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Changing Perception of Queer Theatre

by

Travis Raymond Korby

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Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to look at a variety of works that can be considered queer theatre and discuss the changes in perception of queer theatre with the passage of time. Specifically, this paper will look at works from before the Stonewall Inn riots of 1969, due to the significance of this event in queer history, and how they have aged since then. Those works being *The Children's Hour*, *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* and *The Boys in the Band*. This paper defines what it means to be a work of queer theatre before examining three specific works that are instrumental in the study of the genre. Following these examinations is a look at the historical evolution of the works since their debuts. By the end of the paper it should be clear that the backlash these works received when they debuted was necessary for the progression of queer theatre and should be appreciated for what they did for the genre.

Originally simply meaning different, in today's culture queer is usually an identity that is reserved for someone who does not identify as cisgender, heterosexual or someone who is part of the LGBTQIA+ community. It was the 1970's (the decade following the riots at the Stonewall Inn, a monumental event in queer history) that literature featuring queer characters became more easily accessible, as that was when the American Library Association made the push to feature books with gay and lesbian themes and characters. Until then these works would have likely been found under "sexual perversion" along with works dealing with "sex crimes, incest, and pedophilia." (Adler, 478). It was also during this time that libraries began using "gay" in place of "homosexuality" in works that were not nonclinical. This shows society's desire to display homosexuality as more than an illness or perversion; yet, despite a plethora of plays and books featuring queer characters, it was still not accepted as mainstream literature. For reference, this essay showcases several examples queer theatre works that come from before this change in the cataloguing system. Looking at queer works and their reception when they were first produced, and comparing them with their reception now will show that works heavily featuring queer themes are now allowed to be in canon.

It is difficult to create a blanket definition for what makes something queer theatre, but a good rule of thumb is if the plot or themes revolve around the sexuality or alleged sexuality of a character then it is likely to be queer theatre. Queer theatre, the subsection of queer literature that is plays and musicals for the stage, can seem like a daunting title to assign to works, but it would seem that the distinction can be made with relative ease. A very clear example of queer theatre would be *The Boys in the Band* by Mart Crowley, a play which revolves around gay men and their sexuality; however, it does not need to be so obvious. A work is considered queer as long as a major theme about queerness or even the prospect of being queer is present

throughout the work. A play, such as Lillian Hellman's *The Children's Hour*, does not feature a character that is known to be queer until the end of the play, but throughout the play there are fears revolving around the idea of a lesbian relationship. These fears are what makes the play a work of queer theatre because it centers the conflict of the play around lesbianism. This means that something could be queer theatre if in the absence of queer characters there are characters who are presumed to be queer by their peers.

Some of the plays that could have been discussed in this paper but were left out are the following. These were left out in favor of works that offer a greater discourse on queer themes and the role those themes play in the public perception of the plays. In 1923 Sholem Asch's play *God of Vengeance* makes its Broadway debut, and on the opening night the entire cast is arrested for obscenity charges despite alterations to the play that were meant to make it more acceptable for public consumption. In 1947 *A Streetcar Named Desire* debuted on Broadway and subsequently got seven revivals with the most recent being in 2012, showing its longstanding importance in theatre. *Last Summer at Bluefish Cove* debuted off-Broadway in 1980 and featured only lesbian characters, making it a staple in lesbian drama. Following the assassination of openly gay politician Harvey Milk the play *Execution of Justice* was commissioned to dramatize the criminal court case of the assassin, and it makes it to Broadway in 1986, only eight years after the murder. In 1991 and 1992 Tony Kushner's commentary on the AIDS epidemic, *Angels in America*, premiered in San Francisco in two parts. These are only some of the highlights of queer theatre, and this essay will focus on other milestones and works from before the 1969 Stonewall Inn riots. Those works are Tennessee Williams' *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* (1955), Lillian Hellman's *The Children's Hour* (1934), and Mart Crowley's *The Boys in the Band* (1968). Each of these plays are unique, but also contain some similar and

overlapping themes dealing with the aspects that make them queer theatre.

