inception of the organization. In Germany I have had access to the library of the Schwules Museum in Berlin, which has an extensive, if incomplete, collection of magazines and clippings. Collecting in Germany is made difficult by the nature of the postwar states and their later reunification.

adopted a complete effeminate identity and political strategy from the American gay liberation organization (and, specifically, a San Francisco gay male identity). This is but one example that, historically speaking, an export of gay identities from the United States of America to Western Europe took place long before contemporary television shows and a globalized economy brought queer liberation to, for example, South East Asia as Eng-Beng Lim has argued (see chapter one).

The gay fight that the BBF and its sister organizations in the rest of Europe and the United States of America wanted to fight was intended to bring about a revolution in society's view of sexuality as something neatly structured into heterosexual and homosexual. However, the intense anarchy in the group itself (and likewise in its international parent and sister organizations) relatively quickly undid the group, which splintered into fragments. In the 1980s the BBF primarily became a theatre producing entity producing, with Gay Sweatshop and the Ridiculous Theatrical Company as models, gay theatre by, with, and for gay people. While BBF no longer functioned as a political organization when *Torch Song Trilogy* opened in Copenhagen, it is against the background of its politics, and the gay visibility in Danish society and culture it created, that *Torch Song Trilogy* should be read. BBF and its international sister and parent organizations demanded the right to have promiscuous sex in an attempt to undo what they perceived to be a constricted and prudish society, a topic that is at the emotional and thematical center of Fierstein's *Torch Song Trilogy*.

Torch Song Trilogy opened at the Rialto Teatret, a small black box space with a flexible seating / stage arrangement, on Friday December 9, 1983. The theatre's artistic director, Ebbe Langberg, had succeeded in securing the European premiere of Fierstein's

play about the life and love of Arnold, also known as the drag queen Virginia Hamm. *Torch Song Trilogy* marked the beginning of the import of major gay plays to the small theatre during Langberg's tenure (as we shall see in chapter three Langberg began this import with *Bent*, but to a different theatre). Langberg made the theatre the leading importer of British and especially US drama in the 1980s. His gay repertoire was extensive, with high-profile productions of *Torch Song Trilogy*, *Breaking the Code*, *As Is*, and *The Normal Heart*.⁸⁸

As previously mentioned *Torch Song Trilogy* is a collection of three separate plays, *The International Stud*, *Fugue in a Nursery*, and *Widows and Children First*, which, when performed together, can be considered separate acts. Each play has its own dramatic structure: *The International Stud* is primarily a series of monologues, a phone conversation, and finally a scene in which the two characters meet; *Fugue in a Nursery* is set in a giant bed and the dialogue weaves in and out, aiming for simultaneity and multiplicity; *Widows and Children First* is basically a "realist" play as we have come to know realism through American sit-coms. The development in form, then, moves from the monological (representing a focus on the individual), the multiple (representing a focus on the possibility of forming collectives), to the linear (representing a return to a recognizable, yet slightly queered, tradition of realism). Each play (or act) works within its own definition of time, though this is always in relation to the chronologically

⁸⁸ Before his tenure as artistic director and stage director Ebbe Langberg had a long career as an actor primarily playing the leading man in romantic comedies and, especially, as a heart-throb in Danish movies from the 1950s, 60s and 70s. Langberg was out of a distinguished family of actors (his father Sigurd Langberg was and his brother Jesper Langberg is a famous actor as well), and Ebbe Langberg's artistic merits supplied him the cultural capital to invest in a "radical" repertoire. Jan Maagaard, the director, is now famous primarily for his work on American family epics (for example, *Mourning Becomes Electra*, *Strange Interlude*, *All My Sons*, *Death of a Salesman*, *More Stately Mansions*) at major Scandinavian and Northern European stages. Langberg did not exclusively import gay drama, but for a small theatre, he took a lot of risks.

developed plot. Spatially the performance develops from the empty or bare room defined by a number of platforms in *The International Stud*, over the large abstract bed defining the parameters for non-traditional couple formation in *Fugue in a Nursery*, to the easily recognizable “realistic” apartment in *Widows and Children First*, operating as it is within the ultimate cliché of the American sit-com, the living room / kitchenette. The three plays in many ways create a traditional Aristotelian dramaturgy with *International Stud* as the exposition, *Fugue in a Nursery* as the crisis, and *Widows and Children First* as the resolution, though whether the crisis is truly resolved is questionable.⁸⁹ That the plays, despite their seemingly radically different and experimental forms, succeed in the middlebrow theatre can partly be explained by the fact that the overall form mimics a deeply familiar dramaturgy in the American theatre. This is part of the play’s cunning ambivalence, which is seen in its dramatic form, as well as in how Fierstein treats the topic of gay domesticity in the character of Arnold and his evolution from drag queen to housewife and mother.⁹⁰

The plot of *Torch Song Trilogy* is surprisingly straightforward and, like a torch song, it features cheating husbands, sudden loss of love, loneliness, and a strangely pleasurable, almost masochistic, suffering. The main plot line concerns the love story of Arnold and Ed. The play opens on Arnold’s alter ego Virginia Hamm applying her make-up and, in what has become a dramatic cliché, talking to her own mirror image.⁹¹ In a

⁸⁹ Nicholas de Jongh discusses the issue of the happy end in *Torch Song Trilogy*. See Nicholas de Jongh, 170-74.

⁹⁰ For the concept of “ambivalence” and its function in relation to middlebrow and particularly gay theatre in the middlebrow market place see David Savran’s discussion of ambivalence in *Angels in America* in David Savran, *A Queer Sort of Materialism: Recontextualizing American Theater* (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 2003), 107-33. This essay is discussed further in chapter four of this dissertation.

⁹¹ See for examples *The Madness of Lady Bright* and Prior Walter’s make-up scene in *Millennium Approaches*.

campy, witty yet sad, monologue, Virginia Hamm explains it all to the audience and is exactly what the drag queen traditionally represents in middle-brow drama, a truth teller who, because of her outside position, can share her wisdom on love and life with the uninformed heterosexual audience.⁹² As in the torch song Virginia Hamm sings on stage, Arnold describes his yearning for a lover to share his life with, though not as Virginia Hamm, but Arnold. As he says “But I wouldn’t want no guy that wanted me like this here. No, I’d need him for the rest of the time. For the other part of me. The part that’s not so well protected.”⁹³ This line is spoken toward the end of the opening monologue, and Fierstein cleverly indicates what the rest of the performance is about: Arnold’s attempt to create a life outside of what he perceives as the smoke and mirrors of the gay culture of bars, anonymous sex, and outrageous theatricality—all elements that the drag queen has come to symbolize in contemporary American culture. Arnold wants to be removed from Virginia Hamm’s world. The line, however, also indicates the surprisingly conservative ideology of the play. Arnold’s stated desire to find a man for his own male identity, as opposed to that of the theatrically gay, female alter ego Virginia Hamm, guides the play and its main storyline of Arnold and Ed.

In *The International Stud* Arnold meets the bisexual Ed in a gay bar one evening, but after they’ve been seeing each other for a while, Ed leaves Arnold for a woman, Laurel, and a heterosexual life on his farm in upstate New York. In a familiar move in American culture, Fierstein creates a dichotomy between the rural and the urban, favoring the rural as authentic compared to the flawed, inauthentic, and urban world inhabited by

⁹² In other work on the use of drag in popular theatre I have analyzed performances such as *Rent*, *Hairspray*, and *Hedwig and the Angry Inch* and in all instances the drag queen is, though ultimately dispensable, the wise truth-sayer. See also Laurence Senelick’s excellent history of male to female drag in *The Changing Room* (Routledge: London, 2000).

⁹³ Harvey Fierstein, *Torch Song Trilogy* (New York: Villard Books, 1983), 8.

the likes of Arnold; in other words, rural equals all-American heterosexuality and urban equals a deviant and destructive sexuality. Historically this dichotomy corresponds to the ascent of Ronald Reagan as president and the dawning of the so-called “Republican revolution” and Reagan’s promise to restore America after she had, supposedly, lost her way. After all, Reagan got elected on the motto of “morning in America.” A year later, in *Fugue in a Nursery*, Arnold lives with his 18 year-old boyfriend, Alan, who is “shamefully beautiful. A frightened child in hustler’s clothing.”⁹⁴ Laurel calls Arnold and asks the two of them up to the farm for a weekend. Mirroring a plot out of a Noel Coward play, the two couples talk their way through the weekend, revealing their secrets, insecurities, and desires along the way. Neither couple seems particularly happy, and, after a picnic, Ed has sex with Alan in the hayloft, while Laurel and Arnold argue and do dishes—simultaneously being betrayed by their partners. As in *The Boys in the Band*, a correlation between effeminacy, domesticity, and victimhood is being drawn. In a successful both/and move Fierstein complicates heteronormativity while maintaining it: Ed and Alan are the virile American men, despite their bi- and homosexuality, who get it on together in a rough all-American farm setting, while Arnold (whose alter ego, after all, is Virginia Hamm) and Laurel are the wives being cheated on. Toward the end of the scene, after both couples have discussed their different rules, trespasses, and mistakes, Arnold argues for monogamy when he says “I can’t tell with all these ‘Make ‘em up as you go along’ rules. Monogamy’s a much easier system to keep track of.”⁹⁵ Both couples decide to get married or, in Arnold and Alan’s case, enter into a commitment by contract (though they still have a hard time deciding on the exact rules). At the start of *Widows*

⁹⁴ Ibid., 37.

⁹⁵ Ibid., 78.

and Children First five years have passed, in which Alan was brutally killed on the street after coming out of Central Park after, we assume, anonymous sex.⁹⁶ Arnold has taken in a foster child, David, whom he is in the process of adopting. Ed has recently separated from Laurel and is staying on the couch in Arnold's living room. Arnold's mother is visiting from Florida, and the two of them have one final fight about Arnold's life, during which he asks her to leave if she cannot give him love and respect. She leaves, and Arnold is left alone on stage as he was at the beginning. The difference, however, is that the audience knows that his son and ex- (and maybe soon-to-be-again) lover will return to the family that he himself has created. Schematically (like a torch song) *Torch Song Trilogy* can be reduced to: Man finds man. Man loses man to woman. Man finds a new man and their relationship survives the challenge of infidelity. Man loses new man but gains a son. Man gets the first man back but loses mother.

As previously mentioned, *Torch Song Trilogy* was written between 1978 and 1979, and its performance history reaches into the mid-1980s on Broadway and abroad. If *The Boys in the Band* appeared at a crucial time in American society when gay history was to break wide open with the riots at the Stonewall Inn, *Torch Song Trilogy* appeared at a time when gay liberation (and sexual liberation in general) seemed to have run its course, and Fierstein argues throughout the play for monogamy and against casual sex and multiple partners. He argues for a modeling of gay relationships on heteronormative values. If Hank and Larry, the only couple in *The Boys in the Band*, tentatively agree to try to redefine their relationship into an open relationship off-stage and out of sight,

⁹⁶ Notice the use of Central Park as a metaphor for gay cruising also to be found in *Millennium Approaches* when Louis, with a death wish, futilely attempts to engage in rough unprotected sex. In many ways this localizes even gay American sexuality to NYC, and specifically Central Park. Gay American identity is then not just American, but New York American. See chapter four for further discussion on this.

Arnold in *Torch Song Trilogy* drags the gay relationship center stage, into view, only to then redefine it into a “traditional” marriage.

The question of the possibility of forming gay relationships is the central theme of the play (unlike in *The Boys in the Band* where it was the impossibility of the same), and all Arnold struggles to achieve is a relationship like the one his mother had with his father. The question of the committed relationship, symbolized in marriage, then becomes the central pillar in the performance (as it is in society), and Fierstein pleads for the possibility (and probability) of a gay marriage. In doing so he achieves the double purpose of homosexualizing the concept of marriage while criticizing what had been a key component of the gay liberation movement: free sexual relations outside the boundaries of heteronormativity. It is in this double-edged strategy that *Torch Song Trilogy* has its importance, its weaknesses, and, not least, where the explanation of its major international success as a middlebrow cultural product can be found. Exploring the space between the homosexualization and heterosexualization dialectic, *Torch Song Trilogy* envisions homosexuality as a socialization process. In the following, I elaborate on two central discourses in the play, the homosexual marriage and the question of gay culture, before analyzing the reception of the play in Denmark.

In *Widows and Children First*, Arnold has a long fight with his mother. The two are fighting, as we get the sense they have many times before, about Arnold’s life and sexuality. His mother, known only as Ma, does not agree that Arnold has any right to consider himself a widow just because his “friend” (in the often used euphemistic sense of that word) was killed. Arnold says:

Listen, Ma, you had it easy. You have thirty-five years to remember, I have five. You had your children and your friends to comfort you, I had me! My friends didn't want to hear about it. They said, "What'r you gripin' about? At least you had a lover." 'Cause everybody knows that queers don't feel nothing'. How dare I say I loved him? You had it easy, Ma? You lost your husband in a nice clean hospital, I lost mine out there. They killed him on the street. Twenty-three years old laying dead in the street. Killed by a bunch of kids with baseball bats. [Ma has fled the room. Arnold continues to rant.] Children. Children taught by people like you. 'Cause everybody knows that queers don't matter. Queers don't love! And those that do deserve what they get.⁹⁷

Fierstein attempts to prove that homosexuals are able to love, have families, and that homosexuals are people who are unjustly discriminated against in a world that they are, at once, part of and different from. In a Reagan world where conformity and tradition is highly valued, homosexuals are unwanted. Fierstein here stages the hegemonic struggle with Arnold's dream of belonging in a sociological (and emotional) structure that persistently rejects him.

The dramatic significance of Alan's death becomes clear in relation to this project. His death by gay-bashing elevates their relationship to the hegemonic ideal of "till death do you part." Alan's death then is a good example of how Fierstein both criticizes hegemony and supports it—the play's double-edged strategy. Obviously,

⁹⁷ Ibid., 124.

Alan's tragic and violent death is used to stage the terrible, and terribly real, consequences of state-endorsed homophobia as it can be seen in the line "Children taught by people like you." Here, Fierstein elegantly points out how homophobia is a learned behavior, a cultural construction, with tragic consequences for those who are victimized by it. The brutal murder is used to criticize society and its values, but at the same time Fierstein, in a cruel irony, creates the possibility of gay relationships until death as an ideal that is also achievable for gay men, be it five years or thirty-five. Only by becoming a widow himself, does Arnold achieve the same position as his mother and can he have the final battle for his dignity on a level playing field. At the same time, Alan's death allows Arnold to get back together with Ed (who is not, like Alan, the wickedly handsome young man so adored and mythologized in gay literature and theatre) so that the ideal of a mature homosexual, yet heteronormative, relationship can shimmer in the horizon at the end of the play and a happy end can be achieved. However, the killing of Alan serves as more than a device to maintain the ideal of the heterosexually defined marriage. It points out that gay men are able to love and have relationships, but that they lack a tradition to define those relationships within, because their identity has (and again, we have to remember that Fierstein is coming out of the 1970s) become constructed on casual encounters and anonymous sex. Fierstein constructs the recent gay-liberation as an a-historical movement that prevents gay men from forming meaningful relationships because it, in its destruction of "traditional" modes of couple making, robs gay men of a frame of reference to understand their lives within. Fierstein intends to show that homosexuals are "normal" people, but that they are discriminated against because of a culture prejudiced against homosexuality. Yet, at the same time, he intends to show how

gay liberation has created a mockery of emotion, which is why casual sex, backrooms, and anonymous encounters are always shown as either ridiculous, or dangerous, or both.

In the homosexual organizations in the United States of America and particularly in Denmark and Britain at this time a similar development is seen.⁹⁸ What *Torch Song Trilogy* illustrates then is a new philosophy of assimilation, essentially replacing the philosophy of complete sexual liberation that was the governing sentiment of the gay liberation movements of the 1960s and 1970s. The fight for civil rights has replaced the revolution against restrictive sexual practices and family structures. It is the transformation of the drag queen from the barricades of the Stonewall Inn into a mother and wife.

Fierstein, I believe, attempts to humanize this historical development by letting the plays move from relatively experimental dramatic structures into a recognizable dramatic frame—that of the sit-com. Fierstein ends the play within the frame of American domestic realism (the class difference notwithstanding, we are very close to the apartment in which *The Boys in the Band* is set), and the structure of the nuclear family is mirrored by Arnold, Ed, and their son David who, more than anything, wishes to be able to call Ed “daddy.” Fierstein solves Arnold’s dramatic and thematic crisis with recognizable finality. He starts out the play with the dramatic cliché of the wise drag queen, larger than life, doling out life experience as if it was hard candy. It is funny, bitchy, and sad.⁹⁹ In short, it’s camp. However, the very beginning of the first act is the

⁹⁸ In Denmark the Organization of 1948 started fighting for recognition of gay relationships in 1981 (and succeeded when the Danish parliament in 1989 signed the law of registered partnerships (basically a civil union, carrying all marriage rights except adoption) into law). In the UK this struggle took much longer and in 2005 the first gay partnerships were signed. In Germany gay partnerships were approved in 2001 and amended in 2004 to include adoption rights.

⁹⁹ Fierstein here engages the trope of the drag queens in US popular culture in which the drag queen often functions as the epitome of recognizable subversion.

only time we see Arnold in drag, and his character (along with Ed) develops from the typified and clichéd to the specific and individual as the audience gets to know Arnold Beckoff and his life. As the play moves from the extremely public space of the bar (after all *The International Stud* is named after a bar) to the protective privacy of the home, the characters are humanized. They have put the supposedly corrupting bar life with its spectacle of sex behind them and are gathered at home.¹⁰⁰ This way, Fierstein, besides ensuring that identification with the characters becomes possible for a non-homosexual audience, achieves his double-edged dramatic strategy.

He criticizes the gay community (and by extension the gay men who live their lives within this community and whose identity formation is based upon this world and its ideology) for living in an empty ghetto deprived of any real emotions. This is most clearly symbolized by Ed who refuses to identify himself as gay primarily because he cannot see himself reflected in the values, identities, and actions offered to him by the gay community, and who only accepts Arnold's love when he has become a "mother" and thus thoroughly domesticated. At the same time Fierstein criticizes US culture by utilizing the metaphor (and institution) of marriage in a homosexualized version. By denying gay men the possibility of forming relationships based in heteronormative ideals, society, Fierstein argues, forces gay men into a culture that is solely defined by sexuality. Though Fierstein's critique of the gay community or the so-called "gay lifestyle" would soon become mainstream (due to the emergence of AIDS and the so-called Republican Revolution, discussed in the following chapter), he was criticized by gay intellectuals for being reactionary and for wanting to force gay men back into a family structure they had

¹⁰⁰ In an interview in *Pan*, the magazine published by the Danish gay organization, the director of the Danish (and several German) productions, Jan Maagaard, emphasizes exactly this development in the play and describe how it relates to the ideology of the play in a new conservative era. *Pan*, December 1984.

fought hard to leave. Dramatically he closes the (closet) door to the different lifestyle of which *The Boys in the Band* indicated the necessity. Though both plays operate within a gay subculture, *Torch Song Trilogy* shows homosexuality in public spaces (though we end up at home), where *The Boys in the Band* only took place within a closed domesticated world. *Torch Song Trilogy*, in other words, re-domesticates the gay man. In the years between the plays, *Torch Song Trilogy* argues, homosexuality had become such a public spectacle that it was time to bring it back into the private sphere where, maybe, love, as opposed to sexual activity, is possible. Fierstein, then, desexualizes homosexuality in order to allow it to exist within a, to him, meaningful heteronormative frame. This leads me to an analysis of Fierstein's representation of American gay subculture.

In the two first plays, Fierstein represents several aspects of the gay subculture as it existed in New York City in the late 1970s, when the plays were written, and he uses the third play to put the first two in perspective. In *The International Stud* the loneliness of gay life, despite its abundant visibility and newly liberated existence, is staged in scene four, where Arnold is the passive part in an anal intercourse with a stranger. As the actor is alone on stage, he mimes that somebody is behind him. At first Arnold is reluctant to go into the backroom because as he says, "My standards may lie just left of reactionary" and later "And it hurts me, Murray, it really does, to see this multitude of men so love starved that they resort to sex in a dirty backroom instead of the way God meant us to be."¹⁰¹ However, being just a man, he does go in. As the sex act progresses Arnold keeps trying to make small talk with the man behind him, who is, however, not interested in what Arnold has to say. A minute or two into the sex act Arnold gets bored

¹⁰¹ *Torch Song Trilogy*, 21.

and starts smoking and keeps chatting excessively about how to construct relationships. When the guy is done, he pulls out, zips up, and leaves while Arnold tries to introduce him to his friend. Sure that the guy will be waiting at the bar, Arnold leaves the backroom. The scene, while comical to some extent, is a sad representation of what Fierstein sees as a lonely culture obsessed with sexuality and in which emotions do not exist.

The loneliness is represented physically with having one actor on stage alone during sexual intercourse. Here, about 30 minutes into the play Fierstein stages the taboo of male on male sex by using the ultimate transgressive symbol of an anal intercourse, though, for Arnold, not a very exciting one. Given that we are before the abundance of internet pornography and talk shows on every possible sexual variation, this scene proved to be provocative. In it, the heteronormative masculine gaze could see the, presumably, emasculating act of a man accepting the passive role in the sexual act. However, with the staging of this sexual act Fierstein once again shows the potentially double-edged strategy of the play by provoking both a heterosexual and a homosexual audience. The heterosexual audience could potentially be provoked by the mere visualization of this (the act was, after all, illegal in a number of states), and a gay audience could potentially be provoked by the loneliness, sadness, and hilarity of the situation.

In *Fugue in a Nursery* it is the issue of infidelity and monogamy that Fierstein puts under his looking glass. Arnold and Alan are in an open relationship and, as mentioned, Ed and Alan have a sexual affair, which leads to a rupture in both relationships. However, the models that the homosexual subculture offers as identities do not only make the gay men unhappy, but Laurel as well. She, the heterosexual wife, has

to accept that she is married to a man who does not share her sexuality and, yet, who does not want to identify himself as homosexual though, late in *Widows and Children First*, we get the sense that he is ready to live with Arnold as a partner. To Ed, the gay subculture is a ghetto that he cannot live in and that it seems Fierstein urges gay men to leave. The title of *Widows and Children First* clearly indicates the sense of catastrophe that Fierstein has. The title indicates that the gay subculture has become a sinking loveless ship that it is necessary to leave before it's too late. The long production process of *Torch Song Trilogy*, from its inception at La Mama until it reached Broadway and stages in Western Europe in the early to mid 1980s, changes the meaning of the piece. In the late 1970s it served primarily as a condemnation of the sexually obsessed gay culture. The sudden explosion of the AIDS epidemic in the 1980s served as a much darker context for the potential costs of promiscuity, and this changing context consequentially lead to an ideological change in the piece itself.

In his depiction of a promiscuous and sexually defined culture, Fierstein engages in a debate with the theory of gay liberation. Gay culture, in the US and in parts of Western Europe as described earlier, had achieved a clear visibility, and Fierstein attempts to complicate this picture. The visibility and independence that gay men had achieved had lead to a stigmatized stereotyping. In the opening monologue of *The International Stud* Arnold, dressed as Virginia Hamm, says:

See, I'm among the last of a dying breed. Once the E.R.A. and gay civil rights bills have been passed, me and mine will find ourselves swept under the carpets like the blacks done to Amos, Andy and Aunt Jemima. But that's alright [sic] too.

With a voice and face like this I got nothing to worry about, I can always drive a cab. And that, chillun', is called power. Be it gay, black, or flowered it always comes down to the survival of the majority.¹⁰²

In this prediction of the future Arnold envisions a time when drag queens are politically incorrect representations of gaydom and, through the rest of the play, sets out to find a place to belong in that new world where, maybe, gay power exists.¹⁰³ The unholy analogy of race and sexuality is problematic and under-theorized here as Arnold makes a comparison to earlier civil rights struggles.¹⁰⁴ Through his self-deprecating humor, for one moment, ('chillun'), he achieves license to engage in drag blackface. Arnold here clearly shows great understanding of the struggle for hegemony happening around him. Arnold does not seem to appreciate the complexity in the difference between his representation of sexuality and his black face representation of race. Just as oppressive representations of black people have disappeared, so will the gay culture that he represents as Virginia Hamm. At some point, this opening monologue seems to indicate, it will no longer make sense to speak of a uniquely gay culture. Then, following the monologue, we embark on a journey with Arnold that ultimately negates the value of the way many gay men then lived by completely domesticating Arnold into a housewife. That is what everything comes down to then: the survival of the majority and Arnold's

¹⁰² Ibid., 8.

¹⁰³ Interestingly enough the very civil rights bill, that Fierstein has Arnold envision, is the one that Roy Cohn in *Angels in America* chides the gay community for not being able to push through city hall. Roy Cohn's and Arnold's visions of power are, obviously, quite different.

¹⁰⁴ I discuss other issues of the problem of using analogies in the following chapter and race and sexuality in chapter four.

intense desire to belong to this majority on his own terms. Again, we see the double-edged utopian strategy of the play in Arnold's desire to belong as different.

The first European performance of the play was the one in Copenhagen in 1984, followed in 1985 by a production in the West End in London (featuring Anthony Sher and running for about seven months) and several in Germany in the following year directed by Jan Maagaard, who also directed the Swedish performance in Stockholm in 1985. The Danish performance was heavily advertised, and all major newspapers ran articles on the playwright, the play's "controversial" subject, and not least the actor, Preben Kristensen, who was to star as Arnold Beckoff. Until then he had primarily been known as part of a hugely successful comedy trio singing barbershop on TV. In an interview in the conservative daily, *Berlingske Tidende*, Kristensen expressed worry as to whether the audience would be able to detach him from the trio, and whether they would be able to suddenly see him as gay. He also theorized on gay men's relation to the theatre:

It is part of gay men's classic façade that they use sarcasm and cruelty in attempts to be funny. To be accepted many gay men attempt to be very funny. Many seek out the theatre world, because there you make a living of doing what others are not allowed to, use make-up, act out, play something else than what you are. In some countries all actors are gay men.¹⁰⁵

¹⁰⁵Det hører med til bøssernes klassiske facade, at de bruger sarkasmen og ondskabsfuldheden til at være morsomme med. For at blive accepteret prøver mange bøsser at være meget morsomme. Mange søger til teatermiljøet, fordi man netop der lever af at gøre det, andre ikke må, male sig, skabe sig, spille noget andet end det man er. I nogle lande er alle skuespillere bøsser. Else Cornelius, "Samtale med Preben Kristensen," *Berlingske Tidende*, 11 December, 1983. *Det Var En Lørdag Aften* clippings file, TheaM.

This interview is interesting when read in conjunction with the previously mentioned *New York Times* interview with Cliff Gorman, who played Emory in *The Boys in the Band* on Broadway. Whereas that interview is a strong performance of masculinity and heterosexuality, this interview is surprisingly open about the relations between homosexuality, the theatre, and make-believe, though Kristensen's theory of countries with only gay actors is more aptly described as a fantasy than as reality. There is no doubt that a statement such as this assists the formation of gay men as theatre queens as a collective myth and, in a broader sense, claims the theatre as a gay space. The notion that disguise, sarcasm, and cruelty are part of everyday gay life is reinforced, and audience members, who remembered *The Boys in the Band* in its Danish performance, would be able to draw the parallels. In many ways both performances, when considered in this way, take their locus in a myth about a particular homosexual performativity that, it turns out, is ingrained in the performances themselves and shared by, at least, this particular actor and a number of critics.

In several articles and interviews preceding the performance, Preben Kristensen's decision to accept the part is described as very brave (just as it was with the actors playing Emory in both New York and Copenhagen). Even the very notion of presenting the play is described as courageous. An article in *Politiken*, the liberal daily, states:

The exciting part about this is that the play gets very close to its characters, Ebbe Langberg, the artistic director of the theatre, says. With

this performance he is one of the first who dares present the so-called minority theatre here at home.¹⁰⁶

Precisely what the staff writer means by “so-called minority theatre” is unclear, but it is clear that a dichotomy exists between the “daring” out there and the “safe” here at home. It is a dubious claim, since the gay underground theatres in Copenhagen had presented several performances by this point.¹⁰⁷ However, if we consider the “minority theatre” to primarily relate to an import of American theatre, another picture emerges. The performance of *Torch Song Trilogy* then takes on a strange authenticity in its depiction of an American minority despite its translation to a different culture and language. The American gay minority experience becomes “the real,” if foreign, experience. Anyway, the term is misleading and unfortunate in relation to *Torch Song Trilogy*, which exactly attempts to shed the minority status of being gay by claiming a moral right to live like the majority

The performance received mixed reviews, from the very excited Viggo Sørensen in the conservative paper *Jyllands Posten* to the decidedly cool in Birgitte Grue’s review in the social democratic *Søndags Aktuelt* and Hans-Jørgen Nielsen’s in the socialist *Information*. However, all agree that the performance was entertaining, that it contained interesting dramatic elements, and that Preben Kristensen’s performance ranged from the solid to the sublime.¹⁰⁸ His performance was described in terms such as: “surprising

¹⁰⁶ Det spændende er, at skuespillet kommer utrolig tæt på sine personer, siger teaterchef Ebbe Langberg, der med denne forestilling er en af de første, som vover at præsentere det såkaldte minoritetsteater herhjemme. *Politiken*, section *I Byen* December 12 1983. *Det Var En Lørdag Aften* clippings file, TheaM.

¹⁰⁷ For a study of the theatre production of BBF in Denmark see Christina Herold Thinesen, *Frontens Teater (The Front’s Theatre)*, (unpublished MA thesis, Copenhagen University, 2002). Held at The Royal Library of Copenhagen. Thesis number: 4787-012-4.

