

Brian Roberts

## Whatever Happened to Gay Theatre?

With hopes for a repeal of Clause 28 poised for imminent realization or disappointment, a successful European challenge to Britain's policy on gays and lesbians in the armed forces, and an overwhelming House of Commons vote to equalize the gay 'age of consent', gay issues are high in the public consciousness. But to what extent are these political events being reflected in contemporary theatre? In this article, Brian Roberts considers the fluctuations in gay visibility, and asks what happened to the gay theatre that sprang to prominence in the 'eighties. He situates the best of present gay theatre work as standing in a critically defining role to mainstream theatre culture, not only through its political conscientizing of 'queer' and theatricality, but also in its opposition to an assimilationist gay subculture. Brian Roberts lectures in Drama and Theatre at Goldsmiths College, University of London, and is presently revising his book *Artistic Bents: Gay Sensibility and Theatre* for publication.

RECENTLY, a colleague asked me 'Whatever happened to Gay Sweatshop?' as if the company and, by implication, a gay presence in the theatre had suddenly disappeared. Yet it was only five years ago that Milton Shulman's column in the *Evening Standard* (30 September 1994) was headlined, 'Stop the Plague of Pink Plays', while *The Independent* had an article entitled 'Off the Straight and Narrow' about the 'extraordinary proliferation of plays about gay men on the London stage'.<sup>1</sup> By 2 October, *The Sunday Times* was reporting 'Critics Clash as Gay Plays invade the West End'.

The language of the reportage is interesting in itself, from Shulman's homophobic use of 'plague', redolent of the blame psychology of the early AIDS crisis, to the *Sunday Times's* use of 'invade', clearly a sub-textual reference to an apparently forceful 'promotion of homosexuality' which was the keynote to the infamous Clause 28 of 1988.<sup>2</sup> Ironically, in the same year as Shulman's attack, a revised edition of John Crum's book *Acting Gay* dismissed gay theatre in Britain in the following paragraph:

I devote the great majority of this chapter to American gay drama because British drama, gay and straight, seems to be in a worse slump than the British economy. The parlous state of gay drama only reminds us that, despite the efforts of radical theatre groups in the 'seventies and

'eighties, a tradition of affirming gay drama never developed in Great Britain. The gay presence on the British stage is greatly the result of American imports.<sup>3</sup>

For Crum, the primary duty of gay drama seems to be to present positive ('affirming') gay images. In acknowledging the radical theatre of the 'seventies and 'eighties, a clear reference to Gay Sweatshop, he appears to ignore the funding problems experienced by that company during the period, and more significantly does not seem aware of the evolving face of gay subculture in the decade that followed.

This 'peek-a-boo' phenomenon in relation to gay subculture is not new, dependent as it is on the vagaries of fashion, the commercial and exploitative possibilities of the so-called 'pink pound', and the degree to which the liminality of gay subculture impinges on or is allowed to encroach into the territory of the mainstream. When, for example, did you last see any promotional material for safer sex practice outside of the gay press, and just how pervasive has the homoeroticized, sculpted male body become as an advertising motif? What this pattern of disappearance/reappearance does perhaps indicate is the changing relationship both between a gay subculture and the dominant culture and within the gay subculture itself.

Andrew Sullivan, in his analysis of pre-AIDS western society, saw a complicit pact between the dominant culture and gay subculture, where 'homosexuals could do what they wanted so long as they didn't invade the heterosexual sphere'.<sup>4</sup> His book, *Virtually Normal*, argues a politics of assimilation supported by civil rights and equality legislation and against the false security of the gay ghetto. Some of his argument for this can be seen in a history of gay theatre in Britain, where much of the work produced in this period was either developed by Gay Sweatshop or played only in small gay-friendly spaces – the Drill Hall, the Bush, the Latchmere, the Finborough Arms, the King's Head.

Where individual plays succeeded in breaking into the mainstream, they were supported by a larger name: Ian McKellen in *Bent* (1979), Tony Sher in *Torch-Song Trilogy* (1985), Martin Sheen in *The Normal Heart* (1986). Ironically, those three examples (with the honorable exception of Martin Sherman and *Bent*) bear out Crum's assertion about 'American imports'. Crum probably could not have predicted the outcry of 1994 against a seemingly sudden swell of gay drama, but the responses of some of those critics certainly reinforce Sullivan's analysis of a tacit pact, now broken through an 'invasion' of gay-themed drama onto the mainstream stages of the dominant culture's West End.

### The Response to 'Clause 28'

The initial rallying-point for that upsurge in gay visibility in Britain was the ill-judged legislation which has become known as Clause 28. Ian McKellen came out as 'one of them', protests were organized in many theatres, and Philip Hedley announced a production of Lorca's surrealist and poetic play of forbidden love, *El Publico*, at the Theatre Royal, Stratford East, as a direct challenge to the powers of the Local Government Act and the notion of 'intentionally promoting homosexuality'.

