QUEER DRAMATURGIES:

CONTEMPORARY GAY MALE POLITICS, CULTURE, AND THEATRE

by

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Abstract
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Queer Dramaturgies: Contemporary Gay Male Politics, Culture, and Theatre explores how the visibility associated with the mainstreaming of gay culture and politics in the 1990s impacts the representation of gay men on stage and, in turn, how such theatrical representations inform gay culture and politics. The 1990s unarguably were a period of remarkable visibility for gay men, from the national debates about gay marriage and the right to open military service to the virtual explosion of gay images in popular culture. Whether this increased presence translates into social acceptance and integration has been the subject of considerable debate among different communities and the larger national gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender movement. This dissertation participates in these debates by looking at how the forces of assimilation and mainstreaming manifest themselves in theatre, a cultural arena of historical importance to gay men but generally overlooked in discussions of contemporary gay culture and politics. The project considers a range of performances staged in New York City during the 1990s to better understand how certain performances participate in the mainstreaming of gay men and how different productions or moments in performance disrupt, contradict, or complicate the stable repetition of cultural norms and images on which mainstreaming relies. To this end, theatre functions as a vital public forum where gay men can come to terms with the

implications of their increased cultural and political visibility, examine the normalizing effect that heterosexuality has on gay male culture, reclaim and celebrate sexual difference, and examine differences among themselves and within their larger communities.

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INTRODUCTION

This dissertation is about contemporary gay male politics, culture, and theatre. It explores how the political and cultural visibility enjoyed by gay men during the 1990s has impacted the representation of gay men on stage and, in turn, how such theatrical representations inform gay culture and politics. The 1990s unarguably were a period of remarkable visibility for gay men, from the national debates about gay marriage and the right to open military service to the virtual explosion of gay images in popular culture. How this increased presence translates into social acceptance and integration has been the subject of considerable disagreement among different communities and the larger national gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender (GLBT) movement.[1] The rise in gay visibility is generally regarded as a sign of progress, but various national leaders, community activists, and public intellectuals charge that visibility has been granted only to those individuals and aspects of our lives that appeal to cultural and political norms.

This dissertation participates in the debate about gay visibility by looking at how the forces of assimilation manifest themselves in theatre, a cultural arena of historical importance to gay men but generally overlooked in discussions of contemporary gay culture and politics. The reasons for the oversight are varied and complex, from the long history of anti-theatricalism in U.S. culture to the marginal position now occupied by theatre as a cultural institution and academic discipline. In *Geographies of Learning: Theory and Practice, Activism and Performance*, Jill Dolan defends theatre as an embodied site of social change in which the "persistent potential to engage with the social in physically, materially embodied circumstances" make theatre a vital cultural practice and intellectual pursuit.[2] Following Dolan's lead, this dissertation contributes to the

study of lesbian and gay theatre and performance as a site of social change by examining how theatrical performance negotiates the politics of mainstreaming.[3] In *Up from Invisibility: Lesbians, Gay Men, and the Media in America*, communications scholar Larry Gross defines mainstreaming as "the embodiment of a dominant ideology, cultivated through the repetition of stable patterns and absorbed by otherwise diverse segments of the population."[4] I am interested in exploring how different theatrical performances embody dominant gender, sexual, and racial ideologies, both in terms of how some performances are complicit in the mainstreaming of gay men and in terms of how different productions or moments in performance disrupt, contradict, or complicate the stable repetition of cultural norms and images on which mainstreaming relies. Theatre, I believe, is a public forum where gay men can come to terms with the implications of their increased cultural and political visibility, to examine the normalizing effect that heterosexuality has on gay male culture, to reclaim and celebrate sexual difference, and to examine differences among ourselves and within our larger communities.

The Politics of Mainstreaming

Mainstreaming is not an exclusively gay issue. The question emerges whenever members of a disenfranchised group assert their rights to equal citizenship. What is unique about the question of mainstreaming for gay Americans is the extent to which it historically relates to questions of visibility. Seeking change within the system, the homophile movement of the 1950s and early 1960s challenged the invisibility resulting from the social stigmatization and criminalization of homosexuality through public demonstrations that presented gay men and lesbians as upstanding citizens who should be

treated "just like everyone else."[5] In contrast, the gay liberation movement of the late 1960s and early 1970s sought sexual freedom through a militant rejection of the establishment and mainstream values. Liberationists found agency through a collective politic that understood all oppressions as being related as well as through an individual politic that understood the "personal" as "political." "Coming out" as a gay man or lesbian was foundational to gay liberation. It was a personal as well as a public avowal of sexuality that empowered gay men and lesbians to become as visible as they could in every aspect of public life.[6] Unable to sustain populist support because of its loose leadership structure, the gay liberation movement gave way in the 1970s to a mainstream gay civil rights movement that is still with us today. Increasingly, the gay civil rights movement has desexualized gay culture to demonstrate how gays and lesbians are just like everyone else. Like the homophile movement, it seeks change within the system through participation in election campaigns, the enactment of nondiscrimination legislation, and litigation and legal reform.

During the 1990s, the gay rights movement made significant inroads on all three fronts. For example, the Victory Fund, a national organization that supports the campaigns of lesbian and gay candidates, reports a fivefold increase since 1991 in the number of openly lesbian and gay officeholders. In 2000 alone, two hundred gay and lesbian candidates were elected to local, state, and federal offices. The gay rights movement also has participated in the electoral process by actively campaigning for straight politicians sympathetic to gay issues, perhaps most notably in the 1992 and 1996 presidential bids of Bill Clinton. Clinton proved to be one of the strongest supporters of gay rights in presidential history. He enacted nondiscrimination policies for federal

employees, created the office of a national AIDS czar, and appointed the largest number of lesbians and gay men to government positions than any other president in U.S. history.[7]

On the legislative front, gay rights advocates made significant inroads in 1990 by lobbying to have hate crimes committed against gay men and lesbians included in the Hate Crimes Statistics Act and by lobbying to have the protections offered under the Americans with Disabilities Act extended to people living with AIDS. As an increasingly visible presence on Capitol Hill, gay lobbyists in 1998 helped defeat the Heffley Amendment, which threatened to overturn nondiscrimination employment policies in the federal government. In 1999, the GLBT movement celebrated the passing of the Employment Non-Discrimination Act (ENDA), which prevented private employers from discriminating on the basis of sexual preference.

But the most significant advances for the gay civil rights movement have occurred on the judicial scene. Throughout the 1990s, courts consistently ruled in favor of gay rights. State and federal courts of appeals repeatedly struck down state laws discriminating against gay Americans. In 1997, gay marriage entered the national consciousness when Hawaii's Supreme Court ruled in favor of same-sex marriage. State courts in Vermont and Massachusetts respectively followed suit in 1999 and 2003. Perhaps the greatest legal victory for the gay rights movement, though, was the Supreme Court's decision in *Lawrence v. Texas* (2003) in which the highest court of the land reversed the position it took in *Bowers v. Hardwick* (1986) and recognized the privacy rights of gay Americans.[8]

While these victories are historical milestones, and should be celebrated as such, the road to social equality has been anything but smooth. Every advance has been met with a retreat. Despite the openness of his administration to gay issues, early in his first term in office Clinton went back on his campaign promise of ensuring the right of lesbians and gay men to serve openly in the military. Legal scholar Janet Haley notes that the compromise represented in the military's 1993 policy of "Don't Ask, Don't Tell" compromised the position of gays and lesbians in the military as the number of discharges for sexual misconduct increased under the new policy.[9] Adding insult to injury, in 1997 Clinton signed the Defense of Marriage Act (DOMA) that legislated marriage as a union between a man and a woman. DOMA spurred the introduction of similar legislation in states across the country. Whereas national GLBT organizations have made themselves a force to be reckoned with in Washington, state organizers experience greater difficulty defeating anti-gay ballot measures and legislation. The Policy Institute of the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force (NGLTF) reports that, through the mid-1990s, efforts to defeat anti-gay referenda produced seventeen victories versus forty-six defeats.[10] In 2004, George W. Bush responded to the growing legal recognition of same-sex unions by states and local municipalities across the country by introducing an amendment to the United States Constitution upholding the sanctity of marriage as a heterosexual union. The amendment failed, but eleven state ballot measures defining marriage as a union between a man and a woman passed in the 2004 election.

The uneven terrain, but especially the road block presented by the mobilization of conservative voters in 2004, illustrates the extent to which the gay civil rights movement

has yet to achieve substantive social change. In *Virtual Equality: The Mainstreaming of Gay and Lesbian Liberation,* Urvashi Vaid (former Executive Director of the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force and former Director of NGLTF's Policy Institute) concludes that "more than fifty years of active effort to challenge homophobia and heterosexism have yielded us not freedom but 'virtual equality,' which simulates genuine civil equality but cannot transcend the simulation."[11] Today's movement prizes a kind of assimilation that promotes tolerance over the transformation of social and cultural institutions. As a result, American society merely has adapted to the presence of gay Americans; it has yet to embrace what makes them uniquely different.

Vaid maintains that the movement's focus on civil rights strategies has had a limited effect because civil rights strategies "do not change the social order in dramatic ways. They change only the privileges of the group asserting those rights."[12] As an issue that has come to define the agenda of the national gay movement, marriage illustrates the limitations of civil rights strategies in achieving social equality and justice. Marriage advocates maintain that marriage is a fundamental right that should be extended to all Americans, regardless of sexual orientation. While this has become the dominant view of the gay rights movement, it is not the only one. In *The Trouble with Normal: Sex, Politics, and the Ethics of Queer Life,* Michael Warner makes a persuasive case that that the push for marriage "authorizes the state to make one form of life—*already normative*—even more privileged."[13] Marriage affords couples (gay or straight) a kind of respectability that comes with privileges and rights (healthcare, probate, naturalization) not afforded to non-couples. Extending marriage rights to lesbian and gay couples does not change the system; as Vaid suggests, marriage rights only change the status of those

asserting their right to things that should be granted to all Americans, regardless of marital status.

The push for social inclusion through an issue like marriage creates a divide among gay Americans that works against the development of a progressive gay politic.[14] In *Virtuous Vice: Homoeroticism in the Public Sphere*, Eric Clarke argues that one of the ways that lesbians and gay men have achieved visibility or inclusion in the public sphere is by identifying and promoting issues such as marriage that appeal to a sense of heterosexual propriety. The public sphere assigns greater value to those individuals who appeal to conventional customs and mores. "Good homosexuals" are distinguished from "bad homosexuals," with the good coming to stand in as proxies for the larger community with which they may have little in common.[15]

In *Selling Out: The Lesbian and Gay Movement Goes to Market,* Alexandra Chasin (former Co-chair of the Board of Directors of the International Gay and Lesbian Human Rights Commission [IGLHRC]) notes that the leadership of the national GLBT movement is not elected by its constituents, yet it represents the voices of GLBT individuals everywhere.[16] Increasingly, the leadership of these organizations comes not from individuals who have worked their way up through the movement but from the corporate world. IGLHRC and NGLTF are notable exceptions, but their presence cannot compare with that of the Human Rights Campaign, whose corporate ties, structure, leadership, and values arguably have made it the best funded and, as a result, the most prominent GLBT organization in the United States. Chasin suggests that the growing corporatization of lesbian and gay politics conflates identity politics with identity-based marketing and consumption. This relationship is "inimical to progressive political

change," she argues, because it equates civic value with the commercial or market value of gay Americans.[17] Once again, the system that privileges certain individuals and groups remains intact, with only the social status of those with greater buying power being improved.

In this light, the politics of mainstreaming is remarkably similar to the politics of neoliberalism. Whereas the liberation movements of the 1960s promoted a downward distribution of wealth through "power to the people," neoliberalism emerged in the 1970s (and grew in popularity with Ronald Reagan and Margaret Thatcher in the 1980s) as an economic-political philosophy that promotes an upward redistribution of wealth among the already elite. Neoliberalism dismisses government intervention into any aspect of culture and society, maintaining that the free market holds the answers to economic growth, cultural progress, and social justice. Historian Lisa Duggan suggests that the growing conservativism of the national gay rights movement conspires with neoliberalism through a politics of "homonormativity," which "does not contest dominant heteronormative assumptions and institutions, but upholds and sustains them, while promising the possibility of a demobilized gay constituency and a privatized, depoliticized gay culture anchored in domesticity and consumption."[18] Indeed, the call for extending civil rights to gay Americans does not challenge the privilege of heterosexuality so much as it seeks greater access for individuals who adhere to its sense of moral propriety. In turn, the growing influence of corporations on gay politics identifies the marketplace as the solution to social disenfranchisement. Economic power buys a kind of social access that perpetuates an economic divide which, combined with

the moral divide promoted by issues like gay marriage, works against a sense of group belonging necessary to sustaining a vital political community.

The Culture of Visibility

The 1990s were a decade marked by an increased cultural presence of lesbians and gay men in the media in general but in popular culture in particular.[19] Lesbian and gay characters were a recurring presence on television programs as diverse as *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (1997-2002), *Dawson's Creek* (1998-2003), *E.R.* (1994-), *Frasier* (1993-2004), *Friends* (1994-2004), *Party of Five* (1994-2000), and *Roseanne* (1988-1997). *Ellen* (1994-1998) became the first sitcom to feature a lesbian character in the leading role, paving the way for the introduction of *Will & Grace* (1998-) to NBC's line-up of "must-see TV." Hollywood profited from the desire to see lesbian and gay characters with a range of commercial releases that included films such as *American Beauty* (1999), *Boys on the Side* (1995), *The Brady Bunch Movie* (1995), *A Very Brady Sequel* (1996), *Chasing Amy* (1997), *Clueless* (1995), *Four Weddings and a Funeral* (1994), *Fried Green Tomatoes* (1991), *Heavenly Creatures* (1994), *Home for the Holidays* (1995), *In and Out* (1997), *It's My Party* (1996), *Love! Valour! Compassion!* (1997), *My Best Friend's Wedding* (1997), *The Object of My Affection* (1998), *Philadelphia* (1993), *Silence of the Lambs* (1991), *Three of Hearts* (1993), and *Three to Tango* (1999).

In *All the Rage: The Story of Gay Visibility in America*, sociologist Suzanna Walters notes a radical disjuncture between the cultural explosion of gay visibility and the sometimes explosive politics of gay rights. Walters identifies the coming out of Ellen DeGeneres and her TV alter ego Ellen Morgan in 1997 and the brutal murder of

University of Wyoming college student Matthew Shepard in 1998 as saturated moments in the story of gay visibility in the United States:

> These two events illustrate the confusing and often incomprehensible tenor of the times. We rejoice at breaking down one barrier only to be faced again with the ugliness and brutality of another. Ellen comes out, Matthew dies, and the media turns both into iconic events. Ellen gets cancelled and Matthew becomes a memory and the parents of both become advocates for equal rights. In the eye of the storm it is sometimes difficult to make out the contours, to see with clarity, to know for sure which way the wind is shifting. Surely, though, we're not in Kansas anymore.[20]

At such times, when the yellow brick road disappears beneath our feet, knowing where we've come from can help us regain our bearings. There's no place like home, but there's nothing like history to provide a context to understand the complicated and confusing cultural politics of the present.

The visibility enjoyed by gay culture in the 1990s unarguably benefits from the struggles of earlier generations of activists, most notably gay liberationists and the value they placed on coming out as a personal and public avowal of sexual difference. In many ways, however, the "new" visibility functions as a kind of invisibility that *disavows* sexual difference.[21] Walters writes that "the moment of public visibility marks the beginning of a complex process. The emergence into public view can aid in the process of liberation; surely liberation cannot be won from the space of the crowded closet. Yet the glare of commercial culture can often produce a new kind of invisibility, itself

supported by a relentless march toward assimilation."[22] The new invisibility may produce new forms of homophobia, such as the good marriage-loving, sexless gay versus the bad, liberationist, promiscuous queer. The end result is a set of new stereotypes according to which "good gays" stay home and snuggle with their domestic partners on their IKEA sofas watching *Will & Grace*, while "bad gays" frequent sex clubs, peep shows, and dance clubs that promote promiscuity and dangerous behavior.

The confusion surrounding the rise in gay cultural visibility also reflects what Lisa Duggan identifies as a conflict over the articulation of the cultural politics of neoliberalism:

> On one side is the residual strategy of cultural traditionalism displayed during the late twentieth century "culture wars"—energetic attacks against "multiculturalism" and "permissiveness" intended to shrink the funding base as well as popular support for sites of nonmarket politics—the arts, education, and social services. One the other side is a newly emergent "equality" politics that supports "diversity" and "tolerance," but defines them in the narrowest sense, and entirely within the framework of globalist neoliberalism.[23]

Conservatives continue to wage war against the arts, education, and social services, but their efforts have receded into the background as a new multiculturalism has emerged that promotes tolerance and acceptance of individuals who can easily be assimilated into mainstream society.[24]

The 30 September 1996 issue of *New York* magazine illustrates what this new multiculturalism looks like for gay men with a cover story that asks: "When Did Gays

Get So Straight?" The cover features a photograph of two young, clean-cut white men sporting crisp white T-shirts and short-cropped hair. The models smile at the camera as they sip pink sodas and hold hands to reveal commitment rings. The photograph enacts what, in the featured article, Daniel Mendelsohn calls the "heterosexualization of gay culture."[25] As the gay liberation movement matures, it arguably experiences difficulty distinguishing itself from the heterosexual mainstream. Mendelsohn reduces the question of mainstreaming to a discussion of style—in particular a *theatrical* style—that characterized early AIDS activism as well as the flourishing of queer culture in the late 1980s. As heterosexual norms increasingly take center stage in gay male culture, Mendelsohn fears that this once theatricalized culture risks disappearing as political style is reduced to the level of camp and consumption operative in the headline: "We're Here! We're Queer. Let's Get Coffee!"

Mendelsohn uses theatre as a metaphor to reference the tension between the assimilation associated with the reformist politics of national GLBT organizations and self-identified queer activists who reject heterosexuality as the norm and embrace the diversity of the GLBT community through a broad-based coalitional politic that cuts across sexual, gender, racial, and class identifications. Queer activists often find themselves at odds with national GLBT organizations, as queer activism focuses on the cultural sphere rather than the civil arena. During the late 1980s and early 1990s, for example, AIDS activists used theatre to protest government inaction to the growing epidemic and to imagine a pro-sex culture opposed to institutionalized heterosexuality. Theirs was a contemporary version of Artaud's theatre of cruelty in which theatre was quite literally thrown back into life. Indeed, as Joshua Gamson observes in his

ethnographic study of chapter meetings in San Francisco and New York, ACT-UP (AIDS Coalition To Unleash Power) viewed its political actions as theatre. If ACT-UP was unclear about the intended audience for its street performances (e.g., was the audience an unresponsive and sometimes hostile government, the media, heterosexuals, the activists themselves?), perhaps it was because the forces of normalization that create hierarchies based on social differences made "the particularity of the audience difficult to see."[26] In fact, Douglas Crimp argues that "AIDS brought us face-to-face with the consequences of both our separation and our liberalism, and it [was] with this new political contingency that the word 'queer' [was] reclaimed to designate new political identities."[27]

Queer activists staged an active resistance to social norms that reached beyond the streets into all aspects of cultural production, including theatre. In *Acts of Intervention: Gay Culture, Performance, and AIDS*, David Román documents various ways that theatrical artists used the immediacy of live performance to stage "local interventions" into discourses about HIV/AIDS, from the agitprop realism of Larry Kramer and William Hoffman, the solo performances of Luis Alfaro, Ron Athey, Michael Kearns, Tim Miller, and Ron Vawter, the gay commercialism of Terrence McNally and Paul Rudnick, to the epic theatre of Tony Kushner.[28] In his discussion of Kearns, Miller, and Vawter, Román argues that "gay theatre, like gay men in general at the time, had little cultural power and was imagined as an innately articulating presence. And yet within this abjection of gay theatre, gay men found a space to enact an intervention that began to call into question gay men's own perception."[29] Theatre was a cultural space in which gay men articulated a personal politic as well as a collective response to the ravages of AIDS.

AIDS transformed theatrical representations of gay men in the 1980s and 1990s, even in performances not explicitly about the epidemic. The new and recycled images of gay men that circulated in the 1990s reflected the shift in public perceptions brought about by the increased cultural and political visibility of gay men. In fact, John Clum concludes in the revised edition of *Acting Out: Male Homosexuality and Modern Drama* that American theatre in the 1990s experienced a "lively renaissance" because of the emergence of theatrical representations that "affirm the values of queerness, of radical difference, as something not to be surrendered in the move to assimilation."[30] Just as the commercial and critical success of Beth Henley's *Crimes of the Heart* (1981), Marsha Norman's *'night, Mother* (1983), and Wendy Wasserstein's *The Heidi Chronicles* (1989) capitalized on the political gains made by the feminist movement during the 1970s and 1980s,[31] plays with openly gay themes and characters profited from the rise of gay visibility. "There are no more coded gay figures, no more calls for pity for moody, troubled young men, no more gay Camilles pleading for tolerance, and no more uncritical presentations of stereotypes."[32] Clum suggests that plays such as David Drake's *The Night Larry Kramer Kissed Me* (1992), Larry Kramer's *The Destiny of Me* (1992), Tony Kushner's *Angels in America* (1992-1993), Terrence McNally's *Lips Together, Teeth Apart* (1991), and Paul Rudnick's *Jeffrey* (1993), to use Clum's examples, "place gay men in an empowered and empowering position within a capitalist system."[33] But this sense of empowerment is illusory at best. How does empowerment within the system serve a critique of capitalism? Clum assumes a corollary relationship between visibility and power that fails to account for how power works through such representations.

It is particularly telling, I think, that, for his representative example of the new gay male image, Clum turns not to theatre but to the world of advertising, specifically a 1993 Gap ad in *New York* magazine featuring conservative columnist and former *New Republic* editor Andrew Sullivan: "Sullivan's intense, defiant pose is the 1990s gay look. The visible presence of ACT-UP, Queer Nation, and a myriad of other gay support groups shows that lesbians and gay men are coming out and fighting back. The sissy image is gone and pity and tolerance is not enough."[34] Clum takes the advertisement at face value, overlooking the ways in which Sullivan appropriates the styles of ACT-UP and Queer Nation to advance a neoliberal agenda that is antithetical to queer politics.

In fact, Sullivan dismisses the political actions of ACT-UP as failed "exercises in theater and rhetoric" whose cultural interventions are too diffuse in their focus and approach. As an alternative, Sullivan proposes a politics of liberalism that seeks equality through legal and legislative reforms: "[L]iberalism properly restricts itself to law—not culture—in addressing social problems; and by describing all homosexuals as a monolithic minority, it is able to avoid the complexities of the gay world as a whole, just as blanket civil rights legislation draws a veil over the varieties of black America by casting the question entirely in terms of non-black attitudes." [35] Sullivan embraces the heterosexualization of gay culture that worries Mendelsohn, among others, and that ACT-UP militantly opposed.

What strikes me most about Sullivan's critique of ACT-UP is its implicit antitheatricalism. The metaphor is intriguing in light of a Western history that shrouds attacks on theatre as attacks on male homosexuality (e.g., the Platonic argument that theatre is a feminine art form that makes men weak and effeminate).[36] Sullivan,

however, is not critical of homosexuality *per se* but a particular kind of homosexual politics, specifically one that views itself in theatrical terms. In dismissing the politics of ACT-UP as exercises in rhetoric and theatre, Sullivan ignores the ways in which politics, including his own, is rhetorical and theatrical. His antitheatricalism draws attention away from what Steven Seidman sees as the "thin sociology" in a highly articulate argument that "offers no evidence or reason to believe that formal political equality would gradually translate into social equality. [Sullivan] relies on the hope that gays' increased visibility and social integration will weaken prejudice and stigma." [37] In contrast, AIDS activism rejected a monolithic model of the queer community to acknowledge the complexities and contradictions represented by differences among its constituents. It is this understanding of the power of culture, as well as the collective politic and analysis inherited from the progressive politics of the 1960s, that made AIDS activism so vital, that went to the very heart of how culture produces meaning, and that remains vital to understanding what is at stake in the mainstreaming of gay politics and culture today.

Queer Dramaturgies

This dissertation reclaims theatre as a form of cultural activism to engage the politics of mainstreaming. It examines a cross-section of theatrical productions, from the avant-garde performances of the late Reza Abdoh and Pomo Afro Homos (Postmodern African-American Homosexuals) to the commercial stage of the Broadway and Off-Broadway musical, and from the Off-Broadway revival of Mart Crowley's *The Boys in the Band* (1996) to the queering of *A Streetcar Named Desire* in the Bloolips/Split Britches collaboration *Belle Reprieve* (1991). These readings draw on the interdisciplinary approaches suggested by cultural studies, especially their intersections

with queer theory, critical race theory, and feminism, while retaining theatre as their disciplinary base.

Suzanna Walters writes that cultural studies offers useful methodologies for examining the issue of gay visibility because of the emphasis that cultural studies places on the relationship between identity and representation. "For cultural studies," writes Walters, "one of the crucial questions concerns the relationship between these subcultures and the mass-produced culture that purports to constitute a sort of national discourse on identity."[38] In the case of mass media representations of gay men and lesbians, Walters suggests an historical trajectory in which the move from invisibility to visibility participates in their assimilation into a monolithic American identity.

This study considers how the cultural and political visibility associated with mainstreaming affects representations of gay men on stage. In sampling the different kinds of theatre found in different venues throughout New York City (the primary site of my theatrical viewing during the period of this study), this dissertation approaches theatre as a localized event that, in engaging the national discourse about gay men in the mainstream, offers a counternarrative to Walters. In *Acts of Intervention*, David Román localizes his study of AIDS theatre to avoid perpetuating totalizing narratives that suggest that AIDS theatre began in 1985 with the Broadway productions of William Hoffmann's *As Is* and Larry Kramer's *The Normal Heart*, or that AIDS activism did not exist prior to the emergence of ACT-UP in 1987.[39] Similarly, in looking at the related issues of gay visibility and mainstreaming, I want to avoid participating in totalizing narratives that suggest that gay theatre is experiencing a renaissance because of the increased presence of gay men on stage, or that increased cultural and political visibility is the evolutionary

byproduct of the gay civil rights movement. I also want to avoid participating in a universalizing narrative that takes the experience of gay men as representative of all GLBT experiences. It is for this reason that this study limits its critique to the impact that mainstreaming has on gay men and their representation on stage.

To this end, I have imagined this dissertation as a series of queer dramaturgical case studies. I use the term "dramaturgy" to distinguish my approach from the studies of gay male theatre that rely on universalizing and evolutionary narratives or exclusively on literary analysis. Although textual analysis is often a starting point for dramaturgs, it is not the only method at their disposal. Carey Mazer writes that the dramaturg contributes to the collaborative process by "offering materials, insights, resources, documents, and perspectives that the professional director does not already know."[40] It is generally assumed that the dramaturg's labor serves the unifying vision of the director, but D.J. Hopkins proposes an alternative model in which the dramaturg shares authority with the director by researching and developing a counter-text that independently engages the central text of a production.[41] This project offers a series of counter-texts to the productions it examines from different materials and documents such as playscripts, video recordings, performance notes, programs, advertisements, and promotional materials, approaches such as textual, cultural, and historical analysis, and perspectives suggested by queer theory, critical race theory, and feminism. Like Hopkins, I want to resist the notion of a unified production as well as a unified model of reception that forecloses alternative perspectives and interpretations by privileging what happens onstage as the only source of meaning.

I describe this project as "queer" to mark my own opposition to mainstream gay politics and to examine how theatre, as the "queerest art,"[42] offers a counternarrative to the story of how gays are represented in popular culture and the political arena. In *Tendencies*, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick describes "queer" as marking the "open mesh of possibilities, gaps, overlaps, dissonance and resonance, lapses and excesses of meaning when the constituent elements of anyone's gender, of anyone's sexuality, aren't made (or *can't be* made) to signify monolithically."[43] To the extent that it disengages and disarticulates the binaries of gender and sexuality, "queer" is both anti-separatist and anti-assimilationist. Its political promise rests in what Steven Seidman describes as the "creation of social practices that encourage the proliferation of pleasures, desires, voices, interests, modes of individuation, and democratization."[44] While this shift from an assimilative to a transformative politics is compelling, I cannot help but feel some ambivalence about the practice of queer theory and politics, especially the way that the concerns of white, middle-class gay men get to define what constitutes "queer." Yet, like David Savran, I believe that queer theory can serve a materialist analysis of theatre. In *A Queer Sort of Materialism: Re-Historicizing American Theater*, Savran maintains that queer theory offers "a provocative way of thinking about the intersection between certain theatrical forms and certain sexual subjects." Among other things, "it suggests a mode of excessive and self-conscious theatricality that has long been linked to sexual difference."[45] In fact, as Laurence Senelick notes in his cross-cultural history of cross-dressing on the stage, theatre is "most itself when challenging the norms of its ambient culture."[46] Alisa Solomon concurs, suggesting that "the mutability of human identity promised by theater, and figured by the norm of transvestitism, is precisely what makes

theater the queerest art, perennially subject to railing by those with a stake in promoting the 'natural order' of the status quo."[47]

In *Theatricality*, Tracy Davis and Thomas Postlewait note that theatricality, as a modern concept, emerged in reaction to the rise of realism in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. Realism and theatricality function as a binary in modern theatre, with realism "aligning itself with the idea of an 'artless' art and the many alternatives to realism embracing and celebrating the explicit theatrical condition of the stage, its genres, and its traditions."[48] Of the various practitioners and theorists of the modern stage who promoted theatricality as an alternative to realism, no one has influenced the development of modern stage practice more than Bertolt Brecht. Brecht regarded theatricality as a means of exposing the hidden contradictions of capitalist society. He recycled theatrical traditions and stories to develop a self-conscious theatrical practice that made social relations visible by continually calling attention to theatre as a constructed/constructing art form. Whereas realism relies on unconscious empathy and identification on the part of spectators, the self-conscious theatricality of Brechtian theatre requires the active participation of spectators in the negotiation of a production's various meanings.

Brecht haunts contemporary theatre in various ways, from the recycling of theatrical traditions and stories in postmodern theatre that, according to Marvin Carlson, takes "joy in the artifice of art" to the use of Brechtian theory and techniques by artists and scholars committed to theatre and performance as tools for social change.[49] Brecht's influence can be seen in the street demonstrations of ACT-UP to the epic theatre of Tony Kushner's *Angels in America*. In fact, the excessive and self-conscious theatricality of *Angels in America* comments on various national themes at the same time that it explores

utopian alternatives. For example, *Millennium Approaches* stages an encounter between Prior Walter, a white gay man recently diagnosed with HIV, and Harper Pitt, an agoraphobic Morman housewife addicted to Valium. Through the "magic of theatre," Harper appears in Prior's dream and Prior appears in Harper's hallucination. Together they stand on the "threshold of revelation" where the "limits of the imagination" give them uncanny insights into hidden truths. "Imagination can't create anything new, can it?" Harper asks Prior at one point. "It only recycles bits and pieces from the world and reassembles them into visions." Prior identifies with her. "It's something you learn after your first theme party," he says. "It's All Been Done Before."[50]

The sense that "it's all been done before" is a metatheatrical commentary on how postmodern theatre recycles and reassembles bits and pieces to create a new vision of the world as well as a commentary on the relationship between representation and imagination in queer theatre. Charles McNulty suggests, "Queers understand that representation is not only the product of imagination, but constitutes imagination, both the social and the aesthetic; through it all things are made and unmade. The portrayal of characters—of bodies and minds and hair-dos—offer the chance to point to the schisms and fissures in the narratives out of which we connect this human substance."[51] Theatre liberates the imagination, bringing new awareness to the world around us as well as the worlds we have yet to imagine.

The case studies presented in this dissertation illustrate how theatricality complicates or queers our understanding of gay culture, politics, and performance. Carlson suggests, "Theatre, as a simulacrum of the cultural and historical process itself, seeking to depict the full range of human actions within their physical context, has

always provided society with the most tangible records of its attempts to understand its own operations."[52] For gay men, theatre is a vital public forum in which they can come to terms with the implications of mainstreaming, both in terms of how assimilation forecloses possibilities and how it creates divisions among queers that prevents them from sustaining a progressive political community. By historicizing the process of mainstreaming, we can better understand how it operates and how it can be resisted.