¹⁰⁸ In general his performance is praised and more than one critic mentions that now he is no longer “that guy from Linie 3.” Kristensen was awarded the Jeppe Prize the following year, at that time Denmark’s highest prize in acting named after Ludwig Holberg’s character Jeppe from his comedy *Jeppe on the Hill*.

emotionality,” “great courage,” “poetic innocence,” “musicality,” “good timing,” “provoking,” “vulnerable, aggressive, and touching.” But also as: “fairly adequately explaining and defending” and “theater-traditional transvestite malice.”¹⁰⁹ Two of the reviews describe Kristensen’s performance as being too tame, lacking in energy, and, not least, too straight (or actually, too little homosexual). These two, with their criticism of the play, are the most interesting in this connection as they express their doubts as to what the play might mean in a Danish context, and since these are the most critical reviews, it is possible to theorize that their criticism is related to a criticism not only of the play but of the United States of America as such. Hans-Jørgen Nielsen writes in the leftwing newspaper *Information* that:

This falls completely in line with the fact that Preben Kristensen’s Arnold surely is well thought through and momentarily gripping and touching in his very gestures and expressions, but he doesn’t really have access to the electrifying tension between the highly energetic hectic [sic] and super fragile vulnerability that is necessary to make this person and his lines work. Already in the opening monologue there is a lack of fire and many of the punch lines, falling close to each other here, fall to the ground. It needs more hysteria, more diva, on the one side, and on the other a more

¹⁰⁹ The Danish words are: “forbavsende følsomhed, stort mod, poetisk uskyld, musikalitet, timing, provokerende, saarbar, aggressiv, rørende.” And, “nogenlunde nuancerede forklarende og forsvarende and teatertraditionel transvestit-malice.”

mute and wounded boyishness. That could have made a miracle of
this drag queen.¹¹⁰

The opening line of the review refers to Nielsen's criticism that the dialogue in *Fugue in a Nursery* is not performed in its complexity. In this part of the play the lines interweave, and the criticism is that they fall too distinctly and neatly, which the critic sees as a problem for the play over-all. He expected the performance to be faster, dirtier, and funnier which, I believe, we can take as meaning campier. I think it is clear, though never stated directly, that Nielsen expected something more American, more exotic, than he ultimately received. Nielsen's reception also links to the review of *The Boys in the Band* in which the critic, Schønberg, claimed a privileged, if second hand, knowledge of gay parties, and Nielsen here describes the performance as too nice to be realistic.

Nielsen's evaluation of Kristensen's performance stresses that the interpretation of the part defended Arnold's humanity, his right to love, and his surprising normality instead of the "hysteria." Leading theatre critic Jens Kistrup noted the same when he wrote:

Regardless of how much one can object to the play and the
mentality or ideology in it, the director Jan Maagaard gives it all
the nuances it needs—without the continuity and the passion in it
getting lost. And better acting is not found in the nation—with
Preben Kristensen in the center as the gay man who shows himself

¹¹⁰ Det falder helt i tråd med, at Preben Kristensens Arnold nok er velgennemtænkt og stedvis både gribende og rørende helt ud i mimikken, men ikke rigtig har adgang til den strømførende spænding mellem højenergisk hektik og superskrøbelig sårbarhed, der er nødvendig for at få personen og hans replikker til rigtigt at changere. Allerede i den indledende monolog er der for lidt kul på og mange af de punch lines, der her ellers falder tæt, falder mere eller mindre til jorden. Mere hystade, mere diva på den ene side og mere forknyt drengethed på den anden kunne have fået anderledes mirakel ud af denne drag queen. Hans-Jørgen Nielsen, *Information*, December 16, 1983. *Det Var En Lørdag Aften* clippings file, TheaM.

to be more and more of a human as love lets him down and disappoints him. Here *Torch Song Trilogy* does not look like a specialty for a minority. Here it begins to be a tragedy afflicting us all regardless of how much that tragedy every now and then looks like a comedy.¹¹¹

Kistrup's idea that there is an inherent discrepancy between being gay and being human speaks for itself, but it is clear that he finds elements in the performance that he can identify with. It is a recurring strategy for (particularly heterosexual) male drama critics to generalize and humanize the performance(s) of gay sexuality in order to maintain that this, too, is about them. Everybody seems to agree that the performance's success stands or falls with the actor playing Arnold, and that Kristensen mostly stands. It is clear that for the first time most critics seem to have experienced an actor who humanized the gay male character to an extent never hitherto seen and definitely not in *The Boys in the Band*. Arnold, ultimately recognizable in his yearning for a heteronormative life, is understood as essentially human for a heterosexual audience. In comparison, the performance of *The Boys in the Band* fourteen years earlier can be deemed a zoological garden in which an unfamiliar audience was allowed, even encouraged, to gawk at the gay creatures. *Torch Song Trilogy* is generally considered to relate more immediately to a general world and, not least, to a general Danish audience now used to gay male visibility and the emerging struggle for gay marriage and equality. However, Kistrup also writes:

¹¹¹ Men hvor meget man end kan indvende mod stykket og mentaliteten-ideologien i det, giver iscenesætteren Jan Maagaard det alle de nuancer, der har brug for – uden at linien og lidenskab i det bliver borte. Og spillet leveres ikke bedre her i landet – med Preben Kristensen i centrum som bøssen, der viser sig som mere og mere af et menneske, efterhånden som kærligheden svigter ham og skuffer ham. Her ligner "Det var en lørdag aften" ikke en specialitet for en minoritet. Her begynder det at blive en tragedie, der angår os alle. Hvor meget end tragedien ind imellem ligner en komedie. Jens Kistrup, *Berlingske Tidende*, December 11, 1983. *Det Var En Lørdag Aften* clippings file, TheaM.

Five hours! It is almost getting to be too much. But the Rialto Theatre's performance of *Torch Song Trilogy* almost takes that long. And, at times, it feels even longer. Maybe because one doesn't belong to the congregation that this piece primarily wishes to reach—the homosexual.¹¹²

Kistrup obviously feels estranged from what he takes to be the intended audience of the piece, primarily homosexuals, whom he disparagingly calls a congregation. In general he expresses suspicions towards what he calls “the ideology” of the piece, by which he must mean the “normalization” of homosexuality: the move from the subculture into a heteronormative world. Kistrup does not find this particular move realistic and dismisses the idea of gay relationships and families while praising the human truthfulness of the piece. I believe it is fair to say that this particular critic, though he is not alone in this, is strangely ambivalent in his interpretation and evaluation of the play. The generalization that Kistrup mentioned in the first quote allows him to find the play a human, not a gay, tragedy.

It is generally accepted in the critique that Maagaard's direction and Kristensen's performance together break down the specificity of American gayness and move the performance from an American subculture into a “universal” one. That the Danish performance seemed quieter, less “hysterical,” than the American performance is an observation we also saw in relation to the performance of *The Boys in the Band* and speaks of a particular idea of what America, and particularly gay America, is. The

¹¹² Fem timer – det er lige ved at være for meget. Men næsten så længe varer faktisk Rialto Teatrets opførelse af ”Det var en lørdag aften”. Og den føles somme tider endnu længere. Måske fordi man ikke tilhører den menighed, stykket primært henvender sig til – den homoseksuelle. Ibid., *Det Var En Lørdag Aften* clippings file, TheaM.

reception of *Torch Song Trilogy* must be understood against this background. The translation into the Danish language is also part of the explanation for the reception.

As we saw with *The Boys in the Band*, camp, as a primarily linguistic style, is hard to translate. However, this translation is clearly better than the very literal translation of *The Boys in the Band*. In the translator's foreword to the play, which is kept at the Royal Library in Copenhagen, he writes:

It has been easier than I expected to translate the play's American gay language and I believe that I have achieved a good, natural, gay Danish language. A couple of places I have deleted a couple of lines, either because the reference was too specifically American or because the play with the language was impossible to translate. In a couple of places I have added a little something.¹¹³

It turns out that Kistrup's assessment is correct. The translation of Fierstein's very specific Jewish gay New York language is well done, though, I would argue, it has become less specifically Jewish, less campy, less gay, and much less American. It is clear from the note and the translation itself that Borum had a clear understanding of Fierstein's language, unlike Georg Gjedde and Preben Kaas who produced the terrible and sensational translation of *The Boys in the Band* in 1969. Or, as the anonymous critic

¹¹³ Det har været nemmere end jeg troede at gengive stykkets amerikanske bøssesprog, og jeg tror der er kommet godt, naturligt bøssedansk ud af det. Nogen ganske enkelte steder har jeg sprunget over et par linjer, enten fordi henvisningen til amerikanske forhold var for speciel eller fordi ordspillet var uoversætteligt. Et par gange har jeg digtet lidt til. Jeg tror ikke der er nogen problemer, men er selvfølgelig ville [sic] til at drøfte oversættelsen med instruktøren. The translator was Poul Borum, a leading Danish poet at the time. The manuscript is kept at the Dramatic Library collection under the Royal Library in Copenhagen.

in the gay magazine *Pan* says, tongue in cheek: “Borum has translated with sensitivity, wherever he gets that from.”¹¹⁴

The three elements (the direction, Kristensen’s acting, and the translation) combined appear to have made the performance quieter, less campy, and more “normal” than it seems that the US production was. It was in all likelihood these factors that allowed a critic like Kistrup to feel invited into the performance and able to identify with it to some degree without feeling like he was becoming a card-carrying member of any gay congregation.

A large number of newspaper drawings and photographs from the performance are kept in the archives of the Theatre Museum in the old court theatre at Christiansborg Castle in Copenhagen.¹¹⁵ Most of the drawings, the ads for the performance, and the poster show Arnold in full drag, which is a relatively strange decision since he is in drag for about 15 minutes of the play, if that. In most of the photographs from the performance itself (as opposed to the advertisement) Kristensen is in male attire (in many ways, actually, iconographic American male attire such as boxer shorts and undershirt like Stanley Kowalski, and jeans and t-shirts like James Dean), and his movements seem not to be overly effeminate.

Evidently, director Jan Maagaard consciously decided to tone down the exaggerated femininity that is encoded in the text and in doing so lost part of its campy quality in an attempt to humanize and normalize Arnold. This probably allowed a Danish audience to feel less foreign to the performance and its environment, which might help explain its overwhelming success.

¹¹⁴ Poul Borum – har oversat med indføling, hvor han så har det fra? *Pan* 1 (1984).

¹¹⁵ The museum has 66 photos and a number of newspaper drawings in their holdings along with a technical drawing of the stage design.

The performance reached a large audience and was extended into the following season 84/85. In the fall of 1985 Jens Kistrup wrote a column in *Berlingske Tidende* titled “Who dares answer?” dealing with the question of homosexuality in the theatre and thereby echoing the Taubman debate from the *New York Times*. As in the *New York Times* column, Kistrup constructs the idea of a gay mafia within the theatre intending to discredit heterosexuality, with the difference that Kistrup writes about American plays, and he is primarily blaming directors and artistic directors for their importing of these amoral plays, thereby threatening the moral fabric of the Danish nation.¹¹⁶ In the United States, as previously discussed, it was primarily playwrights such as Williams and Albee that were accused of purposefully tainting heterosexuality. That Kistrup was not alone in his sense that the representation of gay identities was out of control becomes clear from a couple of other articles. Robert Naur wrote in his review in *Politiken* that “The concept of homosexuality has been a problematic taboo for so long that the last years’ rapid liberalization about this minority phenomenon has reached the status of an anti-taboo.”¹¹⁷ And, in the conservative weekly, *Weekendavisen*, Henrik Neiiendam wrote that “Oscar Wilde is mentioned, but the love that, at his time and long after, did not dare speak its name has certainly found its voice in the last couple of years.”¹¹⁸ Clearly with the performances of *The Boys in the Band* and *Torch Song Trilogy*, Danish theatre critics experienced a sudden moment of slight homosexual panic.

¹¹⁶ Though Kistrup never uses the expression “American conditions,” so prevalent in writings on America and American culture in Western Europe, the idea clearly informs his thinking. He is concerned for the pollution of the nation.

¹¹⁷ Begrebet homoseksualitet har så længe været et belastet tabu, at de senere års liberalisering omkring dette minoritetsfænomen nu har fået karakter af et anti-tabu. Robert Naur, *Politiken*, December 11, 1983. *Det Var En Lørdag Aften* clippings file, TheaM.

¹¹⁸ Oscar Wilde nævnes, men den kærlighed som på hans tid og længe efter end ikke turde nævne sit navn, har unægtelig fået mæle gennem den sidste snes år. Henrik Neiiendam, *Weekendavisen*, December 12, 1983. *Det Var En Lørdag Aften* clippings file, TheaM.

It is clear that the Danish performance of *Torch Song Trilogy* touched a nerve in the Danish society in relation to the public debate and ongoing liberalization of anti-homosexual laws (in 1980 public dancing between men was legalized, and in 1984 homosexuality was taken off the list of diseases), and Fierstein's play clearly played into the debate. In its heterosexualisation of gay relationships it, ironically, fulfilled the ambition of homosexual decency that the characters in *The Boys in the Band* strove so hard for. If *The Boys in the Band* appeared on the world stage at a time when it immediately seemed anachronistic, *Torch Song Trilogy* appeared at a time when it had become possible to turn one's back on the gay liberation strategy of an all-encompassing sexual revolution and plead for homosexual relations fashioned in heteronormativity. The need for a subculture that was not just sexual became even more pronounced with the emergence of the AIDS crisis and the way this crisis, from many directions, gay and straight, was blamed on the gay community itself. The same day that a Danish tabloid, *BT*, reviews *Torch Song Trilogy* under the headline "A gay world where laughing is also permitted" (indicating that mostly "a gay world" is sad, dreary, and tragic), it features an early article on AIDS under the headline "Fears abound that the American gay plague becomes a Danish epidemic." Against the normalizing politics of *Torch Song Trilogy*, the conception of homosexuality as pathology reappears in open discourse. Besides being a disease, however, homosexuality is linked to "the plague" and not least to America, creating a sense that its infectious nature is threatening not only to individuals but to the nation as such. From the mid-1980s on, AIDS became closely linked to the production of American gay plays in, for example, Denmark, West Germany and England and in the

process, America itself, along with homosexuality, was repathologized, as we shall see in chapter four.

Chapter Three

Queer Heritage: Imagining Germany and the Holocaust as Metaphor.

There are those homosexuals who take the view: what I do is my business, a purely private matter. However, all things which take place in the sexual sphere are not the private affair of the individual, but signify the life and death of the nation, signify world power or “swissification.” The people which has many children has the candidature for world power and world domination. A people of good race which has too few children has a one way ticket to the grave, for insignificance in fifty or a hundred years, for burial in two hundred and fifty years.

Heinrich Himmler on the “Question of homosexuality”¹

Holocaust is surely very relevant as a metaphor that helps us deal with contemporary tragedy and avoid future disaster. The Holocaust is the paradigm for contemporary tragic history. In the absence of the attempt to give it meaning—even in an American context—the historical discourse itself is meaningless.

Judith E. Doneson in *The Holocaust in American Film*²

Gay people do not grow up in a history that includes us; we grow into an awareness of a parallel history of same-sex desire outside history defined by heteronormativity.³ Gay children are—in most, if not all educational systems—taught a history that they are simultaneously present in and conspicuously absent from.⁴ The active erasure of gay people from general history curricula (in the United States and in Western Europe) necessitates a much later individual discovery of the supplemental,

¹ Heinrich Himmler quoted in Michael Burleigh and Wolfgang Wipperman, *The Racial State: Germany 1933-1945* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 192-93.

² Judith E. Doneson, *The Holocaust in American Film* (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society, 1987), 154.

³ Of course gay people do indeed grow up in history; everybody does. However, the point is that most gay people grow up unaware of the historicity of their own existence. Because heterosexuality is the dominant (and dominating) narrative for Western societies, LGBT history—more so than family history, legend, myths, namely the material that collective memory is constructed by—is a learned history, and thus one that is more directly constructed by cultural products.

⁴ John Boswell argues in *Christianity, Social Tolerance, and Homosexuality* that homosexuality is the ghost of European history: It is ever present and ever absent. John Boswell, *Christianity, Social Tolerance, and Homosexuality* 8th ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005).

correctional, or contradictory history of gay people embedded within a larger heteronormative history.

Fundamental to this chapter is the supposition that the history that gay people grow into is very often constructed by the theatre: the rehearsed theatrical performance of identities, myths, and homosexual love as speech act that through a process of repetition becomes collective memory; and that supposition is a central proposition of the dissertation as such. In conceptualizing gay identity as a never-ending process of coming into being and linking this conceptualization with an understanding of the embodied nature of sexuality, gay history itself is here theorized as a structure of feeling. Gay history understood as a structure of feeling can, this chapter posits, emerges from theatrical performance.

Gay and lesbian history has for a long time been considered separable from the theatrical representation of lesbian and gay identities, which is most often considered a subcategory, outside, in some ways, the realm of political history. As shown in the preceding chapters, that is not the case. Gay and lesbian existence, representation, and history do not exist separate from society (though there are very real ramifications to society's ideologically determined discrimination—a willful erasure of people with sexual identities deemed deviant by hegemony). Rather, gay and lesbian existence is resistantly embedded in said society and culture. In other words, gay theatre history is not just the history of the theatrical representation of gay men and lesbians: gay theatre history is gay history itself, our collective memory, our underlying defining structure of feeling. It is through the theatricalized repetition of representations of identities on stage that many of us became who we are.

Supposing, for now, that more so than is the case with ordinary history—as opposed to a queerer history in the widest sense of queer—gay history is ontologically dependent upon representation and embodiment, this chapter analyzes Martin Sherman’s conscious decision to invoke history in the representation of gay lives in *Bent*. In other words, I investigate the queer use of history in the canonical gay play *Bent*. Sherman’s play consciously invokes and operates with history in its staging of gay men during the Third Reich. As I argued in chapter one, to claim presence in history is to claim agency; it is to reject erasure from the world. This is obviously a project those on the margins of representation (such as women, people of color, lesbians, and gay men) have had to undertake to claim historical presence for themselves, oftentimes through constructing fictionalized histories. In this chapter, Sherman serves as an example of this direct claim to agency.

In chapter two we saw how *The Boys in the Band* used a recognizable form, that of the two-act living room problem play, deeply familiar to middlebrow audiences. But the play queered this space through its domestication of the gay man and by staging, literally, the rehearsal of camp tropes specific to North America. Through these tropes *The Boys in the Band* constructed a place for these gay men to belong in history. *Torch Song Trilogy* relied on camp and a history constructed by Arnold through Hollywood movies, US popular culture, and the mirror hall that is drag. In other words, Arnold constructed a history where, oxymoronicly, an outsider can fit in. However, *Bent* constructs history in a seemingly more direct and—at first glance—less queer fashion.

Bent uses a modified Brechtian approach—the short scenes creating a montage of actions—but queers the form of the straight documentary history play by, I argue, using

the Holocaust as a background for a contemporary critique of gay liberation: a conflation of histories.

Accepting the premise that history and gay identity have a precarious relationship to one another, and that the theatre has served throughout history as a staging ground for deviant identities (not only sexual identities but, indeed, deviant identities in general: independent women, effeminate men, weak kings, the mentally very gifted or impaired, the psychics, and the freaks), I discuss the ways in which *Bent*, for all its invocation and staging of history, is truly engaged in a contemporary debate. I suggest that *Bent* should be categorized as a heritage play rather than the traditional understanding of it as a history play.

In his article “Homosexuality and Heritage,” Richard Dyer discusses the genre of heritage cinema in relation to gay subjects and subjectivities. In particular, Dyer analyzes European movies starting in the 1960s that portray “gay” men, often attractive gay men, in historical settings. Dyer is primarily interested in the aesthetics of these movies—in gay aesthetics in general—whereas my appropriation of his term concerns a more ontological function of the plays. Before turning to that distinction, however, let us for a moment investigate the likeness. Dyer states:

The formal characteristics of such films include the following: the use of a well known literary source, and/or key historical moments (the French Revolution, the Italian Risorgimento, the World Wars), periods (Edwardian, Fascist) or occasionally the lives of writers

and artists; these texts, moments and figures most often drawn from the last 150 years [...]⁵

Clearly, *Bent* fulfills these demands: it takes a key historical moment, the pre-war internment of Homosexuals in Germany at the very beginning of what came to be known as the Holocaust. It thereby historicizes the very recent past by analogizing the detachment of gay community in New York City and London to the actual suffering in Dachau through repeated comparisons to the complex ways in which the Holocaust came to take place.⁶ Dyer further discusses the ways in which heritage cinema relies on “a conventional film style with the pace and tone of art cinema without its propensity for symbolism or intellectual talk or noticeable directorial styles [...].”⁷

Although *Bent* relies on an episodic structure—unlike traditional Broadway dramaturgy—its structure is closer to the language of cinema than to the Brechtian political theatre to which it has aspirations.⁸ Despite the gruesome external realities that are the settings and political determinants for the play, *Bent* centers on a fatal, recognizable, melodramatic love story: that between Max and Horst. The dramatic core of *Bent* is a gay love story undone by the Holocaust. Furthermore, in the play, the historical and the present start to overlap, becoming one and the same. History becomes mixed with heritage. Although John M. Clum relies on an unexamined definition of

⁵ Richard Dyer, *The Culture of Queers* (New York: Routledge, 2002), 205.

⁶ See Bruno Bettelheim’s taxonomy of the concentration camps in “German Concentration Camps” in the collection of his essays *Surviving and Other Essays*. In Bettelheim’s taxonomy, there are three distinct (in terms of function and history) German Concentration camps: The Internment Camp, The Labor Camp, and the Death Camp. Famously, Bettelheim, as a survivor of the Nazi internment system, theorized survival and how the trauma of survival gets transferred not only within families but also within cultures as cultural memory. The Holocaust left us a legacy of trauma that any contemporary trauma is measured against. *Bent* relies on the proposition that trauma is not simply personal but resides as a collective—almost universal—structure of feeling within gay history and identity. Bruno Bettelheim, “German Concentration Camps,” in *Surviving and Other Essays* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1952), 38-47.

⁷ Dyer, 205.

⁸ In my analysis of *Bent* below, I discuss the ways in which Sherman is inspired by Gay Sweatshop and their Brechtian theatre and politics.

“history plays” in his article ““A Culture That Isn’t Just Sexual”: Dramatizing Gay Male History,” I believe that what Clum calls “the historical impulse,” i.e. the impulse to “depict and define the collective past of gay men to affirm a sense of identity and solidarity, and educate the dominant culture about the brutality of its homophobia,” can better be understood as part of Dyer’s concept of heritage. Clum says: “Gay historical dramas celebrate, sometimes even in their structures, creative anarchy as a positive counter to oppressive order. At the same time they posit loving relationships as the norm for gay men. Gay historical drama posits the right to love, not the right to sex, as the stake in the battle against oppression.”⁹

Arguing for clear distinctions between history and heritage—as defined below—is methodologically treacherous as they overlap, inform one another, and exist in a simultaneous process through which one becomes the other. Both are reactions to and interpretations of the past: the event itself (or, Emanuel Kant’s *Das Ding an Sich*). Whether or not *Das Ding an Sich* exists in terms of “the past” is a complicated question as we labor to understand events through artifacts, but the only way in which we can ever have access to the past is through interpretation. This interpretation then becomes the history of which memory and heritage is constructed. Holocaust scholar Berel Lang meditates on the relation between memory and history in his introduction to *The Future of the Holocaust* in which he writes:

Memories—and as they constitute it, memory as such, growing out of the individual marks that compose the alep-beth of a self—turn outward and then into history, accumulating as the impulses of memory become icons,

⁹ John M. Clum, ““A Culture that Isn’t Just Sexual”: Dramatizing Gay Male History,” *Theatre Journal* 41 (1989): 168-69.

reminders, with their surface then taking on the patina of usage, so those marks themselves become depersonalized, public, objective, even—first in a small way but then increasingly—monumental.¹⁰

In his psychoanalytical approach, Lang here offers us an analysis of how memory functions within the traumatized individual, but he also, I believe, points to a central mechanism in the intricate relationship between history and remembrance, namely, the process by which memories—and, remember, *Bent* is a theatrical representation of memories that by becoming icons are quite literally turned into semiotic signs of the past—turn into embodied history. *Bent* exemplifies the “depersonalization” in the theatrical representation of individual memory—the few gay victims of the Nazi persecution whose voices have survived and whose voices Sherman drew on in researching for *Ben* in order to turn these formerly personal memories of the past into gay history.¹¹ The delicate moves that turn the past and the memories of it into history and heritage respectively are clearly complicated. Previously, in chapter one, I have offered Raymond Williams’s “structure of feeling” as a potential concept that would make an analysis of gay identity formation in historical context operational. Thinking of gay heritage as a “structure of feeling” allows us to collect the fragments of memory, history, and heritage, and understand them all as separate yet connected in the formation of cold war gay male identity. Operating with a “structure of feeling” here as an analytical concept allows us to know that history and heritage are a whole while separating them for

¹⁰ Berel Lang, *The Future of the Holocaust: Between History and Memory* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1999), 1.

¹¹ In the analysis of *Bent* offered in this chapter I briefly explain why very few homosexual survivors of the Nazi regime spoke out following World War Two.

the purpose of analysis. It allows us to know that without history there would be no heritage and still delineate the differences between the two.

Theatre scholar Christopher Bigsby in his work on Holocaust drama suggests that the Holocaust is “resistant to the imagination.” Though by no means the first or only intellectual to describe the Holocaust as outside the fathomable, Bigsby’s book is a fascinating study of the function of memory in plays by writers for whom the Holocaust was a defining event. But I question whether it is categorically true that the Holocaust defies imagination, that the horrors of the “final solution” cannot be imagined or described, and much less performed and embodied.¹²

Bigsby’s book is beautifully written, almost hauntingly so, and asks the important question of who owns the Holocaust: a question to which no answer exists. However, Bigsby locates an answer in “the chain of memory,” and in the many ways in which the Holocaust is imagined and re-imagined in contemporary culture. For the purposes of this dissertation, Bigsby’s focus on memory is enlightening. With *Bent*, Martin Sherman remembered (and made the world remember) a forgotten part of Hitler’s Final Solution. Through the performance of the historical suffering of gay prisoners in the Nazi concentration camps, Sherman remembers the willfully forgotten and simultaneously, I claim, he bears witness to a contemporary gay culture he finds disagreeable. The chain of memory—or history as a structure of feeling—then determines the production of the Holocaust in this specific play. Furthermore, Bigsby’s “chain of memory” takes us back to Dyer’s distinction between history and heritage.

In delineating the differences between history and heritage Dyer writes:

¹² Christopher Bigsby, *Remembering and Imagining the Holocaust: the Chain of Memory* (Cambridge, MA: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 9.

History is the discipline of enquiry into the past; heritage is an attitude towards the legacy of the past. Both have to deal with what comes down to us, what is left over, from the past. However, whereas historical enquiry uses an examination of the leftovers to try to understand the what happened in the past and why, a heritage sensibility values them for their own sake, savours the qualities and presence of dwellings, costumes, artworks, and objects. Heritage cinema could be used [...] as a vehicle to explore issues of history, but its main impulse is towards appreciating things of the past and telling stories of what it was like to live among them. In this perspective homosexual heritage cinema is about envisaging homosexual men among the attractions of pastness.¹³

Dyer's interest is primarily aesthetic here, and in his-analysis he does focus his attention on the way heritage cinema aesthetically relates historical gay existence with beauty (which in itself is an ideological position for Dyer). Though Dyer's aesthetic observations are relevant in discussing the marketing of *Bent*, which I will do later, I find his distinctions relevant in the political realm. As I have argued previously in this dissertation, the political is inherently embedded in the aesthetic, and it seems to me that Dyer indicates this. He does so by the way in which he embeds the contemporary gay man in the past. There is a productive conflation in envisioning the contemporary homosexual man in the "attractiveness of the past." Thus, I find that the notion of a "heritage attitude" is useful in analyzing how *Bent* conceptualizes and uses queer history simultaneously as form and content, as past and present, as memory and awareness, as

¹³ Dyer, 206.

history and heritage. Sherman fashions queer history not in but through representation and rehearsal of multiple presents. Rather than being collections of knowledge or interpretations of the past itself, these representations and rehearsals are “attitudes towards the legacy of the past.”

“The emergence of ‘gay’ was part of what made homosexual heritage films possible,” Dyer states.¹⁴ The political advances of gay liberation in the 1960s and 1970s, incremental and tentative as they were, also had tremendous impact on popular culture. A general liberalization of sexual attitudes (the swinging sixties in London and the key-party-decade) can also be found in the increasing commodification of sex experienced at the time.¹⁵ The overt sexualization of the Weimar Republic in *Cabaret* on Broadway in 1966¹⁶ (and in the movie in 1972), the emergence of *Hair* on Broadway in 1968, and the Woodstock festival in 1969 all pushed the boundaries for the nude and/or sexual body in the public space.¹⁷ Though the gay liberation movement was clearly countercultural—and identifiably so, unlike its predecessor The Mattachine Society—it did not exist in a vacuum. It must, I believe, be understood in a dialectical relationship with hegemonic cultural production. *The Boys in the Band* had quite successfully commodified gay male sexuality by domesticating the gay man, by staging gay men as inherently self-loathing, and by negating the sexual part of homosexuality through staging gay men as a group

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ For more on the postwar sexual history of the United States see for example John D’Emilio and Estelle B. Freedman, *Intimate Matters: a History of Sexuality in America* (New York: Harper and Row Publishers, 1988), 301-60. For one perspective on the gay history of the same period see John Loughery, *The Other Side of Silence: Men’s Lives and Gay Identities, a Twentieth Century History* (New York: Henry Holt & Company, 1998), 303-70.

¹⁶ It is outside the parameters of this particular analysis to spend much time on *Cabaret*, but there is no doubt that the enormous worldwide audience to Kander and Ebb’s interpretation of Weimar culture played into (and to a large degree further constructed) the idea that WWII was a sexual war. In this narrative the genesis of WWII is a reaction to a sex-crazed Weimar Germany.

¹⁷ *Cabaret* by John Kander, Fred Ebb, and Joe Masteroff opened in New York on November 20 1966. *Hair* by Gerome Ragni, James Rado and Galt McDermot opened in New York on April 29 1968.

whose sexuality dooms them to a series of unfortunate encounters unless they domesticate in mimicry of heterosexual love (keeping the sex acts monogamous and offstage, i.e., private). The heritage plays to come would not necessarily take a kinder look at contemporary gay male sexual activity. However, they could popularize their critique, if we follow Dyer's logic, because of a cultural structural change in the perception of sexuality that allowed the playwrights to at once celebrate gay existence in history and critique a gay culture with no historical awareness for the precedence of its oppression. In other words these playwrights could use the history of the Holocaust to create a gay heritage.