The Children's Hour

The Children's Hour mainly handles how fear and misinformation about someone's sexuality can have dire consequences. *The Children's Hour* is not as obviously queer as other plays discussed in this essay, as it revolves around a rumor rather than an observation that two women are in a queer relationship. What solidifies this as a queer play is the fact that this rumor, and therefore the idea that two women are in a relationship, ruins the careers and lives of these two women. The fact that a student's parents thought the teachers were together, despite the fact that teacher Karen Wright is married to a man, demonstrates the disapproval of lesbianism particularly for teachers. This demonstrates the danger in rumors, even those started by kids, and the dangers of being an openly queer individual.

The fear theme begins with a rumor about the sexuality of the teachers, and creates a discourse on good versus evil that does not do the play in its entirety justice. This theme of the danger of rumors starts when a kid tells their grandmother "Miss Dobie had always been like that, even when she was a little girl and that is was unnatural ---" (Hellman, 37) and ends with the stage directions "MARTHA exits... There is no sound in the hours, until, a few moments after MARTHA'S exit, a shot is heard." (Hellman, 67). The play stems from the theme of the danger of being queer which is heightened by the fact that the danger comes from a rumor rather than something that is known to be true. Being gay was not necessary, she only needed to be perceived by society as gay. One common way of reading this is a discussion on good versus evil, but that largely misses the point and ignores the most notable and queer theme of the play. To look at the play as such is short sighted and as Phillip Armato puts it "To clarify the play's substance, we should ask what, within the world of the play, is good and what evil." (Armato,

443). Although there is a discussion on good and evil, the play goes deeper than that and it is only one factor in the play.

Hellman wrote *The Children's Hour* at a time of increased lesbianism in theatre, but the increase in prevalence did not make lesbianism any more acceptable in the eyes of the public. *The Children's Hour* was part of a larger movement in the 1920's and 1930's that showcased lesbianism in theatre, and the best known work from said movement (Titus, 215). Hellman and her female contemporaries were facing increasing pressure to act in such a way that would lead them down the road of heterosexual marriage, which is something that could be read into her play (Titus, 216). This has led to speculation that *The Children's Hour* was a sort of social commentary since in the play the perception of these two experienced women straying from the road to heterosexual marriage ruined their lives. To continue this idea of the struggles that skillful women face, the introduction of the play demonstrates an attempt to be accepted as a professional. Mr. Mortar scolds one student saying "If ever you had known the pangs of adversity as I have known them --- Do something else with it. Women must learn these tricks." (Hellman, 9). Essentially claiming that part of a woman's skill set should include some level of deception to ensure that they can get what they want. Ms. Mortar's comments on making handkerchiefs and women learning these tricks works to associate women with "deception and insignificance, both of which she rejects and condemns." (Titus, 218). This clearly shows that Hellman is trying to conform to her male contemporaries as an attempt to fit in and be accepted. This compulsive need for acceptance can be applied to gender and sexuality. With masculinity and heterosexuality being a sort of default in professional fields, if someone wants to be accepted by the field then it would make sense that they try to conform to these characteristics. This is reinforced in the play by all the kids being pulled out of the

school when the parents think that the two school teachers are lesbians. The mere idea that they are lesbians is enough to make the parents lose faith in the institution. The abilities of the teachers were not called into question until it was thought they might be gay. Before that it did not matter as they were doing their job well enough. This critique of professional life at the time was seemingly disliked at the time this play was originally produced, as the play was banned in multiple cities including London and Boston.

The play being deemed “indecent” and for that reason being banned shows that this critique is not approved by the established leaders of the theatre world. Although some places were willing to show it despite the “indecenty” shown, other places were not, and this begs the question; why was it too inappropriate to show in some cities but not others? This highlights the subjectivity of what it means to be indecent as well as certain places and some people’s disregard for the opinions of others on this matter. If there was some subjectivity to the issue then it is likely the play would have been banned everywhere or nowhere. This immediately calls into question whether the play was really indecent or if it was being blacklisted for certain themes. It begins to look like either the play was banned for showing a character that is acknowledging their lesbianism, showing the penalties for not conforming to professional ideals, or because Hellman was the one not conforming to those professional ideals. Regardless of which one of these reasons it was, it would show certain societal thoughts on lesbianism in the professional world. Those thoughts being that lesbianism does not belong in the workplace and either should be kept a secret or just should not exist at all. No matter what the reason was that this play was considered indecent the issue falls along the lines of gender norms and heteronormativity.