Chapter One, "From the Year of the Diva to a Season of Love: Musicals and the State of Gay America," examines the hidden assumptions of the queer theatrical renaissance identified by critics like John Clum by looking at three musicals from the mid-1990s: *Victor/Victoria* (1995), *Rent* (1995), and *Howard Crabtree's When Pigs Fly* (1996). Musical theatre scholarship has experienced its own renaissance in recent years, as scholars like Stacy Wolf and Bruce Kirle insist on examining musicals within a larger socio-historical context that addresses the needs of queer spectators.[53] In placing the representation of gay men in musicals within the context of gay culture and politics of the 1990s, this chapter provides an assessment of the state of gay America that considers how mainstreaming impacts the repertoire of meanings available to gay men.

Chapter Two, "Happy Homosexuals, Gay Corpses: Reviving Mart Crowley's *The Boys in the Band*," looks at the production history of Mart Crowley's controversial play to suggest that the contemporary debates about gay visibility have deep historical roots. Histories of gay theatre and culture more generally are constructed as narratives of progress in which the present is an improvement on the past. This chapter uses the excess of meanings surrounding the 1996 Off-Broadway revival of *The Boys in the Band*

to explore how history and memory serve the interpretative needs of the present and how a reliance on linear models of history fails to provide a political framework for the future.

Chapter Three, "Attending Walt Whitman High: Pomo Afro Homos's *Dark Fruit*," examines the five-year history of Pomo Afro Homos (Postmodern African-American Homosexuals), a San Francisco-based performance troupe that used theatre to explore the complexities of contemporary gay black life. The chapter focuses on the Pomos's production of *Dark Fruit*, a series of sketches that explores the performers' ambivalence about their position in the larger black and gay communities. In challenging the essentialist logic of identity politics in the 1990s, *Dark Fruit* broadens our understanding of how political communities can look and function.

Chapter Four, "The Strangeness of Strangers, The Queerness of Queers: *Belle Reprieve* and the Social Politics of Theatre," uses the 1991 collaboration among Bloolips's Bette Bourne and Paul Shaw and Split Britches's Peggy Shaw and Lois Weaver to understand how different histories and pleasures inform lesbian and gay coalitions. *Belle Reprieve* is a postmodern parody that queers Tennessee Williams's *A Streetcar Named Desire* (1947). Rather than erasing differences by subsuming them in a universalizing male experience, *Belle Reprieve* imagines a genuinely queer time and place where differences are productively engaged in the imagining of new social identities and relationships.

Chapter Five, "Beyond Simulation: Queer Intimacy, Sociality, and the Theatre of Reza Abdoh" looks at the last two productions staged by Reza Abdoh in New York City: *Tight Right White* and *Quotations from the Ruined City*. These productions arguably push at the limits of theatre to highlight the crisis of meaning produced by the AIDS

pandemic. In marking a relationship among history, marginality, and violence, Abdoh's theatre opens a space for new social relationships that can move us beyond the simulated equality offered through cultural assimilation.

Though not exhaustive, these case studies are representative of the ways that theatricality engages the politics of gay visibility and mainstreaming in performance. To that end, they suggest a productive relationship among gay male culture, politics, and theatre in which performance plays a transformative role. Although theatre cannot replace politics, a politically-engaged approach to performance can contribute to the re-imagining of the political sphere through the public engagement and critique of social issues, relationships, and institutions that can only occur in a place like the theatre.

Notes

[1]See, for example, Bruce Bawer, *A Place at the Table: The Gay Individual in American Society* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1993); Michael Bronski, *The Pleasure Principle: Sex, Backlash, and the Struggle for Gay Freedom* (St. Martin's Press, 1998); Michael Bronski, ed., *Taking Liberties: Gay Men's Essays on Politics, Culture, and Sex* (New York: Richard Kasak, 1996); Daniel Harris, *The Rise and Fall of Gay Culture* (New York: Hyperion, 1997); Craig A. Rimmerman, Kenneth D. Wald, and Clyde Cox, eds., *The Politics of Gay Rights*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000); Steven Seidman, *Beyond the Closet: The Transformation of Gay and Lesbian Life* (New York: Routledge, 2004); Andrew Sullivan, *Virtually Normal: An Argument about Homosexuality* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf; reprint, New York: Vintage Books, 1996); Urvashi Vaid, *Virtual Equality: The Mainstreaming of Gay and Lesbian Liberation* (New York: Anchor Books: 1995); Michael Warner, ed., *Fear of a Queer Planet: Queer Politics and Social Theory*, ed. Michael Warner (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993); and Michael Warner, *The Trouble with Normal: Sex, Politics, and the Ethics of Queer Life* (New York: Free Press, 1999).

[2]Jill Dolan, *Geographies of Learning: Theory and Practice, Activism and Performance* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2001). For related discussions of theatre in the academy, see Stephen J. Bottoms, "The Efficacy/Effeminacy Braid: Unpicking the Performance Studies/Theatre Studies Dichotomy," *Theatre Topics* 13 (September 2003): 173-87; and Shannon Jackson, *Professing Performance: Theatre in the Academy from Philology to Performativity* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2004).

[3]For several key texts in the field, see Sue-Ellen Case, *The Domain-Matrix: Performing Lesbian at the End of Print Culture* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1996); Sue-Ellen Case, "Toward a Butch-Femme Aesthetic," in *Making a Spectacle: Feminist Essays on Contemporary Women's* Theatre, ed. Lynda Hart (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1989), 282-99; Kate Davy, "Fe/male Impersonation: The Discourse of Camp," in *Critical Theory and Performance*, ed. Janelle G. Reinelt and Joseph R. Roach (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1992), 231-47; Kate Davy, "Outing Whiteness: A Feminist/Lesbian Project," *Theatre Journal* 47 (May 1995): 189-206; Jill Dolan, *The Feminist Spectator as Critic* (Ann Arbor: UMI Press, 1988; reprint, Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1991; Jill Dolan, *Presence and Desire: Essays on Gender, Sexuality, Performance* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1993); Peggy Phelan, *Unmarked: The Politics of Performance* (New York: Routledge, 1993); David Román, *Acts of Intervention: Gay Culture, Performance, and AIDS* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1998); David Savran, *Communists, Cowboys, and Queers: The Politics of Masculinity in the Works of Arthur Miller and Tennessee Williams* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1992); David Savran, *A Queer Sort of Materialism: Recontextualizing American Theater* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2003); Alan Sinfield, *Out on Stage: Lesbian and Gay Theatre in the Twentieth Century* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999); and Alisa Solomon and Framji Minwalla, eds., *The Queerest Art: Essays on Lesbian and Gay Theater* (New York: New York University Press, 2002).

[4]Larry Gross, *Up from Invisibility: Lesbians, Gay Men, and the Media in America* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2001), 7.

[5]For a comprehensive history of the homophile movement in the United States, 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, 1988).

[6]For key texts and insights into the gay liberation movement, see Dennis Altman, *Homosexual: Oppression and Liberation* (New York: Avon Books, 1971); Michael Bronski, *Culture Clash: The Making of Gay Sensibility* (Boston: South End Press, 1984); Bronski, *The Pleasure Principle*; John D'Emilio, "Cycles of Change, Questions of Strategy: The Gay and Lesbian Movement After 50 Years," in *The Politics of Gay Rights*, 31-53; Karla Jay and Allen Young, eds., *Out of the Closet: Voices of Gay Liberation* (Boston: Gay Men's Press, 1972); and Vaid.

[7]For a thorough overview of the status of gay Americans during the Clinton years, see Suzanna Walters, *All the Rage: The Story of Gay Visibility in America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001), 30-55.

[8]For contrasting studies of the courts and the issue of gay rights, see Joyce Murdoch and Deb Price, *Courting Justice: Gay Men and Lesbians vs. the Supreme Court* (New York: Basic Books, 2001); and Janet R. Jakobsen and Ann Pellegrini, *Love the Sin: Sexual Regulation and the Limits of Religious Intolerance* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2004).

[9]Janet E. Halley, *Don't: A Reader's Guide to the Military's Anti-Gay Policy* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1999).

[10]Kenneth D. Wald, "The Context of Gay Politics," in *The Politics of Gay Rights*, 17.

[11]Vaid, 4.

[12]Ibid., 183.

[13]Warner, *The Trouble with Normal*, 102. Emphasis in original. Marriage enacts what, elsewhere, Warner describes as "heteronormativity." The term first appears in Warner's introduction to *Fear of a Queer Planet*, though it is best defined by Warner and Lauren Berlant in "Sex in Public," *Critical Inquiry* 24 (Winter 1998). Berlant and Warner define heteronormativity as "the institutions, structures of understanding, and practical orientations that make heterosexuality seem not only coherent—that is organized as a sexuality—but also privileged. Its coherence is always provisional, and its privileging can take several (sometimes contradictory) forms: unmarked, as the basic idiom of the personal and the social; or marked as a natural state; or projected as an ideal or moral accomplishment" (548, n. 2).

[14]In *Selling Out: The Lesbian and Gay Movement Goes to Market* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2000), Alexandra Chasin writes: "A progressive agenda . . . must concern itself not only with discriminatory laws and social inclusion, it must attend to the sources and effects of economic injustice across the entire populace. Whereas an issue such as gay marriage, or gays in the military, is the very picture of a liberal-reform, equality-seeking, rights-based, single-issue movement goal, a progressive platform is informed by multi-issue and multi-constituency concern for access" (22-23).

[15]Eric O. Clarke, *Virtuous Vice: Homoeroticism and the Public Sphere* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2000).

[16]Chasin, 198.

[17]Ibid., 24.

[18]Lisa Duggan, *The Twilight of Equality?: Neoliberalism, Cultural Politics, and the Attack on Democracy* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2003), 50.

[19]For a discussion of the rise in visibility of lesbians and gay men in the news media, see Gross. Gross writes that, since HIV/AIDS broke as a news story in 1981, the number of stories focusing on gay issues or offering a gay angle on an otherwise "straight" story has noticeably increased. But "these appearances are almost invariably in the context of some controversy centering on our right to pursue our lives in ways that heterosexuals take for granted. In recent times the most prominent topics for journalistic attention to gay people—leaving aside the AIDS epidemic, increasingly defined by the mass media as a 'nongay' story—have been the exclusion of gay people from service in the military and from the institution of civil marriage" (252).

[20]Walters, xvii.

[21]I am using the concept of disavowal as defined by Lorraine Gamman and Merja Makinen in *Female Fetishism: A New Look* (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1994): "Disavowal, unlike displacement or sublimation, is not a total denial of the desired experience, which is subsequently repressed into another sphere. Instead, through the mechanism of disavowal, the desire is granted a 'safe' expression and satiation in the external world, without having to accept the 'threatening' knowledge involved" (45).

[22]Walters, 49.

[23]Duggan, 21.

[24]Since the 1980s, theatre has been a flashpoint in the culture wars. In 1989, for example, the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) defunded performance artists Karen Finley, John Fleck, Holly Hughes, and Tim Miller for violating its decency clause. The Supreme Court upheld the NEA's decision in 1998. Hughes explores her experience as a member of the "NEA Four" in *Preaching to the Perverted*. For a discussion of Hughes's performance, see Jill Dolan, "Performance, Utopia, and the 'Utopian

Performative,'" *Theatre Journal* 53 (October 2001): 455-479; and Richard Meyer, "'Have You Heard the One about the Lesbian Who Goes to the Supreme Court?': Holly Hughes and the Case Against Censorship," *Theatre Journal* 52 (December 2000): 543-52. For discussions of the culture wars in arts and education more generally, see Dolan, *Geographies of Learning*; Peggy Phelan, "Serrano, Mapplethorpe, the NEA and You: 'Money Talks,'" *TDR: A Journal of Performance Studies* 34.1 (1990): 4-15; and Peggy Phelan, "Money Talks Again," *TDR: A Journal of Performance Studies* 35 (Fall 1991): 131-42.

[25]Daniel Mendelsohn, "We're Here! We're Queer! Let's Get Coffee!" *New York*, 30 September 1996, 27.

[26]Joshua Gamson, "Silence, Death, and the Invisible Enemy: AIDS Activism and Social Movement 'Newness,'" in *Social Perspectives in Lesbian and Gay Studies: A Reader*, ed. Peter M. Nardi and Beth E. Schneider (New York: Routledge, 1998), 345.

[27]Douglas Crimp, "Right On, Girlfriend," in *Fear of a Queer Planet*, 314.

[28]Román, xii.

[29]Ibid., 126.

[30]John M. Clum, *Acting Out: Male Homosexuality in Modern Drama*, rev. ed. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), 281 and 279.

[31]For an analysis of Broadway's mainstreaming of feminism, see Jill Dolan, "Feminism and the Canon: The Question of Universality," chap. in *The Feminist Spectator as Critic*, 19-40; and Jill Dolan, "Personal, Political, Polemical: Feminist Approaches to Politics and Theater," chap. in *Presence and Desire*, 43-68.

[32]Clum, 289.

[33]Ibid.

[34]Ibid.

[35]Sullivan, 37.

[36]For an excellent survey of the history of antitheatricalism, see Jonas Barish, *The Antitheatrical Prejudice* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1981). For discussions about cultural anxieties surrounding theatre, theatricality, and homosexuality, see Peggy Phelan, "Playing Dead in Stone, or, When is a Rose Not a Rose?" in *Performance and Cultural Politics*, ed. Elin Diamond (New York: Routledge, 1996), 65-88; and Alisa Solomon, "Great Sparkles of Lust: Homophobia and the Antitheatrical Tradition," in *The Queerest Art*, 9-20.

[37]Seidman, 186.

[38]Walters, 23.

[39]Román, xviii.

[40]Carey M. Mazer, "Dramaturgy in the Classroom: Teaching Undergraduate Students Not to Be Students," *Theatre Topics* 13.1(2003): 135-41.

[41]D.J. Hopkins, "Research, Counter-text, Reconsidering the (Textual) Authority of the Dramaturg," *Theatre Topics* 13.1(2003): 2. This special edition of *Theatre Topics*, edited by Stacy Wolf, provides an insightful survey of the practice of dramaturgy in contemporary theatre.

[42]I borrow the term from *The Queerest Art*, an importance collection of essays edited by Alisa Solomon and Framji Minwalla that considers various ways that theatre is (and has always been) a queer art form.

[43]Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Tendencies* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1993), 8. Emphasis in original.

[44]Steven Seidman, "Identity and Politics in a 'Postmodern' Gay Culture: Some Historical and Conceptual Notes," in *Fear of a Queer Planet*, 106.

[45]David Savran, *A Queer Sort of Materialism: Re-Historicizing American Theater* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2003), 60.

[46]Laurence Senelick, *The Changing Room: Sex, Drag, and Theatre* (New York: Routledge, 2000), 10.

[47]Alisa Solomon, *Re-dressing the Canon: Essays on Theater and Gender* (New York: Routledge, 1997), 10.

[48]Tracy C. Davis and Thomas Postlewait, "Theatricality: An Introduction," in *Theatricality*, ed. Tracy C. Davis and Thomas Postlewait (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 12.

[49]Marvin Carlson, *The Haunted Stage: The Theatre as Memory Machine* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2003), 173.

[50]Tony Kushner, *Angels in America: A Gay Fantasia on National Themes*, vol. 1: *Millennium Approaches* (New York: Theatre Communications Group, 1993), 33.

[51]Charles McNulty, "The Queer as Drama Critic," *Theater* 24.4 (1993): 19-20.

[52]Carlson, 2.

[53]Stacy Wolf, *A Problem Like Maria: Gender and Sexuality in the American Musical* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2002); Bruce Kirle, *Unfinished*

Show Business: Broadway Musicals as Works in Progress (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2005).

CHAPTER ONE

FROM THE YEAR OF THE DIVA TO A SEASON OF LOVE: MUSICALS AND THE STATE OF GAY AMERICA

As the reigning show queen in Terrence McNally's *Love! Valour! Compassion!* (1995), Buzz Hauser reacts to the world as if everything has the intensity of a Broadway musical. So when his friends object to his suggestion of having six gay men dance *Swan Lake* in drag as part of an AIDS benefit at Carnegie Hall, it is not surprising that Buzz immediately takes offense. Their concerns seem trivial when compared to something that really "matters" like a musical. Musicals give Buzz a feeling of instant gratification that overshadows questions regarding the imagined response of the National Endowment for the Arts to the benefit performance or the desire to be remembered after one's death. "I'm talking about mattering!" Buzz tells his friends, who either don't care that he has perfected a flawless imitation of Gertrude Lawrence or, in the case of the two men in their twenties, don't know who she was. "Die listening to your Madonna albums. I long for the day when people ask 'Who's Madonna?'" Buzz bursts out when the name Barbara Cook draws blank stares from the younger men. "I apologize to the teenagers at the table, but the state of the American musical has me very upset." "The state of America is what should get you upset," remarks his friend Perry. "It does," Buzz says. "It's a metaphor, you asshole!"[1]

Although Buzz never explains what upsets him about the state of the American musical and the state of America more generally, I find his metaphor suggestive in thinking about the state of gay America. Musicals, after all, are the theatrical form most often associated with gay men as well as the most commodified form of commercial

theatre. As such, they are an important site of performance from which to examine how commercial theatre profits from the rise in gay visibility as well as how the politics of mainstreaming play out on the Broadway and Off-Broadway stage.

Musicals "matter" to gay men like Buzz because they are a way of experimenting with sexual and social identifications outside the heterosexual norm. The experience is especially true of middle-class, white gay men who came of age before the rise of gay liberation. In *Place for Us*, D.A. Miller eloquently describes an experience of musicals that, as much as it was a response to the solitude, shame, and secretiveness that was the byproduct of not fitting in, transcended that experience. Miller regards the musical as a "living relic." Post-Stonewall gay identity contradicts the pre-sexual experience that some gay men found through musicals. By definition, Miller writes, post-Stonewall gay identity is "a declarable, dignified thing, rooted in a community, and taking manifestly sexual pleasures on this affirmative basis."[2] As a result, a kind of nostalgia shrouds the Broadway musical; it is a living relic of a private yet pleasurable experience from a bygone era.

But the Broadway musical also is a living relic in the sense that it no longer enjoys the popularity and cultural centrality it did during its golden age in the 1950s and 1960s.[3] The 1980s witnessed the triumph of "bookless" musicals such as Cameron Macintosh's *Miss Saigon* (1988) and Andrew Lloyd's Weber *Cats* (1982) and *The Phantom of the Opera* (1988) in which spectacle replaced the book as the central unifying element. Theatre historian Alan Woods suggests that the vacuousness of these musical spectaculars corresponds with the conspicuous consumption of the Reagan era as well as

a national political climate in which pithy political slogans such as "Where's the beef?" and "Read my lips: No new taxes" replaced political substance.[4]

The musicals of Cameron Mackintosh and Andrew Lloyd Weber continued to reign over Broadway through the mid-1990s (with *Cats* dethroning *A Chorus Line* as the longest-running musical in 1997), surpassed only by the appearance of Disney musicals like *Beauty and the Beast* (1994), *The Lion King* (1997), and *Aida* (2000). Disney recycled successful cartoon musicals (or, in the case of *Aida*, an amusement park version of Verdi's popular opera) to create family entertainment that attracted tourist audiences who, in turn, supported former New York mayor Rudolph Giuliani's efforts to rejuvenate the Times Square Theatre District. If conspicuous consumption defined the 1980s, commercial populism and market expansion defined the 1990s.[5]

Queer cultural critics such as Michael Warner and Samuel Delany argue that the market expansion promoted by Bill Clinton nationally and locally in cities like New York, Los Angeles, and San Francisco detrimentally affected queer subcultures. In New York, for example, the rezoning of the Times Square District dispersed the sex industry to less accessible parts of the city and, in the process, denied queer subcultures an avenue of developing an alternative ethic and way of life through public sex.[6] Commercial populism and market expansion also affected the ways in which commercial theatre represented queer cultures. Musicals such as *Falsettos* (1992), *Kiss of the Spider Woman* (1993), *Victor/Victoria* (1995), *Rent* (1996), and the queer revival of *Cabaret* (1998) featured openly gay characters, perspectives, and/or subject matter. These productions, however, offer a fantasy version of queer culture that can be packaged for Broadway tourists and that can cash in on the gay community as a lucrative marketing niche with

"untold millions" to spend on everything from Absolut Vodka to Calvin Klein Underwear and, of course, theatre.[7]

Unlike the worlds of marketing, which masks its manipulation of consumers, theatre is a remarkably self-conscious art form that continually draws attention to its artifice. As such, it is a potentially powerful tool that can be used to expose the ideology enacted through commodity aesthetics. Like commodities, theatre is defined by multiple doubles. Douglas Bruster provocatively suggests in his study of early modern English theatre that a "double conversion" occurs in the theatre in which actors become characters (who themselves are often transformed into other characters through the convention of disguise) and money is converted into spectacular fantasies.[8] The consuming audience uses these stage fantasies to reconcile desires and to negotiate the larger world around them. Theatre is in the business of culture, and culture is in the "business" of offering what Mary Douglas and Baron Isherwood describe as "a possible pattern of meanings inherited from the immediate past, a canopy for the interpretative needs of the present."[9]

This chapter looks at the state of gay America through an examination of some of the interpretative needs served by three musicals from the mid-1990s that explicitly represent queer culture: *Victor/Victoria* (1995), *Rent* (1995), and *Howard Crabtree's When Pigs Fly* (1996). Based on Blake Edwards's 1982 film, *Victor/Victoria* is a star vehicle for Julie Andrews that appeals to the nostalgia for Broadway's lost golden age and to traditional cultural values. *Rent*, in contrast, is a musical celebration of queer youth culture that, despite its radical claims, normalizes its representation of that subculture through an Oedipal drama that reproduces the values of the parent culture it is

rebelling against. Finally, *When Pigs Fly* is an "old-fashioned" musical revue that stages a gay world where all "rules are suspended" and "common-sense up-ended."[10] Its excessiveness—like the queer pleasures D.A. Miller associates with the golden age of Broadway musicals—pushes the world in which we live "over the top" to imagine an alternative beyond the reach of conventionality. Individually, these musicals respond very differently to the politics of gay mainstreaming. Together, however, these divergent representations suggest a repertoire of meanings that shed light on the state of gay America and its complexities.

Victor/Victoria

The 1995 production of *Victor/Victoria* uses the theatrical double of drag to police the borders of sexual transgression.[11] In contrast to the spectacle of *Cats* or *The Phantom of the Opera*, *Victor/Victoria* is a traditional book musical. Unlike the book of a standard book musical, however, in which the expression of queer values and desires is either coded or read into the production by queer spectators, the plot of *Victor/Victoria* explicitly represents a gay world (albeit a rather flaccid depiction of Parisian decadence of the mid-1930s). The musical's gay content ultimately reinscribes the centrality of heterosexuality by presenting gayness as a copy of straightness.

Victor/Victoria is the story of a second-rate soprano named Victoria Grant (Julie Andrews). Stranded in Paris after the manager from a touring light-opera company absconds with the payroll, she is befriended by a gay night club performer named Caroll Todd, known as Toddy to his friends (Tony Roberts). When Toddy's former lover mistakes Victoria for a man, Toddy (himself recently out of a job) schemes to pass Victoria off as the world's greatest female impersonator, Count Victor Grezinsky. Every

great magician creates a plausible diversion, Toddy tells Victoria, and Count Victor Grezinsky is our plausible diversion. "A woman impersonating as a man impersonating a woman? It'll never work. Everyone will think he's a phony," says Victoria. "Exactly," Toddy proclaims. "Everyone will think that *he*'s a phony."

The distinction between "knowing" and "thinking" effectively underscores the artificiality of gender roles in *Victor/Victoria*. The traditional sex-gender system depends on the ability to identify gender on sight. By casting masculinity and femininity as a kind of play, Toddy and Victoria profit from the inability of the audience in the play to see through their ruse. At the same time, this performance of gender-as-play enacts a crisis of representation within the audience of *Victor/Victoria* that reveals a deep-seated cultural anxiety about the inability to secure gender and sexuality as fixed, seen, and known.

Victor/Victoria is part of what Marjorie Garber sees as a long history in which mainstream culture has flirted with the homoeroticism of cross-dressing in order to stage a representational crisis, only to offer heterosexuality as the reassuring solution.[12] Blake Edwards's 1982 film version of *Victor/Victoria* is the third remake of Reinhold Schwenzel's 1933 film, *Viktor und Viktoria*, which was also remade by British director Victor Saville in 1935 and by German director Karl Anton in 1957. Chris Straayer claims that Edwards's film operates according to the generic conventions of the "temporary transvestite film."[13] In the film, the audience is always aware of the temporary nature of the star's transvestitism, and further recognizes the inadequacies of the transvestite's disguise. Placed in a position of superiority over the story's internal audience—which does not understand the transvestitism as a playful performance—the

spectator of the film or of the stage musical is not confronted with a crisis of indeterminacy, which drag at its most transgressive enacts. As Julie Andrews explains in an interview with drag queen-turned-cultural reporter Charles Busch, "nobody buys that [she's] really convincing as a male."[14] Spectators easily read through her disguise, enjoying the sexual farce produced by Andrews's deliberately inadequate performance as a man.

Andrews was the draw at the box office, and producers hoped that the return of the gay musical icon would attract a sizeable gay audience. A *New York Times Magazine* feature by Philip Weiss reports that *Victor/Victoria*'s creative team assumed that "the avid fans known as show queens [would be] keen to find out: Is Andrews still magic on stage?"[15] Banking on the affirmative, producers hoped to no avail that *Victor/Victoria*'s ballad "Living in the Shadows" would become the new gay anthem.[16] The ballad occurs toward the end of the second act as Victoria realizes that the pressures of leading a secret life masquerading as a gay man prevent her from pursuing a fulfilling relationship with King Marchand (Michael Nouri). "Wand'ring in the darkness, living ev'ry midnight / Doesn't ever rid night of nightmares as love might," Victoria sings. The desire to lead a life outside the shadows is a message similar to the one conveyed in "I Am What I Am" from *La Cage Aux Folles* (1982). "I Am What I Am" is performed by Albin, a drag performer who refuses to be something he is not: "Your life's not worth a damn 'til you can say, / 'Hey world, I am what I am!'" "I Am What I Am" became a gay dance anthem and piano bar standard because it openly celebrated gay identity, where "Living in the Shadows" uses similar themes to celebrate heterosexual romance.

Like *Victor/Victoria*, *La Cage* is a traditional book musical. Its run coincided with the ascendancy of the "bookless" Broadway musical and conservative politics of the Reagan era. Indeed, *La Cage*'s appeal for straight audiences was not its frank treatment of gay lifestyles. Rather, Alan Woods suggests, it was popular because it celebrated the values of family and bourgeois individualism, a recurring theme in American drama since the colonial period that ideology of Reaganism.[17] Like *La Cage*, *Victor/Victoria* uses gay themes and situations to appeal to the sexual conservatism of the 1990s, most notably through its celebration of heterosexual romance. Indeed, the function of farcical fantasies like *La Cage aux Folles* and *Victor/Victoria* is not to provoke but to contain repressed sexual desires. "Like dreams," writes Eric Bentley, "farce shows the disguised fulfillment of repressed wishes" beneath the surface of external representation.[18] For a society based on the institution of heterosexuality, these repressed wishes are manifested in farce as threats to the sanctity of family life or marriage. Farce presupposes accepted standards of normal behavior, at the same time that it frequently relies on the convention of disguise. In the case of *Victor/Victoria*, the confusion resulting from the dual nature of the title character's performance as both a man and a woman ironically points to the contradictory logic that founds heterosexuality.

In adapting a tightly constructed film farce into the book of a Broadway musical, Blake Edwards simplifies the film *Victor/Victoria*'s psychological examination of gender roles—in particular, masculine gender roles—to allow for the insertion of additional solos and production numbers. The film version details the ways in which Victoria's public performance as a man affects the male romantic lead, King Marchand (James Garner). A Chicago nightclub owner with ties to the mob, King falls in love with

Victoria during her debut performance as "Victor," unaware that she is a "man" until she removes her wig. Because King is unwilling to believe that he could have been so easily deceived, he sets out to test Victor/Victoria's masculinity, inviting him/her to smoke a cigar, for instance, and eventually stealing into his/her bath where King finds genital proof of his/her "true" identity.

The 1995 Broadway musical omits the discovery scene because, as Andrews tells Busch, "the world today is so much freer and more emancipated about many things, not just drag. There are so many styles and flavors out there."[19] The suggestion that homosexuality is the flavor of the day overlooks a history of resistance encoded in subcultural practices like drag. Nevertheless, in the stage version, King kisses Victor/Victoria not knowing whether he/she is a man or a woman. The kiss becomes the moment when Victoria's "true" gender and sexuality are discovered, quickly and easily resolving a temporary crisis of masculinity in which King confronts the possible implications of his attraction to Victor (i.e., that King might be gay). King denies the possible homosexual attraction by relying on his masculine instincts: "I've never been wrong about dames, not once in my life. If I had been, you can bet I'd be stuck with a wife." The solo, "King's Dilemma," compresses the complexities of the film's representation of straight masculinity into a sexist and homophobic banter. King's healthy heterosexual appetite defines him as a "man's man." He rationalizes that "the only logical answer is that he's [i.e., Victoria's] a dame." When he imagines introducing Victor as his "boyfriend" to "eight or ten of the world's no question most obnoxious men," King quickly realizes that he would be guilty of homosexuality through association: "It's a trick and a trap. I'm not taking the rap for a crime I didn't pay."

King ultimately needs his masculinity confirmed. Kissing Victor/Victoria will either confirm or deny his identity as a straight man.

Masculinity circulates in *Victor/Victoria* as both a real and a counterfeit currency in which the copy can be distinguished from the original. The musical alleviates cultural anxiety over the inability to distinguish the copy from the original, the real from the imaginary, to the extent that spectators can see through the inadequacy of the transvestite's disguise. The presumed differences between men and women are made transparent because a flawless performance would destabilize the traditional sex-gender system by calling into question the relationship between seeing and knowing.

But the reduction of gender to a type of drag comes at a cost. For gay men, it casts them as melancholics longing to be women. In *Victor/Victoria*, during the midst of her successful career and failed romance with King Marchand, Victoria confides in Toddy that she's tired of being a man. "So am I," replies Toddy. Victoria means to say that she is tired of impersonating a man; Toddy means that he is tired of being one. Truth be told, he would rather be Victoria. In an earlier exchange of confidences, Victoria ask: "If you had your druthers, wouldn't you rather be . . ." "Normal?" says Toddy. "No. Straight," says Victoria. "If I had my druthers," he responds, "I'd rather be you." When he finds himself alone on the nightclub's stage following Victoria's triumphant premiere as Victor, Toddy mimes the choreographed moves of his Eliza Doolittle. His desire to be Victoria is realized in the last moments of the play when, in order to escape the exposure of their fraud, Toddy dresses in drag to play Victoria. Or is it to "become" Victoria?

The performance of a man impersonating "a woman impersonating a man impersonating a woman" deploys a representational strategy in which, Biddy Martin

writes, “femininity becomes the tacit ground in relation to which other figures become figural and mobile.”[20] The crisis of knowing finally is resolved through the reinscription of “man” as the agent of impersonation and “woman” as the means of crossing. In representing gay male identity as a feminine costume, *Victor/Victoria* assures audiences that, because homosexuality is a con, the boy always gets his girl. Gay men may be more visible, but at what cost and at whose expense?

