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LADY BRIGHT AND HER CHILDREN:
CONTEMPORARY AMERICAN
GAY DRAMA

A Dissertation

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Degree

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Charles A. Rees

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DEDICATION

To Cyndi, who gave me purpose;

To Laurie, who gave me courage;

And to Billy,

who makes it all make sense.

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ABSTRACT

Prior to the 1960's, American drama's treatment of homosexuality was marked by evasion and condemnation. Most homosexual characters in serious drama, beginning with Henry Blake Fuller's At St. Judas' (1896) and continuing through plays by Tennessee Williams, Lillian Hellman, and others, died or rejected their homosexuality before the final curtain. Beginning in the 1960's, most notably with Lanford Wilson's The Madness of Lady Bright (1964), however, several plays have portrayed gay men in a more positive light.

The gay drama movement has been linked, in some ways, with the emergence of the gay rights movement, and dramatic developments have frequently paralleled sociopolitical changes. In the tumultuous political atmosphere of the later sixties and early seventies, gay dramatists questioned the place of politics in art. American gays developed a minority culture during the late seventies and early eighties, at the same time as they were achieving increased acceptance within the larger society. During this period, some playwrights, such as Doric Wilson and Richard Hall, chose to write for specifically gay audiences while others, like Harvey Fierstein and Martin Sherman, brought gay drama to mainstream audiences. The plays of the former

assumed a common field of knowledge and interest among their readers that the others could not; all of these plays, however, are gay in that they speak from a gay central consciousness on gay issues, unlike plays such as David Rabe's Streamers (1976), which examines homosexuality from a heterosexual perspective, or Lanford Wilson's Fifth of July (1978), which contains gay central characters but does not explore their being gay.

The sociopolitical event which has had the greatest impact on gay drama has been the AIDS crisis. Several plays about AIDS have appeared, and, for a while, even an established playwright, Eric Bentley, was unable to publish a gay play which did not mention the disease. Some AIDS plays have treated sociopolitical implications of the crisis, while at least one, Harvey Fierstein's Safe Sex, has used the disease as a metaphor. The future of gay drama is unknowable, but the continued influence of AIDS and related sociopolitical concerns seems certain.

PREFACE

Any study which deals with homosexuality must, in our culture, expect to find itself embedded in controversy. Some readers will have difficulty accepting the subject as an appropriate matter for polite discussion. Defense of a particular lifestyle lies within the domain of social scientists; this study, which focuses on gay drama in the United States, assumes that no such justification is needed.

Other readers will have problems which stem more from semantics than from mores, questions which reflect how recently we have begun to explore openly this aspect of our society. For these readers this preface will explain usage of certain terms which are frequently bandied about with only vague distinctions. The noun homosexual applies to any person whose primary sexual and affectional urges are directed toward a person or persons of the same gender. Homosexuality refers to specific acts; therefore, a person might engage in homosexual acts--as numerous social scientists assure us most males do under certain circumstances--without actually being a homosexual. Conversely, a person might engage in heterosexual acts--especially given cultural pressures to perform such behavior--but,

as defined by his/her basic nature, actually be a homosexual. While in life such matters are the private knowledge of the individual, generally speaking, in literature, we are provided enough insight into characters' motivations that we can reach conclusions about such matters.

In addition to the term homosexual, the more popular terms gay and lesbian are used. These terms allow a specificity of gender which becomes essential in acknowledging the "double jeopardy" faced by persons in our society who are both female and homosexual and in discussing an issue such as AIDS, which, though it has awakened the most heroic sympathies of the lesbian community, has not had the same impact there as in the gay male community. Such usage has become standard, as evidenced by the common phrasing, "gay/lesbian." I should also note that these terms, because of their implications of a people's right to choose their own labels, suggest a sense of self-affirmation not necessarily indicated by the use of the term homosexual.

Other terms of literary rather than sociological significance should also be defined here to avoid subsequent confusion. The terms drama, theater, and play have, in popular usage, become interchangeable, but careful criticism requires firm distinctions. Therefore, the term play will refer to an individual

literary work intended for performance; the term theater will be limited to references to performance matters and drama to the body of literature comprised of the texts of plays. Such a distinction acknowledges the dual nature of the play as both a theatrical piece, judgment of which must be based on the work of directors, actors, and many other agents, and a work of literature, which is the primary responsibility and credit of the playwright.

Practicalities have resulted in limiting consideration here to those plays which have been published. Accessibility to a play which exists only in performance is limited to memories of those in attendance, and the play ceases to exist, for all practical purposes, upon the death of the last member of its audience.

This study works within two other limitations which deserve explanation. This study is not, nor was it meant to be, an exhaustive listing of gay plays. The reader would be well advised to turn to Terry Helbing's Directory of Gay Plays for that service. It is, instead, a comprehensive study of trends and developments in gay drama in the United States since 1964.

This concentration on American plays is neither arbitrary nor chauvinistic. It is based on a practical

consideration of differing attitudes toward sexuality in various cultures and resultant differences in gay culture. Gay literature is, by its nature, influenced by the sociopolitical environment in which it originates; numerous sociological studies indicate that attitudes toward homosexuality in various societies are distinct enough to produce significant differences in gay expression in different countries. While the differences suggest an interesting study in comparative literature,such is not the terrain of the study here.

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CHAPTER 1

TOWARD A DEFINITION OF GAY DRAMA

In a 1965 review of Albee's Tiny Alice, Philip Roth queried:

> How long before a play is produced on Broadway in which the homosexual hero is presented as a homosexual, and not disguised as an angst-ridden priest, or an angry Negro, or an aging actress; or worst of all, Everyman?

While the question is less a plea for social tolerance than part of Roth's homophobic tirade against what he called Albee's "pansy prose," the critic would, within two decades, get more than he had bargained for.

Indeed, by the mid-1960's, only a few plays had presented characters or themes clearly identifiable as homosexual, and these presentations usually centered on false accusations or stereotypical characterizations. The language with which American drama had discussed homosexuality was, almost without exception, vague and moralistic.

However, just about the time Roth was decrying the absence of clearly identifiable homosexual characters on Broadway, Off-Off-Broadway plays such as Lanford Wilson's The Madness of Lady Bright and Robert Patrick's The Haunted Host were heralding the arrival of a new force in American drama. Ever-increasing numbers of gay characters began to appear, and by the mid-1980's plays such as Harvey Fierstein's Torch Song Trilogy and

Martin Sherman's Bent were bringing homosexual characters to Broadway, with not "an angst-ridden priest . . . or an aging actress" in the lot.

The developments which occurred in the twenty years from the mid-sixties through the mid-eighties brought into common usage the terms gay play, gay theater and gay drama. However, no commonly accepted definitions of these terms have been established, and few attempts have been made to chart the developments they identify. Instead these developments have generally been oversimplified by labelling plays about homosexuality as pre-Stonewall or post-Stonewall.

The allusion here is, of course, to the June, 1969, riots which erupted in New York's Greenwich Village when patrons resisted police attempts to close the Stonewall Inn, a gay bar. For the first time in this country's history, a large group of homosexuals resisted police harassment and attempted through violent action to effect a change in their treatment by society. The Stonewall Riots are commonly referred to as the beginning of the Gay Rights Movement in the United States.

Simply to label plays with reference to this specific historical event, however, is to ignore not only sociopolitical developments which preceded Stonewall but also significant details of the development of American drama's treatment of homosexuality.

This development, indeed, reflects changing social attitudes, but it also reflects other changes which were occurring in American drama throughout the sixties, the seventies, and the eighties.

There seems to have developed, since the early sixties, a movement which, while often closely allied in substance with the sociopolitical struggle for gay rights, is, in itself, a dramatic movement--though movement here might be taken to suggest not so much an organized attempt to bring about change as a general shifting of attitudes and practices. An assessment of plays which are part of this movement requires consideration of three issues: the value of the individual works; their significance within the movement; and the place of the movement, overall, within contemporary American drama. Such considerations are possible only within a framework which also takes into account prior and concurrent developments in both the dramatic and the sociopolitical realms and only on the basis of firmly established definitions for the terminology to be used, definitions which distinguish the plays of the movement from other plays about homosexuality and which take into consideration the variety among the plays which comprise the movement.

Early Homophile Activity

Citing Stonewall as the beginning of the struggle for fair treatment of homosexuals in the United States requires ignoring several significant pre-1969 developments. More than four decades earlier, on December 10, 1924, Illinois had approved the charter of a nonprofit group in Chicago called the Society for Human Rights. The Society stated as its purpose the promotion and protection of "the interests of people who by reasons of mental and physical abnormalities are abused and hindered in the legal pursuit of happiness . . ." (Katz, Gay American History 387). Such language may seem vague and is indeed couched in terminology which now seems reactionary at best, but Henry Berber, one of the organization's founders, was later to state this purpose more directly: "to ameliorate the plight of homosexuals" (Katz, Gay American History 388). The Society ended in 1925 with the arrest of several members on unsubstantiated charges (Katz, Gay American History 387).

Almost a quarter of a century passed before the next documented effort at organizing homosexuals came about. In 1951, the Mattachine Society of Los Angeles was formed, growing out of three years of efforts by Henry Hay. The group's purpose was to unite and to educate homosexuals and to fight the laws against homosexuality. In 1952, when one member was arrested

on charges of soliciting an officer to commit a homosexual act, the Society succeeded in having the case dismissed. Later, the organization suffered a split over rumors of Communist influence, but it continued to exist (Katz, Gay American History 406-420). The early fifties also saw the formation of ONE, Inc. and the publication of their ONE Magazine. The struggle for gay rights had begun.

The Daughters of Bilitis

The first lesbian organization in the United States, the Daughters of Bilitis, formed in San Francisco in 1955. The group published a newspaper called The Ladder, and eventually chapters formed in other cities (Katz, Gay American History 421).

The male-female separatism apparent in the early organizations has carried over through many areas of the Gay Rights Movement, including the movement within the theater. However, certain goals which had been articulated by the male groups were echoed in the Daughters of Bilitis' statement of purpose. This purpose included "education of the variant . . . to enable her to understand herself and make her adjustment to society" by, among other means, "advocating a means of behavior and dress acceptable to society." While the statement encouraged a degree of conformity, however, it also called for the "proposal of changes"

in "the penal code as it pertains to the homosexual" (Katz, Gay American History 426).

Though separate, these male and female groups shared common goals. They were all pre-Stonewall attempts at organizing and educating homosexuals and changing the attitudes of society at large.

The Significance of Stonewall

The Stonewall Riots, then, were not the first act of gay solidarity and resistance. Barbara Gittings, one of the early leaders of the Daughters of Bilitis, says:

> The militancy--the "we are the experts, not these non-Gays"--all that developed well before Stonewall, thanks largely to Frank Kameny; he was the first one who articulated a complete, coherent philosophy for the Gay movement. (Katz, Gay American History 427)

The philosophy of Kameny, founder of the Washington, D.C. Mattachine Society, contended against prevailing opinion that "homosexuality is not a sickness" (Katz, Gay American History 427). Such a philosophy laid the groundwork for changes which would occur in the sixties and seventies, both in the sociopolitical realm and in American drama.

Dennis Altman recognizes such pioneers as Kameny and acknowledges that a homophile movement was underway in the fifties and sixties, but he sees the years 1969 and 1970 as "an important dividing point" because of "the emergence of a much more militant and broadly

based gay movement," which was "characterized by a willingness to demand not just tolerance but total acceptance" (113). He also states that the new movement "rejected the existing organizations . . . as hopelessly accomodationist in both goals and methods" (114). Altman sees as a major element in that shift a change from viewing homosexuality as a sickness or a sin to "seeing homosexuals as a minority, with a specific life style"(6); the most apparent element of this change has been "the growth of a sense of community"(7) among gays.

These changes in the homophile movement are not unusual given the generally revolutionary atmosphere of the decade in which they occurred. Various other minorities began to demand, in louder voices than ever before, their civil rights, and gains made by black power advocates, who broke from groups such as the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, which they saw as accomodationist, encouraged increased militancy among other oppressed groups, including gays.

Stonewall stands, then, not as the virgin birth of a new movement, but as a change of directions. The homophile activities of several decades came together with a groundswell of popular support, and the product was a movement based on a new sense not just of

individual self-worth but also of community, a sense of a newly defined "we."

Homosexuality in Pre-1960's American Drama

Just as one would have to ignore elements of sociopolitical and intellectual history to state that the movement for fair treatment of homosexuals began in 1969, to state that American drama before the 1960's did not treat the subject of homosexuality would require ignoring several plays. Since homosexuality's first appearance in American drama in Henry Blake Fuller's At St. Judas' in 1896, the subject has been raised by several playwrights. How directly and how fairly their plays have treated such subject matter is, however, a different question.

Jeffrey Meyers, in his discussion of homosexuality in novels from 1890-1930, says that the literature of homosexuality is characterized by "reticence and evasion, obliqueness and indirection"(1), and a survey of American drama prior to the 1960's supports his view. Studies such as Kaier Curtin's We Can Always Call Them Bulgarians show that while homosexual characters have appeared on the American stage throughout the twentieth century, these characters, at least through the first half of the century, have frequently been disguised as heterosexuals, especially in plays imported from Britain. Thus only word-play, such as

Algernon's references to "bunburying" in Wilde's The Importance of Being Earnest, or a campy attitude, as in Noel Coward's comedies, served as clues, primarily for those "in the know," about the characters' real natures.

A few American plays, however, presented homosexual characters as homosexuals. Fuller's At Saint Judas' presents language and tones as well as certain elements of plot which would characterize American drama's discussion of homosexuality for almost seventy years. The one-act piece, which appeared in his collection The Puppet Booth in 1896, was never performed during Fuller's lifetime, and there is no record of any performance since his death (Curtin 19). Indeed, the elaborate stage directions which call for stained-glass windows to come to life seem to indicate that the play was not written for performance.

The plot is fairly simple: In the sacristy of St. Judas' Church, a bridegroom and his best man are preparing for a wedding. While they await the arrival of the bride, the groom recounts several attempts by an as-yet unexposed agent to stop the marriage. Eventually, the best man, who has already attributed his recent negative attitude toward the groom to the way in which his friend had informed him of his marriage plans--"In your sleep--your own pillow close to mine" (88-89)--confesses that he has been the hand behind the attempts to prevent the marriage, and he declares:

> I am here. And she will never be. You may wait, but you shall wait in vain. (He places his hand on the other's shoulder.) If she were to come, I should not let her have you. She shall not have you. Nobody shall have you. (96)

When the best man states, "I have loved you all my life . . . . The thought of her made me mad--made me desperate . . ." (98), the bridegroom presses him to commit suicide. The bridegroom, having now been informed of the bride's arrival, enters the church over "the body of a man in a pool of blood" (99).

The word homosexual does not appear in Fuller's play, of course, since the word was a new coinage at the time and did not come into standard usage until the 1920's (Katz, Almanac 16). Neither does he use any synonym then current. No one, however, has questioned the appropriateness of the term as a description of the best man's desires. In 1939, using language then in vogue, Constance M. Griffin wrote of "the best man's perverted efforts" (49), and in 1974, still using the language of the 1930's, Bernard R. Bowron described the play as an "indirect presentation of a perverse relationship" (174). John Pilkington states more directly that Fuller's play "deals covertly with the theme of homosexuality" (150). Discussing homosexuality without naming it, as Fuller does, is typical of the vague treatment afforded the subject in American drama of the first half of the twentieth century.

In Chester Erskin's melodramatic The Good (1938), the teenaged Howard's friendship with the choir master, Francis Duncan, is described only as "unnatural," and the two are referred to by the family doctor as "a baffling type" (Curtin 232),even though no doubt can exist about the nature of their relationship. Barry, in Rose Franken's 1943 drama, Outrageous Fortune, a young, "sensitive, artistic" man, is suspected by others and questions himself, but he is referred to only as having "too many F cells" (Curtin 257); no one ever states what the "F" stands for. Michel, the protagonist of Ruth and Augustus Goetz' 1954 play The Immoralist, a loose adaptation of Andre Gide's novel by the same name, declares, "I will never be silent again . . . I will say what I am like!" (Curtin 308), but the word homosexual is never spoken, and at least one member of the play's Broadway audience thought Michel's "problem" was cancer (Curtin 314).

Only Tennessee Williams was willing to be a bit more direct, and even his language on the subject is characterized by evasion. In Cat on a Hot Tin Roof (1955), Williams allows Maggie enough directness in speaking of Skipper's love for Brick and allows Big Daddy enough directness in recounting the relationship between Jack Straw and Peter Ochello that Brick easily identifies the subject of both conversations as "sodomy" (119), though none of the other characters uses such an

exact term. Catherine, in Suddenly Last Summer (1959), is similarly direct when she states that Sebastian had manipulated her and his mother into "procuring for him" (79), but she does so only under the influence of an injection under which "everything comes out, decent or not decent" (47) and, even then, in far less detail than is provided in her description of cannibalism. Williams presented more homosexual characters than any other playwright of the forties and fifties, but even he seemed reticent to label them explicitly. Thus, even Blanche's famous speech about Alan Grey, in A Streetcar Named Desire (1948), refers only to her husband's being "different" and to her having found him in a room with "an older man who had been his friend for years" (114).

However, though even Williams was unwilling to label precisely his characters' sexuality, neither he nor his contemporaries were unwilling to define what fate awaited such "different" or "baffling" types. The best man of At St. Judas' is but the first of several homosexual characters in American drama to have met death at his own hands. Alan Grey in A Streetcar Named Desire and Skipper in Cat on a Hot Tin Roof have both committed suicide before the play opens, driven to that end by a "normal" friend or loved one. Also, though Sebastian's violent death in Suddenly Last Summer is

not technically a suicide, an obvious element of self-sacrifice pervades his murder.

Besides death, homosexuals have two other alternative courses of action in American drama before the 1960's. They can challenge the accusations by marrying, or at least going to bed with, someone of the opposite sex, as do Tom Lee in Robert Anderson's Tea and Sympathy (1953) and Rodolpho in Arthur Miller's A View from the Bridge (1955). Or, if they cannot disprove the accusations, they can reform and try to build a heterosexual future, as do Barry in Outrageous Fortune and Michel in The Immoralist.

Seldom did the final curtain allow the audience to believe that one could continue to live a homosexual life. Mr. Duncan and Howard in The Good do run away together, as do Julian and Russell in Outrageous Fortune, but only at the sacrifice of home, family and friends and into an uncertain future. The Arabs of The Immoralist continue as before, but they live in a distant and heathen land. In Western society, homosexuals must not live happily ever after.

Evasive language and negative plots combine to provide the plays with a heavily moralistic tone, a tone that was obvious from the very beginning with At St. Judas'. Though Griffin describes that play as "decadent in theme and treatment" (49), the heavy-handed, judgmental attitude seems difficult to

overlook. When the bridegroom asks the meaning of the best man's declaration that he will not let the bride have his friend, "The Deadliest of the Seven Sins [a figure in one of the stained-glass windows] hides her face; it is too hideous for contemplation" (96), and the groom soon tells his best man, "You shall kill yourself . . . . You have no other road to redemption" (98). A final window comes to life as the suicide takes place, a depiction of the fall of Lucifer, and the reader is reminded of the play's epigraph linking Lucifer and Judas, as the victorious bridegroom, in an apocalyptic stride, steps over the body of his betrayer to claim his bride.

One can detect in the church's being named St. Judas' and in the closing comment that among the "thousand varied splotches of color" which the windows cast on the sacristy, the body of the best man is "broader and brighter than them all" (99), a touch of irony, and this ironic tone is further detected in the playwright's naming his homosexual character The Best Man. Any such irony, however, is overriden by the blatantly moralistic tone created not only by the church setting and the groom's preachments but also by the appearance of numerous personified virtues and vices, which threaten to turn the play into a Medieval morality drama, and by the playwright's call for a

background of Latin chanting, which threatens to turn the play into a Mass.

This moralistic tone with which Fuller presents a homosexual attraction persisted in the drama of the next several decades. It is apparent in the assumption of a good-evil dichotomy between heterosexuality and homosexuality, an assumption implicit in the choice demanded of homosexual characters: reform or be punished. It is also apparent in the view, supported by plays such as Tea and Sympathy, that a boy is better off being seduced by an older married woman than feeling too affectionate toward other males, as well as in the assumption that such an encounter will "cure" the boy, as it does in Outrageous Fortune. Even in The Good, where the male couple admit their feelings and survive, they do so only by rejecting all traditional virtues, represented by church, home and motherhood, and they stand as one example of the social evils besetting the family life of Howard's mother. Homosexuality is always presented as evil, either as a sin requiring repentance or punishment or as an illness requiring a cure.

This view of homosexuality as evil is reinforced by its use as an accusation of terrible impact. What appears to be the first male-male kissing in American drama, Eddie Carbone's kissing Rodolpho in Arthur Miller's A View from the Bridge, is not a sign of

affection but the vilest accusation the man can think of to hurl at his enemy, an accusation so vile that speaking it falsely is an indication of the depth to which Eddie has fallen and a sin for which he cannot be forgiven.

Lesbianism in Pre-1960's Drama

Even rarer than male homosexuality in pre-1960's American drama is lesbianism. Only a few lesbian characters ever appear, and they are presented with the same vagueness and negativity as their male counterparts.

