CONTEMPORARY GAY DRAMA: THE END OF A MODERNIST CRUSADE?

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This dissertation is the result of my own work and includes nothing which is the outcome of work completed in collaboration.

This dissertation does not exceed the limit prescribed by the postgraduate regulations of the University of Leicester.

Abstract

This study examines changes in representation of dissident male sexualities in twentieth century British and American theatre, from early attempts to depict the homosexual as a distinct identity to more recent depictions of sexual dissidence which threaten the traditional boundaries of the gay/straight dichotomy. It relates a selection of plays to thought and to later theories of postmodern sexuality. It examines commentaries of contemporary critics of gay theatre, and takes reference from interviews conducted with the playwrights Neil Bartlett, Kevin Elyot and Michael Wilcox.

Examination of the earlier plays reveals a range of strategies employed by playwrights who attempted to represent the homosexual identity, despite censorship. This study describes how pseudo-medical/scientific constructs of sexual 'otherness' established heterosexual normativity and how those constructs influenced theatrical representations of homosexuals. It shows how contemporary commentators have criticised these plays, applying a critique that fails to take into account the social context in which they were written. After the relaxation of censorship, the more overt characterisations of homosexuals created in the 1970s and 1980s by Gay Sweatshop and playwrights concerned with the issue of AIDS often served to confirm rather than challenge concepts of sexual 'otherness'.

The second half of the thesis considers the work of British playwrights Kevin Elyot, Jonathan Harvey and Mark Ravenhill, identifying aspects of their work which reflect changing attitudes to sexuality. While some of these plays are influenced by postmodern concepts of diverse sexualities and the relationship between sex and consumerism, others continue to reinforce traditional stereotypes of the homosexual as a distinct entity confined within the gay/straight binary. This thesis concludes that personal narratives of sexual identity in contemporary drama, which transgress the heterosexual hegemony (notably those found in the plays of Mark Ravenhill), are beginning to usurp the modern grand narrative of gay emancipation.

297 words

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Prologue

There is evidence of an underlying assumption held by some gay[1] playwrights and critics that, the more visible and more widespread the representations of homosexuality are on the contemporary stage, the more the lives of gay people are affirmed and celebrated. The perceived failure of British playwrights to adequately represent homosexuality is evident in John M. Clum's scathing criticism of gay British drama in 1992:

> the gay man as a political creature in contemporary Britain, or as a person who has managed to create his own positive domestic and social space, does not seem to be viable material for contemporary dramatists. (1992, p.283)

Clum's comments suggest that British gay playwrights are failing in their duty to reflect the lives of gay people and he points to the influx of American plays such as Tony Kushner's *Angels In America* onto London's West End stage in the 1990s. He also inaccurately suggests that there was a comparative dearth of home grown gay drama at that time.

Interviewed in 1998, Neil Bartlett pointed out the dangers of generalising about thematic trends in West End theatre when he referred to comments made by the director Stephen Daldry who 'is on record as saying last year it was gay theatre and this year it's Irish theatre.' Bartlett suggests that such 'trends' are often 'down to commercial managements in London.' He refutes the suggestion that gay plays have become unfashionable.

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[1] Use of the term 'gay' in preference 'homosexual' reflects the more positive social identity which has been widely used in critical writing since the 1970s. As a term it defines itself within the gay/straight dichotomy. In keeping with other critics such as Kaier Curtin and Nicholas de Jongh, it is used here to distinguish a dissident group of writers and a body of work that represent male same sex relationships

> If you get one hit, they look for the follow-up and then usually the National will do the third one. That's what's happened with *My Night With Reg* and then *Beautiful Thing* and *The Day The Earth Stood Still*. It's not necessarily a historical change. (Appendix 1)

The success of Kevin Elyot's work in the 1990s is just one example that seems to contradict Clum's original criticism. However, the underlying assumption is self evident; the more gay plays that are performed on stage, the more the gay community will benefit.

The importance of gay theatre in changing attitudes to homosexuality was confirmed by Michael Wilcox in an interview in December 2002:

> We needed 25 years ago to bash on with plays on out and out gay themes even though its label was not at all satisfactory, simply to try and change the law and change public perception and in a way we have been very successful.[2]

In its simplest form, the assumption that we need more gay plays might be loosely based on an equation that relates the statistical proportion of gay people that exist in Britain to the number of plays that deal with gay issues. If there are few plays at any one time dealing with such issues, then there is a feeling that gay people are not being fairly represented or served by our playwrights and national theatres. If there has been a decline in the number of dramas in performance that might loosely be termed as 'gay', I believe that there are very significant reasons for that decline. I would argue that Clum's inference that American playwrights were more 'liberated' simply because they were more prolific was both inaccurate and outdated.

Of course, the involvement of gay people in the theatre both in America and in Britain, as in all of the arts, is nothing new. What is a comparatively new phenomenon is

[2] Michael Wilcox interviewed by L.J.Bathurst in Newcastle (30 Dec 2002), Appendix 3. The termination of the Methuen 'Gay Plays' series (edited by Michael Wilcox) may, in itself, be an indication that 'gay' plays as a genre, may have been consigned to history.

the apparent freedom available to gay playwrights to openly present gay characters without use of ambiguity or concealment in plays which tackle issues head on that are central to the life of the gay community. It is possible to attribute this new found freedom to Stonewall (1969)[3] and the subsequent gay political movements which fought courageously and relentlessly for equal rights for gay people both in the United States and in Britain. Yet it must be said that the government in the UK, whilst less inclined to invoke the rules of censorship, was nevertheless capable of passing Section 28 in 1988[4]. Although finally repealed on Thursday 18th September 2003, the very existence of such legislation on the statute books over a period of fifteen years labelling gay family relationships as 'pretended' and limiting local authorities from 'promoting' homosexuality is evidence of institutionalised prejudice against gay people.

We may once again witness a time when the only sexual activity openly sanctioned by society will relate to procreation. Section 28 may not be the last of many gestures aimed at discouraging the adoption of gay life styles by the next generation. In addition to recent increases in child benefit for every child born within the family (from 11th April 2005), the Tory leader Michael Howard proposed that new mothers be paid £150 a week to stay at home to look after their babies as a form of extended maternity benefit (*The Times*, 5th July 2005). Such measures are clearly designed to reward traditional heterosexual lifestyles. Certainly there is no reason for gay people to become complacent. Michael Wilcox confirmed this in 2002 (prior to the repeal of Section 28) when he said:

> People of all persuasions simply have not got it in them to repeal this damn thing. I think it is a truly scandalous piece of law and anyone who voted for it should be

[3] In the 1969 Stonewall uprising, gays fought police harassment at New York City's Stonewall Inn.

[4] Section 28 inserts s2A into the 1986 Local Government Act. 2A (1) 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.

thoroughly ashamed of themselves. (Appendix 3)

Prejudice and discrimination are still rife in the wider community and the truism that the power in society is held by white, middle-class, heterosexual men, though hackneyed, still holds true. It might therefore be argued that drama which increases the visibility of gays in society serves to raise awareness of alternative lifestyles and contribute to the changing of minds and attitudes.

What role does gay theatre play within this context? Is the theatre really 'the only public forum a gay writer has,' as the American playwright Lanford Wilson asserted in an interview with Robert Massa published in *Village Voice* (28 June 1988, p.38)? Is gay theatre an exclusive club restricted to openly gay writers, or is it a more complex organism involving other 'interested parties'? Is it indeed self-enclosed or is it subject to wider social and historical constructions? Is gay theatre simply for the community of interest or is it for the wider community? If it is the former, then it may support individuals by celebrating and affirming their sexuality and lifestyle; if the latter, then how effective is it in changing social conditions?

Generalizations about 'Gay Drama' are all too easily made under the banner of 'Gay Studies'. Pre-Stonewall playwrights who wrote for mainstream theatre were criticised by John M. Clum, in his preface for *Acting Gay*, for capitulating in the face of the prejudices of their audiences. In referring to one prominent twentieth century writer, he even goes so far as to suggest that the negative representations of gay people in his plays 'reflect the internalised homophobia[5] of the playwright' (1992, p.xvii)[6]. While there may be elements of truth in such assertions, it is simplistic to pass judgements on previous generations from the comparative comfort of the less censored 1990s and early 2000s. I would argue that

[5] If the word 'homophobia' denotes a hatred or fear of homosexuals and homosexuality, Clum is implying that there is a level of self-hatred permeating this particular playwright's work.

[6] John M. Clum, 1992, p.xvii. Clum argues that the negative characterisation of homosexuality in Tennessee Williams' plays has more to do with his own 'internalised homophobia' than public opinion or legal restrictions.

such criticism is comparable to accusing Arthur Miller of prevarication in *The Crucible* for veiling his attack on the McCarthy witch hunts in historical allegory. No more should we choose to vilify playwrights such as Mordaunt Shairp or Robert Anderson because their portrayal of homosexuality doesn't happen to confirm or promote the gay utopian dream of the 1990s.

It would be tempting to suggest that gay critics are the last people to write objectively about gay drama since their critical stance is likely to be highly partisan. Yet, every critic and theorist carries his/her baggage of personal experience and prejudice through the pages of their texts. Terry Eagleton has suggested that each writer's ideological stance leads to contradictions and attempts at resolution that require close analysis. As Eagleton states:

> what is important to recognise is that the cognitive structure of an ideological discourse is subordinated to its emotive structure – that such cognitions or miscognitions as it contains are on the whole articulated according to the demands[...]of the emotive 'intentionality' it embodies. (1979)

It is therefore important to remember that while ideological stance is perhaps necessary if a premise is to be worked through, objective analysis should predominate where emotive 'intentionality' threatens to take over.

It may be argued that the history of cultural theory itself, from Matthew Arnold (1869) who referred to the working classes as the 'raw and uncultivated ...masses' to Richard Hoggart (who rose from poverty to join the academic middle class), inherently defines its own class prejudice.

One must not be churlish about the progress made in the name of 'Gay Studies' through the last two decades of the twentieth century. It has developed as a multi-disciplinary phenomenon encompassing cultural, critical, philosophical, sociological and literary research under the patronage of an ever-increasing number of progressive

publishing houses. This proliferation of gay theory constructed largely by gay people themselves reflects a level of confidence and self-reliance that would have seemed impossible forty or even thirty years ago. Changes in the theatrical representation of male dissident sexualities[7] have mirrored these developments. Understandably, much of the academic research has been retrospective, concerned with reclaiming history through a gay perspective. This is certainly true of the comparatively recent body of writing in the field of gay theatre studies; a field which gathered momentum after the publication of Kaier Curtin's *We Can Always Call Them Bulgarians* (1987). Ironically, the publication of Curtin's text came one year before section 28 of the Local Government Act (1988) was passed. While the Tory government sought to control the activities of local councils and schools by preventing the 'teaching in any maintained school of the acceptability of homosexuality as a pretended family relationship' (section 28), this period heralds a significant growth in gay related studies in the academic world. The history of the representation of homosexuality on stage, recorded in such texts, is certainly a chequered one, both in terms of legality and public reaction. The development of gay drama in the twentieth century reflects the changing attitudes to a sub-culture which is still defined in the terminology of deviancy. The word 'homosexual' continued to be used in the 1988 legislation, thus perpetuating the myth of 'otherness' and difference that psychoanalysis established in the earlier half of the twentieth century. It seeks to group and define a wide range of sexual identities under one clinical category.

Although I shall refer to the invaluable works of Kaier Curtin, Nicholas de Jongh, John M. Clum and Alan Sinfield in this thesis, I intend to concern myself primarily with the writing and performance of examples of the most recent gay drama and to relate it to the wider issues of critical and cultural theory. With the exception of Mae West, the work

[7] The term 'male dissident sexuality' is used to define male sexual behaviour involving a partner that differs from the heterosexual norm. While it may manifest in sexual preference for same sex relations, it may also include bisexual relations.

of each playwright referred to in this thesis, whether American or British, has been performed on a West End stage. I have chosen particular texts because, at the time of performance, they either confirmed or challenged the perceptions of homosexuality of their day. These texts have been specifically chosen because they illustrate particular types of gay identity. Whether they present positive or negative images of gay identities, they need to be appraised in the context of the period in which they were written.

John M. Clum, in *Acting Gay*, suggests that 'British drama, gay and straight, seems to be in a worse slump than the British economy' (1992, p.281). He criticises British dramatists for failing to capitalise on the opportunities available for depicting gay lifestyles on the stage. He even suggests that politicised gay theatre, exemplified by Gay Sweatshop 'is dead' (p.283). Clum is not alone in his suggestion that the gay political agenda is on the decline. In an article in *The Guardian* entitled 'Cashing In, Coming Out' (29th August 1996) Peter Tatchell bemoaned the apparent de-politicisation of gay people. He referred to the 'shallow, vain, frivolous, amoral, self-obsessed, commercialised trend in gay culture' which threatened to curtail the 'unfinished struggle for queer freedom'. His criticism is of gay commercialism and its emphasis on 'lifestyle' and exclusivity. Such comments of disillusionment are reminiscent of those Russians who, having shaken off the bondage of communism, discovered that it is just as easy to be poor and disenfranchised in a free economy as it was under a more restrictive regime.