By chance, Philip Osment's play *This Island's Mine*, produced by Gay Sweatshop, opened in February 1988. Although the play

was not written as a challenge to Clause 28, its thematic material of conflicting loyalties in a range of domestic situations was seen as an elegant, intelligent, and measured response. As Osment himself comments:

There is no doubt that Section 28<sup>5</sup> gave the play an added significance which meant that critics who had never before come to see the company reviewed the production.<sup>6</sup>

The play, written in a deceptively simple style of spoken dialogue and narrative, is very strongly actor-centred, under the influence of the work of Mike Alfreds and Shared Experience. The overlapping lives and households of the characters create a rich and complex snapshot of Britain in the late 'eighties, not least in the variety of family units and the interconnectedness of personal and political histories.

Osment's earliest idea was for a play about refugees, and there is a sense that the spectrum of characters is each in his or her own way dispossessed, through time, gender, sexuality, ethnicity, unrequited passion, place, or class; yet each, like Caliban, still feels 'this island's [also] mine'. *The Tempest*, in rehearsal and production, becomes both an ironic intertextual reference and also the holding form which brings together the coincidental linking of so many of the characters and households. There is an echo of those earliest ideas in the character of Miss Rosenblum:

Mindful of the time,  
When driven out of house and homeland,  
She fled the terror that swept away half  
her family.  
'Last time, Mr Martin,  
We were the pestilence,  
Now you people are spreading a plague.  
I see it.  
You must watch.  
You must be prepared.' . . .  
'Do not think it cannot happen here.'<sup>7</sup>

That warning note resonated in terms both of the censorship which Clause 28 threatened and the now widespread and fuller awareness of the impact of AIDS. These two factors at the beginning of the 'nineties determined the work of gay writers, con-

sciously or not, and fuelled an anger whose expression took many forms. Crucially, those combined threats (neither of which has gone away) also led to an increased sense of gay visibility and to a lesser extent of community and solidarity.

### Culture, Subculture, and Absorption

From the early 'eighties AIDS had been ineluctably equated with homosexuality, and the visualization of gay men began to take on the proportions of a demonic and doomed menace – for example, with the British government's heavy-handed 'Don't Die of Ignorance' campaign.<sup>8</sup> The red ribbon, the ubiquitous western symbol of AIDS awareness, had its first public showing at a Tony Award ceremony in 1991, and rapidly became a compulsory celebrity accessory. For a brief period in the 'nineties, AIDS was even in danger of becoming *the* fashionable charity, led by Diana, Princess of Wales, and hotly pursued by Hollywood.

This high profile was occasioned and sustained by well-publicized deaths from AIDS-related illnesses of a large number of gay men working in the entertainment industry. AIDS touched the famous in a way that seemed disproportionate to the population at large, and more publicly. Awareness about the virus reached an all-time high as figures of those infected rose in what seemed to be an exponential way with the realization of the largely heterosexual pandemic in Africa. Ironically, as general awareness of AIDS increased, the reality of its effects on gay men seemed to decrease, in both the public and government consciousness, to the point where the subsidy provided to many AIDS charities has now been cut, in the misguided belief that the crisis is over.

The situation in relation to AIDS is yet another example of the 'now you see us, now you don't' syndrome, where increased visibility leads to a paradoxical disappearance, which has been described as a 'de-gay'ing' process. As Leo Bersani put it, 'Never before in the history of minority groups struggling for recognition and equal treatment has there been an analogous attempt, on the part

of any such group, to make itself unidentifiable even as it demands to be recognized.'<sup>9</sup>

The two channels through which this process of becoming 'unidentifiable' happens are assimilation into the mainstream culture and through a rapidly growing and separate or ghetto gay subculture. Neither is mutually exclusive, as it is possible for a gay man to be absorbed into the cultural mainstream (to be 'virtually normal' in Sullivan's phrase) and still enjoy the exclusively gay culture of the ghetto. Indeed, as those two ideas are frequently merged in the popular culture of music, fashion, TV, and film, any residual sense of dislocation between assimilation and the ghetto can seem to fade in a growing appearance of acceptance and tolerance. What might have been visible 'gayness' thus becomes diluted in the fashionable absorption and disappears. What matter that we have four out(ed) gay cabinet ministers, with Clause 28 still on the statute books and an unequal age of consent, if we also have *Gaytime TV*, Lily Savage hosting *Blankety Blank*, and Sir Elton John?