Before turning to an intercultural analysis of *Bent* and its use of the Holocaust, I find it necessary to discuss the representation of the events (the past) to understand how differing interpretations of the atrocities (the histories) function as basis for a cultural production of heritage.¹⁸

*

The 1978 NBC TV miniseries *Holocaust*, written by Gerald Green and directed by Marvin J. Chomsky, had an enormous impact in the United States, Western Europe, and Israel. For the generations too young to have any direct memory of the war, *Holocaust*, in many ways, came to define the Second World War as a war not among independent nations for power, colonies, and *Lebensraum*, but a war primarily driven by an insane hatred of European Jewry.¹⁹ By its very title, *Holocaust* defined the Nazi war as the Germans' war against the Jews. Since it is outside the scope of this dissertation to

¹⁸ It should be noted that by no means is *Bent* the only heritage play about gay heritage from the 1970s and 1980s. Plays such as *Breaking the Code*, *The Dear Love of Comrades*, and *As Time Goes By* all investigate the intersection of history and heritage.

¹⁹ *Lebensraum* is the German word expression for "space to live" employed to justify the annexation of much of Eastern Europe into the Third Reich.

supply an account of the horrors of the Second World War and it is likewise outside its purpose to supply a thorough account of the postwar developments of German society, I believe it fruitful to consider the production and international broadcasting of *Holocaust* a locus of interrogation. *Holocaust*—like the plays discussed in this chapter and the dissertation in general—is a US cultural product that, through its international consumption, exists as simultaneously local and global.²⁰ Given the topic of *Holocaust* (as with *Bent*, as the reader will see), we are faced with the complication of needing to understand a US interpretation of a decidedly European event and history as culturally specific, and thus theorize the miniseries' European reception as colored by local relations to the United States. The US and the German broadcast of *Holocaust* thus serves as a contextualization for this chapter's analysis of *Bent* and its representation of the Holocaust.

In her book, *The Holocaust in American Film*, Judith E. Doneson devotes a chapter-length study to NBC's *Holocaust*, analyzing the extent to which "*Holocaust* has furthered the penetration of the event into the American popular consciousness" and

²⁰ The debate over the Americanization of the Holocaust and the function of this process has been developing for decades in both American and Holocaust studies. My understanding of the field and my analysis in this dissertation are primarily based on the following studies: Jean-Paul Bier, "The Holocaust, West Germany, and Strategies of Oblivion, 1947-1979" and Jeffrey Herf, "The 'Holocaust' Reception in West Germany: Right, Center and Left," in *Germans and the Jews Since the Holocaust: the Changing Situation in West Germany* (New York: Holmes and Meier Publishers, 1986); Robert Braun, "The Holocaust and Problems of Historical Representation," *History and Theory* 33 (1994): 172-97; Pol O Dochartaigh, "Americanizing the Holocaust: the Case of *Jakob the Liar*," *Modern Language Review* 101 (2006): 456-71; Hilene Flanzbaum, ed., *The Americanization of the Holocaust* (Philadelphia: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999); Wulf Kansteiner, "Entertaining Catastrophe: the Reinvention of the Holocaust in the Television of the Federal Republic," *New German Critique* 90 (2003): 135-62; Alison Landsberg, "America, the Holocaust, and the Mass Culture of Memory: Toward a Radical Politics of Empathy," *New German Critique* 71 (1997): 63-86; Michael Naumann, "Remembrance and Political Reality: Historical Consciousness in Germany after the Genocide," *New German Critique* 80 (2000): 17-28; Peter Novick, "The American National Narrative of the Holocaust: There Isn't Any," *New German Critique* 90 (2003): 27-35; Gavriel D. Rosenfeld, "The Politics of Uniqueness: Reflections on the Recent Polemical Turn in Holocaust and Genocide Scholarship," *Holocaust and Genocide Studies* 13 (1999): 28-61; Oren Baruch Stier, "Holocaust, American Style," *Prooftexts* 22 (2002): 354-91.

outlining—almost unwittingly—just how Americanized the representation of the Holocaust has become.²¹

Televised for the first time in April 1978, *Holocaust* was watched by approximately 120 million people in the United States or, at that time, roughly half the population.²² Given the considerable advance press—NBC’s many commercials and significant print advertisement for the show, the *Chicago Sun-Times* special twelve-page section on the Holocaust, NBC’s widely distributed educational material, the educational material distributed by several Christian organizations, and the feature on *Holocaust* in the widely circulated *TV Guide*—*Holocaust* was an event that could not be missed. As a matter of fact, according to Doneson, “The day of the airing of the first segment, Sunday, 16 April 1978, was unofficially proclaimed ‘Holocaust Sunday’ and was to begin a week of thought and reflection. In many churches and public places, ecumenical services were held.”²³ Doneson provides no reference for her claim but, assuming that this is true, it seems apparent that the broadcasting of *Holocaust* allowed for the nation to engage—maybe for the first time—with the Holocaust as an event that was not essentially foreign, but one that influenced the very meaning of being both human and American.

Doneson outlines a three-step development of the representation of the Holocaust in America. The Holocaust, Doneson argues, develops from the symbol for “the universal

²¹ Doneson. See also Judith E. Doneson, “Holocaust Revisited: a Catalyst for Memory or Trivialization?,” *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* vol. 458 (1996): 70-77; Siegfried Zielinski, “History as Entertainment and Provocation: the TV Series ‘Holocaust’ in West Germany,” *New German Critique* 19 (1980): 81-96. For a fascinating study of the Italian reception of the series see Emiliano Perra, “Narratives of Innocence and Victimhood: the Reception of the Miniseries *Holocaust* in Italy,” *Holocaust and Genocide Studies* 22 (2008): 411-40. Perra’s article outlines how the series in Italy allowed for a victimized spectator position in which Italians had no part in the crimes committed during fascism.

²² According to the US Census Bureau, the US population in 1978 was estimated at 222,528,545. <http://www.census.gov>.

²³ Doneson, 188.

suffering of mankind in *The Diary of Anne Frank*, to a universal symbol for contemporary suffering in *Judgment at Nuremberg*.”²⁴ And, she continues, “In *Holocaust*, universalization implies focusing on the centrality of Jewish suffering during the final solution and applying its lesson to modern evil.”²⁵ What Doneson here considers “universal” is really a US interpretation of what being Jewish means. In other words through the dramatization of Jewish suffering, the United States in 1978 attempted to heal its own rifts and nostalgically return to a time of moral fortitude. *Holocaust*, then, in the US, allowed American Jews to at once reaffirm their Americanness and their Jewishness. By this process of universalization of the Holocaust, US Jews—along with, presumably, the rest of humanity—became victims of the Nazi atrocities.

Doneson proposes that *Holocaust* has its genesis in the success of the US TV series *Roots* from 1977, and that *Holocaust* is nothing less than the Jewish “television counterpart” to *Roots*. She links the success of *Roots*, an epic TV series tracing the history of an African American family from its origins in Africa through its struggles and suffering under US slavery to the success of *Holocaust*.²⁶ By comparing *Roots* and *Holocaust*, one explicitly moves being Jewish from a religious identity to an ethnic identity, which, again, by logical extension, relates the production of *Holocaust* to a renewed US awareness in the 1970s of identity politics. *Holocaust*, then, is explicitly

²⁴ The complex representation of German guilt in *Judgment at Nuremberg* can be exemplified in Marlene Dietrich’s classic line “You think we are all monsters” which, when pronounced by Dietrich, can be deciphered either as a declaration or a question. In that one central line, Dietrich’s character verbalizes the sense of German victimization, which allowed the German population to fashion itself not as perpetrators of Nazi policies but rather as victims of them.

²⁵ Doneson, 144.

²⁶ According to Doneson, *Roots* garnered the largest audiences of any TV show ever at its initial broadcast in the US. The series was likewise a tremendous success in Northern Europe, allowing for a reception which coincided with large anti-US imperialism demonstrations in both Western Germany and Denmark. By the timing of its European broadcast during a time of intense anti-American sentiment in Western Europe, *Roots* allowed for a narrative of continuous US imperialist brutality to emerge.

German in its representation of the suffering of the Weiss family, its primary German Jewish family, but it is implicitly US American in its simplified understanding of the enormous complexities of the Final Solution. In Germany, as we shall see, the show's relation to *Roots* is constantly reinforced in what I believe to be an attempt at de-Germanizing the very concept of atrocity. The atrocities perpetuated in the United States through the centuries of slavery are being invoked in an attempt to lighten German guilt and make the Holocaust a historical event that can be overcome.²⁷

That the universalization of the characters made them implicitly American became clear in the US debate fostered by the broadcast as well. In an article by Frank Rich in *TIME* magazine, Gerald Green explains: "I wanted a real German family, the equivalent of American Jews who think of themselves first as Americans. We didn't want to do "Fiddler on the Roof" Jews, although they were the prime victims of the Holocaust. We were afraid they would vitiate what we were trying to do—appeal to a broad audience."²⁸ As a crafty writer, Green (and his producers) recognized that he needed to de-exoticize the events of the Final Solution and make them palatable for a middlebrow American audience. However, the very US nature of the script, its recognizable conflicts, its heroic and melodramatic actions simultaneously allowed the show to be criticized abroad (and at home) as nothing more than an American attempt to mirror itself in the European tragedy of 1933-45. *New York Times* critic John J. O'Connor starts his pre-broadcasting "TV Weekend" column by claiming that "'Holocaust' is less a noble failure

²⁷ The German reception of *Holocaust* will be discussed in detail in the following section. For the invocation of *Roots* as American, see for example "Fernsehen: Gaskammern a la Hollywood?" *Der Spiegel*, 20 (1978): 228-31. "Endlösung im Abseits," *Der Spiegel* 3 (1979), 133-4. "Holocaust: Die Vergangenheit kommt zurück" *Der Spiegel* 5 (1979), 25-7.

²⁸ Frank Rich, "Television: Reliving the Nazi Nightmare" *TIME* April 17, 1978. That Green dismisses the historical victims of the Holocaust as "Fiddler on the Roof"-Jews is eye-opening to the intent of the show. In the same article, Rich, foreshadowing his analysis of *Angels in America*, claims *Holocaust* to be a perfect mixture of "commerce and art."

than a presumptuous venture” and in getting to the very traditional dramaturgy of the show he states that “plodding, realist drama seems unequal to the task” of capturing the “horrors of Nazi Germany.”²⁹ O’Connor primarily objects to the inability of the made-for-TV movie as a form to capture the reality of the event, the historical inaccuracies in the representation, the show’s—perhaps inadvertent—focus on the lack of Jewish resistance to the Final Solution, and, for the purposes of this argument most interestingly, the sexualization of Nazism offered in the show. O’Connor claims that in *Holocaust* “the very barbarity of Nazism is whittled down to an image not dissimilar from the fad for a touch of sadism in lingerie ads.”³⁰

Six days after the broadcast, O’Connor was even more vocal and critical in his actual review. Again, his primary objection seems to be the commodified nature of television itself. In O’Connor’s implicit argument, the Holocaust defies any kind of representation whose goal it is to make money. He writes, “Meanwhile, a monstrous historical fact has been put through the peculiar process that is called commercial television. In its more extreme moments, that processing proved to be almost as obscene as the holocaust [sic] itself.”³¹ O’Connor offers an example of this commercialization when describing how a scene in which the victims are being told that the gas chambers are only for disinfection is followed by a *Lysol* commercial and, furthermore, how a scene in which Nazi officers are looking at photos of naked victims is followed by a commercial for *Polaroid*.³² In the West German reception of the show, the production’s commercial nature was understood as something unique to the United States and

²⁹ John J. O’Connor, “TV Weekend,” *New York Times*, April 14, 1978.

³⁰ *Ibid.* O’Connor is correct in his observation that everything in the show is extraordinarily polished and that the higher ranking Nazis are performed with an almost sadistic perspective.

³¹ John J. O’Connor, “NBC ‘Holocaust,’ Art versus Money,” *New York Times*, April 20, 1978.

³² *Ibid.*

something that seriously weakened the nature of the show. The TV critic in *Der Spiegel*, for example, wrote that the show was a “seven-and-a-half hour tale of suffering, a Hollywood instruction in history interrupted by commercial spots for cream- and crackers despite the tormenting nature of the topic.”³³

Drawing on *New York Times* columnist Drew Middleton’s critique of *Holocaust*, Doneson suggests that the interest in and reception of the series indicated a particular nostalgic yearning in the United States, a yearning for a simpler time of unity when the country bonded together in the fight against a common enemy. In a nation (that of the United States) that was coming out of a decade of fighting in Asia, a decade of race riots, generational strife, and political scandal, the clearly marked boundaries between good and evil were enviable and the “American” family Weiss’s noble fight against the evil Germans marked a nation of hope and prosperity. The Weiss family thus became a symbol—through its one surviving son and daughter in-law and her child by the dead second son—of what is good in the world and thereby fulfills the US American dramaturgical theology of redemption. Understood in this way, the Weiss family represents not only the noble Jews but specifically US Jews. The Weiss family becomes a representation of “America” and thus illustrates the fight for good against the evil ordinary Germans. *Holocaust* brings together—and this is what in the European perspective makes it uniquely “American”—commercialization of culture, redemption of the individual subject with the courage to fight (only Rudi, the one son who resists is seen at the end on his way to Palestine, a scene that was omitted in the West German

³³ Original quote: Die siebeneinhalbstündige Leidenssaga, ein Hollywoodesker Geschichtsunterricht und trotz des peinvollen Themas mit Cream- und Cracker-Spots unterbrochen. “Fernsehen: Gaskammern a la Hollywood?” *Der Spiegel*, 20 (1978), 228-231.

broadcast), and a trivialization through simplification of complex events (i.e., the reduction of the Holocaust to a war on Jews, without the understanding the complexity of the Third Reich). As a background for understanding the cultural production of the Holocaust, as product, history, and memory, I find it necessary to briefly analyze that West German reception of the NBC show as a means to understanding the West German cultural anxiety surrounding the topic. *Bent* with its radically different account of the Holocaust, after all, entered the German theatre scene very shortly after the broadcast of *Holocaust*.

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According to the *New York Times* thirty-four percent of the possible viewing audience tuned into *Holocaust* when it aired in West Germany in early January 1979.³⁴ *Holocaust* elicited strong reactions in the German population. Jochen Stinauer, a spokesperson for *Westdeutsche Rundfunk*, the regional TV station broadcasting the show, informed the *New York Times* that the station received more than sixteen thousand phone calls about the series, and that the calls were two to one in favor of the show. According to Stinauer, two common themes to the calls were questions of “how could it happen” and “how many people knew.”³⁵ If this is true, this US-produced miniseries allowed for a renewed interest in the Holocaust and helped a discussion of German guilt to emerge.³⁶

³⁴ “‘Holocaust’ Audience Far Bigger Than West Germany Anticipated,” *New York Times*, January 25, 1979. (A15) The same article also reports that 32% watched the first episode and 36% the second. In comparison the broadcast of *Roots* was seen by 48% and “an important soccer match gets about 55 percent share.”

³⁵ *Ibid.*

³⁶ That this debate is ongoing can be illustrated by the recent Hitler exhibition opening in Berlin in the fall of 2010. This one exhibition has started a renewed debate about what it means to be German and how (and if) the Germans were complicit in or victimized by the twelve years of the Third Reich. See Michael Slackman, “Hitler Exhibit Explores a Wider Circle of Guilt,” *New York Times*, October 15, 2010.

Despite the charges that the miniseries was no more than an American soap opera, the show was also debated at the highest political level. The statute of limitations on crimes committed during the Third Reich was set to expire in 1979, and *Holocaust* was used by parts of the German political establishment to argue for its extension.³⁷ In a debate in the lower house of the West German parliament, at the time in Bonn, Chancellor Helmut Schmidt spoke about the importance of the remembrance. Inspired by *Holocaust* and its representation of the crimes, Schmidt encouraged the country to engage in “critical reflection,” particularly “in view of the decision each of us must make for himself in the course of this year on the statute of limitations.”³⁸ Though claiming a direct connection between *Holocaust* and the fact that the statute of limitations was extended beyond its 1979 expiration date may be a stretch, the fact that the Chancellor saw it fit to bring the TV show into the debate indicates the enormous anxiety surrounding questions of the Holocaust in West Germany in the 1970s and 1980s.³⁹ That

³⁷ It is outside the parameters of this dissertation to discuss German postwar history in much detail (thus the focus on the reception of a very particular cultural product). For more on postwar German history and culture see Mary Fullbrook, *The Divided Nation: a History of Germany 1918-1990* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991); Eva Kolinsky and Wilfried van der Will, *The Cambridge Companion to Modern German Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998); and Hermann Glaser, *Deutsche Kultur 1945-2000*, (München: Carl Hanser Verlag, 1997).

³⁸ “‘Holocaust’ Audience Far Bigger Than West Germany Anticipated,” *New York Times*, January 25, 1979.

³⁹ In West Germany, *Holocaust* was also used as a means to discuss the application of guilt between East and West. Chancellor Smith, for example, used the TV series as an occasion to encourage the screening of the show in the East as a way to “reflect on our common heritage.” It was official East German policy to understand the East German state as a clear break from the Fascist past which, in an East German optic, continued in the West under capitalism. On the concept of Germans as victims of Nazism (a particularly prevalent point of view in East Germany), see Robert G. Moeller, “Germans as Victims: Thoughts in a Post-Cold War History of World War II’s Legacies,” *History and Memory* 17 (2005): 147-94. This section concerns the reception of *Holocaust* in West Germany. For an analysis of the representation of the *Holocaust* in East Germany see Mark Wolfgram, “The Holocaust through the Prism of East German Television: Collective Memory and Audience Perceptions,” *Holocaust and Genocide Studies* 20 (2006): 57-79. An article in the *New York Times* details the effect of the TV-show in the areas of East Berlin that could receive West German TV signals. One caller is quoted as saying, “We have been shown a large number of documentaries here, but so far we were always led to believe Nazi atrocities were a matter only for the capitalists and did not concern us, as a socialist country.” Ellen Lentz, “Effects of ‘Holocaust’ on West German TV Cross Border Into East,” *New York Times*, January 28, 1979.

Holocaust became such a focus of attention in West Germany further indicates the power of US popular culture in Western Europe.⁴⁰ It is outside the scope of this dissertation to discuss the complex cultural and political relations between Germany and the United States (for a discussion of cultural imperialism, see chapter one); however, one example sheds light on the importance of the theatre in relation to the early postwar reconstruction of West Germany. Following the war, the allied forces created an ambitious cultural program to educate the German population as part of the democratization process. Hermann Glaser, in his sweeping *Deutsche Kultur 1945-2000*, describes this program in some detail. According to Glaser, “the official dramatic canon from the USA contained 60 translated plays of which 45 were actually performed.”⁴¹ Being a program under the control of the Allied Forces, the translation program was initially paid for and administered by the military as a conscious attempt at what the Germans call “*Kulturpropaganda*.” In chapter one, I discussed the concept of cultural imperialism and the notion of “Empire by Invitation,” and this is but one example of a clear US cultural imperialism under the cold war guise of democratizing Europe by means of capitalism. One can argue that this forced import of US culture allowed German intellectuals to create a marked difference between commercial US culture and German high art (*Hoch Kultur*). In postwar German language drama, such as the Swiss playwright Friedrich

⁴⁰ A lot of scholarship on the relationship between the United States and Germany exists. For some examples, see Katja Kanzler and Heike Paul eds., *Amerikanische Populärkultur in Deutschland* (Leipzig: Leipziger Universitätsverlag, 2002), and Alexander Stephan, *Americanization and Anti-Americanism: the German Encounter with American Culture after 1945* (New York: Berghan Books, 2005).

⁴¹ Glaser, 117. Original quote: “Der offizielle Dramenkanon der USA umfasste 60 übersetzte Stücke, von denen 45 tatsächlich aufgeführt wurden.” The US dramatic canon as exported consisted of both straight plays and musical. According to Glaser the French canon consisted of ninety-eight plays and the British canon of fifteen plays, all contemporary.

Dürrenmatt's *Besuch der alten Dame* (1956) for example, the United States can be seen constructed as a place of excessive, comical, and eventually destructive consumption.⁴²

US theatre scholar Marvin Carlson also notes in *Theatre is More Beautiful than War* that “the German theatre was reestablished with remarkable rapidity even in burned-out city centers” and thus, by performing both German and foreign plays through the translation program, served a crucial function in the initial rebuilding of a strong Western German state.⁴³ Carlson also notes that “the idea of theatre as art, distinctly removed from the political realm, was especially prevalent in the Western part of the postwar divided Germany, which for some years dominated the German scene.”⁴⁴ During the 1960s and 1970s, however, the West German theatre became more open to overtly political theatre, although, in contrast to most US political theatre of the time, West German political theatre seemed to not be particularly interested in identity-driven politics perhaps scarred by the deeply divisive identity-driven politics of the Third Reich. At the time, German political theatre was much more interested in class-based structural critiques and investigating a larger notion of what being German meant. Carlson's study illuminates the extent to which both West and East German theatre was indeed invested in politics (and thus if not eradicating the traditional German distinction between *Kunst* and *Kultur* then at least challenging it). Through his study of a string of pearls of German directors, Carlson illustrates the aesthetic richness of the German theatre and the particular understanding of theatre's function in society.

⁴² Friedrich Dürrenmatt, *Besuch der Alten Dame: eine Tragische Komödie* (Zürich: Diogenes, 1988).

⁴³ Marvin Carlson, *Theatre is More Beautiful Than War: German Stage Directing in the Late Twentieth Century* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2009), x.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, xi.

On the concept of directly political theatre in relation to theatrically investigating the particular German responsibility for the Second World War, Carlson mentions the following example:

Perhaps the most famous theatre poster of the era was that for Peymann's revolutionary production of Heinrich von Kleist's *Die Hermannsschlacht*, presented in Bochum in 1982. By presenting this play, a favorite of the Nazis, Peymann was challenging the long-held official silence in the German theatres about the war years, but even more basically the strong political message of his brilliant staging was a powerful refutation of the careful removal from politics of art in general and theatre in particular that had been so prevalent in the Adenauer era.⁴⁵

Carlson's observation that in 1982 an official silence surrounding the events of the Second World War still existed is important in relation to this chapter's analysis of Sherman's *Bent* and its German productions. *Bent* presents multiple challenges to the German theatre: it stages the prewar years (1933-39) as years of excess and willful ignorance, it stages the brutality of the Nazi regime, it physically stages the concentration camp death machine, and, finally, it queers the Holocaust, which had just, as this discussion of *Holocaust* shows, been forced into open discourse.

Even before the actual broadcast of *Holocaust*, before its breaking the public cultural silence, however, *the miniseries* was used in internal political debates in West Germany. Already in the summer of 1978, West German television producers were discussing the merits of *Holocaust* and, not least, the question of whether or not the show

⁴⁵ Ibid., xii.

could and should be broadcast in West Germany. It was decided that it would not be broadcast on the national networks but rather on a couple of regional networks. Arguably, this was done in an attempt to prevent the broadcast from becoming a national event, a move that was unsuccessful. The show was initially “denounced as garbage and cheap commercialism” by the director of *Südwestfunk*, the South Western TV station, Peter Schultze-Rohr, who also opined that the show’s sentiments were those of the worst Hollywood productions.⁴⁶ The program director of *Bayerischer Rundfunk* (the TV station in Bayern), Helmut Oeller, was one of the strongest opponents of broadcasting the show. He said, “I say no because *Holocaust* puts the horror within boundaries, presents it in the same familiar limiting format as Westerns and murder mysteries, all of which we view as entertainment and something not quite real, not quite the truth.”⁴⁷ Evidently, both Schultze-Rohr and Oeller are expressing opinions informed by a certain amount of latent anti-Americanism that informs their dismissal of *Holocaust* as nothing but cheap and commercial Hollywood entertainment.

Several West German newspapers argued on the editorial page that “burying” the show was worse than not showing it. *Frankfurter Rundschau* opined, “Every means is right that disturbs and weakens the suppression mechanism that the majority of Germans have so perfectly mastered till now in relation to the mass murder of European Jewry. That includes a supposed soap opera like ‘Holocaust.’”⁴⁸ The *New York Times* reported

⁴⁶ John Vinocur, “‘Holocaust’ TV series, Criticized, Is Sidelined by West Germans,” *New York Times*, July 3, 1978.

⁴⁷ Ibid. The Hollywood Western movie was a particularly popular genre in Northern Europe and in particular in Germany. On the Western in Germany see Uta G. Poiger, “Rebels With a Cause? American Popular Culture, the 1956 Youth Riots and New Conceptions of Masculinity in East and West Germany,” in *The American Impact on Post-War Germany*, ed. Reiner Pommerin (Providence, RI: Berghahn Books, 1997), 93-124.

⁴⁸ John Kinocur, “On Eve of Airing of ‘Holocaust,’ West Germans Argue its Merits,” *New York Times*, January 21, 1979.

that “other commentators seemed to tacitly dismiss ‘Holocaust’” by suggesting that West Germany had been forced into showing it. This idea was apparent in a pamphlet designed for teachers in the populous state of North Rhine-Westphalia saying that television officials “had absolutely no choice” of turning down the series because this “would have meant supporting the accusation that once again the Germans wanted to cover up their terrible past.”⁴⁹ Undoubtedly there is a certain sense of resentment and of being coerced in the West German reception of *Holocaust*, amplified by the notion that it took a US-produced made-for-TV movie to re-educate the Germans on the atrocities of the Final Solution.⁵⁰

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“Ours is an empty memory,” Klaus Müller writes in his introduction to *The Men with The Pink Triangle*, a first-person account of the gay Holocaust.⁵¹ Given the discussion above concerning the intricate relations between history, heritage, and collective memory, the concept of an “empty memory” is evocative, as it suggests we imagine “memory” as a vessel to be filled by representation. However, in the case of the history of the persecution and eradication of homosexual people during the Third Reich, this memory vessel remained empty for a long time. Following the fall of the Third Reich, homosexual activity remained criminal in Germany, as the dreaded paragraph 175 outlawing homosexual conduct—installed in 1871 in the Bavarian criminal code and

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ In a long article in *Der Spiegel*, it is described the extent to which *Holocaust* was used—willingly and unwillingly—in German grade and high schools. “Thousands of teachers had to alter their lesson plans” (Tausende von Lehrern mußten ihren Unterrichtsplan umwerfen). “In Bergen-Belsen wurde kein Jude vergast: Westdeutsche Schüler reagierten heftig auf “Holocaust”—Strohfeuer oder Dauerbrand,” *Der Spiegel* 6 (1979): 57-65.

⁵¹ Klaus Müller, introduction to *The Men With the Pink Triangle: The True Life-and-Death Story of Homosexuals in the Nazi Death Camps*, by Heinz Heger translation by David Fernbach (Los Angeles: Alyson, 1994), 2.

strengthened by the Nazi party in 1934 to include, among many other crimes, homosexual fantasies—was maintained until its repeal in 1957. In other words, homosexual Holocaust survivors could go from Dachau to jail if they were considered likely to be repeat-offenders, which most homosexuals by the very nature of their crime were considered to be. The threat of further imprisonment bred silence and a shame of having been encamped to begin with. It was a period of time that one homosexual Holocaust survivor has described as “dark years, years without history.”⁵² It is in relation to these “years without history,” in relation to the absence of any real memory, that *Bent* and its very particular conceptualization of the tragedy of the Holocaust must be understood. *Bent*, then, is an attempt to fill the empty vessel of memory with the presence of live bodies re-enacting the suffering of two homosexual men in the Dachau concentration camp. It is an attempt at claiming presence in history.

In claiming this presence, I argue, *Bent*, like *Holocaust*, imagines Germany and the Holocaust for specific purposes. *Bent* and *Holocaust* both create a mirror in which the United States fashions itself in the context of the atrocities of the Second World War. In other words, *Bent* utilizes the specter of Nazism to argue against a particular contemporary gay culture in the United States. *Holocaust* imagined Nazi Germany to discuss issues pertaining to contemporary Jewish identity in the USA, while *Bent* imagined Nazi Germany in a critique of contemporary gay culture. Before turning to an analysis of Sherman’s text and its reception in the United States and in Western Europe—

⁵² Dunkle Jahre—Jahre ohne Historie. Martin Dannecker, *Schwule Regungen—Schwule Bewegungen* (Berlin : Verlag Rosa Winkel, 1985), 13. For a history of the Nazi persecution of homosexuals see Richard Plant, *The Pink Triangle: the Nazi War Against Homosexuals* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1986). See also Andreas Sternweiler, *Self-Confidence and Persistence: Two Hundred Years of History* (Berlin: Schwules Museum, 2004).

in particular in West Germany—we need to understand the background for Sherman’s engagement with gay history, and its relation to politics and memory.

In his article “The Pink Triangle and Political Consciousness: Gays Lesbians, and the Memory of Nazi Persecution,” Erik N. Jensen analyzes how the use of the pink triangle as a modern day liberation symbol began appearing in the United States and Canada (more specifically in San Francisco, New York, and Toronto) starting in the 1970s.⁵³ Jensen furthermore illustrates how important the fictionalized account of the gay Holocaust presented in *Bent* was in shaping notions of the factual persecution of homosexual people under the Nazi regime: He writes “*Bent*’s message continued to shape the American gay community’s collective memory of past suffering well beyond the 1980s.”⁵⁴ Unfortunately, at least according to Jensen, the message concerning the Holocaust that *Bent* produced as collective memory was partly based on falsities and a very selective reading in the history of the events themselves. As the reader will see in the following analysis of the reception of *Bent*, the claim set forth in the play, namely, that homosexuals were the lowest of the lowest in the concentration camp hierarchy was much repeated in the press. However, it is very doubtful that this hierarchy is true.⁵⁵

Jensen thus uses his descriptions of the production of the pink triangle as a symbol of liberation to investigate how a collective memory of the Nazi persecution of homosexuals

⁵³ Erik N. Jensen, “The Pink Triangle and Political Consciousness: Gay, Lesbians, and the Memory of Nazi Persecution,” *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 11 (2002): 319-349. Jensen omits mention of the use of the pink triangle in the very active British gay liberation movement: a use that was widespread and primarily aligned with anti-fascism.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 326.