Cat on a Hot Tin Roof

Cat on a Hot Tin Roof on the surface is about greed, family, distrust, and a troubled one-sided relationship. None of these themes are inherently queer, but the drama of the play stems from the idea that Brick's marriage is failing because he is gay and refusing to sleep with his wife, on top of being depressed because a previous male lover of his died. It is made clear that Brick was close to this other man and became an alcoholic following the death of his friend. There is speculation that Brick was lovers with this man and not just friends, but that is never confirmed during the play, although some characters are making that assumption. This is what makes the play a work of queer theatre. Although it is unclear and there is still debate about the sexuality of Brick, his sexuality is the driving force behind the play, and without it being a major topic in the play there would not be anything driving the plot or the conflict within the work.

Brick's wife is very open about trying to have a kid with him, and wanting to be faithful and not sleep with other men even though Brick is not even attempting to fulfill her sexual needs as he is seemingly not attracted to her. Brick goes as far as allowing and insisting his wife to sleep with other men because he is aware that he is not fulfilling her needs. "What were you thinking when I caught you looking at me like that? Were you thinking of Skipper?" (Williams, 31) Margaret, Brick's wife, asked of him after he was caught blankly staring at her while she was changing. This comes from the beginning of the play, immediately introducing Brick as someone who was previously in a close relationship with a man, and showing that he is not interested or views his wife as someone he is attracted to. By doing this Williams immediately draws into question Brick's sexuality and makes it a significant part of the play.

Brick's sexuality is so much in question that even decades after the first showing of the

play his sexuality is subject to questioning. The main piece of evidence that Brick is not queer is the fact that he is married to a woman. Brick's wife hints that they used to have an active sexual history that is not the same as it used to be, saying, "You know, our sex life didn't just peter out in the usual way, it was cut off short... and it's going to revive again, just as sudden as that." (Williams, 50). Brick is willing to admit that their marriage was more her idea than his and it seems as if he was coerced into it. It is also completely possible that he married a woman as a cover for his repressed homosexuality. It would not have been safe for him to be an out and proud gay man and the best cover for that is to have a wife. To continue this idea, there are several pieces of evidence that Brick is attracted to men, the main two arguments being the closer relationship he had with another man and his unwillingness to be with his wife in bed no matter how much she wants him. With the arguments for each side it is up to the reader to make the decision on whether or not Brick is queer, but regardless of if he is there is enough evidence and speculation that he that this is a work of queer literature. No matter whether Brick was intended to be queer or not the fact that his sexuality continues to be a discussion solidifies the work as queer theatre.

Williams has been questioned before about Brick's sexuality, and even criticized for the lack of clarity of the situation, but he was dodging the question every time he was faced with it. Part of his reasoning for keeping it a secret was not just because of the literary value in the mystery, but also to protect himself from the backlash that he might have faced at the time for writing about a homosexual man (Bak, 226). This obsession with the sexuality of Brick shows the value that is placed on sexuality in works of literature, but it appears that there is importance placed differently for if a character is heterosexual versus if a character is queer. This is reflected in the disdain that characters refer to Brick with when considering that he is

homosexual and ruining his marriage. If the idea of being queer has the same value as heterosexuality then the secrecy would not be as important as it is. Instead, since it is made apparent that being heterosexual is preferred and there is such a high level of pressure for Brick to have a kid and conform to heterosexual norms there is clearly a higher value to that lifestyle being demonstrated in the play. This reflects the heteronormative societal values at the time and makes a strong statement on the place of homosexuals in a society that values child birth as part a key part of a relationship.