The annual Gay Pride march and rally provides something of an exemplar of this process at work. Originally formulated as Gay Pride, it became the Lesbian and Gay Pride March as a greater awareness of specific lesbian issues was acknowledged. A few years ago it became simply 'Pride' and this year it has become 'Mardi Gras'. Over the years the march and festival have grown in numbers and cost, and, in a bid to attract sponsorship and swell numbers even further the organizers have tried to shift public consciousness away from gay politics towards a more generalized sense of carnival theatre and summertime celebration.

The changing relationships within the subculture itself can best be summed up in the phrase 'postgay', as cited in Alan Sinfield's book *Gay and After*.<sup>10</sup> It is a sign of maturity within a comparatively young 'movement' that there are writers and playwrights who are moving beyond the defensive and 'affirming' position of gay cultural production towards a more critical, questioning stance. Several writers (Sullivan, Sinfield, Bersani) have noted that the politics

of the original Gay Liberation Movement have largely shifted from the liberationist to the *ersatz* freedom of assimilation and the ghetto.

Daniel Harris, in *The Rise and Fall of Gay Culture*, sees the changes in gay culture as part of 'the accelerating pace of our assimilation into mainstream society' – towards a 'melting pot' culture in which everything becomes a 'sludgelike stew'.<sup>11</sup> *Anti-Gay* goes further in its attack on gay culture and the anti-critical mentality of the gay response to queer politics which, 'rather than challenge the thinking behind taxonomies of "deviant" and "normal" . . . has been to try and prove its "normality"'.<sup>12</sup>

### Between Queer and Gay

The distinction between 'queer' and 'gay' might seem redundant to those who see the terms as synonymous, but there is an important post-structural understanding which differentiates the terms and is pertinent to the study of contemporary gay subcultural production. The self-designated term 'gay' was deliberately adopted within the post-Stonewall Liberation Movement (Gay Liberation Front) as a way of acknowledging publicly a previously codified signifier used between homosexuals in a covert subculture. The defiantly appropriated term 'queer' has come to be identified with a post-AIDS consciousness and, at one level of meaning, is associated with radical, direct-action groups such as Act-Up.<sup>13</sup> 'Queer' deliberately rejects a perception of 'gay' as white, middle-class, affluent, and assimilated, either passing within the dominant culture or reliant on the ghetto of gay subculture. There are those who would observe that 'queer' has also echoed the gay movement in its rapid transformation from a subversive force into radical chic and a fashion statement – a seemingly willing collusion with the colonizing forces of fashionable commerce and media.

The other significant area of reappropriation of 'queer' is in the rapid expansion of Queer Studies, which developed out of the pioneering Gay and Lesbian Studies, mostly led by American academics. Queer Studies

would subsume queer politics, queer cultural theory, and queer aesthetics, and argues that elements of homophobia and heterosexism may be discerned in the conflicts and contradictions which exist when 'deviant' sexuality encounters most social and cultural structures.

For both academics and activists, 'queer' gets a critical edge by defining itself against the normal rather than the heterosexual . . . [and] also allows it to draw on dissatisfaction with the regime of the normal in general. . . . We might even say that queer politics opposes society itself.<sup>14</sup>

The themes of sexuality and sexual energy are potent forces in so much of our cultural readings and tend to assume a normative and conformative notion of identity. Thus liberation politics, as evidenced in the Gay Movement, were concerned with the individualization of (homo)sexual identity, but assumed 'the social dominance of a system of mutually exclusive roles around sexual orientation (homosexual/heterosexual) and gender (masculine/feminine)'.<sup>15</sup>

This assumption was predicated on the notion that sexual orientation is the only significant difference, and either precludes or assumes an inclusion of differences based on class, race, ethnicity, age, sexual preference, and geographical location. In seeking to challenge the system through individualization, liberationists unwittingly perpetuated notions of identity fractured along binary oppositional lines, and failed to take account of other multiple differences.

The thinking which underpins Queer theory is deconstructionist, and urges a shift in focus 'from the politics of personal identity to the politics of signification'<sup>16</sup> – 'a view of identity as difference'.<sup>17</sup> But difference also implies otherness; so that, rather than attempting to construct some monolithic gay identity, we should be concerned with a deconstructive analysis of identity in relation to its *multiple* significations and possible readings.

By and large, 'gay' has not become 'queer' in the theatre, although productions such as Mark Ravenhill's *Shopping and Fucking* (1996) and Neil Bartlett's *The Picture of*

*Dorian Gray* (1994) are proof that the theatre does not stand outside the postmodern momentum. What is more pertinent is that the queer movement itself seems to have drawn on theatre in its understanding of sexual identity as multiple, metamorphic, and performative. It is thus significant that queer and postmodern in performance terms increasingly imply 'performance art', exemplified in the one-person show or the hybridity of multi-media work, where technology itself becomes the overwhelming feature, with a privileging of form over content.