⁵⁵ It is outside the parameters of this dissertation to perform any kind of comprehensive analysis of the concentration camp system or its hierarchies. Suffice it to say that, no doubt, such hierarchies were fluid throughout the Third Reich, and that the competition in later historiographical work to determine who suffered the most seems both unethical and unproductive. Sherman based his writing partly on Bettelheim’s work on the concentration camps, but it is proven nowhere (and not even mentioned in Bettelheim, to the best of my knowledge) that homosexuals as a group (as opposed to individual actions against individual homosexuals) were treated systematically worse than, for example, the Jews, which is the comparison made in *Bent*.

has been built on rather unreliable, fictionalized material such as *Bent* and, I may add, *Holocaust*.

Unlike Jensen, Kai Hammermeister, in his article “Inventing History: Toward a Gay Holocaust Literature,” reads *Bent* as a heroic play because of “its emphasis on the element of pride over that of suffering, and its portrayal of the historical victims as victors while still preserving their suffering. The gay Holocaust literature that is now emerging is a literature of survival, of victory in defeat, and of dignity. It solicits not so much pity as admiration.”⁵⁶ There is no doubt that many critics and spectators experienced Sherman’s play in exactly this way: as a testimony to the ability of manly love to transform a character (Max) to accept his homosexuality, even if it meant death. I read the play as a negative heritage play that draws our attention to the fact that gay men suffered horribly in the “forgotten holocaust” and simultanelously critiques a 1970s radical sexual liberation strategy. The play, I argue, operates with a bifurcated memory: one that at the same time reaches into the past to understand gay lives and identities, and reaches into the future in an attempt to mirror contemporary pride and hope in past suffering.⁵⁷

John M. Clum describes post-Stonewall gay theatre as being “about finding a place on the dance floor, a place in society where a gay man can safely not act straight”

⁵⁶ Kai Hammermeister, “Inventing History: Toward a Gay Holocaust Literature,” *The German Quarterly* 70 (1997): 23. Hammermeister is primarily referring to the gay Holocaust literature emerging in the 1980s. Hammermeister theorizes—rather obviously—that it took time for a literature to emerge because a silence surrounding the Nazi persecution of homosexuals existed in both Germany and among the allied nations.

⁵⁷ The concept of a “bifurcated memory” belongs to Jensen, though he utilizes the phrase differently. For another example of scholarly work that engages the relationship between specific performances of gay history and contemporary gay identities see Christopher Castiglia and Christopher Reed, “Ah, Yes, I Remember it Well”: Memory and Queer Culture in *Will and Grace*,” *Cultural Critique* 56 (2004): 158-88. In this fascinating article the writers persuasively analyzes the ways in which the invocation of gay memories (often in the form of camp) critically informs the two queerest characters, Jack and Karen. It also, by extension, creates a structure of gay history that all the characters understand themselves within.

and “about the experience of being gay as seen from the inside.”⁵⁸ He then promptly creates two categories for post-Stonewall drama: one that develops an affirming gay history and one that depicts contemporary gay life focused on “what it means to act gay.”⁵⁹ I believe that there is significant slippage between these two categories, and that *Bent* needs to be understood as both “affirming history” and questioning what it means to “act gay.”

Bent was first presented in the United States on Broadway at the New Apollo Theatre on December 2, 1979, starring among others Richard Gere and David Dukes, and directed by Robert Allan Ackerman. The British production, directed by Robert Chetwyn, preceded the US production, opening at the Royal Court on May 3, 1979. In the 1970s American-born Martin Sherman lived in London, and *Bent* is clearly inspired by the politics of theatre for, by, and about gay people of the at-the-time-radical British theatre group Gay Sweatshop. More than simply admiring the general philosophy and politics of the Gay Sweatshop, Sherman was particularly inspired by the group’s performance of Noel Greig and Drew Griffiths’s *As Time Goes By* from 1977.⁶⁰

As Time Goes By is a play that imagines gay history in three vignettes of crucial moments in the development of gay history. It stages a Victorian London brothel during the time of the Oscar Wilde scandal, then young German homosexuals attempt to flee the Nazis, and finally, it stages the Stonewall riots. Besides Greig and Griffiths’s historical analysis of the relation between oppression and capitalism (after all, the play starts in a

⁵⁸ John M. Clum, *Acting Gay: Male Homosexuality in Modern Drama* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1992), 198-99.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 200.

⁶⁰ The reasons given for Sherman’s exile in London are varied. In most interviews and in scholarship on *Bent*, Sherman is described as disenchanted with the American theatre due to a lack of success and/or recognition. I find this narrative fascinating: the American playwright who, by accrued British cultural capital, later becomes an American success. It is a fact, however, that *Bent* was turned down by the Eugene O’Neill Playwrights Conference.

brothel), they invoke historical figures like Edward Carpenter and Magnus Hirschfeld in an attempt to historicize gay identity and debunk the myth that there was no gay liberation prior to the Stonewall riots. They also importantly utilize a decidedly queer mode of representation. Through the use of musical numbers and parodies (the Greek performance at the brothel, the Weimar nightclub performance, and the Stonewall drag queen's mourning of Judy Garland), Greig and Griffiths pointedly maintain the specificity of gay culture while including it in history. In Clum's analysis, the play "counsels courage as a way of life for the gay man—for only in declaring himself and fighting his oppressors will he be free—and urges solidarity for a community united to affirm and protect itself."⁶¹ Although I would argue that Clum minimizes the joy of *As Time Goes By*—that is to say, its central theorization of pleasure as liberating and political—it is evident that Sherman was inspired by the play's focus on the potential for personal development and heroism in the face of great oppression. Considering that *Holocaust* had been broadcast in the United States and in Great Britain and that, as Jensen has shown, the gay liberation movements in North America had been using the pink triangle as a symbol against oppression since 1973, *Bent* appeared at a time when the Holocaust reference—or Holocaust as a metaphor—had been invoked repeatedly. So the play offered, albeit fictional, evidence for the claim of historical presence through oppression, suffering, and ultimately redemption.

In the opening scene of *Bent*, we meet Max, an occasional cocaine user and dealer (more user than dealer, we get the sense), and his boyfriend Rudy, a dancer in a drag show at a local gay night-club. Max is so hung over that he does not remember anything from the night before, not that he was in a fight, not that he invited the entire bar home

⁶¹ Clum, 226.

for an orgy, not that he fell off the table onto “a guy in leather,” nor that he brought home a trick, an SS soldier, it turns out, for rough sadomasochistic inspired sex. The trick, Wolf, who is unmistakably objectified in the play, walks through the room naked. He is the only character we ever see engage in physically sexual activities. The scene ends with the SS police storming the apartment, killing Wolf by slashing his throat, and setting Max and Rudy on their journey. Max and Rudy escape, and “a projection in the center of the stage reads: Berlin—1934.”⁶² The remainder of the first act depicts Max and Rudy’s increasingly desperate attempt to escape from the Nazis, their capture in a forest outside Cologne (again, a show of physical affection—they are holding hands—is severely punished), and their transportation on a train to Dachau. During the transport Rudy is savagely beaten by the guards for wearing glasses and betrayed by Max, who denounces him; and Max is advised by Horst, whom he meets on the train, to lay low because homosexuals are the lowest of the lowest in the camps. After Rudy’s death, Max is forced to have intercourse with a dead young girl in order to secure himself a yellow star rather than the pink triangle. Act two is set in the stone quarry of a concentration camp. In an almost Beckettian movement, Max is carrying stones back and forth from one pile to another. By supposedly bargaining with a commandant, he has ensured that Horst will be transferred from more strenuous labor. The two prisoners talk as they move stones back and forth, and they slowly develop a relationship that culminates in verbal intercourse and orgasm during a break. Through language, they overcome their degradation and become, at least momentarily, human. As Horst says: “We did it. They’re not going to kill us. We made love. We were real. We were human. We made love. They’re not going

⁶² Martin Sherman, *Bent in Forbidden Acts: Pioneering Gay and Lesbian Plays of the Twentieth Century*, ed. Bed Hodges (New York: Applause Books, 2003), 533.

to kill us.”⁶³ As the months go on, Horst gets weaker and weaker, and develops a cold, for which Max ensures some medicine by performing oral sex on a Nazi captain in his capacity as a carrier of the yellow star and not the pink triangle. The captain, realizing that he has been duped (i.e. he has had sex with a homosexual rather than a Jew) throws Horst’s hat on the electric fence and asks him to get it. Horst, realizing that he is going to die, attacks the captain and is shot. Max, then, being asked to bury Horst, does so, but then jumps into the grave, pulls on Horst’s jacket with the pink triangle, and walks into the electric fence.

In scholarly literature, this spectacular (and spectacularly melodramatic) ending of the play is the scene most often analyzed, and it is habitually related to what Hammermeister and Clum called the heroic past. I believe, however, that more than being an example of a performance of a heroic past, the scene relates what Dyer termed “an attitude towards the past.” The scene, unbelievable as it is, marks the play as heritage rather than history. However, before this ultimate portrayal of Max coming into himself as a proud gay man for whom death is better than dishonesty, Sherman queers the concept of history in parallel universes.

In the opening domestic scene, Rudy and Max discuss what happened the previous night, since Max has no recollection of the evening (nor of the hunky blonde who walks through his living room naked). Rudy is reluctant to answer, and Max reacts violently to Rudy’s chatter, wanting to know what he did. Underlying this staging of Max’s self-hatred, which, I believe, should be understood as a symbol of a historically specific self-hatred in the gay culture fueled by promiscuous sex, alcohol, and drugs, one can detect a performance of the desire to know history, even if it is only the history of

⁶³ Ibid., 570.

yesterday. Rudy, knowing that Max will not like what he is about to learn, hides his knowledge behind domestic chatter of grocery lists and plant care. Clearly Max is set up to be the one who is enlightened by the end. Only through knowing history (i.e., knowing what he did) can he know who and what he is.

Sherman, I believe, shows a decisive 1970s sensibility in his description of the sex party and not least in his letting Max fall off the table onto “a guy in leather.”⁶⁴ In contrast, Rudy, the innocent victim in this play, as the sensitive dancer who loves plants and wants nothing more than a twosome with his man, represents a domestication of the gay man that Sherman seems to endorse through these early scenes as a transhistorical desire. Sherman, I argue, actively indicts what he sees as the decadence of gay liberation: its excessive focus on sexual freedom and its inattention to politics. He claims by analogy that the self-indulgence of the 1970s is heading towards another catastrophe. Again, only at the end of first scene of act 1, is the audience made aware that the time and place is Berlin 1934—allowing the audience, at least theoretically, to assume that the time of the setting is contemporary with the performance. In other words, this is an inscription of gay history onto itself; history represented and understood as cyclical, doomed to repeat its own mistakes, because of the “empty history” of gay people.

This inscription of gay history onto itself, of gay history as heritage and structure of feeling, is seen even more plainly in scene four of the second act, which is the second love session staged. Whereas in act two, scene two, the scene in which Max and Horst make love standing at attention, is gentle and results in orgasm, by act two, scene four, Max has become a rougher lover:

Max: Biting your nipple.

⁶⁴ Ibid., 528.

Horst: Yes.

Max: Biting... into it.

Horst: Yes.

Max: Harder... Harder... Harder.

Horst: Hold it! That hurts!

Max: Harder.

Horst: No, hold it. I'm serious. You're hurting me. (A pause. Max catches his breath.)

[...]

Horst: Why'd you have to spoil it? You were making me warm.

Why can't you be gentle?

Max: I am.

Horst: You're not. You try to hurt me. You make warm, and then you hurt me. I hurt enough. I don't want to feel more pain.

Why can't you be gentle?

Max: I am.

Horst: No you're not. You're like them. You're like the Gestapo.

You're like the guards. We stopped being gentle. I watched it, when we were on the outside. People made pain and called it love. I don't want to be like that. You don't make love to hurt.⁶⁵

Here Sherman stages the violence he detects in the gay community and ultimately equates the sado-masochistic desire with fascism. Horst says, "You're like the Gestapo,"

⁶⁵ Ibid., 578-79.

and though he makes no connection between Max and the concentration camp, the line indicates that Sherman sees history in layers. The desensitized nature of “making pain and calling it love” by extension allowed the Nazis to conquer, while those who could have fought were busy elsewhere.⁶⁶ Horst’s line makes a case for a much gentler and supposedly more joyful homosexuality more in line with the ideals of the initial gay liberation movement than with the Tom-of-Finland masculinity of the late 1970s and early 1980s. As *Torch Song Trilogy* would do only a couple of years later, *Bent* essentially makes a plea for domesticating the gay man, fashioning gay sex in terms of a heteronormative and gentle love.⁶⁷ By creating the Nazi / leather analogy that condemns a contemporary seventies gay culture of exaggerated masculinity, rough sex, leather, promiscuity, and what the playwright perceives to be an inability to love, Sherman offers

⁶⁶ The topic of homosexuality and the Nazi movement, the SS, and the Gestapo is a highly complicated one. The charge of homosexuality was leveled against the NSDAP (*Nationalsozialistische Deutsche Arbeiterpartei*) by its critics in the 1920s and 1930s as a way of delegitimizing the movement in the eyes of the highly conservative German population. On the other hand, the charge of homosexuality was used by the Nazi movement itself towards people and groups it considered internal enemies. The execution of Ernst Rohm on the so-called “night of the long knives,” after which *Bent* takes its beginning, is just the most obvious example of that. There is no doubt that the Nazi movement was a hyper-masculinized movement, and this in itself opens it up to charges of homosexuality. Evidently, the Nazis relied implicitly on homosocial structures among its soldiers and simultaneously used the necessity of a strong masculine state as an excuse for a host of violent measures against the Germans, in a supposed defense for the threatened nation. The quote by Himmler at the opening of this chapter is but one example of this. For more on the sexual politics of the Nazi movement and the Third Reich see: Harry Oosterhuis, *Homosexuality and Male Bonding in Pre-Nazi Germany: The Youth Movement, ed., The Gay Movement, Before Hitler’s Rise—Original Transcripts from Der Eigene, the First Gay Journal in the World*, trans., Hubert Kennedy (New York: Harrington Press, 1991); Jeffrey M. Peck and Jürgen Lemke, “Being Gay in Germany: an Interview with Jürgen Lemke,” *New German Critique* 52 (1991): 144-54; Dagmar Herzog, “Sexuality, Memory, Morality,” *History & Memory* (2005): 238-66; Dagmar Herzog, “Hubris and Hypocrisy, Incitement and Disavowal: Sexuality and German Fascism,” *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 11 (2002): 3-21. For analysis of later sexual movements in West Germany, see Dagmar Herzog, “Pleasure, Sex, and Politics Belong Together”: Post-Holocaust Memory and the Sexual Revolution in West Germany,” *Critical Inquiry* 24 (1998): 393-444; Katrin Sieg, “Deviance and Dissidence: Sexual Subjects of the Cold War,” in *Cruising the Performative: Interventions into the Representation of Ethnicity, Nationality, and Sexuality*, ed. Sue-Ellen Case, Phillip Brett, and Susan Leigh Foster (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995), 93-111; Johanna-Christian Busker and Ricardo Westphal, “Die Geschichte der Homosexuellenbewegung in Deutschland seit 1968 und ihre Auswirkungen auf das Bild von Schwulen und Lesben in der Gesellschaft” (Studienarbeit, MA thesis, accessed through Verlag für Akademische Texte. Document Number: V39323).

⁶⁷ This is not to say that plenty of heterosexual people do not engage in sado-masochistic sexual activities; they do. However, these would not be defined as heteronormative sexual practices either.

a negative heritage sensibility. The success of the performances both in the United States and in Western Europe can be attributed to the strategic conceptualization and use of queer history in which a present danger is mirrored in past struggle and heroic defiance. This heritage approach, in which any performance of the play becomes “attitudes toward the legacy of the past,” allows us to understand the representation of history as actively constructing new collective memory in an ongoing process of intercultural gay identity formation. The heritage approach fashions gay history not in but rather through representation and performance of a present informed by multiple pasts.

One final word before we turn to an analysis of the reception of *Bent* in the United States and Western Europe: it is impossible to overlook the discrepancy in *Bent* between the gruesome material history of the treatment of gay men in Dachau and other concentration camps and the representation of this suffering in *Bent*. Sherman’s play has often, for good reason, been criticized for romanticizing the camp experience through its portrayal of Max’s journey towards pride. The pink triangle is often invoked as a weapon against a loss of collective memory (i.e., the oft-repeated phrase that “the Holocaust must never be forgotten”). This was the case in the opening epigraph of a collection of essays on gay liberation, *Pink Triangles: Radical Perspectives on Gay Liberation*. The epigraph, shaped like a triangle, reads:

Not only the Jews were imprisoned and murdered in Fascist Germany. Other groups faced the same persecution, including gypsies, socialists and homosexuals. In the concentration camps each group was forced to wear an identifying symbol. For the Jews it was a yellow star, for the homosexuals, a pink triangle. Today

the pink triangle has been revived so that we don't forget our gay history, or that the gay movement is part of a larger social movement for social liberation. Thus we've chosen Pink Triangles as the title for this book.⁶⁸

Sherman is aligned with this use of the triangle as a modern symbol invoking historical suffering. However, I would argue that, despite all its immense physical representation of the concentration camp itself, in some ways *Bent* all too easily lets us forget under the guise of remembrance. How else does one explain the function of the overt sexual nature of two well-sculpted, naked, male torsos onstage engaging in verbal intercourse? A large number of the newspaper illustrations in the United States chose the image of the shirtless men under a stark sun to accompany their reviews. Interestingly, this is rarely the case in England and Denmark, and never the case in Germany.⁶⁹ Judging by these illustrations, the actors chosen to perform as Max and Horst in the United States of America are often conventionally good-looking and muscular. The more sexual and sensational nature of the US production with Richard Gere is revealing in relation to the more reserved European reception. Before turning to an analysis of the German reception in comparison with the British and Danish reception, I find it useful to analyze the US reception.

In his review of the staging of *Bent* in New York City, Walter Kerr, then the leading theatre critic of the *New York Times* and thus an important arbiter of taste,

⁶⁸ Pam Mitchell, ed., *Pink Triangles: Radical Perspectives on Gay Liberation* (Boston: Alyson Publications, Inc., 1980).

⁶⁹ This analysis is based in my work in the archives of the Theatre History Museum in Copenhagen, Denmark; the Lesbian and Gay News Archive (LAGNA) at Bristol University in London, England; and the library and archives of the Schwules Museum in Berlin, Germany. All these archives had extensive clippings from performances of *Bent*, most of which will be discussed in the following analysis of the reception of *Bent*.

distinguished between “the theatergoer and the *serious* theatergoer.” In his review he wrote, that the serious theatergoer must go see *Bent* because it is “not an exclusively serious play for exclusively serious-minded people. Rather, an imperfect play with so much talent embedded in it that those among us who have made a long-term commitment to theater—to theater *as such*—owe it their presence.”⁷⁰ Here, I believe, we can detect the special connection in the United States between homosexuality and middlebrow cultural production. More so than other identity groups (defined by ethnicity or class), homosexuality—and in particular male homosexuality—holds a special place in the structure of middlebrow cultural production. This is the same homology between the middlebrow and male homosexuality discussed in chapter one of this dissertation. *Bent* with its combination of homosexual titillation, heroic history (after all the United States won the war), serious politics, and representations of what in the United States, particularly following the broadcast of *Holocaust*, is an exclusively Jewish experience, and fulfills all the criteria for a “serious” middlebrow theater: entertainment mixed with a sense (or pretense) of liberal politics. Unwittingly, Kerr elaborated on this when he wrote:

“Bent,” on the surface of things, is crammed—particularly its spellbinding first half—with the garish shock values of sheer melodrama, values that “serious” drama ordinarily washes its hands of. The ambience of the play is emphatically homosexual.⁷¹

Homosexuality here is aligned with the “garish shock values of sheer melodrama” that “serious” drama cannot contain or tolerate. Yet, it seems that it is exactly the combination

⁷⁰ Walter Kerr, “For the ‘Serious’ Theatergoer,” *New York Times*, December 16, 1979.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*

of “serious” and “homosexual” that intrigued Kerr. In an earlier article announcing the arrival of the play on Broadway, Kerr also discussed the homosexual nature of the play:

In a homosexual pad—the language and atmosphere seem genuinely contemporary—two friends and lovers are recovering from the night’s bout with liquor, cocaine, and sado-masochistic sex.⁷²

He much preferred the second act, which one could argue is the actual homosexual act: here the characters become more than *Cabaret* stereotypes. Kerr continued:

It plays as crackling, sobering, authentically dramatic event, as something to be believed in, something all too possible, something to be pursued—avidly—from one plausible step to the next. Playwright Sherman is no doubt helped by history here; though we may know few details of Germany’s homosexual purge, the Jewish Holocaust hovers over the horrors as if to verify them.⁷³

Kerr’s observation that Sherman is “helped by history” confirms the way in which *Bent* is a heritage play, an attitude toward the past. According to Kerr, the Jewish Holocaust, and I would argue *Holocaust*, ghosted the production. In the United States, then, the well-known suffering of European Jewry during the Third Reich adds authenticity to Sherman’s play and heightens its representation of the suffering of homosexuals. It introduces the central issue of the way in which Sherman raises the question of who suffered the most, a question Frank Rich, who admired *Holocaust* for its combination of

⁷² Walter Kerr, “‘Bent,’ Starring Richard Gere,” *New York Times*, December 3, 1979.

⁷³ Kerr, “Serious Theatregoer.”

art and commerce, called “tasteless and gratuitous” in his review of the replacement cast.⁷⁴

Every so often, it seems, the *New York Times* decides to analyze the relationship between Broadway and the London West End. In early February of 1980, Mel Gussow wrote an article discussing four contemporary transfers from the West End to Broadway: Pinter’s *Betrayal*, Sherman’s *Bent*, Stoppard’s *Night and Day*, and Lloyd Webber’s *Evita*. In contrasting the London production with the Broadway production, Gussow touches on two enlightening issues: specificity vs. universality and realism vs. stylized (actually Brechtian) modes of representation. Gussow observes:

“*Bent*” is a play by a young American writer about homosexuals persecuted in prewar Germany and it received its first full production in London with English actors. Now it has returned with an American company and director. In neither the West End nor the Broadway productions was there an attempt to simulate German accents or even atmosphere, which seems very much in keeping with the author’s primary attention—to show the universality of the homosexual experience.⁷⁵

I find it curious that Gussow would describe the atmosphere of *Bent* to be non-German despite the lack of accents. Given the costuming of all the productions from which I have looked at illustrations, it is iconic German concentration camp. As we will see in the criticism from Britain and Germany, even the scenes of the first act of the play are judged

⁷⁴ Frank Rich, “Michael York Heads New ‘Bent’ Cast,” *New York Times*, June 19, 1980.

⁷⁵ Mel Gussow, “London to Broadway: How a Culture Shapes a Show,” *New York Times*, February 3, 1980.

to be very *Cabaret*-like, which in most cases means “Hollywood Weimar Germany.”

Curiously, in Gussow’s analysis of the London production:

The subsequent scenes of flight and terror were staged in a more melodramatic fashion, as if in a British war movie, perhaps so that the British audiences could relate to the difficult subject matter. In New York, the director, Allan Ackerman, attempts to create a more imaginative and free-flowing production. For one thing, the stage is far less cluttered with realistic scenery.⁷⁶

What Gussow interprets as a choice from the British director, Robert Chetwyn, to make the performance seem melodramatic is being interpreted in Europe as something inherently American in the script. In England, to a lesser degree in Denmark, but certainly in Germany, the play’s melodramatic overtones are being interpreted not as attempts at localization but rather as unfortunate consequences of a US culture of excess and commodification.

It may be that the performance in New York City strove for a more abstract scenic expression, but the acting seems to have been in the method acting vein. In discussing the crucial intercourse scene in which Max and Horst have sex without ever touching or looking at one another, Gussow writes:

In New York, Mr. Gere gyrates in the manner of a rock singer and utters a moan of ecstasy. In London, Mr. McKellen’s excitement was completely internalized. In the context of the play, the London approach was more believable. Surely, Mr. Gere’s movements would have been noticed by prison guards. The two approaches

⁷⁶ Ibid.

demonstrate an essential difference between English and American acting—between classicism and emotionalism.⁷⁷

Gussow's speculation regarding the veracity of the performance notwithstanding, it does seem that the acting style—and maybe in particular Gere's sexual performance as Max—resulted in a very different and specifically “American” performance.⁷⁸ That Gere strove for a realistic performance of his character can also be seen in an interview he gave to the *New York Times*, in which he described his research for the performance. In the interview, Gere explained that both the worlds of homosexuality and of the concentration camps were virtually unknown to him prior to working on *Bent*. He said, “I decided to visit Dachau [...]. It was an extraordinary experience. I could feel the place, even seem to smell it, long before I got there. I visited drag clubs in Munich, and, somehow, the gay scene seemed angrier there than it does here.”⁷⁹ It seems important to Gere to ensure the readers that the gay scene was unknown to him in an effort to distance himself from the homosexual characters and their suffering; whereas Dachau is a haunting experience to Gere, the West German gay scene is deemed angrier than the supposedly gayer gay scene in the United States. Dachau as the historical place of suffering is thus made an authentic and extraordinary experience, whereas the gay scene is understood as troubling and maybe surprisingly unlike the *Cabaret*-scene Gere may have expected to find.

David Dukes, Gere's colleague in the role of Horst, also had particular observations on the homosexual nature of the play. In discussing Dukes's playing Horst,

⁷⁷ Ibid.

⁷⁸ I would suggest that the difference is not so much between classicism and emotionalism as between Brecht and naturalism.

⁷⁹ Tom Buckley, “‘Bent’ to Dramatize Little-Told Nazi Horror,” *New York Times*, November 15, 1979.

Eleanor Blau reported in the *New York Times*, that unlike Gere, Dukes did not prepare in any particular way because, “For one thing, Mr. Dukes, who is heterosexual, thought Horst was too much of an individual to affect ‘limp-wristed’ mannerisms, which Mr. Dukes considers to be copied behavior. Besides, no one with such manners would have survived at Dachau, he said.”⁸⁰ Mr. Dukes’s theory of the relationship between effeminacy and individuality notwithstanding, the quote reveals a structural discrepancy in the US performance. Mr. Gere, “gyrating” on stage, is evidently not concerned with the realism of the performance, whereas Mr. Dukes reveals a concern that effeminate men would never have survived at Dachau. This, I believe, indicates the cultural anxiety surrounding the performance of homosexuality in the US theatre, which, as I have argued previously, situates it perfectly within the general anxiety of the middlebrow theatre. This becomes even more apparent when Blau’s report continues: “One scene, however, caused him trouble during early rehearsals. That is the scene in which he makes love to Mr. Gere—without touching, using only words—since they are being watched by the guards.” This homosexual love affair was hard for Mr. Dukes to perform, so “in an effort to empathize with his character, Mr. Dukes tried to picture ‘this girlfriend and that girlfriend’ of his own while spelling out to Mr. Gere’s body he was in fantasy, caressing.”⁸¹ In reassuring the reader (and, by extension, the spectator) that Dukes is imagining sex with a woman and not with Gere, Dukes heterosexualizes the performance. This heterosexualization, in reality an attempt at universalizing the performance, is

⁸⁰ Eleanor Blau, “How David Dukes Solved a Problem in Playing ‘Bent,’” *New York Times*, December 13, 1979.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*

touched upon towards the end of the article. The play, Mr. Dukes emphasized, does not merely concern homosexuality. “It’s about loving and bravery and spirit and survival.”⁸²

Unlike the mostly positive reception of the play in New York City, the reception in Britain was not overly concerned with universalizing the topic of homosexuality. Gene Plunka claims that “London theater reviewers gave the play negative notices” with only a handful of them “offering positive commentary.” Plunka explains that “the major complaints were that Sherman’s play was sensationalized and also glamorized homosexual love in the inauspicious setting of a concentration camp.”⁸³ While I agree that many critics understood the play as sensationalized, I suggest that the reasons for this critique are more ideological and determined by an anti-American and homophobic sentiment.

John Lahr in a quite perceptive review in *New Society*, a leftist weekly political magazine, related the play squarely to the US origins of its writer and to the commodified nature of US culture. Lahr wrote:

But the great American Queen has been politicized. Like any oppressed minority seeking to broadcast its new identity, the homosexual now requires images of nobility, not irony. This is a necessary historical process, good for the cause but bad for art since old categories are merely replaced by new ones. And in America especially, protest and commerce are soon bedfellows:

⁸² Ibid.

⁸³ Gene A. Plunka, *Holocaust Drama: the Theater of Atrocity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 236. A number of other works on theatrical representation of the Holocaust completely ignore *Bent*. See for example: Bigsby, *Remembering and Imagining the Holocaust* and Claude Schumacher, ed., *Staging the Holocaust: the Shoah in Drama and Performance* (Cambridge, MA: Cambridge University Press, 1998).

and what begins in fury ends in fashion. Every dogma has its day, and homosexuals have replaced the Indians, revolutionaries and blacks as America's radical software.⁸⁴

He continued:

Undaunted and with all the fervour of a man who knows that the time for his hero has come, Martin Sherman tries to deliver the all-purpose gay lib play just as *Indians*, *Hair*, and *The Great White Hope* caught the wave of minority protest and ride it straight to the bank. Sherman has worked his metaphor into the perfect theatrical package: Nazi atrocity, unrequited love, fag and drag, gay pride. Inevitable, *Bent* exploits the homosexual stereotypes it purports to decry.⁸⁵

Lahr, following the European left's dogma of anti-American discourse, decries what he perceives to be *Bent*'s performance of politics for money's sake. In Lahr's analysis, *Bent* is sensationalist not for the purpose of liberation or of creating any kind of "real" historical awareness. Rather, Sherman, according to Lahr, turns "fury into fashion," which is to say that the commodified nature of the field of cultural production in the United States immediately absorbs that which threatens to destabilize a vulnerable hegemony. Lahr, being US-American himself, is clearly voicing a critique of the US nature of Sherman's play that in the USA could be considered fulfilling the anti-American fantasy of described in chapter one.

⁸⁴ John Lahr, "Political fag and drag," *New Society* 24 (1979). *Bent* clippings file, LAGNA

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*

Sherman's US origins are mentioned several times in Lahr's review, primarily as a means to denounce how *Bent* attempts to universalize the oppression of contemporary gay people through not only analogizing suffering but also organizing it hierarchically.