In 1942's Cry Havoc by Allan R. Kenward, a story of military nurses in World War II, Stephany Polden, nicknamed Steve and described as "a large, raw-boned, muscular gal who carries herself like a man"(2) is suspect because of her overly affectionate care of wounded nurses. When one of the other nurses calls her a "freak," and refers to a nurse of whom Steve has been protective as "your Connie," she is "unable to believe what she's heard. Slowly the meaning of the accusation hits her" (55). Steve denies any wrongdoing, but she is uncertain of herself because of the charge. Later, Steve, unaware that Connie has just been revealed as a spy, tells her, "No one's going to hurt you any more, Connie, you or me . . . they just don't understand," just before Connie shoots and kills her (95-96). Once

again, a character tainted by even the possibility of a homosexual inclination cannot survive the final curtain.

Lesbians fared no better when the playwright was female. Lillian Hellman, in The Children's Hour (1934), presented Martha, the only acknowledged lesbian in American drama prior to the sixties. Martha and Karen, teachers at a girls' boarding school, are accused by a vicious student of having "sinful sexual knowledge of one another" (58), but the charges are disproven. When Martha then admits that she has indeed desired a more intimate relationship with her co-worker, Karen rejects her and pushes her to suicide. While Martha follows the path taken by Fuller's best man and others like him, Karen further vindicates herself through marriage.

Though Hellman chose to conform by allowing Martha to commit suicide, she must be credited with at least having allowed her characters to speak the nature of the charges against them. Such daring, however, is tempered by her having the youthful accuser whisper into her grandmother's ear when stating what she claims to have seen. Still, any direct language is notable when even Tennessee Williams left lesbianism as the Something Unspoken referred to in the title of the companion-piece to Suddenly Last Summer.

Vagueness was the rule, as was the death of any character who could not be freed from even the least

suspicion of homosexuality. These were the rules, at least, on those rare occasions when American drama chose to look seriously at male homosexuality and those even rarer occasions when it chose to acknowledge the possibility of lesbianism.

Homosexuality in Pre-1960's Comedy

If homosexuality is rare in serious American drama before the sixties, it is almost non-existent in comedies from that period. Only a few comedies even mention homosexuality, presumably because the issue was considered too serious for laughter or too risque to mention, except when warning against it. The few comedies which did include homosexual characters, however, differ somewhat from the more serious dramas in their treatment of the subject. Different, however, is not necessarily better. While the language the comedies used was less vague, it was also more derisive. Also, heavy moralizing, absent in the comedies, was replaced by stereotyping.

Two of these comedies refer more specifically to homosexuality than any other American plays of the first half of the Twentieth Century. Mae West's The Drag (1927) and The Pleasure Man (1928) both contain rather outrageous transvestites who joke about their attractions to other men. Despite the billing of The Drag as "a homosexual comedy," the characters in both

plays opt for terms such as "queen," "queer," "fairy," and "fag" (the terms West used in discussing homosexuals) (Curtin 71). Another American comedy from this period discussed homosexuality in the same sort of derisive language; heterosexual characters in Wolcott Gibbs' Season in the Sun (1952) describe homosexuals with phrases such as "queer as Dick's hatband" (27).

These plays combine such language with stereotypical images to portray homosexuals as objects of ridicule. In The Drag only one homosexual character is fully developed, and like so many of his contemporaries in more serious plays, he dies before the final curtain; when the play was revised as The Pleasure Man, this character's sexual preference was changed. Carried over from the original,however, were several "queens," campy transvestites who spent all of their time trying to seduce heterosexual men (Curtin 76).

The homosexual characters who appear in Gibbs' comedy as local color, since the play is set on Fire Island, a favorite gay vacation area, are just as stereotypical as West's "fairies." They are limp-wristed and are dressed in identical, brightly colored outfits. Their complaints about their accommodations and about having to walk "simply miles down to that village" are juxtaposed with two heterosexual men's discussion of the all-American sport, baseball (26-28). These characters are spared the reform-or-die ultimatum;

they are not referred to as evil or sick. They are never taken quite that seriously. In comedies, homosexuals exist only as the butt of heterosexual jokes.

Since the mouthpieces for such humor are generally males attesting to their own heterosexuality, West's role as chief propagator seems a bit unusual, but any expectation of sympathy for homosexual characters on the part of female playwrights is dimmed by recognition that both Rose Franken in Outrageous Fortune and Ruth Goetz in The Immoralist (in collaboration with her husband) had followed traditional paths of vagueness and moralism. Not until the sixties would a woman, Lorraine Hansberry, who had written letters of support to The Ladder, create a sympathetic homosexual male character. Until then, American playwrights presented homosexual characters who stood as examples of either evil or sickness or as objects of comic derision.

Early Departures from the Rule

Whether in comedy or in serious drama, then, homosexuality and homosexual characters did not fare well in American drama prior to the sixties. Within a decade, beginning in 1954, however, two American plays appeared which broke with tradition in their treatment of homosexuality. While neither of these is currently in publication, we know enough about them to recognize

that they did not follow in the pattern of At St. Judas'.

In 1954, ONE, Inc. published a play titled Game of Fools by James Fugate (a pseudonym for James Barr). The play has been summarized in Terry Helbing's Directory of Gay Plays:

> In the 1950's four men who go to school together have agreed to meet once a month to explore their gayness. On their last meeting, they are arrested on trumped up charges of sodomy so that a Mayor can get reelected on a clean-up campaign. Three plead guilty and one innocent. All are sent to prison for thirteen months and when they're released, one joins a monastery and another slits his throat. When the other two meet for a reunion four years later, one has gone into banking and plans to marry and the other has gone to Europe in his father's business, where he has found tolerance and freedom. When their visit is interrupted by detectives sent by one of the four's hysterical mother, the two decide to stay instead of returning to Europe, to fight prejudice and provide an example for other gay men. (42)

Game of Fools was produced only privately and distributed on a limited basis (Sarotte 31), but that it differed markedly from its contemporaries is obvious from Helbing's summary. The subject of homosexuality is apparently discussed without equivocation, and despite one man's suicide and another's entrance into monastic life, the conclusion seems to counter the prevailing repent-flee-or-die option with a call to arms. Fugate referred to himself as "an amateur propagandist" rather than a professional writer (Helbing 3), but one cannot

deny that his play was ahead of its time in its treatment of homosexuality.

One other play which seems to have anticipated the more complex handling of gay themes appeared in the very early sixties in New York's Caffe Cino, one of the first Off-Off-Broadway theaters. In 1961, Doric Wilson, who has been called "the dean of gay playwrights" (Chambers 5) presented, at the Cino, a piece called And Now She Dances. The one-act, which was reworked into a two-act fourteen years later, has been described as "a multi-level, theatrically stylized study of homophobia" (Helbing 71). William M. Hoffman cites it as "an angry blast at the trial of Wilde" (Gay Plays xxiv), and Helbing explains that it centers on a production of "Wilde's Salome as played by some of the characters of The Importance of Being Earnest," which "turns into a comic/chilling nightmare trial of a liberated, contemporary gay male" (71). Wilson's play, then, seems to stand with Game of Fools as an early attempt to escape ambiguity and evasiveness and to counter the negative moralistic tone which had until that time dominated American drama's treatment of homosexuality.

Developments in 1964

Even after the presentation of Fugate's and Wilson's plays, the developments which occurred in 1964

seem remarkable, perhaps just because so much happened in one year. Within that year three plays by major playwrights presented openly homosexual characters without the traditional evasion and moralizing, several new playwrights who would become major figures in gay drama began making names for themselves, and two of these new playwrights gave American drama sympathetic central characters who were unabashedly homosexual and totally human.

There is little coincidence in the fact that some of the first sympathetic presentations of homosexuals in American drama were written by black playwrights. Both Lorraine Hansberry and Imamu Baraka (Le Roi Jones) used homosexual characters as representatives of oppressed peoples, reflecting the relationship among the various minority rights movements of the period.

Hansberry, in her melodrama, The Sign in Sidney Brustein's Window, created David Ragin, who is described as "not in the least--'swish'" (55). His chief role, however, seems to be filling out a roster of minority representatives along with a black man, a Jew, and a prostitute. He is not stereotypical, but neither is he the focus of the play. More significant than this single character, though, is a scene in which the title character calls sex laws "silly" and challenges David to work to change them (66), a far cry from the moralism of earlier decades. It is interesting to note that

Sidney's views seem to echo those expressed years earlier in Hansberry's letters to The Ladder (Katz, Gay American History 425).

The undisputed leader of Black theater, Baraka, presented two plays in 1964 which feature clearly identified homosexual characters. In The Baptism, a character named Homosexual argues with a character named Minister and tries to convince Boy not to be baptized. Homosexual is indeed stereotypical--he is described as "queenly" (9)--but all of the characters are stereotypes. And though he opposes Minister, his is not a battle of evil against good but a resistance against a failed and hypocritical system. Such criticism of existing systems is also at the core of The Toilet. In the restroom of a high school, a gang of boys beat a fellow student, Karolis, for having written a love letter to their leader, Foots. Foots, who avoids the use of his real name, Ray, around his friends, is unable to escape the hierarchical system of which he is part and behaves as that system demands: he beats Karolis into unconsciousness. Karolis, in the meantime, has recounted a previous encounter "right here in this same place where you said your name was Ray . . . you put your hand on me and said Ray" (59-60), and he has questioned the other boy, "Are you Ray or Foots, huh?" (59). The language of the play is by no standards evasive: Karolis refers to his note "that

said I wanted to take you into my mouth" (59), and when Foots returns, after the other boys have left, to cradle the lifeless body of Karolis, we see homosexuality not as a sin or a disease but as the only tenderness in this boy's world, his only opportunity to use his real name and be himself, and his one option for escape from the hierarchical system which has him trapped.

These black writers used homosexuality as a metaphor for resistance to the established system, but in so doing, they presented American drama with some of its earliest unequivocal portraits of non-stereotypical homosexuals. But Black drama was not the only place where changes were occurring in 1964. During that year, four playwrights who would become important in the history of gay drama came to the forefront of Off-Off-Broadway theater. Robert Heide's West of the Moon was produced by New Playwrights Theater, and the Caffe Cino presented Robert Patrick's The Haunted Host and three plays by Lanford Wilson. William M. Hoffman also lists 1964 as the production date of his own Good Night I Love You at Caffe Cino in the bibliography of Gay Plays, but the listing of that theater's productions in Poland and Mailman's Off Off Broadway Book indicates the opening night of that play as September 16, 1965. Hoffman did appear, however, as Frank in the Cino's 1964 production of The Haunted Host. From Heide, Patrick, Wilson, Hoffman, and others who would

follow came a new sensitivity and clarity in portrayal of homosexual characters. Of these plays performed at the Cino that year, two have been published and survive as indications of the changes which were occurring.

The Madness of Lady Bright

Lanford Wilson describes the title character of his one-act, The Madness of Lady Bright, as "a screaming preening queen" (178), and Leslie is, in many ways, as stereotypical as his predecessors in American dramatic history. His room is decorated in pink; his nails are polished, and he talks in the language of camp, even referring to himself as "girl" (180) and "Mary" (190). But Leslie's character is more than his sexuality. His problems are the problems of all humanity; a sense of alienation, a fear of his own mortality, and an unwillingness to let go of the innocence of his youth.

Leslie's walls bear the signatures of each of the men he has brought to his room and, thereby, stand not only as a divider between himself and the outside world but also as a memorial to his attempts to overcome that alienation. Leslie seeks pleasure in the music which drifts in through his window from other apartments, even commenting on the inferiority of the music he can produce for himself; but the shared music is as inconsistent as the men who have signed his walls since it only plays at someone else's whim. And the phone,his

only other source of contact with the outside world, leads only to recorded messages. At one point, the other characters assume that Leslie is going mad because he is "like that" (193-194), referring to his homosexuality, but Leslie's own diagnosis of his problems seems truer to the facts. When he cries out, "I don't want to be the way I am," his complaint is not with his sexuality but with his being "alone in my room" (195). He is "sick of music for companionship" (194).

In his loneliness Leslie has become obsessed with the past. The only other characters in the play are a boy and a girl who represent flickerings of his memory. But this obsession is not uniquely homosexual; it is that longing for lost innocence which may well be the most common theme of all literature. The most obvious signature on his wall is that of a man named Adam, who was the first to sign the wall, when it was freshly painted pink. Adam was Leslie's first love, and Leslie has tried to recreate, with each of the other men who have signed his wall, that first encounter, that Edenic state which was shattered by Adam's departure.

This obsession with his youth is linked to Leslie's fears of his own mortality and of aging. As he fights off the onset of madness, he insists, "I am young tonight . . . I will never be old." But almost immediately he recognizes the truth: "My arms are so tired.

My legs . . . the veins in my legs are getting old . . ." (96). He recognizes that "age takes you over and buries you" (189), and he tries to dance in imitation of Giselle, who used the dance to ward off death. Leslie Bright simply does not want to grow old and die, especially alone.

Despite all this universality[1] of emotion, however, the audience is never allowed to forget or to deny that Leslie is a man who sleeps with other men. His homosexuality is not the source of his problems, but it is an element of his individuality. Leslie himself declares, looking in a mirror, "There is no question about it any more--you are definitely a faggot . . .. You have been a faggot since you were four years old. Three years old" (181). Lady Bright is a homosexual, but that is not his madness; his madness is his humanity. It results from his mortality and his alienation from other humans.

Wilson's play cannot be seen as just another in the line of plays about homosexuality. The differences are too obvious: gone are the "reticence and evasion" of which Meyers spoke; gone, too, is the moralism which says, "Homosexuals act thus and so and must change or be punished."

The Haunted Host

A few months after the appearance of Wilson's play, the Caffe Cino presented Robert Patrick's *The Haunted Host*. In this play, Jay, the host of the title, is forced to come to terms with his lover's suicide when he is confronted by a stranger who looks like the dead man. Here, heterosexuals are outsiders, as once again the world of the play is the apartment of a homosexual, and Jay mocks the attitude of these outsiders and their attempts to classify him when he responds to the question, "Are you a homosexual?" with a quip: "I am *the* homosexual" (315).

The play differs from those which had preceded it, not only in its gay central consciousness, but also in its positive attitude toward homosexuality. The love which Jay feels for another man is presented as valid, as in no way inferior to heterosexual love, and not as a reason for him to run away or to commit suicide. Because his lover has died, he must continue without him, but there is never a suggestion that he reject his past life, only that he learn to deal more constructively with his memories.

A Definition of Gay Drama

The years which have followed the appearance of *The Madness of Lady Bright* and *The Haunted Host* have

seen a proliferation of plays about homosexuality. In 1980, Terry Helbing published his listing of "some 400 plays that deal directly with the lives and concerns of gay men and women" (2). An increase in numbers, however, is only one of the changes which have occurred.

More important differences between pre-1960's plays and those which have followed, as well as the real significance of the movement indicated by Wilson's and Patrick's plays, are lost in Helbing's definition of gay plays: "plays with major gay characters and/or predominant gay themes" (1). This definition is quite similar to William M. Hoffman's (Gay Plays ix) in its total reliance on character and theme, and neither of these definitions allows for a distinction between a play such as Ron Clark and Sam Bobrick's Norman, Is That You? (1970), which Hoffman says "shows little knowledge of gay life and merely uses gays to sell tickets" (Gay Plays xxix-xxx), and a play such as Wilson's.

Eric Bentley offered a different definition when he spoke of gay literature as "literature by known homosexuals," but he went on to admit that "the only reason anyone would know Marlowe was homosexual was from his writing," concluding that the matter of definition is "a thorny problem" (Norton 295). Questioned about his definition later, he responded:

> If you want to avoid speaking of homosexual writers, all you can do is say, let's speak of (a) writing on homosexual subject matter (which could be by heterosexual writers) or (b) writing perceptibly imbued with homosexual attitudes. (b) will get you right back into what you cite as the biographical fallacy, since to find the attitude is to find the man. (Stambolian 31-32).

Helbing, however, rejects classification based on the sexuality of the writer on the basis that "many writers believe that to be accomplished at their art, they must be able to write sensitively about the entire spectrum of human experience" (2). Now Bentley, in a more recent interview, has stated that he rejects the idea of gay play but uses the term "as a shorthand to refer to plays that derive their interest from gay subject matter"; he defines gay writer as anyone who writes [or] works with "gay subject matter" (Pally 112).

Bentley's new emphasis on subject matter stirs again the questions raised by Helbing's and Hoffman's definitions. Is there to be no distinction between a play which explores homosexuality and related matters from a gay viewpoint and a play which exploits, sensationalizes, and stereotypes homosexuals and has its basis in anti-gay, or at least non-gay, sentiment? How, then, do we explain the differences between the majority of the plays on this subject which preceded Lady Bright and many which have succeeded it?

Playwright and critic Richard Hall seems to have such a distinction in mind when he refers to gay plays

as "plays in which gay men and gay activities were portrayed" (151) while establishing stricter guidelines for what he calls "gay theater." Of the latter he requires a recognition of gay community, an acceptance "of gay identity as an option in life," a direct presentation on stage of homosexual "affection and desire," and a refusal to reshape itself for the comfort of a straight audience. Hall's criteria seem to parallel the distinctions between Lady Bright and most of the earlier plays about homosexuality. Though the play contains no sexual activity, Leslie's homosexuality is discussed more directly and more frankly than that of his predecessors, and he is seen as an individual human being, not an oddity to be examined and then discarded or destroyed. Indeed, Leslie is the central consciousness of Wilson's play rather than its subject matter; the same cannot be said of the homosexual characters in those earlier plays.

The type of play which Hall is describing and which Wilson wrote is not just a play with homosexual characters or subject matter; it is a play informed with a gay consciousness. Such a play moves beyond the clinical attitude implicit in the phrase, "a play about homosexuality," to the sociopolitical awareness implied by the term gay play. Hall's criteria allows for such distinctions.

However, Hall's use of the terms play and theater to distinguish between two types of plays is artificial and confusing. Adapting a more traditional use of the terms play and theater allows distinction between the text and the performance, the distinction Hoffman makes (Gay Plays ix). The distinctions implied by Hall's criteria are better indicated by reference to those plays which are informed by gay consciousness and in which homosexuality is of central interest as "gay" and to those plays not thus informed or in which homosexuality is merely a sideline issue as "about homosexuality." According to this usage, "gay theater" refers to productions which are somehow homosexual in style, as for example a production of Albee's Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf in which all four roles are played by males. Gay drama, then, is the literary corpus composed of gay plays.

These definitions allow one to see the movement indicated by such early gay plays as Game of Fools, And Now She Dances, The Madness of Lady Bright, and The Haunted Host, to trace this movement as it has developed in the two decades since Wilson's play first appeared at the Cino, and to see how references to "baffling types" with "too many F cells" have given way to what Hall, in reference to Leslie Bright, calls "irreducible gay[s]" (256) who offer a valid perspective on life.

Gay drama, then, is drama which moves beyond insinuation to presentation, which replaces accusation with self-acknowledgment, and which sees homosexuality as a subject for exploration rather than systematic moral condemnation. Gay drama assumes homosexuals as the "we" of the audience where other drama on the subject classifies this group as "they." Gay drama, through not only its subject matter and its characters but also its tone, states, though not necessarily in a directly propagandistic manner, that homosexuality is a legitimate part of the human experience.

NOTES

[1]The word universal and its derivatives are used in this study not in the naive assumption that certain themes or issues are significant to all persons in all cultures but, instead, in recognition that certain matters are of interest to both gays and non-gays in contemporary America. The terms should be read merely as indicative of accessibility and/or applicability beyond the gay community.

CHAPTER 2

1965-1974: A DECADE OF DEVELOPMENT

Gay drama, the new movement which had its birth in The Madness of Lady Bright and The Haunted Host, found fertile ground for growth in the revolutionary atmosphere of the late sixties and early seventies. The social climate was less repressive than it had been, more open to challenges of long-held, unquestioned ideologies, and the theater was experimenting with new forms, moving in new directions.

There were, of course, dramatists who continued to write in established patterns and to present traditional views. Their plays, however, seem somewhat cliched and outdated in the presence of newer, more vital voices. The growth of Off-Off-Broadway had provided these other voices a platform from which to be heard.

As usual, however, where there is change there is controversy. The revolutionary atmosphere which nourished these changes was politically charged. As playwrights experimented with new forms and explored new subject matter, they also wrestled with questions of sociopolitical correctness and debated the relationship between politics and art. These questions were especially difficult to answer when the subject matter was as sensitive as homosexuality.

Norman, Is That You?

Some playwrights, of course, avoided controversy by continuing in the paths of the past. The reader of Norman, Is That You? (1970) by Ron Clark and Sam Bobrick, for instance, would be hard pressed to identify much that had changed since the early twentieth century in American comedy's treatment of homosexuality. Despite a few surface attempts at liberalism, the homosexual characters are still stereotypical, and the play still assumes that heterosexuality is eminently superior to homosexuality. Indeed, the premise on which the comedy is based is that the greatest horror a father can face is learning that his son is gay.

The play's protagonist, Ben Chambers, arrives at his son Norman's apartment unannounced, his wife having just run off with his brother. His marital misfortune, however, is soon overshadowed by his realization that his son is "a queer" (23).

The play does make a few rather patronizing attempts at moving beyond the attitudes which had characterized plays like The Drag and Season in the Sun. Garson, Norman's lover, is allowed to recite a standard litany of famous homosexuals. Also, Ben and his wife, Beatrice, having reconciled by the play's close, decide to allow Garson to live in their home while Norman is away in the army. These attempts, however, are tempered by the contexts in which they are

made. Garson's list becomes a joke when Ben, able to accept all the other names, is thrown into emotional turmoil upon being told that Stephen Foster was a homosexual, and Norman's parents reveal their seemingly generous offer as really a move to separate Norman and Garson in hopes of interesting Garson in someone else's son.