### Defining the Subcultural Tensions

These developments in gay/lesbian/queer studies raise the question of whether we can talk of a gay theatre at all. Crum talks of 'gay drama', referring to:

two kinds of plays written for two kinds of audiences. One type is the post-Stonewall play, which is written primarily for gay audiences and which speaks to their shared experience. . . . The other type of gay drama is the pre-Stonewall play written for the mainstream theatre by a homosexual playwright.<sup>18</sup>

The latter category includes the codified drama of Williams, Coward, Rattigan, and Orton, and is arguably not 'gay' at all. Neil Bartlett has persuasively argued<sup>19</sup> that the whole of British theatre is so infused with a gay sensibility that to talk about gay theatre as something particular and separate is wholly redundant. The danger of such a provocative stance is that it either trivializes gay cultural achievement in the theatre or creates the climate of complacency attacked in the post-gay arguments. And both views marginalize gay drama, condemning innovative work to small-scale, poorly financed and resourced short runs in fringe venues, few of which are visited by the major theatre critics.

In preference to the perceived binary opposition between the fringe and the mainstream, I would wish to consider the tension within gay subcultural production between the ideas of assimilation and the ghetto and those of confrontation and opposition. This

is not a simplistic 'gay' versus 'queer' distinction, but a qualitative distinction between a theatre which addresses itself primarily to a mainstream gay audience and one which is more challenging – and which I would consider makes up a canon of gay (in the absence of any suitable alternative word) theatre work. This work may be influenced by the liberation politics of the early Gay Movement, by the oppositional politics of queer, or by the urge to create exciting live theatre which challenges our position and which is created out of a gay sensibility – by which I mean a way of understanding the world from a politicized gay perspective.

Let me give an example of the tension I am talking about. One of the most recent of gay plays to have enjoyed a localized success is Adrian Pagan's *The Backroom*, which was produced at the Bush Theatre in July 1999. The play, advertised as a comedy, is set in a seedy Earls Court male brothel and reflected all the fetishistic obsessions which are popularly believed to constitute gay culture – music, female icons, clubs, fashion, drugs. Much of the writing was fast and comic, operating on the level of a sexual farce, with a proportion of witty one-liners and camp exchanges.

Much the same sort of description might be applied to the critically acclaimed *My Night with Reg* (Royal Court, 1994), although the writing in Elyot's play was much better. There is a tentative romance between two of the rent boys (Charlie and Sandy) who, in an epilogue to the piece, are seen to have set up in their own escort/prostitution business. There were some insights into why this representative group of men were 'on the game', but little in the way of individual character development, which was largely confined to the stereotypical images they projected as their business personae – the 'boy next door', 'surfer boy', 'squaddie', or 'body builder'. The overriding sense was that this was a pilot for a TV sitcom, and about as dangerous as Victoria Wood's *Dinnerladies*.

Rod Dungate's *Playing by the Rules* – seen at Birmingham Rep in 1992 and the Drill Hall in 1993 – also dealt with male prostitution, but in an altogether different style,

theatrically as well as thematically. The play is set in Birmingham, and its action catches up a group of young people: Danny, fifteen; Sean, seventeen; Steve, eighteen; Tony, seventeen; Ape, Tony's half-brother, nineteen or twenty; Julie, seventeen, Steve's girl-friend and Sean's best friend.

These characters survive as best they can through prostitution, petty thieving, and sharing the flat in which Sean is being kept by a local councillor. As the others explain to Danny: 'We watch out for each other. We're a family.' It is exactly that sense of re-creating a lost family which both binds them together and dictates their *modus vivendi*. In each case there is a history of familial disfunction, of rejection, of absence of love, leaving them damaged and defensive.

Steve and Danny have both been in 'The Conifers', a residential care hostel; Tony and Ape were taken into care after the suicide of their mother; Sean was thrown out by his father for being gay; and Julie is still living with an alcoholic mother. Within their surrogate family it is Steve who takes the paternal role, organizing the others and taking care of Danny, while Sean plays the maternal role, providing and supporting, aided by his friendship with Julie. It is the arrival of the fifteen-year-old Danny which provides the catalyst for the action.

In his tutelage of Danny into the life on the streets, Steve gradually realizes the falseness of his dream of a married life with Julie and, possibly seeing something of his younger self in Danny, begins to experience feelings of attraction and love for him. In doing so, he transfers his heterosexual aspirations for marriage and children into his newly discovered and painfully articulated feelings for Danny:

STEVE: I like you more than anyone I've ever met.

DANNY: More than Julie?

STEVE: Don't laugh at me.

DANNY: I'm not.