The musical finale of *Victor/Victoria* reveals the stakes for gay men in their increased cultural visibility. The number is a lavish spectacle reminiscent of the Ziegfeld Follies in which the chorus, dressed in top hats and tails, moves in precisely choreographed moves. The lyrics recap the musical’s plot, which culminates in Victoria becoming a victor through gender confusion: “She spreads confusion/ Her illusion is serene / Behind the screen / Is he is a king or is she a queen?” The lavishness of the visual and aural spectacle creates a fantasy world among spectators, which is momentarily interrupted by the appearance of the gay nightclub owner Labisse. Throughout the play, Labisse has tried to expose “Victor” as a fraud. He disrupts the finale (which in the fictional world of *Victor/Victoria* represents Victor/Victoria’s final performance), confident that he prove fraud. “This man is a woman,” he announces to the audience. “I’m man enough for you, sweetheart,” Toddy says from offstage before appearing in a costume identical to the one worn by Victoria. Implicated as part of the internal audience of the musical, *Victor/Victoria*’s external audience laughs at the sight of Toddy in drag, defeating the gay nightclub owner in an act of public humiliation. King eventually escorts Victoria onstage, and Toddy is joined by “Squash” Bernstein, King’s

bodyguard who also serves as Toddy's romantic interest throughout the play. The production number continues, with the couples explaining the lessons of the musical:

KING: So when a guy loves a lady / However shady it may appear

TODDY: No need to yell if they're two fellows / That's not so queer

VICTORIA: We're all meant to cherish one another

SQUASH: It's not a crime to love each other.

The presence of the two gay men is "not so queer" because it is a reflection of an original that is straight. In fact, the gay men share center stage with the straight romantic couple because the production disavows their difference by appeal to the universal of love.

Unlike Toddy, Squash is anything but a stereotypical queen. "The gay fairy must have had a hernia when she delivered you," Toddy swoons after learning that the former All-American center from Notre Dame can cook, play chess, and recite Shakespeare. Squash represents what Steven Seidman identifies as the "normal gay," whose gender conformity, marriage-like relationships that link sex to love, and economic individualism are a variation of the idealized citizen.[21] Squash is played by musical actor Gregory Jbara, whose cherubic face and athletic build further normalize this representation of a gay ideal. In a 1996 silent auction held to benefit Broadway/Equity Fights AIDS—which claimed to sell "nothing that you can buy anywhere else"—audiences were given the opportunity to bid on a backstage tour with Squash. Jbara normally includes his marriage to Broadway actor Rebecca Luker in his program bio but excluded it during the fundraising period to make himself available. Usually what is being sold in the packaging of Jbara-as-Squash is a representation of straightness-as-gayness that allows *Victor/Victoria* to include, as part of its sale, an assimilationist solution to the problems of

homophobia and heterosexism. The message of the title song that "we're all meant to cherish one another" implies that love between two men is, as Toddy sings, "not so queer." In mirroring the coupling of King and Victoria, the Squash/Toddy pairing demonstrates that being queer is not so strange because it is a copy of an original that is straight. Indeed, of all the styles and flavors out there, *Victor/Victoria* finally chooses a vanilla representation of gay men that compliments heterosexual privilege rather than challenging it.

The virtual normality sold in *Victor/Victoria* initially proved lucrative for producers. On opening weekend, the box office set an industry record with $1.3 million in ticket sales. In total, the production boasted a $15 million advance, which Jeremy Gerard claims was a "figure unmatched by any other American musical."[22] Julie Andrews's return to Broadway seemed a good indication that the 1995-96 season would be, as some critics hoped, the year of the diva with Carol Burnett and Carol Channing also returning to Broadway in *Moon Over Buffalo* and a revival of *Hello, Dolly!*, respectively. Shortly after the New Year, however, ticket sales for *Victor/Victoria* sharply dropped when Andrews took a hiatus from the show to attend to health issues. Liza Minnelli assumed the leading role, but her uneven performance failed to boost ticket sales. Andrews was the real draw. Box office receipts increased with her return, but the production failed to be a runaway hit in part because of the unexpected transfer of a convention-breaking musical by a relative unknown. Almost overnight, the so-called year of the diva transformed into a season of love.

Rent

Jonathan Larson's *Rent* is a rock musical that recycles the narrative of Giacomo Puccini's *La Bohème*.[23] Puccini's libretto, based on *Scenes de la Vie de Bohème*, a series of autobiographical episodes by Henri Murger, focuses on the lives of a group of students, artists, and bohemians living in Paris's Latin Quarter during the 1830s. *Rent* transposes Puccini's characters and setting to present-day Manhattan, chronicling the survival of a group of friends living in the East Village whose daily lives are touched, one way or another, by HIV/AIDS. The jealous dramatist Rodolfo in Larson's musical becomes an aspiring musician and recovering drug addict named Roger (Adam Pascal). The seamstress Mimi becomes a heroin addict, also named Mimi (Daphne Rubin-Vega), who makes her living as an erotic dancer. In *Rent*, both Mimi and Roger are HIV positive. Unlike her nineteenth-century namesake, however, this Mimi lives. The strength of the love she shares with Roger brings her back from death. The philosopher Colline in *La Bohème* becomes an African American math professor at New York University named Tom Collins (Jesse L. Martin) who, like Mimi and Roger, is HIV positive. Collins is coupled with a Latino drag queen named Angel (Wilson Jermaine Heredia). Unlike Mimi, Angel does not survive his AIDS-related death. Musetta, the coquette who takes advantage of the wealthy Alcindoro in *La Bohème*, is transformed into Maureen (Idina Menzel), a white lesbian performance artist who takes advantage of her on-again/off-again girlfriend, an African American attorney named Joanne (Freddi Walker), as well as her former boyfriend and the musical's narrator, a filmmaker named Mark (Anthony Rapp).

When *La Bohème* opened at Turin in 1896, the opera nearly failed. Its gutter realism and unorthodox choice of source material broke with the conventions of Italian

opera, noted among other things at the time for stylized artifice and happy endings. With *Rent*, Larson set out to "reinvent" the musical, using rock music to break from the conventions of standard book musicals like *Victor/Victoria*. His efforts, unlike Puccini's, immediately were celebrated, inviting comparisons with landmark musicals such as *West Side Story* (1957) and *Hair* (1968) as well as to composer Stephen Sondheim. Opening to raves the day after the thirty-five-year-old Larson died unexpectedly from a brain aneurysm, *Rent* packed the 150-seat house at New York Theatre Workshop before it transferred to Broadway's Nederlander Theatre where it opened, 29 April 1996.

Two days before *Rent* premiered at New York Theatre Workshop, *New York Times* music critic Anthony Tommasini wrote that, every generation, young audiences "re-discover" the romanticized poverty of *La Bohème*. *Rent*, he argues, is the 1990s generation's *La Bohème*.[24] The claim is ironic. While the Broadway production attracted significant numbers of spectators in their teens and twenties (thanks in no small part to the availability of discount tickets, aggressive youth marketing, and MTV videos), the Off-Broadway production played mainly to a subscription audience. On the night he attended the New York Theatre Workshop production, Frank Rich noted that "few theatergoers in the house demographically matched the castoffs on stage. But neither did the audience seem like the desperately hip on a slumming expedition."[25] Questions about *Rent*'s imagined audience—notably who attended the production and for what ends—points to larger issues about how the dominant culture reproduces itself through performances like *Rent*. If *Victor/Victoria* relishes in the cultural institution of heterosexuality, *Rent* enacts heterosexuality's reproductive logic by using culture as a

tool for habituation that ensures the perpetuation of the parent culture through its offspring.

"In an age where almost every show-biz event is predigested and presold by the media long before the public can decide for itself," writes Rich, *Rent* is a "truly spontaneous pop-culture phenomenon."[26] The claim seems somewhat disingenuous coming from the former "Butcher of Broadway," who undoubtedly knows the impact that a positive notice from the *Times* can have for a production. Any theatrical experience, regardless of its cultural status, is mediated through various devices (e.g., programs, reviews, word of mouth) that construct interpretative frames for a given production. New York Theatre Workshop, for example, "pre-packaged" its production of *Rent* through flyers mailed to subscribers, features pitched to the press, and most notably by having *Rent* open on the one-hundredth anniversary of *La Bohème*. In turn, Rich's Op-Ed served as a mediation device through which audiences interpreted the Broadway production. When *Rent* received the 1996 Pulitzer Prize for Drama, the musical's cultural capital skyrocketed. *Rent* is only the seventh musical in the history of the Pulitzers to win the prize; Larson is the only author to receive the honor posthumously.[27]

The death of the author is significant in the case of *Rent* because it marks the literal and figurative grounds that define who owns and controls the discourse surrounding the production. In a phone interview with Rich shortly after Larson's death, *Rent* director Michael Greif claims that Larson "gave his life" to his art, working as a waiter to makes ends meet until the day he received his break. The description enacts a romantic notion of the artist whose genius is unappreciated during his lifetime. This romanticization of Larson as an artist easily lends itself to a biographical approach to

Rent, producing an equally romanticized interpretation of the musical's meaning. Rich concludes his column on *Rent* by writing: "What is certain is that Jonathan Larson's brief life belies the size of his spirit. In the staying power of his lyrics, he lingers, refusing to let anyone who hears his voice abandon hope."[28] Like the Mimi of *Rent*, Larson transcends his death, living on through the power of his love for humanity.

In "What is an Author?", Michel Foucault challenges the romantic notion of artistic genius. According to Foucault: "If we wish to know the author in our day, it will be through the singularity of his absence and in his link to death, which has transformed him into a victim of his own writing."[29] In speaking of the metaphoric death of the author (which, in Larson's case, is linked to the author's literal death), Foucault describes the author not as an individual but as a function of discourse. To this end, "the 'author function' is tied to the legal and institutional systems that circumscribe, determine, and articulate the realm of discourses."[30] The author function is equally tied to capital and ideological interests whose investments in the existence of an original artist mask the workings of power. By arguing that *Rent* is a "truly spontaneous pop-culture phenomenon," Rich detracts attention from his own role in the construction of that phenomenon and the romanticization of the author, including his membership on the committee that gave *Rent* the Pulitzer.

The author may be dead (as Roland Barthes famously suggests), but the author function is very much alive in American theatre and culture more generally. The dismissal of Lynn Thompson's legal claim to co-authorship of *Rent* reveals the extent to which our culture is tied to the notion of a single author, and the extent to which Larson is a victim of his writing. In December 1996, Thompson filed a lawsuit against Larson's

estate, claiming that her creative labor as *Rent*'s dramaturg entitled her to more compensation from a production that stands to gross $1 billion than the $2,000 fee paid by New York Theatre Workshop. Because dramaturgy is a relatively new profession in U.S. theatre, lacking any legal precedent, Thompson legally had to claim co-authorship of *Rent*.[31] In its ruling, the court recognized Thompson's contributions as collaborator but denied her claim of co-authorship.

Although Sarah Schulman's claim to the authorship of *Rent* never made it to trial, her charges speak to the ideological investments in maintaining Larson as the sole and original creator of *Rent*. In *Stagestruck: Theater, AIDS, and the Marketing of Gay America*, Schulman argues that Larson plagiarized her 1982 novel about East Village bohemians and AIDS, *People in Trouble*. Whereas the central love story between Roger and Mimi came from Puccini, the plot lines involving lesbians, gay men, and people living with AIDS Schulman claims were hers. Larson apparently told friends when he was developing *Rent* that he not only was familiar with Schulman's work but was using it as source material. For Schulman, the most blatant example of plagiarism occurs at the end of the first act when several alarms go off to remind Roger, Mimi, Angel, and Collins to take their medication. When Schulman wrote her novel in 1982, people living with AIDS wore watch alarms to remind them to take their AZT medication every twelve hours. Drug treatments for HIV/AIDS had changed significantly by the time Larson started developing the script for *Rent* ten years later, suggesting to Schulman that the inspiration for the scene came not from Larson's lived experience (as it did in her case) but from her novel.

Despite the overwhelming circumstantial evidence amassed by Schulman, her case failed to find an advocate among the numerous lawyers, editors, and journalists with whom she consulted. "Authentic representation of gay and lesbian life is not yet a concern of public discourse," she concludes. "Vehicles like *Rent*, *Philadelphia*, and other AIDS stories promoted by straight people portray a world in which heterosexuals have nothing to account for, to reflect on, or to regret in their behavior toward people with AIDS and gays and lesbians in general."[32] Schulman goes on to implicate *Rent* in the construction of a "fake public homosexuality" that has replaced the public denial of homosexuality with false images of lesbians and gay men that can be sold to straight consumers.[33] *Rent*, she argues, casts heterosexuals as the heroes of the AIDS crisis, implying that the experiences of lesbians, gay men, and people with AIDS are exactly the same as the experiences of straights.[34] *Rent* typifies Schulman's central thesis in *Stagestruck*: "Namely, that the dominant culture's power relies on their [sic] inability to see how it is constructed, that they rely on feeling that their power is a naturally objective state, and that efforts to articulate and analyze how their dominance is enforced are met with annihilation."[35]

The use of the plural pronouns "their" and "they" to modify the singular noun "dominant culture" is an unfortunate error in copyediting. But it also reveals a slipperiness that runs through Schulman's argument that casts heterosexuals, rather than institutionalized heterosexuality, as the enemy. The slip points to the pervasiveness as well as the dangers of perpetuating an "us/them" mentality in imagining political community. Pitting identity positions against each other fails to produce a systematic analysis of oppression. While I agree with Schulman's conclusions about the slick

marketing of gay and lesbian culture and politics, nor is she alone in making such a critique, I think it is important for queer artists, activists, and critics to develop strategies for thinking across identity positions. Cathy Cohen writes that "the process of movement-building [should] be rooted not in our shared history or identity, but in our marginal relationship to dominant power which normalizes, legitimizes, and privileges."[36] Cohen imagines a queer coalition that, rather than casting them as the enemy, includes heterosexuals in the formation of its politic. Indeed, a "queer politic which demonizes all heterosexuals discounts the relationships—especially those based on shared experiences of marginalization—that exist between gays and straights, particularly in communities of color."[37] *Rent* arguably shows what a community that cuts across identity positions might look like, staging a kinship structure that represents a multiplicity of racial and sexual identities. The problem with *Rent* is the way that it structures the relationships among characters according to dominant cultural patterns that reinforce racial and sexual differences.

In *Acts of Intervention*, David Román notes that, more than any other Broadway production since Tony Kushner's *Angels in America* in 1992-93, *Rent* captures the cultural politics of AIDS at the end of the millennium. The musical depicts the demographic groups in the United States hardest hit by the epidemic in the late 1990s: gay men, women of color, IV drug users, Latinos, and African Americans. The visibility of these under-represented groups is significant in terms of mainstream theatrical representations of AIDS, in large part because the majority of plays produced outside communities of color focus on the experiences of white, middle-class gay men.[38] Román regards the appearance of the Broadway cast at the 1996 Democratic National

Convention as a sign of the possibility for a more participatory democracy. But the performance of "A Season of Love" on the opening night of the convention seems more motivated by interest in record sales than an interest in a more progressive democracy, as evidenced by musical producer David Geffen's anger over the networks' decision to cut away early from the performance because the convention broadcast was running overtime.

For the Democratic National Committee, the appearance may have been motivated by the desire to build a base among younger voters than in addressing the social issues tangentially raised by the musical. Indeed, Clinton's record on queer issues was inconsistent. Early in his first term he pushed for the rights of lesbians and gay men to serve in the military, quickly compromising his position when faced with opposition from the Pentagon. The policy of "Don't Ask, Don't Tell" implied that homosexuality among military ranks would be tolerated so long as it went unacknowledged. The compromises surrounding a policy that Clinton admitted at the end of his second term was a failure illustrates the extent to which Clinton, as a postmodern president, would continually reinvent himself, easily exchanging one position for another, one image for the next.

The circulation and substitution that Frederic Jameson associates with the cultural logic of late capitalism and that may have characterized Clinton's presidency can be seen in commercial musicals of the mid-1990s, most notably in productions like *Rent* and *Victor/Victoria* that recycle previous works. The resulting atmosphere is one in which co-option and assimilation replaces dialogue and change. *Rent*, for example, risks reducing AIDS to just another issues on the political platform, or to an item on a long list

that includes everything from "love" to "food." A logic of substitution runs through "La Vie Bohème", the musical's declaration of independence from the parent culture:

> MARK: To days of inspiration / Playing hooky, making something / Out of nothing, the need / To express – / To communicate, / To going against the grain, / Going insane / Going mad / To loving tension, no pension, / To more than one dimension, / To starving for attention, / Hating convention, hating pretension, / Not to mention of course, / Hating dear old Mom and Dad / To riding your bike, / Midday past the three-piece suits – / To fruits – to no absolutes – / To Absolut – to choice – / To the *Village Voice* – / To any passing fad / To being an us – for once – / Instead of a them
>
> ALL: La Vie Bohème / La Vie Bohème (n. pag)

Mark's toast to the death of bohemia is motivated by a desire to be part of a community (i.e., to being "an us . . . instead of a them"). But the terms for inclusion quickly dissolve into a randomness that includes anything and everything as well as anyone and everyone: "Bisexuals, trisexuals, homo sapiens / Carcinogens, hallucinogens, men, Pee-Wee Herman / German wine, turpentine, Gertrude Stein / Antonioni, Bertolucci, Kurosawa / 'Carmina Burana'" (n. pag). The values of the dominant culture may be rejected, but they are quickly reproduced through the logic of exchange in which everything trades equally: Bisexuals are the same as trisexuals, which are the same as German wine and turpentine. What appears as a slippery or faulty logic enacts what Susan Willis recites as a mantra of postmodern consumer culture: "Everything transforms, but nothing changes."[39]

To be sure, nothings changes for the principal characters in *Rent*. Maureen's performance piece protesting the gentrification of the neighborhood doesn't prevent the landlord from padlocking the apartment whose tenants are delinquent on the rent, nor does the offstage riot that occurs at the end of the first act produce any change that will protect the neighborhood from corporate developers. Instead, *Rent* enacts what Frederic Jameson describes as a capitalist fantasy of urban life that shows "how urban squalor can be a delight to the eyes when expressed in commodification, and how an unparalleled quantum leap in the alienation of daily life in the city can now be experienced in the form of a strange new hallucinatory exhilaration."[40]

Indeed, *Rent* offers its white middle-class audience what David Savran describes as a multicultural fantasy that is "guaranteed to make it feel liberal and hip."[41] For a musical obsessed with authenticity and innovation, *Rent* draws from a white musical pedigree rather than from African American or Latino forms (which is ironic, Savran notes, as rap and hip-hop were popular idioms at the time that Larson composed *Rent*). Moreover, Savran argues that the musical's representation of racial difference, notably in the characters of Mimi and Angel, offers an updated version of the tragic mulatto figure. *Rent* acknowledges sexual difference by featuring two gay men, two lesbians, and an S/M sex worker among the central characters. Savran suggests: "The representations may not be obviously homophobic, but they function, even more distinctly than the representation of racial minorities—because more premeditatedly—as the sign of upper-middlebrow chic, giving the musical an air of danger and daring and clearly distinguishing it from Hollywood films and other mass culture representations."[42] Queer becomes the site of crossing in *Rent* (whereas gender is the site of crossing in *Victor/Victoria*), giving

audiences an opportunity to disavow racial and sexual difference so they can experience being an outsider without having to abandon their sense of privilege.

In fact, despite all its radical posturing, *Rent* relies on conventional structures of political community. The *Playbill* for the Broadway production represents the musical's kinship structure as a family tree, providing expository information about the characters' interrelationships: Benny used to date Mimi and used to be Mark's and Roger's roommate; Roger now dates Mimi; Mark used to date Maureen, who now dates Joanne; Collin used to be roommates with Mark and Roger; Collin now dates Angel. If *Rent* represents community as "family," it does so through a traditional model defined by heterosexuality in which the sexual excesses of youth give are resolved through an assimilation into the parent culture. Being part of "us" comes through a rejection of being one of "them."

Ultimately, *Rent* enacts an Oedipal drama in which the parent culture reproduces itself, and in which capitalism presents itself as the only solution to the social problems tangentially raised by the musical. In his review of the Broadway production, *Village Voice* critic Michael Feingold attributes *Rent*'s success (both uptown and downtown) to its broad mass appeal: "It's squarely in the oldest Broadway tradition in offering a rich piece with slices for everyone. A familiar, eye-moistening story, and a canny mixture, in the writing, of old-style showbizmanship with freestyle new sound, link it more closely with another taste-changing show, *West Side Story*, than with the nearly unrevivable *Hair*."[43] The emphasis on the revivability of a production is grounded in a reproductive logic that is capitalist in origin and elitist in its assumptions about the desire for upward mobility. In a particularly revealing aside, Feingold writes: "One reason the American

musical needs multiple styles is democracy: The rich love stories about poverty; the poor like to see expensive costumes and banquets onstage. But the poor also identify emotionally with poor outsiders, and vice versa."[44] Feingold seems to revel in a spectacle of capitalism in which the commodity is all there is to see. His comments reveal the extent to which consumer culture ensures its existence through its constant reproduction of social divisions and class structures. There is nothing radical or progressive about Feingold's sense of democracy, as it values assimilation as the means of achieving social justice and equality. In the end, the same critique can be made about *Rent*. Its vision of political community is far from radical, nor is it particularly queer as it finally embraces the values of the parent culture that it claims to be rebelling against.

When Pigs Fly

Jonathan Larson was not the only author to have a musical posthumously produced in 1996. *Howard Crabtree's When Pigs Fly* memoralizes the award-winning costume designer who died from AIDS complications weeks before the revue bearing his name opened at the Douglas Fairbanks Theatre.[45] Unlike *Rent*, however, in which the death of the author rhetorically serves the ideological and capitalist interests of the dominant culture, authorship in the case of *When Pigs Fly* calls attention to who is speaking and from what cultural position. *When Pigs Fly* draws on a camp tradition that critiques popular and commercial culture at the same time that it imagines a space outside but adjacent to it. The musical's most effective moments are not those in which mainstream values are made the spectacle of laughter, however, but those in which the camp lens focuses on the materialism of gay men that makes them complicit in their assimilation.

Crabtree made little distinction between his everyday life and theatrical career. He once described his shows "as a kind of entertainment that you do with your friends, when you're all around a kitchen table, or you're with your brother and you laugh at nothing and then can't stop laughing."[46] As a chorus member of the Broadway production of *La Cage aux Folles*, Crabtree began building outlandish costumes as part of the show's backstage antics. The elaborate costume pageants that the ensemble produced for each other eventually led to the founding the annual Easter Bonnet Competition sponsored by Broadway Cares/Equity Fights AIDS. The backstage productions launched Crabtree's career as a costume designer. In 1992, he joined forces with composer Dick Gallagher on the musical revue *Whatnot*, which received a Richard Rodgers Production Award. The following year, Crabtree, Gallagher, and playwright Mark Waldrop produced the revue *Whoop-De-Doo!* in association with the Glines Theatre and Postage Stamp Extravaganzas at the Actors Playhouse in Greenwich Village. The production won two Drama Desk Awards, one for Best Musical Revue and one for Best Costume Design. *When Figs Fly* came on the heels of that success, opening on Theatre Row, 14 August 1996.

As a musical revue, *When Pigs Fly* is a living relic. During the 1950s and 1960s, revues were a forum for irreverent humor, social commentary, and a coded expression of gay identity. In an essay originally published at both the height of McCarthyism and musical production in the United States, Eric Bentley claims that the musical revue is a potentially democratic form of entertainment because of its ability to break down the barriers between "high" and "low" culture. He contrasts the manipulative sentimentality and moralizing tones of Rodgers and Hammerstein's *Carousel* (1945) and *The King and I*

(1951) with the "cocky, satirical, devil-may-care philosophy" of the Rodgers and Hart's *On Your Toes* (1939). For Bentley, the best musicals are "not those with the biggest intentions behind them but those with the simple virtues in them of singable tunes and sheer showmanship."[47] *When Pigs Fly* is a production of simple virtues, from its catchy lyrics, hummable melodies, to the showmanship of its spectacular costumes.

These elements, but most notably the campiness of the costumes, reminds reviewer Michael Feingold of a gay musical tradition (similar to the one described by D.A. Miller) that is all but forgotten in post-Stonewall gay America:

> Crabtree's costumes come out of the closet, as it were, of the musical theater's past, where their giddy excess was often used, not to display homosexual identity, but to conceal it in an encoded form, simultaneously making it palpable to mainstream audiences and giving it an extra camp kick for those in the know. It's probably no coincidence that the Broadway musical's turn toward dark, lugubrious earnestness began around the same time as the gay liberation movement: Queerdom needed to eschew its secret conventions and smash its repressive codes; that this made our musical theater politically duller was politically beside the point.[48]

When Pigs Fly connects with this earlier moment in gay theatre history. As a result, it differs from *Victor/Victoria* and *Rent* because its representation of gayness does not attempt to pass as straight or "normal."

When Pigs Fly ostensibly is about the business of putting on a show. In the prologue, young Howard (played by Michael West) arrives late to a meeting with his

high school guidance counselor, still wearing a Dream Curly costume he designed himself (complete with sparkle vest, feathered chaps, and false eyelashes). Howard's guidance counselor, Miss Roundhole (David Presner), has called the meeting to discuss the result of Howard's vocational testing. She has narrowed Howard's options down to four: watch repair, garden supply, plumbing, and chicken farming. But Howard has different ideas. He wants to put on shows:

> HOWARD: Can't you see it? Me and all the other Dream Curly's from all the other high schools all over the country—putting on a show! A show where we play all the parts, we sing the big torch songs, we have all the good jokes! Can't you see it, Miss Roundhole?
>
> MISS ROUNDHOLE: Well, when you put it that way, Howard, sure. I can see it . . . WHEN PIGS FLY!!! (11)

Miss Roundhole's attempt to crush Howard's dream by saying it's impossible fails, however. She "disappears," and the action flashforwards to the present where Howard performs the title song:

> When pigs fly
>
> Possibility Beckons.
>
> No alternate side of the brain restrictions apply.
>
> Brother, you ain't seen a thing
>
> Till you've seen bacon takin' wing!
>
> When pigs fly! (11-12)

Soon, the other cast members join Howard onstage. The ensemble includes five men of different ages, physical builds, and talents. They have two things in common: They all

are gay (which they acknowledge), and they all are white (which they do not). The revue that follows defies the limits placed on young Howard by his guidance counselor, as Howard realizes his dream of sharing the stage with four other pastel-clad Dream Curlys, all in a celebration of gayness.

The character of Howard appears throughout the production, battling a crumbling theatre, scene and costume changes, the egos of temperamental actors, and the daunting task of making a pig fly for the finale. Each time things fail to go according to plan, Howard hears Miss Roundhole's voice reminding him of the more appropriate career options set before him. These moments remind the audience that they are watching, unlike *Rent* or *Victor/Victoria*, a gay-identified production. Early in the performance, actor Jay Rogers jokes that the Times Square Renovation Project hasn't reached as far as their theatre. Roger's comment alludes to Howard's constant efforts to fix up the crumbling theatre. It also alludes to how larger cultural developments do not make room for certain aspects of gay male life. Author and cultural critic Samuel Delany describes, for example, the impact of the Times Square Renewal Project on queer subcultures, specifically the exchange among gay men of different racial and class backgrounds that took place in the porn theatres and sex shops.[49] The vision of community enacted by *When Pigs Fly* is not transgressive like the one identified by Delany, but it does claim a space for gay men inside commercial theatre. As Howard fights to get his show on the boards, *When Pigs Fly* serves as a reminder of who gets to define that space.

Like other forms of camp, *When Pigs Fly* relies on an excessive literalness of meaning, basing its humor on puns and sight gags. For example, the musical number "Why Am I Not All Man" is performed by a centaur who apparently doesn't realize he's

half man/half horse. In turn, "You've Got to Stay in the Game" uses card games like Gin, Whist, Pinochle, and Spite and Malice to offer advice to the lovelorn (along with a safe-sex reminder to keep those cards "plastic coated"). The song is performed by four dancing "queens" dressed as the Queen of Hearts, Clubs, Spades, and Diamonds.

But *When Pigs Fly* also draws on a camp tradition of drag whose sole purpose is not to comment on sex and gender roles but to give performers the license to camp it up. Women become the butt of the joke, as seen in the Melody Barn sequence that is the centerpiece of the first act. The scene parodies a community theatre and its aging diva Carol Ann Kniple, whose egotism is matched only by her use of musical cliches and malapropisms.

Co-creator Mark Waldrop defends the production against challenges to its political correctness by claiming that "Howard had no agenda. . . . There's no '90s in-your-face drag attitude here—only the giddy exhilaration that comes with permission to put on a costume and become anything . . . that will serve as a springboard into laughter" (7). Everything and anything can be used as a springboard to laughter, including politics. In fact, six of the fifteen numbers in the musical have overtly political themes, dealing with subjects such as anti-gay ballot measures and same-sex marriage and including a patriotic finale to the first act that underscores the production's liberal values. *When Pigs Fly* may not have an agenda, but it cannot be excused as being apolitical.

When Pigs Fly uses humor to defend gay male culture from conservative attacks. One of the most memorable parts of the revue is the series of torch songs performed by Jay West. Dressed in a white evening jacket and armed only with a long red silk scarf, West confesses his unrequited love for Newt Gingrich, Rush Limbaugh, and Strom

Thurman. The running gag derives humor from the absurdity of a gay man's attraction to three staunch conservatives who in no way could be mistaken as friends of the gay community. In an ideal world, same-sex desire should not be stigmatized; in the simulated ideal of the 1990s, it is. The torch songs thus imagine a utopia at the same time that they acknowledge its antithesis.

The gag ends in the second act with West singing "Laughing Matters." In contrast to the campy torch songs, the number is more serious and heartfelt:

> Bad guys win.
>
> Optimism's wearing thin.
>
> Things are spinning
>
> Out of Control.
>
> Cynicism's all the fad—
>
> World events could make us mad
>
> As hatters
>
> Almost ev'ry day
>
> Some underpinning slips away
>
> These aren't laughing matters. (53)

"Laughing Matters" identifies laughter as tool of defense and survival. Laughter embodies a consciousness that separates oneself from the object being examined and puts oneself outside of culture.

The effect is momentary, however, as the use of camp in *When Pigs Fly* merely marks the problem of social exclusion rather than intervening into its underlying causes. The first act closes with "You Can't Take the Color Out of Colorado," a finale that seeks

to put the "riot in Patriotism with a valentine to lawmakers of America" (31). The only set piece is a two-dimensional cutout representing a panel of conservative judges. The heads have movable parts that are manipulated by crew members backstage. A series of sound bites broadcasting messages of hate plays over the sound system. When the tape ends, actor John Tracy Egan walks out on stage in a band leader's costume. He sings:

> In state after state the legislature
> Wants to regulate human nature.
> In short, from sea to shining sea
> They'd like to tell you who to be.
> They can pass all the statutes that they please—
> Acorns won't grow into maple trees.
> Besides, those differences they hate
> Are the strengths that make this country great.
> Only fools would write those laws.
> The simply can't succeed because . . .
>
> You can't take the "color" out of Colorado
> You can't take the "Mary" out of Maryland
> As John Philip Sousa said, I can't march
> If I can't hear the boys in the band!" (32; ellipsis in original)

The band leader sings that "you need us" (i.e., the nation needs gay men) to make the U.S.A. The lyrics suggest that gay men are an integral part of the social fabric of the United States (i.e., they already have been integrated). Eagan eventually is joined by the

other cast members, costumed as a doctor, construction worker, athlete, and business professional. The first act finale stages the politics of assimilation that runs throughout the production.[50] It also shows the limits of its social vision. In his introduction to *The Politics and Poetics of Camp,* Moe Meyer defines camp as a critique of bourgeois individualism and the tendency toward assimilation.[51] Camp's transgressiveness lies in the performance that is at once outside and inside. In the case of "You Can't Take the Color Out of Colorado," the possibility for a critique is foreclosed because, as the title suggests, gayness already is inside American culture. After all, gayness is what puts the "color" in Colorado and the "mary" in Maryland.

Politically, the most effective moments in *When Pigs Fly* are those that productively engage consumer culture to camp on gay male culture. Richard Dyer explains in his discussion of film musicals that, when parodied, the spectacle of consumption anticipates a utopian moment in which the very real needs and lives of consumers are addressed. Because this alternative world has yet to be represented, popular entertainments like musicals stage "what utopia would feel like rather than how it would be organized."[52] Musicals in this sense are not an escape but a productive engagement with consumer culture that acknowledges both where one lives and where one would like to live.