Adding to the play's attitude of derision is the stereotypical portrayal afforded the gay characters. Garson, described as "obviously somewhat effeminate" (7), keeps dresses in his closet and is obsessed with old movies and his mother. He faints upon learning that Norman has been drafted and, once revived, refers to himself as "a war bride" (62). Norman, though less effeminate than Garson, has left his home in the Midwest to become a window dresser in New York City, where his apartment has "a number of effeminate touches, i.e. purple walls, purple sofa, and purple drapes" (5). In addition, neither of the gay men is given a "normal" name like Ben, and Ben makes much of their having a cat as a pet: he thinks dogs more appropriate for men.

Such stereotypical portrayals are only part of how the play expresses its negative attitude toward homosexuality. The basic sentiment of the play is summed up in the closing joke. Ben, having just learned of his wife's intention of pawning Garson off on some other homosexual in their hometown, adds, "When Norman

gets out of the service, and if he still feels he wants to be a homosexual . . .. Maybe he can do better--we'll find him a doctor or a lawyer" (64). What first appears to be acceptance is actually just an attempt to make the best of an inherently bad situation. Homosexuality, though not condemned outright, is judged as undeniably inferior to heterosexuality.

Clark and Bobrick's comedy seems more appropriate to the 1950's than to 1970. By the time of its appearance, and despite its popularity with middle America, such conventional attitudes were being challenged by playwrights who presented more daring perspectives.

Theater of the Ridiculous

In the liberal atmosphere of Off-Off-Broadway, which had allowed the appearance of The Madness of Lady Bright and The Haunted Host, a new type of comedy appeared. It was based in the camp tradition, and it worked to explode the conventions and stereotypes which plays like Norman, Is That You? were happy to propagate. The Theater of the Ridiculous challenged every convention of form and substance with which it came into contact.

Ronald Tavel, Charles Ludlam, and Kenneth Bernard, the three playwrights most commonly identified as purveyors of the Ridiculous, have resisted attempts to classify their work as a movement, preferring to

discuss it as a "sensibility" or a "style" (Marranca and Dasgupta 5). The refusal of those involved to define exactly what they mean by "the Ridiculous," along with a rather dramatic split between leaders of the group in 1968 and the lack of any sort of manifesto of their objectives, has left vague most attempts to discuss these works, but vagueness may be the key to understanding.

The works themselves are frequently vague, especially when discussing sexuality, but this obscurity is quite different from that which had characterized plays of earlier periods. Some of the obscurity stems from the plays' use of camp, which by its nature insists that nothing is what it seems. While attempts to define camp have generally broken down into lists of "what is and what is not," as in Philip Core's encyclopedia of camp, a few writers have tried to identify its basic qualities. Susan Sontag, in her "Notes on Camp," notes that the "sensibility" is based on "love of the unnatural: of artifice and exaggeration"(275). Not all artifice and exaggeration, however, are camp. Core borrows for his title a phrase from Jean Cocteau, "the lie that tells the truth," which indicates that what is being exaggerated must, at base, be true and that the artifice must encompass that truth. Camp's most common forms of expression have involved being what one is not, as, for example, in transvestism when lines of gender are crossed. In speech this frequently

manifests itself in the use of female names and pronouns when referring to males. The resultant confusion, however, is generally tied to an in-joke for the persons generating the camp. Thus, among gays:

> It originated as a Masonic gesture by which homosexuals could make themselves known to each other during periods when homosexuality was not avowable. (Core 9)

What seemed merely odd behavior to most outsiders was a sign to sympathetic others. In another era, Stepin Fetchit served the same role for blacks in that the exaggerated stereotyping of the character allowed them a sense of reductio absurdum. By carrying the attitude of servitude to its most ridiculous extreme, the character allowed the oppressed to laugh behind the backs of their oppressors, who were laughing only at the surface implications, while at the same time it was an allowable expression of the horror of the actual stiuation. It was "the lie that tells the truth."

When camp deals with sexuality it generally involves a refusal to accept traditional concepts of gender. Female roles are frequently assigned to male actors, as in Ludlam's Camille (1974), where the playwright assumed the title role, and sometimes the gender of a character changes or is uncertain, as with Mais Oui in Tavel's Gorilla Queen, to whom other characters refer "as if she were . . . male" (200). Inconsistency, as typified by a convent populated by

oversexed transvestites in Tavel's Lady Godiva, is the one consistent element of the Ridiculous approach to sexuality. On the basis of its non-traditionalist attitude towards gender and its use of camp, the Ridiculous has sometimes been classified as gay drama.

In reality, however, the Ridiculous deals less with homosexuality than with pansexuality. Despite frequent comments about same-sex pairings, the lack of consistency denies the accuracy of labeling any specific character as gay. These plays are not attempting to explore homosexuality. Indeed, John Vaccaro, producer of numerous plays by Tavel and others, expressed in a 1968 interview an attitude toward homosexuality which is hardly compatible with gay drama. Discussing Ludlam's failure to understand his resistance toward "any brazen show of homosexuality on the stage," Vacarro stated, "I was frightened of homosexuality because I come from a sports family" (Isaac, "I Come From Ohio" 142). Stefan Brecht reiterates the view that Theater of the Ridiculous is not gay drama when he points out that it has been spoken of as "by and for queers" (117) but calls such a view "contemptibly facile" (139); he notes that this theater movement "is not a call for sexual freedom . . . but mockery of the contemporary religion of this country: pervert heterosexuality" (136). Even Tavel, discussing the use of homosexuality in his plays, explains that "the play

starts at a point where sexuality has no meaning" (Isaac, "Ronald Tavel" 114).

Another reason for the frequent classification of the Ridiculous as gay drama is its use of camp. Larry Kornfield, director of Gorilla Queen, said of that play, "Campy, hell! It's downright homosexual" (Hoffman, Gay Plays xxviii). This assumption that camp is exclusively homosexual also seems to lie behind one critic's statement that ridiculous "seems like a companionable adjective for 'gay'" (Cohn 117). Such misguided assessments, however, are confronted by Richard Hall, who points out that irony and camp are not "exclusively the property of one minority" but "have been available to all powerless people." Citing uses of camp by Jews and other minorities, he states, "We cannot claim it as exclusively our own, nor declare those works of art where it is paramount prototypically gay" (152).

The drama of the Ridiculous questioned traditional attitudes toward gender and sexuality, especially as presented in the theater, and by doing so it shared common ground with and, at times, influenced the fledgling gay drama of the late sixties. It also shared with gay culture the use of camp. The two do not, however, share common objectives and attitudes though the distinction between a general attack on sexual categorization and an exploration of a specific

type of sexual orientation and experience inevitably escapes critics who, like Cohn, fail even to distinguish between homosexuality and either transvestism or androgyny (117). Accurate assessment requires accurate definition.

Boys in the Band

Cohn, who focuses so much of his assessment of gay drama on the Ridiculous, fails even to mention the one play of the late sixties which seems to continue, more than any other, the gay movement, but this omission may be due more to his concentration on writers who have produced a corpus of gay plays than to his definition of gay. Many critics were disappointed by Mart Crowley's failure to repeat the success of his Boys in the Band (1967). Crowley's one success, however, despite controversies within the gay community centering on the play's depiction of gay life, indicates more clearly than any one other play where gay drama stood in the late 1960's and where it seemed to be heading.

Crowley's semi-autobiographical play is set in the apartment of Michael, a thirty-year-old Catholic homosexual. The action focuses on a birthday party given by Michael for a friend, Harold. The invited guests are all homosexual: Donald, Michael's best friend with "wholesome, American good looks" (6);

Emory, an effeminate interior decorator; Bernard, who is black; and Hank and Larry, a couple who are squabbling over Larry's promiscuity. Two other men intrude upon the occasion: one referred to simply as Cowboy is a hustler hired as a gift for the birthday boy; the other, Alan, is an old college roommate of Michael's.

The conservative Alan shows up unexpectedly, seeking refuge from his marital problems; tension mounts as he gradually realizes that he is the only heterosexual present. The play reaches its climax in a phone game which challenges each man to call "the one person you truly believe you have loved" (125). The game ends when Alan calls his wife, thereby denying Michael's charge that he should call Justin Stuart, a friend from their college days who had confided in Michael about a supposed sexual relationship between himself and Alan.

The play's frank, forthright treatment of homosexuality brought mixed reviews from mainline critics. Jack Knoll, referring to the play as "queer comedy," saw it as a "remarkably effective" genre piece (93-94). John Simon spoke of Crowley's "bitchy repartee" as "no less clever than Albee's and considerably more honest" but went on to attack the play's "specious psychologizing" and "facile proselytizing" ("Soldier Boys," 31). Most revealing, though, was an unsigned review in Time

magazine; the reviewer praised what he called the play's "uncompromising . . . vision":

> Crowley keeps a dead-level eye on the desolating aspects of homosexual life. He records the loveless, brief encounters, the guilt-ridden, blackout reliance on alcohol, the endless courtship rat race of the gay bars with its inevitable quota of rejection, humiliation and loneliness. Crowley underscores the fact that while the homosexual may pose as a bacchanal of non-conformist pagan delights, he frequently drinks a hemlock-bitter cup of despair. ("New Plays" 97)

The tendency among these critics is to speak of any negative images in the play as "vision" but of anything that goes beyond their stereotypical notions as "proselytizing."

The play's most stinging and most enduring valuations, however, came from within the newly politicized gay community. Here the play was viewed as too heavily reliant on negative stereotypes--a reverse of the attitude of the mainline critics. William Hoffmann refers to this view of the play, noting that "read as an indictment of homosexual self-hatred," it "pleased gay-haters" (Gay Plays xxvii), and even Terry Helbing, in the introduction to his 1980 directory, classifies Boys in the Band with Norman, Are You There?, assuring his readers that "there is a lot more going on in gay theatre than" those two plays (6).

Both camps, however, ignore the play's real value. Crowley moves beyond a mere depiction of his characters' lifestyles to an exploration of negative forces which

threaten those characters and the individual strengths and weaknesses which enable or disable them in their struggle against those forces.

Even the other characters in the play recognize the source of Michael's self-hatred not in his homosexuality but in his failure to accept his homosexuality. One of Michael's friends explains: "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" (173). Michael's Catholic upbringing has instilled in him a sense of guilt, and when he attempts to escape reality--as when he goes to church at the end of the play because he cannot stand his own apartment--he, without fail, runs back to that same Catholicism. Until he faces reality, he is as Harold tells him, wasting his time with "all the prayers to [his] God" (173). Similarly, Bernard's self-hatred--exemplified when he his joins the others in referring to himself by names such as "the African queen" (61)--eventually is seen as the product not of his homosexuality but of his having internalized white racist attitudes which have haunted him throughout his life. Michael and Bernard hate not who they are but who society has told them they are.

Such homosexual self-hatred is not the only homosexual stereotype to be countered in the play. Indeed, much has been made of Emory's mincing about the

stage addressing other men with feminine names and pronouns. Hank, however, is described as "athletic" (6) and tends more toward serious discussion than toward camp. Were all the men stereotypically gay, Alan would never have to question why they associate with Emory. Yet even Emory is never portrayed as negative; he merely relies on his sense of camp to give him the strength which allows him to confront Alan's heterosexism more directly than any other character in the play.

Only one image is subjected to unabated mockery in this play. The Cowboy, that prototypical symbol of American masculinity, appears as an object of lust, what every man wishes to be. During the course of the play, however, he proves himself hopelessly shallow and easily manipulated for money. As other characters state, "He can't even follow from one sentence to the next," but "he has unnatural beauty" (101).

Boys in the Band is not an attempt to win heterosexual America's approval by parading stereotypical homosexuals across a stage. Each of the characters is an individual with individual strengths and weaknesses, which come into conflict. In these conflicts we are allowed to explore the truths beyond those stereotypes. The one heterosexual character is no more perfect than the eight "irreducible gays." As the play closes we see men providing each other with honest criticism and

necessary support. Alan runs off to try to save his marriage, while Hank and Larry put aside their differences to share their love.

From the opening of this play to its close, gays are never outsiders. The world of the play, like the worlds of The Madness of Lady Bright and The Haunted Host, is a homosexual world. Heterosexuality is suspect; the one character who claims to be straight is put on trial. Alan's assumptions of the other characters' heterosexuality meet with mockery. The playwright wrote from within the gay world, and as William Hoffman says, "Boys in the Band, more than any other single play, publicized homosexuals as a minority group" (Gay Plays xxvii).

The criticism the play received, even from within gay circles, however, serves to highlight questions which were beginning to take center stage in discussion of gay drama, questions of political correctness and the relationship between politics and art.

Coming Out! and The Faggot: Politics vs. Art

By 1973 these questions came to the fore as two very dissimilar plays, both featuring gay characters and themes, enjoyed New York runs. Critical reaction to these plays centered almost entirely on the relationship between politics and art.

Al Carmines' The Faggot has never been published, but Helbing describes it as "a musical revue with scenes of various aspects of gay life: bars, movie theaters, hustlers, fag hags, Gertrude Stein and Alice B. Toklas, Oscar Wilde, etc." (37). The play was not well received.

Stanley Kauffmann, in reviewing the play, said, "Inadequacy has now become the standard" for Off-Off-Broadway, and he spoke of "increasing sterilities in Carmines' material" (2). D. Keith Mano, writing for the National Review, spoke of it as "dull" and labeled it "I Love Desi with an R rating" (1125). The play would be significant only in an account of Carmines' tenure as playwright-regent of the Judson were it not for a review in the New York Times.

In that review, Martin Duberman blasted The Faggot for its "cheap parodies" and "cartoon realities." The playwright/critic went on to state, "Gay and straight alike will profit infinitely more . . . from a viewing of Coming Out! than from The Faggot" (4). Coming Out!, by Jonathan Katz, which had first appeared at the Gay Activists Alliance Firehouse as part of a Gay Pride Week celebration in 1972, was then enjoying a run at the Night House. Much of the attention Carmines' and Katz' plays received was in the form of contrasts between the two.

In his production notes Katz describes his play as "a political entertainment" intended "to express an assertive, militant, radical gay liberation philosophy" (Katz, C.O. 74-75). The piece is Brechtian agit-prop.

Beginning with the Village Voice account of the Stonewall riots and moving backward and forward through the pages of American history and letters, Katz, who is primarily a historian, presents a series of accounts of persecution of and resistance by gay men and lesbians. Katz stands out as one of the few gay playwrights who has dealt with both gay men and lesbians in the same work, possibly because he is also one of the most political and is, therefore, focusing more directly than other gay playwrights on political issues such as oppression and persecution which cross gender lines.

The influence of Brecht is obvious in Katz' play, which he subtitled A Documentary Play About Gay Life and Liberation in the U.S.A. The structure is episodic, with narratives linked thematically rather than chronologically. The collective is stressed in stage directions, which call for all members of the cast to remain on stage throughout the production. This emphasis is also seen in Katz' attributing of various elements of the play's published form to persons involved in the original production. He credits, for example, David Hoggensack, the original producer, with adding action to his original "rather static reading" and the lesbian

members of the original cast with suggesting some of the material (Katz, C.O. 74). Of performance Katz says, "A positive ensemble feeling should be apparent among the cast in the way the actors relate, touch" (75).

The most Brechtian element of the play is the distance maintained between character and actor as actors assume various roles with no attempt at imitation. Action is always merely suggestive; the audience is never allowed to believe that Gertrude Stein, Horatio Alger, or any of the other figures portrayed is actually present on stage. Katz' production notes illuminate what he hopes thus to accomplish:

> All artifice should be avoided in the acting . . .. The actors should work from their own gay feelings . . .. The fact of gay actors 'coming out' and making themselves vulnerable before a live audience is part of this play's demonstrated power. (75)

Katz is very specific about his political aims.

The few humorous moments in the play are present, according to Katz, to "make the rhetorical speeches digestible" (74). The one extended humorous sketch in the play was written not by Katz but by Judy Grahn for inclusion in Coming Out! "The Psychoanalysis of Edward the Dyke" mocks the motives and methods of psychoanalysts who attempt to "cure" homosexuals. The dark humor of the piece is apparent in the analyst's ironic interpretation of Edward's experiences. She tells him of

having been shot at by policemen as she attempted to escape several heterosexuals who had violently attacked her upon learning she was a lesbian; he interprets: "apparent suicide attempt after accosting girls in restrooms" (59). The humor, however, is carefully contained, says Katz:

> The serious basis of the humor should not be overlooked; when 'camp' humor is used it should always be an expression of defiance directed at our oppressors, not a put-down of ourselves. (74)

Different attitudes toward humor probably account for some of the contrast between Katz' and Carmines' plays since much of Duberman's ire was aimed at the latter's "cartoon" depiction of reality. This disparity, however, indicates differences in overall tone. Carmines' chief goal was entertainment. Katz' overall tone is seriously political, a la Brecht. The thrust is reform through active resistance. The play ends with a short song sung by the entire cast, ending with the line, "You Ain't Gonna' Keep Us Down" (70). The song begs for audience participation; the obvious objective of the play is to effect social change by awakening social consciousness.

Katz' political tone was not wasted on Duberman and other critics. Though he states that its "importance is as a political artifact, not art" (100), he goes on to contrast it with The Faggot:

> The one deals in lives, the other in stereotypes. The one stirs, the other lulls. The one provides a context for struggle, the other an excuse for ignoring it. (100)

Duberman even brings Boys in the Band into the fray, calling it "Crowley's once-daring witty play" and preferring it to Carmines' play because, "Even in its moments of melodramatic self-pity and sentimentality, 'Boys' dealt feelingly with real aspects of the then dominant gay life style" (99).

A battle ensued in the "Letters" column of the New York Times. Not least notable of the responses was Carmines' own. The playwright reminded his critic that he was "not dealing with a political position paper, but rather with a personal, idiosyncratic, quirky, highly subjective theater piece" (101). He went on to state his view that politics "has nothing at all to do with art." He spoke of his attempt to see "both the squalor and the glory of homosexuality" and challenged the limitations of Duberman's view. His response was supported by other letter writers who spoke of Duberman as "short-sighted" in his failure to comprehend "Carmines' idea that the best way of getting beyond homosexual stereotypes is not by ignoring them but by exploding them" (Grumley), who praised Carmines' "outlaw" spirit (Longo), and who countered "Duberman's suggestion that when drama transforms human oppression into a circus,

it loses its political punch" with a reminder of the clown's tragic side (Heyward).

Other writers, however, joined Duberman's chorus, stating that "a theatrical work about gay life staged in 1973 [must] necessarily have a political dimension . . . [and] political consequences" (Corn) and recommending that Carmines read Brecht, "the totally politicized man and playwright" (Galassi). Even Katz himself got involved, accusing Carmines of expressing "an ivory-tower view I believed had gone out with the glorious 1950's." In his letter, Katz summarized his position on gay art:

> There exists at this particular time in our history what seems to me a marvelously inspiring and challenging role for the homosexual artist: to create a new, liberated gay culture which is both of high artistic quality and reflective of the new consciousness being created by gay liberationists . . . including a sense of the social situation of homosexuals, anger at our oppression, and joyous self affirmation.

Though, as is generally the case in such debates, no consensus was reached, and though debate over the relative worth of such disparate works might have been futile, Katz' letter may well stand as one of the earliest manifestos of gay drama in America. His Brechtian brand of agit-prop, however, was not adopted by his contemporaries; no other published gay plays from the late sixties and early seventies are as blatantly political as Coming Out! On the other hand,

Carmines' view of art as apolitical did not seem to be shared by other gay playwrights either. Indeed, the form which seems to have been most popular in the period and which continues to dominate gay drama today is the type of personal drama, sometimes bordering on melodrama but not without a social consciousness, typified by Crowley's Boys in the Band, which Duberman ranked as a middle ground between Katz and Carmines. The emphasis on the person as political seems only now, in the light of the AIDS crisis, to be receiving its fullest expression, but the seeds had been planted early in the gay drama movement.

Robert Patrick: One Person and Fred and Harold

Crowley was only one of several playwrights to explore the more personal aspects of gay life. Robert Patrick, though many of the plays he wrote during this period were not gay at all, published One Person (1969). In this brief monologue, the speaker addresses one member of the audience, apologizing to the rest of the audience for having brought them together under false pretenses and explaining that this was his only opportunity to confront his ex-lover. Through mime and witty narrative, he confronts difficulties commonly encountered in gay relationships, notably failure to communicate and lack of commitment.

Despite the negativity of the play's subject matter, Patrick's wit and sensitivity never allow it to become overwhelming. Also, the negativity is never attributed to the characters' homosexuality as it would have been a decade earlier. The problems are human; their sexuality is neither an advantage nor a disadvantage. It is merely one aspect of their being.

A gay encounter was the subject of Patrick's Fred and Harold (1969). Fred, having picked up Harold at a party and then having attempted to strangle him "out of frustration" when Harold just wanted to talk, is now trying to convince Harold that they should become lovers. Harold resists. The very brief skit is the only gay scene of the eight which comprise Patrick's I Came to New York to Write (1969), a series of vignettes which Lanford Wilson, in his introduction to the work, says captures "the transience of urbanites"(3). In context, Fred and Harold serves primarily to demonstrate changing attitudes toward sexuality, but the skit indicates Patrick's continuing attempt to bring gay characters to the stage.