STEVE: I can't even think about no one else.<sup>20</sup>

Danny's eventual betrayal of Steve and the 'family' is motivated by a sense of vengeance for his wronged adolescent self and against the system of false carers. The form it takes is

his involvement with King, who controls the 'rent scene'. Each of the actors, in turn, plays the role of King, emphasizing his origins and their potential future. King's connections extend beyond the Birmingham rent scene into supplying drugs and an international male prostitution business.

Danny's journey ends with him playing a youthful copy of King, recruiting boys from the same care centre from which he had absconded, turning his back on Steve's 'happy ending', and reaching out for the one thing that he has learnt: the power potential and financial rewards from the commodification of his own and others' bodies. He learns not only to play the rules of the rent scene, but to turn them into power games for his own advantage, abandoning the others to their dreams and a rapidly disintegrating 'family'.

### Layers of Deprivation

Dungate suggests that the social and emotional layers of deprivation, coupled with a shrinking traditional job market and an increase in low-paid service work, begin to explain, if not justify, the 'rent scene'; but the response to the character of Danny – whose story we have followed through innocence and initiation to learning and success, with sympathy, humour, excitement, and pathos – is more complex. The final moments of the Epilogue, with this same character in a smart suit conducting his exploitative business on a mobile phone, are shocking:

See, what I'm thinking is we're paying 'em too much. What they do for twenty, they'll do for fifteen . . . anything we ask 'em to do's a piece of piss: the kids I'm talking to are desperate for money (p. 98).

There is an evident political comment, but this is not just a 'problem-play' about male prostitution: it is a richer theatrical experience and a play about 'six people', rather than a Shavian *Mr. Warren's Profession*, in which 'the acting space is like a large mirror in which Society is reflected'.<sup>21</sup>

*Shopping and Fucking*, Mark Ravenhill's 1997 *succès de scandale*, challenges political thinking in its deliberate use of shock tactics

and an action which goes beyond a monolithic focus on gay issues. This is possibly another determining factor in the distinction between assimilationist/ghetto and confrontational/oppositional gay theatre work. The former addresses itself to a gay audience and also confines itself to a gay agenda; the latter resonates both within and beyond the gay experience. Ravenhill himself acknowledges that he wants to 'disturb and provoke' with his play, but also makes the point that:

There was a slight worry . . . that it had become an event, something to be crossed off a list, that it was really more important to be there than to engage with what was being said, which was to look at what is happening to young people after seventeen years of this government.<sup>22</sup>

Ravenhill's cautionary note is about the dangers of his work being absorbed into the fashionable ghetto culture, rather than being more freely oppositional to the gay subculture as much as to society itself.

The key metaphor of the play, which is largely metaphor, opens and closes the production. The opening stage direction reads: 'Lulu and Robbie are trying to get Mark to eat from a carton of takeaway food.' The closing direction is: 'Mark, Robbie, and Lulu take it in turns to feed each other.'<sup>23</sup> This is, indeed, a play about consumption: consume or be consumed, consumer society, conspicuous consumption, the *consummatum est* of that final image. But it is also about the by-products of consumerism – waste, detritus, fall-out, junk, trash – where human intercourse becomes entirely transactional and love is an addiction: reality held at bay with 'little stories' of shopping or fucking which have replaced the metanarratives which might once have given meaning to life.

The Garden of Eden becomes a homoerotic scenario on a telephone sex line, and Chekhov's *Three Sisters* is ironically juxtaposed in a *faux* audition for a role selling drugs with the sentimental power-broker Brian. And the explicit sex scenes are made doubly shocking in the unfolding story of the abused adolescent Gary and his willing submission to his perceived destiny as victim

(of the consumer system, of AIDS, of an unrequitable sexuality).

I've got this unhappiness. This big sadness swelling like it's gonna burst. / I'm sick and I'm never going to be well. . . . I want it over. And there's only one ending.<sup>24</sup>

The bleakness of this vision is only partially relieved by some of the darker comedy and by the acceptance of the last moments of the play, where survival seems to be about both mutual feeding and also feeding off within a 'family unit' held together by its collective narrative. The consumption/waste nexus becomes a terrible indictment of capitalism in its Thatcherite form in general and the complicity of the gay subculture within a monetarist economy in particular.

### Caught in the Culture of Commodification

In all three plays bodies, particularly male bodies, are commodified, packaged, and sold – for cash, for comfort, for a sense of belonging. In *Backroom* this is presented as unproblematic fact, where police raids and genital warts are occasional occupational hazards and where the primary concern is to make enough money to enjoy the sybaritic amnesia of the gay ghetto club culture (Madonna, Craig, Dallas), pay for a university education (Sandy), break from the strictures of middle-class values (Charlie), or support a young family (Paul).