Tatchell's call for a return to the crusade for sexual liberation may have gone unheeded. In a sense the world had moved on, and no-one is immune to the commercialism of the media dominated postmodern culture. The gay 'grand narrative' (which Tatchell *et al* would like to see extended to embrace all sexualities) has been hijacked. A good deal of assimilation and dissemination has occurred and nowhere is this more evident than in contemporary gay drama.

In recent years plays such as *Beautiful Thing* (1994) by Jonathan Harvey and *My Night with Reg* by Kevin Elyot (1994) have been highly successful in commercial terms.

Beautiful Thing has followed *My Beautiful Laundrette* into mainstream cinema. Few playwrights now write for an exclusively gay audience. Homosexuality itself has, in a sense, gone mainstream. As Neil Bartlett stated in an interview in 1998: 'we've reached a point where that division between mainstream and fringe no longer pertains' (Appendix 1). Gay characters can be found on most television soaps and openly gay playwrights such as Russell T. Davies and Jonathan Harvey write sit-coms and dramas for prime-time television (*Doctor Who*, *Queer as Folk* and *Gimme, Gimme, Gimme*).

In this thesis I am interested in the representation of male dissident sexual identities on stage. What are the issues that concern today's gay playwrights? What images of gay men are they concerned with presenting? To what extent is such drama still 'crisis' oriented, dealing with the 'problems' of 'coming out', familial rejection or AIDS? The main body of this investigation will be informed by interviews with three leading contemporary British playwrights. In addition to their contributions, I intend to draw on recent cultural/critical theory to consider the state of contemporary gay drama in a wider context.

The more recent plays considered in the later chapters of this thesis have been written in a time of dramatic changes in the law regarding gay rights. In 2000 the Sexual Offences (Amendment) Bill lowered the age of consent for same sex relationships from eighteen to sixteen. In that same year the ban on homosexuals in the UK armed forces was lifted. In 2003 regulations were introduced, for the first time, protecting lesbians and gays from discrimination in the workplace, although it was criticised for allowing faith-based organisations to be exempt. As a result many gay and lesbian employees remain vulnerable to being fired. In 2002 the Adoption and Children Act made it possible for same sex couples to adopt a child jointly. Finally, the Civil Partnership Act which comes into force on 5th December 2005 will allow the first same sex civil partnerships to be registered although there is still some confusion over the pension rights of such couples. Although this legislation represents a remarkable improvement in the rights of gays and lesbians,

there remain areas of concern. For example, the 2000 Sexual Offences Bill states that a person under sixteen (whether female or male) is incapable of giving their consent to take part in a sexual act. Any sexual act is therefore deemed to be an assault which can be punished with a custodial sentence. That this law ignores the fact that many young people under the age of sixteen (whatever their sexual orientation) are sexually active, remains one of the anomalies of current legislation governing sexual behaviour.

Having achieved the intended cultural-political goal of emerging from the closet, of raising public awareness and possibly increasing public acceptance of gay identity, certain questions about the future of gay drama remain. The main proposition which underpins this thesis is that the process of gay emancipation is a modern project in the sense that it shares its central aim with other social and cultural groups in its search for identity and independence and that, in common with similar projects, that purpose is now exhausted.

ACT 1

Scene One

Towards a Greater Sexual Diversity

If the modern project of gay emancipation has indeed been exhausted, as I suggest in the opening prologue, what has taken its place? There have been changes in the representation of sexual dissidence on stage that relate to cultural changes which suggest that the classification of sexual identity is not as universal, inevitable or immutable as it was once perceived.

Changing attitudes to sexual identity, whether in drama or in the wider society, are difficult to confirm or quantify. Since the groundbreaking work of Gay Sweatshop in the 1970s (which I will be considering in some detail in Chapter Four) which set out to voice 'the concerns of the Gay Movement' and to 'fight prejudice and bigotry' (Osment, 1989, p.vii), there have been many important developments in the philosophical and cultural theory of identity and selfhood. Much of it questions the very nature of static sexual identities. This thesis will consider some examples of homosexual representation in British and American drama from the 1920s to the 1980s before examining the work of Kevin Elyot, Jonathan Harvey and Mark Ravenhill. Before commencing any detailed analysis of these texts it is necessary to establish my own critical position in response to particular theoretical, cultural and sociological contributions which inform the postmodern stance of this thesis.

If Lyotard celebrated the importance of desire in *Discourse, Figure* (1971), as Hans Bertens points out, he also suggested that under capitalism:

> the flow of libidinal energy, the primary process, is continually thwarted by the secondary process, which involves 'transformation and verbalisation' and bows to a reality principle and to the demands of an ego that are ultimately constructed by capital. (1995, p.135)

But while desire may be constrained by capital through the ego, the possibility of breaking through those constraints is always present. The representation of the sexual subject is controlled and constrained by a representation machine which intentionally links subject, representation, meaning, sign and truth. Only by breaking that chain can authentic communication and representation be achieved. Representations of sexual dissidence on stage, as in all art, have been constrained within the language that defines identity. The privileged 'discourse' of medical/scientific narratives has dictated the way in which we see ourselves as subjects and the way in which we represent ourselves as subjects through artistic mediums.

The relationship between identity and capital is further explored by Baudrillard in *Le Systeme des Objets* (1968) in which he asserts the growing dominance of material consumption. Through advertising, the importance of the product becomes less important than the life-style of which it is presented as an integral part. The advertising system bypasses language and rationality to establish an effective universal 'sign-system' that defines social standing and status. The construction of sexual behaviour, gender and identity are linked by D'Emilio (1997) and Greenburg and Brystyn (1996) to the development of consumerism. D'Emilio goes so far as to suggest that the 'historical development of capitalism' has:

> allowed large numbers of men and women in the late twentieth century to call themselves gay, to see themselves as part of a community of similar men and

women. (1997, p.170)

It then becomes possible to target this identifiable group as consumers. The images of gay people represented through advertising become part of Baudrillard's endless 'procession of simulacra' (1993). In such a world dominated by advertising, the representation of different sexual identities becomes justifiable in economic terms only. The more populous the sub-group, the more valuable it becomes to the owners of production, even if, as Baudrillard (1988) suggests, having passed through the four 'phases of the image' (p.170), it finally has no bearing in reality whatsoever.

The essential indispensability of the Marxist tradition to our understanding of the relationship between sexual identity and capitalism seems to be inescapable. In *Profit and Pleasure* (2000), Rosemary Hennessy returns to that tradition. She refers to the increased visibility of homosexuals in the United States but warns that this is a limited victory for gays 'who are welcome to be visible as consumer subjects but not as social subjects' (p.112). Like Danae Clark (1991), she is also suspicious of the motives behind this greater visibility, suggesting that it represents 'capitalism's appropriation of gay "styles" for mainstream audiences' (p.112). What is perhaps more important here is that, whereas gay dramatists are in a position to confirm, challenge or threaten concepts of sexual identity (with some external limitations) from within the dissident group, the images of gay and lesbian identities presented through much of the media lie within the control of the white heterosexual males who dominate the industry.

What is missing from Rosemary Hennessy's analysis of the relationship between capitalism and sexual identity is that advertisers subliminally manipulate the sexual image to constitute the commodity itself. The male models in the Levi or Calvin Klein adverts

may be attractive to straight women, but they are also images which men are encouraged to aspire to whether they are straight or gay. Whether the observer wants to 'have' or mimic the image becomes irrelevant for the purposes of product placement. Once again we can see how advertising bypasses language and rationality, relying on the overt or hidden desires of the observer as voyeur. The sexual image has become the object of desire for men and women, whether straight or gay. In the process of commodifying the object to appeal to a polyvalent multiplicity of desires, the nature of that desire becomes blurred. In effect sex itself has become the commodity in a postmodern world in which everything can be bought and sold. In a later chapter, his thesis will explore how Mark Ravenhill explores the nature of desire and the commodification of sex in his plays.

While late capitalism has sought to establish gays (especially gay men) as a legitimate consumer group, academia has, through its control and organisation of knowledge, gone some way to destabilising the gay/straight dichotomy. Dissatisfied with the 1970s-80s' label 'Gay and Lesbian Studies', many university departments, notably those in America, embraced the term 'Queer Studies' in an attempt to bind together under one banner of dissidence the often-oppositional voices of gays, lesbians, bisexuals and trans-genders. There are a number of college courses in this new discipline, and at least five institutions in the US currently offer an undergraduate course in 'Queer Studies'. It is perhaps significant that some of these courses have been integrated into 'Women's Studies' majors. For example, Smith College, Northampton, MA. includes 'Queer Studies' in what the college describes as its 'leading Women's Studies programme'. It seems contradictory to consider that such a course which focuses on the 'borders, limits and margins' of queer theory should, by the very nature of the institution in which it is being studied, exclude gay men.

In his introduction to *Queer Frontiers* (2000), Joseph A Boone acknowledges that the contributors to this collection of essays 'do not naively assume that "queerness" as a lifestyle or "queer theory" as an intellectual approach to understanding sexuality is a stable entity whose future is guaranteed.' The purpose of queer theory then is to 'push the meanings of the term in order to explore its limitations as well as its possibilities' (p.11). Boone positions queer theory as a 'distinctly post-modern praxis' identifying all who contribute to the debate as claiming membership to a 'queer community.' But has this movement served to strengthen or weaken the position of sexual dissidents? Has it broken down the barriers of sexual identity or created new ones?

If queer studies and queer theory are to be positioned within the framework of postmodern thought, there remain some contradictions which need to be resolved. If we accept the social-constructionist theory that the modern homosexual identity is a product of the nineteenth and twentieth century, then the process of tracing a history of same sex relationships becomes problematic. Such a project is embedded in modernist assumptions about the stable, linear unity of history. As Scott Bravmann (1996) asserts: 'gay men and lesbians should not take whatever we want from the past and call it a part of "our" history' (p.348). If the very nature of postmodern thought is to question the modernist metanarrative of history then the attempts to re-claim people or periods of history and define them in terms of modern lexicography might seem to be suspect. Bravmann proposes an alternative model for queer historical practice in which 'historiography's codes of representation are as much an object of analysis as they are an instrument of it' (p.348). Andreas Huyssen (1986) maintains that such a practice is indeed going on today 'which manifests itself in the concern with cultural formations not by logocentric and technocratic thought, in the decentering of traditional notions of identity...' (p.230). He

refers to the great value put on 'difference and otherness' that guides this process. This is not the historicism that Walter Benjamin condemns, which benefits and is complicit with the ruling class at the moment of the historian's own writing, but is the historical materialism which is aware of what is being ignored in the process. The campaign of historical reclamation conducted within the framework of 'queer studies', may be to explore what Lyotard (1984) calls the 'petit récits' of individual stories in a postmodern undermining of the grand narrative of lineal history and its pretence to tell the 'truth' about our past.

Does queer theory lack the focus of Gay and Lesbian Studies? While the latter fought for equality and civil rights within a heterosexist society, queer theorists argue about who should be allowed access to the term 'queer', and whether the Marxist agenda of the earlier feminist movement has been sidelined. Far from unifying individuals who engage in a variety of dissident sexual acts, it appears to have spent more time dividing into further identity based sub-categories, while at the same time calling for an end to the stereotypical representation of sexual identity in the media. Resistance to the advance of queer theory is still very much in evidence. To many activists who have spent a lifetime supporting the movement for gay and lesbian emancipation, the project pursued by queer theorists through queer studies remains an anathema.

In *Queer Frontiers*, John Rechy rails against the 'political correctness' that would outlaw sexual stereotypes. He defends the portrayal of stereotypes vehemently:

> Banish stereotypes and you banish figures of daring - outlaws who fought on the frontiers even before the war was declared, redefining, challenging, courageous, these noble flaming queens, these unflappable antique dealers and others we simply dismiss as flamboyant. (2000, p.127)

As Mary McIntosh (1993) points out in her essay 'Queer Theory and the War of the Sexes': 'Women have seen men as misogynist; men have seen women as castrating' (p.33). After considering the cultural and theoretical background of feminism she suggests that the cause of queer theory may be flawed because gays and lesbians 'can hardly begin to understand each other's desires' (p.33). While she recognises that Queer Theory is 'important for feminists', it is still important for feminists to 'agitate for an awareness of gender in queer thinking' (p.49). In effect they continue to use language to restrict and constrain individuals within one group or another.

In 'The Final Frontier: A Roundtable Discussion'[8] (1997) George Chauncey reflects what must be the ultimate postmodern position on sexual identity when he says:

> I also see in the future the growing possibilities for people to explore a variety of sexual subjectivities and positions, and to not feel as forced to identify themselves as one way or another, in the way that my generation did because of the kind of stigmatisation of homosexuality. (p.321)

While he recognises that this may be difficult for those who fought so hard for gay emancipation to accept, it is because of their successes in that struggle that we have been able to reach this 'new cultural moment.' To recognise the postmodern view that individual sexualities cannot be constrained within the heterosexual/ homosexual dichotomy, we must also recognise that the rights of people who have identified themselves specifically as 'gay' will cease to be the central focus in any future discourse concerning sexual identity.