Duberman's Male Armor

Among the playwrights who joined Patrick and Crowley in the exploration of gay life was Martin Duberman, whose criticism of Carmines had stirred such a controversy. In a collection of his plays titled

Male Armor (1975) he explores "the devices we [men] use (which then use us) to protect ourselves from our own energy, and especially from our sexual energy: the strategies that help us grow a skin" (Duberman, Male Armor, xii). Most of the plays in this collection make at least passing references to homosexuality though few of them can really be considered gay drama.

Elagabalus, one of the two long plays in the collection, is based on the story of the fourth-century Roman emperor remembered for his androgyny. Adrian, Duberman's twentieth-century Elagabalus, is the schizophrenic sole heir of a wealthy family. Julia, the matriarch, is at first pleased by her grandson's announcement of his plans to marry, agreeing with his statement that "the continuation of the family takes precedence over everything. Even predilection" (286), but she is outraged when she learns of his plan to have two brides, one male and one female. The family's anger increases as Adrian's plans progress. Eventually, however, wedding plans give way to plans for a ritual suicide as Adrian sacrifices himself to Baal, an ancient god of darkness renowned for his demanding the sacrifice of innocents.

Adrian is, perhaps, less gay than unconventional, and the same can be said of Elagabalus. Androgyny is more the order of the day than is homosexuality. The family's attitude is not especially anti-gay; they just

fear that Adrian's strange behavior--and that is by no means limited to sexual behavior--will endanger his uncle's political future.

The heavy phallic imagery which runs throughout the play does, to some extent, sexualize the focus of the action. Adrian spends quite a bit of time caressing a large onyx stone which he refers to as the phallus of Baal, and the family physician recommends castration of Adrian, primarily, it seems, in order to add to his collection of severed genitalia. The overriding sexual images, however--a sadomasochistic encounter between Julia and her chauffeur and the recurrent projection of a fellatio scene from a pornographic movie--are blatantly heterosexual.

Duberman presents, in Adrian, a character who "may seem to choose and alternate his personae with greater freedom and from a wider repertory than most people imagine is available to them" (Duberman, Male Armor, xiii), but that "repertory" seems more in line with the pansexuality of the Ridiculous than with the homosexuality of gay drama.

On the other hand, Payments, another play in the collection, focuses more specifically on a man's exploration of his own capacity for homosexuality. The play examines the world of male prostitution in an unusual plot which hinges on a woman's arranging for her out-of-work husband, Bob, to become a "call boy."

By the end of the play, Bob has decided to divorce his wife and keep this new job, but not before he has developed such a fondness for a client named Paul that he gets into a fight over him with another hustler.

Helbing refers to the play as "a study in . . . male closetry" (77), and the audience must assume with him that Bob is a homosexual--or perhaps bisexual--who is struggling with his own sexuality. Rather than reaching a state of self-affirmation, however, Bob remains perpetually immature. The audience cannot cheer his decision to change his life because he seems unaware of the reasons behind that decision. His wife's closing comment, however, offers hope; she tells him, "I hope you'll . . . wish . . . something for yourself" (278).

The play explores negative aspects of homosexuality, but it does so with a sympathy and an insight best labeled gay. It is one of only two of the plays in Duberman's collection which can really be classified as gay drama. Metaphors and The Colonial Dudes mention homosexuality, but they focus on the failure of communication between men of different generations. The question of homosexuality is only one of the tensions present. The Guttman Ordinary Scale is not an exploration of homosexuality, though its theme is the ridiculousness of attempts to classify sexual behavior as ordinary or deviant. Even The Recorder, in which a biographer questions a man about a dead friend (and

probable lover), provides details of the dead man's sexual experience only as an indication of how we write and interpret history. In none of these works is homosexuality a primary concern; indeed, it amounts to little more than a sideline curiosity.

The Electric Map, however, which first appeared in 1970 as half of a double bill with The Recorder, under the collective title The Memory Bank, is definitely a gay play. Backstage at the electric map at the Gettysburg memorial, two brothers, one straight and the other gay, confront their family history. The straight brother, Jim, is insisting that the gay brother, Ted, leave town before news of his roommate's arrest for soliciting sexual favors from men makes his homosexuality public knowledge. The ensuing argument focuses on the men's relationships with their mother and runs parallel to the map's recorded narrative of the Civil War battle. As the argument becomes a shouting match, the sound equipment malfunctions, and when Jim storms out leaving his brother in hysterics, we are left with static and various mechanical noises drowning out Lincoln's "Gettysburg Address." Ted reminds the audience, reciting the monument's words to fill in for the failed machinery, that "the accident of birth and environment determined whether they would wear the Blue or Gray" (124). Through rather obvious symbolism Duberman explores the destructive nature of fraternal struggles

and more specifically of the familial warfare which most gays experience. Here, as in none of the other plays in this collection except Payments, Duberman's focus is a specific aspect of the gay experience. Despite his praise for Katz, however, the playwright focuses not on the political but on the personal.

Tennessee Williams in the Seventies

One play which, though not gay drama itself, does venture a bit of commentary on society's treatment of homosexuals, deserves note if for no other reason than its author's identity. The homoeroticism which lies below the surface of most of Tennessee Williams' plays has been explored in works such as Georges-Michel Sarotte's Like a Brother, Like a Lover, and we have already seen the frequency with which Williams presented characters accused or suspected of homosexuality. His earlier plays, however, had treated the subject in much the same manner as other pre-sixties drama about homosexuality--in vague terms and with gay characters dying before the final curtain. In Confessional (1970, reworked as Small Craft Warnings in 1972), Williams came closer to writing a gay play than he ever had before; he also came closer to writing a political play than did most of the gay playwrights of the early seventies.

The play contains two clearly identified gay characters and makes frequent reference to a third who is already dead. The gay characters are quite stereotypical: a cynical Hollywood scriptwriter who specializes in witty repartee and attributes his hardness to his gay lifestyle which he sees as "more and more empty of real interest and surprise" (178); a naive, young boy from Iowa seeking new adventures and being preyed upon by the older man; and a violinist whose early death was the expected outcome of his frail life. They are part of the play's parade of lost souls, which also includes, Leona, a self-proclaimed "faggot's moll" (173)--in the slang of the day, a heterosexual woman who associates primarily with gay men--and Bill, a heterosexual man who picks up homosexual men in order to assault and rob them. Williams ventured an exploration of gay life broader than that presented in his earlier plays.

In this exploration he did not shy away from a bit of political commentary. Bill's comments that his victims never report his crimes highlight the vulnerable position into which anti-gay laws place some citizens. Then Monk, the bar owner, speaks of the frequency with which police raids on gay bars result not from a sense of civic duty but from the bar owners' failure to pay protection money.

Despite his frank approach to such issues, however, and despite the higher profile given gay characters here than in plays such as Streetcar Named Desire and Suddenly Last Summer, and even despite Williams' having publicly acknowledged, by this time, his own homosexuality, his play does not speak from a gay perspective. The gay characters are intruders into the primarily heterosexual world of the bar and are never given proper names. The Young Man speaks of homosexuals only in third person. The Boy admits enjoying being with another man, but his discussion of homosexuality focuses on the "one man like that" in his hometown, an older man who seduced young boys in Goldenfield, Iowa. Monk, who comes closer than anyone else to being the central consciousness of the play, states, "I've got no moral objections to them as part of humanity, but I don't encourage them here," and he explains his fear that "they" will take over his bar (182). Williams, likewise, allows them in his play "as part of humanity" but, even at this late date, seems hesitant to let them take over.

Passing By

Williams' reticence, of course, is somewhat anachronistic, compared to such earlier plays as The Madness of Lady Bright and Boys in the Band. More in line with the sentiment of its day, Martin Sherman's

Passing By (1974) is significant not only as the herald of the arrival of a major, new, gay playwright but also as a measure of just how far gay drama had come by the end of its first decade. In this play, even more completely than in its predecessors in the gay drama movement, homosexuality is a given, and no apology is offered.

The plot is simple: Toby and Simon both come down with hepatitis after having spent one night together, and they share Toby's apartment while recovering. Upon recovery they separate to pursue their individual dreams. Thematically, the play is not complex. It examines the effects two men can have on each other's lives, even when they are "just passing by."

The play is remarkable, however, in its openness and honesty. Little is said about oppression or gay rights, just a few comments about being unable to kiss in public. Indeed, the words gay and homosexual, and all their synonyms, are absent; yet here is no evasiveness. In the swiftness with which it moves via blackout from the brief opening scene in which Toby and Simon first exchange glances to their waking together the next morning, the play seems to be saying, "Yes, these men are homosexual. Now can we get on with the story?" The play never attempts to shock, but neither does it shy away from the men's natural displays of their affection.

Also notable is the play's positive attitude men are not perfect: Toby is clumsy and is not above petty thievery and deceit; Simon is egotistical. Nor is their lifestyle without problems, as evidenced by their sharing a disease. The men, however, are likeable in their caring for each other and admirable in their dedication to their dreams. Their lifestyle is not tragic; the disease leaves "no scars" (120). Indeed, Toby's assessment is accurate when he tells Simon:

> It's because of you that I'll be able to paint. I mean, nothing you said. Nothing special you did. No lightning flashes. It's just that a little loving can do an awful lot. You bank on it, you draw on it later. (118)

Though its openness and positive tone belie any sense of shame, the play makes no call for political revolution. However, it also does not deal in reticence, stereotyping, or moralizing. By the mid-seventies some gay men in America, especially in larger cities, were feeling the liberating effects of the continuing socio-political struggle. Gay drama, especially in plays like Passing By, was not usually addressing this struggle directly. It was, however, demonstrating what Katz had referred to as "self-affirmation."

Such plays do not model themselves on Katz' agit-prop, but neither do they accept Carmines' dictum

that "politics has nothing at all to do with art." Instead, in stressing the basic political unit, the person, they began to explore "the social situation of homosexuals." Though these plays differ greatly from Katz' own, in their exploration of the gay experience, they answer the challenge he presented to the gay artist.

CHAPTER 3

SEPARATIST GAY DRAMA

What began with a couple of plays performed at the Cino in the mid-sixties had grown, by the mid-seventies, into a clearly identifiable movement. The growth of gay drama is apparent not only in the increase in the number of plays being published but also in an increased self-awareness among writers of gay drama. While this self-awareness helped further to legitimate gay drama, it also stirred disagreement about the direction the movement should take.

Through most of its growth in the late sixties and early seventies, gay drama had been largely a child of radical Off-Off-Broadway. Gay plays had appeared at theaters like the Cino, the Washington Square Methodist Church, and La Mama's E.T.C., intermingled with other plays whose content and/or form did not fit the Broadway mold.

By the mid-seventies, however, gay drama began declaring its own identity. TOSOS (The Other Side Of Silence), established by Doric Wilson in 1972, was the first of several theaters dedicated solely to the production of plays with interest to the gay community. While TOSOS spent its early years primarily presenting revivals of plays, they did present some original works, including Sherman's Passing By in 1975 (Hoffman,

Gay Plays xxxi). While such theaters may have encouraged a degree of separatism, they have also encouraged the writing of gay drama by offering playwrights the stage they might have otherwise been denied.

Of course, while these playwrights were increasing the volume of gay drama, other playwrights, by seeking mainstream acceptability, were adding to its visibility. Some of the most successful gay plays of the late seventies and early eighties have been criticized, much like the most popular gay play of an earlier period, Boys in the Band, for being too accomodationist. Despite such charges, however, playwrights like Harvey Fierstein and Martin Sherman brought gay drama to a larger audience than it had ever had in the United States. By the mid-eighties, no one could ask, as Roth had twenty years before, "How long before a play is produced on Broadway in which the homosexual hero is presented as a homosexual?" though one could ask whether Broadway mattered to most gay playwrights.

Gay Theater Groups

In establishing TOSOS, Doric Wilson declared the independence of gay theater. No longer could talk of gay plays be limited to derisive phraseology like Jack Kroll's 1967 comments about "queer comedy." Wilson's move encouraged both growth and separatism.

In an appendix to his 1980 Directory of Gay Plays, Helbing lists nine gay theater companies from around the country. The 1987 edition of Gayellow Pages lists at least five more. These companies have presented a remarkable number of original gay plays. Each of the two most notable companies is associated with one of the most significant gay playwrights of the period: TOSOS with Wilson, and the Glines with Richard Hall. The most significant of the other companies is Theatre Rhinoceros of San Francisco.

In 1981, Wilson, having already done so much to popularize gay theater, was involved in further establishing gay drama as a literary entity. His Forever After became the first play published in JH Press' Gay Play Script Series. That series, more than any other undertaking, has made gay drama available to a widespread audience. No longer is knowledge of important gay plays limited to the audience of the plays' initial performances. These scripts have added to the corpus of gay plays published by other small presses and, in a few instances, by mainline publishers, and they have made works by writers such as Wilson available to audiences outside New York.

Doric Wilson

Doric Wilson stands foremost among the dramatists writing for a specifically gay audience. His three

published plays explore various aspects of the gay experience in the America of the late seventies and early eighties. The plays are very obviously products of the New York environment which gave them birth, but Wilson's insight and wit grant them an appeal which transcends their locale.

Most localized of the three is Forever After (1980), which had its first performance at the First Gay American Art Festival. Wilson, aware that several passages in his play are of limited interest to persons outside of New York, marked those scenes--which he refers to as "parochial"--"INSERT," in the published text, and he notes that they "are published intact primarily as a record of the original" production and "probably should be deleted in other productions"(5). These sections deal primarily with theater gossip, as when one actor steps out of character to challenge another, saying:

> Well at least I don't linger around backstage winking and snorkeling at the would-be wit of the playwright in hopes that hanging in chains from the ceiling of his "rumpus room" will somehow further my aspirations for a really big show biz career.(21)

These passages also contain jokes about other New York playwrights, with one character referring to "the unhappy genius of Robert Sherman! No, that's not his name. Sam Patrick? Martin Shepard? Whatever be his nom de malediction," and punning on the titles of Sam

Shepard's Buried Child, Martin Sherman's Bent, and Robert Patrick's T-Shirts(46).

Such in-jokes are less apparent in A Perfect Relationship (1978) and Street Theater (1982), though these plays, too, are peppered with allusions to New York fads and locales. Wilson writes for a local audience. His plays, however, somehow transcend their setting. His insights into human nature and the gay experience in America of the seventies and early eighties are presented with an accuracy and a wit which overshadow the more gossipy elements of his plays.

Two of the plays explore male-male relationships from radically different directions. A Perfect Relationship, subtitled "a domestic comedy in two acts," looks at how some gay men go about establishing and avoiding relationships. Forever After, subtitled "a vivisection of gaymale [sic] love without intermission," explores understandings and misunderstandings about love relationships in a form which seems indebted to theater of the ridiculous. Both plays, somehow, end at about the same point.

Ward and Greg, in A Perfect Relationship, are unwilling to admit they are a couple. They share an apartment, but their friendship is dominated by a constant barrage of good-natured bickering. Each is unwilling to display affection. Their lives are complicated when Ward brings home Barry, who proceeds

to become romantically involved with Greg, who then asks Ward to move out of the apartment so Barry can move in. All of this action is constantly interrupted and commented upon by Muriel, from whom the men are subleasing the apartment, and her parade of boyfriends, all of whom are played by the same actor. In the end, Barry takes over the apartment and plans to share it with Hank, Muriel's most recent beau, who has turned out to be a latent homosexual. Muriel offers a different apartment to Ward and Greg, who have decided to stay together. As to the future of their relationship, the two men agree: "Who knows?"(119)

Despite the men's uncertainty, the audience must agree with Muriel, who tells them:

> I used to say to myself, if and when you finally become bored with the lies and the games and the "convincing" and all the other shit, you'd take a hard look at each other and discover you're on the way to a perfect relationship.(113)

She explains that, while they seem to have "nothing going for them" as a couple, they have a good relationship because they are "two people dealing with each other--lies and all"(113).

Each of the two men is afraid to admit affection. This fear manifests itself in the way each handles his numerous sexual encounters. Ward opts for a world of leather and fantasy while Greg resorts to drug-induced unconsciousness. That sort of self-deception carries

over into their relationship. They call themselves "buddies" and "pals" because they see "lovers" as plagued by "hassles over who uses the shower first" and "arguments about who does the cooking"(17), ignoring their own bickering about both of these and their argument about what to name the dog they "should get"(16).

Greg and Ward are not the only characters unwilling to commit themselves to a relationship. Muriel, who encourages them to stay together, characterizes herself as "a loner with a fairly voracious sexual appetite"(113), yet when she learns that Hank is married she is incredulous: "Wife? You were two-timing me?!"(117). Barry is similarly contradictory in establishing two relationships in the course of the play after having told Ward, "I've had lovers. I don't recommend them"(34). He seems to ignore his own assessment of his life: "I'm into one-night stands, but somehow they never seem to work out. Somehow they always seem to turn into relationships"(34).

The source of Greg's and Ward's fear of commitment, however, is fairly specific. Throughout the play, much of the dialogue between Greg and Ward consists of mutual attempts to prove themselves more masculine than each other, and in such dialogue lies the key to their fear. Dennis Altman speaks of "the macho cult, which became the vogue among American gay

men in the seventies" with its "reaffirmation of the most traditional male stereotypes"(13). As representatives of this trend, Greg "project[s] an understated cowboy image taken directly from the pages of Mandate magazine" and Ward is "dressed as Colt Studio's concept of a construction worker"(12). They accuse each other of being "domestic," and and each tries to suggest a more "masculine" breed of dog for their pet (12-16). Also in keeping with the American stereotype of masculinity, they are obsessively non-committal. Muriel, however, finally points out the problem inherent in trying to live up to those stereotypes:

> You're so preoccupied convincing yourself what you are and what you are not and what you think you want and what you think you don't want, you completely overlook what you need.(112)

Greg and Ward may indeed have the "perfect relationship," but as long as they maintain the roles they are playing they will remain unable to admit it.

Wilson again deals with gay relationships in Forever After, but this time he uses a very different form. Influences of theater of the ridiculous are apparent with drag queens assuming the female roles, actors slipping in and out of roles, and witty allusions to popular culture frequently dominating the dialogue. This play tends more toward burlesque than toward domestic comedy.

Tom and David's first anniversary is supposed to be the "happily ever after" close to their play, but it is interrupted by Thalia, the muse of comedy, and Melpomene, the muse of tragedy, both "in drag"(5). The two cannot agree on how relationships should turn out. Amidst the play's numerous turns, Thalia pushes the two men to pledge their love "forever after" while Melpomene insists that "love is only a rumor, a malicious fabrication which flies in the face of all available evidence, a tenacious and insidious social problem"(30). The two men eventually find a middle ground between Thalia's romanticism and Melpomene's cynicism. They decide to work together toward establishing "a little 'perfect harmony'" and "every now and then . . . a bit of 'absolute concord,'" but they close with the comment, "Fuck 'forever after'"(76).

In the arguments which lead to this conclusion, Wilson's view becomes clear. He addresses several stereotypes involving men's--especially gay men's--attitudes towards love, debunking all of them through Tom and David's actions. For instance, Melpomene states, "Gay men are particularly incapable of any lasting emotional commitments," and Tom and David assume she must be right since the line has "that necessary ring of familiarity about it"(51). Yet the play ends with their recommitting themselves to a relationship which has already lasted a year.

Wilson's satire also touches on other areas of gay behavior. Focusing on Tom's and David's insistence on their own masculinity, Wilson takes a jab at the "macho trend." Melpomene throws glitter at them, claiming, "You scatter just a pinch of glitter at Butch Types like this, they die"(57). Attacking another element of gay popular culture of the period, Thalia tells Melpomene, "'Love' may belong to you, cruising Christopher Street is definitely the province of comedy"(67). Whether he is satirizing the attitudes of heterosexual society towards gays or the behaviors of gay men themselves, however, even his terminology--with words like butch and offhand references to Christopher Street--indicate that he is indeed writing to a gay audience.

In Street Theater, such satire dominates Wilson's account of events leading up to the Stonewall Riots. The play is less a history of the riots than an exploration of the attitudes and motives of the participants. The characters are stereotypes and composites of people found in Greenwich Village in June, 1969.

The two chief targets of the play's satire are Donovan and Seymour, two undercover policemen. They are portrayed as harassing gays primarily to extort cash in exchange for not arresting them. Their method of operation is blatant entrapment. Donovan is quick to state that "homos" are a threat to Western Civilization, even quoting an actual FBI training session:

"Homosexuals represent a threat to the community in that when they commit suicide jumping from buildings, they sometimes hit passersby"(73). He is not, however, above having sex with the men he arrests; he tells Seymour, "You're supposed to let them finish, it's evidence"(70). Seymour, too, is less heterosexual than he claims to be; eventually Donovan catches him propositioning Jack, who is described as "heavy leather, keys left"(11).

The only other heterosexual male in the play is equally despicable. Murfino, the owner of the Stonewall Inn, is described as "a thug"(11). He speaks of the other characters as "lowlifes" and "gutter crud"(11), but he is quick to accept their money. Having learned of an intended police raid on his bar for later that night, he attempts to draw in as much of an early crowd as he can so he can maximize his profits before the raid. He is unsympathetic to the victims of police harassment and even uses Seymour's attempt to arrest Sidney, who is described as "in the closet"(9), to increase his business.