Lahr continued:

By linking the holocaust [sic] to homosexual rights, the play makes this special pleading irresistible and sensational. But to argue from the particular homosexual hero to the heroism of homosexuality has the same logic as the prejudice that takes the example of Larry Grayson's act to suggest that all homosexuals are limp-wristed.⁸⁶

In other words, Lahr is critical of both *Bent*'s commercialism and its attempt at universalizing a specific historical event. This runs contrary to much of the reception in the United States but also to other views of the play in Britain. A critic of the Oldham production from 1980, for example, wrote that "the strength of 'Bent' is that it is about today and despite the cliché, its theme is universal."⁸⁷

In *Gay Left: a Gay Socialist Journal*, *Bent* was reviewed by Barry Davis, who was positive toward Sherman's project, yet skeptical towards the merits of the production itself. Fundamentally, according to Davis, Sherman "meant to relate to the contemporary situation of gays" by the ways he "alluded to the sado-masochistic elements that he sees as a predominant element in the contemporary American (and doubtless British) gay sub-

⁸⁶ Ibid. Larry Grayson was a British music hall comedian famous for his high camp humor.

⁸⁷ Chris Shepherd, "Greatest show has standing ovation," *Oldham Evening Chronicle*, April 22, 1980. *Bent* clippings file, LAGNA. The Oldham production of *Bent* was the site of intense controversy. *The Oldham Evening Chronicle* could report that "opinion is polarised by the main protagonists. On the one hand, Pastor Hewitt of Failsworth, revolted and sickened by the prospect although he admits that he has not seen the play; in favour, the Rev. Neil Richardson, whose comments in his church magazine were the spark of all that has been written in recent weeks." "Today in Oldham," *Oldham Evening Chronicle*, November 26, 1979. *Bent* clippings file, LAGNA.

culture.”⁸⁸ Again, we see the sadomasochistic eroticism of the play theorized as a particularly American (or, at least, originating in the United States) and particularly damaging part of gay culture. Davis here draws connections between capitalist US gay sexuality and German Fascism. Furthermore, Davis is critical of Sherman’s use of the Jewish identity as a sounding board for homosexual suffering. He writes:

I believe that Sherman has obscured so much of our understanding by involving us in the metaphor of the Jewish identity. To take on such an identity voluntarily was unlikely in any case, except of course in theatrical or literary contrivance (as in Frisch’s *Andorra*) or when it was clear that this was a gesture and not reality (as when the King of Denmark and many of his subjects donned the yellow star in defiance of the German anti-Jewish measures in 1943).⁸⁹

Like Frank Rich in the United States, Davis finds Sherman unethical in his analogy of suffering, but seems more offended that the idea is unbelievable. He criticizes the British broadcast of *Holocaust* for doing something similar in the way it “spread a certain awareness of the events of the period, though it did a profound disservice to the actual facts of suffering of the Jews and of others, perhaps in the interest of commercial viability.”⁹⁰ Again, as we will also see in the German reception—though not in the Danish reception—the charge of commercialization, which is typically code for anti-Americanism, is crucial in understanding the critical reception of the play and its production of gay male identity.

⁸⁸ Barry Davis, “Bent: a Play by Martin Sherman,” *Gay Left: a Gay Socialist Journal* 9: 31-3. Gay magazine collection, LAGNA archive.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.* That the Danish King and general population wore yellow stars in 1943 as a way of criticizing the German occupation of Denmark and the treatment of Danish Jews is, unfortunately, a myth.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*

Specific to the British reception is a significant amount of homophobia. Sir Peter Hall, who was then director of the National Theatre, characterized the play as “A Manhattan fag’s fantasy—black leather and swastikas in concentration camps [...] salacious and sentimental. Phew.”⁹¹ Besides Hall’s derogatory description of Sherman as both “Manhattan” and “fag”—and it is unclear which is worst to Hall—we see the fascination with the sexual aspect of the leather and the oppression, something that in Hall’s account seems particular to the United States. In the *Guardian*, Michael Billington wrote, “With the exception of *Edward II* and *A Patriot For Me*, I can think of few good plays about homosexuality.”⁹² Likewise, Desmond Pratt, writing for the *Yorkshire Post* wrote:

Mr. Sherman, an American author, has dredged up a subject apparently unknown by historians, dramatists, and film producers. Or was it perhaps that they wished not to put pen to paper about it? It appears that in Germany of the 1930s homosexuals were hated even more than the Jews and the play portrays the sufferings inflicted on their minority group. Yet after the war, it is factual that British soldiers brought back German newspapers that proved there was considerable homosexuality in Germany three years after 1936, the time of this play. Mr. Sherman, could, I think, have found finer examples of human suffering.⁹³

⁹¹ Clipping from unidentified newspaper September 14, 1983. *Bent* clippings file, LAGNA.

⁹² Michael Billington, “Bent,” *Guardian*, April 5, 1979. *Bent* clippings file, LAGNA.

⁹³ Desmond Pratt, *Yorkshire Post*, November 27, 1978. *Bent* clippings file, LAGNA.

In his criticism of *Bent*, Pratt obviously considers Sherman's US origins important and influential on the way Sherman understands the war and the history of the Holocaust. He seems on the verge of indicating that it might be better if the story of the gay Holocaust remained untold, and, not least, comes close to revising history by suggesting that even if the representation of history in *Bent* was factual, the Nazis were unsuccessful in their endeavors.

Bent was performed in Denmark at the small theatre Strøghus Teatret. Its artistic director was Ebbe Langberg, who later became artistic director of Rialto Teatret, at which *Torch Song Trilogy*, *As Is*, and *The Normal Heart* were performed throughout the 1980s. In other words, despite never directing any of the plays, Ebbe Langberg, as artistic director, was singlehandedly responsible for most of the importation of American gay theatre to Denmark in the 1980s. Strøghus Teatret was a rather small theatre located in central Copenhagen. The stage for *Bent* was located in the middle of the room with bleachers for the audience on both sides. Throughout the performance then, the audience was watching not only the action, but also the other audience members. Unwittingly, maybe, the Danish production made this connection in its adding "the others" to the title: *Bent-De Andre (Bent-The Others)*.⁹⁴ In the second act, four concrete pillars were erected and rusty barbed wire strung around the stage, which was transformed into a "muddy sandbox."⁹⁵ As critic Birgitte Grue wrote, "It is close to being too much—also because it

⁹⁴ In much of the criticism of the performance, the title is considered confusing. Bent is an old Danish male name. Adding "the others" to the title is an attempt to solve the problem of there being nobody named Bent in the performance.

⁹⁵ Birgitte Grue, *Aktuelt*, December 11, 1980. *Bent* clippings file, TheaM.

both rains and sparks fly from the barbed wire in Steffen Aarfings overwhelmingly naturalist set design.”⁹⁶

Generally speaking, the Danish critics were impressed with the production. Like the US critics, they seemed intent on universalizing the play. In terms of acting, Viggo Sørensen wrote in *Jyllands Posten* about the play’s representation of its homosexual characters:

Generally speaking, Birgitte Price has managed to direct so that the homosexuals are represented clearly with their unique characteristics in soul and body intact, and without any kind of ridicule of their particularity.⁹⁷

While most critics agree with Sørensen that the performances were excellent, Svend Kragh-Jacobsen, writing in *Berlingske Tidende*, was most relieved that nobody showed any gay mannerisms while acting in what he called a very “human tragedy.”⁹⁸

In terms of discussing the supposedly universal message of the play, the Danish critics again aligned themselves with the US critics, with only a couple of dissenting voices. Elin Rask, writing in what was then Denmark’s only Christian newspaper, considered the play a work about the conditions of humanity in societies in crisis. She wrote:

Strøghus Teatret currently houses a strange performance—strange in more than one way. The performance, called “Bent—the

⁹⁶ Det er lige ved at blive for meget—og også da det i Steffen Aarfings overvældende naturalistiske scenografi både regner på scenen og da pigtråden slår gnister! Ibid.

⁹⁷ Men i det hele taget har Birgitte Price forstået at instruere, så homoseksuelle står med deres karakteristika i væsen og fremtoning uden nogen form for latterliggørelse af deres egenart. Viggo Sørensen, *Jyllands Posten*, December 11, 1980. *Bent* clippings file, TheaM.

⁹⁸ Svend Kragh-Jacobsen, “Den Lyserøde Trekant,” (the Pink Triangle), *Berlingske Tidende*, December 11, 1980. Clipping from *Bent* file, TheaM.

others,” is written by the American playwright Martin Sherman and is about the conditions of the outsider in a society in crisis.⁹⁹

And she further explained:

Sherman’s play concerns the homosexuals in Germany and the Nazi’s systematic eradication/execution of a group of people who were considered even lower than the Jews! Of course “Bent-the others” also has a message for our own time—why else perform it. [...] What is the state of tolerance in our own society? Where will the current crisis take us?¹⁰⁰

Clearly, the Danish program for the performance must have explained the ranking of the different groups of prisoners. Every single Danish review mentions the idea that the homosexual prisoners were lower than the Jews, which is a fabrication of collective memory happening in large part because of *Bent*.¹⁰¹ Despite her argument for the relevance of the topic, Elin Rask claims that the play is too melodramatic to be truly efficient, and one can suspect, based on the general reception of American popular culture in Denmark, that Rask ascribes its melodramatic nature to its American origins.

⁹⁹ Strøghus Teatret er rammen om en ejendommelig forestilling, ejendommelig i mere end en forstand. Forestillingen, der hedder “Bent—de andre” er skrevet af den amerikanske dramatiker Martin Sherman, og den handler om outsiderens kår i et samfund i krise. Elin Rask, “Fortidens Spøgelser—Nutidens Problemer,” (“The Ghosts of the Past—The Problems of Today”), *Kristeligt Dagblad*, December 11, 1980. *Bent* clippings file, TheaM.

¹⁰⁰ Shermans skuespil handler om de homoseksuelle i Tyskland og om nazisternes systematiske udradning af en gruppe mennesker der blev anset for ringere endnu end jøder! Naturligvis har “Bent-de andre” også bud til vor egen tid, ellers var der ingen grund til at opføre det. [...] hvordan står det til med tolerancen i vort eget samfund? Hvorhen fører krisen os idag. Ibid.

¹⁰¹ Like every nation in Europe, Denmark has a very particular understanding of itself and its position in World War II. Part of this collective memory is, as was mentioned in the British review, that the Danish king wore a yellow star, when there is absolutely no evidence of this. The Danish government had a collaborationist policy with the German occupation forces, the ethics of which has lately been questioned in the field of Danish history. However, in 1980, Denmark still saw itself as the country that saved its Jews by sailing them to Sweden, often willfully forgetting the steep price at which those transports happened.

This was also the charge against *Holocaust* in several other European countries, as previously shown.

Randi K. Nielsen, writing in the Communist newspaper *Land og Folk*, observed that “[it is a] well-performed, coherent performance in which gays and Nazism are only the superficial carriers of a more universal message.”¹⁰² That, Nielsen elaborates, is the simple message that it is wrong to oppress anybody for economic gain, and that, regardless of sexuality, it is necessary to “invest” in other people to be free.¹⁰³

The only slightly dissenting voice came from the critic at *Ekstrabladet*, then Denmark’s leading tabloid. True to tabloid form the review starts:

It’s one hell of a Christmas show Ebbe Langberg puts on at Strøghus Teatret. “Bent” will take the sweetness right out of your marzipan. [...] Think of the Holocaust while you decorate the tree and send your money for gifts to Amnesty International.¹⁰⁴

Managing to comment on the excessive consumption that usually takes place in the weeks to Christmas and on the Holocaust at the same time, the writer continues to endorse the performance as an exhilarating experience. In general, *Ekstrabladet* took great interest in the performance, running a page-length description of the plot the Friday before the opening. Obviously, *Bent* was considered to be quite an event in Copenhagen. More than that, the tabloid also used material from the program to question Denmark’s own position in the war. The middlespread of the program was a collection of quotes

¹⁰² Det er en velspillet, sammenhængende forestilling, hvor bøsser og nazisme kun bliver de ydre omstændigheder for et almenmenneskeligt budskab. Randi K. Pedersen, “Velanvendt Realisme,” (Well-used Realism”), *Land og Folk*, December 12, 1980. *Bent* clippings file, TheaM.

¹⁰³ Ibid.

¹⁰⁴ Satan til juleforestilling Ebbe Langberg sætter op I Strøghus Teatret. “Bent” skal nok tage det søde af marcipanen. [...] Tænk paa Holocaust mens træet pyntes og send julegavepengene til Amnesty International. *Ekstrabladet*, December 11, 1980. *Bent* clippings file, TheaM.

from Danish politicians, intellectuals, and thinkers from the 1930s praising Hitler's Germany.¹⁰⁵ Some of these quotes were reproduced in the newspaper spread and thus dared to ask readers and audience members to consider their own complicity in oppression. These quotes, I would argue, effectively act as correction to the process of creating collective memory in *Bent*. The quotes ask audience members to contemplate just how easily one can end up on the wrong side of history. The critic's only complaint hints at a certain irritation over the import of American culture. He writes that "the title is confusing: 'Bent' means preference in English, but most people still speak some Danish in this city and the play is about homosexuals in Hitler's extermination camps."¹⁰⁶ Compared to the harsher criticism of the United States in the British press, the Danish critics are impressed by both the play and its "human" portrait of homosexuals. In Germany, however, the reception was more complicated.

Bent was first performed in West Germany at Nationaltheater Mannheim in 1980.¹⁰⁷ The production was directed by Jürgen Bosse. The following years saw a number of more or less professional productions of *Bent* in West Germany. In 1981, *Bent* was performed at the Schiller-Theater-Werkstatt in Berlin in a production directed by Hans Gratzer. In 1988, it was performed in Cologne at Theater Der Keller in a production directed by Wolfgang Trautwein. In 1994, the play was performed by the English-speaking theater group Berlin Play Actors in Theater Zerbrochene Fenster in Berlin. The production was directed by Rik Maverik. Finally, in 1998, *Bent* was performed at the

¹⁰⁵ The program from the performance is in the *Bent* clippings file, TheaM.

¹⁰⁶ Titlen er forvirrende: "Bent" betyder tilbøjelighed på engelsk, men de fleste taler stadig noget dansk her i byen og stykket handler om homoseksuelle i Hitlers koncentrationslejre. Ibid.

¹⁰⁷ In a later tourist brochure attempting to brand Mannheim as Germany's Queer Capital (I suspect Berliners would disagree with this!), it is prominently mentioned that Mannheim hosted the German premiere of *Bent*.

Wolfgang-Borchert-Theater in Münster in a production directed by Heinz-Rudolf Müller.¹⁰⁸ Obviously, *Bent* has been an important play in Germany, and I believe it has been so exactly because it is a heritage and not a history play. Because it represents an attitude towards the past rather than a representation of the past, it allows German audiences to engage with the narrative while discrediting it as American.

As previously discussed, West Germany in 1979 was in a process of rediscovery of the Holocaust, the population's complicity in the atrocities, and a discussion of how to move forward in time without forgetting history. It was a time of tremendous anxiety for the nation.¹⁰⁹ In reviewing the London production of *Bent*, Lutz Liebelt wrote:

Martin Sherman's play helps understanding the double meaning of the word/term 'bent', so that the tragedy of the extinction of homosexuals is equated with the million-fold murder of Jews, in a way that did not denigrate the victims but in which the henchmen and torturers appear as the truly perverted monsters. So that we should not be surprised by their clichéd depictions in war novels, films, and on TV, that nowadays are such an aggravation to Germans.¹¹⁰

¹⁰⁸ This list is in all likelihood not complete (for example, it cannot account for amateur performances). My knowledge of productions has primarily been constructed from theater programs and newspaper clippings contained in the *Bent* clippings file at the Schwules Museum Library and Archive in Berlin. I have information about one more production that I cannot place: a production by the "free" (freie) group Theater am Einlass that took place in Theater in Brienner Strasse. I suspect that this is what is now the Teamtheater in Munich. This would be the only performance mentioned in this dissertation performed by one of the collective theatre troupes that were an important part of Western European theatre in the 1970s and 1980s.

¹⁰⁹ Not only was the country now being forced by the broadcast of *Holocaust* to face its past in a very public way, it had also been facing significant threats throughout the 1970s from domestic terrorism. The Red Army Faction (better known as the Baader-Meinhoff Gang) had terrorized the nation with kidnappings, murders, and bombings that brought memories of the 1920s and 1930s, and deeply destabilized civil order.

¹¹⁰ Martin Sherman's Stück verhilft der Doppelbedeutung des Wortes 'bent' zu einem Verständnis, in dessen Licht der Tragödie der Homosexuellenvernichtung dem millionenfachen Judenmord auf eine Weise

Liebelt, I believe, proposes a history/heritage divide in this analysis of *Bent*. He maintains the horrors of the events, but he simultaneously utters frustration at the representation of Germans. Paragraph 130 in the German penal code outlaws *Volksverhetzung* (incitement of the people) under which Holocaust denial falls. More specifically, section three includes provisions against “denying and/or belittling any act committed under the rule of National Socialism,” and section four outlaws “assaulting the human dignity of the victims by approving of or rendering harmless the violent and arbitrary National Socialist rule.”¹¹¹ Liebelt, thus, must maintain that no denigration was taking place—if there was, a German production of *Bent* would have been impossible. However, it is apparent that Liebelt, without outright writing so, is frustrated by the essentially foreign representation of the Holocaust and, importantly, the German guards, henchmen, and torturers’ role in the atrocities. In some ways then, *Bent* in Germany becomes not about Max or Horst but about their guards and killers.

The same frustration and sense of having a national (and personal, if history really is a structure of feeling) history appropriated for entertainment, can be seen in *Der Spiegel*’s review initial review of *Cabaret*:

Director Bob Fosse has revived the old varieté genre and at the same time overloads it. Using a short story and motifs of a novel by the British writer Christopher Isherwood, he wanted to launch new stars, new songs, and capricious sex, and with it he wanted to

gleichgesetzt wird, daß nicht die entwürdigten Opfer, sondern deren Henker und Folterknechte als wahrhaft perverse Monstren erscheinen; so daß wir uns über deren klischeehafte Darstellung in Kriegsromanen, Filmen und Fernsehstücken, die den Deutschen heute ein großes Ärgernis sind, eigentlich gar nicht wundern dürfen. Lutz Liebelt, “Rosa Dreieck als Hoffnung und Lied: zur Uraufführung des Stückes “Bent” von Martin Sherman in London,” *Heimat-Zeitung*, July 14, 1979. *Bent* clippings file, Schwul.

¹¹¹ For this particular part of the German penal code, see: <>

reappraise history. Fosse “musicalizes” the dawn of the Nazi era.¹¹²

The critic clearly does not believe that Fosse succeeded in “reappraising” history, and he further finds the commercial nature of the movie tasteless. In the review it becomes clear that *Cabaret* is understood as a clear Americanization of German history for commercial purposes, which, to many German intellectuals, immediately disqualifies the cultural product from any serious discourse about the German past.

That *Cabaret* entered not only the US collective imagination and memory of the years leading up to the war, but that it also entered the German imagination and memory of itself can be seen by the review of *Bent* in *Der Spiegel*. There the critic dismissively writes about the play and its writer, “His hero, Max, is a Berlin homosexual, who snorts and deals cocaine, enjoys doing it with s/m leather dudes, and lives with a dancer who performs in gay bars; Berlin just like in the film *Cabaret*.”¹¹³ *Cabaret*, here, serves as a way of disengaging Germany from the play itself, I believe. The Germany represented in *Bent* is, by the logic of the review, fundamentally based on another fiction and as such unreliable. It is simply the “typical” representation of the German past. The critic continues his criticism of the US-American commercial nature of the play when he writes, “The facts are shattering, no question; the dramatization, however, does not live up to the reality. How could it? Sherman resorts to shock effects, film clichés,

¹¹² Den Regisseur Bob Fosse (Sweet Charity) hat das alte Tingeltangel-Genre belebt und überfordert zugleich: Nach Short-story- und Roman-Motiven des britischen Autors Christopher Isherwood wollte er unbedingt neue Stars, neue Songs, und kapriziöse Sex lancieren, aber dabei auch noch Zeitgeschichte aufarbeiten. Fosse musicalisiert den Anbruch der Nazizeit. “Tanz auf dem Vulkan,” *Der Spiegel* 40 (1972). *Bent* clippings file, Schwul.

¹¹³ Sein Held, Max, ist ein Berliner Homosexueller, der Kokain schnifft und damit handelt, es gern mit Sado-Masoch-Lederkerlen treibt und mit einem Tänzer zusammenlebt, der in einer Schwulen-Bar auftritt; Berlin wie im Film “Cabaret.” “Rosa Winkel,” *Der Spiegel* 17 (1980). *Bent*, clippings file, Schwul.

melodramatic devices, and laconic mini-dialogues.”¹¹⁴

Again, as we saw with the initial criticism of the performance in London, the critic here feels compelled to accept the horrors of the past all while decrying the cheapening of the representation of it. Of course, in Europe and in particular in Western Germany, “melodramatic” and “film clichés” mean “American” and essentially foreign.

The critic from *Der Spiegel* analyzed Sherman’s use of the Holocaust as a metaphor and reached the conclusion that, “the historical Holocaust is to Sherman (“I’m homosexual and I’m a Jew.”) also his metaphor—for “oppression to which homosexuals are still exposed.” Concentration camp as a reflection/mirror image of the world? With such a claim, the passion play evokes discomfort.”¹¹⁵ The categorization of *Bent* as a passion play should, I believe, not be understood as a reference to the large religious plays of Medieval Germany but rather as an understanding of *Bent* as a play of passion, in other words, as a melodrama. Understood in this way, *Bent* mirrors an American understanding of passion, sexuality, and melodrama in the gruesomeness of the concentration camp. In other words, the universality of the themes that was much heralded in the United States and Denmark and to a lesser degree in England, is understood in Germany as offensive. It is conceptualized, by this critic at least, as undoing the specificity of the German past by universalizing the suffering and localizing the villains: It generalizes heritage while localizing history.

¹¹⁴ Die Fakten sind erschütternd, keine Frage; die Dramatisierung freilich is der Wirklichkeit nicht gewachsen, wie könnte sie auch. Sherman behilft sich mit Schockfilm-Effekten, Kino-Klischees, Melodramatik und lakonischen Stummel-Dialogen. Ibid.

¹¹⁵ Der historische Holocaust ist für Sherman (“Ich bin homosexuell, und Ich bin Jude”) freilich auch seine Metapher—für die “Unterdrückung, der sich Homosexuelle noch heute ausgesetzt sehen.” KZ als Abbild der Welt? Mit solchen Anspruch erweckt das Passionspiel Unbehagen. Ibid.

CHAPTER FOUR

FLYING BACKWARDS THROUGH SPACE: *ANGELS IN AMERICA* IN THE USA, ENGLAND, DENMARK AND GERMANY¹

Fabulous was roughly the gay equivalent of that indefinable, ineffable thing young African Americans used to identify as *soul*, and later perhaps as badness and *def* and *phat*, and which Jews identify *menschlichkeit*. If you possess it, you don't need to ask what it is. When you attempt to delineate it, you move away from it.

Tony Kushner, foreword to *Staging Gay Lives*²

Before *Angels in America* opened on Broadway in April of 1993, *Millennium Approaches* was performed in London in a critically acclaimed production at the National Theatre. This early production was an indicator of the tremendous success that *Angels in America* would have internationally with performances all over the world. It might seem peculiar that a play so specifically US American would spark such international interest. It certainly did to Tony Kushner himself, who explained to Adam Mars-Jones in an interview at the National Theatre on 24 January 1992: "The play felt so much addressed to Americans and about America that I never really imagined it was going to go anywhere else."³ However, I believe that the international success of *Angels in America* must be seen as a combination of a renewed interest in the United States after the cold war, the prevalence of US popular culture throughout the world, and the immense

¹ Parts of this chapter were, in a slightly different format, published as Ken Nielsen, *Tony Kushner's "Angels in America"* (London: Continuum Books, 2008). For the purposes of this chapter and the argument set forth in this dissertation, I have eliminated most of the textual and character analyses from the book and added information to the radical contextualization and the information regarding the Danish and German productions.

² John M. Clum, ed., *Staging Gay Lives: an Anthology of Contemporary Gay Theater* (Boulder, CO: Westville Press, 1995).

³ Adam Mars-Jones, "Tony Kushner at the Royal National Theatre of Great Britain", in *Tony Kushner in Conversation*, ed. Robert Vorlicky (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1998), 18–29.

theatrical qualities in the play itself. More than any other US play from the last two decades, *Angels in America* intrigued an international audience and provided insights into the world's then only remaining superpower. For international audiences *Angels in America*, I argue, offered new insights into a nation that people around the world already felt they knew very well. Rather than understanding Kushner's undertaking as an attempt at deconstructing the nation, I contend that in *Angels in America* international audiences found a play into which they could project their own pre-conceived imagination—if not fantasy—of the United States.

Angels in America is arguably the most important American play to be produced in the past twenty years. From the moment *Millennium Approaches*, the first play in *Angels in America*, exploded onto the American (and international) stage, Tony Kushner became the most talked about contemporary playwright in America, once heralded as both a great revolutionizer and a savior of the American theatre. The play was, once produced, instantly recognized; *Millennium Approaches* won a Tony Award for best play in 1993; *Perestroika* won a Tony Award for the best play in 1994, and Tony Kushner was awarded the Pulitzer Prize for best drama in 1993 for *Millennium Approaches*. *Angels in America* seemed to energize the critics in a way that the American theatre had not been able to for a very long time. In his review of the first complete production of *Angels in America* at the Mark Taper Forum in Los Angeles in November of 1992, the influential theatre critic for the *New York Times*, Frank Rich, wrote that:

Some visionary playwrights want to change the world. Some want to revolutionize the theatre. Tony Kushner, the remarkably gifted

36-year-old author of “Angels in America,” is that rarity of rarities:
a writer who has the promise to do both.⁴

Rich’s reaction represents a general tendency towards hyperbole in the initial critical reception of *Angels in America*, John Lahr of the *New Yorker*, for example, called *Perestroika* “a Masterpiece” and claimed that “not since Williams has a playwright announced his poetic vision with such authority on the Broadway stage,” obviously drawing parallels between Tony Kushner and Tennessee Williams, author of iconic American plays like *A Streetcar Named Desire* and *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*.⁵ While both these quotes highlight the ecstatic tone of the initial reception, Rich’s review also highlights the extent to which Kushner came to embody *Angels in America* in the public. Through interviews, newspaper profiles, and TV appearances, Tony Kushner in significant ways came to represent his play. Kushner’s biography in its complexity (Jewish liberal vs. a conservative society, North/South, urban/rural, gay/straight), I contend, became part of the lure of the play itself.

What seemed so appealing about Tony Kushner was the way he in his play and through his biography galvanized disparate elements and historical movements of and within the American theatre and politics. *Angels in America* is of epic and tragic proportions, not unlike Eugene O’Neill’s mammoth plays such as *Mourning Becomes Electra* and *Strange Interlude*, dealing with the inner workings, functions, and histories of individuals, couples, and families. At the same time, it utilizes the Brechtian elements of the popular political theatre of the 1930s such as Clifford Odet’s play *Waiting for Lefty* and Marc Blitzstein’s anti-capitalist musical *The Cradle Will Rock*. Also, Kushner uses

⁴ Frank Rich, “Marching out of the Closet, into History,” *New York Times*, November 10, 1992.

⁵ John Lahr, “The Theatre: Earth Angels,” *New Yorker*, December 13, 1993.

elements of Tennessee Williams's lyricism in the creation of characters, particular in Harper, who is as lost and delusional as Blanche Dubois in her search for love and belonging (besides, of course, giving Prior the famous line 'I've always depended on the kindness of strangers' from *A Streetcar Named Desire* as a direct homage to Williams). Furthermore, Kushner actively borrows from conventions of musical theatre and theatrical spectacle to create a fast-paced production featuring such spectacles as steel books, flaming letters, a vision of heaven as a decrepit San Francisco, and, not least, the Angel crashing through Prior's bedroom ceiling.

Another way of judging the importance of a piece of theatre is to look at the controversies sparked by it. *Angels in America* has definitely caused its share of controversy both in terms of censored or contested productions and in terms of scholarship. Historian of gay theatre John Clum, for example, calls the play "the most talked about, written about, and awarded, play of the past decade or more," "a turning point in the history of gay drama, the history of American drama, and of American literary culture," and nothing less than "a turning point for the inevitable, eternal, if turbulent relationship of gayness and theatre, the climax of this chapter of its history."⁶ Clum thus proclaims that Kushner with this one play altered the course of the American theatre and, interestingly for the purposes of this dissertation, heightened the relationship between male homosexuality and middlebrow theatre production. The logical conclusion of Clum's assertion is that Kushner made the invisible, though always present, relationship between US culture, theatre, and gay male identity formation visible and marketable.

⁶ Clum, *Acting Gay*, 249-57.

Though most often celebrated, scholars have also found the play to be problematic. British critic, Alan Sinfield, though sympathetic to Kushner's politics and project, says "My misgiving is that *Angels in America* slides into the cloudiness of irony, symbolism, and profundity at moments where clear elucidation would be valuable," and he questions whether or not the hope that gets expressed at the end of *Perestroika* rings true. Sinfield asks whether "a state that has depended on extreme violence in its founding, consolidation, continental expansion and global hegemony can realize, from within the ideology that has shaped it, a future that will be harmonious as well as purposeful."⁷ Writing from a British perspective, Sinfield draws attention to the way in which change in *Angels in America*, despite its invocation of Marxism as "the Beautiful theory,"⁸ essentially fashions change only on the individual rather than the structural level. As I demonstrated in chapter one, in Europe America is often understood to be a nation of excessive individualism without a social network to catch those who may fall and not succeed. Where the American Dream in the United States is a mythology of optimism, in Europe (and particularly in Northern Europe) it is often understood as ruthless and oppressive.⁹

Angels in America appeared at a time when the world-order that had been in place since the Second World War seemed to be crumbling. The Berlin Wall had fallen in 1989, creating a symbolic end to the cold war, the Soviet Union disappeared almost

⁷ Sinfield, *Out on Stage*, 205-07.

⁸ Tony Kushner, *Angels in America: a Gay Fantasia on National Themes*, combined paperback edition (New York: Theatre Communications Group, 2003), 147-49.