[8] 'The Final Frontier: A Roundtable Discussion' is moderated by Tania Modleski and is published in *Queer Frontiers*, Ed. Joseph A. Boone et al. (London: University of Wisconsin Press, 2000)

If we are to aspire to the aesthetics of existence advocated by Foucault which would help us to negotiate historical constructions of normalisation, then it would be necessary, like Madonna, to constantly re-invent ourselves.

One growing area of debate, which threatens the traditional concepts of sexual identity, centres on bisexual behaviour. As Clare Hemmings (1995) asserts: 'Traditional identity politics have to go out of the window to be replaced with notions of transgression and gender-play' (p.197). Many of the arguments surrounding bisexuality highlight the differences between sexuality as a set of acts and sexuality as an identity. Jo Eadie (1993) argues that the resistance to bisexual identities from within the gay/lesbian movement reflects 'a very real fear of the collapse of a symbolic system: the heterosexual/homosexual dyad' (p.154). He suggests that the key issue for a theorisation of bisexual politics 'is the dissolution of those boundaries.' He identifies the bisexual as a hybrid and he appropriates the work of Homi K. Bhabha on race and colonialism to illustrate how 'the paranoid threat from the hybrid is finally uncontrollable because it breaks down the symmetry and duality of self/other, inside/outside' (Bhabha, 1985, p100). However, William Simon (1996) points to the dangers of focusing exclusively on the gender of the object choice of the individual to establish fixed sexual identities:

> By making gender the focus and explanation of sexual behaviour we have dissolved the enormously complex issue of the aim into an excessively simplified conception of the object, and in so doing, we have created versions of the 'normal' heterosexual, the 'normal' homosexual, and we are currently in the process of attempting to create the 'normal' bisexual. (p.35)

Such versions of the 'normal' are likely to be so rare that, in Simon's words, they may 'earn them representations in museums of natural history'.

In *Identity Without Selfhood* (1999), Miriam Fraser effectively illustrates how bisexuality, unlike heterosexuality or homosexuality, cannot be seen as a property of the self. It can be argued that because of its fluidity as a concept, it defies any attempt to define it in terms of *an* identity. In her analysis of the relationship between Simone de Beauvoir and the media based representations of herself, she concludes that bisexuality 'cannot be articulated in terms of selfhood' (p.164). In effect, bisexuality defies the barriers that divide the gay and straight identities yet remains hidden on the periphery. Her reference to Louis McNay is particularly relevant to my own exploration of the representation of male dissident sexual identity in contemporary dramatic texts:

> For the individual, freedom from normalising forms of individuality consists in an exploration of the limits of subjectivity. By interrogating what we held to be necessary boundaries to identity or the limits of subjectivity, the possibility of transgressing these boundaries is established and, therefore, the potential of creating new types of subjective experience is opened up. (1994, p.145-6)

It is therefore the intention of this thesis to examine particular texts to assess the extent to which they transgress established boundaries in the representation of sexual dissidence. Foucault (1978) related the growth of interest in the erotic consciousness to the outward desire to remove it from public vision as medical/scientific discourses sought to define and control sexuality. More recently erotic images, both conventional and unconventional have become widely visible through a media which both overtly and covertly promotes the sexual. Has this plethora of sexual imagery changed the nature of sexual desire? Have playwrights reflected this change or have they been influential in bringing it about?

ACT 1

Scene Two

Modernist Constructs and an Early Prototype

There are two fundamental reasons for relating the portrayal of homosexuality in the first half of the twentieth century drama to the project of modernity. Before explaining those reasons it is necessary to establish briefly what is meant by the 'project of modernity.' It is concerned here with the continuance of enlightenment reason through social and cultural thinking. Jürgen Habermas views this project as the format of a problem set that came into currency in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. For him, modernity embraces such concepts as revolution, progress, emancipation and crisis. It is a period of self-reflexivity which has been 'broken off from its past and opened up to the immanent teleology of an "epochal new beginning"' (1987, p.6). The philosophical discourse of modernity, according to Habermas, is the outcome of the social subject's coming into awareness of its place in the process of a universal history and so acquiring the capacity to become its author. It is this capacity which fuels self-definition of the present, and which permits the re-interpretation of the past and our subsequent relationship with the future. History becomes a resource for determining one's expectations of the future. The principle of rational efficiency is central to modernity; the same principle, argues Zygmunt Bauman, that led inexorably to the Holocaust. While Habermas suggests that the project of modernity is not yet exhausted, Jean-Francois Lyotard argues that because of the Holocaust, that project has 'been abandoned...destroyed, liquidated' (1984, p.111) and he calls into question the validity of the grand narratives that have underpinned the project of modernity.

The will to self-definition and the desire for human progress and emancipation are evident in the grand narrative of psychoanalysis. While the works of Sigmund Freud

are rooted in the desire to rationalise human behaviour ('where id was, there ego shall be') they also destabilise the idea of the rational cognitive mind. The influence of Freud's writing is evident in such artistic movements as Dada and Surrealism which commented on the insanity of World War 1 and other crises of the period. They are particularly significant in the development of our attitude to homosexuality. It is through Freud that we can first relate the homosexual identity to the project of modernity.

The lexicographical creation of the homosexual as a separate entity from his heterosexual counterpart as derived from the research and writing of Sigmund Freud *et al* was to have far reaching effects on deviant behaviour. In his *Three Essays* published in 1905, he associates perversion with any sexual practice which abandons the aim of reproduction. His article '"Civilized" Sexual Morality and Modern Nervous Illness' stresses the centrality of homosexuality to neuroticism: 'homosexual impulses are invariably discovered in every single neurotic' (1908, p.349). While Freud's works have been re-appraised by several theorists over recent years (notably Jonathan Dollimore in *Sexual Dissidence* in 1991), the impact of his work cannot be over-estimated. As Jeffrey Weeks points out in his essay 'The Construction of Homosexuality'[1], in the late nineteenth century there was 'no awareness of homosexuality constituting the centre of a life "career"' (p.47). He confirms that the adaptation of the term 'homosexual' 'both by sexologists and by the homosexuals themselves, marked as crucial a change in consciousness as did the widespread adoption of the term 'gay' in the 1970s (p.48). The homosexual had become a 'medical model'. As Zygmunt Bauman points out: 'To classify means to set apart, to segregate. It means first to postulate that the world consists of discrete and distinctive entities.'[2]

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[1] Jeffrey Weeks, 1996, p. 41-65. Weeks distinguishes between homosexual behaviour and the formation of homosexual roles, categorizations and identities.

[2] Zygmunt Bauman, 1991, p.1. Bauman goes on to theorise a correlation between the modernist quest for knowledge and ambivalence and indeterminacy. He concludes by suggesting that post-modernism allows us to come to terms with that ambivalence.

Psychoanalysis, being a pseudo-scientific metanarrative developed in the tradition of the Enlightenment[3], was constructed to explain human behaviour for the social and moral improvement of society. Although the development of psychoanalysis may be viewed as an attempt to use a 'scientific' approach to explain human behaviour, it should be noted that Freud himself was pessimistic about the pre-eminence of science in the modern era:

> Men have gained control over the forces of nature to such an extent that they would have no difficulty in exterminating one another to the last man. They know this, and hence comes a large part of their current unrest, their unhappiness and their mood of anxiety. (1985, p.340)

By moving away from studying and defining acts of sodomy, a word enshrined in English law for centuries, psychoanalysis created a new entity; a classification of 'otherness' which was subsequently adopted either voluntarily or involuntarily by the generations of sexual dissidents that followed. This construction has fundamentally altered the way we view ourselves in contemporary society and the way in which we view deviancy in a historical context. As Earl Jackson, Jr. points out in *Strategies of Deviance*: 'to elaborate the importance of Walt Whitman's or Hart Crane's homosexuality to their poetry is easily justified; to declare Plato or Shakespeare "homosexual" or "gay" is quite another story' (1995, p.53)[4]. There is a substantive difference between asserting that Shakespeare's sexuality was more complex than our normative heterosexuality would suggest, and simply invert it by suggesting that he was 'gay' is anachronistic.

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[3] By 'the tradition of the Enlightenment' I refer to belief in a rational, orderly and comprehensible universe which pervaded philosophical and political thought in the 17th and 18th centuries exemplified in Immanuel Kant's 1784 essay 'What is Enlightenment?'

[4] Earl Jackson Jr., 1995, p. 52. Jackson refers to Freud as the first person to miss-apply such terminology to historical figures in his essay 'Leonado da Vinci and a Memory of His Childhood' (1910).

The quest of the Enlightenment was to define and explain scientifically, and to exercise control over our environment. If the Enlightenment as the Kantian Age of Reason may be historically sited in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, its influence continued to shape Victorian attitudes and ways of thinking. This manifested itself in the dominance of Utilitarianism and the ever greater sub-division of knowledge into clearly demarked subject areas. It is exemplified by Darwinism and *On the Origin of Species* (1859). The Victorian obsession with gathering, ordering and classifying information pervaded all fields of knowledge. The definition and the various 'scientific' attempts to explain homosexuality in those terms reflect that process. Foucault in *History of Sexuality, 1* (1978) explores the multitude of dialogues created by Victorian theorists and scientists on the subject of sexuality. He further illustrates how society and its governments sought to control sexual behaviour by bringing deviancy into the open. Changes in the law regarding homosexual behaviour may have given some elements of freedom and equality to gay people, but they have also served as a double edged sword in that they have prescribed new areas of deviant behaviour which have then been made subject to prosecution. For example, in Britain, male homosexual acts involving more than two consenting adults, even in the privacy of their own home, were illegal until 28th November 2000.

Throughout the 1970s, 1980s and 1990s police continued to use *agent provocateur* surveillance techniques to entrap gay men. In 1993, for example, 124 males were sentenced for persistently soliciting or importuning 'in a public place for immoral purposes' under the Sex Offences 1956 Act; a crime which still carried a maximum penalty of two years in prison. In 1993, the DV8 theatre company produced a piece of physical theatre at the Royal Court entitled *MSM*, based on interviews with 50 men of different ages, backgrounds and sexualities who had been involved in 'cottaging'. *MSM* was intended as an intervention in the discussion about such prosecutions. The 1997 Sexual Offences Act introduced the register of sex offenders which not only required the

inclusion of people convicted of such offences but also those merely cautioned for sex offences. As a result, in 1996, 718 offences of buggery and 551 offences of gross indecency were recorded by the Home Office (Home Office 1997b, Table 7 p.21). As Helen Power points out in 'Gay Men and Part 1 of the Sex Offenders Act, 1997', 'the threat to a gay man of a caution, and thus registration, is therefore not illusory' (1998). It is also worth noting that as recently as in 1998 sixty five members of the armed forces were ejected for being gay This is further evidence, if indeed any were needed, that the State continues to define and control sexual behaviour. The complexity of the 2003 Sex Offences Act and its attempt to cover a wider range of offences to protect children and other vulnerable groups confirms the intention to extend the government's area of influence.

In a second and no less fundamental sense, the gay liberation movement of the 1960s and 1970s reflected the spirit of the broader project of modernity. In common with other subjugated groups, the gay movement has presented its case for equality in terms of universal morality and law. Ernesto Laclau (1993) in his essay 'Politics and the Limits of Modernity' usefully clarifies this when he states:

> If something has characterised the discourse of modernity, it is their pretension intellectually to dominate the foundation of the social, to give a rational context to the notion of the totality of history, and to base in the latter the project of a global human emancipation. (p.329-343)

Such has been the intention of the Gay Rights Movement; to establish gay rights as a part of that very project. Theirs, rightly or wrongly, was the utopian dream which would not only recognise homosexuals as equals, but would extend to them every right extended to heterosexuals, including the right to marry and parent children. While the emancipation of subjugated colonial peoples resulted symbolically in independence, the emancipation of homosexuals is not so clear cut. If postmodernity challenges the very

foundation of the major narratives, including that of psychoanalysis, the boundaries of sexuality once again become blurred.