None of these ideas is explored, beyond giving a little surface background to the characters, and it is as if they are hermetically sealed in this all-male environment with little reference beyond the squalid setting of the brothel and the hedonism of the gay scene. Even Charlie's complex relationship with his evidently wealthy family is subsumed in his initiation into being 'streetwise' and hence accepting this world, and in his personal/business relationship with Sandy, as if that provided the 'happy ending' which Dungate eschews in the same Epilogue form.

Both *Playing by the Rules* and *Shopping and Fucking*, however, identify and theatricalize the damage to young people caught in this commodification culture which goes beyond

the immediacy of the gay subculture. The set of *Playing by the Rules* – with derelict cars, oil drums, and a structure resembling the desolate land beneath motorway flyovers – and *Shopping and Fucking's* insistent neon signs, reinforce ideas of abandonment and waste in the former and the pressure of commercialism in the latter. Both are plays which demand a response beyond a cosy 'good night out' which seemed to be the primary intention of the *Backroom* farce.

### The Work of Jonathan Harvey

Jonathan Harvey is a writer who also rejects the middle-class assumptions of 'gay', but whose work is not obviously confrontational and keeps a delicate balance between assimilationist sentimentality and a more oppositional understanding of the gay experience. *Beautiful Thing* (Bush Theatre, 1993) was a coming-out play praised and damned in almost equal measures for its 'feel-good factor'. It was remarkable for a number of reasons: the characters of Jamie and Ste (fifteen and sixteen respectively) were evidently 'under age' at a time of parliamentary deliberation about lowering the age of homosexual consent; the characters were placed in a Thamesmead housing estate and were not 'two public schoolboys punting through Cambridge in cricket whites';<sup>25</sup> and the ending – on a note of joyous celebration – affirmatory and heart-warming.

The play was criticized for its unreality, which spoke more about the painfulness of coming out as a gay rite of passage than the realities of parental and sibling homophobic brutality which were there in the absent characters of Ste's family, the oblique reference to AIDS, and the internalized sense of (wrong) self which emerges in Jamie's outburst: 'I'm a queer! A bender! A puffer! A knobshiner! Brownhatter! Shirtflapflifter!' The final scene was an unashamed piece of theatrical artifice, with a glitter-ball 'casting millions of dance-hall lights', the music of Mama Cass singing 'Dream a Little Dream with Me', and the two boys dancing together – simultaneously generating that warm 'feel-good' factor, but also projecting a powerful

wish-fulfilment, not just of 'if only . . .', but also of 'why shouldn't it be like this?'

Harvey's next play, *Rupert Street Lonely Heart's Club* (Donmar Warehouse, 1995), had little of that 'feel-good' element in its focus on the psychosexual pathology of gay desire – in particular, the relationship of the two brothers Marti (gay) and Shaun (straight). The intensity of their love/hate relationship, Marti's sexual feelings for his brother, and the 'camp' interlude where they briefly meet, hiding true feelings behind the persiflage of Bette Davis dialogue, provides a powerful frame for what becomes a weakened melodrama in Marti's attempted suicide – a destructive gesture, expressive of inadequacy and loneliness.

The exploration of gay/straight masculinity takes this play out of a comfortable assimilationist category and into a problematic area for gay and mainstream audiences alike. The play, more obviously oppositional and challenging in its confrontation with masculinities, seemed to confuse gay audiences looking for more of an affirmatory 'feel-good' follow-up to *Beautiful Thing*.

Uneasy fraternal relationships seem to feature in much of Harvey's work. They reappear in a more resolved form in *Hushabye Mountain* (Hampstead Theatre, 1999). This is Harvey's AIDS play, and bears some comparison with and more than a passing resemblance to Kushner's momentous *Angels in America* (National Theatre, 1992–93). Both plays have central conceits of heaven, angels, and hallucinatory experiences *versus* domestic realities as the frameworks for their fantasias on gay themes in a time of AIDS. If the angels in *Hushabye Mountain* are less celestial and more homely, the quest is not as cosmic as the fantasy in *Angels*, where God has abandoned the earth until stasis returns.

In Harvey's play, the spirit of Daniel is in limbo on a cotton-wool cloud, unable to pass on ('or is it over?') until unfinished business with his mother, lover, and friends has been completed: centrally, the delusional lives he and his mother have led, his denial of her existence, her choice between homophobic husband and homosexual son, and retreat into temporary silence and madness.



Both are redemptive plays of reconciliation, forgiveness, and healing, but whereas Kushner's message is that of Auden's 'We must love one another or die', Harvey's is to do with letting go, moving on, and surviving. Kushner's is the bigger political picture, Harvey's more domestic; but both are richly veined, multi-threaded theatrical explorations of the realities of gay life in the 'nineties.