The only heterosexual character who is not absolutely detestable is Heather, but she too is a target of satire. Heather is "a flower child"(14) who has painted a fire hydrant in psychedelic colors and who wanders through the play handing people daisies and spouting lines like, "far out, dig it, and what's

happening, man?"(62). Heather intends no harm to anyone; she even joins the gay characters in their resistance of police harassment. The audience must laugh, however, when she states that she does not drink water because she is a vegetarian and is unwilling to ingest the "hundreds and hundreds of tiny animals" she saw when she once looked at water through a microscope"(92). In a similar state of confusion, she fails to understand why as a pacifist she should be unwilling to work in a bomb factory. Heather represents those for whom love and peace are not a way of life but a late-sixties fad. Thus, her attitude toward gays is in line with her overall personality; she envies her former boyfriend who "went gay" because "being gay seems to give him a sense of purpose"(96). Although not as dangerous as Murfino and the police, Heather is surely comical.

The gay characters are also targets of similar satire. As Ceil and Boom Boom, two "street queen[s]," search through trash cans for items to use as clothing, Boom Boom bemoans a recent "calamity," her having become employed; she tells Ceil, "When I was broke, I could bring home tricks--what were they going to steal? . . . Now that I'm a working woman, I have sex, I get rolled"(34). Ceil swears to keep her friend's misfortune secret but seizes her first opportunity to inform a bar full of people.

The play satirizes various gay "types": Jordan and Gordan epitomize the posturing of those who are determined to be politically correct, even to the point of hypocrisy; Timothy has just arrived from the Midwest in search of "vice," which he assumes must be fun because of "the way mom talked it down"(41), and Jack, "the ominous image used to promote S&M establishments"(12), must turn to C.B., a lesbian friend, for mechanical help when his motorcycle breaks down.

C.B. is the one character whose presentation is most consistently positive. Lesbians are rare in gay drama, and her presence may be primarily an element of historical accuracy, since the first people to resist the police at Stonewall were lesbians. She is, however, as much of a stereotype as the other characters. She is referred to, in stage directions, as a "diesel dyke" and as "a politically incorrect lesbian"(13). As with other such references to stereotypes, however, Wilson uses these labels ironically. C.B. projects a tough image, but one cannot ignore the gentleness with which she treats Heather, whom she finds adrift on Christopher Street and whose daisies she rescues from a trash can. She is also the first character to suggest that "an army of lovers" could stop the police harassment "once and for all"(54). To the world, she is a "diesel dyke"; to a sympathetic audience, she is a gentle, caring individual.

Most of the characters overcome individual weaknesses to join C.B. in the rebellion at the Stonewall. The two policemen are notable exceptions; they run off to continue their self-serving, hypocritical harassment. Murfino, of course, is concerned only about the damages his bar is sustaining. The only other characters who do not join the resistance are Michael and Donald, two characters from The Boys in the Band who wander through the play wallowing in self-pity and guilt. In an obvious depiction of Crowley's play as accomodationist, Wilson gives these two borrowed characters lines such as, "None of this has anything to do with me"(140), and "It's public displays like this which make it harder for the rest of us"(108). The play closes as Donald shouts, "You faggots are revolting!"(150) The newly-uncloseted Sidney throws off his sunglasses and replies, "You bet your sweet ass we are!"(151)

In Street Theater, as in Wilson's other plays, gays are not exempt from the type of satiric attacks to which heterosexuals are subjected. Here, as in his other plays, he considers both the weaknesses and the strengths of his gay characters. Some, like Sidney, achieve a sense of self-affirmation, while others, like Donald here and Barry in A Perfect Relationship, remain mired in self-hatred or self-deception. By thus depicting his gay characters, he allows his audience,

also gay, to examine their own weaknesses and problems as well as their potential to overcome them.

Richard Hall

Another playwright who has written primarily for a gay audience and whose plays rival Wilson's in quality is Richard Hall. Hall is noteworthy not only for his plays but also for essays in dramatic theory and criticism. In a prefatory note to his Three Plays For A Gay Theater, Hall states, "The story of the gay performing arts has been, in recent years, mostly the story of The Glines," and indeed, all three of the plays in this collection have been produced by the company established by John Glines in 1976 to promote gay theater. While many of the themes at work in these plays apply to both gays and non-gays, the plays are as separatist in nature as the collection's title suggests.

Love Match (1977), the first of these plays to be produced, is an unusual gay play in certain respects. Unlike most published gay plays, this one is not set in New York. It also departs from convention in its inclusion of a lesbian couple; very few gay plays acknowledge that women, too, can be homosexual. The play also moves beyond the domestic concerns which dominate gay drama though it is not really political in its thrust.

The plot centers on the making of a film based on a novel about a gay tennis player. The central conflicts occur among Martin Corelli, the openly gay author of the novel, Alex Cameron, the heterosexual actor cast in the lead role, and Parker Murdoch, Alex's secretly lesbian agent. Alex, despite his desire to play the role because of its social value, finds himself unable to relax while filming love scenes with a man. Parker, fearing disclosure of her relationship with Mary Jo Finley, fuels Alex's discomfort by secretly hiring pickets to protest the filming and feeding negative comments to the press. Alex's discomfort peaks when Martin and his lover, David Lorton, trick him into a situation which they hope will awaken latent homoerotic tendencies which Alex insists are nonexistent. The star quits the show. After Mary Jo confronts Alex with Parker's secret, however, he tells his agent and friend, "I want you to feel good about yourself" (104),and he resumes work on the film with "a new freedom"(105).

Hall's exploration of homophobia is very obviously aimed at a gay audience; he even, at times, invites them to join in a bit of lighthearted mockery of heterosexism. While Alex and his wife, Liz, prepare for dinner with Martin and David, Liz speculates on the conversation which lies ahead: "First they're going to ask if we knew Judy Garland"(59). David also predicts

the conversation: "First thing, she's going to ask where we met"(66). David is right; one of Liz' first lines is "Where did you two meet?"(68). Judy Garland, however, enters the conversation only when Liz, attempting to rescue herself from a faux pas, claims to have known "Judy." David's response, "Fabulous. (Pause.) Judy who?"(69), only adds to the mockery of a heterosexual's attempt to communicate with gays on the basis of stereotypes.

If anyone is stereotyped in this play, the heterosexuals are. Alex, the heterosexual male, is obsessed with his own macho image; he is unable even to consider seriously the possibility of emotional tenderness between two men, and he absolutely refuses to think of his wife as his equal. Liz's attempts at a liberal attitude only highlight her shallowness and hypocrisy. Such mockery, however, is not the focus of the play.

The central issue in Love Match is homophobia, and, as presented in the play, it is not primarily a heterosexual problem. Of course, Liz and Alex are homophobic to some degree, but the most dangerous homophobe in the play is a lesbian. Parker's fear of disclosure knows no bounds. To this fear she is willing to sacrifice not only her relationship with Mary Jo but also the film and, with it, Martin's career. She passes up the opportunity for friendship with Martin and almost destroys her friendship with

Alex. She becomes the driving force behind the virulently anti-gay Coalition of Christians. She becomes her own worst enemy; only when forced disclosure renders her fears moot can the film and her life progress smoothly.

This play does not ignore the very real problems confronting the gay community from outside, but it emphasizes a more internal conflict, a problem posed to homosexuals by homosexuals. Similarly Hall's two other plays also focus primarily on conflicts among homosexuals.

Prisoner of Love, which was first performed in 1978 at The Glines, differs from Halls' other plays in that it contains no heterosexual characters at all. The basic conflict is between Martin, a gay man from New York, and Jackson, his friend and host in Puerto Rico. Jackson sees his friend's obsession with politics as boring; Martin considers his friend's apolitical stance decadent. Armando, a Puerto Rican hustler, becomes a pawn in the conflict when Jackson secretly pays him to have sex with Martin. Martin, blinded by his own idealism, is unaware of Jackson's involvement and tries to interest Armando in his dream of Puerto Rican liberation, and Armando feigns interest while blackmailing Jackson into continuing to pay for the time he is spending with Martin. Jackson, frustrated, finally attempts to force his friend to confront the

truth, but he finds himself unwilling to destroy his friend's idealism. Armando, too, though not ready to become the radical leader Martin expects of him, has, by the end of the play, been affected by Martin's dreams; he talks hopefully of the revolution to come.

The play's subtitle, The Price of Idealism, presents the play's central theme with a touch of irony. At the outset, the phrase seems to refer to Martin's having sacrificed pleasure to his political idealism. He is not, however, the only one who must pay a price. In the final scene, Jackson complains about having paid over one hundred dollars in blackmail to protect his friend's dream. Armando tells him that the cost of a dream is "high as the sky! WHEN YOU AIN'T GOT ONE OF YOUR OWN!"(143) Indeed, each of the non-dreamers has invested in Martin's dream. Jackson seems to recognize a certain propriety in this fact; he tells Armando, "Maybe I had a stake in all his dumb ideas."(142)

Martin is a political idealist; Jackson, a pragmatist. Jackson needs Martin's dreams to stir him into action; before Martin arrives his life consists of endless walks on the beach and exploitation of the Puerto Rican natives. Martin pricks his conscience. Jackson, on the other hand, provides Martin what he needs: human companionship; financial support; and, most signfiicantly, a human element, in the person of

Armando, for his theories and ideals. Hall is demonstrating, with a lighthearted touch, the interdependence within the gay community between political idealism and pragmatism.

Unlike Prisoner of Love, Happy Birthday, Daddy (1981) does contain heterosexual characters. Again, however, the emphasis is on gay life. The main characters are Deke and Nick, a gay couple, each of whom must free himself from a past which is interfering with their relationship. Deke has become accustomed to promiscuity and persistently resists Nick's pleas for monogamy. Nick, on the other hand, has not resolved his feelings of guilt toward his ex-wife, Jean, and his son, Joey, nor has he completely accepted his own homosexuality. When Jean and Joey arrive at Nick and Deke's apartment to celebrate Nick's birthday, the gay couple begin arguing. The celebration ends when Joey runs away after claiming to have helped "beat up a queer"(19). The next day Nick and Deke separate after an argument which is, on the surface, about Joey's behavior but which seems to stem more from Nick's inability to accept Deke's promiscuity and Deke's refusal to modify his behavior. A month later, they reconcile, Nick allowing Joey to walk out and not chasing after him, and Deke agreeing to a monogamous relationship.

The play's treatment of gay parenting indicates its emphasis. Little attention is paid to Jean or to Joey as individuals. Their actions are significant primarily in their impact on Nick and his relationship with Deke. Joey's claim that he took part in the assault on a classmate suspected of being gay is never thoroughly examined. Motives are suggested but not explored. The real issue is not why Joey took part but why Nick cannot bring himself to punish his son. Nick must confront his son not for Joey's sake but for his own, as an act of self-acknowledgment, and for the sake of his relationship with Deke, who is morally outraged. Nick's affirmation of his own homosexuality--he tells his son, "Yes, it's true. I had sex with a lot of other men. I think sex is okay"(43)--has a positive effect on his relationship with Deke; its impact on the father-son relationship is left unexplored.

Such a highly focused concentration might seem short-sighted to those who long for a fuller exploration of the issue of gay parenting, but that is no more the concern of this play than is monogamy. The play explores the maturing which two men must experience in order to confront those problems which assail their relationship. The audience is not ex-spouses of gay men or children with gay fathers but, once again, gay men. Here, as in his other plays, Hall treats

a subject of interest to both gays and non-gays but addresses himself to a clearly defined audience.

Other Playwrights "For a Gay Theater"

Wilson and Hall stand out among the playwrights who have written for a specifically gay audience because of the number and the quality of works they have produced. They do not stand alone, however. Off-off-Broadway's Robert Patrick, though he wrote numerous non-gay plays, did not abandon the movement altogether. And several other playwrights, such as Sidney Morris, C. D. Arnold, and Robert Chesley, have been published in JH Press' Gay Play Script Series. Though these plays vary widely in content, form, and quality, they share a focus on issues of interest to gay men.

Sidney Morris' If This Isn't Love is a well-intentioned but flawed attempt to establish a gay history/mythology. The play was first performed in 1982 as part of The Glines' Sixth Anniversary Rep. It follows the developing relationship of Adam and Eric through three decades of change in the gay experience: "The Fearful Fifties," "The Seeking Sixties," and "The Succulent Seventies." An opening note states that "each Act reflects a decade and not a particular year"(7).

The titles of the acts indicate changes not only in the lovers' relationship but also in overriding attitudes of the gay community in America, or more specifically in New York. In the first act Adam and Eric become lovers after having met in a night class; in the second they separate after Adam learns that Eric has been unfaithful. In the final act, Adam, temporarily confined to a wheelchair after a minor stroke, and Eric, ecstatic with seventies-style liberation, are reunited and watch the annual Gay Pride parade from the balcony of their apartment. As drama, the play is, at times, too obvious and too contrived. In case the audience misses the obvious symbolism in the characters' names, Eric announces, in the first act, "You're Adam and I'm Eric. Like--like Adam and Eve. And here--here we have our own Garden of Eden!"(40) In the second act, Adam just happens to find evidence of his lover's infidelity, a love letter which Eric just happens to have left in the pocket of his jacket, on the night before a peace march; then, in the third act, in Morris' clumsy attempt to fill in the intervening years, the two recount their chance meeting during the march. Adam had said of the man with whom Eric had had sex, "I'll have to kill him!"(69) The next day, though no motivation for such a change in attitude is apparent, he had suddenly decided that "a thousand men could make

love to your sweet body--I didn't want any--any space between us"(79).

Such contrived solutions to very real human crises add to the overriding sentimentality of the play. The play opens and closes as the song from which the play borrows its title "fills the air"(9), enveloping the play in its idealistic sweetness. Within this frame, each act builds to a refrain. The first act ends with Eric calling his mother to tell her he will not be home for the night; at the end of the second, after his fight with Adam, he calls to ask if he can come back home. The third act ends when the two yell to her from their balcony, as she marches in the parade below with a group of parents of gays: "Mom! It's me, Eric!" and "Mom! It's me, Adam!"(101) Just at that moment, Adam rises from his wheelchair, suddenly able to walk. No reason is given for what is presented as a sudden interest in gay rights on her part. Nor is any reason given why Adam's mother has written a letter which he receives in the final act, some time after her death thanks to a postal delay, in which she repents of her negative attitude toward her son's lifestyle, saying, "I see now, what is given by God can't be changed"(85). The play seems to imply that suddenly, in the seventies, parents no longer objected to their children's homosexuality.

Such sudden, unexplained shifts in attitude characterize the play's facile treatment of gay issues. Just as characters move from rejection to acceptance with no obvious motivation, the gay community moves from fear to pride with no sense of the struggle behind such changes. To some extent Morris is successful in capturing a sense of gay attitudes in the decades of the fifties, sixties, and seventies. He fails, however, to explain adequately the significant developments they indicate.

Not all of the playwrights who wrote for a gay audience were as sentimental in their treatment of gay themes as was Morris, however. Robert Chesley, in his Stray Dog Story, presents an honest, accurate picture of gay life, love, and death in a deceptively cartoon-ish form.

Nicholas Deutsch, the play's original director, says in his introduction to the play that "the dramatic method of Stray Dog Story . . . [is] not that of satire, but of farce"(4). He also speaks of "its comic-strip mode"(4) and its debt to "Andersen's fairy tales"(5). All of these connections are appropriate. The plot of the play is a fairy tale; a man wishes that his dog could become a man, and the dog's Fairy Dog Mother complies. The characters are comic-book style stereotypes; most have names which are merely labels, ranging from Upper East Side Fag to Leatherman Activist.

The humor is farcical; much of it is word-play based on the dog-man's naivete and inability to comprehend human ways. Underlying all the seeming simplicity is a sharp satiric base.

The simplicity and fairy-tale plot constantly disarm the audience, only to allow Chesley's sudden attacks on their emotions and their attitudes. After a humorous first scene in which Buddy's Fairy Dog Mother, described as "like Billie Burke," transforms him into a man and which ends with him and his master/lover, Jon, performing mutual fellatio, the second scene hits home with cold reality. Jon is attacked and killed by a gang of "fag-bashers"; Buddy, human for less than twenty-four hours, is suddenly alone in Manhattan. What follows are a series of adventures in which Buddy's lack of knowledge about human ways allows him to be battered financially, physically and emotionally.

Almost everyone Buddy encounters is a target of satire. The gays he meets are, for the most part, either too shallow to care about anything more than appearances or too concerned about political ideology to understand Buddy's honest emotion. Only two characters besides Jon and Buddy are presented in a positive light: the Fairy Dog Mother, who, after her first appearance, is a bag lady "without the Billie Burke inflections"(55), and Dondi, a drag queen/hustler, who, despite confusion about Buddy's persistence in trying

to find a specific "john," attempts to help him before being arrested by the police.

Despite its negative views, however, the play is not anti-gay. The characters' weaknesses are human weaknesses: greed, lack of compassion, mistrust. While Chesley depicts these shortcomings as they are manifested in the gay community, he never suggests that they are gay-related. Indeed, the only innocent in the play is a character who is gay without realizing it. When another character explains to Buddy that homosexuals are "men who love other men, and women who love other women," the dog/man replies brightly, "Well I guess that makes me homo--what was it?"(77). Chesley is writing about humanity's struggle between innocence and corruption. He focuses on the gay community, and as Deutsch states:

> taking for granted the existence of that world--a community with certain shared experiences--he proceeds to explore its specific characteristics and conflicts with the purpose of revealing something of the broader nature of the society in which we live.(4)

Taking that community for granted and assuming it as his audience allows Chesley a greater latitude in presenting experiences honestly. Knowing that he is writing for a gay male audience, he can allow characters to perform fellatio when the story calls for it without having to shield his audience's sensitivities. He also can make jokes about sadomasochistic games and

political realities with greater certainty of audience comprehension; he does not have to stop to explain his characters' actions and words because his audience is as familiar with them as he is. As part of the community for whom he is writing, Chesley can confront problems within that community in a tone which casts him not as judge but as self-examiner. Knowing his audience allows Chesley to be honest.

Honesty, indeed, is the overwhelming characteristic of Stray Dog Story. Chesley pulls no punches, spares no one from his satiric jabs. Even the fairy tale ending, in which Jon returns clothed in bright light to take Buddy away, does not stoop to sentimentality. Buddy dies from drinking wine in freezing weather; in the background some of the people he has met celebrate Christmas Eve in a warm restaurant. Only innocence is gone; the world continues eating and drinking unaware.

Another honest yet humorous portrait of gay life in late-seventies New York was presented by a playwright who had been part of gay drama since its beginnings. Robert Patrick has published over fifty plays, some gay, some not. T-Shirts, which was first performed in 1978 by Out and About Theatre Company of Minneapolis, is obviously directed toward an audience of gay men.

William Hoffmann refers to Patrick's play as "a crash-course in what it's like to be a sophisticated gay man in any big city in America" in the late seventies (Gay Plays xxxvi). Ruby Cohn takes issue with that assessment, saying, "It is rather a crash-course in what it's like to be prey to camp bon mots"(122). The play, more than anything, seems an indictment of a lifestyle common among gay men in American cities of the late seventies and a suggestion that the lifestyle reflects the general vapidity of American culture.

Much of the play is given over to witty repartee, indicating a camp influence which, though no longer dominant, remains present in gay expression. To Marvin's question, "Is that what you really used to think?" his roommate, Kink, responds, "I used to think. Therefore I used to be"(7). Marvin later responds with equal wit to a young guest, Tom, who questions whether his host is "out to get" him: "I'm a successful older man and you're a scrumptious stray cat . . . voulez-vous cliche avec moi?"(21) Such exchanges, however do more than evoke laughter. They reflect a serious lack of communication. Marvin and Kink speak for their own pleasure, not caring whether Tom even understands what they say.

Tom definitely does not comprehend much of anything. Marvin and Kink are, more than anything, a convenience; he is in their apartment to escape the

rain while waiting for his friend and their neighbor, Greg, to return home. The only subjects which really capture his attention are bars, cruising, and television. He discusses Marvin's work as a playwright because he would like a break as an actor, but his view of how to succeed in that field becomes apparent when he thinks Marvin's asking him to undress is an interview.

Two images, more than any others, capture Patrick's view of the society these men represent. The central image, of course, is the T-shirts of the title. These shirts seem to comprise the bulk of Marvin and Kink's wardrobe; indeed, Marvin packs nothing else when travelling. Much is made of Marvin's and Kink's, and eventually Tom's, attempts to find the shirt whose witty saying best captures his personality and mood. Phrases like "Anita Bryant Like Anita Hole in the Head"(6) are as close as anyone in the play comes to political commentary, and when Kink facetiously states, "I could build a philosophy on T-shirts"(19), the obvious implication is not the significance of the shirts but the lack of any well-developed, coherent philosophy in the men's culture. He almost immediately lumps T-shirts with "umbrellas, cigarettes, matches, instant coffee, and paperback books"(19). Theirs is an instant society, a throwaway culture.