The second act opens with "Vanity with Pride." It is performed by four Restoration dandies, who talk about the pains they go through to make themselves beautiful. The number eventually becomes a critique of contemporary gay male lifestyles, specifically the obsession with beauty and youth:

> You wear your vanity with pride,

Vying for the limelight's glare.

With each stomach crunch

And protein powder lunch

You prove you're in the power of the mania we share.

Before performing the final verse, the dandies assist the ladies as they attach their dressing vanities to their costumes so they literally can wear their vanities with pride. The irony of this moment in the performance enacts the allegory found in *Kapital* in which Marx imagines what it would be like if a table could stand on its legs and take on airs.[53] For Marx, the metaphor speaks to the hidden labor of commodities. In *When Pigs Fly*, the wearing of the vanities and taking on airs calls attention to the relationship between social subjects and the object world around them, specifically in the way that consumption and commodification affect expressions of cultural identity. To this end, as Susan Willis writes, the everyday becomes a powerful site of resistance in commodity culture: "Dismissed as trivial, fragmented, and fetishized by its assimilation to the commodity form, daily life is our site of convergence with the historical."[54] In effect, *When Pigs Fly* reclaims a history of musicals as a part of daily life. This potential is not available to everyone as not everyone trades equally in commodity cultural exchanges. But it does serve as an important reminder that consumption, or spectatorship in the case of theatre, can be an important practice of negotiating and renegotiating cultural identity.

Toward the end of the production, Howard has all but given up hope. His cast has mutinied, he's broke, and he is left without a finale. Miss Roundhole appears, reminding him of his more conventional choices. Howard fears he may have gone too far, before realizing that he hasn't gone far enough. Howard dreams of going over the top, and

reminds the audience that “even the most mundane profession can be fabulous” (58). As Howard shouts out the names of the conventional professionals presented to him as a young man, the other cast members appear on stage in elaborate Vegas showgirl costumes made out of the everyday objects associated with the professions of watch repair, chicken farming, garden supply, and plumbing. By staging what Richard Dyer imagines as a materialism “not necessarily what the everyday would assure us it is,”[55] Howard goes over the top to a place where pigs fly. The literal embodiment of the professions of watch repair, chicken farming, garden supply, and plumbing arguably allows the audience, as Dyer suggests, to rediscover our bodies “as part of [the] experience of materialism and the possibility for change.”[56] In its final moments, *When Pigs Fly* engages the materialism of contemporary gay male culture that contributes to the assimilation of gay men as virtual citizens. In the process of parodying identity-based consumption, *When Pigs Fly* reclaims musicals as a practice that holds the potential to transform the state of America into a place where gay men genuinely matter through a critical engagement of cultural attitudes, behaviors, and values that taken for granted.

Notes

[1]Terrence McNally, *Love! Valour! Compassion!* In Love! Valour! Compassion! *and* A Perfect Ganesh*: Two Plays* (New York: Plume Books, 1995), 51.

[2]D.A. Miller, *Place for Us: Essay on the Broadway Musical* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1998), 26. For a more anecdotal discussion of the subcultural significance of musicals for gay men, see John M. Clum, *Something for the Boys: Musical Theater and Gay Culture* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1999). Stacy Wolf explores the significance of musicals for lesbian-feminist spectators in *A Problem Like Maria: Gender and Sexuality in the American Musical* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2002).

[3]For an historical survey of Broadway's golden age, see Wolf.

[4]Alan Woods, "Consuming the Past: Commercial American Theatre in the Reagan Era," in *The American Stage: Social and Economic Issues from the Colonial Period to the Present*, ed. Ron Engle and Tice L. Miller (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993), 253-54.

[5]For more on Disney on Broadway, see Maurya Wickstrom, "Commodities, Mimesis, and *The Lion King*," *Theatre Journal* 51 (October 1999): 285-89.

[6]Michael Warner, *The Trouble with Normal: Sex, Politics, and the Ethics of Queer Life* (New York: Free Press, 1999), 162; Samuel R. Delany, *Times Square Red, Times Square Blue* (New York: New York University, 1999).

[7]In *Selling Out: The Gay and Lesbian Movement Goes to Market* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2000), Alexandra Chasin notes that moments of political enfranchisement historically coincide with the identification of movement constituents as a target market (xv-xvi). Marketers identified the gay and lesbian community as lucrative niche market with large disposable incomes. Ironically, marketers base their conclusions about gay wealth on a faulty sample. On average, gay men and lesbians have less secure income that their straight counterparts. Nevertheless, the gay market exists because marketers say it does. For more on the economics of gay and lesbian life, see M.V. Lee Badget, "Beyond Bias Samples: Challenging the Myths of the Economic Status of Lesbians and Gay Men," in *Homo Economics: Capitalism, Community, and Lesbian and Gay Life*, ed. Amy Gluckman and Betsy Reed (New York: Routledge, 1997), 65-72; and M.V. Lee Badget, *Money, Myths, and Change: The Economic Lives of Lesbians and Gay Men* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001).

[8]Douglas Bruster, *Drama and the Market in the Age of Shakespeare* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 9.

[9]Mary Douglas and Baron Isherwood, *The World of Goods: Towards an Anthropology of Consumption* (New York: Basic Books, 1979; reprint, New York: Routledge, 1996), 42-43 (page references to reprint edition).

[10]Howard Crabtree, Mark Waldrop, and Dick Gallagher, *Howard Crabtree's When Pigs Fly* (New York: Samuel French, 1999), 11. Subsequent references hereafter cited within.

[11]My discussion of *Victor/Victoria* is based on the performance I attended in October 1995.

[12]Marjorie Garber, *Vested Interests: Cross-dressing and Cultural Anxiety* (New York: Routledge, 1997).

[13]Chris Straayer, *Deviant Eyes, Deviant Bodies: Sexual Re-Orientations in Film and Video* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996), 43-44. Straayer makes a useful distinction between transvestitism and cross-dressing. Whereas cross-dressing calls attention to the performance of gender, transvestitism requires a successful pass in which the gaps of gender performance are concealed.

[14]Charles Busch, "Tattle of the Sexes: When She's a He, and He's a She," interview with Julie Andrews, *New York Times*, 15 October 1995: 2:5.

[15]Philip Weiss, "Return of the Punk Panther," *New York Times Magazine*, 1 October 1995, 54.

[16]Ibid., 76.

[17]Woods, 254. The 2004 revival of *La Cage aux Folles* similarly occurred in a conservative political climate, opening a month after George W. Bush's re-election. Ironically, *La Cage* offers a model of gay marriage and family that Bush used as a fear tactic to mobilize conservative voters.

[18]Eric Bentley, "The Psychology of Farce," in Let's Get a Divorce! *and Other Plays*, ed. Eric Bentley (New York: Hill & Wang, 1958), x.

[19]Busch, interview with Andrews.

[20]Biddy Martin, "Sexualities Without Genders and Other Queer Utopias," *Diacritics* 24 (Summer-Fall 1994): 119.

[21]Steven Seidman, *Beyond the Closet: The Transformation of Gay and Lesbian Life* (New York: Routledge, 2004), 133.

[22]Jeremy Gerard, "Broadway," *Variety*, 30 October 1995, 176.

[23]My discussion of *Rent* is based on the performance I attended in July 1997.

[24]Anthony Tommasini, "Late Lyricist's Modern *Bohème* an Eloquent Legacy," *New York Times*, 11 February 1996.

[25]Frank Rich, "East Village Story," *The New York Times*, 2 March 1996.

[26]Ibid.

[27]In addition to *Rent*, the other Pulitzer Prize-winning musicals are *Of Thee I Sing* (1931), *South Pacific* (1949), *Fiorello!* (1959), *How to Succeed in Business Without Really Trying* (1961), *A Chorus Line* (1975), and *A Sunday in the Park with George* (1984). The Pulitzer increased *Rent*'s cultural capital as well. The one-day sale of single tickets following the announcement of the prize nearly doubled. See Greg Evans, "Pulitzer Pumps B.O. of B'way Bound *Rent*," *Variety*, 15 April 1996, 183.

[28]Rich.

[29]Michel Foucault, "What is an Author?" in *Language, Counter-memory, Practice: Selected Essays and Interviews*, ed. Donald F. Bouchard and trans. Donald F. Bouchard and Sherry Simon (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1977), 117.

[30]Ibid., 130.

[31]For a more detailed discussion of Thompson's case and the cultural and legal status of dramaturgs in the United States, see Alisa Solomon, "How about Money?" *Village Voice*, 3 December 1996, 48-49.

[32]Sarah Schulman, *Stagestruck: Theater, AIDS, and the Marketing of Gay America* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1998), 17 and 147.

[33]Ibid., 146.

[34]Ibid., 101.

[35]Ibid., 145.

[36]Cathy Cohen, "Punks, Bulldaggers, and Welfare Queens: The Radical Potential of Queer Politics?" *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 3.4 (1997): 458.

[37]Ibid., 450.

[38]David Román, *Acts of Intervention: Gay Culture, Performance, and AIDS* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1998), 275.

[39]Susan Willis, *A Primer for Everyday Life* (New York: Routledge, 1991), 36.

[40]Frederic Jameson, *Postmodernism; or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1991), 33.

[41]David Savran, *A Queer Sort of Materialism: Re-Historicizing American Theater* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2003), 40.

[42]Savran, 41.

[43]Michael Feingold, "Music Hath Qualms," *Village Voice*, 4 June 1996, 73.

[44]Ibid.

[45]I saw *When Pigs Fly* at the Douglas Fairbanks Theatre in July 1997 and screened a videorecording of the Off-Broadway production from the New York Public Library's Theatre on Film Archive.

[46]Howard Crabtree; quoted in Charles Busch, "Celebrator of Fun, in All Its Many Guides," *New York Times*, 11 August 1996, 2:5.

[47]Eric Bentley, "The American Musical," in *What is Theatre?* (New York: Antheneum, 1968; reprint, New York: Limelight, 1984), 192 and 191.

[48]Michael Feingold, "Centaurs and Sailors," *Village Voice*, 27 August 1996, 71.

[49]Delany.

[50]Harry Forbes, "Dressed to Kill," *Manhattan Spirit*, 23 August 1996, 24.

[51]Moe Meyer, Introduction to *The Politics and Poetics of Camp*, ed. Moe Meyer (New York: Routledge, 1994), 2-3.

[52]Richard Dyer, "Entertainment and Utopia," in *Only Entertainment* (New York: Routledge, 1992), 23. For more on the utopian possibilities of performance, see Jill Dolan, "Performance, Utopia, and the 'Utopian Performative,'" *Theatre Journal* 53 (October 2001): 455-79.

[53]Karl Marx, *Capital*, in *The Marx-Engels Reader*, ed. Robert C. Tucker, 2nd edition (New York, 1978), 319-20; quoted in Margreta de Grazia, "The Ideology of Superfluous Things: *King Lear* as Period Piece," in *Subject and Object in Renaissance Culture*, ed. Margreta de Grazia, Maureen Quilligan, and Peter Stallybrass (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 18.

[54]Willis, 158.

[55]Richard Dyer, "In Defense of Disco," in *Only Entertainment*, 157.

[56]Ibid.

CHAPTER TWO

HAPPY HOMOSEXUALS, GAY CORPSES:

REVIVING MART CROWLEY'S *THE BOYS IN THE BAND*

Mart Crowley's *The Boys in the Band* is one of the most mythologized productions in the history of gay theatre in the United States. Opening Off Broadway on Easter Sunday 1968, *The Boys in the Band* broke ground with an explicit representation of homosexuality that departed from the coded representations arguably found in the plays of Edward Albee, William Inge, and Tennessee Williams. The queer performances of Jack Smith (1961-1971), the ridiculous theatre of John Vacarro, Ronald Tavel, and Charles Ludlam (1965-1967), the community of playwrights at Caffe Cino (1958-1968), and the Off-Broadway success of John Herbert's *Fortune and Men's Eyes* (1965) illustrate the extent to which gay theatrical activity existed before *The Boys in the Band.* But none of these performances enjoyed the same mainstream success, and none has been referenced in discussions of post-Stonewall gay theatre more frequently than *The Boys in the Band*. "For all intents and purposes," theatre critic Don Shewey claims, "gay theatre began as a result of *The Boys in the Band,* much the same way that gay liberation began with Stonewall. In both cases, gays were extant and visible before, but the event was the catalyst for a sudden eruption of activity."[1] In effect, Shewey suggests, gay theatre came out of the closet with *The Boys in the Band*.

Coming out narratives, like any origin myth, are highly subjective. Indeed, personal memories of the 1968 stage production and the faithful film adaptation that premiered in 1970 vary widely, depending on how the production addressed the interpretative needs of different spectators. In 1992, for example, a *New York Times*

reader responded to a front-page feature about the history of *The Boys in the Band* that ran in the Sunday Arts and Leisure section. Charles Cole Lehman challenged the accusation frequently made against *The Boys in the Band* that it represented the worst elements of gay life. "Gay men of my generation didn't see the characters as unsympathetic stereotypes; they were like people we had known. Perhaps they were a bit like ourselves," writes Lehman.[2] In contrast, a 1996 feature about *The Boys in the Band* sparked a remarkably different response from a reader who felt the film had a detrimental effect on him as a sixteen-year-old struggling with his sexuality. "That collection of unhappy characters seemed to send a message that I was condemned to a life of self-loathing," writes Robert Ristelheuber. "Crowley may have broken new ground by revealing this side of gay life to the broad public, but he did no favor to a generation of young people struggling with their sexuality."[3] The polar responses represented by the two letters reflect positions commonly taken by gay men in discussions of *The Boys in the Band*. Neither interpretation is more "correct" or "accurate" than the other. Both are equally valid and illustrate the abundance of meanings that performances like *Boys in the Band* generate.

This chapter uses the occasion of the 1996 revival of *The Boys in the Band* by the WPA (Workshop for the Players Art) Theatre to explore the excess of meanings surrounding this cultural performance.[4] The play's controversial history offers a useful analytical framework to understand current debates about gay visibility and mainstreaming. I am not interested in reconstructing a linear model of progress that positions contemporary gay theatre as an improvement on its dark past. I instead want to explore the implications of the histories and memories that haunt *The Boys in the Band*.

In *Queer Fictions of the Past: History, Culture, and Difference*, Scott Bravmann suggests an approach to queer historiography that accounts for the ways that lesbians and gay men creates histories and myths about the past to theorize their present lives. Bravmann writes that "though the study of gay and lesbian history provides cogent ways of addressing questions of identity, politics, community, and difference, historical events and memories of them also continue to imbue the present with meaning and give the past a surplus of signification that is itself in need of critical analysis."[5] Bravmann's thesis resonates with me for various reasons, not the least of which is the way it speaks to recent conversations among theatre scholars about the role of cultural memory in theatrical reception. Marvin Carlson provocatively describes theatre as a cultural practice haunted by ghosts or memories of past performances, plays, and productions.[6] Similarly, David Savran suggests that contemporary American theatre is haunted by its "glorious past" and the 1960s as "the last truly progressive era" in politics.[7] In exorcising the ghosts raised through the WPA's revival of *The Boys in the Band*, this chapter explores the various meanings made in the present through a return to the past.

The Boys in the Band: 1968

When *The Boys in the Band* opened in 1968, homosexuality was an unwelcome subject in the theatre. Lesbians and gay men were infrequently represented on stage; when they were, it was as demonized figures.[8] This dramaturgical practice reflects the cultural xenophobia that dominated American foreign and domestic policies at the time. Cold War ideologues suspected that alien groups, most notably Communists, had integrated the United States to such an extent that they no longer could be recognized by the visible markers of racial and ethnic difference. Homosexuality was synonymous with

communism, as both were invisible menaces that not only escaped detection but opposed the reproductive logic of capitalism and capitalist institutions such as family and marriage.[9]

Commercial theatre during the 1960s replicated prevailing cultural attitudes toward homosexuality. The New York critical establishment, most notably the *New York Times*, waged a campaign to protect American theatre from undue homosexual influences. Insofar as homosexuality was an insidious presence that could escape detection and pass as "straight," dramatic criticism performed the public service of decoding productions to reveal latent homosexual themes. The success of Edward Albee's *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* in 1962 particularly alarmed critics, who regarded the play as a vicious attack on the institution of marriage by gay figures in straight drag. In a 1966 cover story in the Arts and Leisure section of the *New York Times*, Stanley Kauffmann argued that "postwar American drama presents a badly distorted picture of American women, marriage, and society," in part because the three leading playwrights of the day (Albee, Inge, and Williams, to name names) used heterosexual plots to code their homosexuality.[10] Kauffmann maintains that homosexual men hold a feminine, and subsequently dishonest, world view. Their violent lashings out, illustrated by the misogyny of *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*, are desperate cries from individuals who want nothing more than to be normal. In equating homosexuality and misogyny, Kauffmann echoes the prevailing cultural attitudes of Cold War America that defined gay men as victims of a psychological gender disorder and women as sexual objects or the mothers of children. Within this framework, straight men are the legitimate heirs of the theatre because theirs is the only "honest" point of view.[11] Kauffmann

ultimately wants to expose the lie of homosexuality through more open representations on the stage. Once visible, the problem can be identified and contained. "I don't argue for increased homosexual influences in our theater," concludes Kauffmann. "It is precisely because I, like many others, am weary of disguised homosexual influences that I raise the matter."[12]

With *The Boys in the Band*, Crowley took up Kauffmann's challenge to write the gay experience as a gay experience. The story focuses on a group of gay men in their late twenties and early thirties who have gathered to celebrate the birthday of a friend. The party is interrupted by the unexpected arrival of Alan McCarthy, a college friend of the host, Michael, who doesn't know that Michael is gay. Disturbed by the campy and effeminate antics of a party guest named Emory, Alan physically lashes out as he calls Emory a freak. The incident proves too much for Michael, who becomes increasingly intoxicated and vicious toward his guests as the party progresses. He clumsily creates a party game called "Affairs of the Heart" in which participants confess an unrequited love. Michael wants to force Alan to admit a homosexual affair with Michael's college roommate. But Michael is foiled at his own game, as Alan chooses to return to a failing marriage rather than acknowledging the affair. Harold, the guest of honor who has sat by and watched Michael annihilate his guests, in the end turns the tables on Michael, forcing him to confront his internalized homophobia:

> 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 all the years you've got left to live. You may very well be able to know a heterosexual life if you want

> it desperately enough—if you pursue it with the fervor that you annihilate—but you will always be a homosexual as well. Always, Michael. Always. Until the day you die.[13]

Harold gathers his presents (including a male hustler named Cowboy) and thanks his friends for the party. Once the party breaks up, Donald comforts Michael as he breaks down hysterically: ". . . If we . . . could just . . . not hate ourselves so much" (393; ellipses in original). Michael recovers his composure and goes to a late Mass, leaving Donald alone in the wake of the party to finish his book and bottle of brandy.

Although Crowley successfully answered Kauffmann's challenge of writing the gay experience as a gay experience, Crowley still had to overcome the homophobia of the theatre industry if he wanted to have his play produced. Producing an openly gay work like *The Boys in the Band* was a commercially risky venture in the late 1960s. In his unpublished memoirs, producer Richard Barr recalls receiving the manuscript of *The Boys in the Band* from his literary agent, Janet Rogers, because Barr was the only person Rogers knew "crazy enough to try it." Barr initially found the script "too risky" for an Off-Broadway run, but was interested in producing the play at the Playwrights Unit, a nonprofit organization he co-founded in 1962 with Charles Woodward and Edward Albee. Barr's colleagues did not share his enthusiasm for the script. Woodward disliked the play and subject matter so much that he refused from the very beginning to be involved with any production of *The Boys in the Band*. Albee worried that critics would compare *The Boys in the Band* and *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* as both plays rely on the theatrics of a party game to shatter the pretensions and illusions of their characters. Albee agreed to meet with Crowley to suggest revisions, all of which Crowley refused to

make. Albee withdrew his support, and the Playwrights Unit went on to produce *The Boys in the Band* under Barr's sole stewardship. The production originally was supposed to receive four or five performances, but Barr extended the run to ten performances (the maximum allowed by the Unit's contract with Actors' Equity Association) because of the high demand for tickets and unusual interest expressed by other producers in transferring the production to a Broadway or Off-Broadway house. Barr ultimately decided to produce *The Boys in the Band* Off-Broadway, transferring the production from the Unit's home on Vandamm Street to Theatre Four, a theatre space located on West 55th Street between Ninth and Tenth Avenues.[14]

As Albee feared, critics inevitably compared *The Boys in the Band* with *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* and other plays suspected of being "closeted" works. For example, in his review for the *New York Times,* Clive Barnes wrote that Crowley made *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* "look like a vicerage tea party." Structurally both plays rely on sadistic party games to shatter pretenses, but Crowley's is a "more honest homosexual drama" because it does not rely on heterosexual drag to make its point. *The Boys in the Band* is "the frankest treatment of homosexuality I have ever seen on stage," Barnes concludes. "We are a long way from *Tea and Sympathy* here."[15]

Such comparisons came at Crowley's invitation. The script of *The Boys in the Band* references earlier works by Edward Albee, Robert Anderson, William Inge, and Tennessee Williams. During the course of dinner, the party's host, Michael, makes a toast that alludes to the graphic violence depicted in Williams's *Suddenly Last Summer* (1958):

> MICHAEL: Ladies and gentlemen. Correction: Ladies and ladies, I would like to announce that you have just eaten Sebastian Venable.
>
> COWBOY: Just eaten what?
>
> MICHAEL: Not *what*, stupid. Who. A character in a play. A fairy who was eaten alive. I mean the chop-chop variety.
>
> COWBOY: Jesus.
>
> HANK: Did Edward Albee write that play?
>
> MICHAEL: No. Tennessee Williams.
>
> HANK: Oh, yeah.
>
> MICHAEL: Albee wrote *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* (36*2;* emphasis in original)

In a few lines of dialogue, Crowley summarizes a representational history of gay men in American theatre, creating a context that reminded audiences how this representation differs from what they may have seen before. "It's not always like it happens in plays," Michael announces to his friends, "not all faggots bump themselves off at the end of the story" (364).

When it comes to representing gay men and lesbians, realism is a deadly form. In a comparative history of lesbian representations in modern American stage realism, Jill Dolan writes that, because realism "makes difference acceptable by constructing it as sameness," lesbian and gay figures inevitably must choose between the conversion cure offered through compulsory heterosexuality or a figurative and sometimes literal death.[16] Thus, in *The Boys in the Band*, when the repressed Alan must confront his latent homosexuality, he goes back to his wife. But the fate of Crowley's other characters is not

as clear, as the play resists the conventional closure associated with realist drama. Crowley instead offers an open ending in which the story of this gay band of characters presumably plays on.

Michael's observation that "it's not always like it happens in plays" is an ironic moment in the production that calls attention to the production's artifice as well as the artificial relationship between the production's internal and external realities. The metatheatrical commentaries point to the structural conventions of American stage realism, which were also foregrounded by the staging of the production. The Playwrights Unit produced *The Boys in the Band* on a shoestring budget, using photographs of an apartment as a backdrop against which furniture was placed. No attempt at a convincing *mise-en-scène* was made. Barr retained the original set design when he transferred the production from the Playwrights Unit to Theatre Four. By highlighting the artifice of theatre, both in terms of the script and its realization on stage, *The Boys in the Band* commented on realism as a constructed/constructing art form from a gay perspective. In effect, the production "camped" on realism.

Camp was a powerful tool of surviving the Cold War closet of homosexuality. Camp was a defense mechanism and, to those who understood the codes, a signifier of gayness. In "Notes on Camp" (1964), Susan Sontag describes camp as "something of a private code, a badge of identity, even among urban cliques" that is arguably queer. With its emphasis on artifice and exaggeration, camp and "its metaphor of life as theater [was] peculiarly suited as a justification and projection of a certain aspect of the situation of homosexuals," specifically the moral indignation they encounter in society at large.[17]

Camp refuses to accept things as they seem, celebrates artifice above naturalness, and approaches cultural texts as holding double meanings to create alternative ways of seeing.

As a producer, Richard Barr understood that the camp elements in *The Boys in the Band* would engender different reactions than the official interpretations sanctioned by the critical establishment. When the production transferred from an Off-Off Broadway to an Off-Broadway house, Barr decided against inviting reviewers to the opening night performance. Reviewers attended a preview performance the night before so backers, friends, and family members could relax and enjoy the production. Barr also wanted to ensure that "word of mouth in the homosexual world" spread. The strategy paid off. Barr recalls: "It was quite an opening night. Cliff Gorman [as Emory] came flying down the stairs with his show-stopping line: 'Who do you have to fuck to get a drink around here?' and the riot began. The audience loved it, and inevitably spread the word."[18] Combined with generally positive reviews, the enthusiastic word of mouth made the Off-Broadway transfer a sold-out hit.[19]

Barr's concerns about the impact that the presence of reviewers might have on audiences proved well founded. If reviewers once focused their energies on identifying homosexual traces within the text, they now turned a critical eye to identifying a homosexual presence in the audience. In his review, George Oppenheimer mentions a disruptive element from a "less than male" group in the audience: "Unhappily, on a preview last night a portion of the audience with its shrill shrieks at the most obvious references did its best to spoil the first act, while the author resorted to a far-fetched and unbelievable device to mar the second." [20] Similarly, Richard Watts, Jr. condemned the gay response as inappropriate:

> [M]ost of the spectators appeared to regard it as the merriest of larks, and I think they were being unfair to it. Some of its characters and incidents are amusing, particularly if you care for that type of humor. Yet it is basically a sad and rather wistful play, and it certainly has no truck with the theory that the third sex—"queens," "queers," and "fags" it would prefer to call them—lead happy and carefree lives. A more melancholy group of young brooders you could hardly expect to meet.[21]

Watt co-opts the discourse of camp so it functions not as a critique of homophobia but as a symptom of the homosexual's unhappy lot. Camp as a discourse associated with the closet demonstrates the effects of homophobia and heterosexism on individual gay men rather than intervening into their social causes. Because the camp subject cannot control the field of representation, as that field has already been defined as heterosexual, camp lends itself to co-option and assimilation.

Realism, in contrast, is a highly assimilative form that, in reinscribing the dominant order, turns social critiques onto themselves. Elin Diamond writes that realism is less a category of generic classification than a reception strategy in which spectators identify what they see on stage as truth. According to Diamond, realism "produces 'reality' by positioning its spectators to recognize and verify its truths. Naturalizing the relationship between character and actor, setting and world, realism's project is always ideological, drawing spectators into identifications with its coherent fictions. It is through such identifications that realism surreptitiously reinforces (even if it argues with) the social arrangements of the society it claims to mirror."[22]

By reading *The Boys in the Band* through the conventions of realism, reviewers focused on how truthfully the stage production represented what reviewers believed was the world of the homosexual. Barnes described the production as "frank" and "honest"; George Oppenheimer found it "highly perceptive."[23] Helen Kruger, in her review for the *Chelsea Clinton News*, characterized *The Boys in the Band* as "an honest glimpse into the chic, campy, world of the East Side homosexual," which in the end is "a brittle empty world, plagued by jealousy and self-loathing."[24] Such reviews overlooked the possibility of approaching the production ironically (i.e., reading the production through a camp lens), naturalizing the staging as a true and honest representation that, in the end, served heterosexual ideology.

The cultural specifics embodied in the production quickly and easily were erased to demonstrate that humans are not different but basically the same. Clive Barnes championed *The Boys in the Band* as "a play that takes the homosexual milieu, and the homosexual way of life, totally for granted and uses this as a valid basis of human experience." To this end, the play "remorselessly peels away the pretensions of its characters and reveals pessimism so uncompromising in its honesty that it becomes in itself an affirmation of life."[25] Barnes effectively underscores the universalizing ideology of liberal humanism that founds American realism and, as Dolan notes, reconstructs difference as sameness. The interpretation of *The Boys in the Band* as an American tragedy gained credibility through the endorsement of the production by Walter Kerr, then the chief drama critic for the *New York Times.* "The party is not a party," Kerr writes, "it is a gathering of self-contained isolates, easy in their separate orbits." Kerr rhetorically marks the gay figures as isolated individuals representing the

different types of homosexuals, only to erase the difference among them to claim an inherent sameness among them: "They are one and all different and one and all the same."[26]

In claiming *The Boys in the Band* as a universalizing affirmation of life, reviewers characterized the homosexual world as emotionally dead. Despite the great lengths that Crowley went to create a narrative outside realism's deadly narratives, cultural watchdogs imposed an interpretation on *The Boys in the Band* that associated homosexuality with a death drive. Richard Watts writes, for example: "[T]he viewpoint is underlined more definitely by a statement from the host that I repeat from memory. He says perhaps excessively but approximately, 'Show me a happy fag and I'll show you a dead queen.' And assuredly all the characters in the play, including the most outwardly outrageous, are living lives of unquiet desperation."[27] Watts's memory is not entirely accurate. The line to which he refers actually reads: "Show me a happy homosexual and I'll show you a gay corpse." Nathan Cohen picked up on the line as well, accurately quoting it to conclude that "what began as an unapologetic presentation of homosexuality as a way of life turns out in the second act to be a sentimental dissertation about loneliness and the ordeal of being human."[28]

To serve their respective interpretations, Watts and Cohen ignore the context of the scene in which Michael speaks the line. In its entirety the line reads: "Who was it that used to always say, 'You show me a happy homosexual, and I'll show you a gay corpse?"' (393). The rhetorical question points to an unidentified speaker who, in terms of the line and the production's reception, is key to understanding the negotiation of meanings. Just as the meaning of the line depends on the intonation of its delivery, the

defining attribute of *The Boys in the Band* depends on the change in emphasis made by the spectator. Who is speaking and for what purpose are key questions in the negotiation of meanings. As a question, the line rhetorically suggests that death is not an inevitability for gay men. As a declarative statement, the line perpetuates realism's claim that the only good homosexual is a dead one.

A *New York Times* advertisement for the published script illustrates the extent to which mainstream reception of *The Boys in the Band* equated homosexuality and death. On 7 November 1968, Farrar, Straus & Giroux ran a full-page advertisement in the obituary section of the *Times*. The phrase "You show me a happy homosexual, and I'll show you a gay corpse" served as the banner headline. The copy read: "In *The Boys in the Band*, Mart Crowley introduces us to eight happy homosexuals. Then, with surgical precision he reveals their inner corpses." The advertisement suggests that, at their core, gay men are dead. Their lives are a negative example that allows readers the chance to affirm their own lives. But whose life gets affirmed depends on who's speaking.

The late 1960s and early 1970s were a period of rapid cultural and political change in the United States. David Savran notes in *Taking It Like a Man* that the rise of the black civil rights, women's liberation, gay liberation, and antiwar movements, combined with the waning economic boom of the post-World War II economy, put the patriarchal institution of heterosexuality on the defensive.[29] In response to *The Boys in the Band*, the best defense was an aggressive offense that positioned heterosexuality as normal and homosexuality as abnormal. The interpretative strategy appears in, among other places, the shifts in Clive Barnes's reception of the play. Barnes was the only reviewer to write about *The Boys in the Band* on multiple occasions. Initially finding the

play a “frank” and “honest” production, Barnes in his second review claims he was disturbed by the play’s “campily hysterical tone.” It’s a “tragic play about wasted lives,” he writes, questioning whether the play is even accurate: “I should have imagined that a well-adjusted homosexual stood as much a chance as a heterosexual. Certainly among my friends and acquaintances there are homosexuals who are neither alcoholic, neurotic nor pathetic, and if they are not as happy as everyone else, they are putting on a remarkably good act.”[30]

While rapid political and cultural changes put the institution of heterosexuality on the defensive, the advances made by the gay liberation movement invited gay men to reconsider their relationship to cultural practices like camp and texts like *The Boys in the Band*. The Stonewall riots symbolically marked a threshold for the gay liberation movement. The increased visibility experienced by lesbians and gay men during the late 1960s and early 1970s gave larger numbers access to lesbian and gay subcultures. At the same time, that accessibility transformed homosexuality into a lifestyle that could be commercially marketed. In 1970, members of the Gay Liberation Front (GLF) protested the Hollywood premiere of *The Boys in the Band* for its one-sided representation of homosexuality. Vito Russo points to the protest as the “first public reaction” of the post-Stonewall gay rights movement and to the film as the beginning of Hollywood’s representation of homosexuals as freaks.[31]

The marketing of the stage production of *The Boys in the Band* was also called into question by members of the nascent gay community. Donn Teal questioned the decision of A&M Records to immortalize *The Boys in the Band* as a recorded voice play rather than Tom Stoppard’s *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* (1967) or Neil

Simon's *Plaza Suite* (1968). Teal feared that the record studio was profiting from an unfair representation of homosexuality. "Many homosexuals can find a bit of their story and struggle in Michael, Harold, and Emory. And though we have overcome we can nevertheless sympathize . . . with a defenseless Michael, trembling and weeping in his friends arms, in one of the most affecting conclusions in recent history," Teal writes. But

> we are angry still that an ugly representation has been broadcast by an excellent play. If, however, audiences can gain a deeper understanding of the *minority* of homosexuals represented by Michael, Harold, and Emory, and if, above all, legislators can be persuaded to take steps to legalize male/male and female/female adult sexual relationships in this country, then Crowley would deserve not only our accolades but even the adulation of the world he has so one-track-mindedly described.[32]

Teal's criticism echoes the concerns raised by the GLF protest of the film. Although the play has some insightful moments, it remains a single view of a complex world, and any one-sided presentation of a social group, the argument went, is a form of bigotry.