The time difference between the two plays makes a difference. The anger at untimely loss is there in both: the fear, the hurt, the struggle to understand, the resilient humour of camp are both common and uncommon emotions which link the plays. In Kushner there is survival (Prior) as well as death (Roy Cohn), whereas in Harvey's play the death of Danny problematizes the survival of Connor and his relationship with his brother Lee and his new lover Ben, here echoing Andrew Alty's *Something about Us* (Lyric Studio, 1995). But, more significantly, where Kushner dared to characterize Roy Cohn as part of the texture of American life in the 'eighties, Harvey, through the character of Ben, speaks some of the unspeakable truths about living with AIDS and the stabilization of combination therapies in the late 'nineties:

I've spent the last three years thinking me time was up. Owt I did was a preparation for death. And now. Now some tosser's gone and moved the goalposts. I can't really take it all in. . . . They've closed three AIDS wards in London coz they couldn't fill the beds. . . . D'you know my dream? They'll have to change the Lighthouse into a job centre for all of us who thought we were going to die.<sup>26</sup>

The staging of both plays demands rapid, fluid changes of scene, with lighting and sound playing key roles. While the touring production of *Hushabye Mountain* could not command the resources of the RNT, the same sense of conscious theatricality pervaded both productions.

### Theatre and Theatricality

It is probably a truism to observe that 'theatricality' is more than an unproblematic or uncontested way of describing 'theatre': there are tensions within that relationship.

A quick glance at a dictionary illustrates a growing understanding of the word 'theatrical' from the neutrality of 'pertaining to or connected with theatre' to the more loaded 'artificial; affected' and 'extravagantly or irrelevantly histrionic; "stagey"; "showy"'. I would take that tension between theatre and theatricality further, and express it as a series of binary oppositions, such as: serious/frivolous; content/form; authenticity/parody; truth/illusion; reality/play; masculine/feminine; heterosexist/camp (queer); orthodox/paradox; catharsis/pleasure; verbal/pictorial; sincerity/artifice.

Mainstream theatre may have used the language of theatre, but has largely excluded theatricality from its vocabulary. Theatricality was the territory of the popular theatre of melodrama, music hall, cabaret, circus; the world of the cinema, pantomime, musical theatre, the pop concert. What is important is not the fixed meanings of those oppositions, but the slippage between them and the flexibility that that opens up. In an interview with Robert Lepage in 1992, Richard Eyre makes the observation about his work that 'it converts the commonplace into the magical and makes the magical real and accessible', and in the same interview Lepage states: 'I think there's an important word that has lost its sense in the theatre, and that's the word "playing".'<sup>27</sup>

This tension between 'high' and 'low' art in the theatre is not new. Shaw castigated Wilde's *The Importance of Being Earnest* for playing without a purpose – in other words, for being theatrical without due regard for theatre. Peter Brook's *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (1970) was possibly a pivotal moment of slippage between the 'high' art of Shakespeare and the 'low' art of circus skills and popular forms. Although I could not argue that all gay theatre work is informed by that quality of theatricality, much of the work which I have been identifying does seem to embrace all those understandings of theatricality in its rich sense of the possibilities of theatre – work which is multi-layered and is best understood through a sensory as well as intellectual apprehension, which is both an expression of gay sensi-

bility and yet oppositional; which expresses something of the learned performativity of gay identity through camp (itself concerned with the slippage between the masculine/feminine binary) and an awareness of play, parody, irony, and the periphery of the mainstream.

### Theatricality and Gender Identity

Perhaps nowhere in contemporary theatre is this illustrated more clearly than in the work of Neil Bartlett. His *Night after Night* (Royal Court, 1993), *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (Lyric, Hammersmith, 1994), and *Sarrasine* (Traverse, Edinburgh, 1990; Lyric, Hammersmith, 1996) all consciously play with the metaphor of theatre and the understanding of sexual and/or gender identity. All three play with time, having an evident setting in the past, but with images and allusions that resonate in the present – most obviously in *Night after Night*, where Bartlett plays himself as a character in his father's story of musical theatre in the 'fifties.

The theatre in all three plays is literal as well as a metaphor of performed identity: the layering of costumes and backdrops to the bare walls in *Sarrasine*; the backstage life of *Night after Night*; the obliquely built set of *Dorian Gray*, blending with the ornate proscenium arch stage left but exposing the brickwork and concrete of the Lyric's outer shell stage right and soaring into the flies with a black-framed gallery for the musicians of the string orchestra who echo, counterpoint and comment on the action below.

That layering of image and meaning, the transitions from 'high' to 'low' art, the casting of established names with drag actors, invites a deconstruction of the notions of 'seeming' and 'being' not only in relation to gender and sexual identity, but also in terms of history, mythologies, performance, and an understanding of theatre itself. More acutely, Bartlett synthesizes ideas from the assimilationist/ghetto gay subculture with those of a more challenging confrontational/oppositional theatre, both intelligent and theatrical.