The Boys in the Band

The Boys in the Band is full of queer characters and themes and is seen as significant in the representation of queer individuals to the public eye due to the high level of exposure of queer ideas. *The Boys in the Band* debuted off Broadway in 1968, a year prior to the Stonewall Riots, and featured exclusively queer characters and a sexually ambiguous character. The play serves as a way of showing a glimpse into the life of queer individuals at the time, while at the same time not making all the characters stereotypes of queerness. So, naturally there are several queer themes in this play. One major theme that comes from this play is this idea of the safety of the closet, or the safety in people not knowing that one's sexuality. The idea of straight passing is prevalent in the play, and shows the audience that in general it was safer to avoid judgment and at times danger by hiding that aspect of one's life. "Faggot, fairy, pansy..." ... "ALAN *beats* EMORY *to the floor*" (Crowley, 58) Another major theme to come from the play is the importance of sexuality. This applies to one's own sexuality as well as knowing the sexuality of others and can be seen by the significance of their sexuality to how the characters live their lives as well as Michael's obsession with finding out Alan's sexuality. "Pick up the phone and call Justin... CALL HIM!" (Crowley, 101), Michael commands Alan

attempting to get him to confess his love for Justin. One last major queer theme from *The Boys in the Band* is this idea of persistence despite circumstances. This is most directly alluded to by Michael who quotes “You show me a happy homosexual, and I’ll show you a gay corpse.” (Crowley, 106), demonstrating an awareness of a major issue in the queer community. This is juxtaposed to the fact that none of the characters die in this play, defeating the “bury your gays” trope. This is indisputably a work of queer theatre in every facet.

One major talking point of the play is that it not only is a queer play, but a heavily queer play. Every character is thought to have at least some homosexual attraction and some relations with another man, be it during the play or events prior to the night of the party that get discussed again on stage. This creates a high level of representation that is not common even in today’s media. On top of featuring so many queer characters, even most of the actors from the original production were gay, and in the 2020 revival every actor was openly gay. This not only creates a discourse on the lives of queer individuals, but now it also speaks to the work of queer individuals. This is significant because it heightens the spotlight that is put on the queer community in this work by adding another element that is to be considered when evaluating the play. Now instead of looking at the play as a straight man’s interpretation of a gay character it is a gay man’s interpretation of the gay character. This adds a level of authenticity to the characters since the actor is now more likely to understand the character having lived a similar lifestyle.

The Boys in the Band is not free from criticism now, nor was it when it was first produced. While certain problems with the play are not related to the sexuality of the characters directly it does seem to be a by-product of the character’s identities. Michael Schiavi makes note of the “dense referentiality” (Schiavi, 79) stating that some audience members might be

uncomfortable with it because they do not understand the references in the play. It would seem that things being referenced are more popular amongst queer individuals and therefore these characters will understand it while the audience might have a tougher time with that. This is not the audience being uncomfortable with the sexuality of the characters, but rather the sexuality of the characters creating situations in which the audience might be lost. On the other hand, Schiavi does acknowledge that the “reactionary political and rhetorical positions” (Schiavi, 76) can infuriate some readers. It is clear in the play that homosexuals are oppressed as a group which is something that should garner a reaction, but it would seem that some people were made uncomfortable by this fact. As though they did not want to believe that the group they were a part of was guilty of oppressing this other group of people. Schiavi also makes a claim on how the play has aged, claiming that the gay men today will have a hard time relating to characters who are pre-AIDS epidemic and pre-stonewall riots. It is bold to think that the issues gay men are facing have changed so much that these characters are no longer relatable. There are certainly issues that have changed, such as AIDS is less prevalent and gay marriage is legal in many more places, but this does not change the fact that there are certain homophobic tendencies in society that are still prevalent. The play may remain controversial within and outside the queer community, but something that remains true is “the play has never retreated from dramatic or cinematic scholarship, and it remains a staple of gay autobiography, spectatorship, and conversation.” (Schiavi, 76). Regardless of people's opinion the play has cemented itself in queer history due to its timing and depiction of gay men in the 1960's.