Cultural and political forces adversely affected the reception and, ultimately, the reputation of *The Boys in the Band*. In 1970, in his third and final review of the production, Barnes argued that the increased cultural visibility of gay men made *The Boys in the Band* a "period piece": "I do not believe that all homosexuals are nearly as miserable as Mr. Crowley would have us believe. Some of my best friends are homosexual, and basically neither sadder nor gladder than my heterosexual friends. At least most of the former don't have to worry whether their children are going to become dope addicts."[33] Not only does Barnes conclude that homosexuals have adjusted to

society, he stops short of saying that gay liberation is a call for special rights. Barnes presumes that the issues raised by *The Boys in the Band* no longer were topical, relegating the production and the world it represents to another time and place.

The Off-Broadway production of *The Boys in the Band* closed in September 1970 after a run of 1,001 performances. Except for college and community theatre productions, the play fell into relative obscurity, its reputation based more on the controversy surrounding the film than its stage production. It would be twenty-six years before *The Boys in the Band* would enjoy a professional New York production.

The Boys in the Band: 1996

The 1996 revival of *The Boys in the Band* by the WPA Theatre occurred at a time of heightened queer theatrical production. If homosexuality was an unwelcome subject in American theatre during the 1960s, it was a familiar presence in the 1990s. Broadway plays and musicals such as Tony Kushner's *Angels in America* (1993), Terrence McNally's *Love! Valour! Compassion!* (1996), *Kiss of the Spider Woman* (1994), *Rent* (1996), *Victor/Victoria* (1995), and the revival of *Cabaret* (1997) featured explicitly gay situations and characters. Off-Broadway mirrored the trend with comedies such as Paul Rudnick's *Jeffrey* (1992) and *The Most Fabulous Story Ever Told* (1998), the (auto)biographical performances of *Frasier*'s Dan Butler (and later Olympian Greg Louganis) in *The Only Worse Thing You Could Have Told Me . . .* (1995) and Colin Martin in *Virgins and Other Myths* (1999), the documentary theatre of the Tectonic Theatre's *Gross Indecencies: The Three Trials of Oscar Wilde* (1998), and the softcore titillations of David Dillon's *Party* (1995) and Ronnie Larsen's *Making Porn* (1996) and

Naked Boys Singing (1997). Though not inclusive, these productions illustrate the representational diversity in gay male theatre during the mid-1990s.

The revival of *The Boys in the Band* opened the twentieth season of the WPA Theatre, an Off-Broadway company dedicated to producing new American works as well as neglected American classics. Throughout its history, the WPA has regularly produced works by gay male writers, most notably Tennessee Williams's *Vieux Carre* (1983) and *The Milk Train Doesn't Stop Here Anymore* (1987), Paul Rudnick's *The Naked Truth* (1994) and *Jeffrey* (1993), and Charles Busch's *The Lady in Question* (1988) and *Red Scare on Sunset* (1991).[34] Unlike the original production, which featured an ensemble of virtually unknown performers, the WPA's revival of *The Boys in the Band* featured three established and openly gay performers in the leading roles of Michael, Harold, and Emory: David Drake (*The Night Larry Kramer Kissed Me*), David Greenspan (*Dead Mother, or Shirley Not in Vain*), and David Lecesne (*Word of Mouth*), respectively. The production was directed by Kenneth Elliott, long associated with the WPA as Charles Busch's director.

Elliott's ongoing collaborations with Charles Busch influenced Elliott's approach to *The Boys in the Band*. Busch's performances are camp send-ups of Hollywood films from the 1940s, 1950s, and 1960s in which Busch plays the female lead. Much of the humor in Busch's drag comes from a cursory knowledge of the performances he is citing. Elliott approached *The Boys in the Band* as if it were a Charles Busch production, finding opportunities to camp it up even if it came at the cost of the dramatic action. For example, Greenspan's Obie-winning performance as Harold steals the second act.

Greenspan milks every line he can for a laugh, creating a standout performance that detracts from a sense of ensemble among the actors.

But Elliott's experience as Busch's director influenced his take on *The Boys in the Band* in another significant way: its approach to history. Early in rehearsals, Elliott discovered that many of the actors were unfamiliar with the cultural allusions made in the text. Some of the performers pronounced the "Bette" in "Bette Davis" as if it were "Bette" in "Bette Midler." As an educational tool, Eliot had a friend make a "training film" composed of film clips and music from the period. Bits from the film can be seen in the impersonations of Bette Davis and Ann-Margret incorporated into the Fire Island dance performed by Michael, Emory, Larry, and Bernard. The historical research influenced other production elements, from the two-story set representing an Upper East Side Manhattan apartment furnished with slick mid-century furniture, the detailed period costumes and hairstyles, and the use of period music to set the mood before and during the production.

Publicity for the production emphasized the historical significance of the revival. Reviewers seized the opportunity to determine whether *The Boys in the Band* has stood the test of time. Every review addressed the troubled history surrounding *The Boys in the Band*. For example, in his review for the *New York Times,* Ben Brantley leads with the conclusion: "It's O.K. to like *The Boys the Band* again." The proclamation resolves the controversial history of the stage and film versions, suggesting that the source of the controversy was a demand for political correctness. For Brantley, however: "The bigger more important question is how it's survived the test of time." The answer is "surprising." For starters, he writes, "the play's most notorious stereotype, a sashaying

decorator [Emory], turns out to be far spunkier and braver than anyone remembered." But, overall, *The Boys in the Band* is "a fairly creaky piece of craftsmanship, a piece of dramatic literature neatly tailored to a fault and far too intent on explaining itself."[35] John Simon from *New York* magazine similarly maintains that the larger issue raised by the revival is "how old does a play not good enough to be a classic have to be for a legitimate theatre piece?" For Simon, "the changed status of homosexuals makes quite a bit of it seemed dated" and didactic. There are "too many times when the stage becomes a chart, and the writing a pointer."[36] *Newsday*'s Jonathan Mandell suggests that the most shocking thing about this "competent" production is that the experience represented in the play "could ever have been real."[37] Jan Stuart, also from *Newsday*, points to the presence of a male couple holding hands in the audience as a sign of progress, while the debates about same-sex marriage and gays in the military suggests that "self-loathing is still a very valid lifestyle choice in 1996."[38]

Although reviewers disagreed on how *The Boys in the Band* speaks to contemporary audiences, they all relied on a linear model of historical progress that positions the present as an improvement on the past. Social progress is a more complicated process than this historical model allows for. In terms of gay politics, for example, John D'Emilio writes that "change has come in the form of alternating cycles of what might colloquially be described as leaping and creeping."[39] Bursts of activity such as the few years following the Stonewall riots or the 1987 March on Washington are followed by periods of institution-building that lay the groundwork for the next leap forward. The danger with a linear model of progressive development is the tendency to ignore the work that needs to be done in the present.

While drama critics in the 1990s seem more open to gay issues, they shared the perspective of their predecessors that the play is a period piece, a time capsule of a bygone era in which the problems addressed by the play have been resolved through mainstream integration. Brantley writes, for example, that the "picture perfect" sets and costumes "underscore an easy feeling of anthropological distance." Indeed, the historical chasm between 1968 and 1996 allows straight audiences to experience gay culture from a safe distance. Brantley contrasts the revival with *Party*, an Off-Broadway comedy that, like *The Boys in the Band*, uses a party game to strip away pretenses (literally, in the case of *Party*, as all the performers are naked by the end of the performance). Brantley contends: "What attracted the noncult, nongay audience to *Party* will be what draws straight theatregoers to *Boys.* Both works provide a window on an insular life style, replete with checklists of gay mating habits, gay apparel, gay dance styles and, most important, gay wit. It can all feel a bit like visiting the safari park at Great Adventure."[40] A safari park is a simulation of a safari in which visitors view animals in their "natural" habitats from the safety and comfort of their cars. Similarly, when it comes to gay representations like *The Boys in the Band*, straight spectators experience gay culture from the safety of their seats in front of the proscenium arch. Their enjoyment requires little effort, and the process requires no interaction with "real" individuals or identification with the lives represented on stage (much the same way, as noted in the previous chapter, that *Rent*'s white liberal audience experience the East Village without ever having to visit it).

Up until this point, I have focused only on the dominant interpretative strategies made available to straight audiences. I now would like to turn my attention to the

response of the gay press to the revival of *The Boys in the Band* to see how the interpretative strategies generated by gay publications differ from those found in mainstream publications. When *The Boys in the Band* opened in 1968, a national gay media did not exist outside the handful of publications produced by homophile organizations. By 1995, however, an estimated 2,608 gay lifestyle publications existed in the United States.[41] The gay press unarguably has been a key factor in imagining a national lesbian and gay community. In *Selling Out*, Alexandra Chasin writes that "the national gay community came into being through the imagined comradeship of gay men and lesbians reading an increasingly commercial gay press."[42] Chasin notes that the national gay press has become increasingly associated with white gay men, in large part because they tend to be ones with the disposable incomes that have come to define the gay niche market. As a result, the national gay press positions white gay men as proxies for a larger and more diverse community. "It is the white-dominated gay male press that has effectively constructed images of a national gay community," explains Chasin, "and it is that press that is most intimately related to correspondingly dominant strains in the political movement" which takes assimilation as its ultimate goal.[43]

One of the results of its uncritical support for the politics of gay mainstreaming is that the national gay press tends to identify with the larger cultural mainstream. This certainly was the case in terms of the critical reception of the WPA's revival of *The Boys in the Band*. In his review for *The Advocate* (the most widely-circulated gay publication in the United States), Dick Scanlan writes that the revival "vindicates this often vilified play." Scanlan suggests that, although the play's racist humor is no longer acceptable because of the changed social status of African Americans, the "gay jokes still play."[44]

The changed social status of gay Americans is presumed but never considered as a factor in how *The Boys in the Band* plays for contemporary audiences. If, as Scanlan suggests, humor is a reflection of a specific era, why do the gay jokes transcend time? The answer may have less to do with the position of gay men in mainstream society and more with a desire to forget the marginalized position of people of color within the national gay community.

Gregory Young takes up the issue of difference within the gay community in his review for *HX* magazine, a weekly gay entertainment guide circulated in bars throughout New York City. Like mainstream reviewers, Young relies on a linear model of social progress to suggest that the revival "draws attention to the intensity of Crowley's words and the differences between the play's twisted folk and the audience watching it." One of the most significant differences for Young is a celebration of difference within the gay community: "Today . . . the gay scene is openly and proudly polarized within itself; one need only observe this week's Pride March to see a totally united group celebrating its diversity."[45] New York City's annual Pride March historically has been a divisive event, with organizers and participants often at odds over how to represent diverse queer communities. Increasingly, the issue has been resolved through the presentation of a homogenized and commercialized version of the gay life, culminating in a street fair not that different from ones found in the city during the rest of the year.

In a keynote delivered at the 1995 Queer Theater conference sponsored by the Center for Lesbian and Gay Studies, Brian Freeman spoke to the invisibility of queers of color in representations such as *The Boys in the Band*. Freeman was a founding member of Pomo Afro Homos, a San Francisco-based performance group whose critique of

racism in gay communities and homophobia in African American communities I discuss in greater detail in the next chapter. Although Freeman's remarks occurred before the 1996 revival staged by the WPA, they address the limitations of the visibility celebrated by Young and Scanlan. "Seeing *Boys in the Band*, even in the campy film version, was the first time I saw gay people in pop culture—us—talking about our lives in our vocabulary," Freeman says. "But then and now there is that not-so-fabulous question: Who is us? Black artists, my guys, my community, and me?"[46]

Freeman's question exposes the whiteness of *The Boys in the Band* that goes unmarked in most gay male performances. But Freeman also raises an important issue regarding audience response and identification. How do we respond to texts like *The Boys in the Band* when we don't see a reflection of ourselves, when the interpretative strategies available to us are limited and not reflective of our community, either the one we live in or the ones we imagine? *The Boys in the Band* raised similar questions in 1968, challenging the stigmatization of gay men in the commercial theatre with an unapologetically gay representation of urban gay lifestyles. But the legacy of *The Boys in the Band* for contemporary gay theatre is not whether the original production offered a sympathetic representation of gay men or whether the play stands the test of time. Instead, *The Boys in the Band* illustrates how theatricality exposes the ideological function of cultural representation, even in highly assimilative forms like realism, and, in turn, how a self-conscious theatre might be used by gay men to interrogate differences amongst ourselves.

Notes

[1]Don Shewey, "Gay Theatre: Gays in the Marketplace vs. Gays for Themselves," in *Lavender Culture,* ed. Karla Jay and Allen Young, rev. ed. (New York: New York University Press, 1994), 231.

[2]Charles Cole Lehman, "In Tune with *Boys in the Band*," *New York Times,* 10 May 1992, 2:4.

[3]Robert Ristelheuber, "A Message with Little Hope," *New York Times,* 30 June 1996, 2:37.

[4]I attended the WPA Theatre's production of *The Boys in the Band* in July 1996. The production was remounted at the Lucille Lortel Theatre and videorecorded for the New York Public Library's Theatre on Film Archive.

[5]Scott Bravmann, *Queer Fictions of the Past: History, Culture, and Difference* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 4.

[6]Marvin Carlson, *The Haunted Stage: The Theatre as Memory Machine* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2003), 2.

[7]David Savran, *A Queer Sort of Materialism: Recontextualizing American Theater* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2003), 94.

[8]For a survey of how gays and lesbians were represented on stage in the twentieth century, see Alan Sinfield, *Out on Stage: Lesbian and Gay Theatre in the Twentieth Century* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999).

[9]For more detailed discussions, see Robert J. Corber, *Homosexuality in Cold War America: Resistance and the Crisis of Masculinity* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1997) and Lee Edelman, "Tearooms and Sympathy, or, The Epistemology of the Water Closet," in *The Lesbian and Gay Studies Reader* ed. Henry Abelove, Michèle Aina Barale, and David M. Halperin (New York: Routledge, 1993), 553-76.

[10]Stanley Kauffmann, "Homosexual Drama and Its Disguises," *New York Times,* 23 January 1966.

[11]In *Communists, Cowboys, and Queers: The Politics of Masculinity in the Work of Arthur Miller and Tennessee Williams* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1992), David Savran writes that critics like Kauffmann "assume that the gay writer, who allegedly produces only more of his own gender and his own sexuality, is in essence unlike the straight writer, who, it would seem, can construct the characters who are authentically either heterosexual or homosexual (they would never dream of suggesting that the suspected homosexual liaison in Robert Anderson's *Tea and Sympathy* is, in fact, a furtive heterosexual couple in disguise!). They also seem to harken back to the nineteenth-century figuration of homosexuality as 'sexual inversion' as the trapping of the soul of one gender in the body of its 'opposite'" (116).

[12]Kauffmann.

[13]Mart Crowley, *The Boys in the Band*, in *Famous American Plays of the 1960s*, ed. Harold Clurman (New York: Dell, 1972), 390-91. All subsequent references will hereafter be cited within the text.

[14]Richard Barr, *You Have to Hawk Your House: The Story of a Producer* [unpublished manuscript], 321. I am grateful to David Crespy for sharing this resource with me.

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

[16]Jill Dolan, *Presence and Desire: Essays on Gender, Sexuality, Performance* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1993), 112.

[17]Susan Sontag, "Notes on Camp," in *Against Interpretation* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1990); reprinted in *Camp: Queer Aesthetics and the Performing Subject: A Reader*, ed. Fabio Cleto (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1999), 64 (page reference to reprint edition).

[18]Barr, 322.

[19]Because ticket scalpers were able to sell tickets at an exorbitant price, Barr raised the regular ticket price to $10.00. At the time, the average price of a ticket to a Broadway play was $7.50.

[20]George Oppenheimer, "On Stage," *Newsday*, 15 April 1968.

[21]Richard Watts, Jr., "A Birthday Celebration Among the Homosexuals," *New York Post*, 15 April 1968, 53.

[22]Elin Diamond, "The Violence of 'We': Politicizing Identification," in *Critical Theory and Performance*, ed. Janelle G. Reinelt and Joseph R. Roach (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1992), 393.

[23]Barnes; Oppenheimer.

[24]Helen Kruger, "Theatre: *The Boys in the Band*," *Chelsea Clinton News*, 5 September 1968, 8.

[25]Barnes.

[26]Walter Kerr, "To Laugh at Oneself—Or Cry," *New York Times*, 28 April 1968.

[27]Watts.

[28]Nathan Cohen, "Homosexuality Gets a Candid Look in *Boys in the Band,"* *Toronto Daily Star,* 4 May 1968.

[29]David Savran, *Taking It Like a Man: White Masculinity, Masochism, and Contemporary American Culture* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998).

[30]Clive Barnes, "*The Boys in the Band* is Still a Sad Gay Romp," *New York Times*, 19 February 1969.

[31]Vito Russo, *The Celluloid Closet: Homosexuality in the* Movies, rev. ed. (New York: Harper & Row, 1987), 177.

[32]Donn Teal, "How Anguished Are Homosexuals?" *New York Times* [citation incomplete]. Clippings File. Billy Rose Theatre Collection, New York Public Library. Emphasis in original.

[33]Clive Barnes, "Stage: Birthday for *Boys in the Band," New York Times,* 19 April 1970, 34.

[34]The 1996-1997 season was a particularly queer one. In addition to *The Boys in the Band*, the WPA produced Williams's *Red Devil Battery Sign* (1996), Busch's *Flipping My Wig* (1997), and *Fairy Tales* (1997), a musical revue imported from the Duplex Cabaret in Greenwich Village (which regularly stages gay works).

[35]Ben Brantley, "As the Boys Return, The Party Isn't Over," *New York Times,* 21 June 1996, C3.

[36]John Simon, "Theater," *New York,* 8 July 1996, 51.

[37]Jonathan Mandell, "Gay Life in the Bad Old Days of 1968," *Newsday*, 21 June 1996, B15.

[38]Jan Stuart, "*The Boys* Are Back and Still Too Relevant," *Newsday*, 21 July 1996, C18.

[39]John D'Emilio, "Cycles of Change, Questions of Strategy The Gay and Lesbian Movement after Fifty Years," in *The Politics of Gay Rights*, ed. Craig A. Rimmerman, Kenneth D. Wald, and Clyde Wilcox (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 42.

[40]Brantley.

[41]See Rodger Streitmatter, *Unspeakable: The Rise of the Gay and Lesbian Press in America* (New York: Farrar Straus & Giroux, 1995).

[42]Alexandra Chasin, *Selling Out: The Gay and Lesbian Movement Goes to Market* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2000), 92.

[43]Ibid., 62.

[44]Dick Scanlan, "Band of Gold," *The Advocate*, 9 July 1996.

[45]Gregory Young, "Drama Queen," *HX Magazine*, 5 July 1996, 55.

[46]Brian Freeman, "When We Were Warriors," in *The Queerest Art: Essays on Lesbian and Gay Theater*, ed Alisa Solomon and Framji Minwalla (New York: New York University Press, 2002), 252.

CHAPTER THREE

ATTENDING WALT WHITMAN HIGH:

POMO AFRO HOMOS'S *DARK FRUIT*

Pomo Afro Homos (Postmodern African-American Homosexuals) was a San Francisco-based performance group founded in November 1990 by Brian Freeman, Djola Bernard Branner, and Eric Gupton. The company grew out of the support group "Black Gay Men United," whose twenty-some members included the late filmmaker Marlon Riggs (1957-1994). Riggs's *Tongues Untied* (1991), a cinematic exploration of the complexities of urban gay black life, inspired Freeman, Branner, and Gupton to form their own ensemble.[1] In January 1991, the Pomos debuted *Fierce Love: Stories from Black Gay Life* at Josie's Cabaret and Juice Joint, a performance space in San Francisco's Castro District known for producing queer work. The Pomos toured Seattle, Chicago, and Los Angeles with the production before receiving an invitation from George C. Wolfe to appear as part of *Moving Beyond the Margins: A Festival of New Voices* at the Joseph Papp Public Theater in New York. *Dark Fruit*, the group's second and only other collaboration, received a workshop production at the Public, 14 December 1991. During the next four years, *Fierce Love* and *Dark Fruit* played in repertory throughout the United States and Great Britain. In 1993, Marvin K. White joined the company during Gupton's sabbatical from the group. Pomo Afro Homos officially disbanded in 1995 so its members could pursue individual projects.[2]

Although its existence as a performance company was short-lived, Pomos Afro Homos occupies an important place in the history of contemporary gay male performance. The 1990s witnessed a virtual explosion of cultural activities by

politically-engaged artists of color who created new and generative understandings of identity and community. *Fierce Love* and *Dark Fruit*, in particular, staked out a place for theatre in the project of re-imagining political communities in the United States. Whereas *Fierce Love*, according to Freeman, was a "warm and cuddly show," *Dark Fruit* was "more about ambivalence and things that are not right within [their] community and the larger communities [the Pomos] travel through."[3] Insofar as its seven sketches ("Aunties in America: Epiphanies 'n Roaches," "Last Rights," "Black and Gay: A Psycho-Sex Study," "Sweet Sadie," "Doin' Alright," "Tasty," and "Chocolate City, U.S.A.") reflect a desire for a cultural space that "intersects with both the black community and the larger white gay community,"[4] *Dark Fruit* provides an opportunity to read through the debates that characterized identity politics in the 1990s and to explore how theatre contributes to the project of re-imagining political communities.[5]

Identity politics was an "issue" in the 1990s because of the crisis of agency that Kobena Mercer associates with an "atomistic and essentialist logic . . . in which differences are dealt with one-at-a-time and which therefore ignores the conflicts and contradictions that arise in relation *within* and *between* the various movements, agents, and actors in contemporary forms of democratic antagonism."[6] The multicultural mantra of "race, class, gender" values difference through the creation of a representational economy in which all identities trade equally. This so-called "Rainbow theory" of multiculturalism feeds a pluralistic impulse in which categories of identification are predetermined and unchangeable, overlooking the intersection of various factors in the construction of social and political identities as well as the negotiability of any identity claim.

Dark Fruit challenges the implicit heterosexism of African American identity politics as well as the implicit whiteness of gay identity politics through the cultural practice of signifying. Building on the work of Henry Louis Gates, Jr., Geneva Smitherman, and Mary Helen Washington, Charles Nero claims signifying as a cultural practice among gay black men that makes its critique through an indirect form of address.[7] Nero quotes Smitherman to suggest that effective signifying is "to put somebody in check . . . to make them think about it and, one hopes, correct their behavior."[8] Signifying is a communal practice to the extent that its indirect address, if it is to have meaning, requires a direct knowledge a community's vernacular. To this end, signifying contributes the project of community-building, first and foremost, by giving voice to gay black men and by forcing community members to look critically at themselves. Within the gay male community, the challenge is to recognize how whiteness operates in support of a politics of mainstreaming.

In *White*, Richard Dyer discusses the challenge of locating the operations of whiteness in cultural representations. Whiteness is riddled with paradoxes. "White must be seen to be white," Dyer explains, "yet whiteness as race resides in invisible properties and whiteness as power is maintained by being unseen. To be seen as white is to have one's corporeality registered, yet true whiteness resides in the non-corporeal."[9] *Dark Fruit* challenges the pervasiveness of whiteness in cultural representations of gay men by rendering it visible, demonstrating how the corporeality of performance can be used to expose and resist the unseen workings of whiteness as power.

Dark Fruit opens with "Aunties in America," an imagined conversation among the black gay characters from three critically acclaimed Broadway productions: Belize

from *Angels in America* (1992-93), Paul from *Six Degrees of Separation* (1990), and Jacob from *La Cage aux Folles* (1983). After describing their respective relationships with Missy Kushner, Missy Guare, and Missy Fierstein, the three figures don kerchiefs to transform themselves into stereotypical "mammies." *Dark Fruit*, in turn, closes with "Chocolate City, U.S.A." in which the performers read a litany of letters addressed to institutions like the African American church, activist organizations like ACT-UP, Queer Nation, and Gay Men's Health Crisis (GMHC), and cultural figures from Leonard Jeffries and Magic Johnson, to Bill and Hilary Clinton. The letters protest the failure of society at large to acknowledge the presence of black male homosexuality as well the effect of the AIDS pandemic on gay black men. At the end of the piece, the Pomos throw the letters into the air as Tina Turner's "We Don't Need Another Hero" plays over the sound system. Together "Aunties in America" and "Chocolate City, U.S.A." frame the production's larger interest in exploring how representations of gay men generally are marked "white" and how representations of African Americans generally are marked "straight." If gay black men are represented at all, the Pomos suggest, it usually is as stereotypical figures like mammies.

"Aunties in America" challenges a gay politic in which assimilation is the ultimate goal. Despite the claims of openness and inclusion that frequently characterize the rhetoric of gay male politics, gay male subcultures too often reproduce the privileging and oppressive structures of the dominant culture. As a result, write Isaac Julien and Kobena Mercer, black men are "often implicated in the same landscape of stereotypes in the gay subculture, which is dominated by the needs and demands of white males."[10] The Pomos explore the workings of this dynamic through its engagement of Tony

Kushner's *Angels in America*, the award-winning cycle that, in many ways, was a watershed moment in gay theatre during the 1990s. In *Angels in America*, Belize is a supporting character, whose roles as faithful friend, surrogate mother, and nurturing caregiver transform him into what the Pomos describe as a desexed mammy. For some critics, Belize lacks specificity as an individual. David Román writes, for example, that, "of all the major characters [in *Angels in America*], Belize seems to lack an interiority. We mainly see him in relation to the other characters, who are all white, never quite getting a sense of his inner life or outer journey."[11] Belize arguably carries the burden of being the sole representative of racial difference. He sums up his predicament in *Perestroika*: "I am trapped in a world of white people. That's *my* problem."[12] In the published text, the line occurs following a series of recognitions in which Prior identifies Joe as Harper's "gay" husband, and Joe identifies Belize as Roy Cohn's nurse. "We all look alike to you," Belize tells Joe in attempt to hide behind the mask of racial stereotypes.[13] As staged in George C. Wolfe's Broadway production, Belize literally hides behind a scarf, which he finally drops to comment on his role in the drama.[14]

In his performance as Belize in the Pomos's "Aunties in America," Brian Freeman takes up the mask of racial stereotypes. This time, however, the mask gives the performer license to comment more extensively on the whiteness of *Angels in America*. The scene opens with Belize's reenactment of the angel's entrance at the end of *Millennium Approaches.* He then describes the appearance of what, in Kushner's text, represents the divine "Continental Principality of America": "The *last* Miss Ann Angel: white dress, white wings, white halo, white attitude, white everything—looks like a flying igloo. Miss Thing comes crashing through the ceiling."[15] The description points

to the whiteness of the angel as well as to the whiteness of *Angels in America* more generally. For example, Paul and Jacob wonder why the angel crashes through the ceiling rather than using the front door. "You know white folks," says Belize. "Then everywhere you look feathers, plasters, epiphanies, and roaches." Paul asks, "Now who's going to clean that up?" (324) Belize looks at him, not having to answer. After all, they know white folks.

Through "Aunties in America," the Pomos suggest that the pervasiveness of whiteness in plays like *Angels in America* renders it invisible as a particularizing quality. Nor is *Angels in America* an isolated example. Kate Davy writes in her discussion of the W.O.W. Cafe that whiteness is endemic to lesbian and gay performance because "Performing sexuality *excessively* as an oppositional strategy . . . depends on racial encoding."[16] Davy argues that lesbian and gay culture reproduces hegemonic structures and values, specifically the values of white middle-class respectability, in part because of the constant revaluing of assimilation as the goal of the lesbian and gay cultural movement. As the lesbian and gay movement struggles with the politics of visibility, it must ask itself what remains invisible in the quest for recognition and respectability. The challenge is to make whiteness seen, to give it corporeal presence so its power can be demystified.

In *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics*, José Esteban Muñoz suggests that one of the ways that artists of color resist the normalizing effects of assimilation is through the act of disidentification:

> Disidentification is about recycling and rethinking encoded meaning. The process of disidentification scrambles and reconstructs the encoded

> meaning's universalizing and exclusionary machinations and recreates its workings to account for, include, and empower minority identities and identifications. Thus, disidentification is a step further than cracking open the code of the majority; it proceeds to use this code as raw material for representing a disempowered politic or positionality that has been rendered unthinkable by the dominant culture.[17]

Muñoz focuses on disidentification as a mode of performance, but disidentification, I believe, can also be used to understand a mode of reception in which spectators use performance to recycle and rethink the dominant culture meanings encoded in the representation before them. In the case of *Dark Fruit*, the Pomos recycle the very images that disempower gay black men, find agency by seizing control of the discourse, and provide spectators the opportunity to move beyond the atomistic and essentialist logic of identity politics.

With "Aunties in America," the Pomos expose the operations of whiteness by talking back to the roles scripted for gay black men. "Missy Kushner has me up there every night reading those kids' asses or wiping their butts," says Belize. "It's all the same to me. In part two I get to wipe Roy Cohn's butt. Find an epiphany in that!" (324) Paul (Branner) similarly finds his fate in *Six Degrees of Separation* lacking as an epiphany, describing himself as "some kind of Hattie McDaniels meets Mandingo biotech fruit." First he has to feed them, then he has to fuck them. "Do I look like some anecdote to dine out on to you?" (324) Jacob (White) is trapped in a world of dinner theatre productions of *La Cage* that puts him through a "Butterfly French Maid McQueen" routine eight times a week: "I can live with the eye bugging and noble

caretaker nonsense. But, children, it hurts my pride so bad, night after night, to put on heels and have to walk around like the last Steppin' Jungle Bunny Fetchit!" They all agree that "a black drag queen in her first pair of pumps can out shasay/chante Naomi, Cindy, and Claudia" (324). In the end, Belize, Paul, and Jacob take solace in their time away from what is sometimes an isolating and lonely existence. "But what we gonna do?" Belize asks. "Quit?" (325) They pause, then laugh in unison.

The resoundingly defiant response to the possibility of quitting reveals a conscious decision on the part of the characters not to retreat but to engage the conditions of their oppression. Like the characters they perform in "Aunties in America," the Pomos disidentify with the received meaning of gay black identity. They speak through the figures of Belize, Paul, and Jacob without becoming them or validating the stereotypes these dramatic alter-egos represent. The space between these racialized images and their embodied meanings in representation creates a Brechtian distance among spectators that not only forces them to confront their empowerment/disempowerment through such images but allows spectators to begin to imagine how difference can transform how we understand identities and communities.

If "Aunties in America" takes queer culture to task for the reproduction of hegemonic structures that privilege white gay men, *Dark Fruit* also challenges an essentialism in black cultural politics found in authenticating claims of masculinity. Concerns about a crisis of masculinity point to a deep-seated anxiety that Homi K. Bhabha takes as "a 'sign' of danger implicit/on the threshold of identity, *in between* its claims to coherence and its fear of dissolution."[18] When forced to confront this

knowledge posed by difference, the rigid codes of masculinity require that difference be denied, disavowed, and, if need be, punished.