This assessment might be read as an indictment of the men's gay lifestyle alone, especially in light of

comments such as Marvin's, that "Gay life is okay if you're very pretty or if you're rich and inhuman"(34), were it not for Patrick's introduction of the ultimate symbol of contemporary American culture, the television. After campily evaluating the vapidity of television broadcasts, the men sit to watch, but what they watch is literally a reflection of their naked selves. Marvin, after insisting that everyone disrobe, shows the others how, by placing themselves between the room's only lit lamp and the darkened television screen, they can watch themselves "on TV. Looking all three-dimensional"(42). Marvin's comment ironically points out the flatness of the men's lives. The vapidity of television is a reflection of the vapidity of America, a country whose culture boils down to witty phrases on T-shirts. To Marvin's and Kink's credit, they, at least, tire of their own reflections. Marvin sets out on one of his frequent trips with no real destination; he's heading for Rome, but from there, he tells Kink, "I'll let you know if I'm going to Africa or anywhere"(43). Kink leaves for the baths, knowing that sober he'll realize that the "people smell so disgusting . . . drunk, impotent and easily fuckable"(7). Even these pursuits, however, seem more worthwhile than Tom's. Greg calls, but the prospect of human contact seems less interesting to him than his own reflection.

As the play closes, he stands narcissistically, posing for himself before the television.

In T-Shirts, then, Patrick has presented a culture devoid of real thought, lacking a sense of direction and narcissistic in its self-absorption. New York gay subculture serves as a microcosm for the larger American culture. While the play indicts the society as a whole, however, it targets a specific audience within that culture. Allusions to varied elements of gay life in the late seventies such as specific bars, sex toys, and a song by Patti Labelle might confuse or even offend a mainstream audience, but Patrick, writing for a specifically gay audience, could feel certain these allusions would be appreciated. Also, because he knows his audience, Patrick feels free having one male tell another, "God, Kink, you're hung"(42), an assessment which his stage directions insist "must be" true(2). The playwright is commenting on the larger society, but he is addressing his comments to a specific audience.

That T-Shirts was first performed in Minneapolis is indicative of the spread of gay theater outside the New York City area. The most important of the non-New York theaters, San Francisco's Theatre Rhinoceros, was the first to produce C. D. Arnold's trilogy, The Dinosaur Plays, in 1981. Two of the three plays, A Night in the Blue Moon and Dinosaurs, had been produced individually before they were joined with The Blonde in

Twenty-B to form the longer work. Each of the plays presents a character dealing with emotional "dinosaurs," emotions which should be extinct and which hamper the person's functioning in the present.

A Night in the Blue Moon is set in a room in the Blue Moon Hotel, upstairs from Arthur and Pablo's twenty-year high school reunion. The two, who had engaged in sexual play as teenagers, have not seen each other for several years. Arthur has remained in Piscataway and is the married father of two sons. Pablo, on the other hand, after travelling extensively, has settled in San Francisco, openly gay but haunted by memories of his first love. After engaging in sex and recounting numerous memories, Arthur leaves since, as he tells Pablo, he is "just not a homosexual"(17). Before leaving, however, he confesses to Pablo that he had run away to San Francisco once to look for him but had been driven home by fear. He also admits that each morning on his way to work he meets a boy, who reminds him of Pablo as a teenager, for mutual masturbation in a public restroom. Finally he tells his old friend that he stays with his wife because "we share a world. A fucked-up, screwed up . . . familiar world, and we hold each other, and we get each other through, and we belong"(26). Pablo, having confronted the reality behind his dreams, is able to say goodbye.

The realization which both men must reach is that the past has no place in the present except as memories. Arthur's early assessment of their meeting as "the reunion of the dinosaurs"(10) is accurate in that the teenagers who met secretly by the pond in moonlight are as definitely extinct as any prehistoric reptile. The moonlight has been replaced by the flashing blue neon of the hotel sign, and romance has given way to "wallow[ing] around on toilet floors in strange hotels"(18). Unpleasant as it is, however, the present is reality, and the dinosaurs threaten that reality. Arthur warns Pablo, "Careful you don't wag your tail. We don't want to bust up the furniture"(10). Memories must be put into perspective. Arthur admits to Pablo, "The summers still smell of you . . . A little fainter maybe, but it's still there."(27)

The Blonde in Twenty-B links this play with Dinosaurs; it is quite distinct, however, not only from those two plays but also from almost all gay drama in that all the characters are lesbians.[1] Despite differences evolving from this shifting of gender, however, the play repeats themes presented in A Night in the Blue Moon and foreshadows Dinosaurs.

The differences between this play and the others are subtle. While Arnold's male characters talk quite frankly about sex, his females reveal their lesbianism only by their situation, never by their conversation;

they never acknowledge their own sexuality. Whether Arnold is uncomfortable with lesbian sexuality or unaware that women do indeed speak about such matters is unclear. However, he is also much more restrained in depicting physical affection between females than between males. In A Night in the Blue Moon Pablo holds a naked Arthur, and in Dinosaurs one of the characters "rings a soft dinner bell between his legs" to entice the other(71). Arnold's lesbians,however, never progress beyond a brief embrace.

These differences, however, are largely overshadowed by thematic similarities which establish the unity of the trilogy. Again the plot focuses on a character's confrontation with someone from her past. On the eve of Laurel and Bernice's move from New York City to Texas, Laurel's former lover, Katie Day, shows up, ready to attempt a music career. Laurel's own show-business ambitions had been important in shaping her decision to leave Katie and Alabama, and to follow Bernice to New York. Never having had the opportunity to pursue those goals and not wanting to move to Texas, Laurel is tempted by Katie's talk of the two of them performing together again. By the end of the play, however, she settles for entering a talent contest with Katie before moving to Texas. As in A Night in the Blue Moon, dreams which had seemed extinguished reawaken, but, because they are incompatible with

present reality, they must be confronted and laid to rest.

This theme is presented most directly in the third play of the trilogy, Dinosaurs. As this piece opens, Christian, sitting on his bed in the Tenderloin district of San Francisco, tells the audience, "I was contemplating my extinction today"(57). His evaluation of his life and comments on existence are interrupted by the sudden return of Johnny Pole, a former lover who had run off to Hollywood hoping for a movie career. Having been rejected by a director of pornographic movies because of his age, he has returned to Christian. However, he is followed by the police because he has stolen a valuable painting from the director. Christian resists Johnny's advances at first, but he is giving in just as blue lights begin to flash through the apartment windows. Waiting for the police to come in and arrest them, he returns to his contemplation of existence, and, seeing extinction settling about them like a gentle snow, he tells Johnny, "It's the Ice Age coming . . . We're saved."(73)

Christian, like Pablo and Laurel, is confronted by his romantic memories. Unable to resist those dreams, however, he falls victim to the extinction which must befall such dinosaurs. Unlike Pablo and Laurel, he has not built for himself a present strong enough to resist the destructive force of the past.

Such a theme, like so many of those dealt with in gay plays, does indeed apply in non-gay life. The appeal of the play, however, is more specifically gay. All of the play's characters are homosexuals or, at least, express homoerotic tendencies. The only discussion of heterosexuality is as a poor substitute for someone whose inability to deal honestly with his own sexuality has left him sad and lonely. A gay audience would recognize the appropriateness of New York and San Francisco as meccas in which dreams can be realized, of Alabama and Piscataway as dead-ends to be avoided, and of the Tenderloin as a place where one can sell himself out to his dreams until he has none of himself left to build on. The emotions are universal; their expression is specifically gay. Arnold, like Wilson, Hall, and the others, was writing for a gay theater.

Contributions of Separatist Gay Theater

These playwrights then, in writing for such a pre-defined audience, produced works which, despite their differences, shared certain attitudes, and assumptions. Their variety helped to expand the range of gay drama; their similarity established a more clearly defined movement.

By encouraging playwrights to write more plays for specifically gay audiences, these theaters helped to increase the types of gay drama. This period saw

such domestic drama as If This Isn't Love, such social problem drama as Prisoner of Love, such sophisticated comedy as T-Shirts, and such outrageous comedy bordering on farce as Forever After. The forms, however, were not the only differences. Characters ranged from stereotypical to well-rounded. Heterosexual and homosexual characters ran the gamut from despicable and detestable to charming and admirable. The issues addressed were equally varied: homophobia, prostitution, political idealism, love relationships, and gay parenting, among others.

Despite the variety, however, the plays had one thing in common: they were written for gay audiences, and their writers knew it. These plays shared a willingness to discuss and sometimes portray sexuality frankly and without apology. The playwrights, free to assume a sympathetic audience, saw no need to shy away from a scene which called for embraces between nude men or from dialogue in which men commented on other men's sexual organs. Their audience, they could be sure, shared a common bank of experiences. Perhaps, though, most important of all was an unwillingness to accept the traditional heterosexist view of the world. Homosexuality, in these plays, is the norm; the only serious perversions are not accepting oneself and trying to hinder someone else's growth. If any form of

sexual expression is suspect, it is an unquestioned heterosexuality.

Playwrights, then, writing, as Hall said, "for a gay theater," provided gay drama not only a markedly increased number and variety of plays but also a stronger sense of definition. These playwrights, however, were not the ones whose gay plays received the most attention during this period.

NOTES

[1]The absence of lesbians in gay drama parallels a similar treatment of gay men in lesbian drama. None of the plays in Kate McDermott's Places Please: The First Anthology of Lesbian Plays contains any male characters, and one, Dos Lesbos, by Terry Baum and Carolyn Myers, even contains a scene in which two lesbians joke about killing all "the faggots" (21-22). Nor does Jane Chambers, who has had two plays published in the JH Press Gay Play Script Series and one included in Hoffman's Gay Plays anthology, ever treat male homosexuality. Common themes do run through both movements--most notably, what Richard Hall refers to as "sexual otherness or emotive apartheid" (165). Lesbian drama, however, has generally been concerned with women's issues which are not frequently mentioned in gay drama, while gay drama has often dealt more with physical sexuality than its female counterpart. Causes for the differences range from the obvious to the obscure. Whatever the reasons, however, Arnold's trilogy represents one of the few bridges between the two movements.

CHAPTER 4

MAINSTREAM GAY DRAMA

During the same time period in which Doric Wilson and others were creating and writing plays for a separatist gay theater, other more mainstream playwrights, including another Wilson, were also writing plays containing gay characters and plots. Some of these other plays, such as Lanford Wilsons's Fifth of July (1978), raised new questions as to which plays could and could not be classified as gay. At the same time, some of these mainstream plays, such as Harvey Fierstein's Torch Song Trilogy, despite occasional accusations by hard-core gay dramatists that such plays were too accomodationist, were certainly as gay as any by Richard Hall or Doric Wilson. These plays, through the questions they raised and the attention they received, brought gay drama a visibility the more separatist plays were unable to achieve alone.

Non-Gay Plays About Homosexuality in the 1970's

Some of the plays which attracted attention to gay drama in the mid-seventies were not, themselves, gay plays. By dealing honestly and forthrightly with homosexuality and homosexual characters, however, they helped not only to awaken interest in other plays on the subject but also to raise questions which allowed

sharper definition of gay drama. Two non-gay plays, in particular, stirred controversy with their treatment of the subject.

David Rabe's Streamers (1976) cannot be accused of approaching the subject shyly. In his study of soldiers in the Vietnam-era army, Rabe presents Richie, a young self-proclaimed gay man, and his roommates in the barracks: Roger, a young black man, and Billy, a white college graduate. Neither Roger nor Billy is willing to believe that Richie is gay, and Billy tries to ignore Richie's passes and insinuations that the attraction is more mutual than his heterosexual roommate claims. Violence erupts when Carlyle, a neurotic but streetwise black recruit, assumes that Richie has been providing sexual services for his roommates and tries to avail himself of the same services.

Streamers is, on one level, about homosexuality. The characters question why some people are gay, and they represent a variety of attitudes toward homosexuality. Conversations on the subject are frank: Billy tells of a friend with whom he used to trick older gay men into buying drinks and meals by pretending interest and who eventually turned out gay; Carlyle asks Billy, "Is that Richie a good punk? . . . He takes care of you and Roger?"(68). At one point the light in the room comes on to reveal Carlyle on Richie's bed with "Richie

kneeling before him"(85). This play differs greatly from the evasive dramas of earlier decades.

The play is also less negative in its approach to the subject. It does, at times, rely on stereotypes. Richie is described as "effeminate"(68), and homosexuality is portrayed as resulting from an absentee father and indoctrination by older homosexuals. On the other hand, the plays's heterosexual characters frequently speak out in favor of individual choice, with a sergeant summing up the overriding attitude; thinking that Richie is crying about being gay, he comforts him:

> You gonna' be okay. There's a lotta worse things in this world than bein' a queer. I seen a lot of 'em, too. I mean, you could have leukemia. That's worse. That can kill you. I mean, it's okay. You listen to the ole sarge. I mean, maybe I was a queer, I wouldn't have leukemia. (107-8)

The sergeant's language is patronizing, if not downright demeaning, but his speech lacks the condemnation it would have expressed in a play of an earlier decade.

Despite the ways in which this play differs from those earlier works, it is not a gay play. Sexuality, here, is, like race, just one of many ways in which we characterize and alienate each other. The play lacks a gay central consciousness. Richie is no more of an insider than any of the others; indeed, if anything, he is more of an outsider. At one point he confides in Roger his occasional wish to be "more like you . . . but not to any severe extent"(34), but his alienation

from the others is all too obvious when they leave him behind as they go out for a night on the town. Roger tries to invite him but only in hope that "a chance to really run with the boys" (34) will change him. Indeed, on their night out, even Carlyle, the intruder, is more a part of the group than Richie since he knows where to find women. Carlyle's inclusion is temporary, however, and his later rejection is the focal point of the play.

Carlyle, when he has been arrested for murdering Billy and a sergeant, yells at the military police, "Don't you people understand when a man be talkin' English at you to say his mind? I have quit the army!"(100). That lack of understanding is exactly the problem. The white men fail to understand Carlyle's black slang. The enlisted men find the officers' song about a parachute not opening "un-fuckin'-believable"(43), but the sergeant tells them, "You just be listenin' up, 'cause if you hear it right you can maybe stop bein' shit sacks"(42). Billy and Roger are operating on that same level when they keep telling Richie to stop talking "that fag stuff"(28). Each of the men speaks a different language. Even Roger and Billy only pretend to share a common language; when the topic at hand gets uncomfortable, they immediately slip into army jargon and speak of "standin' tall" and being "good fuckin' troopers"(17). Richie, however, sees through the

pretense and when Billy, in anger, steps out of that role, Richie is quick to attack:

> Obliterate"? "Obliterate," did you say? Oh, Billy, you better say "shit," "ain't" and "motherfucker" real quick now or we'll all know just how far beyond the fourth grade you went. (14)

The men speak different languages, and their inability to communicate results in violence. This theme is reinforced when a drunken sergeant recounts for the men the story of a Japanese soldier he had killed in war and slips into singing the paratroopers' song in mock Japanese. The two men sang the same song in different languages, but their failure to understand each other was the reason for the war.

Homosexuality, then, is in the play as an example, an illustration. The play is not exploring the gay experience, nor is it examining a larger issue from a gay perspective. It is merely using sexual differences, in the same way that it uses racial differences, to demonstrate the general lack of communication within the larger society. The play is not gay; it is merely a play touching on homosexuality though it avoids the negativism and vagueness which had characterized such plays in earlier decades.

Another play which, though not really gay, dealt with homosexuality as frankly as and more positively than Streamers appeared in 1978.

Of all the plays of the late seventies and early eighties, probably none has done more to bring into question the nature of gay drama than one written by the man who wrote the play which signifies the beginning of gay drama. Though Lanford Wilson wrote numerous plays during the years following The Madness of Lady Bright, not until 1978 did he again treat homosexuality so directly. At the center of his Fifth of July stand Ken Tally and Jed Jenkins, a gay couple.

The significance of the characters' sexuality is apparent both in the play and in the playwright's comments about the play. The first action of the play is a kiss between Ken Talley and his lover, Jed. Wilson has spoken of his revisions of the play in which that kiss moved "closer and closer to the beginning" in order to avoid "the impression that Gwen and John rather than Ken and Jed were going to be the center" of the play (Picano 23). He also expresses the view that the relationship between Ken and Jed "wouldn't have worked as a heterosexual relationship" (Picano 24). Still, little is said about the relationship; the few comments made about their being gay are mostly Ken's attempts at a slightly self-deprecating humor, as when he refers to himself as "Superfag" (31).

This play, despite its gay central characters, is not about homosexuality; homosexuality just happens to be part of the world it is exploring. The play focuses

on how we cope with the world we have been given to live in and how we approach the future. When Ken's sister, June, tells her daughter, Shirley, "You've no idea of the country we almost made for you" (40), referring to the rebellion of the sixties, she is expressing the tension which the characters of her generation feel between what they had hoped the world would be and what they have found it to be. They must, in order to resolve the tension, become more like the characters in Ken's student's story, who "were very happy, because . . . they knew it was up to them to become all the things they had imagined they would find" (74), and they are doing just that. Their hometown had rejected the marriage of Sally Talley to a Jew, but they now accept Ken and Jed with hardly a raised eyebrow. Despite June's disclaimer that she "thinks it's all a crock now"(40), they are becoming the country they "almost made." Ken and Jed's homosexuality is necessary in that it helps to throw off balance the portrait of the typical rural American family; it functions in much the same way as June's status as an unwed mother. The play is set in the seventies and reflects changes brought about by the rebellion of the sixties. Still, despite Wilson's claim that it was "exciting . . . to write a relationship that was vaguely like the world I knew, instead of all these really strange relationships you see in

literature"(Picano 24), the relationship is never explored. Richard Hall suggests that "the loving relationship between Ken and Jed was the subject of much praise--mostly because it was never discussed in the play" and notes that "touching was reduced, in the downtown production, to a carry-up to the second floor of the legless Ken by his younger lover"(171). As in Streamers, homosexuality is a device rather than an emphasis. Unlike Leslie Bright, in Wilson's earlier work, Ken Talley is not the central consciousness of the play. He is merely one of the members of the family.

Streamers and Fifth of July are not gay plays; they are plays which deal with homosexuality, albeit in a more positive light than such plays had in earlier decades, but they do not explore the gay experience. They use homosexuality to make a point, as an illustration or an example, but they do not reflect what it means to be gay. Still, by serving as counter-examples they helped to clarify definitions of what gay drama is. Helbing is right to reject Fifth of July when classifying gay plays, since, as he states, "gayness is not an issue, a problem or a subject of the play"(2), and in doing so we can state more clearly what plays are gay drama.

Another function served by these non-gay plays in the 1970's, was to help build a broader audience for

gay drama. Doric Wilson and others who were writing for gay theaters were creating a large body of work which was finding a limited audience. David Rabe and Lanford Wilson, as well-known and respected playwrights, helped prepare a more mainstream audience for direct, honest treatment of homosexuality. In doing so they broke ground for dramatists who were seeking to expand gay drama. They also helped to raise interest in a subject which, until then, many Americans were still unaware could be treated frankly in drama.

Fierstein's Torch Song Trilogy[1]

The positive reception by mainstream audiences of Rabe's and Wilson's plays opened the way for other plays, unquestionably gay, to address themselves to mainstream audiences. The writers of these plays shared common Off-Off-Broadway roots with writers like both Lanford Wilson, though they chose to deal more directly with gay issues than did Fifth of July, and Doric Wilson, though their plays are aimed at an audience broader than just the gay community. Most notable among these writers is Harvey Fierstein, who had worked with Lanford Wilson, Doric Wilson, and Robert Patrick, among others, at Cafe Cino and later at La Mama E.T.C. Torch Song Trilogy (1982) grew out of his work at La Mama, combining his plays The International Stud, Fugue in a Nursery, and Widows and Children

First!. The trilogy demonstrates the high quality achieved by gay comedy during this period. Eric Bentley has stated that the strength of this play, as with Fifth of July, lies in its presentation of gay characters who are "normal people"(Pally 53). Unlike Wilson's play, however, Torch Song Trilogy explores those people's gayness.

The International Stud introduces Arnold Beckoff, a drag performer, and his love for Ed Reiss, a bisexual who leaves him for a woman though he is still in love with Arnold. Fugue in a Nursery picks up on the story a year later when Arnold and his new lover, Alan, spend a weekend with Ed and his girlfriend, Laurel. During the weekend Ed and Alan have sex, but after the truth about that is revealed to Arnold and Laurel, the couples decide to reexamine and recommit themselves to their relationships. The play ends when Arnold learns that Ed, with whom he is still in love, plans to marry Laurel. In Widows and Children First!, set five years after Fugue, Arnold's mother has come to visit. Arnold, who is still mourning Alan's murder by a gang of teenagers, is in the process of trying to adopt David, a gay, sixteen-year-old delinquent, and is playing host to Ed, who is in the process of getting a divorce. After numerous arguments, Mrs. Beckoff moves toward acceptance of her son's lifestyle, and Arnold agrees to consider Ed's proposal that they try again to

be lovers. The plot is deceptively simple; the play's chief strengths are its depth of character and its honesty.

When Arnold's mother complains about his talking about his being gay, Arnold stands firm: "You want a part in my life? I am not going to edit out the things you don't like" (152). His sentiment seems to echo Fierstein's approach to writing a gay play. In the trilogy he deals with drag, backroom sex, married men having homosexual affairs, anti-gay violence, gay parenting, gay teenagers, familial rejection, promiscuity, and gay relationships. Nothing is edited out to avoid offending the audience.