It is therefore evident that gay identity constructions in twentieth-century drama, as in all forms of literature, are constrained and determined by the ideology of modernity in fundamental ways. As an integral part of that ideology the homosexual 'identity' was a construction embedded in modern assumptions about the ostensibly stable, linear unity of history; the apparent inevitability of progress and development and our supposed ability to know the past as it really happened, and its consequences for the present. Modernity is enshrined in the concept of the narrative coherence of history, historical progress or development while postmodernity undermines and challenges those very narratives. The positional notion of homosexuality being at variance with, diverting or subverting the dominant heterosexist[5] culture is itself in question. The gay crusade has sought to justify its mission with statistical assertions. For example, that one man in every ten is gay. In America the ten percent figure was inaccurately extracted from the Kinsey report. Bruce Voeller (1990) who was chair of the National Gay Task Force in the late 1970s admits to originating the ten percent myth. In his article 'Some Uses and Abuses of the Kinsey Scale', Voeller states that the use of this mythical statistic by the modern gay rights movement's campaign was to convince politicians and the public that 'we (gays and lesbians) are everywhere'. In fact, Kinsey's book *Sexual Behavior in the Human Male* (1948) recognises homosexual acts rather than homosexual identities. What Kinsey actually reported was that 'ten percent of men are more or less exclusively homosexual for at least three years between the ages of sixteen and fifty-five' (LeVay

[5] A 'heterosexist culture' promotes its own values and practises while covertly and overtly discriminating against persons of different sexual orientation. The heterosexual/homosexual binary implies the dominance of one sexual orientation over the other.

and Nonas, 1995, p.51). In Kinsey's data, only about four percent of men and two percent of women were exclusively homosexual throughout their adult lives. The obsession of the gay movement with the gay/straight dichotomy has served to marginalize bisexual individuals, and nowhere is this more evident than in the symbolic notion of 'coming out of the closet', a rite of passage central to the formulation and adoption of the modern gay identity since the late 1960s.

The homosexual sub-culture[6] enforces conformity on its members through rites which mirror the dominant culture, thereby denying the right of the individual to define his/her own sexual identity. Whether such rites contain an element of parody or whether they represent a serious attempt at self-legitimisation, they exist as public acts and as such seek to define and control deviant[7] behaviour by bringing it into the open. These rites are integral to the way in which the gay community defines itself and its members and to how it presents gay identity to the wider community. It is perhaps ironic that the very process of exposing individuals who indulge in deviant sexual behaviour, a role traditionally assumed by the dominant heterosexual establishment, should be taken up in the 1980s and early 1990s with such zeal by sections of the deviant group itself through the process of 'outing' public figures. Foucault (1978) emphasises the point that the voice of homosexuality has made its demands; 'often using the same vocabulary, using the same categories by which it was medically disqualified' (p.101). In my view, postmodern thought brings the value of such practices into question by emphasising the multiplicity and plurality of identity.

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[6] 'Homosexual sub-culture' refers to representation of gay life-styles through the gay media and associated campaign groups.

[7] Although the word 'deviant' (as it is used here) either as a noun or adjective, simply suggests a person or behaviour that strays from what is considered to be the norm, it has become a pejorative word with connotations of subversion, perversion or corruption.

According to Ihab Hassan (1993) and Jacques Derrida (1970) postmodernism is not concerned with boundaries but with intertextuality. While the grand narratives have sought to define and delineate, postmodernism is inherently indeterminate, constantly questioning the paradigmatic, at once playful and ironic. In terms of sexual politics it is concerned with multiple desires and plural identities rather than constructed identities. It is this fundamental change that has influenced the representation of sexual dissidents on the stage in the latter part of the twentieth century.

It is not my intention here to illustrate modernist developments in the presentation, style or performance of gay drama or to place gay drama within the critical framework of modernism, but to show how modern concepts of sexuality influenced the presentation of sexual deviancy on stage and to gauge the response of contemporary dramatists to postmodern views of sexual identity.

My own interests in contemporary gay drama are concerned with two areas of research. Firstly to examine the way in which gay critics have attempted to interpret twentieth century drama in terms of its contribution to the modern crusade. There are now several seminal commentaries on the representation and presentation of gay characters on stage, notably *We Can Always Call Them Bulgarians* (1987) by Kaier Curtin, *Not In Front Of The Audience* (1992) by Nicholas de Jongh, *Acting Gay* (1992) by John M. Clum and most recently *Out on Stage* (1999) by Alan Sinfield. Such texts have served to outline the portrayal of gay men through times of marginalisation and censorship, to more recent representations characterised by their candid and challenging nature. These critics have viewed gay drama in terms of its assistance in the sexual/political construction of the homosexual identity. I contend that there is perhaps some kind of underlying 'ideal' blueprint implied in their texts against which each play

is measured and often found wanting. Such a blueprint is drawn to reflect a 'political correctness' which has become an inherent part of 'gay sensibility'. These plays are all too often assessed for their effectiveness in promoting 'acceptable' gay identities, rather than as individual texts exploring the wider issues of sexual desire.

Secondly, I intend to examine current constructions of gay identity in contemporary drama, and suggest ways in which particular plays conform to or challenge existing theory. What images of male sexual dissidents are being presented to the public and why?

To illustrate what I consider to be a dramatic change in this representation, I have divided this thesis into two distinct parts: the first part examining particular plays which seek to confirm the homosexual/heterosexual dichotomy and the second part relating to more recent plays, which effectively undermine that same dichotomy. To establish a critical position, the first chapter considers aspects of modern and postmodern theory which inform this study as a whole.

What is important here is that this thesis is not attempting to review the impact of every gay playwright of the twentieth century. Consequently there are specific omissions that require some explanation. For example, I have not referred to the celebrated works of Joe Orton in any detail because, although he was an openly gay playwright, his plays contain no exclusively homosexual characters. It may be argued that many of Orton's characters are attracted to other characters regardless of their gender or family relationship. Don S. Lawson (2002) suggests that Orton should therefore be rightly seen 'as an important precursor by the contemporary queer movement.' While this is an interesting proposition, the purpose of Orton's plays was not simply to represent sexual dissidents on stage but in a much wider sense was to undermine and threaten social

orthodoxy and the controls of a conformist society. There are similarities between Orton's opportunistic bisexual character Sloane in *Entertaining Mr Sloane* (1964) and some of Mark Ravenhill's sexually ambiguous characters, but I would argue that while Ravenhill is consciously threatening sexual stereotypes in his work, Orton's anarchic defiance is of authority and the establishment, and as such has a much broader critical platform. As Simon Shepherd suggests, when referring to Orton's work in *Because We're Queers* (1989): 'there's no sense of that other, equally relevant author-figure, the campaigning, law-reforming homosexual, aiming to use his writing to tell the truth about the homosexual "condition"'. It is because Orton has deliberately rejected the portrayal of homosexual desire as a central theme to his work that I have chosen to exclude an in-depth consideration of his work in this study.

Similarly, this thesis does not dwell on the work of gay writers whose plays merely touch on the theme of homosexuality as part of a wider critique of modern living. This is especially true of playwrights such as Edward Albee and William Inge. Criticism of the works of these American writers often focuses on their attempts to undermine the concepts of 'the American dream', American manliness and the American family. When writing about Edward Albee's *Tiny Alice* (1964), Philip Roth (1975) attributed the play's 'tediousness', 'pretentiousness', 'its galling sophistication' and 'its gratuitous and easy symbolising' to the playwright's 'unwillingness or inability to put its real subject at the center of the action.' At the time, there was a general feeling that many American gay playwrights were carefully avoiding overt representations of homosexuality on stage. The *New York Times* critic Stanley Kauffmann (1976) suggested that it was not surprising that gay playwrights presented a 'badly distorted picture of American women, marriage and society in general' since it was that very society 'that constricts and,

theatrically, discriminates against them.' It is because such plays do not centre on the theme of homosexuality that they are not considered in the body of this thesis. They are however, extensively covered in texts which set out to commentate on the history of twentieth century gay theatre, such as Alan Sinfield's *Out On Stage*.

Before considering some of the British plays dealing with the overt representation of homosexuality that appeared on stage in the first half of the twentieth century, it is appropriate to mention a group of earlier American plays written by Mae West.

The purpose of including these plays here is to exemplify what representations of homosexuality were possible when playwrights in the first half of the twentieth century were prepared to take risks. It is difficult to imagine that such overt reference to same-sex relationships could have appeared in a play performed on American stages in 1927. *The Drag* was one of several plays written by the Vaudeville star Mae West, two of them (*The Drag* and *The Pleasure Man)* dealing explicitly with the theme of homosexuality. These key playscripts were published for the first time in 1997 (having been part of the Manuscript Collection of the Library of Congress) and were edited Lillian Schlissel.[8]

Mae West had become a cult figure whose audience enjoyed the raucous humour of her Revues and understood the sexual innuendoes and the camp masquerades which were an integral part of her shows. While most of her plays were performed in front of packed houses, she did not escape censorship and was prosecuted on several occasions. On one occasion she was jailed for ten days. Her successful defence of *The Drag* in which she never personally appeared cost her $60,000. The police would arrest the

[8] Mae West's plays were not available in published form until 1997 when they were published by Nick Hern Books Ltd. They appear in the bibliography under the name of the editor Lillian Schlissel.

whole cast in the middle of a show, jostle them into the back of black Marias and lock them up. Mae West provided the bail money for up to fifty people to gain their release. These events brought her notoriety, but after her Broadway plays ended in 1931 with *The Constant Sinner,* she moved to Hollywood.

The Drag contains two contrasting representations of gay men. At its heart is the story of David Campbell's love for Rolly Kingsbury, which is told without ridicule or embarrassment: 'We loved each other. I worshipped him. We lived together. We were happy...in our own way. No normally married couple were happier than we were' (p.102). Rolly has since married Claire, the daughter of the doctor who has been making a study of 'inversion'. In contrast to this, the sub-plot reveals the lives of a group of exotic party-goers who often appear in drag. They are the ideal vehicles for the camp humour that West clearly enjoyed. They would not be out of place in Andrew Holleran's classic *Dancer From the Dance* (1978). When Rolly's friends visit him, some of them are dressed in drag. The dialogue is both camp and timeless:

> *Clem*: Now, I don't give a goddamn who knows it. Of course, I don't go flouncing my hips up and down Broadway picking up trade or with a sign on my back advertising it. (Laughs.) But of course. I don't pass anything up either, dearie. I'm out to have a good time as well as the next. (p.121)

What is striking about these characters is that they appear to be quite settled in their sexuality and have learnt how to survive in a hostile society. Yet Rolly's predicament reflects the power of the dominant ideology of the time; that 'inversion' was an illness which needed to be treated.

> *Doctor*: I've got a poor devil in there right now, whom you'd call a criminal Perhaps—a poor degenerate—an outcast, and yet in his own mind, he's committing no wrong—he's doing nothing save what he should do—his very lack of normality is normality to him. I'd call him—a trick of fate— a misfit of nature— (p.107).

The play even deals with a central issue that is still a subject for argument seventy years later: that of nature versus nurture.

> *Judge*: A man is what he makes himself—
> *Doctor*: And before that, a man is what he is born to be. Nature seems to have made no distinction in bestowing this misfortune upon the human race. We find this abnormality among persons of every state of society. (p.107)

If some of the views expressed about homosexuality might appear to be too antiquated for a contemporary audience to swallow, *The Drag* bravely reflects some of the attitudes of the time. Yet surprisingly, the play has been vilified by Kaier Curtin, Nicholas de Jongh and John M. Clum alike. In *We Can Always Call Them Bulgarians*, Curtin suggests that West 'cashed in' on the exploitation of gays and that this served to 're-inforce the stereotyping of gay men as vulgar, sex-obsessed effeminates who wear women's clothing at drag parties' (p.137). Clum points out in *Acting Gay* that neither *The Captive* (a play about lesbians) nor *The Drag* gave 'those sensually inclined men and women very much on which to base a positive self-image' (p.90). Yet he begrudgingly admits that:

> it was an image, and so, though the plays reinforced attitudes about the horror of unnatural sexuality, they did provide gay people with at least a grudging acknowledgement of their existence.

What is absent from the criticism of Curtin *et al* is any understanding of how a contemporary gay audience would have reacted to *The Drag* in 1927. Richard Helfer (1996) in 'The Drag: Mae West and the Gay World' argues that West's sympathy for gay characters was astounding for the times. To present gay characters, however bizarre

or stereotypical they may seem today, as relatively secure within their gay identity is an achievement that was not to be repeated until the 1960s. It is relatively easy to compare *The Drag* with more recent gay drama and find it wanting. It is quite another to assess fairly the historical contribution such a play has made to raising public awareness of a gay presence in society.

Not only does Mae West's *The Drag* pre-date most of the British plays to which I shall be referring, but it also illustrates how representations of homosexuality were influenced by the modern desire to categorise and explain deviancy. In the opening scene, Dr Richmond who represented the 'dignified' and irreproachable face of scientific enquiry had been reading a book about Karl Heinrich Ulrichs [6] who coined the term 'invert' to describe homosexuals. On being questioned about its content he remarked: 'There are many ills that science has not yet discovered Barbara, to say nothing of being able to cure them' (p.97), confirming that homosexuality was a disease that had to be controlled. Thus, by the medicalization of sexual deviancy, it became possible to justify monitoring its taboo status through surveillance and through the psychoanalyst's confessional couch.

Whether for notoriety or for more altruistic reasons, Mae West was prepared to risk the wrath of the New York censors and the police department in her determination to represent homosexuality on stage. Although these scripts have only recently been rescued from obscurity, they are significant because they present a directness about the representation of homosexuality that set a standard for other playwrights in Great Britain and America to follow.