Brian Freeman's monologue "Doin' Alright" explores the consequences of a virulent black masculinity on gay black men through the lived experience of a black drag queen. Freeman relates his chance encounter at a gay working-class bar in Boston with a childhood friend named Dennis, now a Donna Summer look-alike going by the name Denise. Denise ultimately is killed by the leading cause of death among gay black men. But it's not what you think, he tells the largely white audience during a 1993 performance at New York University. The presumption that Denise died from AIDS complications privileges sexual identification in such a way that it ignores the intersection of sexuality with other factors like race and class in the construction of social identities. Denise was killed because she was in the wrong place at the wrong time, and, as Freeman notes: "When you're poor, black, effeminate, and gay, life is the wrong place at the wrong time" (337).[19]

Henry Louis Gates, Jr. attributes intraracial violence against gay black men to a sexualized definition of nationalism inherited from the Black Power Movement of the 1960s and 1970s.[20] Within the radical definitions of self and nationhood espoused by the black nationalists, masculinity was the unquestioned norm from which any deviation was regarded as a betrayal of the race. Gates points to the intimate link between black nationalism and homophobia in a passage from *Home* in which Amiri Baraka (then writing as LeRoi Jones) states in no uncertain terms: "Most white men are trained to be fags."[21] For Baraka, political allegiance is synonymous with sexual practice, and any

activity outside heterosexual norms regarded as a betrayal of the race.[22] Homosexuality, in his opinion, is exclusively a white man's disease.

The controversy surrounding the exclusion of the Pomos from the National Black Theatre Festival (NBTF) in 1991 and 1993 suggests that homosexuality in some parts of the African American community continues to be tolerated only as a closeted practice. According to festival director Larry Hamlin, the Pomos were not invited to participate because the inferior quality of the videotapes submitted by the group made it difficult to evaluate their work. Although the tapes were submitted after the application deadline, Freeman insists that the Pomos were "banned" from the NBTF because the gay content of their work made them too controversial to be included in Hamlin's "Parade of Stars." Most of the celebrities who attend the festival are invited not to perform but to take part in nightly receptions that in 1993 included a tribute to Sidney Poitier.[23] It seems that Hamlin has substituted an assimilationist politic for the separatism once espoused by black nationalists. But the erasure of sexual difference is an expensive price to pay in representing "community" as it leaves everyone in a vulnerable position.

In a 1993 Op-Ed piece in *The New York Times*, Donald Suggs and Mandy Carter discuss an alliance formed between the religious right and conservative churches in Cincinnati that wanted to prevent social reforms that would secure the rights of lesbians and gay men. Through *Gay Rights, Special Rights*, a videotape produced by conservative groups that juxtaposes visual images from the black and gay liberation movements, the right propagated notions that gay rights and black rights inherently conflict. More significantly, the videotape suggests that the call for gay rights in effect demands "preferential treatment" based on the sexual orientation of an elite minority comprised

largely of white men.[24] Preferential treatment is a charge frequently evoked to denounce affirmative action programs. The failure of gay activists and black religious leaders to look beyond their immediate concerns validates claims that marginalized interest groups are self-serving and, more disturbingly, it prevents them from imagining a revitalized sense of community based on a sense of shared struggle that cuts across identity positions.

In terms of queer politics, this dynamic plays itself out in round-table discussion among *New Republic* editor Andrew Sullivan, *Village Voice* columnist Donna Minkowitz, author Bruce Bawer, and playwright Tony Kushner featured on a special edition of "The Charlie Rose Show" in 1994.[25] Sullivan dismisses racial injustice as an issue outside the immediate political concerns of the gay political movement. He maintains that lesbians and gay men have successfully assimilated into American society and, as a result, have demonstrated that they are essentially like everyone else. It is for this reason that Sullivan argues that gay politics should be about "confirming the equal dignity of human beings who happen to be born and grow up loving someone of the same sex." The key for him is distinguishing between culture and politics. The gay and lesbian movement needs a "politics of argument" rather than a "politics of theatre"; only through the former can it eliminate pro-active discrimination.

Kushner and Minkowitz take issue with the statements Sullivan makes about race on the all-white panel. Like Brecht, Kushner maintains that culture is always political. Minkowitz borrows the metaphor of Bawer's *A Place at the Table* (1994) to suggest that, rather than a new place setting, we need to overturn the table. She even suggests at one point that Sullivan's agenda reflects a privilege that comes from being white and from

being male. The very idea that lesbian and gay activists need not concern themselves with the plethora of issues inherited from the Left of the 1960s, especially the implication on Sullivan's part that gay men and lesbians should not let the struggles of other marginalized groups influence their political agenda, is "morally bankrupt" as a strategy in combating the well-organized campaign waged by the religious extremists. Minkowitz and Kushner in effect underscore the importance of understanding identities not as essentializing ontologies but as hybridized constructions and, in turn, of understanding communities not as innate expressions of solidarity but as sites of empowerment and resistance conceived in relation to existing systems of power.

As a whole, the broadcast demonstrates the difficulty of defining a political movement exclusively according to identity. Sullivan's identification with the term "gay," for example, is as valid as Kushner's claim to the term—though both use it for different political ends. The heated exchange among the panelists, especially between Sullivan and Kushner, performs the problem in terms of whether to move from an assimilationist to an inclusive politics as envisioned by some queer theorists and activists. Sullivan and Kushner clearly dominate a conversation that at times gets quite personal. Sullivan argues, for example, that Kushner's critique of capitalism doesn't play outside the West Village. "Get real," he says. Kushner later brags that more people will see *Angels in America* than will read Sullivan in the *New Republic*.

Artistic representation is important to the formation of a queer community, but its value should not be measured by sales at the box office or at the newsstand. The very "politics of theatre" that Sullivan dismisses can contribute to a progressive democratic process. Representational democracy assumes that the actions of elected officials

represent the needs and concerns of diverse constituencies, in much the same way that classic stage realism relies on a mimetic theory in which theatrical representation mirrors the real. In both cases, the logic of metaphor in which two or more are turned into one transforms difference into sameness. Performance, however, provides a model for a representational economy in which, as Peggy Phelan writes, "the reproduction of the Other *as* the Same is not assured."[26] As an ephemeral event that cannot be repeated or reproduced, performance does not necessarily arrest and fix its image of the Other. As a result, performance holds the promise of being a space where the atomistic and essentialist logic of identity politics might be overcome.

Phelan argues that metaphoric violence is replaced in performance by a metonymy in which differences are contiguously inscribed on the performer: "Performance uses the performer's body to pose a question about the inability to secure the relation between subjectivity and the body *per se*; performance uses the body to frame the lack of Being promised by and through the body—that which cannot appear without a supplement."[27] It is Branner's body in "Sweet Sadie," for example, that represents his troubled relationship with his mother, Sadie, whom he feels abandoned him as a child and who now suffers from Alzheimer's disease. Branner sits on a bench for most of the monologue. As he shifts weight and changes poses, the lines between characters blur: Branner's mother becomes his childhood self; his childhood self becomes his adult self; his adult self becomes his mother. Branner's performance realizes a pre-lapserian moment in which the subject's sense of self is contiguous with his/her environment, thus staging the "messy space" of identity to mark the failure of the body to secure one's subjectivity.

Branner never disappears into his environment, nor does he "become" his mother in the Stanislavksian sense of the term. Their relationship remains in flux. At one point in the piece, Branner comes off the stage and into the audience to speak in what the published stage directions indicate is the voice of the "universal black mother":

> You are one selfish and ungrateful man. How could you even think of saying those things about your mama? Have mercy! Blasphemy! That's what it is. She's the one who pushed you from her womb, and you know she did the very best she could. You even changed the name she gave you. What the hell is a "Djola"? (335)

The use of the universal black mother as the interlocutor between Branner and his mother risks the reinscription of the trope of the black welfare mother who becomes the scapegoat for the plight of the black male. It moreover reinscribes a psychological explanation of male homosexuality as compensating for the absence of appropriate role models (i.e., straight male role models) during childhood.[28] According to these narratives, Sadie's six-year-old son will grow up to be gay become he was fatherless and "abandoned" by his mother during his youth.[29]

If not as successful in disrupting stereotypes about black gay masculinity as other pieces in *Dark Fruit*, "Sweet Sadie" demonstrates the difficulty of telling a story as simple as one about the relationship between a black mother and her son outside controlling cultural narratives. Branner's queer body becomes a contested site where the performer negotiates his identity as well as his sense of shared subjectivity with the audience.

Like identities, political communities are continually "becoming" (or, as Ed Cohen reads Foucault, "we" is not prior to the question but a result temporarily determined by the terms put to it). Cohen feels that communities move people to action through emotional appeals, locating the "possibilities for future transformation" in the "living now" of the political body: "Across, within, and through time and space, we trace our trajectories of our (e)motions, always crossing and being crossed, touching upon and being touched by the (e)motions of others."[30] Brian Freeman explores these trajectories in the monologue, "Chocolate City, U.S.A." Freeman and his lover travel to the "National March on Washington for Lesbian and Gay Rights: For Love and For Life We Are Not Going Back." He quickly loses his companion among the 650,000 marchers, and stands on the sidelines watching various banners pass by. The solidarity demonstrated among the participants, particularly Whoopi Goldberg's compassion and commitment to issues that touch all our lives, moves Freeman. "[T]oday Whoopi Goldberg is beautiful because she has pushed Jimmy Maness, a person with AIDS, the entire length of this March in a wheel chair," Freeman recalls. Later that day, she asks the crowd at the rally to join her in asking: "How long is it going to take before people get smart, huh?" (340). Goldberg's words and actions resonate because they are based on a shared experience of marginalization that does not reinscribe difference among groups but directs its critique at the institutions of power that inscribe those differences.

If the issue of identity politics can be traced back to the essentializing logic of the late 1960s, an alternative approach can found in that moment as well. Kobena Mercer points to Jean Genet's allegiance with the Black Panthers as an example of how elected membership in a community can transcend the limited terms of identity:

> What intrigues me about the way this wretched orphan homosexual thief was adopted into these "imagined communities" is the ambivalent intermixing of eroticism in the political desire for solidarity and "community." The libidinal dimension is certainly there in Norman Mailer's White Negro who went into black culture in search of sex, speed, and psychosis; but in Genet's case it leads to a radically different subject-position which does not attempt to master or assimilate difference but which speaks from a position of equality as part of a shared struggle to decolonize inherited models of subjectivity.[31]

Mercer makes an important distinction between identification as an assimilative and as a transgressive act. Elin Diamond explains that identification, in addition to being an act of assimilation and appropriation in which the Other is rendered the Same, can also result in the transformation of the I/ego by the other.[32] Mercer's reading of the community formed between Genet and the Black Panthers links the psychoanalytic with the material, showing how the transformation of the psychic "I" affects the political "we."

Diamond suggests that theatre has the possibility of serving as a politically transformative experience because identity and identification are mimetic functions. Diamond writes: "All identity claims are propped on the hierarchical structure of classical mimesis: Identity is imagined to be the truthful origin or model that grounds the subject, shapes the subject, and endows her with a continuous sense of self-sameness or being." Identification holds the potential to transgress the self-sameness defined by identity claims. It is a "passionate mimesis," writes Diamond, "a fantasy assimilation not locatable in time or responsible to political ethics."[33]

Dark Fruit utilizes theatre as a passionate form of mimesis. Rather than substituting positive images for negative images of gay black men (i.e., substituting one identity claim for another), the Pomos perform the process of subjectification that stereotypical discourse makes possible. They empty meaning from cultural representation of gay black men, exposing it as the construction of an Other, and produce a new epistemology. By occupying the racialized space in the gay community, the Pomos reorder the politics of representation. The difference, according to Jonathan Dollimore, "is never the absolute unfamiliar, but the reordering of the already known, a disclosure of a radical interconnectedness which *is* the social, but which present cultures can rarely afford to acknowledge and must instead disavow."[34] To this end, *Dark Fruit* resists the pressures of assimilation, locating the inclusiveness of queer politics in the symbiosis of social relationships.

Nowhere is this potential of queer performance better enacted in *Dark Fruit* than in Freeman's "Black and Gay: A Psycho-Sex Study." According to the program notes for a 1993 performance at New York University, "Black and Gay" is "adapted 99 percent from an actual 60's pulp/porn pseudo-science novel, *Black and Gay: A Psycho-Sex Study* by Victor Dodson." Dodson (Freeman) narrates the piece, presenting a "scientific" lecture (complete with pseudo-scientific language charts interspersed with slides of black male nudes from gay pornography) about the ability of gay black men to "adjust normally" to white gay culture: "Our research indicates that the majority of Negro homosexual males seem to prefer sexual relations with Caucasians rather than with members of their own race. Furthermore, many white homosexuals very often prefer their sexual partners to be Negroid" (325).

To support his claim, Dodson presents the dramatized case study of Cliff, a model black student from a single-parent household in Shantytown who has been bused to a predominantly white high school on the other side of the tracks. Cliff becomes the desired object of a white jock-cum-integrationist named Paul, who wants nothing more than to call Cliff "friend": "How can we hope to change the world, Cliff, if we don't start right here at Walt Whitman High?" (329). At first reluctant, Cliff eventually consents to meet Paul for a "man to man" talk. The young men quickly give into their passions, dropping their pants and rubbing their Fruit of the Looms against each other in a expression of adolescent passion and desire.

Walt Whitman is a queer place, as the allusion to the nineteenth-century American poet suggests. The name, however, also has another and equally significant meaning in terms of the representational history of racial politics in the United States. Walt Whitman High School was the setting for the award-winning television series, *Room 222*. Airing on ABC from 1969 to 1974, the television drama looked at the experiences of students, faculty, and staff at an integrated high school in Los Angeles through the eyes of an African American teacher whose history class meets in Room 222. Phillip Brian Harper suggests that African American viewers regarded the series as not so much about social integration as about social differentiation among various socioeconomic groups. Aware of the difficulties of representing a single African American community, *Room 222* presented multiple black subjectivities.[35]

Like *Room 222*, "Black and Gay" resists integration as a resolution of racial differences, using theatre to frame the contradictions and limitations of its liberal foundation. "Walt Whitman" is invoked in the performance piece to challenge the claim

that integration allows gay men of color to "adjust normally" to a culture defined and controlled by white gay men. Cliff's relationship with Paul is far from equal. When the young men are discovered by Miss Emory, the high school's sex education teacher, Cliff is the one blamed for corrupting the innocent white man. "You can take the boy out of Shantytown, but you can't take the Shantytown out of the boy," says Miss Emory (332). Paul goes home holding his head in shame, but the consequences for Cliff are more severe. He loses Miss Emory's recommendation for the state's Booker T. Washington Scholarship. That night, Cliff runs away from home to lose himself in the "homosexual jungle they call New York City" (332).

"Black and Gay" demonstrates how social identities and relationships are constructed by the discourses of institutions like education and science. "Viewed as a normative and social force," Steven Siedman writes, for example, "science has the effect of drawing moral boundaries, producing social hierarchies, and creating identities."[36] Just as classic stage realism requires a stable referent to assure the spectator of the "truth" of its representation, science requires a control to produce its sense of "truth" and to obscure the assumptions it makes. "Black and Gay" quotes (in the Brechtian sense of the term) the institutional discourses of science and education to queer the process of normalization they attempt to ensure. The pseudo-scientific language of Dodson's "objective" study of black homosexuality is de-mystified with the camp narrative and the pornographic slides of black male nudes. At one point during the performance I attended at New York University, Freeman steps out of his role as Dodson to respond to the audience's laughter. He suggests that our reactions reveal a familiarity with these photographic images. The moment serves a transformative experience in which, as

Elizabeth Wright writes in her discussion of the Brechtian comic: "The spectator's own subjectivity is brought into question along with the representations on the stage; the desires of the body are . . . reached so that it awakens to an understanding of its own socialization and the discovery of its political repression."[37] The spectatorial gaze becomes an object of the Pomos's performance, and, in much the same way that Robert Mapplethorpe's photographs of black male nudes are as much about the agency of the photographer as they are about the fetishized subjects in the photographs, the spectator is made aware of his/her "seeing" and "being seen." The spectator's identity is rendered multiple and fractured as his/her psyche becomes the object of the mind's eye; and as the gaze becomes the object of performance, the "I" disappears.

Identification can be an act that appropriates the Other as the Same, or in which the subject imagines becoming the object of his/her desire. The subject, however, can also be transformed by an encounter with an Other, depending on the position he/she takes within that *mise-en-scène*. Indeed, an identification not *as* but *with* another holds the potential to re-imagine social as well as political relationships. The "I" becomes a "we" in which difference is not assimilated by a common culture but transformed into a radical politic that speaks to the needs of the present and future. In the end, how can I—how can we—hope to change the world if we don't start right here at Walt Whitman High?

Notes

[1]Branner appears in the film; Freeman worked as an executive producer.

[2]In 1996, Branner toured the United States with *Sweet Sadie*, an expanded version of a monologue originally presented as part of *Dark Fruit*. Freeman performed *Civil Sex*, a solo performance about civil rights leader Bayard Rustin.

[3]Brian Freeman; quoted in Stephen Holden, "In the Margins of Two Minorities; A Double Fringe," *New York Times*, 23 July 1993, C3.

[4]Ibid.

[5]My discussion of *Dark Fruit* is based on the performance I attended at New York University's Loeb Student Center, 21 September 1993.

[6]Kobena Mercer, *Welcome to the Jungle: New Positions in Black Cultural Politics* (New York: Routledge, 1994), 289. Emphasis in original.

[7]Charles I. Nero, "Toward a Black Gay Aesthetic: Signifying in Contemporary Black Gay Literature," in *Brother to Brother: New Writings by Black Gay Men*, ed. Essex Hemphill and Joseph Beam (Boston: Alyson Publications, 1991), 230. For a discussion of signifying as a theatrical practice, see Harry J. Elam, Jr., "Signifyin(g) on African-American Theatre: *The Colored Museum* by George Wolfe," *Theatre Journal* 44 (October 1992): 291-303.

[8]Geneva Smitherman, *Talkin and Testifyin* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1977), 121; quoted in Nero.

[9]Richard Dyer, *White* (New York: Routledge, 1997), 45.

[10]Isaac Julien and Kobena Mercer, "True Confessions: A Discourse on Images of Black Male Sexuality," in *Brother to Brother*, 93.

[11]David Román, *Acts of Intervention: Performance, Gay Culture, and AIDS* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1998), 213. For an insightful critique of *Angels in America* and the politics of assimilation, see David Savran, "Ambivalence, Utopia, and a Queer Sort of Materialism: How *Angels in America* Reconstructs the Nation," *Theatre Journal* 47 (May 1995): 207-28.

[12]Tony Kushner, *Angels in America: A Gay Fantasia on National Themes*, Part Two: *Perestroika* (New York: Theatre Communications Group, 1993), 93. Emphasis in original.

[13]Ibid., 92.

[14]For a different perspective on the dramatic function of Belize, see Framji Minwalla, "When Girls Collide: Considering Race in *Angels in America*," in

Approaching the Millennium: Essays on Angels in America, ed. Deborah R. Geis and Steven F. Kruger (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1997): 103-17. Minwalla suggests that Belize serves as both Kushner's mouthpiece and ethical touchstone: "By locating a black man at the ethical center of his fictive universe, and playing his other characters off him, Kushner makes identity, especially racial and gendered identity, one of the central facts of his drama. Belize occupies that space against which we gauge the ideology, morality, actions—perhaps even the very humanity—of Kushner's other inventions" (104).

[15]Pomo Afro Homos, *Dark Fruit*, in *Staging Gay Lives: An Anthology of Contemporary Gay Theater*, ed. John M. Clum (Boulder: Westview Press, 1996), 323. Emphasis in original. Unless indicated otherwise, all quotations are from the published text and will hereafter be cited within.

[16]Kate Davy, "Outing Whiteness: A Feminist/Lesbian Project," *Theatre Journal* 47 (May 1995): 195. Emphasis in original.

[17]José Esteban Muñoz, *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), 31.

[18]Homi K. Bhabha, "Are You a Mouse or a Man?" in *Constructing Masculinity*, ed. Maurice Berger, Brian Wallis, and Simon Watson (New York: Routledge, 1995), 60. Emphasis in original.

[19]Another telling moment occurred during the discussion following the performance at NYU when Freeman had to reassure the audience that the reason for Gupton's brief hiatus was not that he was "sick" (as if the only reason a gay man would take a break from performing was that he was HIV positive).

[20]Henry Louis Gates, Jr., "The Black Man's Burden," in *Black Popular Culture: A Project*, ed. Gina Dent (Seattle: Bay Press, 1992), 79.

[21]LeRoi Jones, "American Sexual Reference: Black Male," in *Home: Social Essays* (New York: William Morrow, 1966), 216.

[22]Baraka explores these themes in *The Toilet* (1965), which documents the punishment of a white high school student whose love letter to a black male student is intercepted by his friends. The letter is addressed to the unofficial leader of a group of young black men. The black student's efforts to convince his friends not to "flush" the white student lose out to the group's collective need to reinforce its heterosexuality. Indeed, the group is startled to learn that the letter may have been welcomed.

[23]For an excellent analysis of the tensions between Freeman and Hamlin, see C. Carr, "Show Me the Way to Go Home," *Village Voice*, 17 August 1993, 37.

[24]Donald Suggs and Mandy Carter, "Cincinnati's Odd Couple," *New York Times*, 13 December 1993, A17.

[25]"The Charlie Rose Show," WNET, New York, 24 June 1994. "The Charlie Rose Show" is an hour-long talk show based in New York. Each broadcast is divided into three twenty-minute segments that usually are not thematically linked. The broadcast of 24 June, however, focused on the twenty-fifth anniversary of Stonewall and the modern lesbian and gay liberation movement. The first segment featured Martin Duberman, Jim Fouratt, and Barbara Smith, who historically positioned Stonewall; the third segment was an interview with actor Ian McKellen, who was performing his one-man show, *A Knight Out*, in conjunction with the Gay Cultural Festival. Quotations in this and the following two paragraphs are transcribed from "The Charlie Rose Show."

[26]Peggy Phelan, *Unmarked: The Politics of Performance* (New York: Routledge, 1993), 3.

[27]Ibid., 150-51.

[28]For more on the black matriarch, welfare queen, and other controlling images of black womanhood, see Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment* (Boston: Unwin Hyman, 1990) and Cathy Cohen, "Punks, Bulldaggers, and Welfare Queens: The Radical Potential of Queer Politics?" *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 3.4 (1997): 437-66. For an insightful critique of psychological discourses of male homosexuality, see Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, "How to Bring Your Kids Up Gay: The War on Effeminate Boys," in *Tendencies* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1993), 154-64.

[29]Since his departure from the Pomos, Branner has developed the monologue into a full evening. In the expanded version, Branner comments that no one seems able to understand his relationship with his mother, let alone his need to tell his dying mother that he wants to write a performance piece about their lives together. The pain is only an illusion, he repeats as a mantra throughout the performance. He finally realizes that the pain is only an illusion because, beneath the pain, there was love.

[30]Ed Cohen, "Who are 'We'? Gay 'Identity' as Political (E)motion (A Theoretical Rumination)," in *Inside/Out: Lesbian Theories, Gay Theories*, ed. Diana Fuss (New York: Routledge 1991), 87. For a discussion of the potential of affect in performance, see Jill Dolan, "Geographies of Learning: Theatre Studies, Performance, and the 'Performative,'" *Theatre Journal* 45 (December 1993): 417-41; and Jill Dolan, "Performance, Utopia, and the 'Utopian Performative,'" *Theatre Journal* 53 (October 2001): 455-79.

[31]Mercer, *Welcome to the Jungle*, 293.

[32]Elin Diamond, "The Violence of 'We': Politicizing Identification," in *Critical Theory and Performance*, ed. Janelle G. Reinelt and Joseph R. Roach (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1992), 396.

[33]Elin Diamond, *Unmaking Mimesis: Essays on Feminism and Theater* (New York: Routledge, 1997), 106.

[34]Jonathan Dollimore, *Sexual Dissidence: Augustine to Wilde, Freud to Foucault* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), 230.

[35]Phillip Brian Harper, *Are We Not Men?: Masculine Anxiety and the Problem of African-American Identity* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), 165-66.

[36]Steven Seidman, "Identity and Politics in 'Postmodern' Gay Culture: Some Historical and Conceptual Notes," in *Fear of a Queer Planet: Queer Politics and Social Theory*, ed. Michael Warner (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), 109.

[37]Elizabeth Wright, *Postmodern Brecht: A Re-Presentation* (New York: Methuen, 1989), 62.

CHAPTER FOUR

THE STRANGENESS OF STRANGERS, THE QUEERNESS OF QUEERS: *BELLE REPRIEVE* AND THE SOCIAL POLITICS OF THEATRE

At the opening of *Belle Reprieve*, Mitch wheels three large boxes onstage. The boxes later will be used to represent a steamer trunk, bath tub, and a poker table in reenacted scenes from Tennessee Williams's *A Streetcar Named Desire* (1947). At this moment, however, the boxes serve a different purpose. Mitch points to one and indicates that, inside, it's four o'clock in the morning. "I know that sounds incredible but it's true," he says. "I know because it's my four o'clock in the morning. Every time it comes around, I put it in this box. I've been doing it for years now. At four o'clock, the thread that holds us to the earth is at its most slender, and all the creatures that never see the sunlight come out to make mincemeat of well laid plans."[1] If you listen closely, Mitch tells the audience, you can hear the sounds of the creatures shuffling about. "I have always relied on the strangeness of strangers" (6), a voice says from inside one of the boxes. The voice belongs to Blanche, whose entrance references Blanche DuBois's famous exit line in *A Streetcar Named Desire*, "I have always relied on the kindness of strangers."[2] In *Streetcar*, the trust that Blanche places in the benevolence of others ultimately fails to protect her from the mental and physical abuse she suffers at the hands of Stanley Kowalski or from going insane. In *Belle Reprieve*, Blanche's reliance on the strangeness of strangers suggests a new way of imagining social relationships based on the differences among individuals. It is a distinctly queer knowledge based on the experience of being a social castaway, one of the creatures who never sees the light of day.

Belle Reprieve opened in January 1991 at London's Drill Hall Arts Center and in February 1991 at New York's LaMama E.T.C. in a collaborative production among Split Britches's Peggy Shaw and Lois Weaver and Bloolips's Bette Bourne and Paul Shaw. None of the performers had worked with members of the opposite sex since the 1970s, but all shared a desire to develop a queer text with colleagues who had similar histories as performers. The actors developed the performance during a month-long retreat on the island of Majorca, using improvisations based on a found prop, scene, or a line from *A Streetcar Named Desire* to develop a richly layered text that troubles the relationship between narrative and social conformity and the relationship between naturalism and naturalized notions of gender and sexuality.

Belle Reprieve is not so much a queer production of *Streetcar* as a queering of the sex-gender system authored by Williams and regulated by his estate. The production recasts *Streetcar* across genders and sexualities. According to the program notes and published stage directions: Mitch is "a fairy disguised as a man" (Paul Shaw), Stella is "a woman disguised as a woman" (Lois Weaver), Stanley is "a butch lesbian" (Peggy Shaw), and Blanche is "a man in a dress" (Bette Bourne) (4). The nonconventional casting reflects what Deborah Geis regards as *Belle Reprieve*'s "more general interweaving of its critique of *Streetcar*'s gender roles with the queer appropriation of Brechtian metadrama" in which the performers call attention to their performances on and off stage.[3] The result, Alisa Solomon suggests, is a "delicious display of how *liberating* it can be to live in our skins, sensual, sentient, and alive to the world."[4] *Belle Reprieve* liberates individuals so they can experience desires unscripted by a rigid sex-gender system; at the same time, the production liberates social relationships through an

acknowledgement of the strangeness of strangers. To that end, *Belle Reprieve* riffs on the issues raised by identity and post-identitarian politics to expose the interpersonal politics already at play in *Streetcar* as well as the hidden contradictions of queer culture and politics produced through their inadvertent reproduction of systems of privilege and power.

In *Communists, Cowboys, and Queers*, David Savran contrasts the writings of Arthur Miller and Tennessee Williams to suggest that a liberatory potential is always at play in Williams's dramas. Savran describes Williams's plays as pluralistic and indeterminate. Characters form alliances among themselves, only to clash, regroup, and then clash again. "As a result," Savran explains, "the social body is constantly being redrawn and reconfigured in unexpected ways, with the collective subject always on the horizon of possibility."[5] Because they "redefine and reconfigure resistance so that it is less the prerogative of rebellious individuals than a potential always already at play within both social organization and dramatic structure," Williams's plays "bestow an inheritance that a progressive theater of the 1990s can ill afford to ignore."[6]

Belle Reprieve is a benefactor of this queer legacy. It "queers" gender and sexual roles in the same fashion that Williams destabilized the sex-gender system of Cold War America. In her production notebooks for *Belle Reprieve*, Lois Weaver (who also directed the production) describes *Belle Reprieve* as a piece about "four actors escaping from a script—a heterosexual script."[7] Rather than retreating, *Belle Reprieve* confronts heterosexuality on its own grounds, taking aim at one of its most canonical works to expose the gender inconsistencies at the heart of *Streetcar*. *Belle Reprieve*'s title alludes to Belle Reve, the ancestral home of Blanche and Stella DuBois. The Dubois' are

"French only by extraction" (55), so much so that the name of their family estate violates one of the most basic rules of the French language: the gendered agreement of nouns and adjectives. "Rêve" (dream) is a masculine noun that should take the masculine adjective "beau" (beautiful), not the feminine "belle." Felicia Hardison Londré maintains that the "logical assumption" to be drawn from the grammatical error is that the plantation originally was named "Belle Rive" (Beautiful Shore). "[O]ver the generations, the name has been corrupted as the family's fortunes dwindled. What had been a solid *shore* is now but an evanescent *dream* of lost splendor."[8] Londré's is not the only logical assumption that can be made, however. Belle Reve also holds the possibility of serving as a queer utopia where genders do not agree. Located in a place and time outside the present world of the play, Belle Reve illustrates the extent to which utopias—be they utopias of one's home-place, the utopia of theatre, or the utopia of queer politics—are forever marked spatially and temporally.[9]

By putting time in a box, Mitch arguably achieves the suspension of time desired by so many of Williams's characters. Literary critic C.W.E. Bigsby identifies time as the true antagonist in Williams's plays:

> [T]he real proves so relentless and unforgiving that it has been transformed, restaged, so that it becomes tolerable to those who lack the qualities for survival. . . . In his personal life [Williams], like Tom [in *The Glass Menagerie*], like Blanche, and like so many of his characters, sought some ultimate meaning in an art which granted him the only refuge from the deprivations of natural process while at the same time leaving him to rely on the comfort offered by "the nearest stranger."[10]

Bigsby points to the purpose of theatre in the everyday lives of the social outcasts who inhabit Williams's dramatic universe. Theatre is the means through which characters like Blanche convey their need for affection and companionship. Blanche DuBois is a consummate actor, Elia Kazan writes in his notebook for the 1947 Broadway production of *Streetcar*. Beneath the desire for colored lights and magic, he suggests, Blanche ultimately wants to "find protection" through another person, whether it be the protection offered by a family member, lover, or through the "kindness of strangers."[11] If a reliance on the kindness of strangers ultimately fails to protect Blanche (most notably from Stanley's physical and mental abuse), it may be because that reliance does not empower Blanche. It's a survival mechanism, not an empowering practice.

In contrast, the reliance on the strangeness of strangers claimed by Blanche in *Belle Reprieve* begins with an acknowledgement of difference that rejects social conformity. In *Sexual Strangers: Gays, Lesbians, and Dilemmas of Citizenship*, political scientist Shane Phelan metaphorically describes lesbians and gay men as strangers because of their inability to align themselves with heterosexual norms. Lesbians and gay men are ambiguous figures in U.S. culture and politics. They are not the enemy, as they are not fully excluded from the rights of citizenship, but they also are not quite members. Indeed, their presence troubles the border between "us" and "them" that defines national identity. Phelan concludes that life on the border structures the exclusion of lesbians and gay men as well as their ambivalence about becoming part of the mainstream.[12]

Belle Reprieve explores the feeling of being a sexual stranger through a literal reenactment of a border crossing. Blanche disembarks on an unspecified beautiful shore confused, wondering where she is.