Richard Hall, who sees Torch Song Trilogy as indicative of a "suburban" phase in gay drama (176), suggests a contrast between it and Doric Wilson's A Perfect Relationship. He refers to a scene in the latter in which Barry, witness to an argument between Ward and Greg, pleads, "If you guys are going to fight, put on jock straps first . . . ; two guys fighting in jock straps can be very hot!" (Wilson 73). Hall suggests that Wilson's play is more willing to present "a sensory world whose assumptions share nothing with" those of someone "caught in the hetero world" (175), but in drawing such a contrast he ignores a scene which he himself has called "brilliant" (173). No scene or dialogue in Wilson's play could have shocked a main-

stream American audience more than the scene in which Arnold mimes backroom sex or than the fact that throughout most of Fugue in a Nursery all of the actors are in bed together, frequently with men embracing men. Fierstein cannot fairly be accused of shying away from the realities of gay life or of taking a "sanitary approach to gay sensuality" (Hall 171).

Instead, at times, Fierstein's trilogy exhibits a feature characteristic of gay plays directed toward mainstream audiences, a tendency to explain details of gay life which the separatist plays assume as common knowledge among their audience. To some extent, by allowing Arnold to address the audience directly in the first play and, even more, by including Laurel and Mrs. Beckoff, outsiders who are unfamiliar with gay life, in the other plays, Fierstein provides his characters, primarily Arnold, with the opportunity to explain specific details of gay life or to make statements which would be unnecessary were the play addressed to a specifically gay audience. Indeed Arnold's plea for "love and respect" (153) is aimed as much at the audience as at his mother, and no gay audience would need the explanation, "The International Stud bar has this dark backroom where everyone goes to fool around"(69). This tendency to explain rather than just to explore or to present gay life is more common in earlier gay plays like Boys in the Band than in the

separatist dramas of Doric Wilson, Richard Hall, and the others. It does not, however, deny that play's classification as gay drama.

Despite Hall's "notion that Fierstein . . . has partially betrayed his message of gay freedom" by a conclusion in which "Arnold ends up happily with his lover Ed ('husband'), his adopted son David ('child'), and--as if this nuclear family weren't enough, (sic) the grudging approval of his mother"(173-174), the play is uncompromising. It does not, as Hall contends, suggest that "gay people are just like straight people; all they want is a loving spouse, nice in-laws and a kid who gets good grades" (174). As his phone conversations with his friend Murray, his experiences in the International Stud, and accounts of the various men's pasts all indicate, Arnold does not represent all gays. He is an individual. He is not perfect; he is no ideal to strive for. Indeed, much of the play's comedy derives from his weaknesses, as when he deceives himself into thinking of his encounters in the backroom as a "relationship" or when David points out his pattern of answering every question with "no" before actually reaching a decision. Fierstein is not presenting Arnold as achieving what all gay people want. Indeed, the trilogy ends on a speculative note; no one, especially not Arnold, knows whether the new arrangement will work.

Fierstein explores gay life and does not say "gay people are just like straight people." He points out common human experiences, such as "widowing" (144), and needs, "love and respect" (145), but he also notes differences. Laurel and Ed's wedding plans are hardly "just like" Arnold and Alan's pact "to take equal responsibility for walking and feeding the dog"(96).

What separates Torch Song Trilogy from a play like A Perfect Relationship is its recognition of a diverse audience to whom its characters' experiences may seem foreign. While Fierstein concentrates more on establishing common ground and on explaining differences, however, he is no more shy about presenting nor willing to apologize for those differences than are Wilson, Hall, and the others. His trilogy is definitely a gay drama.

Sherman's Bent

The comedy of Fierstein's trilogy stands in sharp contrast to the somber tones of the one other most notable gay play of this period. Martin Sherman's Bent (1979), however, despite obvious differences in style and tone, is, like Torch Song, gay drama written for a mainstream audience. Unlike Fierstein, however, Sherman does not try to explain gay life to non-gays in his audience. Instead he uses history both to make a plea

for understanding among non-gays and to warn gays about dangers they might be facing.

Bent presents the seldom discussed plight of gays in Nazi Germany, who, like Jews, were killed and imprisoned in large numbers. Max, as the play opens, has a lover, Rudy, but, under the influence of cocaine, has brought home, unknowingly, the boyfriend of Karl Ernst, deputy to the second-in-command of Hitler's SA. When storm troopers raid their apartment and kill their guest as part of Hitler's purge of homosexuals from the army, Max and Rudy flee. After two years of running, they are arrested; Rudy is killed. Max is imprisoned but convinces the guards to give him a yellow star, indicating that he is a Jew, instead of the pink triangle which indicates homosexuality. At Dachau, Max meets Horst, another gay man. Max, using money and sex as bribes, obtains for Horst both a new job assignment, which though designed to drive them insane allows the two men to talk, and the medicine he needs for a serious cold. After the two men have reached a level of intimacy which allows them to talk each other through lovemaking to orgasm, Horst is killed by the guards. Max finally admits his love not only for Horst but also for Rudy, and, wearing the pink triangle which he takes from Horst's body, he walks into an electrified fence. As he dies, the light from the fence "consumes the stage. And blinds the audience"(76). Appended to

the play is a chronology of historic events significant in the Nazi persecution of gays.

In part, Sherman uses history and myth to make his play accessible to non-gay audiences. The horror of the Nazi concentration camps and the sense of human loss they evoke are distressing but familiar; the audience is prepared for the emotions the play awakens. The play also incorporates the myth of Sisyphus' meaningless, repetitive task to emphasize the emptiness of Max' alienated existence; his job of moving rocks from one pile to another then back is designed to drive him insane, but he avoids that end by establishing emotional contact with Horst. Thus grounded in history and myth, the play allows non-gays in the audience a sense of familiarity.

Bent also deals with several broadly accessible themes. The alienation which Max experiences as a result of his unwillingness to trust others or to express his emotions honestly is not limited to gays. The sense of self-affirmation he achieves when he is finally able to admit his feelings to Horst and to take his destiny into his own hands, though it has special meaning for gays, runs at the heart of human experience.

In allowing non-gays this accessibility, however, Sherman does not compromise his gay concerns. The central issue here is, of course, sexual oppression,

and, though the play is set in thirties Germany, the parallels with America in the late seventies are obvious. In both situations there is an element of self-oppression. Speaking on the similarities, Sherman says:

> What I see happening in New York did happen in pre-holocaust Germany. I do get frightened when I see a large society . . . advertising something that suggests pain and hurting. Even though I realize that most people who do that aren't really into that at all. I'm concerned when that goes under the guise of liberation. I think that's very self-oppressive. (Ortlieb 11)

Sherman's sentiments echo Horst's comment to Max during one of their verbal lovemaking scenes: "We stopped being gentle. I watched it, when we were on the outside. People made pain and called it love" (66). In the specific context, he is referring to sado-masochism, but the implications run much deeper to the infliction of emotional pain. Sherman is warning the gay community about the alienation which can result from the refusal to become emotionally involved with others. He sees in the sexual liberation of the seventies a loss of necessary emotional support.

Sherman's warning is that alienation which results from wholesale rejection of the larger society's ideals can weaken the minority to the point where they are unable to join in a struggle against oppression. Since he is dealing specifically with a sexually-defined minority, here, the ultimate act of defiance is a

shared orgasm; thus Horst exclaims, "We did it. They're not going to kill us. We made love. We were real. We were human. We made love. They're not going to kill us"(58). The ultimate act of self-affirmation is admitting one's love for someone else. Thus, only once Max has admitted his love for Horst, and for Rudy, and for "some boy a long time ago. In my father's factory. Hans"(75), can he wear the pink triangle which states that he is gay and determine his own fate by walking into the fence.

Sherman's other warning to gays is much simpler and more direct. Rudy demonstrates a total lack of awareness of political reality; his only concerns are his plants and his dancing. Likewise, Max is concerned only with sex, drugs, and paying the rent. Their lack of awareness allows them to bring into their home the boyfriend of a leader of Hitler's storm troopers, an event which soon forces them to flee from their home and eventually leads to their deaths. Without support from gays like Rudy and Max, even people like the politically involved Horst cannot bring about change, as is indicated by Horst's comments about the petition circulated by Magnus Hirschfeld to "make queers legal"(37).

In many ways Bent, despite its historical setting, is the most political gay play of the late seventies and early eighties, and its political message is aimed

directly at a gay audience. It succeeds with a non-gay audience, however, by using a technique common in American political drama. Like Arthur Miller's The Crucible, Sherman's play presents a surface of history and appeals to issues of interest to both gays and non-gays, allowing him to express his real political message with a subtlety which belies the play's emotional impact.

Other Mainstream Gay Plays

Other gay plays, though they did not receive the acclaim awarded Torch Song Trilogy or Bent, also helped to establish gay drama with mainstream audiences. The variety displayed by these plays demonstrates the breadth of gay drama during the period and indicates means by which the movement began to reach a larger audience. Indicative of this variety are Eric Bentley's Lord Alfred's Lover, S. Michael Schnessel's The Day Mr. Donald Disappeared, and Alan Bowne's Forty-Deuce.

Eric Bentley's reputation as a playwright and a critic was well established before he wrote what he considers, and what indeed is, his first gay play, Lord Alfred's Lover (1981). Bentley places his play in this category "not because it's about Oscar Wilde but because it's about sex" (Pally 112). Conversely,

however, the play is accessible to a non-gay audience primarily because it is about Wilde.

Lord Alfred's Lover is an account of the trial of Wilde and of events leading up to and following that most famous example of homosexual oppression. The account is given as a confession by a no-longer-young Lord Alfred Douglas, and much of the action consists of flashbacks. Though the play is based on historic events, Bentley notes, in an appendix, that "history plays are anachronistic from beginning to end since they are put together by writers not by antiquarians or linguists"(127). Despite such a disclaimer, the play's biographical element appeals to a curiosity about Wilde's personal life which remains strong nearly a century after his death, but if satisfying that curiosity were the play's only achievement, it could hardly be classified as gay.

The play, however, does go beyond that level. Indeed, on another level, the play is a plea for gay rights. By portraying Wilde's prosecution as politically motivated--an attempt to dispel suspicions about the Prime Minister, Roseberry--he brings into question the laws which allow such injustices. Bentley presents Wilde, in his imprisonment and in the broken life he leads after his release, as one of the "monstrous martyrdoms" (120) whose sacrifices would lead to the repeal of such laws.

Even more, though, Lord Alfred's Lover is a plea for gay self-acceptance. Wilde, even physically broken and near death, is portrayed as admirable in his refusal "to be shamed by a shameful world"(124). In contrast, Lord Alfred, having renounced his homosexual past and having outlived his former lover by almost half a century, is lonely and filled with regret, like "the Ancient Mariner--always retelling his story" in search of freedom from his guilt(20). Clearly, Wilde's course, even when it results in physical pain and loss, is preferable.

Bentley rejects in-jokes which he sees as characteristic of ghetto theater (Pally 53), but he does not shy away from gay subject matter. Indeed, at one point we actually see two men in bed "making love"(42), and in another scene Wilde and a young Lord Alfred lie in bed discussing, quite frankly,their sexual preferences. Despite such frankness, however, Bentley does address a general audience. He has stated that playwrights should "make gay references universal" when possible, adding that "most of us wouldn't be able" (Pally 52). In Lord Alfred's Lover he has not "universalized" so much as personified his ideals, but by capturing these ideals in a character he can expect his audience to recognize he has given them if not universality at least a sense of familiarity. In so doing he has

written a play which addresses gays and non-gays simultaneously with companionable messages.

Other gay playwrights found different means for addressing general audiences with their plays. one such play, S. Michael Schnessel's The Day Mr. Donald Disappeared, was published in Southern Theatre in 1979. The play is lighthearted, even farcical, but its message is direct and definitely gay. It differs from most gay drama, however, in that all of the characters are heterosexual.

The basic premise of the play explains the absence of gay characters: suddenly and inexplicably every homosexual in the world has vanished, leaving behind nothing but a pile of clothes. The play focuses on the confusion which erupts when George Matheison, the newly-elected mayor, and Art Mingus, his campaign manager, fail to arrive for George's victory banquet. The central characters are Hilda Matheison and Lucille Mingus, their wives, who gradually become aware of the reason for their husbands' absence. Realizing that the men they love will not be returning, they resolve to make love to each other and thereby go to wherever the homosexuals have gone. Lucille expresses concern that their husbands may not want them, but Hilda comforts her as they exit arm in arm: "Don't worry, darling. We'll have each other, won't we?"(22)

The play's theme becomes most apparent in consideration of the title character. Mr. Donald, Hilda's hairdresser, is described as "flamboyant, sharp-tongued, and extremely feminine in his mannerisms"(12). The other characters consider his sudden absence proof that the radio broadcast about the disappearance of homosexuals is accurate; when he suddenly reappears, straightening his clothes, the wives, thinking the mysterious incident has ended, try to brush aside their suspicions about their husbands. To everyone's surprise, however, he reveals that he has been hiding "in the pantry performing an unnatural act on" Ilsa, a female member of the catering staff(21). The message is obvious; one cannot judge who is or is not gay on the basis of appearances.

Schnessel's play lacks subtlety in presenting its message, but its whimsical attitude helps to temper any heavyhandedness. Though its intended audience and all of its characters are primarily heterosexuals, its attitude and its theme earn it classification as a gay play. Its publication in a journal such as Southern Theatre indicates the degree to which gay drama was achieving mainstream acceptance.

While Schnessel allowed his audience to laugh as he presented his message and Bentley used history to establish distance as well as recognition, Alan Bowne confronted off-Broadway audiences with hard-hitting,

gritty realism in Forty-Deuce (1981). Bowne's play explores a seldom-examined area of gay life, the world of male prostitution, blending a realism which borders on documentary with a human drama which pleads for understanding and compassion.

Most of the characters are teenage hustlers who represent a rainbow of ethnic backgrounds. Ricky has been put in charge of the boys' operation by Augie, who in turn works for Mike, the boss who controls the boys' activities and takes a share of their earnings in exchange for providing them a room. Mike never appears but hangs like a shadow of fear over the boys' lives. Ricky, hoping to earn enough money to be able to live and work independently, has set up a deal without informing Augie or Mike; the deal involves hiring out a thirteen-year-old runaway to Roper, one of Mike's best clients, to earn money with which to buy a large quantity of cocaine for resale. When the young boy, whose nude body on an unmade bed "is made the visual focus throughout" the play(5), dies from an overdose of drugs the boys have given him, Ricky decides to encourage Roper to smoke marijuana before he sees the boy, then, after leaving them alone for a few minutes, to return and accuse Roper of manslaughter. By blackmailing Roper, he expects to make even more money than he had originally intended. The plan backfires, however. Roper chooses only to hold the boy gently,

never progressing to the sadomasochism Ricky thought was his preference and, therefore, never seriously implicating himself in the boy's death. He also fails to respond coherently to Ricky's threats and accusations. Ricky is left unable to acquire the money he has promised the drug dealers and afraid of a confrontation with Mike, who has been filled in on Ricky's actions by one of the other hustlers who resented the mistreatment of the dead youth. He escapes into a heroin-induced delirium and wanders into the bathroom; the other boys flee, leaving the dead youth alone on the stage. Augie has explained that the drug dealers will arrive soon but so will the police, who, finding the dealers alone with the body, will blame them for the death.

The play's success results primarily from its realistic approach to its subject. The language is frank: the opening line is "Jeez. Fuckin' jeez"(8); the final line is "The cocksuckin' toilet"(93). The boys talk not only about someone wanting to "suck my cock"(56) and to "jab his thumb up my asshole . . . rippin' my asshole"(59) but also of their fear that Mike will "rub glass in our eyes" for trying to cheat him(89). The audience is not spared reality; at one point a middle-aged man climbs into bed and caresses a nude thirteen-year-old boy. While such frankness certainly alienates some members of the audience, it

appeals to the curiosity of others. In its unwillingness to apologize for the reality it presents, the play seems to tell its audience, "This is the world, like it or not."

By limiting his focus, however, Bowne has provided his audience emotional distance. The action of the play is set in an area of New York known for such activity; the characters are part of a world which stands apart from the audience's world. The play's almost documentary realism allows the audience to satisfy its curiosity without seeing itself as part of the world it is observing.

This distance, however, is not absolute. Though Ricky, Augie, and the other hustlers are part of that other world, two characters appear as representatives of the world outside, the world of the audience. Roper delivers a monologue to the body of the dead John Anthony in which he reveals his own insecurities and presents parallels between his corporate world and the world of Forty-Second Street, referring to his business associates as "little hustlers with their warts and styles and meanness"(66-67), and stating a preference for the prostitutes, "such wonderfully foul little creatures"(66). However, his anger with Blow, one of the hustlers, for having waved to him on Sixth Avenue indicates his fear that this other world might contaminate his own.

The primary image of the play, though, is the "curved and twisted" body of John Anthony(5). Blow tells the others that the youth had come to the city from upstate "'cause his brother say he just a little queer get outa my house"(39); then he speculates on the brother's motives:

> Some upstate crud . . . . Think he is so straight prob'ly take it up the ass. I deal with straight guys they all take it up the ass. Then they go back to the wife and girlfriend and talk about queers . . . throw out his little brother the little queer can't live with such a real fuckin' man and his real fuckin' wife . . . .(39)

John Anthony is a constant link between the prostitutes' world and the audience's. Thus, though Bowne allows his audience necessary distance, he forces them to confront the links and the similarities between their own world and the world on stage, and he reminds them that this world exists because of their own.

In balancing distance and involvement Bowne successfully creates a gay play for a mainstream audience. The play's focus is more limited than that of many gay plays; neither Ricky nor Roper is presented as an average gay man. The play does, however, explore this one specific area of gay life with honesty and with sympathy. It succeeds in representing to a mainstream audience an aspect of gay life which though unpleasant is real, and without condemnation it explores

the motives of those involved in this world on all levels.

Differences Between Separatist and Mainstream Gay Plays

The differences between plays like Forty-Deuce, Torch Song Trilogy, and Bent and plays like Forever After and T-Shirts reflect the differences between their intended audiences. Their similarities, however, provide the definitive qualities of gay drama.

Gay drama, by definition, does not apologize for dealing with homosexuality. Plays aimed at mainstream audiences sometimes provide more explanation and background than do plays written for specifically gay audiences, as when Fierstein's Arnold explains what a "backroom bar" is. Sometimes, too, they rely on history to make themselves more accessible or on comedy to make themselves more palatable, or they find some other means of allowing non-gays in the audience the distance necessary to refrain from systematic moral condemnation. They all, however, present gay characters and subjects without apology, rejecting the view that heterosexualty is innately superior.

The common thread is a plea for understanding and acceptance. In the more separatist drama, this plea may be for self-acceptance or for acceptance of other gays; it may be an attempt to help the gay community better understand its own strengths and weaknesses. In

plays aimed at general audiences it may be a direct plea for gay rights or an attempt to discredit traditional stereotypes. Even when these plays explore negative aspects of gay life, they do so with sympathy and in an attempt to improve, not to degrade.

Most significantly, though, in all of these plays, gay characters are the "we" of the play. Even when the play seems to explore from the outside, as in The Day Mr. Donald Disappeared, homosexuality is an assumption, and gays are in the know, as it were. The non-gays must be educated. In-jokes, slang,and casual references to homosexual behavior serve as reminders that in the worlds of these plays, gays are central.

Such attitudes and approaches, having first surfaced in the mid-sixties with plays like The Madness of Lady Bright and The Haunted Host, had developed into a movement which, by the early eighties, had produced a corpus of works of amazing number and diversity, had defined its own parameters and concerns, and had presented itself to the world outside without apology. By the early eighties no one could question whether gay drama really existed.

NOTE

[1]Fierstein's most popular work, the book for the musical version of La Cage Aux Folles (1983), has not yet been published, and has, therefore, not been considered in this study. That play, however, which tells the story of a drag queen and his lover who have raised the second man's son, is definitely an example of gay drama which has reached a mainstream audience.

CHAPTER 5

AIDS PLAYS

The development of the gay drama movement from the early sixties to the early eighties, in many ways, mirrors socio-political developments of the same period. As gays became more assertive in voicing their self-acceptance and in demanding acceptance by society at large, gay drama became increasingly self-aware and willing to confront sensitive issues. Just as some gays chose to work within the system to eventuate change while others chose to create their own society--some would say "ghettoes"--within cities like New York and San Francisco, some gay plays addressed themselves almost exclusively to the gay community in attempts to strengthen the movement internally while others sought more mainstream audiences and attempted to effect changes in the larger society. The number and diversity of gay plays which appeared in the late seventies and early eighties parallels the number and diversity of gay organizations and businesses which sprang up during the same period, as evidenced by directories such as Gayellow Pages.

It is not surprising then that a tragedy which has had immeasurable impact on the gay community should change the course of gay drama. Though no one, as the eighties began, could possibly predict the devastation

AIDS would wreak on the gay community, by the mid-eighties no one could discuss gay issues without mentioning the disease. Similarly, gay drama seemed to become the drama of AIDS. Numerous plays appeared in which AIDS was the central concern, and plays which did not deal with AIDS found their relevance called into question.

Martin Sherman, writing in 1983 about his own Passing By, questioned whether performance of the play would be appropriate at that time, and spoke of

> fear that the tragic AIDS epidemic raging through New York would throw the story of two men who happen to contact hepatitis into a completely misleading light and fan some of the misconceived and prejudiced linkage of homosexuality and physical illness that was then popular in the American press.(101)

Not only the playwrights were troubled by such questions. Eric Bentley found publishers and producers unwilling to handle his second gay play, Round Two (1985).