⁹ As we shall see in the analysis of the Copenhagen production of *Angels in America*, the set, probably unwittingly, invoked the original set design for Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman*. In that particular design the tenements were encroaching on the Loman dream; in Copenhagen the set consisted of barely visible skyscrapers weighing down on the characters.

overnight, and in the USA Reaganism was displaced as Bill Clinton took office and promised a new America in 1993.¹⁰ At the beginning of the 1980s Ronald Reagan had been elected President of the USA using the slogan of ‘morning in America’, promising a renewed optimism, and exorbitant consumerism combined with lower taxes and supply side economics. Tony Kushner describes this era as being essentially greedy and without compassion, understanding, or equality for minorities or the poor. He says: “Nineteen eighty-four through 1985 was a horrible, horrible time. It really seemed like the maniacs had won for good. What Martin says in *Millennium* now seems like a joke that we can all snigger at, but at the time I just wrote what I thought was most accurate,” that is, that there would never be a Democratic president again and that there would be a permanent Republican majority on Capitol Hill.¹¹

Angels in America must be read against the backdrop of late cold war society. The play investigates an US society plagued by egoism, consumerism, greed, AIDS, hypocrisy, and loneliness as a vantage point from which it creates an almost Brechtian parable about the very nature of the American nation. After all, the play’s subtitle is “a gay fantasia on national themes.”

In 1996 Tony Kushner said about *Angels in America*, “I think it’s my best play because I started writing about my world.”¹² Compared to some of his earlier plays—*Bright Room Called Day*, for example, is set in Weimar Germany—Kushner really did describe the world he saw and lived in directly in *Angels in America*. Furthermore, this

¹⁰ It is a peculiar development that all incoming US presidents need to stress that their administration is a “morning in America.” Something that would explain what has been called a particular “American amnesia” by Tony Kushner.

¹¹ Savran, “‘Tony Kushner’, Interview with Tony Kushner,” in *Speaking on Stage: Interviews with Contemporary American Playwrights*, ed. Phillip C. Kolin and Colby H. Kullman (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1996), 291-313.

¹² *Ibid.*, 313.

reinforces the way in which Kushner at times embodies both the play and the nation necessitating an understanding of Kushner's biography in relation to the play. *Angels in America* takes place in New York City, where Kushner lived and lives. Five of its characters are gay men, as is Kushner. Several of its characters are Jewish, as is Kushner. Louis is an ardent believer in some form of socialism, radical democracy, and American liberalism, as is Kushner. Though I am not necessarily arguing that *Angels in America* should be read solely as an autobiographical play, knowing a writer's background helps put the work in perspective. More so than with the other plays analyzed in this dissertation, *Angels in America*, I would argue, fundamentally relies on the identification of the play with Kushner. The play, particularly in the United States but to a lesser degree also in England, Denmark, and West-Germany, is ontologically dependent on its writer. Through interviews and newspaper profiles, *Angels in America* derived a dramatic authenticity from Kushner. While framing the play within Kushner's biography (and his representation of it), it is of course important to realize that there is no direct correlation between art and life, between the writer and his work, and that no particular character is the mouthpiece of Tony Kushner. As a matter of fact, critics disagree on which character, if anyone in particular, represents Kushner's own views.

British critic Christopher Bigsby has aptly described Tony Kushner as "a man wandering through a snowstorm of influences, his head tilted back to the sky. Where others might see contradictions, he sees a kind of harmony, unlikely, perhaps, but real enough given his upbringing."¹³ It is clear, as Bigsby also points out, that there are markers from Kushner's biography in his works and that the world Kushner writes about

¹³ Christopher Bigsby, *Contemporary American Playwrights* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 86.

in *Angels in America* is one that brings together the personal (as drawn from his personal life and experience) and the political (as it is seen in the play's scathing indictment of America under Ronald Reagan in the mid-1980s). One of the play's great strengths lies exactly in the combination of the personal with the political. In his attempt to define his own political theatrical practice, Kushner also points to the connection between his personal history, his politics and his theatre when he says "The genesis of my politics is no loftier, no less mundane, nor more free of family drama than the genesis of my theatrics."¹⁴ The importance of eliminating the perceived gap between the personal and the political is evident in Kushner's writing: Theatre is always, to Tony Kushner, both personal and political.

As a gay, socialist, Jewish, white man Tony Kushner shares characteristics with many of the characters in *Angels in America*. Though raised in Lake Charles, Louisiana, a southern state in the USA, Tony Kushner was born in New York City on 16 July 1956. His parents, whom he describes as "New York-New Deal liberals transplanted from New York to the Deep-South," were both classically trained musicians and fervently interested in both arts and politics.¹⁵ His parents had inherited this interest in culture, politics and their interconnected nature from their parents Kushner finds their inherited intellectual awareness closely related to Jewish culture in general. In Jewish culture Kushner identifies an "insatiable curiosity, skepticism, pessimistic optimism, ethical engagement, and ardent pursuit of the millennium."¹⁶ These traits are most prominently displayed in the play in Louis's guilt-ridden pursuit of his own life. Besides coming from a Jewish liberal family, Kushner's politics were sharpened through experiences of "mild anti-

¹⁴ Tony Kushner, "Notes about Political Theater" in *The Kenyon Review* 19 (1997): 19–34.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 20.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

semitism and not-so-mild homophobia” while growing up Jewish and gay in the American South.¹⁷ This experience also runs through a later work by Kushner, the musical *Caroline, or Change*, which is set in Louisiana and describes a young Jewish boy’s relation to his black nanny.¹⁸

Kushner became interested in the theatre early on when his mother became the leading lady of the Lake Charles, Louisiana Little Theatre. He describes her as an actress who, despite being an amateur, was of “considerable emotional depth and power, a real tragedienne.”¹⁹ Among other parts, she played Linda Loman in *Death of a Salesman* and Anne Frank’s mother in *The Diary of Anne Frank*.²⁰ Kushner describes how watching her act when he was between the ages of 5 and 9 enthralled him because of the power of her acting and the nature of performance itself. The effect his mother’s acting had on her audience was impressive, inspiring and creating in the young Kushner a sense of “total identification.”²¹ From hindsight, Kushner also describes how the theatre represented a sort of free space. In the safe and fictional space of the theatre, the performance of a character potentially sets one free through the liberation of not having to be oneself. The idea of the theatre as a space for personal freedom and escape is evident in Prior and Harper in *Angels in America*. Both characters utilize performance (after all, Prior is a former drag queen) to escape their hostile and repressive environments.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ *Caroline; or Change* is a very ambitious example of Kushner’s ability to create characters that embody change theatrically. The change referred to in the title furthermore indicates Kushner’s critical eye for the relation between commodification and politics in the United States.

¹⁹ Kushner, “Notes,” 19. There is a curious relation to *The Boys in the Band* here. In Crowley’s play a number of the characters believe they became gay because of their mothers’ avid interest in theatre and film. Kushner, in these interviews, fulfills a well-known trope of US popular culture: that of the gay man with an “unnatural” and “unmanly” interest in the performing arts.

²⁰ Savran, “Tony Kushner,” 293.

²¹ Kushner, “Notes,” 20.

Kushner describes growing up as a deeply closeted child and young man who had “decided at a very early age to become heterosexual,” but who also sensed that the theatre, with its potential for disguise and transformation, could offer a free space in which to become something else.²² This notion of being able to escape one’s own identity through performance runs through the central, ultimately liberated, characters in *Angels in America*; Prior and Belize both found (and find) escape in doing drag, while Harper escapes into fantasy and imagines herself in different versions—a migrating Mormon mother, a woman in Antarctica, and being pregnant, for example. Embedded in the bone-marrow of the dramaturgy of *Angels in America* is a theory of the theatre as a deeply necessary imaginary space for real social change.

In an essay titled “American Things,” Kushner theorizes freedom and the necessity of living free. He also, however, describes his own family’s political belief system in a narrative of the family’s Passover Seder. The religious/political belief system that Kushner grew up within was one that drew connections between the ancient suffering of the Jewish people and contemporary struggles, between ancient and modern exploitations, between an ancient lack of civil rights and a modern one. The liberalism that Kushner’s parents installed in him, and that in turn influences his world view and writing, is “the aggressive unapologetic, progressive liberalism of the thirties and forties, a liberalism strongly spiced with socialism, trade unionism and the ethos of internationalism and solidarity.”²³ In this combination of religion, identity, politics and an intense perception of historical perspective we can find much of the belief system—that

²² Savran, “Tony Kushner,” 293.

²³ Tony Kushner, *Thinking About the Longstanding Problems of Virtue and Happiness* (New York: Theatre Communications Group, 1995), 5. This a part of US history that most Europeans know little or nothing about, which helps explain why the play in much of the European press is seen as Utopian and slightly exotic.

undergirds *Angels in America*, with its broad scope, historical critique, and belief in progress, however painful and difficult.

Tony Kushner came back to New York City in 1974 to attend Columbia University, from which he graduated with a Bachelor of Arts degree in English Literature in 1978.²⁴ Kushner's time at Columbia University proved to be formative in terms of developing his thinking and politics; influenced by faculty and fellow students, Kushner found his world changing. As he began to become increasingly familiar with Karl Marx's thinking, in particular his theories of historical materialism, Kushner found himself inspired by dialectic thinking and the anti-capitalist critique offered by Marxism. Simultaneously, Kushner was first introduced to the German thinker, playwright, and director Bertolt Brecht, who is a foundational inspiration for Kushner's work. Reading Brecht's text *Short Organum for the Theatre* and Brecht's play *Mother Courage and Her Children* (which is one of Kushner's favourite plays and which he has translated for the Public Theatre in New York City) changed his view of the theatre and opened up a world of politically engaged theatre for him.²⁵ It was also at Columbia that Kushner first read the German philosopher Walter Benjamin, whose thesis on history would later supply the idea of the Angel for *Angels in America*.

When Kushner graduated from NYU in 1984 he was experiencing "a very, very black time."²⁶ "The very black time" was characterized by the loss of a relative, a close friend's serious car accident, the disintegration of 3P Productions, Carl Weber's exit from New York, and finally, most importantly, President Ronald Reagan's re-election as

²⁴ James Fisher, *The Theater of Tony Kushner: Living Past Hope* (London: Routledge, 2002), 14.

²⁵ Savran, "Tony Kushner," 294.

²⁶ Christopher Bigsby, *Contemporary American Playwrights* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 91; Tom Szentgyorgyi, "Look Back—and Forward—in Anger," in Robert Vorlicky (ed.), *Tony Kushner in Conversation*. (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1998): 11–17; Fisher, 15.

President of the United States. The re-election of Ronald Reagan, whose politics, strategies, and rhetoric Kushner found appalling, was an indication of the state of the nation to Kushner. Besides later setting *Angels in America* during this dark time, he also began work on a new play, *A Bright Room Called Day*, that drew historical and political parallels between the last days of the Weimar Republic and Ronald Reagan's America. As Sherman did with *Bent*, and Kramer did with *The Normal Heart*, Kushner mirrors the United States in Fascist Germany as a means of investigating contemporary issues.

A Bright Room Called Day was initially produced by the Heat and Light Company at Theatre 22 in New York City in 1985. In 1988 it was produced in London, where it was met with rather harsh criticism, and in 1991 it opened at the Public Theatre in New York to mixed reviews.²⁷ Much like *Angels in America*, though on a different and much smaller scale, the play interweaves the private lives of a group of people with events in history. It takes place within the Berlin apartment of Agnes Egging, a middle-aged actress, and centres on a small group of friends. The play follows the disintegration of this group under the rising pressures of Adolf Hitler's Nazi Party. As the political climate changes the group must face the question of what to do next, not unlike the question that faces the characters in *Angels in America*. What do you do in the face of catastrophe? Exile is the course chosen by most of the characters in *A Bright Room Called Day*, though not by Agnes, who stays in her apartment. Interspersed with the scenes of the play we find so-called 'disruptions' by a young woman named Zillah, who aims a critique of contemporary American politics directly towards the audience. In a

²⁷ The reason that *A Bright Room Called Day* could move so relatively quickly from a small production to a production at The Public Theater must, I believe, be found in the explosive accumulation of cultural capital Kushner experienced in the early 1990s. Furthermore, no doubt, the British production also paved the way for the US production.

historical parallel, Zillah has fled Ronald Reagan's America and the power of the Republican Party in an attempt to reconnect with history and to wake America from its chosen amnesia; by theatrical coincidence she lives in Agnes's old apartment. In the end Zillah decides to leave Berlin and go back to America to re-engage in the fight for change. In this early play one can clearly see the outlines of the theories and styles of the two plays *Millennium Approaches* and *Perestroika* that were to consume much of Kushner's time for the next many years. Furthermore, the central themes of migration, travelling, and change are introduced in relation to a combination of personal and political issues.

If Kushner did become the personification of his play and any radical contextualization of his play thus needs to consider his biography in relation to the formation of *Angels in America*, it is just as necessary to understand the political and social context in which the play is set and which it problematizes.

Though *Angels in America* takes place over the course of 3 months during the fall and winter of 1985–1986 and its immediate context is that of the United States under the Reagan administration and the early years of the AIDS epidemic, it frames and draws on a much longer historical frame, primarily that of the Cold War and its consequences. As described in chapter one, the Cold War was a protracted period of real, yet primarily symbolic, ideological warfare. It is this binary world-order that the play takes place within.

The play draws clear parallels, through the historical characters of Roy Cohn and Ethel Rosenberg, between Reagan's America and its AIDS crisis, and America during the 1950s, McCarthyism, and the second Red Scare. The play is full of references to current

and historical events: the medieval plague, the Mayflower, the founding of America and the philosophy of radical individualism, the visions of Joseph Smith, early Jewish immigration to the US, the Mormon migration West, and people such as McCarthy, Reagan, and a wealth of others. As the late days of the Weimar Republic serve as a historical parallel in *A Bright Room Called Day*, the structure, politics and culture of the Cold War is used to parallel the 1985 state of the United States of America in *Angels in America*. Daryl Ogden comments on this when he writes, “Kushner portrays Reaganism polemically, as a version of Neo-McCarthyism.”²⁸

If we consider the eulogy by the Rabbi at the opening of *Millennium Approaches* to be a prologue of sorts, it is actually Roy Cohn who opens the play—showing off his power to his protégé, Joe. In that scene he single-handedly represents the disingenuous nature of politics and functions as a symbol of American Republicanism. He is interested neither in change nor the people, but only in his own power and its preservation. The corrupt execution of Ethel and Julius Rosenberg that he helped achieve is the ultimate sign, to him, of the power he has wielded in the world.²⁹ Through the dramatic confrontations between Roy Cohn and Ethel Rosenberg, Kushner highlights the essential position of the Cold War as background for the play, making the 1950s a parallel to Reagan’s 1980s. The fear of Communism, symbolized in Roy Cohn’s relation to Senator Joseph McCarthy’s prosecution of alleged Communists, creates a parallel to the Reagan administration’s treatment of minorities such as gay people and the administration’s reaction to AIDS. The white straight monolith that Louis and Belize discuss in the coffee

²⁸ Daryl Ogden, “Cold War Science and the Body Politic: An Immuno/Virological Approach to *Angels in America*,” *Literature and Medicine* 19 (2000): 243.

²⁹ There is a wealth of historical scholarship on the court case against the Rosenbergs. See for example Ronald Radosh and Joyce Milton, *The Rosenberg File* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1997).

shop scene in *Millennium Approaches* is constructed in the play as being the Reagan administration; a continuation of McCarthy's binary philosophy and approach to society is seen in his words, "if you want to be against McCarthy, boys, you've got to be either a Communist or a cocksucker."³⁰ In this McCarthy quote, we find evidence of the masculinized discourse of US politics in which any hint of effeminacy is made suspicious and in which homosexuality equals anti-American sentiments. Homosexuality is a mighty powerful factor in the way anti-Americanism functions in the US as a domestic fantasy. *Angels in America* problematizes this relation between politics and a masculinized nation through its dramatization of the United States under the presidency of Ronald Reagan—a former Hollywood star in B-movies, in particular that all American genre of the Western.

There are widely different opinions about the presidency of Ronald Reagan. Supportive scholars praise Reagan for his optimism, his tax-cuts, his transformation of social programs, his foreign policy and the enactment of supply-side economics. Critics blame him for the exact same policies. It is beyond doubt however that the election and re-election of Reagan changed America in several ideological ways and that "the Democrats of 1989 and 1990 sound a bit more Republican than they did in 1980 or 1984," as one scholar reflecting on the period put it.³¹

Ronald Reagan was elected on the slogan of "Morning in America," often invoking the image of letting America be the shining city on the hill, a universal beacon of optimism. Reagan promised in his first election campaign to restore pride and

³⁰ K. A. Courdileone, "'Politics in an Age of Anxiety': Cold War Political Culture and the Crisis in American Masculinity, 1949–1960," *The Journal of American History* 87 (2000): 521. For the discussion of the White Straight Monolith, see *Angels in America*, 95-106.

³¹ Larry Berman, "Looking Back on the Reagan Presidency," in *Looking Back on the Reagan Presidency*, ed. Larry Berman (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1990), 3.

optimism in America following the 1970s' pessimism, based on the tremendous damage done by the Vietnam War, race riots, oil crises, international terrorism and the Iran hostage situation. The Reagan/Bush administration (1981–1989) cut taxes as part of their so-called “supply-side economic theory,” whose central premise is that if the individual is given more money (i.e., pays less taxes) this will create a dynamic economy, as the money will be put back into the economy in the form of consumption. Critics of supply-side economics claimed that it was nothing but a way of making the rich richer and the poor poorer. Thomas E. Mann, for example, says: “The poverty rate is no lower and by some measures is actually higher than before. There are some people in this country who have been left behind.”³² In order to slim down the welfare state, which the Reagan Republican party judged as being out of control, they cut social programs by seven hundred billion dollars while giving a fifty billion dollar tax-cut, and increasing defense-spending twenty-seven percent. However, his transformation of American society, known as the Reagan Revolution, was not just an economic decision, rather it was part of Reagan's overall project of restoring America to her former self.

In his farewell address to the American people, Reagan described his own presidency, not as a revolution (which had been the common description), but as a rediscovery of “our values and our common sense.”³³ In this way, according to Reagan himself, the 1980s was a reconstruction of a nation that had gone astray during the 1960s and 1970s, with the increased liberation of minorities and experimentation with other forms of living of those years. The gay community had experienced tremendous personal and sexual liberation since the riots at Stonewall Inn in New York City in June of 1969,

³² Thomas E. Mann, “Thinking about the Reagan Years,” in *Looking Back on the Reagan Presidency*, ed. Larry Berman (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University, 1990), 23.

³³ Berman, 5.

and it was partly this increased sexual freedom, manifested through visibility, that Ronald Reagan campaigned against, with his project of restoring America by emphasizing issues of morality, religion, and family values in social and cultural policies. Reagan's focus on religion and restoring the traditional American nuclear family proved detrimental to his administration's reaction to AIDS. I believe that the Reagan administration's intense focus on American optimism prevented the administration from engaging the AIDS crisis in any constructive way. AIDS, conceptualized as a plague, simply did not fit Reagan's rhetoric of the shining city on the hill.

Two events in the spring and summer of 1985 changed America's thinking about the disease (AIDS) that was killing thousands and thousands of American citizens: the opening of Larry Kramer's play *A Normal Heart* and the death of Rock Hudson. AIDS had been killing particularly gay men and intravenous drug users in America since the beginning of the 1980s and had by 1985 become a regular epidemic. Although the Center for Disease Control estimated in June of 1985 that 11,010 Americans had contracted AIDS and that 5,441 had died, the Reagan administration had yet to address the topic or to initiate or allocate money for research. Then on 23 July 1985, Rock Hudson, American film star, he-man, and heart throb, publicly admitted that he had AIDS, thereby giving the disease a public face. Until then he had maintained, much like Roy Cohn in *Angels in America*, that he had liver cancer. Rock Hudson's going public with his disease, though not his sexuality, created an early watershed moment in the history of AIDS, from which point on AIDS could no longer be kept a secret 'gay' disease.³⁴ Having not yet addressed the topic in public, Reagan mentioned AIDS in a press conference in 1985, but the

³⁴ Randy Shilts, *And the Band Played On: Politics, People, and the AIDS Epidemic* (New York: St Martin's Press, 1987), 575–582.

Reagan administration did not give a major policy address on the AIDS crisis publicly until 1987.

It is now clear that if the Reagan administration had focused on AIDS research and prevention earlier, the epidemic might have taken a different course. Though officials from the Department of Health and Human Services asked for increased funds to conduct research and prevention and did not receive any, they publicly maintained that they had sufficient funding, thereby undermining the nation's research and treatment potential. This is indicative of the administration's reaction to the crisis and the nation's dying citizens. When AIDS first struck, Reagan and the Republicans had just been elected on their socially conservative platform, and they were in no way eager to publicly react to a crisis affecting, at the time, primarily gay men, who, besides trying to cope with the crisis, were repeatedly scape-goated by many on the political right. During this period the White House physician reports that Reagan thought, "it was measles and it would go away."³⁵

It can be hard to fathom today the devastating nature of AIDS on the American gay community and the consequences of the disease, enormous fear combined with despair that nothing seemed to be done about it. Through the inaction, the official policy of ignorance, gay men were treated as people with no rights, as amoral people who had brought this upon themselves, and as discardable. In an interview with the magazine *Body Positive*, Kushner looks back on the 1980s and discusses the representation of AIDS in his play:

³⁵ Craig A. Rimmermann, "Presidency, U.S.," in *Encyclopedia of AIDS: A Social, Political, Cultural, and Scientific Record of the HIV Epidemic*, ed. Raymond A. Smith (Chicago: Fitzroy Dearborn, 1998), 399.

I really was astonished in the 80s at the extent to which people believed – and it wasn't only Reagan, though he's culpable because he was elected to be a leader – the way in which society as a whole believed for a long time – believed that we deserved to die because we had sex with each other.³⁶

That Kushner is not exaggerating can be seen from how the conservative movement in America, the people backing the Republican Reagan administration, spoke about the disease as a lifestyle problem, indicating that since, in their belief, homosexuality was a choice, well, so was AIDS. Patrick J. Buchanan, who was then and is now a Republican commentator, put it sarcastically in his first column addressing the crisis: “The poor homosexuals – they have declared war upon nature, and now nature is exacting an awful retribution.”³⁷ *Angels in America* then takes place within a gay community ravaged by confusion, fear, silence from the administration, and, not least, blame from the president down.

If gay activism had been on the downhill at the beginning of the 1980s, with much of the gay minority believing that liberation had indeed to some degree been won—though, as Roy Cohn points out in the play, it had not had much legislative success—AIDS radicalized gay culture into taking action in the face of devastation. Larry Kramer, whose play *The Normal Heart* put the epidemic on stage in 1985, had also been instrumental in founding the Gay Men's Health Crisis in 1982, an organization supplying practical help to people with AIDS, while at the same time a lobbying on their behalf. Years later, in 1987, Kramer was also one of the initiators of a much more visible

³⁶ Patrick R. Pacheco, “AIDS, Angels, Activism and Sex in the Nineties,” in *Tony Kushner in Conversation*, ed. Robert Vorlicky (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1998), 59.

³⁷ Shilts, 311.

organization dealing with questions of AIDS politics and activism: ACT UP (an acronym for AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power).³⁸ With ACT UP the gay community refused to be silenced anymore; in fact one of the slogans read “Silence = Death”, written on a black background featuring a pink triangle, visually connecting what they claimed to be a genocide against gay people with the Nazi persecution and execution of homosexual people. Kramer had analogized the AIDS crisis to the gay Holocaust in *The Normal Heart*, and with ACT UP he (and the rest of the organization) took that analogy of gay suffering and oppression to the streets. The formation of ACT UP was important for Kushner as he began writing *Millennium Approaches* because of the way the organization showed its anger and political defiance in the face of crisis. ACT UP (and the later formation of the group called Queer Nation) insisted on gay and queer visibility and civil rights in a way that *Angels in America* also does. The project of queering America, central to the play, was suddenly gaining ground in post-Reagan America.

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Keeping in mind Christopher Bigsby’s image of Kushner as a man walking through a snowstorm of influences, it is obvious that *Angels in America* draws on multiple layers of inspiration and influences. This section seeks to outline some of them and discuss the element of genre.

If there is one iconic image from *Angels in America*, it is the spectacular angel crashing through an AIDS infected gay man’s bedroom ceiling in the middle of the 1980s. The angel hovering about his bed, proclaiming that “the great work begins”, has graced posters and book covers. This is the central image that connects the two plays,

³⁸ Steven Epstein, *Impure Science: AIDS, Activism, and the Politics of Knowledge* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1996), 219-21.

repeated as it is in *Perestroika*. The image represents the opening that cracks history wide open, as Ethel Rosenberg predicts it will before the ambulance carries Roy Cohn off to the hospital and, eventually, his death. The inspiration for this angel is taken from Walter Benjamin's (1892–1940) "Theses on the Philosophy of History" in which he describes a painting by Paul Klee called *Angelus Novus*, portraying an angel blowing backwards through space while staring back at where he came from. The angel faces the past, which we might perceive as a chain of events, but he sees it as one large catastrophe. Yet he is constantly blown forwards by a storm from paradise while debris from the past piles up around his feet. In Benjamin's description the storm from paradise:

has gotten caught in his wings with such violence that the angel can no longer close them. The storm irresistibly propels him into the future to which his back is turned, while the pile of debris before him grows skyward. This storm is what we call progress.³⁹

Though the angel in *Angels in America* is female (or rather "hermaphroditically Equipped as well with a Bouquet of Phalli"),⁴⁰ it is clearly the same angel who wishes for Prior to stop the wind, the catastrophe, and finally let the world rest and no longer move forward. The use of Benjamin's angel is more than just spectacular, it lends the play its governing philosophy: that change is absolutely essential though painful, and that it is necessary to remember history to envision a future. That human existence is dialectically constructed between the past and the future.

Following Kushner's belief in the importance of history, it is necessary to look at *Angels in America* in relation to the contemporary theatre in the 1980s and early 1990s

³⁹ Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections*, trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken Books, 1968), 257-58.

⁴⁰ Kushner, *Angels in America*, 175.

and in relation to the representation of gay men on stage in general. As we have seen in the previous chapters, the theatrical representation of gay male sexuality basically followed two trends beginning in the late 1960s: mainstream productions such as Mart Crowley's *The Boys in the Band* (1968), Martin Sherman's *Bent* (1979) and Harvey Fierstein's *Torch Song Trilogy* (Broadway 1982), and more underground theatrical productions such as Charles Ludlam's Ridiculous Theatrical Company in the East Village in New York City. The middlebrow productions which are the topic of this dissertation broke down barriers by the way they gave visibility to the existence of gay men on stage and in society, while the less mainstream plays offered new modes of production of a certain gay sensibility, a certain gay style, a certain way of seeing the world that Kushner acknowledges as important for his own writing. *Angels in America* shares obvious elements with all three previous middlebrow successes. It shares a certain Jewish and Camp humor and sensibility with *The Boys in the Band*, without adopting its self-hating characters, though Louis at times displays a certain element of self-loathing that could be taken directly out of Crowley's play. The difference, however, is that Louis does not loathe his sexuality but his actions, while with Crowley's characters it is the other way around. *Angels in America* shares a notion of the importance of history with *Bent*, where the audience is reminded that oppression of gay male sexuality is a historical phenomenon that must be understood as such in order for change to happen. Kushner's play also shares a number of elements with *Torch Song Trilogy*. As we saw, in *Torch Song Trilogy* the audience follows Arnold, a New York drag queen, in his struggles to find a man and establish a family. Through three acts the audience follows Arnold's trials and tribulations, culminating in a fight with his mother. As Alan Sinfield has pointed out,

Torch Song Trilogy “has split scenes, the discarded female partner, and mother flying in to sort things out.”⁴¹ Despite their similarities, *Angels in America* is a very different gay play (however stiff a category that is) than *Torch Song Trilogy* in terms of its politics. In *Torch Song Trilogy* Arnold only wants what his mother has. He wants her life—a house, man and child—where the characters in *Angels in America* have been radicalized by AIDS. The utopian dream in *Angels in America* is not a dream of assimilation but rather a dream of equality and citizenship based in recognition and valuation of difference.

This radicalization of politics can also be seen in a radicalization of the theatrical form. For this Kushner acknowledges his debt to Charles Ludlam and his fabulous theatre. Charles Ludlam founded the Ridiculous Theatrical Company in 1967 (two years before the Stonewall Riots) and, until his untimely death from AIDS in 1987, the company produced a series of plays, most in a fantastic, over-the-top, campy and ridiculous style and often in a non-logical form. Kushner sees Ludlam’s theatre as a sort of first generation gay theatre and his own as a second generation. This generational transformation can be called the change from the ridiculous to the fabulous. What Kushner calls the theatre of the fabulous utilizes a notion of history (standing on the shoulders of the ridiculous) and politics. The politics of the fabulous, as it is inspiring Kushner, comes from a Queer Nation chant: “We’re here. We’re Queer. We’re Fabulous. Get used to it.” Fabulous in one sense evolves beyond ridiculous in the way that fabulous becomes a rejection of the weakness inherent in being stigmatized as ridiculous. Fabulous rejects being perceived as weak or suffering in relation to oppression. Another related sense is that this use of fabulous includes a historical awareness of gay history and gay

⁴¹ Sinfield, *Out on Stage*, 205.

theatre history that Ludlam, at least the pre-Stonewall Ludlam, could not have.⁴² In Kushner's own relation to gay theatre history, then, we see the same dialectic between the past and the future that governs *Angel in America*. He is inspired by, and in conversation with, the writers who came before him: Tennessee Williams, Mart Crowley, Martin Sherman, Harvey Fierstein, Robert Patrick, Larry Kramer, and William Hoffman.

Besides standing in relation to previous gay writers and the theatrical representations of gay men, the obvious inspiration for Kushner, as we saw in the biography, is Bertolt Brecht. In an interview with his mentor Carl Weber, who taught Kushner at NYU, Kushner remembers his first encounters with the theatre and theory of Bertolt Brecht. In a modern drama class he read Brecht's *Threepenny Opera* and *The Good Person from Sezuan* without being considerably impressed. However, after being presented with Ernst Fischer's theory of the artist's responsibility towards society, seeing Richard Foreman's production of *Threepenny Opera* several times, and reading *Brecht on Theatre*, he realized that Brecht had successfully suggested a way in which a committed public intellectual could work productively in the theatre. The intervention in history and society that Kushner intended to create with *Angels in America* then is ultimately as deeply indebted to the theories and practices of Brecht as it is to the narrative American dramatic tradition exemplified in Tennessee Williams's early plays.