> BLANCHE: (Emerging from stage left box) Are we here? Is this the place? Are my necessaries disembarked? How sweet it is to arrive at a new place for the first time. The future stretches out in front of us like a clean, white carpet. There's the stir and rustle of endless possibility in the air.
>
> STANLEY: You don't say.
>
> STELLA: Honey, we're in exactly the same place we started out from.
>
> BLANCHE: Started out? What do you mean? You mean we haven't arrived?
>
> STELLA: No, we haven't arrived, but don't worry about that now. You just take it easy. (7)

Indeed, these traveling players have not arrived, nor will they by evening's end. When they make their respective entrances as a fairy disguised as a man, a woman disguised as a woman, a butch lesbian, and a man in a dress, the performers do not so much take the stage as they enter the field of visibility.

After relishing in the possibilities before them, the queer entourage finds itself at a policed border. Masquerading as a customs agent, Stanley asks Blanche to produce her passport as proof of her identity. The request shocks Blanche, who claims she "wasn't aware that we were crossing any borders" (8). As a man in a dress, however, Blanche already has crossed the borders of gender. When she finally produces her passport, the photograph does not match the face of the person standing before the customs agent. "My namesake is a role played by that incandescent star, Vivien Leigh," Blanche offers in her defense, "and although the resemblance is not immediately striking, I have been told that we have the same shoulders" (8).

Blanche never claims to be the Blanche DuBois in the photograph. Bourne's performance of Blanche as a man in a dress cites an earlier performance of Blanche by Vivien Leigh. The layering of Blanche's identity illustrates Anne Fleche's suggestion that individuals do not inhabit but proximate the roles assigned to them as well as the ones they choose.[13] If that is the case, then no one ever arrives at identity. No one is ever here yet. We all exist in a suspended state between being and becoming, with endless possibilities stretching before us like a long, sandy beach.

Ultimately Blanche's identity becomes a question not of who she is but who she was. Blanche first presents "[herself] as overwhelming evidence that [she is] actually here" (8). But her presence is insufficient proof of her identity. In the end, she has to "come clean by showing her dirty laundry to the world" (9), a prospect that leaves her dizzy.

> BLANCHE: Hold me Stella, I think I feel a flashback coming on. (Lights flash, music plays, a curtain painted like a grotesque piece of torn lace is pulled on stage behind the action, the actors shuffling backward around the trunk.) And so it was that I set out to prove to the world that I was indeed myself. A difficult enough task, you might say, for anyone.
>
> STELLA: She threw herself at the feet of an unforgiving world to prove her identity.
>
> MITCH: The answer was somewhere in that trunk. (9)

The flashback temporarily splits the narrative of the scene. The performers address the audience in the here and now, casting the action of rummaging through the trunk into an unspecified past. The use of the past tense to describe Blanche's "being" rhetorically

marks the extent to which one's identity is one's history as a subject. Blanche's identity, for example, is a history of identifications represented by the objects that Stanley removes from her trunk (a diamond tiara, gold bracelet, feather boa, cheerleading doll, and a newspaper clipping). Individually these objects have no particular meaning; together they suggest what Laura Mulvey sees as a metonymic relationship between subject and object.[14] Just as we recognize Pandora as "Pandora" by her box, we come to recognize Blanche as "Blanche" through the objects in her trunk. If a dangerous femininity lurked inside Pandora's box, an equally subversive and destabilizing queerness is contained in Blanche's trunk.

The social knowledge unleashed in *Belle Reprieve* queers the notion of a fixed and stable identity and, in turn, queers the notion that social relationships are fixed and stable. For example, Bette Bourne's performance of Blanche and Lois Weaver's performance of Stella renders the familiar relationship of sisters strange and unfamiliar. In a moment of sisterly tenderness, Stella confesses more than admiration for her big sister Blanche:

> Waiting for her to come home from Woolworth's with the new Tangee lipstick. And when I wasn't waiting I was following. I used to follow her into the bathroom. I loved the way she touched her cheek with the back of her hand. How she let her hand come to rest just slightly between her breasts as she took one last look in the mirror. I used to study the way she adjusted her hips and twisted her thighs in that funny way when she was changing her shoes. Then she would fling open the bathroom door and

> sail down the staircase into the front room to receive her gentleman callers. (13)

The scene directly lifts language from *Streetcar*. In the film version, the scene performed by Kim Stanley (Stella) and Vivien Leigh (Blanche) has a distinctly lesbian subtext. In *Belle Reprieve*, the subtext is made explicit. Donning cheerleading costumes, Blanche and Stella perform a cheer and then sing a song with the suggestive title "Under the Covers." Bourne and Weaver make the familiar scene strange and queer. Is it now a lesbian scene, Alisa Solomon asks, or an incestuous one? Or does the presence of a male and female performer make it a scene of perverse heterosexual desire?[15] All are possibilities, and are actively at play in this moment of the performance.

Such moments in *Belle Reprieve* demonstrate the transgressive potential of queer performance as well as the limitations of queer theoretical and cultural practices that began to gain currency around the time *Belle Reprieve* premiered. Queer theorists such as Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick and Judith Butler maintain that identities are not natural but socially constructed performances in which individuals unconsciously enact scripts to become recognized and meaningful subjects. "Queer" subverts systems of power through a conscious performance that exposes the artificiality and contradictions among chromosomal sex, gender, and desire. As a cultural practice, Sedgwick argues, "'Queer' seems to hinge much more radically and explicitly on a person's undertaking particular performative acts of experimental self-perception and filiation."[16] Sedgwick even goes so far to hypothesize that "queer" only signifies in the first person. It is something that can be done by anyone, regardless of gender or sexual identity. While such experimentation plays with identities and relationships outside the cultural mainstream,

its readily availability to anyone willing to try on sexual difference tends to ignore the material consequences faced by individuals whose investments in queer identities are more than a passing fancy. In fact, Jill Dolan argues that "the insistent anti-hegemonic pose of 'queer' can . . . be a ruse for not taking responsibility for the vagaries of a movement, a style, a life."[17]

In queering *A Streetcar Named Desire*, the performers in *Belle Reprieve* continually draw attention to the artificiality of the roles they are playing. As a result, the production creates an excess of meanings. Possibilities abound. But the production avoids the limitations of queer cultural practices identified by Dolan because the performances onstage are grounded in the offstage relationships among the performers (both professionally and personally). As a result, the performers take responsibility for their representations of queer identities and desires.

In the second act, for example, Bourne wonders aloud what it would be like if the film version of *Streetcar* were real:

> Trouble is, Marlon Brando does look gorgeous. And I know that if I met him at the time he was in that film I'd want to lick his armpits. I don't suppose he'd be able to open himself up to that though . . . surrender himself. But he does have that big shapely mouth . . . I guess I'm pretty taken with this actor in the film. But what if the film was life and I could just walk right into it? I don't suppose he'd welcome me, probably give me a hard time. Just like he gave Blanche . . . I mean Miss Leigh . . . and what would she say if this drag queen poured out of the camera lens and blew up to size right there in front of her. Yes, well, she had to deal with

> Marlon Brando all day and Laurence Olivier in the evenings . . . I'd say she had enough problems without me on the set . . . I feel like an old hotel. (27-28; ellipses in original)

The monologue alternates between a desire and fear of meeting Marlon Brando's Stanley in real life. As a gay man in a dress, Bourne understands the abuse he would likely suffer at the hands of Stanley Kowalski. But Brando's larger-than-life screen presence in *Streetcar* nevertheless appeals to Bourne. Peggy Shaw, as Stanley, undercuts the moment pulling a curtain across the stage and laughing at Bourne's predicament. Alone again on the stage, Blanche sings of the lost world of gay bathhouses as she prepares to take a bath:

> Cold winds blowing through empty rooms
> Windows broken, floors damp and rotten now
> No sound in the silence
> No steps in the stillness
> No warmth in the cold air
> Only shadows moving in the half-light
> Empty lockers, lines of empty hooks
> Vacant showers, all deep in dust now
> Just a modest price bought you paradise
> No one wondered would it last
> Running out of steam, now the beautiful dream
> Has passed. (28-29)

Blanche's song is, quite literally, "une beau rêve." Gay bathhouses offered gay and bisexual men a temporary reprieve from everyday reality. It was a world that relied on anonymity among strangers that redefined masculine identity and relationships. But the splendor of this world has been lost to AIDS. It now exists only as a dream.

Bourne undercuts the sentimentality of the moment through humor. Blanche slips into a tub. "Bubbles, bawbles, bumholes . . . Municipal, that's the word. Now I'm going under" (29; ellipsis in original), she says before submerging herself in a tub (represented by one of the boxes wheeled onstage by Mitch in the opening). When she resurfaces, Blanche is wearing a bubble dress. In the background, a ukulele can be heard. The man of Blanche's dreams appears, but it's not Marlon Brando. It's Mitch, as played by Paul Shaw (Bourne's romantic partner in real life). Mitch wears a fairy costume and plays a ukulele to court Blanche. The costume literalizes Mitch's identity as a fairy and a source of much innuendo. "Are you sure that you're a fairy?" Blanche asks. "I'd imagine they were blond. And frankly I'm not leaving 'til I've seen your wand" (30). Blanche teases Mitch about the costume, and the two continue to exchange innuendos. Mitch eventually helps Blanche out of the tub and twirls her about the stage in her bubble dress.

The verbal and visual humor of the scene draws on the performance aesthetic associated with the Bloolips company. Bloolips's productions enact a campy musical hall style that combines theatrical *shtick* with a clownish performance of drag. Productions such as *Lust in Space* (1980), *Living Leg-ends* (1981), *Teenage Trash* (1987), *Gland Motel* (1990), and *Get Hur* (1992) are elaborate musical and film parodies that push at the conventions of theatre as well as the conventions of traditional gender roles. Alisa Solomon notes: "Playing in, and on, a performance tradition where every

trick is done, undone, and undone again, Bloolips uses drag to celebrate queerness, not to mock or reify women's second-class status."[18]

Similarly, Peggy Shaw's and Lois Weaver's performances in *Belle Reprieve* draw on their history together as part of the Split Britches company. Their onstage performance of butch-femme roles mirrors their offstage relationship as a couple at the time. As early as *Beauty and the Beast* (1983) and continuing through *Anniversary Waltz* (1989) and *Lust and Comfort* (1995), Shaw's and Weaver's collaborations as part of the Split Britches company have charted their evolving relationship together and apart. Sue-Ellen Case notes that *Belle Reprieve* marks a shift in how Weaver and Shaw represent lesbian sexuality. According to Case: "[T]he feminist context, which governed the critique of earlier plays, now relocates, as lesbian becomes 'upwardly mobile.'" and more visible in performance.[19] Lesbian desire is overtly staged in *Belle Reprieve*. As Case puts it, it's less talk and more doing.

Weaver and Shaw embody the hyper-sexualized roles of Stella and Stanley, exposing the inherent sexism of Williams's original at the same time that they stage a lesbian sexuality that resists cliches and stereotypes. In both the film and stage versions of *Streetcar,* Kim Stanley played Stella as if she was in a constant narcotic state of sensuality. The very sound of Stanley's voice calling her name from the courtyard hypnotizes her, and she moves toward him as if in a trance. In *Belle Reprieve*, Stella is the seducer. In a moment that directly copies the film, Stanley falls to his knees and presses his face in Stella's bosom. The scene continues from where Williams's original leaves off. Stella confidently assumes control and tells Stanley to stop masquerading as a heavy:

STANLEY: Are you saying I'm not a real man?

STELLA: I'm saying you're not real. You're cute. Could be much cuter if you weren't quite so obvious.

STANLEY: Then it wouldn't be me. I am not so subtle.

STELLA: Try it. Just for tonight.

STANLEY: You mean put in on like clothes? I couldn't pull that off.

STELLA: No, take it off. Take it all off. I want to see what you're really made of. I want to see what it is that makes me want you. That makes me want to have you as I've never had anyone. Strip. Take it off, then we'll talk. (24)

Talk's cheap, Stanley tells Stella in an attempt to distract her from the task at hand. But Stella calls his bluff, frightening Stanley when she turns off the lights. A low light fills the stage and Mitch and Blanche appear silhouetted behind a scrim dancing as the piano player sings the song "Sweet Little Angel":

I've got a sweet little angel
And I love the way she spreads her wings
When she spreads those wings over me
She brings joy in everything (24-25)

The scene ends with Stella spreading her wings over Stanley. She wraps her legs around Stanley, ripping the T-shirt off his back as her carries her off stage.

"Doing" lesbian sexuality rather than talking about it is a disruptive performance practice. In *Presence and Desire*, Jill Dolan suggests: "Making sexual practice blatantly visible on gendered bodies that wear the deconstruction of compulsory heterosexuality

might still be a productively alienating act."[20] The blatant representation of lesbian sexuality contradicts the desexualized images circulated in mainstream popular culture and endorsed by the conservative sexual politics of the mainstream lesbian and gay movement.

For some spectators, the alienation described by Dolan is a pleasurable experience. Solomon notes, for example, that during the run of the show Peggy Shaw received scores of fan letters, many of which were from gay men.[21] For other spectators, the spectacle of lesbian sexuality is threatening because it is excessive. Laurence Senelick notes, for example, that some spectators greeted the London production of *Belle Reprieve* with anger and fear. They were disappointed that *Belle Reprieve* wasn't the usual Bloolips fare and disturbed by the excessive representation of lesbian desire that, as Solomon notes, appealed to others.[22]

The different reactions are not surprising, as *Belle Reprieve* challenges audience expectations throughout the performance to implicate spectators in the process of making meaning. The experience can be liberating or threatening, depending on the spectator's willingness to assume an active role (as well as the spectator's familiarity with the techniques of the two companies). Weaver first appears as Stella from behind a scrim seductively sipping a Coke. As she walks downstage, she addresses the audience:

> Is there something you want? What can I do for you? Do you know who I am, what I feel, how I think? You want my body. My soul, my food, my bed, my skin, my hands? You want to touch me, hold me, lick me, smell me, eat me, have me? You think you need a little more time to decide? Well, you got a little over an hour to have your fill. (5)

Weaver's speech invokes feminist theories of spectatorship that characterize the process of viewing as a universalizing gaze that objectifies women.[23] In effect, Weaver returns the audience's collective gaze, suggesting that the boundaries between performer and spectator are fluid and permeable. Spectators are made aware of their seeing by being seen. But the moment also marks a frustration with theatre practice. We never get what we want, or at least what we came to the theatre thinking we wanted. As the evening comes to a close, Weaver once again addresses the audience: "Did you figure it out? Who's who, who's what, who gets what, where the toaster is plugged in? Did you get what you want?" (36)

On stage, the frustration identified by Weaver is marked in gendered terms, reflecting different predispositions among the ensemble. In an interview with Kate Davy, Peggy Shaw alludes to some of the difficulties the cast encountered in rehearsals. The men thought that the lesbian scenes should be played more tenderly, buying into a stereotype about lesbians as being overly nurturing.[24] The male performers, moreover, found the rehearsal process more than a little off-putting. Accustomed to working with a script, both Bette Bourne and Paul Shaw were taken aback by the process. As Paul Shaw explains in an interview with the London's *What's On* magazine: "Allowing yourself room to search around with free associations feels quite dangerous, it starts to throw up some horrific and frightening images. In the past we tended to centre around comic effects, but Lois and Peggy like to walk the line between horror and poignancy and tragedy and humor."[25] Working without a net allows for multiple meanings that include, among the possibilities, an improvised reprieve from the script authored by an oppressive and sometimes violent sex-gender system. For that escape to be a completely queer one,

the male performers needed to unlearn the privilege they take for granted and that is not available to their female collaborators.

The acknowledgment of gender differences and privilege serves as the dramatic climax of *Belle Reprieve*, which attempts to reenact the climatic rape scene from *Streetcar Named Desire*. The cast enters wearing lantern costumes, dancing about the stage until Bourne drops character in protest:

> BLANCHE: I want to be in a real play! With real scenery! White telephones, French windows, a beginning, a middle and end! This is the most confusing show I've ever been in. What's wrong with red plush? What's wrong with a theme and a plot we can follow? There isn't even a fucking drink trolley. Agatha Christie was right.
>
> STELLA: Now we all talked about this, and we decided that realism works against us.
>
> BLANCHE: Oh we did, did we?
>
> STELLA, STANLEY & MITCH: Yes we did!
>
> BLANCHE: But I felt better before, I could cope. All I had to do was learn my lines and not trip over the furniture. It was all so clear. And here we are roaming about in the avant-garde and I don't know what else. I want my mother to come and have a good time. She's seventy-three for chrissake. You know she's expecting me to play Romeo before it's too late. What am I supposed to tell her? That I like being a drag queen? She couldn't bear it, I know she couldn't. She wants me to be in something realistic, playing a real person with a real job, like on television. (33)

The decision that "realism works against us" echoes feminist critiques of realism, notably the position advanced by Case and Dolan that realism forecloses possibilities outside the dominant order.[26] Bourne's desire to be in a "real play" suggests the some gay men unconsciously may have a stake in maintaining the status quo. Even if institutionalized heterosexuality denies them certain rights, it still gives gay men certain privileges based on the mere fact that they are men. Indeed, as Michael Lowenthal concludes, "lesbians and gay men try to build cooperative efforts but the gay men soon disappoint the lesbians by showing their true colors—they're not gay men, they're gay *men*."[27]

Though difficult, attempts to build queer coalitions across gender lines remain an important political project. The challenge for gay men is to acknowledge a place for lesbians in queer culture that does not erase or subsume lesbianism in the expression of gay male desire. Gender differences need to be productively engaged rather than subsumed into a single view.

Belle Reprieve does not shy away from this challenge. As the scene continues, Bourne gets his wish to be in a real play as Peggy Shaw begins to enact the rape scene from *Streetcar*. When the scene becomes too realistic, Bourne quickly tries to stop the action by defending himself.

> STANLEY: If you want to be in this play you've got to drop the stiletto.
>
> BLANCHE: If you want to be in this play you've got to make me!
>
> STANLEY: If you want to play a woman, the woman in this play gets raped and she goes crazy in the end.
>
> BLANCHE: I don't want to get raped and go crazy, I just wanted to wear a nice frock, and look at the shit they've given me! (35)

The conflict arguably stems from the fact that Bourne and Shaw are acting according to two different scripts, one defined by the experience of being a gay man and the other from the experience of being a lesbian. Because they are only play acting, Bourne can stop the action before any real harm is done. He also can turn the scene into a joke, complaining about the frock they have given him to wear.

The exchange serves as the production's *gestus*, or the moment in performance described by Brecht when implied social attitudes become visible to the audience. Indeed, the frustrations as well as the pleasures that spectators experience through *Belle Reprieve* reflect how the *gestus* complicates the reception process. Elin Diamond writes that "what the spectator is seeing is not a mere miming of a social relationship, but a *reading* of it, an interpretation by a historical subject who supplements (rather than disappears into) the production of meaning."[28] Thus, as Blanche, Bourne experiences a moment of recognition in which the acknowledgment of an unassumed privilege becomes the first step in its undoing.

Shaw ends the scene by comforting Bourne, assuring him that he is not alone:

> We're in this together, me and you. We've known that from the start. We're the extremes, the stereotypes. We are as far as we can go. We have no choice, me and you. We've tried it all, haven't we? We've rejected ourselves, not trusted ourselves, mirrored ourselves, and we always come back to ourselves. We're the warriors. We have an agreement there's plenty in this world for both of us. We don't have to give each other up to anyone. You're my special angel. (35)

Lois Weaver and Paul Shaw join the scene, and the performers sing a reprise of “Special Angel.” The man disguised as a man, the woman disguised as a woman, the butch lesbian, and the man in a dress play different and extreme roles outside the dominant order of heterosexuality. Together, however, their collective presence suggests what queer culture might look and feel like when we allows ourselves to rely on the strangeness of strangers, rather than trying to make them look familiar.

Notes

[1]Bette Bourne, Paul Shaw, Peggy Shaw, and Lois Weaver, *Belle Reprieve*, in *Lesbian and Gay Plays Today*, ed. Terry Helbing (Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 1993), 5. Emphasis in original. All subsequent references hereafter cited within.

[2]Tennessee Williams, *A Streetcar Named Desire* (New York: Signet, 1951), 142. All subsequent references hereafter cited within.

[3]Deborah Geis, "Deconstructing (*A Streetcar Named*) *Desire*: Gender Re-citation in *Belle Reprieve*," *American Drama* 11 (Summer 2002).

[4]Alisa Solomon, *Re-dressing the Canon: Essays on the Theater and Gender* (New York: Routledge, 1997), 164. Emphasis in original.

[5]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), 91.

[6]Ibid., 81 and 88.

[7]Lois Weaver; quoted in Sue-Ellen Case, Introduction to *Split Britches: Lesbian Practice/Feminist Performance*, ed. Sue-Ellen Case (New York: Routledge, 1996), 28.

[8]Felicia Hardison Londré, "A Streetcar Running Fifty Years," in *The Cambridge Companion to Tennessee Williams*, ed. Matthew C. Roudané (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 1997. Emphases in original.

[9]For more on the utopic possibilities of theatre, see Jill Dolan, "Performance, Utopia, and the 'Utopian Performative,'" *Theatre Journal* 53 (October 2001): 455-79.

[10]C.W.E. Bigsby, "Entering *The Glass Menagerie*," in *The Cambridge Companion to Tennessee Williams*, 41.

[11]Elia Kazan, "Notebook for *A Streetcar Named Desire*," in *Directors on Directing: A Source Book of the Modern Theater*, rev. ed., ed. Toby Cole and Helen Krich Chinoy (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1963), 366.

[12]Shane Phelan, *Sexual Strangers: Gays, Lesbians, and Dilemmas of Citizenship* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2001).

[13]Fleche, 260.

[14]Laura Mulvey, "Pandora: Topographies of the Mask and Curiosity," in *Sexuality and Space*, ed. Beatriz Colomina (Princeton: Princeton Architectural Press, 1992), 52-71.

[15]Solomon, 160.

[16]Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Tendencies* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1993), 9. Judith Butler offers a contrasting view in *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of "Sex"* (New York: Routledge, 1993). According to Butler, identity is not a construction but "*a process of materialization that stabilizes over time to produce the effect of boundary, history, fixity, and surface we call matter*" (98; emphasis in original).

[17]Jill Dolan, *Geographies of Learning: Theory and Practice, Activism and Performance* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2001), 94.

[18]Ibid., 156.

[19]Case, 27.

[20]Jill Dolan, *Presence and Desire: Essays on Gender, Sexuality, Performance* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1993), 193.

[21]Solomon, 158.

[22]Laurence Senelick, *The Changing Room: Sex, Drag, and Theatre* (New York: Routledge, 2000), 490-91.

[23]Mary Ann Doane, *The Desire to Desire: The Woman's Film of the 1940s* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987); E. Ann Kaplan, *Women & Film: Both Sides of the Camera* (New York: Methuen, 1983); Laura Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," *Screen* 16 (Autumn 1975); Jill Dolan, *The Feminist Spectator as Critic* (Ann Arbor: UMI Press, 1988; reprint: Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1991.

[24]Peggy Shaw, interview with Kate Davy, in *Modern Drama: Plays/Criticism/Theory*, ed. W.B. Worthen (Fort Worth, TX: Harcourt Brace, 1995), 1004.

[25]Paul Shaw, *What's On*, 9 April 1991, 37; quoted in Case, 29.

[26]See Sue-Ellen Case, "Toward a Butch-Femme Aesthetic," in *Making a Spectacle*, ed. Lynda Hart (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1989), 282-99; Dolan, *The Feminist Spectator as Critic*; and Dolan, *Presence and Desire*.

[27]Michael Lowenthal, "The House O'Happy Queers at 281 State," in *Sister and Brother: Lesbians and Gay Men Write about Their Lives Together*, ed. Joan Nestle and John Preston (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1994), 84. Emphasis in original.

[28]Elin Diamond, *Unmaking Mimesis: Essays on Feminism and Theater* (New York: Routledge, 1997), 53. Emphasis in original.

CHAPTER FIVE

BEYOND SIMULATIONS: QUEER INTIMACY, SOCIALITY, AND THE THEATRE OF REZA ABDOH

On some level, the theatre of Reza Abdoh (1963-1995) defies description. His productions reject the linear logic of modern stage realism to expose the dark and chaotic nature of U.S. popular culture and history. In works like *Minamata* (1989), *Father Was a Peculiar Man* (1990), *The Hip Hop Waltz of Eurydice* (1990), *Bogeyman* (1992), *Law of the Remain*s (1992), *Tight Right White* (1993), and *Quotations from the Ruined City* (1994), Abdoh combines overt homoeroticism with visually striking and violent images of torture, cannibalism, lynching, rape, infanticide, and castration. He embraces the irrational and chaotic, producing a vision, David Román writes in a review of the Los Angeles Theatre Center's production of *Bogeyman* that "seems to be in synch with a growing constituency of fed-up non-majority peoples who find in Abdoh's theatre a voice who speaks of the risks by which we all live now."[1]

Describing Abdoh's vision is difficult in part because the work resists classification. In his discussion of *Quotations from the Ruined City*, John Bell locates Abdoh's productions within a history of avant-garde performance dating from nineteenth-century French symbolism and, more immediately, to a history of American experimental theatre dating from the Living Theatre and John Cage in the 1950s to the high postmodernism of Robert Wilson, Richard Foreman, and the Wooster Group. Bell regards Abdoh's productions as the "culmination of modernist and postmodernist theatre's fragmented, multimedia collage techniques."[2] Abdoh unarguably recycles avant-garde performance techniques, and acknowledges his indebtedness to high

modernism in an interview with Bell.[3] At the same time, however, Abdoh does not identify as an avant-garde artist. "I hate the word avant-garde," Abdoh tells Philippa Wehle in a 1993 interview.

> I'm a populist. I think of my work as popular entertainment. It engages a lot of ideas and a lot of your intellect because I believe in really physicalizing difficult ideas. I'm interested in the culture of the Apocalypse. I'm not interested in the culture of white bread normalcy. I'm interested in an alternative model, a model that is vicious and violent but that at the same time presents a hope for something that is not referential, some kind of religion beyond the organized models that we have.[4]

As described here, Abdoh's theatre combines the affective athleticism of Artaud's theatre with the intellectual appeal required by Brecht. Moreover, this resistance of the culture of white bread normalcy and the desire for an alternative model is based on a distinctly queer world view.

Abdoh acknowledges numerous influences on the development of his aesthetic, including the underground club culture that flourished in Los Angeles and New York during the 1990s. While other critics only mention the influence of club scene in passing, I contend that it holds a key to understanding Abdoh's theatrical vision. Club music "re-mixes" or recycles popular songs to create a new style, much in the same way that Abdoh's theatre recycles images from mass and popular culture to create an alternative model of social relations and theatre. The experience of going to a club, like the experience of attending one of Abdoh's productions, allows participants to play an active

role in giving meaning to that world. In *Impossible Dance: Club Culture and Queer World-Making*, Fiona Buckland suggests that social value of dance clubs for participants is the act of "queer world-making" that occurs within such venues. Buckland defines queer world-making as a "conscious, active way of fashioning the self and the environment, cognitively and physically, through embodied social practices moving through and clustered in the city" at various club venues.[5] Abdoh's theatre similarly is an embodied process that, in rejecting the culture of white-bred normalcy, makes a queer world by negotiating the dialectic among space, time, and the presence of social beings that defines theatre.

As an émigré artist of color, born in Iran and educated in London who also is HIV positive, Abdoh occupied a liminal cultural space. Marvin Carlson suggests that Abdoh's theatre distinguished itself from other gay performances, most notably performances that address the AIDS pandemic, by the very nature that Abdoh did not work as a solo artist but with an ensemble as a writer and director.[6] Indeed, Abdoh used the spectacle of theatre to mark the crisis of representation surrounding AIDS, re-mixing cultural artifacts to imagine a world beyond the simulation offered by normative heterosexuality. This chapter examines how this dynamic is manifested in Abdoh's last two works: *Tight Right White* and *Quotations from the Ruined City*.[7] *Tight Right White* recycles performance texts and techniques form blaxploitation films, slave narratives, minstrel shows, white supremacist documents, and German folk songs and dances to create a theatrical experience that assaults the senses, forcing audiences to experience the violence suppressed by a culture of white-bred normalcy. In contrast, *Quotations from the Ruined City* is a more reflective piece that stages the ruin of representation marked by AIDS.

Despite their formal differences, both *Tight Right White* and *Quotations from the Ruined City* use the theatricality of performance to imagine a more just world.

Tight Right White

AIDS profoundly informs both *Tight Right White* and *Quotations from the Ruined City*. AIDS is a "remarkably historicized phenomenon," Jeffrey Weeks writes, "framed by histories that burden people living with HIV and AIDS with a weight they should not have to bear."[8] The spectacle of AIDS has marked cultural difference, global interdependence, and the crisis of modernity heralded by postmodernism, opening a space to imagine what Weeks describes as a potentially "radical humanism" in which "the real challenge of living with uncertainty" begins by accepting diverse cultural and sexual practices.[9]

For the religious Right, AIDS represents not so much an historical crisis but a moral one in which the acknowledgement of alternative lifestyles threatens so-called "family values." Early in the history of pandemic, for example, some religious extremists used AIDS to create a panic about the disease being a God-sent plague. As Gayle Rubin points out, however: "Moral panics rarely alleviate any real problem because they are aimed at chimeras and signifiers. They draw on pre-existing discursive structures which invent victims in order to justify treating 'vices' as crimes."[10]

Abdoh's theatre confronts the moral panic surrounding AIDS on its own terms by working on the level of signifiers. Unlike the work of Pomo Afro Homos, which uses humor as an indirect forum of address to expose the encoded meanings in representations of gay black men, Abdoh directly challenges oppression by recycling unsavory and disturbing images. In the process, Abdoh does not empty meaning from these signs but

performs those meanings to excess. Instead, Abdoh bombards the audience with a ceaseless flood of disconnected words, phrases, and images: a frantic minuet, a slave auction where the genitals of a male and female slave are prominently displayed on the auction block; a scene in which a black man runs from three hooded clansmen carrying torches; a scene in which a naked man (whose entire body is painted red) shaves his genitals while a camera "records" and simultaneously projects the image on a video screen located behind the performer. The images do not contribute to the construction of a cohesive narrative. Instead, the rapid succession of scenes and images point to the inability to fix knowledge and understanding in the age of AIDS.

Simon Watney writes that "AIDS is not only a medical crisis on an unparalleled scale, it involves a crisis of representation, a crisis over the entire framing of knowledge, about the human body and its capability for sexual pleasure."[11] Homosexuality is at the heart of this discourse because the structure and maintenance of paternity requires the suppression and invisibility of same-sex desire, and in turn because the fight against AIDS demands the legitimization and visibility of that desire. The conflict is played out on an historical field where the acknowledgement of cultural differences threatens established institutions of knowledge. Thomas Yingling writes:

> The mathematical sublime . . . quickly gives way in the case of AIDS to what we might call the historical sublime, for even more than the mathematical, the historical sublime marks reading—and our stake in it, as an activity framed equally by demand and defeat, as the ground on which we are condemned to negotiate the difference between that which cannot

> be comprehended by the capacities of the intellect and that which can only be apprehended as beyond, in excess, or pitted against such capacities.[12]

AIDS is a crisis of such magnitude that it cannot be expressed in words. Indeed, AIDS produces an excess of meanings, not only about our capacity for knowledge as well as our conventional understandings of such concepts as sexuality, race, gender, class, nation, et cetera.

Yingling maintains that AIDS activism resisted co-option, at least in the early years of the pandemic, because its political use of spectacle resisted translation into use value (i.e., it resisted commodification).[13] Abdoh's theatre similarly puts spectacle to political use. *Tight Right White*, for example, marks the relationship among marginality, violence, and the process of writing history. Abdoh structures the performance loosely around the 1970s blaxploitation film *Mandingo*, which he reportedly found in his local video store. In Abdoh's deconstructive reading of the film, the patriarchy of the South is disrupted and threatened by the libidinal desires of the plantation heir and his wife (both figures are played by black actors in whiteface). The son's refusal to engage in heterosexual coupling threatens the continuity of the family blood line; in turn his wife's sexual desire for the slave Mandingo results in the birth of a child that threatens the so-called "purity" of the blood line.

