ACADEMY OF PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Written Communication Student Artifact

The Rainbow Spectrum: How Gay Men Are Portrayed in Theatre

Theatre shows audiences many adaptations, worlds, characters, relationships, concepts, and even thoughts or ideas. The stage is a place where anything can happen. One would assume that the great white way has seen a multitude of different relations, and lives of homosexuals. However it has been my experience that the gay community is most commonly depicted in three specific ways in contemporary theatre. The first being when a gay man comes out of the closet, the second being the AIDS epidemic, and the third about the mistreatment and bashing of the gay lifestyle. In this paper I will analyze three plays, each with a specific angle. "The Normal Heart" by Larry Kramer, which follows the characters through loss and tears through the AIDS crisis. "The Laramie Project" by Moises Kaufman, which is a retelling of the infamous bashing of Matthew Shepard. Last, but not least, I will be reading "Take Me Out" by Richard Greenberg, a story of a Baseball Player who comes out as a homosexual in the MLB. These plays are primary examples, and indications that gay men are viewed very narrow mindedly in theatre, and this paper will discuss those topics and connotations, and enlighten the search for a different homosexual story that is beckoning in the arts.

Before one can talk about how gay men are portrayed in theatre, we must first discuss what a homosexual male is, and what he represents or should represent. A "gay" man, is someone who is of the male gender, but is also sexually energized by other men. He is not different than any other human being, he simply just has a different sexual preference. Negative things are related to homosexuals, such as AIDS, or promiscuity. However, these are by circumstance. Gay men have been known to live long lives, without any disease, with healthy committed relationships, lives with love, acceptance, and support from their families. Lives without hatred, or damnation. Normal, everyday lives. Passionate lives. Gay lives.

We all know the story, a gay teen is in the closet, he has his first love, he tells his family he is attracted to other boys, and his family kicks him out, or disowns him, or worse, it leads to physical assault. Coming out of the closet, and confronting who you really are takes a great deal of courage and bravery. Who knows how people will react. This moment is crucial, and important, and stakes are very high, so of course it is no wonder that most written works about gay men revolve around this life altering moment.

"Take Me Out" by Richard Greenberg, deals heavily with this topic. In fact the entire play is about Darren Lemming, who is the center fielder for the New York Empires, a baseball team. He is at the top of his game, everyone loves him, until three guesses when… that's right, until he tells everyone he is gay. This news is so shocking that it takes the champion team, and throws them all for a loop, discording their team efforts, and throwing their balls into utter chaos. Darren's business manager, Kippy Sunderstrom, must now suddenly come face to face with his own sexuality, and decide on what action to take. Kippy is attracted to the pitcher, Shane Mungitt, a red neck, who of course is homophobic, meaning afraid of homosexuals, Shane is a true redneck. The entire team is affected by the announcement, and when they start attacking each other, Shane and Darren are suspended. When returning to the MLB they are confronted by Kippy, and Shane freaks out, and of course leaves the team, he is terminated, and no one on the team hears from him again. Kippy, as the narrator, reveals that Shane, the homophobic redneck, bought a shotgun, and went guns a blazing to every convenient store locally, and shot all the milk. Darren and the team won the World Series. All things seemed to work out, but not without loss of a great friendship, and the loss of respect from his fellow teammates.

A great example of how coming out leads to loss, heartbreak, anger, violence, and attack. In real life these instances happen all the time, and the events turn out quite differently. On outsports.com, I discovered a Guinness beer campaign commercial featuring professional rugby player, Gareth Thomas. Gareth announces in this video, that he has been in so much pain, but none of which compared to his fear of coming out of the closet. When he thought he was alone, and had no one to turn to, he turned to his team, and unlike in Take Me Out, by Richard Greenberg, he was supported by his teammates. They always had his back. He was not alone. There are so many other

stories, about athletes coming to terms with who they are, and their teams supporting them, but this one speaks to the topic at hand. He had the same fears that Darren did. However when he accepted who he was, people did not lose sight of their team, or their victories, their successes. They bonded, and grew closer, and developed a firmer foundation with each other. Why is this never the case on stage?