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[6] Karl Heinrich Ulrichs (1825-95) published a number of pamphlets suggesting that this 'inversion' was not only in the choice of sexual object but also an 'inversion' of one's broader gender characteristics as well. See Neil Miller, *Out of the Past* (New York, Vintage, 1995) p.14.

I am not suggesting here that the early representation of homosexuality on stage was exclusive to Great Britain and America. Laurence Senelick in *Lovesick: Modernist Plays of Same-Sex Love, 1894-1925* identifies and assesses four plays from Europe in addition to one from Britain and another from the US. These plays have been salvaged from obscurity to demonstrate the attempts of particular playwrights to evade censorship and the opprobrium of contemporary critics. Senelick traces the rise and fall of the homosexual as the unhappy protagonist frequently 'associated with blackmail' (p.3), often identified as the victim whose troubled life would end in suicide. Senelick foregrounds the period considered in this thesis. He admits that each of the plays he has selected 'offers an archetype that will recur throughout twentieth century drama' (p.12). With the exception of *The Blackmailers* by John Gray and Marc-André Raffalovich, which made a single matinee appearance at the Prince of Wales Theatre on 7th June 1894, none of the plays in Senelick's collection were performed on the West End stage or in New York. For this reason I have chosen not to consider them in any detail in this thesis.

ACT 1

Scene Three

Re -Assessing the Pathfinders.

In many ways theatre in the English speaking world was slow to respond to the radical developments in style and structure common to other literary forms during the Modernist period. British drama remained relatively unaffected by European trends towards innovation exemplified by the works of Ibsen, Strindberg and Pirandello. Some critics, including Peter Faulkner in *Modernism* (1977, p.21), suggest that we have to look towards the works of Samuel Beckett, Eugene Ionesco and Harold Pinter in the 1950s and 1960s to find evidence of true Modernism. Essentially, Modernism, as an artistic and cultural movement, developed in response to the complexities of life in the twentieth century, not only through changes in style and presentation, but also through the very content and subject matter considered. Modernist writing is predominantly cosmopolitan, and often expresses a sense of urban cultural dislocation, along with an awareness of new anthropological and psychological theories. The relative comfort and safety of the Victorian era was destroyed forever by the mass extermination of a generation of young men on the battlefields of Europe in the First World War. The consciousness of the modern artist, affected by such a cataclysm, focused strongly on the psychological implications for mankind. The project of the Enlightenment, to define and explain the environment and to subjugate it to the service of mankind, had ended in disaster. Modernist writers abandoned this project and began to consider the fragmentary nature of the contemporary world, often exploring the powerless isolation of individual consciousness in the face of the devastation of history.

J.R.Ackerley's *The Prisoners of War* is one of the first plays to examine the complexity of the close relationships experienced by many servicemen during the First

World War and, as such, must have had a profound effect on surviving soldiers who were able to see it performed at the Three Hundred Club and later at the Playhouse in 1925. For the first time in history literally millions of men, both young and middle aged, were thrown together in surroundings which were both unfamiliar and life threatening for the duration of the war. Ackerley's attempt to represent some of those relationships within this play is both autobiographical and universal. This may be considered modernist in its content because it not only confronts the reality of modern warfare and its implications for the individual, but it is also one of the first plays to openly explore the social and psychological construction of homosexuality. Ackerley has established a stage in order to expose fallacies of conventional morality. As in other fields of art, the theories of Freud were influential here.

It is important to note that although Freud stressed the pathological aspects of homosexuality, he did not consider it to be an illness. This is confirmed in Freud's much quoted letter to a mother concerned about her son's sexuality:

> Homosexuality is assuredly no advantage, but it is nothing to be ashamed of, no vice, no degradation, it cannot be classified as an illness; we consider it to be a variation of the sexual function produced by a certain arrest of sexual development. (1935)

However, by using terms like 'Oedipal complex', 'penis envy' and 'anal fixation' in his earlier work, it was assumed by many followers of psychoanalysis that homosexuality was indeed an illness that needed to be cured. Freud refused to treat homosexuals unless they were also neurotics, thus perhaps fostering the idea that the two were intricately linked.

In addition to presenting the homosexual as a distinct entity in the character of Captain Conrad, *The Prisoners of War* also examines the basic drives and instincts that motivate him. Ackerley frees himself from the traditional constraints of heterosexual

conformity by daring to illustrate the depth and strength of man's feelings for his fellow comrades. Such emotional feelings had, hitherto, largely been unrepresented on the British stage. In common with other modernist writers of prose and poetry, it is the play as an entity, as an artefact, which concerns Ackerley rather than any possible audience it might be allowed to attract. Indeed, at the time of writing, Ackerley can have had very little idea of it reaching any kind of audience under the constraints of censorship which then prevailed. Although the representation of homosexual characters was not forbidden by statute, the Lord Chamberlain still had the freedom to decide whether it was appropriate 'for the preservation of good manners, decorum or of the public peace...to forbid the acting of any play' (Section 12: Theatres Act of 1843).

The play itself is about unrequited love set in the confines of a Swiss hotel occupied by British and allied internees. They have been confined there for the duration of the war after being captured by the Germans. Ackerley sets out to show how confinement and close proximity to others can lead to heightened and distorted emotions. Since this is such a significant play, I intend to review the plot in some detail. Captain Conrad's desire for the company of the younger Grayle goes beyond the boundaries of acceptable homosocial behaviour shared by the other young officers. Conrad is guilt ridden by the dark thoughts and desires which plague him. Below the surface of Ackerley's play jealousy, depression, suicide, homosexuality and mental instability are woven together, constructed and constrained within the grand narrative of psychoanalysis. For just as Conrad is jealous of Grayle's friendship with a fellow officer called Rickman, who is described in the opening stage directions as 'rather like a wild horse' (p.93), Rickman himself has an admirer in Tetford who eventually proposes that they both return to Canada after the war to set up in business together. When Grayle shared Conrad's room he seemed to enjoy the company. Conrad's longing for Grayle is

thinly disguised: 'It's like this when I want you most' (p.102). Conrad is desperate but Grayle finds his morose advances too claustrophobic. Adelby, another officer (who later takes his own life) senses the cause of Conrad's desperation: 'You get everything out of proportion, so that all your values are false, and your weights displaced' (p.106). The language used in reference to this stormy relationship might describe any lovers' tiff: 'Haven't you made it up yet' asks Tetford, 'you'll go on missing him. You're made that way' (p.109).

Grayle exercises his power over Conrad: 'I can do what I like with him' (p.113), yet his power is at once impotent and destructive since it contributes to Conrad's eventual breakdown. It is no secret that Conrad dislikes women. He answers ambiguously when Mme. Louis inquires: 'I have heard that you do not like the fairer sex' (p.119). Conrad replies: 'The fairer sex? Which sex is that?' When Mme. Louis makes her own advances towards Grayle, Conrad is compared to the Monk who stands between the Eiger and the Jungfrau. Mme. Loius explains how the Monk protects the young woman (Jung frau) from the evil intentions of the ogre (Eiger) by standing between them.

The atmosphere of bleak hopelessness which enshrouds the play reflects the constraints of a wider society whose intolerance forced gay men to sublimate and control their desires. The house plant clutched by Conrad in the final scene is a substitute for his desired object, since he knows he cannot closet and protect Grayle from the vagaries of an 'evil' heterosexual society (illustrated by Rickman's callous exploitation of Grayle at cards). The azalea-bush is Conrad's only comfort as he retires to sit on the verandah: '...a creature obscure, apart' (p.135).

Women are generally marginalised in the play. Mme. Louis is portrayed as a husband murderer and social climber; Mrs. Prendergast as the ineffectual yet sympathetic confidante who can never really grasp what is happening to Conrad.

There can be little doubt that *The Prisoners of War* is an autobiographical

representation of the playwright's war experiences as Ackerley himself confirmed in his memoirs entitled *My Father and Myself* (1968). Yet, if it is a reflection of his confused homosexual desires, it is equally a reflection of the stereotypical attitudes of the time. Homosexuality is portrayed as effeminate; Conrad is described as 'nervy and highly strung....like a woman in some ways' (p.132). What is evident is that Ackerley himself was, on the surface, none of these things, being both an active sportsman and of a masculine appearance. Social pressure and the underlying narrative of homosexuality/deviancy have constrained Ackerley's perception of himself. Ironically, Ackerley asserted that Conrad was the only homosexual character in the play, but as Nicholas de Jongh points out in *Not in Front of the Audience*, the relationship of Tetford and Rickman could hardly be construed as anything other than a homosexual relationship. De Jongh contrasts the two relationships effectively: 'when Conrad does something just as suspect, stroking Grayle's curls, the second Lieutenant warns him: "Look out, someone might come in!"' (p.103). By comparison Tetford and Rickman are open, honest and unashamed. At one point, they are holding hands 'without embarrassment' (p.129). Ackerley's denial of the homosexual nature of the Rickman/Tetford relationship betrays an inner conflict in the playwright which deserves closer examination.

It seems likely that the Lord Chamberlain permitted the play a licence because ostensibly it portrays homosexuality in a negative light through the central character. Ackerley's intention with the Rickman/Tetford relationship was to appeal to ex-servicemen who had experienced similar close bonds with comrades during war time. In this way, the play threatens the borderline between acceptable homosocial and unacceptable homosexual behaviour. The semiotics of physical touch present in both relationships serves to emphasise the fine line drawn between close comradeship and sexual desire. When Rickman touches Tetford on the head we are reminded of an earlier scene between Conrad and Grayle (p.128). Conrad absents himself from the 'chummy'

friendships of the other characters because he believes his true feelings will betray him in such circumstances. He is jealous of the younger men whose friendship seems to transcend his own, albeit at a superficial level. It is a friendship from which he must forever be excluded, condemned to sit on the sidelines.

The ambiguous nature of the Rickman/Tetford relationship may well have been lost on the Lord Chancellor who may not have understood the significance of their plan to live happily together on a remote ranch in Canada after the war was over. In spite of Ackerley's determination to play down the nature of their friendship, in later years, as Nicholas de Jongh points out, the unmistakable evidence is there for all to see in the text and it would not have been lost on the original audience.

Ackerley's 'betrayal' of this relationship is probably due to a combination of psychological and social pressures. The evidence from his autobiography suggests that he was unable to initiate the kind of ideal relationship portrayed by Tetford and Rickman in his own life, leading him to believe that such a relationship was impossible amongst the 'queens, prostitutes, pimps, pickpockets, pansies, debauched servicemen and detectives' he refers to in his autobiography (p.216). Whether sexually consummated or not, the Rickman/Tetford relationship represents the ideal coupling that Ackerley spent most of his life pursuing.

Secondly, a public affirmation of the homosexual nature of the Rickman/Tetford relationship would have led to Ackerley's own ostracism at a time when such relationships were both illegal and socially unacceptable. To the wider world, Ackerley may have considered such a denial expedient especially when he knew that the true significance of their friendship was self-evident.

Ackerley's denial has been viewed as a betrayal by some contemporary gay critics, yet it must be recognised that the opportunity to discuss homosexual relationships in any depth was severely limited by the times and the act itself was still totally illegal.

Far from 'merely reflecting' society's contemptuous and appalled view of

homosexuality' as Nicholas de Jongh would have it (p.27), Ackerley had written an innovative play which, for the first time, considered the complex nature of homosexual desires within a society which had only recently sought to label and categorise men who exhibited such desires. The positive response of the majority of critics to the early performances of *The Prisoners of War* in London is described by Kaier Curtin in *We Can Always Call Them Bulgarians.* The London *Times*'s critic suggested that it would be 'impossible to imagine that the play could have been better produced, or better acted' ('The Playhouse', London *Times*, 1st September 1935). In his introduction to the *The Prisoners of War* in *Gay Plays: Volume Three* (1990), Peter Burton quotes an anonymous critic from *The Times*:

> The facts are dark, it may be, but the treatment is full of light – the light of which no audience can fail to be continuously aware when a man, who is deeply and sincerely moved by his subject, writes with a superb naturalness and a real control of the stage. (p.90)

Nicholas de Jongh records a more dismissive response to the 1935 Broadway premiere which, while mostly anti-homosexual, was also dismissive for other reasons. The *New York Times* reviewer noted:

> A decade ago, before the Depression turned values upside down again, the bare mention of those neuroses and the suggestion of homosexual attachments were sufficient for an evening of speculation in the theatre. *Prisoners of War* falls into that category....such themes need deeper clarification today. They are no longer fascinating in themselves. (Atkinson, cited in de Jongh, 1992. p.212-213)

Despite such hostile criticism, Ackerley succeeded not only in presenting the issue of homosexuality on stage, but also in portraying a homosexual relationship in Rickman and Tetford that survived the denouement of the play intact. In effect, Ackerley may have succeeded in 'hoodwinking' the Lord Chamberlain, whose intentions were to prevent such positive images from being seen by the public. It is also possible that he permitted it because it was not considered to be too 'overt'.