Two other narratives compete with the Mandingo story. The first is the story of a black teenager named Blaster, who is constantly asked by television producers if he wants to be on TV. You have a "gem of a tale to tell on TV," the producer tells the young man. As it turns out, Blaster is the gem of a tale, as the producer ultimately wants to broadcast Blaster's death. The second narrative revolves around the figure of Moishe

Pipkik, a Borscht Belt comic who serves as the production's emcee. Played by actor Tony Torn in a loud plaid suit and fake nose, Moishe appears throughout the performance to tell blatantly offensive jokes. "A Turk and a Jew fall from a house. Who falls down faster?" Moishe asks one of the other performers. "The Turd is a turd, the Jew is ashes. The Turk lands first."[14] A heil gesture accentuates the punch line, pushing the already offensive joke over the edge to create an excessive moment that disarticulates the source of the joke's humor. "All images are part of a history of people and a part of their evolution, part of gaining power," claims Abdoh. "If you put it in a bin, it's still going to be there."[15]

In effect, Abdoh's theatre goes to the crux of what Andreas Huyssen describes as postmodernism's "veritable obsession with the past."[16] Unlike Lyotard, who associates postmodernity with amnesia and the decline of western civilization, Huyssen points to the construction of Holocaust memorials and monuments in the late twentieth century as a sign of the larger commitment to the project of remembrance: "Without memory, without reading the traces of the past, there can be no recognition of difference (Adorno called it 'nonidentity'), no tolerance of the rich complexities and instabilities of personal and cultural, political and national identities."[17] This obsession with the past, as Huyssen describes it, proves to be the crisis of modernity anticipated one hundred years earlier in Ernest Renan's famous discussion of nationhood. Renan identifies a nation's soul as the "rich legacy of memories" commonly shared by peoples with a "desire to live together."[18] History serves the project of the nation insofar as it provides a series of governing statements justifying present systems of power on the basis of past tragedies and triumphs. Official histories forget the presence of marginalized cultural groups and

their often violent subjection into becoming citizens. Indeed, Renan contends that forgetting is so fundamental to national identity that the very solidarity by which a nation defines itself is threatened when "historical enquiry brings to light deeds of violence which [take] place at the origin of all political formations.[19] I would go one step further to suggest that national solidarity is threatened when historical enquiry remembers difference by constantly marking its absence.

It was precisely on these grounds that AIDS was viewed as a threat to national security. "National identity requires an ideal conception of the body and rejection of accommodation to Otherness," explains Thomas Yingling.[20] To that end, AIDS threatens the solidarity of the nation-state because any acknowledgement of AIDS requires an open acknowledgement and genuine acceptance of sexual difference. Ironically, insofar as the nation is like any other subject in that it requires the production of an Other to define itself, it also produces the very object that results in its undoing. Culture becomes the means for policing the liminal space between such borders. That is to say, a nation preserves itself through the image its produces. But culture is also the arena where those images can be challenged and reimagined.

"Popular culture is the livelihood of this country," Abdoh tells Thomas Leabhart in an interview,

> and a lot of it gets manufactured in Hollywood, because Hollywood is the apex of the industry of image making. Image making is equal to economic power and economic subjugation; popular culture is not just about what is being sold on television, but about how your thought is being processed for you, how your thought is being determined.[21]

The central role played by culture on the process of identity formation is evident in the story of Blaster in *Tight Right White*. Blaster finds it difficult to locate himself within a cultural narrative:

> I'm a black man, and I don't know how to preach to no congregation. I'm too small to be a football player and I'm too ugly to elected mayor. When I watch TV and I see all of them people living in them fine homes they live in and all them nice cars they drive, and I get full of ambition. Now you tell me, what am I supposed to do with all this ambition I got? (74)

Moishe immediately responds by telling Blaster to "shove his black dick up [Moishe's] ass" (74). The excessiveness of the moment articulates the unspoken sexual fantasies about black men (i.e., their subjectivity is equated with their penis) that lurks in the subconscious of the American imaginary. Capitalism, in turn, remains the only other narrative available by which Blaster can define himself. Even there, however, Blaster fails to find himself.

Tight Right White challenges the conventional narratives made available through popular culture by performing them to excess. As a result, the production blasts open a space to imagine an alternative. For spectators, Michael Feingold comments, there's no escape in *Tight Right White*. Spectators cannot leave the performance even if they wanted to, as the audience is required to move throughout the space to eight different stages where images of violence, death, and decay are joined in what Abdoh calls a "quest for ecstasy, joy, and redemption."[22] According to Feingold, *Tight Right White* assaults audiences with a "nearly-two-hour barrage of obscenely racist images, for purgative purposes: a psychological enema, shoved up the id of liberal theatregoers to

expel the unhealthy imprints a racist society has implanted there."[23] Concerned only with the experience of liberal spectators, Feingold's review fails to consider what impact the production could have on the fed-up non majority peoples identified by David Román in his review of *Bogeyman*. Feingold imagines that disenfranchised groups would find *Tight Right White* offensive. "None of it makes sense," he writes, "but then neither does racism, to accuse Abdoh of which would be patently absurd—though I suspect large numbers of African, Asian, Jewish, and gay Americans would fail to see anything in his work bout a hideous outpouring of filth."[24]

Rather than cleansing the psyche, *Tight Right White* returns to the primal scene and all its excessive meanings. To that end, spectators become implicated in the production. They are both inside and outside the performance, constantly aware of their gaze in the spectacle of subjugation that the performers enact. Like Artaud, who claimed to recite poetry not to be applauded but to experience "the bodies of men and women . . . tremble in unison with [his] own,"[25] the performers in *Tight Right White* share the labor of making theatre with the audience. The physical demands made on the actors are visually evident in the sweat that washes away the paint from their bodies; the audience too catches its breath from moving between locations within the space, feeling the base line of the music pulsating through their bodies. In the process, spectators become conscious of their relationship to the images staged before them.

While critics like Feingold might dismiss the production on the grounds that it is too excessive, Abdoh defends his work against such terms. He maintains that "when you deal with a world that prides itself on so desperately clinging to sanity that it will ignore deafening cries for help, excess is not such a bad thing."[26] Beth Coleman suggests that

"the law of disorder . . . in *Tight Right White* levels a larger critique of American stage realism and the very notion of 'story.' To have a 'narrative' in some ways implies one has a home, is located, and locatable."[27] Jill Dolan similarly describes realism as a type of family drama that marginalizes people of color because it assumes a white, middle-class, male-dominated family as the norm, and that in turn excludes lesbians and gay men from its narrative because it takes heterosexuality as the norm.[28]

In this case of *Tight Right White*, however, while Abdoh raises challenging questions about how white heteronormativity works through popular culture, it never suggests an answer (nor does it indicate where such answers might be found). Despite its social critique, the production seems remarkably apolitical. Abdoh himself refused in interviews to subscribe to a political world view, preferring to call himself a poet of the theatre. The burden of making sense of the production is finally placed on the audience. Throughout the production, the actors recite the phrases "Wake up dead man!" and "Who will be the witness?" from a collection of African American chain songs. The implication is that the audience bears witness to the oppressive history that has been staged around it. What exactly they do with that knowledge is never articulated, nor is it necessarily something that can be expected of theatre.

Peggy Phelan takes up the subject of witnessing in her provocative discussion of performance and the paintings of Caravaggio. Drawing on Renaissance theories of perspective, Phelan suggests that theatre, like Renaissance painting, imagines an ideal spectator who never appears but is nevertheless summoned by the artist:

> Western theatre is itself predicated on the belief that there is an audience, an Other willing to be cast in the role of auditor. The "act" at the heart of

> theatre making is the leap of faith that someone (that ideal spectator some call "God") will indeed see, hear, and love those brave enough to admit that this is the movement that keeps us from our deaths (or at least from permanently dark houses). The psychic problem raised by theatre is that it remains a perpetual rehearsal. The one for whom the theatre maker makes the piece never arrives for the performance. ("Nobody/bears witness for the/witness.") This is why theatre remains an art rather than a cure.[29]

Phelan explains why cures are always in great demand even though they often remain elusive. The desire for an alternative world represented by a cure is a driving force in queer theatre and culture in the age of AIDS. Jill Dolan maintains that theatre and performance offer the promise of such utopias that, even though they cannot be realized, can be "imagined or experienced affectively through feelings, in small, incremental moments that performance can provide."[30] To this end, *Tight Right White* stages a catharsis that does not purge but engages emotions in the act of queer world-making. Audiences affectively bear witness to oppression so they can begin to imagine a more just alternative.[31]

Quotations from the Ruined City

Though far more lyrical than *Tight Right White*, *Quotations from the Ruined City* also engages the utopic promise of theatre and its failure to provide a cure. Co-written with Reza's younger brother, Salar Abdoh, *Quotations from the Ruined City* moves between locations, specifically the cities of Sarajevo, Los Angeles, and New York, to stage the ruin of representation. The performance takes place in a found space, the top floor of an abandoned pajama factory in Manhattan's Meat Packing District. Amidst the

broken machines, Abdoh constructs a space that differentiates the worlds of the spectators and performers. The worlds literally are separated by strings of barbed wire that run the length of a white rectangular platform on which most of the action occurs. Two video monitors suspended above the stage flank the platform. White boxes marked "Laundry Detergent" are neatly stacked in a pyramid that looms behind the main platform. The pyramid is flanked by two large metal boxes in which openings have been cut to reveal only the faces of the performers standing inside. A clothesline on which carcasses of meat and bloodied laundry are hung runs across the rear of the platform. Unlike *Tight Right White*, the audience remains seated throughout the production.

The performance space is hidden from the audience as they enter the floor. From behind a closed curtain, sounds of the actors warming up can be heard. At both the performances I attended, Abdoh mingled among the audience. His presence was a reminder that the production that we were about to see was the work of an artist dying of AIDS. When the audience was finally let into the performance space, they took their seats on the platforms that had been set up for them. Abdoh, in turn, assumed his position, standing behind and slightly above the rows of audience members. In effect, he assumed the role of "ideal spectator" that would have been occupied by the monarch in a Renaissance court spectacle as well as the one described in modern theories of directing as well as theories of feminist performance.

As Abdoh's last work, *Quotations from the Ruined City* is shrouded with an excess of meanings. Tim Lawrence notes that the last works of artists who have died from AIDS complications frequently are represented as catastrophic displays of ravagement.[32] Like Derek Jarman (the subject of Lawrence's essay), Reza Abdoh resists

the trope associated with last works by producing a work that deliberately fails to provide easy answers. It lives beyond the artist's death, serving as constant reminder of the challenges that AIDS continues to ask of our culture and that Abdoh asks of theatre and performance. In a time when both the gay and mainstream media entertain the possibility of the end of AIDS, David Román concludes that cultural critics should "delve into the difficult questions AIDS continues to pose instead of opting for the comfort of a culture that is supposedly not about AIDS."[33] *Quotations from the Ruined City* on the surface may not appear to be about AIDS, but the presence of the artist dying from AIDS in the audience reminds us that AIDS has pervaded our understanding of all social relationships, including what those relationships ultimately look like.

As the audience enters the performance space for *Quotations from the Ruined City*, spectators encounter what appears to be a graveyard populated by still bodies dressed in white mummy costumes. Some hold funerary wreaths. The disembodied voices of the men in the boxes are heard through the television monitors. "The ruin is infested nowadays," one says. "I return to the ruin . . . Because I am done romancing the gutter."[34] Throughout the ninety-minute performance, images from American popular culture (e.g., the chopsticks scene from *The Seven Year Itch*) as well as film footage from war-torn Bosnia play on the television screens. The ensemble recites lines from American sitcoms like *The Brady Bunch*, sings campfire songs, and reenacts the torture of the Muslim soldier Mustafa.

The fate of two anonymous male lovers serves as a unifying force for the production's narrative. They physically torture each other throughout the production, each act of mutilation becoming more and more violent. At one point, they undress and

"gently fuck" (as the stage directions describe it) while the rest of the ensemble (dressed in scouting uniforms) stands to the side singing a campfire song. Shortly thereafter the ensemble rushes toward the barbed-wire fence, and in a frenetic dance, tears down the fence and runs into the audience. The lovers remain onstage, however, holding each other in a tender embrace. One observes that the "easiest victories are the most costly." "We are bound the past as we cling to the memory of the ruined city," the other says, as the lovers cling to each other (135-36).

In his reading of the production, John Bell suggests that Abdoh resists a sentimental ending:

> It is not a "real" happy ending, but a passably happy one, not unlike Hollywood might do if it made 1990s MGM-style musicals about queer young men finding strength and spiritual redemption. But Abdoh was not content to let romance reign alone. Following the men's embrace, the last illuminated image is four larger-than-life-size sides of beef hanging upstage: dead meat.[35]

The juxtaposition described by Bell is indeed jarring, but the final tableau resonates with me differently. The final image I recall is the two men holding each other as the lights fade. The moment of tenderness may be disturbing for some audiences, in the same way that the earlier moment in which the actors simulated sexual intercourse may have been pleasurable for some spectators yet disturbing to others (or, as noted in the previous chapter, that the excessive representation of lesbian sexuality in *Belle Reprieve* generated mixed responses among spectators). Bell takes the simulation as being real, claiming that "half of the audience did not even notice the two lovers' graphic intercourse" amidst the

other images onstage.[36] Such a claim can never be proven. If it could, it may point to a larger apprehension about same-sex desire and about the spectacle of male-male sodomy more specifically.

Lee Edelman writes:

> Any representation of sodomy between two men is a threat to the epistemological security of the observer—whether a heterosexual male himself or merely heterosexual-male identified—for who the vision of the sodomitical encounter refutes the determinacy of positional distinctions and compels him to confront his too clear implication in a spectacle that, from the perspective of castration, can only be seen as "catastrophe."[37]

Edelman suggests that the staging of sodomy marks a return to the primal scene, producing catastrophe when the viewer is shown that the penis has not been cut off as the threat of castration demands. If, as Leo Bersani suggests, the rectum is both the ultimate site of male self denial and "the grave in which the masculine ideal . . . of proud subjectivity is buried," then sodomy is potentially transgressive because it produces a logic of reversal that, in Edelman's words, "threatens to reduce the play of history to the finality of an endgame."[38]

Within the psychoanalytic framework suggested by Edelman and Bersani, the simulated act of sodomy in *Quotations from the Ruined City* reduces history to the finality of an endgame. The spectacle averted by Bell in his discussion requires not only the acknowledgement but the recognition of an Other. It demands to be seen. In the final analysis, however, a psychoanalytic reading of this moment in performance focuses on its effect on the straight white male viewer. It fails to consider the moment as an enactment

of an alternative social model that rejects the primacy of male heterosexuality as well as the utopic feeling performed in what Dolan identifies as the intersubjective moments that occur in performance between performers and among performers and spectators.[39]

In "Not About AIDS," David Román describes performance as "a cultural practice that does more than illustrate the social and historical context in which it is imbedded. At its best, it shapes and transforms the way we understand and experience our lives."[40] Thus, in *Quotations from the Ruined City*, when the two male lovers engage in a simulated act of sexual intimacy, the spectacle of sodomy stages a moment of interconnection that holds out the utopian promise of re-imagining social relationships. "Marx was right," Tony Kushner writes in the afterword to *Perestroika*, "the smallest individual human unit is two people, not one; one is a fiction."[41] Indeed, change occurs in *Quotations from the Ruined City* not on the macro level but in the microcosm between the two lovers. Similarly, in the theatre, social change occurs in the microcosm between the performer and spectator who share responsibility for negotiating meaning and imagining an alternative world, even if it is forever beyond their reach.

Abdoh's refusal to identify with a political position or to settle on a "happy ending" produces ambivalence, frustration, and excitement about his work, much the same way that ambivalence and excitement circulate in and around Kushner's *Angels in America*. *Angels in America* uses the international crisis marked by the end of the Cold War to imagine a radical perestroika. According to David Savran, "*Angels in America* aims to re-conceptualize and reclaim humanism, to think beyond internalized oppression, and to take up Fanon's challenge in the name of a queer internationalism" based on the interconnectedness of humanity." [42] Savran maintains, however, that "*Angels*'

mobilization of a consensual politic (masquerading as *dis*sensual) is precisely the source not only of the play's ambivalence but also of its ability to be instantly recognized as part of the canon of American literature."[43] In contrast, Janelle Reinelt suggests that the pluralism of *Angels in America* models a theatrical practice that contributes to the project of radical democracy.[44]

Kushner attempts the impossible with *Angels in America.* He uses what Dolan regards as the utopic promise of theatre and performance to imagine an alternative world. Change occurs not on the macro but on the micro level in the intersubjective exchanges between and among characters. *Perestroika* ends with an epilogue set at the Bethesda Fountain in New York's Central Park with Louis, Belize, Hannah, and Harper debating the meaning of the New Internationalism promised by perestroika. The journey they have shared in the play has brought them together, transforming their identities as well as their relationships with one another. Such subtle changes may be the first steps toward an alternative world that relies on what Hannah describes as our "interconnectedness," or what Blanche in *Belle Reprieve* describes as the "strangeness of strangers."[45]

Like *Angels in America*, *Quotations from the Ruined City* uses the international crisis marked by AIDS to imagine a more radical form of democracy. Unlike Kushner, however, Abdoh refuses to stage this utopia. The pastoral idyllism of Abdoh's final image is located in the intimate bond between the two male lovers, which is connected to the larger social world of the play. A sense of hope emerges from the production's mourning, but it doesn't serve as the final outcome or conclusion of the piece. As is the case with *Angels in America*, which ends with a blessing of the audience, the "great work" to be done by *Quotations from the Ruined City* and queer theatre more generally

begins outside the play. It is within the audience and its ability and willingness to continue to ask the questions that redefine what the social might look like and that makes theatre a dynamic social institution. "You need an idea of the world to go out into the world. But it's the going that makes the idea," Hannah says in *Perestroika*. "You can't wait for a theory, but you have to have a theory."[46] *Quotations from the Ruined City*, like the other performances discussed in this dissertation, demonstrates how theatre enacts different theories of the world. Theatre fills us with ideas, perspectives, and experiences that transform the way we go out into the world and that have the potential to connect us with others in profoundly new ways.

Notes

[1]David Román, Review of *Bogeyman*, Los Angeles Theatre Center, *Theatre Journal* 44 (October 1992): 395-96.

[2]John Bell, "AIDS and Avantgarde Classicism: Reza Abdoh's *Quotations from the Ruined City*," *TDR: The Journal of Performance Studies* 39 (Winter 1995): 21.

[3]John Bell, "'To Reach Divinity Through the Act of Performance': An Interview with Reza Abdoh," *TDR: The Journal of Performance Studies* 39 (Winter 1995): 48-71.

[4]Philippa Wehle, "Reza Abdoh and *Tight Right White*," interview with Reza Abdoh, *TheatreForum* 4 (Fall/Winter 1994): 61-62.

[5]Fiona Buckland, *Impossible Dance: Club Culture and Queer World-Making* (Middleton, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2002), 19.

[6]Marvin Carlson, "Back to the Basics," in *Reza Abdoh*, ed. Daniel Mufson (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999), 122. Solo performance was not the only theatrical form used by gay male artists to respond to the AIDS pandemic. For a survey of the different representational strategies used in AIDS theatre, see David Román, *Acts of Intervention: Gay Culture, Performance, and AIDS* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1998).

[7]I attended the Dar a Luz production of *Tight Right White* in New York City in February 1993 and the Dar a Luz production of *Quotations from the Ruined City* in New York in February and March 1996.

[8]Jeffrey Weeks, *Invented Moralities: Sexual Values in an Age of Uncertainty* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1995), 16.

[9]Ibid.

[10]Gayle S. Rubin, "Thinking Sex: Notes for a Radical Theory of the Politics of Sexuality," in *The Lesbian and Gay Studies Reader*, ed. Henry Abelove, Michèle Aina Barale, and David M. Halperin (New York: Routledge, 1993), 25.

[11]Simon Watney, *Policing Desire: Pornography, AIDS, and the Media* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987), 9.

[12]Thomas Yingling, "AIDS in America: Postmodern Governance, Identity, and Experience," in *Inside/Out: Lesbian Theories, Gay Theories*, ed. Diana Fuss (New York: Routledge, 1991), 292.

[13]Ibid., 296.

[14]Reza Abdoh, *Tight Right White*, *TheatreForum* 4 (Winter/Spring 1994): 68. All subsequent references will hereafter be cited within.

[15]Reza Abdoh; quoted in Beth Coleman, "It's a Family Affair," *Village Voice*, 16 March 1993, 39.

[16]Andreas Huyssen, "Monument and Memory in a Postmodern Age," in *The Art of Memory: Holocaust Memorials in History*, ed. James E. Young (Munich: Prestel-Verlag, 1994), 11.

[17]Ibid., 16.

[18]Ernest Renan, "What Is a Nation?" trans. Martin Thom, in *Nation and Narration*, ed. Homi K. Bhabha (New York: Routledge, 1990), 19.

[19]Ibid., 11.

[20]Thomas E. Yingling, "Wittengstein's Tumor: AIDS and the National Body," in *AIDS and the National Body*, ed. Robyn Wiegman (Durham: Duke University Press, 1997), 25.

[21]Thomas Leabhart, interview with Reza Abdoh, in *Reza Abdoh*, 39.

[22]Michael Feingold, "Artaud You So," in *Reza Abdoh*, 104; Reza Abdoh, Press Release for *Tight Right White*, Clippings File, Billy Rose Theatre Collection, New York Public Library, New York, NY.

[23]Feingold.

[24]Ibid., 106.

[25]Antonin Artaud, "Letter to Henri Parisot, 6 October 1995, trans. Helen Weaver, in *Selected Writings*, ed. Susan Sontag (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1976; reprint, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988), 452.

[26]Reza Abdoh; quoted in Doug Sadownick, "To Hell and Back," *The Advocate*, 12 March 1991, 71.

[27]Coleman.

[28]Jill Dolan, *Presence and Desire: Essays on Gender, Sexuality, Performance* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1993), 139.

[29]Peggy Phelan, *Mourning Sex: Performing Public Memories* (New York: Routledge, 1997), 31.

[30]Jill Dolan, "Performance, Utopia, and the 'Utopian Performative,'" *Theatre Journal* 53 (October 2001): 460.

[31]For a more extensive discussion of the utopic in *Tight Right White* and its sociopolitical implications, see Ehren Fordyce, "This is Home, This Isn't Home: Reza Abdoh's *Tight Right White*," *Modern Drama* 47 (Summer 2004): 214-36.

[32]Tim Lawrence, "AIDS, the Problem of Representation, and Plurality in Derek Jarman's *Blue*," *Social Text* 52-53 (1998): 241-64.

[33]David Román, "Not-About-AIDS," *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 6.1 (2000): 23.

[34]Reza Abdoh and Salar Abdoh, *Quotations from the Ruined City, TDR: The Journal of Performance Studies* 39 (Winter 1998): 109. Ellipsis in original. All subsequent references hereafter will be cited within.

[35]Bell, 33.

[36]Ibid., 24.

[37]Lee Edelman, "Seeing Things: Representation, the Scene of Surveillance, and the Spectacle of Gay Male Sex," in *Inside/Out*, 106-7.

[38]Leo Bersani, "Is the Rectum a Grave?" *October* 43 (1987): 222; Edelman, 104.

[39]Dolan, "Performance, Utopia, and the 'Utopian Performative'," 471.

[40]Román, "Not-About-AIDS," 8.

[41]Tony Kushner, Afterword to *Angels in America: A Gay Fantasia on National Themes*, Part Two: *Perestroika* (New York: Theatre Communications Group, 1993), 158.

[42]David Savran, *Taking It Like a Man: White Masculinity, Masochism, and Contemporary American Culture* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998), 292. Emphasis in original.

[43]Ibid., 272. Emphasis in original.

[44]Janelle G. Reinelt, "Notes for a Radical Democratic Theater: Productive Crises and the Challenge of Indeterminancy," in *Staging Resistance: Essays on Political Theater*, ed. Jeanne Colleran and Jenny S. Spencer (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1998), 283-300.

[45]Kushner, 146.

[46]Ibid., 147.

EPILOGUE

> HARPER: Nothing's lost forever. In this world, there is a kind of painful progress. Longing for what we've left behind, and dreaming ahead.
>
> –Tony Kushner, *Angels in America*[1]

"Queer theater has lost its radical juice," Charles McNulty writes in his review of 2002 Queer@Here Festival, in large part because the queer movement has become "almost completely moribund."[2] In the 1980s, cultural invisibility and social indifference to the medical emergency of AIDS fueled the anger and creativity of queer activists who demanded social justice and equality. Street activism functioned as a kind of political theatre, at the same time that theatre functioned as a kind of political activism that addressed the pressing needs of queer communities. Now that mainstream society welcomes "respectable" gay men and lesbians into its fold, McNulty maintains that queer theatre has settled into a "comfortable mediocrity" illustrated by theatre festivals and productions that are queer in name only. "As a gay man in his mid-thirties, who once held such hope of an integrated and engaged community, it's hard for me not to be disappointed by the lackluster turn in our theatrical and political affairs," writes McNulty. "The theatrical silence post-*Angels in America* on meaningful gay and lesbian subjects has been appalling."[3]

As a similarly-aged gay man, I easily identify with McNulty's assessment of queer theatre and politics. While cultural and political visibility is preferable to the invisibility that historically accompanied the stigmatization of sexual difference, I cannot help feeling that something valuable has been lost in the name of progress. The emphasis that the national gay rights movement places on mainstream integration sharply contrasts

the progressive politics imagined in the late 1980s and early 1990s (which itself re-imagined the progressive politics of the 1960s). Mainstreaming offers social enfranchisement through a reassertion of gender, racial, and economic privilege that divides rather than unites queer communities. At the same time, what passes as queer theatre in both mainstream and subcultural venues is a homogenized representation of queer lives that fails to address the differences among queer constituencies. Yet, as McNulty notes, while it's undoubtedly easier to watch a gay sitcom in the comfort of one's own home, I find myself returning to the theatre in the belief that nothing's lost forever, including theatre's potential as a transformative cultural practice.

In a discussion of theatre's democratic possibilities, Janelle Reinelt suggests that "the optimal relationship between theatre and society is one in which theatre, as a cultural practice, has an active role to play in the discovery, construction, maintenance, and critique of forms of sociality appropriate to that society."[4] In the late 1980s and early 1990s, queer theatre actively participated in the imagining of a more progressive democracy through the insistence that queers be seen and acknowledged. The visibility won through the labor of queer activists, however, has altered the once antagonistic relationship between queer theatre and mainstream society. As mainstream society embraces certain aspects of queer culture and life, queer theatre has become more a reflection than a critique of mainstream society. Mainstreaming, as noted in the introduction, is an ideological embodiment of cultural and political norms that works through a stable repetition of patterns and images. Theatre, however, as a simulacrum of historical and cultural processes, relies on a reproductive logic that never is stable. It is a remarkably self-conscious art form that continually calls attention to its artifice and, as a

result, to its ideological investments. In productions like *Victor/Victoria* and *Rent*, for example, which arguably participate in the process of mainstreaming by adhering to the cultural norms prescribed by heterosexuality, the theatricality of performance results in moments that expose its cultural and political workings. Reza Abdoh's theatre illustrates how an excessive theatricality can disrupt the repetition of cultural and political norms by refusing to forget difference. To that end, his theatre offers a countermemory to the smooth narrative of social progress associated with mainstreaming and that haunts the contemporary reception of Mart Crowley's *The Boys in the Band.* In turn, *Belle Reprieve* and *Dark Fruit* employ theatricality to enact a politics of pleasure that challenges the reinscription of white men as the norm in queer communities. Together, these performances are part of a shared cultural memory bank that contradict and resist the larger historical narrative of gay politics at the same time that they demonstrate the logic on which it thrives.

The historical knowledge enacted in performance arguably makes theatre a valuable form for addressing the challenges facing the GLBT movement today. Historian John D'Emilio suggests that, since the 1950s, progress in gay politics has occurred in a series of fits and starts in which periods of intense activity (such as the bursts of activity following the Stonewall riots in 1969 or the founding of ACT-UP and the March on Washington in 1987) are followed by periods of prolonged institution-building that lay the foundation to support the movement in its next leap forward. The gay movement currently is in a period of building institutions. Unlike earlier movements of institution-building, however, the gay movement is struggling with what D'Emilio describes as a "strategic incoherence" between the goals and agenda of contemporary gay politics:

> In previous periods, goals, methods, and strategic vision worked in tandem with one another. Today, the gay and lesbian movement still places high value on a strategic vision that emphasizes coming out and community building, but the actual goals toward which activism is directed—goals around family, school, and work encapsulated by the outlook "we want in"—will not best be served by primary emphasis on coming out and building community. Access to equity within the key structures of American life will instead require that winning allies becomes a priority.[5]

To that end, rather than forming meaningful alliances with other disenfranchised groups, the leadership of the national gay rights movement increasingly has sought allies within straight America by offering non-threatening appeals that capitulate to heterosexual norms. The emphasis placed on the goal of integration ignores problems within the GLBT community and, in the long term, significantly limit its vision of the future. For example, in response to the passing of eleven out of eleven anti-gay ballot measures in the 2004 election, the board of directors of the Human Rights Campaign (HRC) asked for the resignation of its newly-appointed executive director, appointed its first straight-identified board co-chair, and considered taking a less aggressive approach to achieving equality that included, as one possibility, support for the privatization of social security as a bartering chip with the Bush administration.[6] For longtime activist Larry Kramer, the ineffectiveness of national organizations like HRC to stand up against the triumph of neo-liberalism heralded by Bush's reelection, marks the slow death of the gay rights movement in the United States.[7] Indeed, it seems that the institutions on

which the future of the gay rights movement will be built are failing us. We need a new strategic vision that balances the goals of integration and liberation.

At a time when the gay community is preoccupied with consumption and domesticity and is becoming increasingly privatized and depoliticized, a public forum like the theatre is an important venue to address debates about the political vision of gay politics. Theatre can never replace politics, but it can contribute to the imagining of a just, equitable, and liberating political future. Unfortunately, theatre has not enjoyed the same institution-building experienced by the larger gay political movement. Arts funding continues to decrease, politically engaged and savvy artists who once worked in alternative spaces understandably seek greater security in more mainstream venues, and, as McNulty notes, much of the work that is produced in subcultural or community-based theatre often is void of political conviction or imagination.[8] Despite the obstacles, and the material challenges facing queer theatre and contemporary theatre more generally, the potential to engage, critique, challenge, and imagine is always at play. The question is what we choose to make of it.

Notes

[1]Tony Kushner, *Angels in America: A Gay Fantasia on National Themes*, Part Two: *Perestroika* (New York: Theatre Communications Group, 1993), 144.

[2]Charles McNulty, "Theater's Queer Fate," *Village Voice*, 26 June 2002.

[3]Ibid.

[4]Janelle Reinelt, "Notes for a Radical Democratic Theater: Productive Crises and the Challenge of Indeterminacy," in *Staging Resistance: Essays on Political Theater*, ed. Jeanne Colleran and Jenny S. Spencer (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1998), 283.

[5]John D'Emilio, "Cycles of Change, Questions of Strategy The Gay and Lesbian Movement after Fifty Years," in *The Politics of Gay Rights*, ed. Craig A. Rimmerman, Kenneth D. Wald, and Clyde Wilcox (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 50.

[6]John M. Broder, "Groups Debate Slower Strategy on Gay Rights," *New York Times*, 9 December 2004.

[7]Alisa Solomon, "'You Can Never Not Fight Back!'" interview with Larry Kramer, *Village Voice*, 15 December 2004.

[8]For detailed reflections on the state of queer theatre, see Jill Dolan, *Geographies of Learning: Theory and Practice, Activism and Performance* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2001), 105-115; and David Savran, *A Queer Sort of Materialism: Recontextualizing American Theater* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2003), 56-81.

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