Brecht's epic theatre was based in his Marxist political beliefs and his antipathy towards the theatre of his time – what he called a culinary theatre, in which the audience was seduced to complete identification and therefore, presumably, asked no critical questions of the world it saw reproduced on stage. Brecht wanted an active political

⁴² Michael Cunningham, "Thinking about Fabulousness," in *Tony Kushner in Conversation*, ed. Robert Vorlicky (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1998), 62–76; Savran, "Tony Kushner," 299–301.

theatre that allowed, even demanded, its audience to ask questions and think critically about the fictional world on stage. However, and this is a common misinterpretation of Brecht's theatre, Brecht insisted that the theatre should always also be entertaining, as he describes in *Short Organum for the Theatre*.⁴³ The theatre should teach, but it should do so in an entertaining way through songs, spectacles, and so forth. Kushner's favorite play by Brecht, *Mother Courage*, is a history play set during the Thirty Years' War (1618–1648) in Europe. Through representing events as historical, Brecht creates the distance between the work and the spectator that he finds necessary to prevent the spectator from a complete, passive, identification. Through this treatment, he can make the spectator watch the play and not just say "that's how I would act" but add "if I had lived under those circumstances." Through this process, an awareness of the social situation arises that can be used in the struggle for change. When producing contemporary works dealing with current issues, the events should be produced as if they were historical. If this is done, Brecht's theory goes, the spectator will find the actions odd, which will, potentially, make the spectator reflect on his/her own actions in the contemporary world.⁴⁴ Evidently, this is a technique Kushner applies in *Angels in America*, a history play dealing with very contemporary issues. In order to prevent the audience from a total identification with the character, Brecht invented what he called "verfremdung": an acting (and directing) technique in which breaks were created through which the spectator would be reminded of the fictional nature of the theatrical event. Multiple times throughout *Angels in America* we find these Brechtian devices used. Kushner's "note about the staging" says:

⁴³ Bertolt Brecht, *Brecht on Theatre: The Development of an Aesthetic*, ed. John Willett (New York: Hill and Wang, 1964), 180.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 190.

The moments of magic – the appearance and disappearance of Mr. Lies and the ghosts, the Book hallucination, and the ending – are to be fully realized, as bits of wonderful *theatrical* illusion – which means it’s OK if the wires show, and maybe it’s good that they do, but the magic should at the same time be thoroughly amazing.⁴⁵

Having the Angel’s wires show points to the fact that the angel is indeed, one, not real angel and, two, an actor suspended from a piece of stage machinery pretending to be an angel in a play by Tony Kushner. However, and we sense an ambiguity here, Kushner insists that this be amazing, which we can interpret as meaning entertaining, just like Brecht would have wanted it. Brecht’s influence in the theatre was much larger in Europe and particular in Great Britain following the tour of the Berliner Ensemble in 1956 than it has been in America, and Kushner is quite inspired by the way British playwrights have adopted a Brechtian dramaturgy, particularly as it can be seen in the writings of Caryl Churchill, such as *Vinegar Tom*, *Cloud Nine*, and *Top Girls*. Given the tradition of Brecht in European theatre, in European performances of *Angels in America*, as we shall see, these Brechtian elements seem much less radical than they did in the US productions.

Kushner subtitles his play *A Gay Fantasia on National Themes*. Fantasia as a musical form has roots in improvisation and is a piece of music not adhering to any particular mode or form. It is centered in the composer’s fancy or imagination. As a theatrical genre, this does not exist. Kushner thus breaks down the boundaries between particular genres (such as comedy, tragedy, and tragicomedy) and mixes these in a “fantastic” way. *Millennium Approaches* follows traditional theatrical forms more closely than *Perestroika*, with its increased moves between the real and the imagined, between

⁴⁵ Kushner, *Angels in America*, “Playwright’s Notes.”

earth and heaven, between the living and the dead. Both plays mix the comical with the tragic, the domestic with the public or political, and the real with the imagined. The plays combined have characteristics of expressionistic plays such as August Strindberg's *A Dream Play* along with elements of medieval theatre such as the simultaneity and the abundance of religious symbols. The genre of *Angels in America*, however, is probably closest to that of the history play as outlined by Brecht before. It is ultimately the investigation of recent history that connects all the disparate elements.

Kushner says about the relationship between the theatre and history that "Americans suffer from collective Amnesia; our own past is lost to us. Theatre has always had a vital relationship to history; the examination and, yes, the *teaching* of history has to be accounted a function of any political theatre."⁴⁶ Through his use of an eclectic mix of theatrical genres and Brechtian devices, Kushner then lives up to Walter Benjamin's description of a historical materialist, whom Benjamin describes as one who "regards it as his task to brush history against the grain."⁴⁷ However, brushing US history against the grain means widely different things in the US, where, supposedly, an audience is familiar with the history invoked in the play, and in Europe, where, indeed, US history remains, for the most part, known solely through representation.

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Before turning to an analysis of the US and European production, I will briefly analyze some key scenes for the way in which they invoke history and the subject of "America" and her relation to the concept of progress.

⁴⁶ Kushner, "Notes," 28.

⁴⁷ Benjamin, *Illuminations*, 257.

Scene one is a monologue by Rabbi Isidor Chemelwitz, who is speaking at the funeral of Sarah Ironson, Louis's grandmother: It functions as a prologue to the play. *Angels in America* thus opens with a funeral, indicating that something is dead; a way of being in the world disappears with this individual death. The Rabbi points out how Sarah Ironson was the last of a generation who made the great journey from Europe to America in search of a better life. She is an example of the migration that America is founded upon. He describes America as a melting pot where nothing melted and continues by saying to the descendants of Sarah Ironson that they actually do not live in America. Instead these descendants, according to the Rabbi, carry with them their grandmother's Lithuanian or Russian or any other ethnic identity, and it is this identity that shapes their lives, not America. America is a fictional construction in which all sorts of ethnic and religious identities strive to create a certain American identity. This opening scene introduces the central relationship between migration and roots, fixed and fluid identities, stasis and change. The deceased Sarah Ironson was an example of migration in search of hope and progress, something the disillusioned Rabbi declares no longer exists.

In the last scene of the play, scene ten, Louis, Prior and Joe, remain on stage from their previous scene. Harper appears above them, suspended in mid-air, on her way to San Francisco. She shares her insight that through pain and suffering we progress. She says "Nothing's lost forever. In this world there is a kind of painful progress. Longing for what we've left behind, and dreaming ahead."⁴⁸

The epilogue takes place in February 1990, four years after *Perestroika*. It is titled 'Bethesda,' referring to the Bethesda Fountain in Central Park in New York City. The Bethesda Fountain was unveiled in 1873 as a tribute to the lost soldiers of the Civil War.

⁴⁸ Kushner, *Angels in America*, 275.

It refers to the Biblical story of the angel who touched the Bethesda pool and gave it healing powers to cleanse whoever bathed in it. Prior, Louis, Belize, and Hannah are sitting by the fountain. Belize and Louis are arguing about world events: the fall of the Berlin Wall and the following reformation of Eastern Europe, Gorbachev's politics and philosophies, the end of the cold war, the Palestinian case, and so forth. As they continue in the background, Prior, going blind but happy to be alive, speaks directly to the audience about the angel of the fountain, the biblical story of the cleansing powers of the water she touches. Though the fountain doesn't flow at the moment of the scene, Prior knows that it will flow again. In a concluding speech Prior makes the case that progress and change are both possible and good.

The first scene of each play functions as a prologue to the play, despite not being named so. Structurally the two opening scenes lead us into the play and construct a frame through which to understand the actions, the breakdown of order, and finally, perhaps, the possibility for change.

It is significant that *Millennium Approaches* opens with a funeral; something has died and disappeared and the survivors are left to make order of what remains. Though this is the funeral of an individual, Sarah Ironson, grandmother of Louis, the Rabbi makes clear that it is also the end of an era. Likening her, in a joke, to one of the last Native Americans, the Rabbi creates a parallel between the disappearance of the Jewish people who migrated to the USA from Eastern Europe, settled in the Bronx or in Brooklyn, and the erasure of the Native Americans as a people. In this parallel we find a notion of tribal belonging which governs the structures of experience of life in America's ethnicized neighborhoods, but which also constructs the nature of "E Pluribus Unum" as nothing but

an impossible dream. This tribal order, the staying within the parameters of your ethnic belonging, has disappeared forever with Sarah Ironson. The Rabbi describes how Sarah Ironson and her fellow immigrants left Lithuania and Russia for America and how they fought for the Jewish home in New York, in America, so their children “would not grow up here, in this strange place, in the melting pot where nothing melted.” He continues, “You do not live in America, no such place exists,”⁴⁹ suggesting instead that their identity is fundamentally constructed by the country and culture that the predecessors left. In this sweeping denial of America as a category, as a unity, and as an identity lies a fundamental premise that the play sets out to investigate. Does America exist and, if so, what constitutes it? Along with questioning America and, by extension, the impossibility of being an American the Rabbi expresses the idea that although Sarah Ironson’s journey lives within each and every one of her children and grandchildren, it is no longer possible to take the journey from the old world to the new world. “[S]uch Great Voyages do not anymore exist” the rabbi claims, but the play ultimately ends up negating that assertion.⁵⁰ Such journeys do indeed exist. Louis and Prior are on a journey, Joe Pitt is on a journey from being closeted to being out, and Hanna Pitt is on her way to becoming a fuller, more understanding person. Harper, of course, is last seen floating somewhere close to the Ozone layer on her overnight flight to San Francisco – literally on a journey (after all her imaginary friend is a travel agent). Their journeys are perhaps no longer that of the Jewish immigrant, who came from Lithuania to Grand Concourse Avenue in the Bronx, or to Flatbush in Brooklyn, or that of the Mormon believer migrating across the plains to Utah, but they are journeys for that Jewish or Mormon woman’s children and their

⁴⁹ Ibid., 16.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

grandchildren and their children again. That journey, if we accept the hope of the epilogue, is a constant journey into becoming, not into being, American.

The opening scene of *Perestroika* is set in the Kremlin, the seat of the governing body in the Soviet Union in Moscow, where the world's oldest Bolshevik, Aleksii Antedilluvianovich Prelapsarianov, is addressing his party in front of a large red flag. The old Bolshevik, the description indicating that he was part of the original Russian Revolution and the movement that later became the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, is addressing the notion of change. In reference to classical tradition the Bolshevik is blind, like some seers such Teiresias from classic Greek tragedy. January of 1986 was a time of great change within the Soviet Union due to Gorbachev, then General Secretary of the Soviet Communist Party, and his process of economic restructuring begun in the summer of 1985. Defining Perestroika as a revolution and a "decisive acceleration of the socio-economic and cultural development of society which involves radical changes on the way to a qualitatively new state," Gorbachev undertook the enormous project in an attempt to save Communism.⁵¹ The old Bolshevik is directly addressing this radical attempt to change. Just as the Rabbi formulated the notions of history, identity and journey in his eulogy for Sarah Ironson, the Bolshevik formulates the fundamental questions that structure *Perestroika*. He asks, "The Great Question before us is: Are we doomed? The Great Question before us is: Will the Past release us? The Great Question before us is: Can we Change? In Time?"⁵² He does not give the answers to his questions, but warns the Party (and by extension the audience who, as he

⁵¹ Mikhail Gorbachev, *Perestroika: New Thinking for Our Country and the World* (New York: Harper and Row, 1987), 162.

⁵² Tony Kushner, *Angels in America*, 147.

says, “Live in this Sour little Age”)⁵³ that though change is absolutely necessary it must be based upon a theory as bold as the original theory, Marxism. However, no such theory is to be found, and the Bolshevik laments the overtaking of his theory by market incentives, American cheeseburgers, and watered-down Bukharinite stopgap makeshift Capitalism.⁵⁴ Ironically, the world’s oldest living Marxist here voices a critique and perception of the United States that we have often seen in this dissertation as crucial elements of European anti-Americanism.

Where the Rabbi’s opening monologue is a funeral for an individual, this is a funeral for a system. Through the words of the blind Bolshevik we attend the funeral of the Soviet Union: the funeral of the dream, or what Prelapsarianov calls the beautiful theory, Marxism. This, the second prologue, bemoaning the collapse of Marxism, is systemic. Where the first prologue complicated the notion of the possibility of a singular America and a singular American identity, the second one concerns the ideological systems under which we live and, by consequence, these systems or world orders falling apart without any obvious replacements. Like the angels roaming around in the heaven that God abandoned, we are left drifting in the shifting ideological wind from paradise.

If the two opening scenes introduce the audience to the central themes and questions of the plays, the Epilogue closes and concludes by opening up the play to the future (Kushner had initially planned several more plays about the characters). It is the closing frame and combines issues of the individual or personal with issues of the systemic or the public. Again, in the epilogue, the personal becomes political. Louis, Belize, Hannah, and Prior sit in front of the Bethesda Fountain in Central Park, New

⁵³ Ibid., 148.

⁵⁴ Ibid.

York City, on a cold February day in 1999, four years after the end of *Perestroika*. Prior is, obviously, still alive, and Hannah is “noticeably different – she looks like a New Yorker and is reading that symbol on intellectual liberalism, the *New York Times*.”⁵⁵ The transformed characters have entered a new decade and a transformed world. It is the early 1990s, when Reagan is gone, the Berlin Wall has fallen, the Soviet Union is clearly about to collapse, and the established order of the cold war has been overthrown, blown away like dried leaves in the first fall storm. The possibility for change suddenly seems real. Prior, the play’s unwilling prophet, gets the last word. While Louis and Belize discuss the situation between Israel and Palestine, Prior turns to the audience and says:

This disease will be the end of many of us, but not nearly all, and the dead will be commemorated and will struggle on with the living, and we are not going away. We won’t die secret deaths anymore. The world only spins forward. We will be citizens. The Time has come. Bye now.

You are fabulous creatures, each and every one.

And I bless you: More Life.

The Great Work Begins.⁵⁶

This progress-will-make-us-citizens-despite-suffering-and-death epilogue is central to the play by the light it sheds backwards on the hours of theatrical rhetoric we, as audiences, have moved through in forward motion. The epilogue serves as a political commentary on the individual actions of the characters throughout the performance and the transformation these actions lead to in the intertwined lives of the characters. It applies the critique of Reaganism and its consequences presented in the play to society as such

⁵⁵ Ibid., 277.

⁵⁶ Ibid.

and not just to the individual. In doing so the epilogue structurally mirrors the function of the two prologues.

In his seminal essay on the play, David Savran states that “The opposite of nearly everything you say about *Angels in America* will also hold true,” which is a fundamental premise in his reading of the play’s thematic and political ambiguity, an ambiguity that I believe has driven the writings on the play from its first production until today.⁵⁷ It is also, however, a statement that one should keep in mind when thinking about the changing interpretations of the play and its meaning(s). In the twenty or so years since its original productions much has been said and written about *Angels in America*. The criticism stretches from reviews, profiles, portraits, interviews in newspapers, to scholarly treatments of the play, discussing its themes and politics, its merits and failures. *Angels in America* is a complicated play and the discourse surrounding it matches it fully.

The initial critical response to *Angels in America* was predominantly positive – except for Conservative or rightwing newspapers that disagreed with the play’s bleak portrait of Reagan’s America. In the so-called more liberal press, the *New York Times* had numerous articles about Tony Kushner and the play, including reviews of the different productions. Frank Rich, then the lead critic, wrote an article meditating on what he claimed was a needed “transition from an old Broadway to a new one,” suggesting that Tony Kushner and *Angels in America* was part of the solution to this renewal of American middlebrow theatre. The theatrical landscape in which *Angels in America* was performed was one of great stagnation, according to Rich, who warns that if Broadway is

⁵⁷ David Savran, “Ambivalence, Utopia, and a Queer Sort of Materialism: How *Angels in America* Reconstructs the Nation,” in *Approaching the Millennium: Essays on Angels in America*, ed. Deborah R. Geis and Steven F. Kruger (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1997), 13–39.

to survive, “There is no time to waste.” In Rich’s article *Angels in America* comes to the rescue, and he presents Kushner as a playwright whose work is:

Nothing less than a radical vision of American society, politics, and religion, as written in the uncompromisingly extravagant voice of a homosexual leftist intellectual who will try anything (except conventional social realism) to turn original ideas and life-and-death emotions into gripping and often ferociously funny theatre.⁵⁸

Rich expresses hope that *Angels in America* can bring a new audience to Broadway and take American playwriting out of its domestic realm and into the political world. He creates a dichotomy between the past and the present that the play would not necessarily agree with, though he also does seem to say that *Angels in America* is the right play for the right time. Most of the criticism written about *Angels in America*, which David Román points out as well, is written after the 1992 American presidential elections in which Bill Clinton defeated George H. W. Bush and ended twelve years of Republican rule in the White House. Román points to the way that this change in power highlighted the play’s function as a history play, since it truly did analyze something that was now over, that is, in the past.⁵⁹ In the first hopeful days of the Clinton presidency, *Angels in America* became somehow translated into a new time. Keeping in mind that Rich had earlier called *Millennium Approaches* “miraculous,” it seemed as if both the theatre and its surrounding society suddenly had the ability to change. It seemed almost like a Benjaminian moment, where “history burst wide open,” allowing for at least a specter of change. Rich points this out when writing:

⁵⁸ Frank Rich, “A New Generation on Old Broadway,” *New York Times*, June 6, 1993.

⁵⁹ Román, 205–224.

What has really affected “Angels in America” during the months of its odyssey to New York, however, is not so much its change of directors as Washington’s change of Administrations. When first seen a year or so ago, the play seemed defined by its anger at the reigning political establishment, which tended to reward the Roy Cohns and ignore the Prior Walters. Mr. Kushner has not revised the text since—a crony of Cohn’s still boasts the Republican lock on the White House till year 2000—but the shift in Washington has had the subliminal effect of making “Angels in America” seem more focused on what happens next than on the past.⁶⁰

What Rich points out here, without ever saying it directly, is the play’s Brechtian device. That it historicizes the recent, almost present, past to comment on the present and point to the future. David Richards, also writing in the *New York Times*, makes the same observation, but somewhat differently. In a review of *Perestroika*, he first claims that in *Millennium Approaches* Kushner demonstrated virtues such as ‘an intrepid theatricality, stinging intellect, and an engaging proclivity for undercutting himself with humor’ and that these virtues are even greater in *Perestroika*, which he sees as a better and, ultimately, much more hopeful play than the brooding *Millennium Approaches*. The hope that Richards sees produced by the play, however, comes only at the very end of the play since, most of the characters are actually worse off initially. In the end, in Richards’s interpretation, Kushner speaks directly to the audience when Prior tells us that:

Mankind will save itself. Or no one will. That is the daunting reality of Mr. Kushner’s huge drama and also its humane promise.

⁶⁰ Frank Rich, “A Play to Embrace all Possibilities in Art and Life,” *New York Times*, May 5, 1993.

The choice is ours. 'The great work begins,' says Prior as the curtain falls. He's looking right at us.⁶¹

The reviews cited above represent only a fraction of the reviews written about the play and its productions worldwide, but they represent an elated, very positive, trend in the initial reception of the play.

To date there are two anthologies specifically on the play: *Angels in America: Essays on Kushner's Angels* (1995) and *Approaching the Millennium: Essays on Angels in America* (1997). The academic interest in the play and in Tony Kushner's writings in general clearly matches that of the initial newspaper criticism. The number of journal articles, book chapters, essays, and so forth grows every year, and *Angels in America* seems to continue to garner interest. Obviously this has to do with the amount of information, references, intellectual material, and theatrical qualities of the play. Though basically all of the essays and articles commend the plays for the same reasons that the newspaper criticism did, most of the analyses put forth in these volumes also put forth certain criticisms, two of which will be presented here.

David Savran analyzes the inherent political ambivalence in the play. A quote from his article opened this section saying that because of the play's scope and politics of the opposite of anything you say about the play can also be true. Savran shows us that *Angels in America* envisions utopia and dystopia as inherently connected, meaning that disaster is necessary in order to imagine utopia, which is why everybody, except Roy Cohn, who dies, must look disaster in the eye before moving on. Building on this

⁶¹David Richards, "'Perestroika,' Part 2 of Tony Kushner's Huge Daring Drama Is Moving because It Is Humane," *New York Times*, November 28, 1993.

fundamental dichotomy, utopia/dystopia, the play is structured around a series of other dichotomies such as: heaven/hell, forgiveness/retribution, communitarianism/individualism, spirit/flesh, pleasure/pain, beauty/decay, future/past, homosexuality/heterosexuality, rationalism/indeterminacy, migration/staying put, progress/stasis, life/death.⁶² These dichotomies should not just be read as binary ends against which the characters and themes are played out, but rather, Savran suggests, as figures of undecidability. It is in the contradiction between them that meaning lies and not, as we would usually think, in the resolution of the conflict between them. Read in this way, the contradictions in the play, and in and between the characters, are representations of struggle, and in that struggle progress itself is thematized. Savran also makes clear that it seems like Kushner's politics, and therefore the play, favours communitarianism, rationalism, and progress over their counterparts. However, despite its seemingly progressive nature and intent, it is questionable if the play's undecidability prevents a true political stance from being taken. If everybody can read the play exactly how they please, then, ultimately, what is the progressive message that so much initial newspaper criticism seemed to find buried under the represented rubble of a crumbling nation? How can a play giving such a scathing criticism of American society become such a success unless the audience, and the system of production in which it is mounted, can read something redeeming into it? The play's ambivalence can, I contend, be seen as strategically produced through the prolonged US production process during which the play was shaped to shock a middlebrow sensibility just enough. Furthermore, as we shall see in the analysis of the British, Danish, and German productions, the ambivalence

⁶² Savran, "Ambivalence," 18.

allowed these European audiences to understand the play as a confirmation—rather than a challenge to—of the United States.

While fundamentally agreeing with David Savran, Janelle Reinelt offers a slightly different view in her criticism of *Angels in America* as epic theatre. Concisely outlining the history (or rather lack thereof) of Brechtian epic theatre in America, Reinelt reads Kushner in relation to Brecht, his professed predecessor. Finding many redeeming qualities in the play, like Savran, Reinelt ultimately ends up pointing out how the play displaces the essential Marxist notion of class onto questions of every other sort of identity.⁶³ Though we meet characters of varying religious, sexual, and racial markers, none of the main characters exist outside the middle class – the ghosts excepted. We get the sense that Roy Cohn belongs to an upperclass, but more because of his power than his financial abilities, of which we hear little besides the fact that he has embezzled from some clients and, partly therefore, is being disbarred. The only poor person we encounter is in fact a psychotic homeless woman in the South Bronx, who is mostly in the play for comic relief. The only group for which we are not given a chance to feel sympathy is the poor, or the working class. This abandonment of class strikes Reinelt as strange for a professed socialist playwright, as it consequentially leads to a renewed focus on the bourgeois individual. In the European countries chosen for this dissertation, all much more conscious of class as a social structure, this rejection of class, I suggest, intensified

⁶³ Janelle Reinelt, “Notes on *Angels in America* as American Epic Theater”, in *Approaching the Millennium: Essays on Angels in America*, ed. Deborah R. Geis and Steven F. Kruger (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1997), 234–44.

the Americanness of the play and the inherent middlebrow nature of Kushner's undertaking.⁶⁴

Though *Angels in America* strives hard to work with a collective subject, a group of people rather than the tribulations of one particular character, it ultimately ends up focusing on the individual. It is Prior's individual rejection of stasis that drives the play, and by extension, the world forward. Reinelt also offers us an example of the reinscribed individualism by reading the scene in which Belize strong-arms some bottles of AZT, by winning an abusive and racist argument with Roy Cohn. Belize, after getting the medicine from Cohn, admits to him that she needs it for some friends, and this is where individualism takes over on behalf of the possibility for a collective movement. By only framing Belize's actions in relation to Prior and not to a community as such, Kushner allows Belize's activism to end up reifying individualism rather than be an example of a potential collective struggle.

Both Reinelt and Savran in their analysis read if not history, then Kushner, against the grain, concluding that despite the play's many qualities as theatre it ends up somewhat short as political theatre. The abundance of theories and influences creates multiple cracks in the American hegemony, no doubt about that: Cracks where an audience member might for a moment burst history open and start anew. However, in the end, the play in all its grandeur leads us back to us, its initial audience at least, individuals in America.

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⁶⁴ As the reader will see, this is particularly true for the German productions.

Tony Kushner began working on *Millennium Approaches* in 1987 as commissioned by the Eureka Theatre Company in San Francisco, a company devoted to political, especially epic, theatre. Oskar Eustis, then artistic director of the Eureka, met Kushner after a performance of *A Bright Room Called Day* in New York in 1985, and he immediately recognized Kushner's talent. Eustis directed the first professional production of *A Bright Room Called Day* in San Francisco in the fall of 1987, and following this production, the theatre commissioned Kushner to write a new play, eventually to become *Millennium Approaches*.⁶⁵ Kushner describes Eustis's influence on the play as tremendous; in fact Kushner wrote it specifically for him to direct.⁶⁶

Initially, as commissioned by the Eureka, *Angels in America* was intended to be something quite different from what it eventually turned out to be. Oskar Eustis has recorded it as being intended as a short and humorous play with serious underlying issues. He has described his reaction when he saw the first draft, "We were terribly excited about this 90-minute comedy. But then in the fall of 1988, the first draft came in and we knew that we were in trouble."⁶⁷ Obviously Eustis and the company had had other expectations for the piece, while Kushner had become intent on fulfilling his own vision of a much longer, deeper, and more complicated play.

The first reading of the manuscript took place at the New York Theatre Workshop in November of 1988. Following that, since Eustis had accepted a job at the Mark Taper Forum in Los Angeles, the play was developed there. During the process at the Mark Taper Forum it became obvious that the play should be split in two parts, so in the spring of 1990 a workshop production was presented of *Millennium Approaches*, directed by

⁶⁵ Bruce Weber, "'Angels' Angels," *New York Times Magazine*, 25 April, 1993.

⁶⁶ Susan Jones, "Tony Kushner's *Angels*," in *Tony Kushner in Conversation*, 158.

⁶⁷ Weber, 1993.

Eustis and designed by Mark Wedlend. Further changes and revisions took place and then, in May 1991, *Millennium Approaches* received its world premiere at the Eureka, directed by David Esbjornson and designed by Tom Kann.

While *Millennium Approaches* was being rehearsed Kushner had been writing on *Perestroika*, which was performed at the Eureka only as a staged reading, following the full performance of *Millennium Approaches*.⁶⁸ Director David Esbjornson recalls that the production situation was an odd one, because of unresolved conflicts between Kushner, Eustis, and the Eureka. Nevertheless, talking to the *New York Times* in 1993, he describes the job as one of his best productions, despite a low production budget resulting in small catastrophes like collapsing scenery.⁶⁹ However, *Perestroika* was far from done (at the time it ended with all the characters standing at the foot of the Empire State Building when an atomic bomb explodes), and it was obvious after the reading at Eureka that the play needed extensive work. Though the Eureka production was fairly well received by local critics, Broadway producers remained wary of the play, partly because of fear of controversy over its subject matter, and partly because of its large technical demands.⁷⁰ Following the production, *Perestroika* was taken back to the drawing board for further workshopping under Eustis's direction at the Mark Taper Forum, while *Millennium Approaches* went to London to be performed at the National Theatre, which turned out to be a major critical success.

Millennium Approaches opened at the National Theatre in London on January 23, 1992. The performance played at the Cottesloe, essentially a black box and the smallest

⁶⁸ David Román, *Acts of Intervention: Performance, Gay Culture and AIDS* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1998), 204-05.

⁶⁹ Weber, 1993.

⁷⁰ Fisher, 60.

space at the National Theatre, seating 300. Declan Donnellan, who is primarily known for his work on Shakespeare and seventeenth-century theatre, directed the play. The choice of Donnellan seemed strange on the surface, as he had never worked with a living playwright before. However, Kushner's sprawling play is not unsuited to the Shakespearean theatre. John M. Clum sees connections to Shakespeare's romantic comedies in *Angels in America*, and Art Borreca has pointed to the particular combination of Shakespeare and Brecht in the British theatre from the mid-1900s, claiming that "Donnellan's production of *Angels* demonstrated that the English synthesis of the "Shakespearean" and the "Brechtian" is still a vital one."⁷¹ While the American productions had struggled with the play's Brechtian qualities and elements, Donnellan's production seemed to have no trouble visualizing the dialectic and contrapuntal structure of the play. Donnellan collaborated with Nick Olmerod on the set design, and they decided on a solution that would highlight the American nature of the play in a playful way, while also commenting on itself.

For the production of *Millennium Approaches*, Donnellan and Olmerod decided to keep the stage bare and black except for a Jasper Johns-like painting of an American flag on the back wall. All scenes and actions took place in front of this flag. Obviously, this very visual reference ensures the audience's focus on the play as a representation of "America." Kushner recalls having second thoughts about the set. In the *New York Times* he said, "I thought 'Oh, God, they don't really like the play—they just want to do this play to knock America. '"⁷² Rather than "knocking" America though, the production sought to frame, or give an abstracted idea of, America; illustrating Belize's charge

⁷¹ Art Borreca, "Dramaturging the Dialectic: Brecht, Benjamin, and Declan Donnellan's Production of *Angels in America*", in *Approaching the Millennium*, 245; Clum, 249.

⁷² Weber, 1993.

against Louis that what he really cares about is not the real America, but the idea of America.⁷³ In this way, Borreca observes, the London production truly fulfilled Brecht's notion that a performance should visualize the obscured reality behind the action. By framing the stage itself in a representation of an idea of America, *Millennium Approaches* took on new meanings. On this empty playing field, the characters and stage-hands wheeled in and out only the most necessary elements. The changes of scenery thereby became part of the process of the play, truly constructing the actor-driven event wished for by Kushner, who also ultimately came to love the performance. Seeing the show after the second preview, Kushner said, "It had blossomed in a way that hadn't seemed possible."⁷⁴

With the strong critical acclaim from London making its way back to America—essentially the same mechanism that ensured Sherman's play, *Bent*, a success in the United States—the buzz surrounding the play grew noticeably bigger and an increasing number of producers began showing interest in it.⁷⁵ However, with critical acclaim came pressure: The pressure on Eustis and Kushner to produce something extraordinary in the first complete production of the play at the Mark Taper Forum in Los Angeles.