Public perception of gay identity in the earlier half of the twentieth century was very much influenced by the shadow of Oscar Wilde. While openly tolerated as an effeminate dandy, he was later socially ostracised as a convicted sodomite. The significance of Wilde's eccentric, witty, flamboyant personality for the social construction of gay identity has been detailed elsewhere (notably by Jonathan Dollimore in *Sexual Dissidence*), but there is little doubt that many heterosexuals considered such qualities to be synonymous with homosexuality.

It is not surprising, then, that the Lord Chamberlain refused to allow public performances of the Leslie and Sewell Stokes's biographical play *Oscar Wilde*, limiting it to a short run at the private Gate Theatre Club, where the actor Robert Morley played the lead, before it moved to a highly successful run on Broadway in 1936.

In a contemporary context many would argue that the clichéd link between aestheticism and homosexuality has proved retrogressive to the development of a positive gay identity. What is unquestionable however is that Wilde provided a semiotic topography for playwrights to utilise that would, in performance, be instantly recognisable to any audience thus making any direct reference unnecessary. While many of these signs pre-date Wilde, it was he who gave them indelible significance to the twentieth century stage. As Colin Spencer (1995) acknowledges in *Homosexuality: A History*: 'Wilde has extra significance for this history because he stamped an indelible character upon homosexuality itself' (p.288).

In retrospect, such stereotypes reflect an inherent desire to classify and diagnose the homosexual presence in order to establish a clear 'distance' between homosexuality and heterosexuality. Although perpetuating stereotypical images, by creating such characters, playwrights were nevertheless able to deal with issues which would not otherwise have been aired on stage. One such play is *The Green Bay Tree* (1984) by Mordaunt Shairp which was first presented at St. Martin's Theatre, London on 25th January 1933. The central character Mr Dulcimer is created entirely within the Wildean

tradition. He is described as a 'complete dilettante' who has a sharp wit and a penchant for flower arranging. His meticulously decorated yet 'artificial' flat reflects 'his sensitiveness and delicate appreciation of beauty' (p.3). Having adopted the full range of signifiers Shairp leaves no doubt in the mind of the audience when his stage directions refer to him as 'A man who could fascinate, repel and alarm'; a phrase which reflects the morbid curiosity held by many for plays dealing with issues of homosexuality. This wealthy aesthete is mocked by Trump (his butler) who suggests that he might like to wear an apron to protect his clothes while arranging the flowers. We can almost hear the inevitable sniggering this would have engendered from a largely straight audience. Such contrivances must surely have served to denigrate Dulcimer in the eyes of the audience. It then comes as no surprise to the audience to learn that the third occupant of the flat is Julian, a young man in his early twenties who has been adopted by Dulcimer at the age of eleven when he fell in love with his heavenly treble voice. This leaves the audience to infer that Dulcimer is not only a homosexual, but that he is also guilty of paedophilia, although this is never confirmed in the text. The play centres on the power wielded by Dulcimer over his protégé in the face of opposition from Leonora (Julian's new-found girlfriend) and Mr Owen (Julian's real father). Dulcimer has fashioned Julian in his own narcissistic image.

Although *The Green Bay Tree* refuses to confront the issue of homosexuality overtly, for which it was berated by some contemporary critics: 'one may wish that Mr Shairp had been more forthright in clarifying his issues and had not hesitated to call a spade a spade' (Wolcott Gibbs, *New Yorker*, 28 Oct 1933, p.26), it is likely that, as in *Prisoners of War*, any direct reference would have resulted in censorship on both sides of the Atlantic. There can be little doubt that any play with even implied homosexual undertones was sufficient to raise questions about the playwright's own sexual identity. John M. Clum points out that Shairp, apparently conscious of such implications, was quick to assert that he had 'first shared the idea of the play with his wife' (p.92), thus

allaying any possible rumours.

The development of 'otherness', the separateness of homosexuality, is taken to extremes by Shairp. In *Not in Front of the Audience* Nicholas de Jongh describes it as 'the most dishonest and morally disreputable play about homosexuality to reach the stages of London and Broadway between the wars', with the added caveat, 'It was the most commercially successful and critically applauded' (p.35).

What kind of stereotype is being confirmed here? There is no doubt that Dulcimer's fussy, over-obsessive regard for flower arranging and interior decoration conforms to Freud's analysis of neurosis[1]. Both central male characters have more than a passing interest in modern art. This is confirmed through both the stage directions and the dialogue. In his notes on set design Shairp suggests that 'over the mantelpiece should be a decorative painting by a modern artist' (p.3). When Julian fails to join Dulcimer in visiting an exhibition he says: 'No I missed you. You're always so instinctively right about modern art' (p.6), thus suggesting that aestheticism, an appreciation of the avant-garde and homosexuality are somehow indelibly linked. Underlying prejudice is evident everywhere. The association of wealth, decadent life-style and a blatant disregard for other characters in the play is reminiscent of anti-Semitic writing. Dulcimer's total hedonism never allows him to consider the needs or desires of other characters, the satisfaction of his own desires being the dominant force throughout the play. The world that he has created for himself is portrayed as false, even two dimensional, since women are, wherever possible, excluded. Dulcimer's revulsion for the seasons of nature is a metaphor for all things natural: 'There is always something terrifying in the remorselessness of nature, something shattering in all this re-assertion of the principles of life' (p.26), implying a deep rooted aversion to sexual reproduction in words which might have been uttered by Wilde himself.

[1] Sigmund Freud, 'Psychoanalytic notes on an Autobiographical Account of a case of Paranoia' (Dementia Paranoides) (1911). Freud's linking of neurosis and homosexuality continued to influence medical opinion on homosexuality into the 1950s.

Such a profile of domination casts Dulcimer as the Mephistopheles to Julian's Faust, taking his body and soul in exchange for a decadent life of luxury. Yet, according to Kaier Curtin, *The Green Bay Tree* attracted a large gay audience to its run at the Cort theatre in New York:

> That the gay underground was out in force for at least one performance seemed evident to veteran and inveterate theatre-goer, Reginald Cockburn. He recalled: looking back and up at the balcony when a companion called my attention to it. 'My God, would you look at them!' he whispered laughing. 'The gay bars must be empty tonight.' (p.188)

These comments were recorded by Curtin during a telephone interview with Reginald Cockburn in New York (10th October 1978).

How would gay spectators have responded to it at the time? It is likely that any play touching on homosexuality would have been welcome relief to such an audience. It is possible that they found humour in the parody of homosexuality represented by Dulcimer, either because of its grotesque nature or because it was created within the Wildean tradition. What is certain is that, while a heterosexual audience would have found Dulcimer's posthumous triumph (when Julian rejects the real prospect of a relationship with his girlfriend in favour of inheriting Dulcimer's money) disturbing, the gay audience would have found some comfort in the suggestion that such alternative values could supplant dominant heterosexist ideology.

Any audience, regardless of sexuality, is unlikely to have felt sympathy for Dulcimer. Indeed, it is difficult to view any of these characters as worthy of such a response. Julian, though apparently capable of feeling some kind of emotion for Leanora, allows his hedonistic desires to predominate. While Leanora's 'clean-cut, charming, strong-willed' even 'masculine' (p.94) character is determined to change Julian, her dislike for Dulcimer borders on the pathological. Owen, Julian's estranged father, whose previous passion for excessive drinking is exceeded only by his current

passion for bible-punching, proves to be an ineffectual influence who can offer his son little to compensate for having 'sold' him to Dulcimer at the age of eleven.

What is self-evident is that Shairp's Dulcimer is so dependent on Freud's construction of the 'homosexual' type that the character might easily have been one of Freud's own patients. Dulcimer has selected Julian as his narcissistic object choice and the totality of this choice is confirmed by Leanora: 'This man has got hold of Julian body and soul' (p.96). He has engulfed Julian in a world of pleasure and is determined to repel any desire Julian may have to enter into the 'real' worlds of work or marriage, thus conveniently complying with the pleasure/reality binary principle. While Dulcimer's misogyny is confirmed by Trump in the final scene: 'Mr Dulcimer always said, sir, that a man could never settle down until he'd got women out of his life'. This inability to relate to women is stereotypically attributed to an unnaturally close relationship with his mother:

> *Julian*: You never knew your father, did you?
> *Dulcimer*: No.
> *Julian*: But you adored your mother.
> *Dulcimer*: She was the only woman who ever meant anything to me. (p.56)

If Shairp's central character is so redolent of a Freudian case study it is because medical research into sexual deviance was so influential at the time. Yet Dulcimer also owes a lot to the modernist representation of dandyism. Peter Nicholls (1995)[2] charts the rise of the dandy in the second half of the nineteenth century when political power was shifting from the aristocracy to the bourgeoisie. Dissatisfaction with such political struggles which failed to address cultural issues led some artists and writers (notably Baudelaire) to develop their own aesthetic. 'As he (Baudelaire) explains in his account of the dandy, such men became "outsiders" --the French word *déclassé* whose willed estrangement

[2] Nicholls suggests that dandyism represents the last flicker of taste and refinement in the face of the rising tide of democracy 'which spreads everywhere and reduces everything to the same level' (1995, p.11).

exemplifies a new sense of the incompatibility between artistic vocation and social obligation' (1995, p.12-13). Baudelaire even goes so far as to say that 'the future will belong to men of no class' whose sheer genius will separate them from the crowd.

While Dulcimer may lack that genius, he exhibits a sense of isolation, contempt for the mob and rejection of any alliance with others. Like Wilde, he has developed his own aesthetic values which are often at odds with the society in which he must live. It is this materialist aestheticism; this consumption of modern art; this desire to surround himself with beautiful things which typifies Dulcimer, and with these values he successfully indoctrinates Julian. It is a level of decadence in which materialism dominates and the only emotional need in evidence is a Sadean desire to inflict pain and discomfort on those around him.

This inter-dependence of dandyism, decadence and homosexuality represents an attempt on the part of the playwright to appeal to the basest prejudices of a straight audience. The intention is clearly that we should find Dulcimer repugnant, if only because homosexuality is identified as an integral part of social decadence.

The Green Bay Tree, through its stereotypical Freudian iconography (Dulcimer's childhood confirms the 'weak father' theory and the influence of a domineering mother) and its personification of decadence can only suggest to a heterosexual audience that homosexuals pose a threat to those with whom they come into contact and to the values of a civilised society. It panders to the fear that middle class homosexuals were somehow determined to corrupt working class youth. As a popular drama, it served to promote the 'otherness' of homosexuality, suggesting that such people could be easily identified by their distinct mannerisms, affectations and attitudes to life. Unlike *Prisoners of War*, which to a certain extent avoids stereotyping, (especially in the Tetford/Rickman relationship), *The Green Bay Tree* condemns homosexuality and seeks to confirm its status as a form of neurotic deviancy.

There is no doubt that dramatists were greatly influenced by the proliferation of

medical research into sexual deviancy during the first half of the twentieth century. A range of discourses emerged both during and after the Victorian era, which were as Foucault suggests 'carefully tailored to the requirements of power' (1976, p.99). Many sought to define and explain 'the abominable vice' to aid the identification of guilty parties in court. The stereotypical traits that we recognise even today were taking form during this period. Colin Spencer in *Homosexuality: A History* points out that 'It was established by medical practitioners that a male homosexual was effeminate: They feel "the need for passive submission, they become easily enraptured over novels and dress"' (p.319). He produces a wealth of evidence to support his argument. For example, R. von Krafft-Ebing (*Psychopathia Sexualis*) who 'thought that homosexuality more often than not went with transvestism, and that they were both signs of degeneracy' (p.292). Such traits were thought to be hereditary and much effort was made to trace a history of neurosis, psychosis and degenerative signs in the patients' ancestry.

In seeking to establish psychoanalysis as a science, Freud was not interested in moral judgements or in the idea of 'curing' people who were functioning healthily whether such lifestyles were socially acceptable or not. The idea that all homosexuals were essentially 'ill' was largely a product of the US where psychoanalysis became a method for cure. Jonathan Dollimore (1991) refers to an essay by Sandor Feldman which clearly illustrates this:

> As a practitioner, I have leaned that, essentially homosexuals want to mate with the opposite sex. In therapy my intention is to discover what kind of fear or distress diverted the patient from the straight line and made a devious detour necessary. (p.171)

Here the moral position of the analyst becomes dominant. Feldman is no longer seeking to help analysands to negotiate their neuroses with the objective of making them healthier individuals. Feldman makes his position clear:

> The more convinced the analyst is that an underlying natural personal relationship is present, the more likely will the patient come to the same conclusion as the analyst: that man is born for woman and woman is born for man. (p.171)

According to Henry Abelove, Freud 'knew despised, and opposed' this moralistic strain, which has dominated psychoanalytical thinking in America, but he 'never succeeded in overcoming or even mitigating it' (1985, p.62). The dominance of such moral judgements within the American school of psychoanalysis is evident in the final plays to be considered in this chapter.