Round Two is Bentley's "update" of Reigen (1896) by Arthur Schnitzler, a play which Bentley had translated into English in 1955, and it features ten gay men. Purposely avoiding AIDS issues, Bentley set his play in Manhattan of the 1970's. The playwright expressed concern that the time for treating AIDS in drama had not yet come, fearing that "immersed in politics, we miss things" (Pally 52). Contrasting the approach a contemporary playwright might take in

writing about AIDS with Ibsen's use of syphilis in Ghosts, he said:

> AIDS itself is not yet a metaphor . . . . To treat AIDS symbolically, a writer would have to abandon all concern about the people who are dying (Pally 53).

Conversely, his own play was attacked by proponents of what he called the "gay activist approach" for dealing with frivolous sex without warning about its dangers and calling for monogamy and for showing an older man paired with a minor. The play's publication was delayed significantly (Pally 53).

From the midst of this controversy, however, plays arose which dealt specifically with AIDS, a few of which have been published more quickly than gay plays usually are, in part because the playwrights were already established and also because of curiosity about AIDS in the society as a whole. Though all of the playwrights were well known in gay literary circles, the plays vary in style, content, and quality. As Is, by William M. Hoffman, and The Normal Heart, by Larry Kramer, appeared almost simultaneously in 1985 but took sharply different approaches to their subject.

As Is

Hoffman, who had been associated with gay drama since the early days of the Cino and who, in addition to writing plays, had edited one of the first anthologies of gay plays, achieved his greatest success to

date with a look at the personal implications of AIDS. As Is tells the story of Rich, who reunites with his ex-lover, Saul, after everyone else rejects him because he has AIDS. The play focuses on the men's relationship and the effects of the disease on each of them; other people's reactions are also presented. Much of the exposition is given in flashbacks, creating something of an episodic structure. Various short scenes are linked either thematically or by overlapping bits of dialogue, and three monologues by a worker in a hospice provide a frame.

Overall, the play deals with how an awareness of mortality forces one to reevaluate attitudes toward life. In a pivotal scene, a hospitalized Rich recounts an experience from his training for a marathon when, coming suddenly from the darkness of a narrow street into the twilight along the river, he experiences a sudden elation: "I'm running and telling God I didn't know he was that good or that big"(74). His narrative suddenly shifts tone, however:

> The next morning I woke up with the flu and stayed in bed for a couple of days and felt much better. But my throat stayed a little sore and my glands were a little swollen . . . (There is a long silence. Rich speaks casually.) Saul, I want you to do something for me.(74)

The "something" he wants is assistance in a suicide attempt; Saul attempts compliance but cannot carry through. Rich, unable to deny his diagnosis, has

decided that life is no longer worth living if he will be unable to achieve the goals he has set for himself, such as running a marathon and becoming famous as a writer. Saul has almost reached the same conclusion as he purchases the fatal pills; he tells Rich, "I wanted enough for both of us . . . Tristan and Isolde"(86), but a confrontation with the squalor of the city, a squalor in which he and Rich had once revelled, changes his mind:

> There I was in front of a sex shop, and I looked down and there in a puddle was a reflection of the red neon sign. It was beautiful. And the whole street was shining with the most incredible colors. They kept changing as the different signs blinked on and off . . . .(90)

Gradually he convinces Rich that change is bearable, that life must be accepted "as is," whether or not the present lives up to the expectations of the past. Eventually, Rich begins making new plans, not only for his death--"I want to be cremated and I want my ashes to fertilize the apple tree in the middle of Jake's pasture"(93), a field to which he had accompanied Saul on a photographic expedition when they were first dating--but also for what life he has left, reading at a coffee shop where the people "look newborn, but slightly depraved"(93-94). The two men's decision to have sex with "precautions"(94) reflects their new, more honest approach to life, a hope tempered with a realistic acknowledgement of restrictions.

A similar development can be found in the narrative of the hospice worker. She had begun her work with the terminally ill because of her idealism:

> I thought working with the dying would give me spiritual gold stars. I thought I'd be able to impact my great wisdom to those in need of improvement. I wanted to bear witness to dramatic deathbed conversions, see shafts of light emanating from heaven, multicolored auras hovering above the heads of those in the process of expiring.(3)

Experience has tempered her expectations, however; she admits, "I've lost some of my idealism," as she recounts her most recent triumph:

> The other night Jean-Jacques--he's this real queen, there's no other word for it--he told me what he misses most in the hospital is his corset and high heels. I mean he weighs all of ninety pounds and he's half-dead . . . . Last night I painted his nails for him. Flaming red. He loved it.(97)

Her idealism is not lost, but it has been tempered. Like Saul and Rich, she has learned to cope with reality by adopting simpler, more realistic goals; in so doing they reaffirm the basic value of life.

In addition to developing this theme, the play treats several other issues surrounding AIDS. In a montage scene in which various characters provide excuses for their sudden unwillingness to associate with Rich, Hoffman confronts the fears which have caused people to avoid persons with AIDS and explores the resultant alienation experienced by the person suddenly deserted. He also presents a hospital-bed

confrontation between Rich and his brother in which he explores difficulties faced by family members who have been previously unable to accept a relative's homosexuality as they must now also learn to deal with his illness. Such problems complicate Rich's situation as he attempts to come to terms with his own mortality. Hoffman does allow something of a resolution for Rich's difficulties in that the two brothers open lines for communication and the hospice worker, speaking at an indefinite time later than the final scene of the play, informs us that Rich has "a lot of friends visiting, and both families"(96). In keeping with the overall tone of the play, though, the optimism of this final note is tempered; the hospice worker states, "They get a lot of support at first, but as the illness goes on, the visitors stop coming--and they're left with only me"(96). Hoffman never abandons hope; neither, though, does he lose touch with reality.

The Normal Heart

Kramer's The Normal Heart, which debuted approximately one month after As Is, differs sharply in tone and subject matter. Where Hoffman emphasizes the personal aspects of the AIDS crisis, Kramer focuses on the political, and where Hoffman offers hope tempered with realism, Kramer tends toward cynicism.

The play presents a fictionalized account of Kramer's own experiences as a founding member of Gay Men's Health Crisis, an AIDS service organization from which he was later ejected because of his outspoken militance. The title comes from Auden's "September 1, 1939," and the piece of that poem which serves as epigraph to the play ends with the line which is, essentially, Kramer's theme: "We must love one another or die." The play does, indeed, contain a love story, the story of Ned Weeks, "a thinly disguised surrogate for Kramer himself" (Williams 23), and his lover, Felix, who dies of AIDS in the play's final scene, leaving Ned to cry out, "Why didn't I fight harder! Why didn't I picket the White House, all by myself if nobody would come. Or go on a hunger strike"(122). Here, as throughout the play, however, personal emotion is subordinated to political concerns. Indeed, the set for the play consists of whitewashed walls with statistics and political statements painted "everywhere possible"(19). The story of Ned and Felix seems significant only in its political consequence.

Similar treatment is given to other personal issues in the play. For example, in dealing with familial rejection, the play introduces Ned's brother, Ben. The conflict between Ned and Ben peaks not in a personal plea for love but in a political outburst, with Ned screaming, "I'm beginning to think that you

and your straight world are our enemy"(71). The resolution comes not in an emotional exchange, such as the hospital bed confrontation between Rich and his brother in As Is, but in a business-like scene in Ben's law office. Felix asks him to write up his will, and the scene considers the legalities involved in gay inheritance at greater lengths than it does the personal aspects of familial rejection and acceptance.

Such political treatment is not unusual for Kramer; his chief claim to fame had been his novel Faggots (1977), whose theme was "that sexual indulgence paraded as liberation . . . was a trap that could spiritually weaken the gay community" (Williams 23). That novel's political, and many would say negative, assessment of the personal lives of many in the gay community had earned Kramer a reputation. As Andrew Holleran states in his introduction to The Normal Heart, when Kramer first started writing about AIDS the common reaction was, "That's Larry, always screaming"(23). Kramer does not, however, apologize for his political approach; indeed, he states, "There is nothing in this whole AIDS mess that is not political" (Williams 23).

Still, it is approaches such as his which led Bentley to state that AIDS plays are "more interesting socially than artistically" (Pally 53). Kramer states that his intent in never using the word AIDS in his play is to universalize the experience:

> Everybody's a member of one minority or another and can identify with the situation of being a member of a minority which is not heard when it's necessary that they be heard. (A. Williams 23)

The disease, however, never achieves the status of metaphor in Kramer's work. His political statements are direct; his targets are specific. The play's strengths are its topicality and its honesty, not depth of characterization or universal recognition. In contrast to As Is, which dealt with AIDS on many levels simultaneously by emphasizing basic human emotions, The Normal Heart seems more a political tract than a piece of dramatic art. Taken together, however, the plays indicate not only the success gay drama was achieving in reaching a general audience but also the variety with which it was presenting itself.

Fierstein on AIDS

Both As Is and The Normal Heart were well received, at least in part because they confronted an issue which was, when they appeared, front-page news. Numerous minor plays also appeared around the country, most notably The AIDS Show (1984) presented by San Francisco's Theatre Rhinoceros and its sequel Unfinished Business (1985). These shows, which consisted of a series of sketches, monologues, and songs written and performed by an ensemble, have not been published, but they received attention outside the San Francisco area

primarily as the subject of a television documentary which aired on the Public Broadcasting Network. The plays, however, which aroused the highest expectations were the three one-acts which comprise Harvey Fierstein's trilogy, Safe Sex (1987): Manny and Jake, Safe Sex, and On Tidy Endings.

The plays take very different approaches to AIDS, but all emphasize social and personal impact. The common theme is the alienation which results from our attempts to protect ourselves from others and others from ourselves, to keep our interpersonal encounters "safe" in an unsafe environment. This theme is explored in the context of three very different relationships. Manny and Jake presents one man, Jake, attempting to pick up another, Manny, who is HIV positive, that is, an "AIDS carrier." Manny, whose goal had been "to lie in the arms of every man"(16) with only one rule, "No repeats. No attachments"(18), refuses to give Jake what he wants, saying "You could take it. But you couldn't take it away"(7). Manny assesses the current situation as well as his previous encounters when he speaks of two men parting "unhappy but safe"(10), and he counters Jake's offers to have sex despite the risk:

Jake: There are ways around it. Things you can still do.
Manny: Omissions.
Jake: Precautions to take.
Manny: Deletions.
Jake: Alternate activities.

Manny: Bastardizations.
Jake: Positive, health-conscious acts of love and fulfillment.
Manny: Can you kiss?(21)

Manny ends the exchange with a question which was a mainstay of early discussions of safer sex practices, but here the question takes on greater significant as kissing comes to represent the ultimate intimacy.

The play ends with Manny still refusing Jake's advances: "I can't change. I can't. So, I'll sit. And remember. And pray for everything else to change," but he speaks optimistically of a time when he will "remember how to kiss" and will give and take "without fear of small print or hidden clauses"(24). Fierstein allows himself to share in the universal hope for a solution to the AIDS crisis, but his hope is tempered by an honest understanding of human nature: Manny states, "I will kiss having learned nothing"(24). Fierstein also moves beyond the immediate circumstance, allowing safe sex to become a metaphor for the distance we maintain for the sake of self-protection.

This theme is addressed even more directly in the second play in the trilogy. Safe Sex features Mead and Ghee, former lovers who have reunited out of fear of AIDS; throughout the play, the two men, dressed in bedclothes, balance on a giant seesaw, representing their struggle for power in the relationship. Ghee counters every sexual advance with a move to "get the

list" of safe and unsafe sex practices(32), but Mead finally accuses him of using the list as "a concrete, board-certified, actual, purposeful excuse to avoid intimacy"(42). Ghee, in turn, suggests that Mead's inattention to personal hygiene was meant to keep his lover at arm's length. After a long monologue in which Ghee bewails the changes from a time when "politics were argued, sex was great" to now when "we enjoy politics and argue sex"(56-57), the two men come to an understanding that what is missing is trust. As they walk carefully toward each other, keeping the seesaw in cautious balance, they agree to shower together, a cleansing act of intimacy not based on dominance and power, an act which Ghee states is "the very corner-stone on which Safe Sex is built"(53). Manny could only hope for a day when he could kiss because he was unable to change, but Ghee and Mead recognize that real safety lies in trusting intimacy; the second play ends with the lovers "melting in the embrace"(62).

The final play of the trilogy contains none of the prose poetry of Manny and Jake, nor does it rely on a metaphoric set like Safe Sex. In many ways it resembles Torch Song Trilogy more than either of the other plays in this trilogy. Still, On Tidy Endings shares with those plays a common theme, though it is developed in a quite different circumstance.

The play's central characters, Marion and Arthur, have one thing in common, their love for Collin, who has recently died of AIDS. Marion was his wife of sixteen years; Arthur had become his lover three years before his death and just after his diagnosis. The circumstance is their meeting to sign papers to sell the home which Arthur and Collin shared. The encounter begins in suspicion and aloofness but gradually works its way through angry exchanges to the onset of a new intimacy. Arthur is possessive of his emotions and unwilling to share them with Marion: "These condolences do not belong to you, they're mine"(95). Marion, too, is protective of her own world, reminding Arthur, as they discuss her and Collin's son, Jimmy, "You're not his mother and you're not his father"(86). When their sharp exchanges lead Arthur to passionate pleas that he be allowed to maintain his "intangible place in a man's history"(104), Marion's coolness begins to melt, and when she admits to Arnold that she has tested positive for HIV antibodies, he begins to realize the extent to which their lives are intermingled. The play ends with a reconciliation as Jimmy hugs Arnold at the urging of his mother who tells him, "He's a hell of a lot more than your uncle"(111).

Fierstein's second trilogy was not well received in its New York debut. One critic attacked "the soap opera manner" and "the inevitable roseate ending" of <u>On</u>

Tidy Endings and spoke of the trilogy's "mawkish and superficial treatment" of AIDS (Humm 86). John Simon accused Fierstein of being afraid to offend his audience and, therefore, of practicing "safe theater" (Simon, "Playing" 66). If indeed Fierstein's intent had been to educate his audience about AIDS the accusations would be valid, but Fierstein is an artist not a teacher.

In Safe Sex Fierstein explores various aspects of the AIDS crisis not to present knowledge but to explore the implications of a specific event in the larger context of human experience. He attempts what Bentley felt was not yet possible, using AIDS as a metaphor, but he does not abandon concern for those who suffer. Fierstein has written that because of AIDS his "personal address book looks more like a calendar: names crossed off like so many days passed and gone" (ACT UP letter, 1). In his preface to Safe Sex he states that the play "is what I needed to say today . . . my last phone call, the guests just leaving my home, the thought I just completed"(xii). Fierstein's accomplishment is turning this immediacy into a power which drives his exploration of the broader implications of the problem. Like the best of the gay drama which preceded it, Safe Sex is written from inside the situation it explores yet manages to

maintain perspective and to place that situation into a more accessible context.

AIDS Plays as Gay Drama

The eventual outcome of the AIDS crisis not only for the gay community but also for the world is as yet unknowable. Likewise, the eventual place of plays like As Is and Safe Sex in the history of gay drama is yet to be evaluated. That these are gay plays, however, is undeniable.

These plays never apologize for their characters' sexuality. Compared to some of the explicit language of As Is--in a scene in a leather bar, for example, the conversation is peppered with talk of mirrors, chains, dildos, dungeons and "watersports"(29-30)--the other plays may seem tame, but they all speak from the same position, a rejection of heterosexist assumptions of the inherent inferiority of homosexuality.

These plays, also, share a common concern for the well-being of the gay community. They are sometimes critical of that community--most notably, The Normal Heart--but they all speak as part of that community, hoping to be part of its improvement and its survival. All of these plays address honestly the despair of the present, but they also all offer hope.

CHAPTER VI

CONCLUSION

Gay drama is a drama of change and development. In two decades it has grown from a practically non-existent concept into a clearly defined movement, yet during that period it has shifted directions to adapt to the sociopolitical environment.

The Madness of Lady Bright is clearly a point of departure from what had gone before. Landford Wilson wrote without the vagueness and the negative moral assessments which had characterized previous plays about homosexuality. Like the Stonewall Riots, which indicated the newly politicized nature of the gay rights movement, Wilson's play stands as an indication of a new openness of expression and a new sense of self-affirmation in drama's treatment of homosexuality.

The years which followed saw not only an increase in the number of plays moving in the same direction as Wilson's but also the questioning of what those plays should be accomplishing. Boys in the Band evoked questions about how gay drama should treat the negative aspects of gay life, and the controversy stirred by The Faggot and Coming Out! stirred discussion of the relationship between politics and art. Attempts to answer these questions brought about the earliest attempts to define the infant genre.

These attempts at definition came into clearer focus as certain playwrights left their Off-Off-Broadway roots to establish specifically gay theaters. Following the lead of Doric Wilson, numerous dramatists wrote plays characterized by an assumption of a shared identity among their audiences. These playwrights increased significantly the number of plays which comprise the corpus of gay drama. At the same time other playwrights wrote plays which, though gay, appealed to mainstream audiences by establishing common ground between homosexual characters and heterosexuals in the audience. In so doing they provided gay drama greater visibility. Similarities between the works of separatist and mainstream plays provide the criteria for defining a movement which by the mid-1980's was firmly established.

Sociopolitical in nature, then, gay drama, as could be expected, is influenced by developments outside the theater. The AIDS crisis which began in the early 1980's has been the most significant such external influence. After the outbreak of AIDS, some plays which did not acknowledge the AIDS crisis were shelved, while plays which focused specifically on AIDS became common.

AIDS is not merely a gay issue, though much of the mainstream interest in the disease was grounded in misunderstanding. Whatever their reasons, the general

public flocked to see AIDS plays, and gay drama found new audiences. These plays, however, were in many ways more closely related to separatist gay plays than to the plays which had been presented to mainstream audiences in the years preceding the epidemic. William Hoffman's As Is, for example, presented a gay couple but never attempted to explain or to discuss the nature of such a relationship; taking such matters for granted had only been done, until that time, in plays whose audience was presumed to be gay. Likewise, Hoffman used terms such as "clones," "cockrings," and "watersports," without the explanations or definitions one would have found in mainstream gay drama of a few years earlier. The general public's concern about AIDS had, because of the disease's predominance among gay men, raised interest in gay lifestyles, and, as a result, the gap between separatist and mainstream plays diminished.

AIDS continues to be the most significant problem facing the gay community, and the issue is still central in some new plays which are emerging. Quisbies (1988), for example, an as-yet unpublished play by Leland Moss, a member of Theatre Rhinoceros and a person recently diagnosed with AIDS, centers on a group of college classmates as they reunite after the death of a common friend (Ricketts 60-62). Other signs, however, indicate that the stricture against gay plays

which do not deal with AIDS is being relaxed. Eric Bentley's Round Two, for example, though not, as yet, published, finally was produced in 1987, by Celebration Theatre in Los Angeles. Also, a new play which does not deal with AIDS is receiving attention. Jeff Hagedorn has written at least four plays about AIDS, all of which have been staged but none of which have been published. His latest play, however, Clowns in the Kitchen (1988), deals with a different gay issue altogether. The play focuses on the attempt of Ken, a gay man, to cope with having been brutally raped by two men in an alley (Bommer 56, 58).

Hagedorn's play indicates that gay drama is once again shifting directions. While talk of a post-AIDS period would be definitely premature, since gay drama continues dealing with AIDS, it may also be ready to focus once again on a variety of gay issues and concerns. Some of these issues will, in all likelihood, be issues which were central in earlier gay drama, though emphasis and approach are likely to show the lasting effects of the AIDS crisis.

Gay plays have frequently explored gay relationships and will certainly continue to do so, but the nature of those relationships has changed, and the changes will be reflected in future plays. New emphasis in the gay community on long-term, monogamous relationships--largely a reaction to fear of AIDS--will probably

cause a shift away from the "fuck forever after" attitude of plays like Doric Wilson's toward consideration of how to make a relationship more enduring. Talk of monogamy as heterosexist propaganda is likely to give way to calls for official recognition of gay unions.

Another issue likely to be a focus of gay drama in the wake of AIDS is coping with the death of a loved one. The subject has been touched on in a few gay plays, such as Widows and Children First, but in the light of an epidemic which has left few lives untouched, the issue will probably take center stage more frequently.

Similarly, anti-gay violence, the subject of a few gay plays in the past, is likely to be considered more often because of sharp increases in the frequency of such acts, probably due, in part, to fear of AIDS though also linked to the resurgence of a generally more conservative attitude in America than was prevalent in the seventies.

One other lasting influence of the AIDS crisis is likely to be the increased knowledge about and awareness of homosexuality among the general American population. Newspapers such as The New York Times, faced with the importance of informing their readers about the epidemic, have found themselves abandoning policies which rejected references to gays and now find

themselves discussing gay lifestyles quite openly. In addition, many heterosexuals who once thought they had never met a homosexual have had to confront not only a loved one's being gay but also his imminent death. Gay playwrights who address mainstream audiences can assume a heightened awareness and, therefore, can present gay subject matter with less explanation.

One can only speculate as to the future of gay drama. Twenty-five years ago not even the term existed; today the movement is well established. So far, each of the sociopolitical changes which has affected the gay community and numerous developments in the theater have combined to shape its course. There is nothing to indicate that the future will be any different in that respect, and there is no reason to believe that gay drama will not continue to grow through these changes.

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In 1980 he entered the University of Tennessee at Knoxville. He earned his Master of Arts degree in English. While in Knoxville he has, in addition to pursuing graduate studies, been involved with various organizations within the gay community, including Knoxville's Ten Percent, of which he is a founding member and on whose Board of Directors he has served two terms. He has also served as Education Committee Chairperson for AIDS Response Knoxville.