This consideration of work which might be considered as making up the canon of gay

theatre doesn't take into account some of the many other talents working in the contemporary theatre: Kevin Elyot's *My Night with Reg* (Royal Court, 1994) and *The Day I Stood Still* (1998); Philip Osment's most recent plays, *What I Did in the Holidays* (1995) and *The Undertaking* (Gay Sweatshop, 1996); the work of Noel Grieg; Lindsey Kemp; Bette Bourne and Blooplips; DV8 Dance Theatre; Nigel Charnock; Matthew Bourne and Adventures in Motion Pictures – and all the many others who have attempted to move beyond the ghetto of the gay subculture to challenge the drift into assimilation and invisibility by articulating the concerns of a gay minority through a politicized gay sensibility and a theatricalized voice which speaks to more than just a gay audience.

To answer my own question, what happened to gay theatre is that it grew up and became more than the 'affirming gay drama' whose absence Crum noted in 1992. The best of gay theatre work in the last decade has become closer kin to the radical theatre of its origins. Despite (or because of) the censorship of Clause 28, the debilitating effects of multiple bereavement from AIDS-related deaths, homophobic attacks in the press, and a changing perception of 'gay' itself, the theatre continues to be a place where vital issues within and beyond the gay community can be expressed in a range of forms – magical and moving, shocking and humorous, sensuous and thought-provoking.

### Notes and References

1. Paul Taylor, *The Independent*, 26 September 1994.
2. This section of the Local Government Act of 1988 is still referred to by its original title of 'Clause 28' and states that: 'A local authority shall not: a) Intentionally promote homosexuality or publish material with the intention of promoting homosexuality. b) Promote the teaching in any maintained school of the acceptability of homosexuality as a pretended family relationship.' The section/clause remains on the statute books, unreformed and unchanged.
3. John M. Crum, *Acting Gay: Male Homosexuality in Modern Drama* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1992; revised, 1994), p. 281.
4. Andrew Sullivan, *Virtually Normal* (London: Picador, 1995), p. 122.
5. 'Clause 28' is still the most commonly understood description of the notorious paragraphs. Strictly, when

it passed into law it became 'Section 28' of the Local Government Act, 1988.

6. Philip Osment, ed., *Gay Sweatshop: Four Plays and a Company* (London: Methuen, 1989), p. lxiv.

7. Osment, *ibid.*, p. 88.

8. Simon Garfield's *The End of Innocence: Britain in the Time of AIDS* (London: Faber, 1994) is a compelling account of the history of the virus in Britain.

9. Leo Bersani, *Homos* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1995), p. 31–2.

10. Alan Sinfield, *Gay and After* (London: Serpent's Tail, 1998), p. 115.

11. Daniel Harris, *The Rise and Fall of Gay Culture* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1997), p. 4.

12. Toby Manning, 'Gay Culture: Who Needs It?' in Mark Simpson, ed., *Anti-Gay* (London: Cassell, 1996), p. 100.

13. Act-Up (the AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power) was formed in 1989, based on the American organization Outrage. It was/is an *ad hoc* pressure group which uses theatrical strategies to raise public awareness about Queer issues.

14. Michael Warner, ed., *Fear of a Queer Planet: Queer Politics and Social Theory* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), p xxxi–vii.

15. Steven Seidman, *Identity and Politics in a 'Post-modern' Gay Culture*, in Warner, *op. cit.*, p. 129.

16. *Ibid.*, p. 130.

17. Diana Fuss, *Essentially Speaking* (London: Routledge, 1989), p. 102–3.

18. Crum, *op. cit.*, p. xvi.

19. Neil Bartlett, 'What Mainstream?', paper delivered in *absentia* at the 'Queering the Pitch' conference, Manchester, September 1994.

20. Rod Dungate, *Playing by the Rules*, in Michael Wilcox, ed., *Gay Plays: 5* (London: Methuen, 1994), p. 76.

21. Dungate, *ibid.*, p. 99.

22. Mark Ravenhill, interviewed by Tilly McAuley, *Gay Times*, April 1997.

23. Mark Ravenhill, *Shopping and Fucking* (London: Methuen, 1997).

24. *Ibid.*, p. 83.

25. Jonathan Harvey, in an afterword to *Beautiful Thing*, in Wilcox, ed., *Gay Plays: 5*, *op. cit.*, p. 210.

26. Jonathan Harvey, *Hushabye Mountain* (London: Methuen, 1999), p. 94–5.

27. Robert Lepage, in discussion with Richard Eyre, quoted in Michael Huxley and Noel Witts., eds, *The Twentieth-Century Performance Reader* (London: Routledge, 1996), p. 238–41.