Obsession and Repression in the U.S.A

This process of weeding out degeneracy through pseudo-scientific practices became an integral part of social conditioning in the early twentieth century. Great importance was given to scientific ideology in countries which began to pursue a policy of managing defective human stock. J.A.Barondess (1996, p.1657) refers to an award-winning essay by Willhelm Schallmayer (written in 1903) which suggested that civilised man was threatened by physical degeneration, and advocated a process of social selection which would aid the perfectibility of mankind. The idea that society in general could not be left to its own inclinations was supported by many literary luminaries of the modernist movement. Zygmunt Baumann (1991) recalls H.G.Wells' request for 'a complete organisation for all these human affairs that are of collective importance' (p.24). He also reminds us of the anti-Semitic views held by T.S.Eliot. It is precisely the climate created by such views which made possible the passing of the eugenic sterilization laws in twenty-one states of the U.S.A. between 1907 and 1928. As early as 1893 a Dr Daniel suggested that:

> Rape, sodomy, bestiality, pederasty and habitual masturbation should be made crimes or misdemeanours, punishable by forfeiture of all rights, including that of procreation; in short, by castration, or castration plus other penalties, according to

the gravity of the offence. [3]

Homosexuality was clearly viewed as a sickness which some thought should be punished and others thought should be cured.

If homosexuality was to be controlled, it would first have to be identified and rooted out. This task was taken up with zealous enthusiasm in the United States where homosexuals provided a suitable scapegoat for the Republican Party which had lost five presidential elections in succession. The witch hunts initiated by Senator Joe McCarthy in the early 1950s often linked homosexuality to communism, resulting in many thousands of gay bureaucrats in Washington losing their jobs. Earlier, the Kinsey Report *Sexual Behavior in the Human Male* (1948) had classified the sexual behaviour of male adults on a scale of zero to six, with heterosexuality safely at one end and homosexuality threateningly at the other. The vast majority were recorded as being somewhere between these two extremes having experienced sexual liaisons with both men and women. The American Psychiatric Association had already classified homosexuality as an illness in 1942 and this led to a proliferation of pseudo-scientific vitriol targeting homosexuals.

This obsession with exposing the homosexual enemy within is the subject of Robert Anderson's play *Tea and Sympathy*, first performed at the Barrymore Theatre in New York on 30th September 1953, starring Deborah Kerr. The play, set in the dormitory of a boys' school in New England focuses on a lonely, misunderstood youth who is mistakenly (as it turns out) accused of homosexual tendencies.

The importance of the sexual undercurrent permeating this educational establishment is first alluded to by Lilly, a master's wife who openly admits to flirting with the boys: 'They come here ignorant as all get-out about women, and then spend the next four years exchanging misinformation'..... 'All the boys talk about me. They have

[3] Dr Daniel's paper is unambiguously entitled 'Should Insane Criminals or Sexual Perverts be allowed to Procreate?' (Colin Spencer, *Homosexuality: A History*, 1995, p.293). He links all these groups together since they are all supposedly transmitted by heredity and castration would therefore prevent these tendencies from being passed on.

me in and out of bed with every single master in the school - and some married ones.' She admits to enjoying their admiration from afar: 'I love watching them look and suffer' (p.8).

It is against this rather perverse though acceptable reference to heterosexual desires that the audience is informed of an act of indiscretion in which Harris, a young master, is seen swimming naked at the beach with Tom the central character of the play. Harris is immediately dismissed and Tom becomes the subject of vicious rumours, both amongst the boys and the staff. Harris is already branded as a suspect character. Bill, the house master talks of 'A man like Harris' (p.24) and Tom's father asks: 'what was a guy like that doing in the school?' (p.31). What is interesting at this point is that it is Bill who, at the age of forty, has married a young woman, and is so quick to make accusations against Harris: 'I tried to tell them,' (p.31) he asserts, but it is Bill's fear of his own latent homosexuality, which is the motivation behind these accusations.

What are the signs which single out the homosexual underclass in Anderson's *Tea and Sympathy*? In true interrogatory style, Ralph, one of the students, who shares the dormitory, demands of Tom: 'aren't you interested in women?' (p.21), as Tom tries to stop the group of friends from spying on a woman who is undressing in the window of a building adjacent to the dormitory. Tom's reluctance to take part in this act of voyeurism is viewed as unnatural. Tom is labelled as a sissy and is nicknamed 'Grace' by the other students. Many of the signs are inconclusive on their own, but taken together in a setting where only the 'manly' virtues are rewarded, they can only indicate one thing. Bill suggests that: 'Tom would rather sit around...and listen to music and strum his guitar' (p.25). Tom's sexuality is supposedly revealed in: 'the way he walks, the way he stands sometimes.' He is described as an 'off-horse', a youth who 'isn't a regular fellow' (p.26). This dichotomy between what is regular/irregular corresponds to Eve Sedgwick's homosocial/homosexual distinction (1985). Tom is viewed as an outsider who refuses to take part in team games and whose sporting success at tennis is negated by the 'artistic'

style of his playing. His rejection of the usual rituals of male bonding is seen as an indictment of his sexuality. His ability and enthusiasm for playing the leading female roles in school productions completes the perverse taxonomy.

However, Anderson's purpose in drawing the threads of the homosexual stereotype around the character of Tom is not to confirm those stereotypes but to question them. Tom is portrayed as being innocent of the implications of being seen naked with a 'known' homosexual. There is never a hint that Tom is anything other than the lonely, sensitive boy described by Laura, and it is apparently Laura who rescues him from his fate in the denouement of the play. The character who is presented as the real threat to a heterosexual society is Bill, the teacher at the forefront of the accusations. The signs of his deviancy are more subtly concealed behind the facade of marriage, but are nevertheless increasingly obvious to the audience.

By marrying at the mature age of forty, Bill is conforming to yet another stereotype; the latent homosexual struggling to deny his inner-most feelings. Laura first intimates that something is wrong in the first Act when she refers to the night of their engagement:

> I think you're ashamed of the night you gave it [the cheap engagement ring] to me. That you ever let me see you needed help. That night in Italy, in some vague way you cried out....(p.29).

Thus, in the eyes of the audience, it is Bill who is presented as the serious threat to the moral and sexual development of his students, especially those with whom he spends the summer vacation at his holiday lodge. Although he is never guilty of indecent behaviour with his students, Anderson plays to the assumption of a straight audience that no minor is safe in the company of a homosexual adult. Bill's attempts to sublimate his homosexual feelings through forming a relationship with a woman conforms to contemporary ideas put forward by psychologists. As Nicholas de Jongh points out in

'The Enemy Within', the psychotherapist D.J.West (1960, p.55) suggests that the homosexual 'may sometimes overcome his inhibitions...through an experience with a sympathetic but not too demanding woman' (p.132). Laura fulfils that role for both her husband and the youthful Tom who conveniently reminds her of her first husband. This explanation is offered almost as an apology, as if such a reason was needed to justify the attraction felt by a twenty-one year old woman for an eighteen year old man. Yet, this is in keeping with the whole atmosphere of a play in which sex is alluded to but never consummated, even between married heterosexual couples.

Anderson's play reflects a society ill at ease with any form of sexuality; a society uncomfortable with itself and eager to identify scapegoats to divert attention from its fundamental malaise. Latent homosexuality is blamed for the inadequacy of Bill's marriage to Laura: 'Did it ever occur to you that you persecute in Tom, that boy up there, you persecute in him the thing that you fear in yourself' (p.84), and once this is established, there can be no future for their relationship. In Anderson's play homosexuality/heterosexuality are presented as binary opposites and there cannot be any grey areas between them. Each character has to be either one thing or the other.

Tea and Sympathy remains an enigmatic play for two reasons. Firstly, while it appears to question the notion that homosexuals may and should be distinguished by their effeminate demeanour, it nevertheless confirms that homosexuals, even when they hide behind a facade, should be ostracised. There is no similar sympathetic treatment of Bill after his true nature has been exposed. Secondly, the play appears to threaten the binary relationship between effeminacy/manliness by suggesting that Bill's involvement in homosocial bonding through team sports and outdoor pursuits has been little more than a cover for his own conscious or subconscious same sex attractions.

Tom's conversion in the final scene is never convincing. Having established a clear oppositional relationship between homosexuality and heterosexuality and having ostensibly aligned Tom with the former group, in spite of his initial attraction to Laura,

the audience is asked to accept that by giving herself to him, Laura has re-claimed him for heterosexuality. A straight spectator may then go home relieved that good has triumphed over evil, but a gay spectator might be forgiven for thinking that such an ending is designed to satisfy the censors, rather than offer any insight into adolescent sexuality.

Nicholas de Jongh (1992) condemns *Tea and Sympathy* because it: 'feeds upon the myths engulfing homosexuality, while rejecting those that characterize heterosexual males' (p.62.) Clearly, it is not sympathetic to the cause of gay emancipation. It is certainly a play 'ultimately in harmony with its own nasty times', yet it is a play which undermines certain assumptions about manliness and effeminacy. Accepted signifiers cannot be relied upon to represent known signifieds. It therefore contributes to breaking down socially constructed models of sexuality. Although Tom is apparently 'rescued' by Laura in the final scene there are no simple solutions for him. When Laura tells him, 'one day you'll meet a girl, and it will be right' his response is unequivocal: 'I wish I could. But a person knows -- knows inside' (p.87). Anderson has successfully portrayed the confused sexuality of male adolescence and leaves the audience to consider how this confusion might be resolved. Laura's decision to give herself to Tom, is as much due to the need to satisfy her own sexual desires, because of her failed marriage, as it is to guide him towards the goal of heterosexuality.

Tea and Sympathy sounds an alarm to a straight audience. It warns the public of an ever present threat to accepted social boundaries; that homosexuality cannot be readily identified if such 'strangers' are intent on concealing their inherent flaw of character. The assumption is always there that such people are undesirable, inferior and ultimately dangerous. They, amongst other strangers, stand in the way of the utopian dream of modernity, a dream founded on scientific reasoning. They are, in Derridian terms, the 'undecidables' who disrupt the oppositional logic. Like the zombies, the living dead, they are neither one thing nor the other, and like the under-cover subversive communist, they

strike at the very foundations of civilized society.

For the contemporary gay critic, any merit to be attributed to the three plays mentioned here lies in the fact that they placed homosexuality firmly in the public domain. Their effect was cathartic since they showed that in spite of censorship, it was possible to tackle prohibited issues, thus paving the way for other playwrights to move beyond the boundaries of what was considered acceptable. Through their superficial attempt to explore sexuality they tended to re-assert existing dogma rather than challenge it. In tune with the age, they succeeded in problematising gay identity; confirming the essential 'otherness' of homosexuality. They may be considered an integral part of the wider process of exercising social control through the process of definition and categorisation. They are totally dependent upon the prevailing stereotypical 'scientific' constructions of homosexual identity.

Sexuality is portrayed as the scene of conflict and turmoil where the predominant heterosexist ideology demands conformity, and the ultimate rejection of deviant values. Nowhere is this scene of conflict more self-evident than in the work of Tennessee Williams.

It must be stated from the outset that few of Williams' plays deal openly with homosexuality and for obvious reasons. The playwright himself refused to be drawn into discussions about his own sexuality until the latter years of his life. Williams' contribution to the development of gay drama remains controversial. As John M. Clum points out in his essay 'Something Cloudy, Something Clear: Homophobic Discourse in Tennessee Williams'[4], he was frequently criticised for failing 'to contribute any work of understanding to gay theatre' (p.149). Clum quotes here from Lee Barton's 'Why Do Playwrights Hide Their Homosexuality?' (1972). But what is really meant by this

[4] John M Clum, 'Something Cloudy, Something Clear: Homophobic Discourse in Tennessee Williams' *Displacing Homophobia*, Ed. Ronald R Butters, John M Clum and Michael Moon , Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1989. Clum's article illustrates how much of William's work served expose his homosexuality to his audience while 'anticipating and affirming their homophobic reaction.' (p.165)

damning criticism? That Williams' plays are about sexuality and desire cannot be denied. That they are full of symbolism and personal trauma is also self-evident. Barton's comment reflects a wider dissatisfaction with his plays because they never depict openly gay characters. In Britain during the 1970s, playwrights were clearly expected to reflect the new legitimate status of male homosexuals within their work. If the 1967 Sexual Offences Act in Britain permitted same sex relationships, the legislation in America was less comprehensive. While Illinois decriminalised homosexual acts as early as 1962, by 1999 similar laws had been passed in only 11 states nationwide. Rights enjoyed by gay Americans still depend upon the state in which gays live. Both California and Hawaii have state-wide domestic partnership systems which extend many of the rights enjoyed by heterosexuals to gay couples. Because of the variation in legislation from one state to another, the implications for playwrights remain confused. A play which is acceptable in New York may not be so warmly received in Colorado where the state legislature attempted to nullify existing civil-rights protection for homosexuals (although this change was later overturned by the U.S. Supreme Court). In Britain, when male homosexual acts were decriminalised in 1967, the representation of homosexuality on stage ceased to be grounds in itself for censorship.