Another character who came out and entered a world of pain, is Matthew Shepard. The Laramie Project, written by Moises Kaufman, is based on reality. Matthew Shepard, according to theguardian.com, an article written in 2013, on the 15 year anniversary of his death, states "Kidnapped by two men who had befriended him, tied up to a fence in a remote rural spot, pistol-whipped and tortured, Shepard died of his head injuries on 12 October, 1998. The outrage that erupted from Shepard's murder not only put his abductors – Aaron McKinney and Russell Henderson – behind bars for life, but it also provoked a nationwide debate about hate crimes against gay people."

The debate, also influenced Moises, who is known for other works of homosexuality that are based on reality, such as "Gross Indecency: The Three Trials of Oscar Wilde." He, and his theatre troop interviewed the town, and developed a collection of their reactions and thoughts of the event. Both sides of the story were told, and every angle or viewpoint was explored, including the theatre troop's own feelings towards what had happened. Tectonic Theater Project, the theatre troop, took these interviews and then acted as dramaturgs as they acted out the different people, characters that they met. They developed a ground breaking piece of theatre.

However, it was so focused on the hate, and the torture of how gay men should be treated, at least according to the people of Wyoming. A quote from Reverend Fred Phelps in the play is "We wouldn't be here if this was just another murder the state was gonna deal with. The state deals with hundreds of murders every single day. But this murder is different, because the fags are bringing us out here trying to make Matthew Shepard into a poster boy for the gay lifestyle. And we're going to answer to it. It's just that simple… you don't like that attribute of God."

The bashing, while never shown in the play, is praised by the townspeople. Others in the play defend Shepard's actions, but the whole piece leaves a taste of bitterness

towards Matthew. The play also reveals, of course, that Matthew was infected with HIV.

Speaking of HIV, it is extremely difficult to mention homosexuality without discussing the AIDS epidemic. Many plays reference, or doom their characters to the disease, but the one that truly sticks out is the ground breaking work by Larry Kramer in "The Normal Heart." This play has recently been brought to attention by the motion picture directed by Glee creator Ryan Murphy starring, Julia Roberts, Mark Ruffalo, Jonathan Groff, Jim Parsons, and many more. The play, like many others, tells the tale of a group of gay men who get infected with HIV, or AIDS. It comments on the reactions of the public, and how one man faced the world to bring information of the truth behind this horrible condition. Several characters die, and Ned Weeks, and Dr. Emma Brookner, are left to fight the fight to make the government aware or the epidemic that they are facing. Ned speaks out "I'm beginning to think that you and your straight world are our enemy. I am furious with you, and with myself, and with every goddamned doctor who ever told me I was sick and interfered with my loving a man. I'm trying to understand why nobody wants to hear we're dying, why nobody wants to help, why my own brother doesn't want to help." It's true, and this play is also based on very real and devastating events.

Written in a time when it was ignored by the cultural world, and no one would talk about it. The Normal Heart, was a tool, to get politicians hearing about the epidemic, to relate to the community as a whole. This piece did make an effort to create a buzz about what was happening to gay men everywhere, and spread the word, so doctors and physicians would find answers.

When looking at ten of the most popular gay plays, according to playbill.com, they all deal with one of the three topics at hand. The list is as follows, Beautiful Thing by Jonathan Harvey, a story of a British teen who comes out, he gets bullied, he falls in love with a jock, and he gives a heart wrenching speech to his entire school about self-acceptance.

Love! Valour! Compassion! by Terrence McNally, deals with a group of gay men who spend time together in a country house upstate, they all discuss AIDS and plan for survival. Jeffrey by Paul Rudnick, makes light and hilarity of the AIDS epidemic.

Hedwig and the angry inch (classified as performance art, and not a musical) with Music & Lyrics by Stephen Trask, book by John Cameron Mitchell, deals time and again with Hedwig coming out as a man, while she may seem as a complete woman, she had a surgery that went bad and was left with an angry inch. Her being a man, and not a woman leads to the ultimate climax when she comes out and her soulmate abandons her.