Shared Themes and Historical Importance

All three of these plays show very different settings, but through the queer themes that each one features there are still similarities among the stories. Namely there seems to be a high

value placed on sexuality in each story, regardless of if a character's sexuality is known to the audience or other characters. It makes sense that in a story full of queer characters there is a high value in sexuality, but in all three stories there is a clear emphasis on figuring out someone else's sexuality because of the belief that they might not be heterosexual. Rather than these characters minding their own business they are making decisions on the presumed sexuality of others when it seems unnecessary that others' sexuality needs to be part of the decision process. All of these stories are drastically different if these questionably queer characters are assumed to be heterosexual. The motives for knowing these characters' sexuality is different in each play, reflecting society's changing reasons for needing to know someone's sexual preference. In *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* Brick's sexuality is relevant to whether or not he will inherit the land from his father, because if he is not going to have kids then it seems like a poor choice to give him the land since he will not have any offspring to pass it to when he dies. In *The Children's Hour* it is relevant because parents do not want their daughters being taught by two lesbians in fear that their daughters will also then become lesbians. Then in a twist in *The Boys in the Band* a homosexual man wants to know about another man because of his own personal obsession rather than some unwanted outcome that would come with learning that the character truly is queer.

These differences in reasons show how time and perspective influence obsessions with sexuality. Most notably the perspective that a queer character brings when obsessing over someone else's sexuality is one more focused on the self rather than the possible effects that there are on others and future prospects. When comparing the first two works there are more homophobic tendencies when concerning the sexuality of someone else. First there is the idea that the future bloodline is more important than who is already family. Just because Brick might

be gay and therefore likely will not get someone pregnant means that the family lineage dies with him. This implicitly claims that if Brick were to adopt a child it would not be the same as his brother's children and is also less worthy of taking control of the family land. Hellman decides to focus on another issue, and that is this idea that if young girls are taught by lesbians then that is what would make them become lesbian instead of it being something that was always true and rather than learning to be lesbian they discover that aspect of their life. These changes are in part due to the changes in the viewing of homosexuality and the perspective that the author views homosexuality's place in society, but these changes also show that there is change in society that is allowing for these different perspectives to show their point of view.

Another way of looking at these societal changes is by looking at how these pre-Stonewall Inn riots works are viewed in contemporary society. To look at these works now and condemn the actions while also noting how things have changed and these events are much more unlikely now than they were then highlights the progress that has been made. The simple fact that these works have been redone, whether it be a revival of the play or a movie adaptation, shows that these once controversial works have a place in society despite the publicity of the controversies that arose when they were new. It is one thing for a play to be produced and controversy arise from certain details of the play, but it is something else if those details can be acknowledged and the play be produced again anyways. By acknowledging the controversy and then going on with a production it is implied that those previous issues are either smaller issues or not issues at all anymore. This proves that the issues are not as big of a deal as they used to be, if they are issues at all. Looking at controversies that came from queer drama to observe how the controversies change throughout time and how the controversies are viewed is not to say that the controversies are objectively bad. It is not necessary to look back and say that these controversies

should not have happened and for example to wish that *The Children's Hour* should never have been banned in certain cities because that would eliminate the historical importance of the work.

These works serve as social commentary and part of why they work as social commentary is they are willing to show issues that were not the best parts of society. If the authors were to conform to norms more and make their works less controversial, then they would not have been able to serve so well as the social commentary that they are now. This is part of the historical significance of the works and without the controversies there would have been less of a spotlight on the injustices that homosexuals faced because of a part of their lifestyle that was not a choice. It is not fair that these authors and their works were put into these situations, but because they were, it allowed for progress to be made not only in queer representation in theatre. Also, through greater representation and more exposure to the general public thoughts and feelings about queer individuals were able to be changed. Without these plays showcasing issues in society they could not have paved the way for later works of queer theatre and would be lacking the historical significance to continue discussions on queer theatre through revivals and other adaptations.

Conclusion

It is through hindsight that we can look at works of queer theatre and appreciate what they did for the community as a whole and specifically for future works of queer theatre. Despite how different queer theatre might be there are still certain themes and ideas that transcend the works. Through looking at these transcendental features it can be said that although the works were controversial when they first premiered there was an aspect to that controversy that had inherent value. This value lies in the discussion and publicity of issues plaguing the queer communities during the time of production. This discussion and publicity

allows for progress to be made, even if it was detrimental to the work during that time of scrutiny. The historical values of these works were much more difficult to recognize at the time, but now in hindsight it is much more clear and easier to appreciate.

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