The team had the difficult task of producing both plays, of which *Perestroika* was still in a phase of constant revision, in a short period of time. Work had already been done on *Millennium Approaches* at both the Taper and at the Eureka, and rehearsals for the play were going well. However, as was to be the case with most theatres taking on both plays, *Perestroika* seemed to be problematic both for the directors and the actors,

⁷³ Borreca, 253.

⁷⁴ Weber, 1993.

⁷⁵ This importation or re-importation of US plays that have been successful in London is not unique to Kushner (or Sherman). The US playwright who finds success and gains cultural capital in London and then returns to Broadway indicates the resistance in the US production system to potential controversy.

who had to be in rehearsal for the play while also performing in something else at night. During the rehearsal process, Kushner was still writing the play, which of course added to the actors' challenges. Kushner recalls the problems with *Perestroika*, which ultimately received very mixed reviews in the Los Angeles production. He outlines how he and others had problems with the structure of the play, initially written in five acts. Some people around him felt that the play needed to have stronger similarities with *Millennium Approaches*, so Kushner transformed the play to a three-act structure, thereby undoing part of *Perestroika*'s more fluid or journey-like nature.⁷⁶ Ultimately Kushner realized this was a mistake, and once *Perestroika* reached Broadway, it returned to a five-act structure.

The Los Angeles production was very well received in general, with most critics focusing their praise on *Millennium Approaches*. Having been bedazzled by the British production, Frank Rich, however, was more skeptical of this production, describing the staging as “at times stodgy,” and “plodding,” and he called *Perestroika* “a somewhat embryonic, occasionally overstuffed, mixture of striking passages, Talmudic digressions and glorious epiphanies.”⁷⁷

Between these productions and the British production of *Millennium Approaches* in January of 1992, the two parts had literally been seen by thousands of people over two years.⁷⁸ This means that, though the Los Angeles production was in essence the first full performance of both plays, *Angels in America* had received ample attention during its long process and was awaited with great expectations. Part of the enlarged or growing expectations for the transformative qualities of Kushner's play(s) grew from the recent

⁷⁶ Jones, 160.

⁷⁷ Rich, “Marching.”

⁷⁸ Román, 205.

elections in the United States. In the years it took to write and produce these different versions of *Angels in America*, America itself had changed.

Following the Taper production it was clear that *Angels in America* was heading to Broadway, in spite of a tentative earlier agreement to perform the play at the Public Theatre in New York City, which has a long history of performing socially conscious and political material. The major theatre producing organizations in New York competed over the rights to the play, and it was announced that instead of moving the Taper production, the play would have a new director and designer. In other words, though several of the central actors remained the same, a completely new production of *Angels in America* was to be staged within just two years of the official opening in San Francisco.⁷⁹

New York director and playwright George C. Wolf was chosen to direct the production, which had designs by Robin Wagner. This production ultimately landed excellent reviews for both plays and earned numerous Tony nominations and awards for the cast, creative team, and Kushner. It was also, compared to other so-called “straight plays” at the time, one of the most expensive productions in Broadway history. The production cost 3.7 million dollars to mount, with a running cost of about two hundred thousand dollars a week. It was estimated that it would have to run a year or more on Broadway to recoup the investments made.⁸⁰ In the end, the production turned out to be tremendously successful and reached a large audience; *Millennium Approaches* ran for 20 previews and 367 performances, and *Perestroika* for 26 previews and 217 performances and.⁸¹ Its producers did not make much money on the Broadway production, but as a

⁷⁹ Given that most transfers to Broadway are complete productions simply traveling from one location to another, the brand new production of *Angels in America* in New York City is highly unusual.

⁸⁰ Bruce Weber, “On Stage, and Off,” *New York Times*, January 7, 1994.

⁸¹ www.ibdb.com.

result of the national tour, national and international productions, and not least, the later HBO TV version, they have ultimately done so.

Returning to Kushner's surprise that *Angels in America* worked well in England despite its very American qualities, in the following, I analyze the reception of Kushner's play in Denmark and Germany

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Angels in America is a fundamentally American play in terms of its subject matter and its many references to culture, history, and politics. Despite this it has received a wealth of international attention and keeps being produced around the world. Most theatres will create a program with notes that explain the many references and supply a historical background of America in 1980s, to offset an international audience's lack of familiarity with the specifics of the play. Though the play in general has been well received, skepticism towards America and its politics dominates much of the international critical discourse.

In 1995 both *Millennium Approaches* and *Perestroika* were performed in two different Danish cities. Aarhus Teater, the leading regional theatre, premiered *Millennium Approaches* on 10 February, while the Royal Theatre in Copenhagen, the national theatre, premiered *Millennium Approaches* on 17 February, with *Perestroika* following only two weeks later. The arrival of *Angels in America* on the Danish stage was without doubt the cultural event of the theatrical season. All leading newspapers published features on the plays and reviews of European productions that preceded the Danish ones. Expectations, similar to those expressed in America, that the plays held the magical power to somehow transform the theatre were prevalent.

In the newspaper criticism, however, it becomes clear that the performances did not succeed completely.⁸² The plays, considered as texts, are described as masterpieces of the American theatre, but according to the Danish critic the performances did not fully realize the texts' potential. For example, after the opening of the *Millennium Approaches* in Copenhagen, an angry audience member took to the editorial page. In a letter to the editor she wrote:

I grab my pen to express my shocking experience with the play 'Angels in America' at the New Stage of the Royal Theatre. I have never been presented with something so demoralizing, and when I think of all the disgusting expressions that were used—and at our national stage! I could understand it if it was some ridiculous side-street-theatre that had this play in its repertoire, and that Birgitte Price [then artistic director at the Royal Theatre] tolerates this can only be seen as a desire to be fashionable and to cater to the young. I think it is an insult to show this to people, and how many audience members were left at the final curtain, I don't know, as we were many who left at the first intermission (the play ran until 11:30PM). And, it is unfathomable to me how one can make actors participate in something like this. I sincerely hope they feel disgusted with themselves afterwards. For being theatrical art it is far from!⁸³

⁸² My analysis of the Danish reception of *Angels in America* is based in my research in the clippings archives of The Royal Library, the Theatre Museum, and the archives and library of the Danish gay organization, Landsforeningen for Bøsser og Lesbisle—all in Copenhagen, Denmark.

⁸³ Nu griber jeg pennen for at sætte ord på min chokerende oplevelse i forbindelse med teaterstykket "Engle i Amerika" på Det Kongelige Teaters Nye Scene. Aldrig har jeg været præsenteret for noget så demoraliserende, når jeg tænker på alle de svinske udtryk der blev brugt—og så på vores nationalscene. Jeg kunne forstå hvis det var et eller andet useriøst sidegadeteater, der havde dette på repertoire, og at Birgitte Price tolererer noget sådant, kan vel kun tages som et tegn på, at hun vil være med på noderne og lefle for ungdommen. Jeg synes simpelthen det er en uartighed at byde mennesker en sådan forestilling, og hvor

Clearly, this angry writer, whose name was withheld by the newspaper, found the play offensive, but I will argue that it is not solely because of its subject matter. Her exclamation that “being theatrical art is far from” to me indicates that part of the offense of the play is its US origins. This, I would argue, is also made even clearer in the letter writer’s critique that the play is being performed at the national stage, nonetheless. Denmark’s leading left wing newspaper also criticized this choice. On its editorial page it claimed that this play was “too American” to interest anybody in Denmark and took it as a sign of the immense crisis at the Royal Theatre which, as the editorial points out, receives all its funding from the Danish tax payers. The author of the unsigned editorial writes, “at the opening of second part of *Angels in America*, one experienced the strange occurrence that the audiences diminished by each intermission.”⁸⁴ Evidently, then, *Angels in America* is being used in an intense debate about the repertoire choices of the national theatre. It is, one could argue, taken hostage in a debate about the extent to which a national stage should perform US plays that, in the analysis of the editorial writer, are insignificant for anybody not living in the United States. This is a curious position, however. The Royal Theatre had for decades performed a significant amount of canonical US plays—O’Neill, Miller, Williams, Albee—which suggests that more than the American-ness of the play it was its contemporary-ness. Even if we accept that Kushner’s play was being used in an already ongoing debate about the repertoire at the

mange der var tilbage ved stykkets slutning, ved jeg ikke, for vi var utroligt mange, der allerede forlod teatret i den første pause (stykket varede til 23:30). Og det er ganske ubegribeligt for mig, hvordan man kan få skuespillere til at medvirke i sådan en forestilling. Jeg håber inderligt de væmmes ved sig selv bagefter. For skuespilkunst er det så langtfra. Letter to the editor, *Weekend Avisen*, March 17, 1995. *Angels in America* clippings file, KB. Interestingly, Birgitte Price who, as we saw, was the director of *Bent-de Andre* in Copenhagen had by this time become Artistic Director of the Royal Theatre while Jan Maagaard, director of *Torch Song Trilogy*, had become the Royal Theatre’s leading director.

⁸⁴ Ved premieren på andendelen af englene, oplevede man imidlertid det særegne, at tilskuerflokken skrumpede ind for hver af de to pauser der blev holdt. *Information*, March 7, 1995. *Angels in America* clippings file, KB.

Royal Theatre, it is clear, I believe, that *Angels in America* in the editorial writer's opinion was insignificant in that it simply illustrated rather than deconstructed the United States.

The history, the different religions, and the political system seemed too foreign. The identities represented by the different characters were read as too particularly American and thus too different for a Danish audience to really care about the characters' conflicts—or so the argument went. This disappearance of immediate identification meant that the performances ran the risk of being unable to maintain an audience's interest in the characters, making them seem less universally human and more like American curiosities, according to some critics. Instead of disrupting or deconstructing the notion of a particular, unified, melting-pot America, the performances seem to have reified an already existing notion of America, however skewed or prejudiced that notion might be. The nation performed in *Angels in America* confirmed what the Danish critics already thought they knew about America and the relations between politics, organized religion, AIDS and male homosexuality. This is identical to some German critics' reaction (described below) and points to both the ever prevalent anti-American sentiment in Europe and the way America, or rather an idea of America, is ingrained in Western popular culture. It also illustrates perfectly how difficult it is to take a play as specifically American as *Angels in America* and transplant it to a different cultural and political climate.

The performances in Aarhus of *Millennium Approaches* and of both plays in Copenhagen got a wide variety of reviews. All three productions received both positive and more critical reviews. In Aarhus production *Millennium Approaches* performed as a

chamber piece, not unlike the Cottesloe production in England, in a smaller house with a more intimate setting. The Royal Theatre production was performed in a larger traditional theatre, making use of the proscenium. These productions then both highlight the theatrical possibilities and problems in the cultural translation of a play as culturally specific as *Angels in America*.

Performing the play in a country that considers itself liberated in relation to the acceptance of alternative sexualities and lifestyles, as is the case in Denmark, obviously changes the dynamics of the performance. That both theatres also to some extent tried to universalize the topic by focusing the play on the domestic tribulations of the two couples can be seen from the criticism. The Aarhus production will serve as an example.

In Aarhus the play was performed on a small bare stage. The stage consisted of a bare stone-like platform getting slightly narrower towards the back, a wing on either side and steps in front.⁸⁵ One critic called it a “concrete desert.”⁸⁶ The director, Johan Bergenstråhle, chose to focus on the interpersonal relationships between the characters and thereby downplayed the larger political and historical issues. Danish theatre scholar Bent Holm notes how the performance used the body as a recurring metaphor for the characters and their relationships leading to a transformation in which “the verbal dimension – the intellectual, sophisticated wit – was toned down, as was the detailed description of the external world. Thus the priority was moved from exterior and intellectual drama to interior and physical drama.”⁸⁷ In doing this, the director seems to have de-emphasized the gay aspect of the play to the extent that Joe and Harper became

⁸⁵ Bent Holm, “Flying in Different Directions: American Angels in Denmark,” in *Essays on Kushner’s Angels*, ed. Per Brask (Winnipeg: Blizzard Publishing, 1995), 32.

⁸⁶ En beton ørken. Me Lund, “Englenes Tilbagetog,” *Berlingske Tidende*, February 12, 1995. *Angels in America* clippings file, TheaM.

⁸⁷ Holm, 35.

the one central couple. Critic Me Lund describes this in her review and suggests that, in this production, Prior and Louis seem to be nothing but a contrasting mirror image to Joe and Harper and that this focus makes Joe's struggle with his sexuality and his complex father/son relationship with Roy Cohn the central conflict of the play. She asks "why perform precisely this play, if it is the white heterosexual male's fear of his inner gay man that is the theme?"⁸⁸ She continues:

The play is intended as a grand and broadly focused narrative—gay drama and universal drama all in one. It dances with all the large existential questions in life, questions we have to ask here at the end of a millennium, questions that can be collected under the headline: What is one to do with one's life in a world without constant values. When the text is more moving than the performance of it at Arrhus Teater, it's due to a fundamental mistake by the director. From fear of overplaying the gay angle, he has downplayed it so much that it almost becomes a colorful *La Cage aux Folles* background with an affected Lars Junggreen and a totally distanced Klaus Tange in an unbelievable love relation.⁸⁹

Obviously this approach transformed the play, and while the performance managed to carry on its investigation of America as a cultural and political threshold, for some of the

⁸⁸ Hvorfor overhovedet spille dette stykke, hvis det er den hvide heteroseksuelle mands frygt for sin indre bøsse der er temaet? Lund. *Angels in America* clippings file, TheaM.

⁸⁹ Stykket er tænkt som en storstilet og bredt facetteret fortælling – bøsseudramatik og universeldramatik i ét. Det tager livtag med alle de store eksistentielle spørgsmål, vi må stille her ved udgangen af et årtusind – og som kan samles under overskriften: Hvas skal man stille op med sit liv i en verden uden blivende værdier? Når teksten er mere gribende end selve forestillingen på Aarhus Teater, skyldes det et grundlæggende fejlgreb fra instruktørens side. Af frygt for at overprioritere bøsseudsvinklen i stykket har han nedtonet den så meget, at den nærmest tager sig ud som en slags farverig "La Cage aux Folles"-baggrund – med en affekteret Lars Junggreen og en totaldistanceret Klaus Tange i et utroværdigt kærlighedsspil. Ibid.

critics, the downplaying of the gay aspects fundamentally changed the play into a study of a heterosexual relationship, however volcanic, instead of a gay fantasia.

In the year following the American openings of *Angels in America*, the play, particularly *Millennium Approaches*, received numerous German productions (e.g. Zurich, Hamburg, Essen and Frankfurt). As was the case with the Danish productions of the play, word had already reached Germany about this new American theatrical sensation. However, some curiosity as to what the fuss was about can be seen here as well. In a review of the National Theatre production, performed on tour in Germany in November of 1992, critic C. Bernd Sucher expresses his doubts as to what exactly the play has to offer a German audience. He calls the play “the answer for the theatre of Dallas and Denver. Instead of rich, dumb, scheming heteros we see poor, wise, homos with integrity. A gay fantasia in episodes.”⁹⁰ Apparently, Sucher here scathingly critiques *Angels in America* as a fundamentally cheap and frivolous play that could only possibly entertain the less “cultured” and educated American population. As was the case with *Bent*, the anti-American understanding of the United States as a shallow place of excessive consumption determined the critic’s evaluation of the play

In a review of the New York production, Joerg von Uthmann suggests that at the centre of *Angels in America* we find two homosexual couples: one in which the partners leave each other and one in which the partners cannot find each other. This obviously refers to Louis and Prior, and Joe and Roy Cohn.⁹¹ Unlike the far more typical reading of the play, in which we have a heterosexual and a gay couple at the centre, or the Danish

⁹⁰ Bernd C. Sucher, “Alles Unter Kondom? Tony Kushner’s ‘Angels in America’ Beim Europa-Theater-Festival in Dusseldorf,” *Sueddeutsche Zeitung*, November 21, 1992. *Angels in America* clippings file, Schwul.

⁹¹ Im Mittelpunkt stehen zwei homosexuelle Paare - eines, das auseinandergeht, und eines, das nicht zueinanderfinden kann. Ibid.

reading with Harper and Joe at the centre, Uthmann's reading completely relegates the female characters to a secondary position and thereby shifts the balance of the play. However, it does point to the different constellations of homoeroticism at the core of the play, and makes it, truly, a gay play concerned primarily with gay issues.

Uthmann is not particularly impressed with the play, however. He asks why the Broadway interest is so great, since the American theatre, unlike the German theatre, has seen plenty of plays dealing with questions of AIDS: William Hoffman's *As Is*, Larry Kramer's *The Normal Heart* and *Destiny of Me*, Cheryl Weston's *Before It Hits Home*, Paula Vogel's *The Baltimore Waltz*, William Finn's *Falsettos*, and Paul Rudnick's *Jeffrey*. Though most of these plays would be unfamiliar to a German readership in the early 1990s, Uthman answers his own question by claiming that in each of the other plays we are given an individual story of disease without connection to a larger issue. In *Angels in America*, according to Uthman, AIDS is a collective disease functioning as a metaphor for a diseased society. Despite this recurring pathologization of America by linking the United States as a nation to AIDS, Uthman offers an interesting thematic reading of the relation between the formation of a nation and an international disease. However, his interesting reading did not necessarily translate into performances in Germany.

In a comparative review of four productions, the theatre critic for the respected theatre magazine, *Theater Heute*, Franz Wille, analyses the differences among them. Wille points out a central if somewhat surprising premise: that *Angels in America* does not tell a German audience anything it did not already know about America or AIDS. As we saw in the Danish criticism, this is a recurring observation. Where the Danish critics generally agreed that the translation, done by poet Morti Wizki, was excellent, Wille

points out that the different German translations were problematic. Wille makes clear that the play took even longer in German due to the language and this, in the performances that stayed loyal to the text, created performances that were simply too long. The performances in Zurich, Hamburg and Essen all stayed close to the text where the performance in Frankfurt radically changed the text.

The Zürich performance, directed by Volker Hesse, took place in a small theatre, the Zuericher Neumarkt-Theater. The small auditorium was divided by a platform stage on which the action took place. As in most other productions the focus was on the actors, who, however, seem to have performed in a superficial, external, and clichéd fashion. Using the character of Roy Cohn as a case in point, Wille points out how Christian Schneller utilized American TV as an example of how to play his character. He says “Schneller plays Roy Cohn as you might imagine a nasty, ambitious, American lawyer, if you mainly know about nasty American lawyers from lousy American TV series [. . .].”⁹²

The local critic did not have kinder words for the show. C. Bernd Sucher, critic for *Sueddeutsche Zeitung*, called this performance of *Angels in America* a “theatre version of the gay hit: I am what I am”, compares it to *Charley’s Aunt*, and calls it a piece of kitchy, bad, writing.⁹³ Hubert Spiegel says, “Kushner’s play is a pointed homo-operetta, a trivial tragedy about marriage, a Republican pandemonium, an angry fairy tale of Reagan’s children, and a portrait of the homosexual gay-basher Roy Cohn.”⁹⁴ Here, again, we see Sucher relate the very form of *Angels in America* to an understanding of the

⁹² Franz Wille, “Historical Revue and Dance of Death,” in *Essays on Kushner’s Angels*, ed. Per Brask (Winnipeg: Blizzard Publishing, 1995), 56.

⁹³ Ibid.

⁹⁴ Kushners Stück ist eine pointensichere Schwulen-Operette, eine triviale Ehetragödie, ein Republikaner-Pandämonium, das böse Märchen von "Reagans Kindern", wie Louis sagt, und die Porträtstudie des 1986 verstorbenen homosexuellen Schwulenzüglers Roy Cohn. Hubert Spiegel, *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, 1993. *Angels in America* clippings file, Schwul.

United States as a shallow place for shallow people consumed by popular culture, as seen in his reference to the hit “I Am, What I Am,” which, ironically, is from *La Cage aux Folles*.

The Hamburg production, directed by Werner Schroeter and performed in a much larger space at the Deutsches Schauspielhaus, was played on a traditional stage with interlocking platforms in front of a stylized skyscraper with a wading pool in front. Grander in scale than the Zurich production, the set seemed to diminish the actors in scale, forcing them to primarily act on the front stage in what Wille describes as “large, if false, emotions.”⁹⁵ The main problem with the production, however, seems to have been its fear of its gayness: its unwitting homophobia. Wille identifies a lack of homoeroticism between the characters that renders the whole performance unbelievable and hard to understand. As with the Danish production from Aarhus, the refocusing of the play away from its depiction of gay love, sex, and death, creates an unbalance that, eventually, radically alters the show. The highly stylized and effeminate performance of Belize, according to Wille, “transplants *Angels in America* to where it least of all belongs: in the middle-class fantasy land of a transsexual honky-tonk.”⁹⁶

All is, however, not lost in Germany. The modern German theatre, in a heritage from Piscator, Brecht, and the theatrical modernist avant-garde, has a tradition of producing radical stagings of plays. The Frankfurt production, directed by Thomas Schulte-Michels, was a radical deviation from the previous German stagings of the play –

⁹⁵ Wille, 57.

⁹⁶ Wille, 57–8. According to Lasse Kekki, a Finish scholar of queer theory and literature, Belize in Finland was played by a white actor in black makeup. Obviously this unwitting use of blackface changes the dynamics of the play significantly. For more on the Finish production see Lasse Kekki, *From Gay to Queer: Gay Male Identity in Selected Fiction by David Leavitt and in Tony Kushner’s Play Angels in America I+II* (New York: Peter Lang Publishing, 2003).

a sort of The Wooster Group meets *Angels in America* approach to the play. Here the audience saw no representation of New York, met no recognizable psychologically identified characters, and witnessed no performances built on, or inspired by, American TV or movies. The characters all used microphones or micro-ports, at times speaking directly to the audience, spoke in a ferocious tempo, and, since the text had been radically cut, would relate the missing scenes to the audience. Wille, and here he reveals his own taste, clearly liked this performance the best because it seemed less “American” and more “German.” In Brecht’s homeland, however, it does seem appropriate that the acting should be illustrative instead of naturalized.

The importance-of *Angels in America* for the contemporary theatre in the United States cannot possibly be overstated. Kushner’s play, as demonstrated in this chapter, transformed the way in which the US theatre could engage political issues and the way in which gay men could take center stage. Through the radical contextualization of *Angels in America* offered in this chapter, I hope to have demonstrated the enormous complexity of Kushner’s plays in terms of its politics and references to US theatre history and the ways in which this complexity threatens to get lost in intercultural performances. In understanding these complexities, most importantly though for the purposes of this dissertation, I hope to have illustrated the ways in which Kushner’s play exported a very particular sense of the United States to Western Europe. It is clear from the reception in Denmark, but particularly in Germany, that the productions of *Angels in America* never did succeed in performing the complex critique of the United States that is clearly at the heart of Kushner’s endeavor. Rather, the productions were received as fascinating, if

melodramatic and shallow, critiques of an American nation that audiences already thought they knew. Directors, as well as critics, as shown in this chapter, tended to universalize the personal issues of the play at the expense of the political issues. The political themes of the play, the central critique of the United States set forth in the play, in Europe, as opposed to in the United States, confirmed the anti-American sentiments already harbored by the critics. In other words, *Angels in America*, rather than deconstructing the United States through performance, reiterated it as a shallow, greedy, and fundamentally corrupt fantasy of a democratic Utopia.

CONCLUSION

I started out this dissertation by invoking Raymond Williams' observation that, "there is no position except in fantasy where one can merely examine what others are inscribing." In many ways, the multiple intersecting, overlapping, and crossbreeding discussions offered within these pages are all inspired by this simple epigraph. There is no position for a scholar outside that of history or society. Consequentially, analyzing the representation of sexual identities on stage must, I contend, be rooted in a careful radical contextualization that attempts a deep investigation of the historical and theoretical environment within which any representation of identity is received. In analyzing the export of US representations of gay male identity to Western Europe, I have shown the degree to which identity—and maybe particularly gay identity, because of its ontological relationship to specific cultures' histories of repression, legal codes, and the often-ongoing cultural stigmatization—is culturally rooted in a sense of the nation state. The US-produced representations of gay identity then, I argue in *Exporting America*, can only really be understood in careful relation to localized historical and contemporary identities. Through an analysis, then, of the public discourse and rhetorical strategies surrounding the British, German, and Danish performances of popular North American plays—such as *The Boys in the Band*, *Bent*, *Torch Song Trilogy*, and *Angels in America*—I investigate how these performances construct a particularized and rhetoricalized American version of gay male sexuality and masculinity in cold war Western Europe. Through textual analysis of this very particular body of dramatic literature, and a contextualization of this literature within a sociology of culture

particularly through an analysis of the reception of the performances, I am able to point to the vital function of dramatic literature and theatrical performance in the social construction of gender and sexuality in an increasingly intercultural and performative world.

Furthermore, the ultimate conclusion of William's observation is that there is no such thing as complete individuality. While we are all individuals, we are also all collective individuals existing in complicated societal structures that help determine who and what we are. In these pages, I have made the case that for gay people—and I have focused this argument on gay men in here—this is especially true, and that in the creation of a collective to exist within, theatrical performance has played a particularly important function. Part of the structure then that US produced representations of gay male identity are understood within in Europe is determined by an ever present (though sometimes under-articulated) anti-Americanism. Anti-Americanism, I argue in *Exporting America: Theatre, Gay Male Identity, and anti-Americanism in Western Europe* can operatively be understood as a structure of feeling that determines the way in which the performances analyzed in these pages are received, understood, and discussed in public discourse.

In chapter two I argued that *The Boys in the Band* and *Torch Song Trilogy* both fashioned gay existence in terms of liberation. *The Boys in the Band*, at a time in history when gay men were pathologized, utilized domestication as a camp trope of effeminacy through which the characters, and in particular the effeminized character of Emory, imagined a homosexual heritage. The play, however, simultaneously imagined domesticity as an ideal for the only couple that may have a happy future together. Domestication, then, not sexual liberation is the ultimate goal of *The Boys in the Band*. If

we accept that this was the ideal for a US gay population in *The Boys in the Band*, it was not understood that way in Denmark. In Denmark, my analysis showed, *The Boys in the Band* was understood as inherently American and thus foreign. I suggest that *The Boys in the Band* in its Danish performance created a sense of double-otherness in which a Danish gay audience could simultaneously mirror and distance themselves. I argue that the Aveny-Theatre framed its show as sensational and its characters as American freaks to be watched and dismissed. I argue that the theatre critics accepted this premise and understood the show as American to the degree that it allowed them to understand themselves as liberated as opposed to the supposed repressive nature of American society. *Torch Song Trilogy*, likewise, I argue, operated with a strategy of domestication in order to position its hero, Arnold, in opposition to a movement of gay liberation focused primarily on sexual freedom. Through my analysis of the Danish reception of the play, I suggest that, as was the case with the reception of *The Boys in the Band*, the Danish critics utilized the performance to create a distinction between “liberated Danish gays,” and “repressed US gay men.” The performance thus created a way for the Danish critics—and, for gay men, to the extent we have source materials from the gay press—to construct a national narrative of liberation in opposition to an anti-American construction of the United States as a repressive and superficial nation. The very dramaturgy of both plays—what I have discussed as the homology between theatrical representation of gay male identity and middlebrow theatrical production—was seen, in Denmark, as an essentially US dramaturgy, intended for the acceptance of its subject matter in the US; something that was understood as unnecessary for a, supposedly, more sophisticated Danish audience.

In chapter three and four, in analyses of *Bent* and *Angels in America* as text, in US performance, and in the European performances, I turn to the performance of history in an attempt to delineate the particular use of history in gay theatrical performance.

Through an appropriation of Richard Dyer's term "heritage," I suggest that gay plays that imagine a particular gay history (as in *Bent*), or relation to history (as in *Angels in America*) simultaneously position gay men in history—and thus undo the active erasure of homosexuality from history—and use this historical position to critique contemporary gay culture. Or, as is the case with *Angels in America*, use the historicity of gay existence to critique society as such. Unlike *Bent*, which centers its critique of contemporary gay culture within the gay community itself, *Angels in America* imagines this critique as systemic and not necessarily solely in relation to a homosexual subculture.

In other words, *Bent* creates a certain epistemological framework through which to understand its particular fictionalized version of the history of homosexuality, whereas plays like *The Boys in the Band* and *Torch Song Trilogy* rely on a history of camp, popular culture, and psychoanalysis. Unlike *The Boys in the Band* and *Torch Song Trilogy*, *Bent* uses the actual event of the Holocaust to theorize a victimized gay identity through a fictionalization of gay suffering. *Angels in America*, as the last performance analyzed in this dissertation, then cracks history way open by offering a gay heritage that is related to the collective formation of identity on a national level rather than a sub-cultural level. Understanding, as this dissertation does, "identities" as "the names we give to the different ways we are positioned by and position ourselves to narratives of the past," I believe to have demonstrated the absolute necessity of doing away with the notion of "Western gay male identity," and even the possibility of a unified gay theatre

history (as opposed to histories). Second generation gay theatre history, I propose in these pages, must be understood through an analysis of the local theatrical performance of identities—with identities understood as essentially always locally and historically determined.

The Boys in the Band, *Torch Song Trilogy*, *Bent*, and *Angels in America*, in their performances in Europe, are understood as particularly American plays in their melodramatic—which, as shown, in Europe does not refer to the historical US genre of actual melodramas, but rather to a sense of dramatic excess and overly emotionally wrought performances—structures. In *Exporting America*, *Bent* serves as the particular example of this reception. It is clear in the reception of *Bent* (but also in the analysis of *Angels in America*) that an almost Ardonioian critique of the United States determines the way in which the play is understood.

This European fantasy of the American middlebrow theatre as essentially unworthy—or ‘uncouth’ to use an expression from Andrei Markovitz discussed in chapter one—of serious discourse, is a topic for further research. Given the enormous importance of US theatre to Western Europe—even of gay plays like these—the constant dismissal of them as commercialized, melodramatic, insincere and so on, seems almost schizophrenic. I believe that in understanding the export of theatrical representations of America through the method of radical contextualization, we can achieve a better understanding of the complex cultural dynamics not only between the US and Europe, between national and historical gay male identities, but, essentially, of the way middlebrow US theatre exports not only US theatre, or US gay male identities, but America herself.

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