Torch Song Trilogy by Harvey Fierstein, in which Arnold comes out and his mother is intolerant of his decisions to be gay, he does rise above and creates a support system and ultimately raises a gay son alone, but a central theme is the unacceptance of his family when he comes out. Bent by Martin Sherman, is the definition of bashing. Bent is about the persecution of homosexuals in Nazi Germany, in hopes of "normalizing" them. Falsettos with Music & Lyrics by William Finn Book by William Finn & James Lapine, is a musical about AIDS. The Normal Heart, by Larry Kramer made the list. Angels in America by Tony Kushner, in which a man battles his religion, and comes out to God and his wife, ruining his marriage, and he becomes lovers with a man who left his partner with AIDS, and then gets bashed by his new lover. This play deals with every topic. The Boys in the Band by Mart Crowley, is the only play on the list that doesn't directly correlate with one of the three bullet points in the play. It shows the true relationships of gay men. However, Boys in the Band does depict gay men, as self-loathing, promiscuous, and depressing creatures. So, in a sense it may not be the best example of breaking out of the shell of gay theatre.

After, doing more research, and learning more about the plays I have selected to analyze, I have discovered that my opinions are not accurate facts. Theatre shows all aspects of gay culture, I just was blind to it. According to an article found at nytimes.com, there are new plays about the modern gay lifestyle being produced. While they are not receiving the same notoriety as the plays before them, they are making strides to change the face of theatre and how LGBT people are perceived by audiences. "Steve" is a comedic drama about two gay men with the same name who raise a child

from a surrogate. A quote from the article is “In some ways these plays are distinctive less for their subject matter than for what they don’t contain. There’s not much trauma, there’s no cowering in the closet, the threat of AIDS has seemingly passed and if self-loathing appears, it is unrelated to sexuality. The plots and arguments that defined decades of gay playwriting (at least playwriting by and about white men) aren’t present.” I think that this is revolutionary. Gay people with normal lives, what a concept. It’s also interesting that this article points out that there has been a precedent problem with how plays usually contain a certain subject matter. However it is nice that change is happening.

I am looking forward to a new era of gay theatre with plays like the ones mentioned in this article. “Steve,” “Dada Woof Papa Hot,” “Mothers and Sons,” “Next Fall,” and who knows what else is to come. Theatre with a new voice, that doesn’t focus on the death, doesn’t focus on the tragedy, doesn’t focus on the abandonment, theatre that focuses on the similarities with straight people. The homosexual lifestyle is becoming more and more “normal” and it’s time the world sees the new normal. Luckily there are people out there making this difference.

Elissa Blake, wrote an article that states “where are today’s gay plays?” "We treat HIV/AIDS with amnesia, like it was a bad season of flu. What we fail to recognize, and especially in our art, is not just the huge impact it had in terms of fatalities, but also the impact HIV had, and still has, on our art and culture.” Elissa quotes Playwright Lachlan Philpott whom she interviewed. "We lost a generation of artists and thinkers and lovers and activists. Who knows what the art scene might look like had we not lost so many people? So the impact is not just in the lack of work but also in the lack of artists and leaders."

I found this quote interesting, because it completely changed my view of “gay” theatre. This playwright, and this article, states that AIDS is an important part of our culture that needs to be expressed, and not ignored. That theatre is getting complacent with telling heartwarming stories, and not enough about the pain we have went through. The article also states that homosexuality isn’t the button pusher it used to be. Elissa quotes artistic director Lee Lewis “I think we're seeing a normalization of sexual identity politics, where people can be gay in a play without that being the primary

narrative," she says. "So maybe it's more socially normalized on the main stages. It's a sign of progress."

So basically, Lewis, is stating that gays are running amuck in theatre. While I have been focusing on how they are viewed in three narrow minded viewpoints, this Griffin Art Director seems to completely disagree. Suddenly gay topics, are common. Another article by Carl Miller, really hit me by stating

> "One reason lesbian and gay culture collapses is because we lose our history every few years. Collectively we fail to pass anything (apart from the occasional body fluid) between generations. Of course we're not taught it, but that's no excuse to neglect to learn it either. Without homosexuality there would be no British theatre worth watching, not just since the 1950s, but the 1350s. These discoveries are slowly filtering on to the stage."

This is so true. This is why I was fighting gay theatre. I had not been taught, or really cared to learn about gay culture, and the history we went through. So when the theatre I was seeing reflected these topics of negativity in the community, I wanted to push past these topics and get to happier times. When it is a necessary topic, because every story needs to be told, and history needs to be taught through some outlet. They are not teaching us gay history in schools, without going out of your way to find it, so what better place to learn it than the theatre.

Times Colonist (Victoria, British Columbia), posted an ad for a play titled Grid: A One Man Grindr Play. A one man show, written, directed, and starring, Jenson Kerr. This show takes a dark, harsh look, at modern gay culture, and how the millennial gay men search for romance. In seeing this synopsis, I took a long look at how the modern gay world is, and what we would appear to be on stage. A one man show, about Grindr, pretty much sums it up.

Maybe it is better to view the coming out story, the AIDS crisis, the bashing, at least those topics have meaning, and teach us something. What does Grindr, a gay hook up application on smart devices, teach us about culture, about life? From personal experience, I can tell you, it teaches us nothing, however, this is exactly what I was

asking for in the beginning of this paper. A play about modern gay life, and something beyond what we always hear about.

"There's always going to be somebody's first year coming out," said Mr. Andrew Volkoff, "There are always going to be men in their 30s or 40s divorcing their wives because they are comfortable enough to come out, or women leaving their husbands because they're in love with other women. You're always going to have people at different points in their lives who need to hear these stories." This is a quote from the New York Times when Volkoff was defending his decision to open a gay theatre company. The article states "At a time of rapid change in the gay-rights movement, from marriage to the military, the purpose of a strictly gay theater company isn't the same as it was 10 years ago." This is very true.

Gay culture has many things being explored in theatre today. Maybe the one man Grindr play isn't all we have to offer. However, this company, looks not only at modern contemplation, but also on classics, like Angels in America. The Times of India (TOI) states "Theatre has transformed the lives of LGBTs and sex workers in ways more than one. Living Smile Vidya, a Dalit transgender who played the lead character in the play [Molagaapodi], said the production changed the stereotypical perceptions people had about LGBTs. "The focus is always on our sexuality and we are seen as people who are not part of society. I am a poet, writer and actor but for six years I had to plead with theatre groups to give me a chance to act. Finally, in 2011 Kattiyakkari gave me a chance and I have carved my own niche as an actor and people recognize me," she says." This is just one example on how theatre is becoming a new world of expression for all types of gay culture. Transgender normality's are being explored and defined. Something, unseen in any theatre before today's culture of millennials.

An article found on Guardian.com states "It's been heartening to see gay writers exploiting the freedom that came with the abolition of censorship and the relaxation of the law. While it would take too long to list everything, theatre radically changed along with social attitudes. The 1970s saw the emergence of Gay Sweatshop in Britain, founded in 1975, and the Gay Theatre Alliance in America, which burst into life not long after. In the 1980s the Aids crisis was reflected on stage in plays as diverse as Larry Kramer's The Normal Heart and William M Hoffman's As Is. The 1990s brought us

Tony Kushner's monumental Angels in America, in which sex, politics, religion and race were all miraculously combined. And in Britain over the last 20 years writers such as Bryony Lavery, Phyllis Nagy (who is American by birth), Kevin Elyot, Alexi Kaye Campbell, Samuel Adamson, Mark Ravenhill and many others have all dealt openly and explicitly with gay themes." This was written by Michael Billington, and now that I have dove further into the context of gay theatre I would agree.

With this new world of transgender theatre, and gay companies, and gay marriage, gay military, even Grindr. It is hard to back up my thesis, of Gay men being portrayed in one of three ways in theatre, because that is simply not true. Yes, those topics are common, and expected in gay theatre, but these are many more stories to be told, that are being told. In conclusion, gay men, and the LGBT community as whole are not depicted by 1) Coming Out, 2) Bashing, and 3) The AIDS crisis, solely. While these are issues, that are referenced, and considered thoroughly in plot points, they are not the main focus in every theatrical work about the community. As stated earlier, the gay community is becoming common, and in more recent theatre, a gay character's sexuality is not even a major plot point to the show. My thesis was incorrect. I do think I need to read more, see more, and do more, but I know now that it is out there. There is theatre that takes gay culture, and shows the whole Rainbow Spectrum. I for one cannot wait to explore as many of the new works as I can.

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