In America playwrights were required to support the great crusade towards enlightenment and to hold up the banner for gay rights. Tennessee Williams categorically refused to co-operate with this crusade stating that he didn't 'find it necessary' to 'write a gay play.' His refusal to portray gay characters is clear: 'I'm not about to limit myself to writing about gay people' (Clum, 1992, p165). In retrospect, Williams' work amounts to something more than a mere benchmark in the history of gay drama. Although there is not time here for a detailed exploration of Williams' plays, I intend to illustrate how his work, with its concerns for individual sexuality, its dissatisfaction with social conventions and the constraints of constructed identities, has more in common with postmodern theories of identity than it has with the gay modern crusade.

Barton's criticism of Williams reflects the way in which marginalized groups construct and protect the boundaries of their identities. At the time it seemed important to clarify those boundaries, even when it was enshrined and encoded within the language of dominant heterosexual discourse. Contemporary theorists now argue that this process was in many ways counter-productive, since any gay historiography, of necessity, tended to negate issues of ethnicity, class, nationality, religion or ideology. By accepting the imposed binary opposites, differences within homosexual identity were largely avoided for the sake of the wider struggle. In his article 'Postmodernism and Queer Identities', Scott Bravmann (1996) draws our attention to Marshall Berman's *All That Is Solid Melts into Air* (1988) which states that 'modernity is indifferent to difference' (p.15). Such a statement appears contradictory since the gay rights movement, if it was about anything, was about celebrating 'difference', yet at the same time, by its very process of dichotomous segregation it denied difference within its own constructed identity. Even today the gay press will inscribe public figures as 'gay' for engaging in a homosexual act even if they have spent most of their lives in heterosexual relationships. It is easy to see why it is important to expose hypocrisy but it is difficult to understand why the gay press continues to marginalize bisexuality.

Progress to gay emancipation, in a sense, was made at the expense of individual freedom and difference. The spirit of postmodernism acts against the determinacy of classification; it threatens the boundaries of difference and the very notion of gay history. At the same time it deconstructs the body politic and definitive notions of sexual identity, thus opening the way for an infinite and indeterminate multitude of sexualities.

Tennessee Williams' protagonists reflect that dislocation and dissatisfaction with the

social and sexual roles they are forced to play. Many of them are intent on seeking their own solutions to what appear to be insurmountable problems; many are dysfunctional; some, in effect, 'play' with their own identities. In this way, I would argue that this work has more in common with the direction of contemporary gay drama than with the work of many of the 'evangelical' playwrights of the 1970s and 1980s. Williams recognises the gay/straight dichotomy in several of his plays. For example, through his constant reference to the ideal 'marriage' of Jack Straw and Peter Ochello in *Cat On A Hot Tin Roof* (1956). They were so dependent on each other that: 'When Jack Straw died -- why, old Peter Ochello quit eatin' like a dog does when its master's dead, and died too!' (p.27). Straw and Ochello's relationship is never questioned and it pervades the whole play. Ironically, it is in their bed that Brick cannot bring himself to conduct a sexual relationship with his wife. Big Daddy, heir to their plantation, an ogre from the southern states who might be expected to exhibit intolerance and bigotry, is more accepting than his own son Brick. As John M. Clum (1992) points out: 'For a change, the homosexual's environment is created to present a positive picture' (p.156).

The play concentrates on the character of Brick who is mourning the loss of his close friend Skipper and is turning to alcohol for support. Meanwhile, his sexual relationship with his wife Maggie is foundering. Throughout most of the play Brick is trying to understand his feelings for his friend Skipper which are clearly in conflict with his innate abhorrence of homosexuality. He is intent on convincing those around him that he is not gay: 'You think so too?' he asks Big Daddy, 'You think me an' Skipper did, did, did! --*sodomy*! -- together?' (p.77). Brick's main concern seems to be with what people think about homosexuality: 'Don't you know how people feel about things like that. How disgusted they are by things like that' (p.78). John M. Clum believes that, in this depiction of a gay character, Williams is 'as trapped as his predecessors by the enforced reticence of popular drama and the silences and evasions associated with the closet' (p.135). This criticism once again reflects the frustration felt by many with the fact that Williams

refuses to legitimise homosexuality by depicting positive gay characters. What Williams is successfully depicting here is a character who is uncertain of his own sexuality; someone who is conscious of the strength of his feelings for another man, but who is well aware of social attitudes to those feelings. He is also aware of the social pressures put upon him to patch up his marriage and to produce children. The options open to him are limited. He cannot simply pack his bags and move to Los Angeles, although to risk being flippant, such a move might have satisfied the playwright's many critics.

Whether we believe Williams' assertion that homosexuality was never a central concern of his plays or not, they were considered dangerous enough at the time to be modified or 'toned down' both in the stage productions and when they were produced as films. As Alan Sinfield (1999) points out in *Out on Stage*, Elia Kazan, the first stage director of *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* thought that Brick should 'undergo some "apparent mutation"' and by changing the stage directions at the end implied that Brick 'seemed inclined to renewing sexual relations with Maggie' (p.199). In the 1958 film, Brick's latent homosexuality was played down by the director Richard Brooks, preferring instead to stress his immaturity and 'refusal to grow up and meet the responsibilities of adult life' (p.199). Sinfield suggests that Williams went along with such changes because his desire for success outweighed his artistic reservations.

If Williams cannot be counted amongst the proselytes of gay theatre, it is because he is interested in the more universal themes of personal identity, self-oppression and social constraints. His protagonists are confused because of their circumstances and because of their struggle to understand contradictory and unpredictable sexual desires. There is no panacea to resolve the difficulties they face, no simple traversing of the gay/straight divide. They are individuals in crisis for whom there is no simple solution. As Alan Sinfield (1999) points out in *Out on Stage*, Williams' plays are 'radical in their dwelling upon the faultlines in the sex/gender system' (p.202). They undermine constructions of masculinity and femininity and as such question the very assumptions on

which American society is based. Williams' agenda is not and never will be shared with Larry Kramer, Harvey Fierstein or Tony Kushner.

ACT 1

Scene Four

Gay Sweatshop: Real Progress on the Fringe?

The ability of gay playwrights to have their works performed at major theatre venues has largely been determined by commercial factors. As for any other play, the theatrical impresarios will often make a decision based on what they believe is currently fashionable and appealing to a mainstream audience. As a result the opportunities for gay playwrights to access West End theatres, have at times, been limited. When interviewed initially in 1998 [1], Neil Bartlett suggested that it was extremely difficult, at the time, to stage a gay play because the fashion was then in favour of 'Irish plays'. One organisation that sought to promote gay plays in the 1970s and 1980s whatever the current trend or fad was Gay Sweatshop. In response to a perceived demand for a gay season of plays in 1974 at the Almost Free Theatre in Rupert Street, a group of about ten people banded together and decided on the name Gay Sweatshop because of the hard work that was required to prepare the season. For the first time ever in this country, an organisation had been formed to exclusively promote the work of gay playwrights, directors and actors.

Idealistically, this was to represent a radical turning point in gay drama. I am particularly interested in how the representations of gay characters in Gay Sweatshop productions challenged or confirmed existing concepts of sexuality or whether they served to simply legitimise a gay lifestyle that had hitherto been condemned, or at the very least misrepresented.

[1] Neil Bartlett interviewed by L.J.Bathurst, Lyric, Hammersmith, 18th Aug. 1998. Appendix 1

As Philip Osment pointed out in 'Finding Room on the Agenda for Love' (1989), positive images of gay people on television and in film were non-existent. He cites Otto Preminger's *Advise and Consent* (1962) and *The Loudest Whisper* (1961) based on Lillian Hellman's *The Children's Hour* as being particularly disturbing. Although they presented the idea that homosexual love was possible, in both films one of the leading protagonists commits suicide. As we have already seen, before 1967 it was almost impossible to portray a gay relationship as having any future. Gay characters were permitted only if they served to warn the audience of the moral dangers of homosexuality.

The motivation behind Gay Sweatshop was therefore to present positive images of gay people. Although the intended audience was largely homosexual, many straight theatregoers who frequented other fringe productions also became patrons. If there was occasional hostility from some pressure groups, most audiences, whether gay or straight, were sympathetic to the cause of gay liberation. Osment declares that Gay Sweatshop: 'put the experiences of lesbians and gay men centre-stage' (1989, p.vii). There is no doubting the zeal with which the company set about this task, but the images of gay people presented in their plays needs closer examination.

In addition, Gay Sweatshop set out to challenge the traditional premise that conventional theatre was already supposed to house a number of homosexuals. What was perhaps more important for those who were initially involved in the setting up of the company was that, as actors and directors, they no longer had to acquiesce or collude with the stereotypical images of gay people that were prevalent on stage. They were in a position to choose or write plays that reflected (as they perceived it) the lives of real gay people. For the first time a theatre company helped to reflect and define what it was like to

live as a homosexual in a society that increasingly sought to segregate and distance itself from what it still viewed as deviancy.

What is blatantly obvious from Philip Osment's account of those early months is that agreement on what was appropriate material was hard to achieve. Having learnt to survive within an environment that branded homosexuals as social pariahs, the process of breaking down barriers and re-defining must have been both challenging and liberating for those who took part. Having lived within the social boundaries of the gay/straight binary and having experienced the prejudices of the predominant culture first-hand, they did not initially set out to undermine the binary itself, but to raise the profile of gay people by celebrating their essential 'otherness'.

The experience of being gay actors in rep or in the West End had been a negative one for most of the founding members. Osment details several examples of how prejudice and discrimination operated. If gay people have euphemistically been referred to as 'theatrical types' in the past (suggesting some unspoken and historical link between the two), there is little evidence in these accounts to suggest that the presence of gay people in the theatre had been influential in the portrayal of homosexuality on stage: 'All members of Gay Sweatshop have memories which belie the popular belief that it is easy to be gay in the theatre' (1989, p.xxiii). Those same members were suddenly thrust into a position (as they saw it) of being able to set their own agenda free from the constraints of heterosexual barriers.

However, in retrospect, their unique position both in the theatre and in the wider society was a complex one. Any decision they would make would reflect each individual's negative experiences of what it was like to be gay. As Philip Osment points out in his introduction: 'The internalisation of society's attitude to homosexuality had an insidious

effect upon gay artists leading to self-hatred and self-censorship' (p.x). In effect, society's homophobia had become internalised. Simply being a member of Gay Sweatshop signified an act of confession. After joining Gay Sweatshop, Drew Griffiths, who had been developing his career in straight theatre, was so concerned about the effect of joining on his career, that he sat 'with his back to the cameras' at a press conference because he was 'afraid of being publicly identified as homosexual' (p.xvii). As Jeremy Tambling suggests in *Confession: Sexuality, Sin, the Subject*, this spontaneous 'coming out' may have initially had the power to shock, yet its confessional nature showed 'the marks of a prior power exercised upon it' (p.178). It surrendered oneself to the category of 'homosexual' and made 'certain types of "gayness" representable.' Tambling, like Foucault, recognises that there is an element of 'self-fashioning' which is resisting power and upsetting 'the hegemony of a white middle class community' (p178), but he is also conscious that this space has been created by that dominant community in its efforts to bring dissident groups under its control. If society has sought to define sexual identity in terms of sexual behaviour, then the act of 'coming out' serves to both challenge and confirm concepts of sexual identity.

What issues were confronted through the plays produced by Gay Sweatshop? What kind of audience were they writing for? One of the earliest conflicts within the group, according to Philip Osment, concerned the use of straight actors. Some members were offended when one actor referred to his wife and family in his programme biography. The argument that only gay actors should play gay characters mirrored the view that the existence of so many good black actors should make the necessity of white actors 'blacking up' redundant. Although this may have been a powerful political argument, it did not lead to any outright ban on straight actors appearing in later productions. If the

actors were reluctant to admit their sexuality at times, so were the audience. Osment recalls how many postal advertising campaigns were ineffective because so many were returned, due to the fact that people had given false addresses.

It is not my intention here to examine every play produced by Gay Sweatshop. Such a task would prove impossible since many of the scripts were never published and remain unobtainable. What is important is to examine some of the issues they addressed and to consider the views of sexuality they consciously or subconsciously promoted. Of the three plays performed as part of the successful lunchtime season entitled *Homosexual Acts* (1975) which included *Limitations* by John Roman Baker, *Thinking Straight* by Laurence Collinson and *Ships* by Alan Wakeman, Philip Osment refers only to *Thinking Straight* in his essay 'Finding Room for the Agenda of Love'. He describes a scenario which must have been familiar to many gays working in the theatre, in which a scriptwriter is coming to terms with his own homosexuality, while having to write heterosexual plays. Many of the early plays concentrated on fighting oppression of one form or another. *Mister X* (1975) by Roger Baker and Drew Griffiths sought to expose the complacency of the apolitical gay man who would frequent the gay bars, but who would not support the call for gay liberation on the basis that he didn't personally feel the need for it. The suggestion here is clearly that there is no place for the men who choose to conform to conventional norms during the day while pursuing their homosexual preferences at night. If gay men had hidden their illegal sexuality before 1967 for fear of prosecution or at the very least discrimination, this was no longer considered acceptable. Philip Osment admits that this early play was a piece of 'agit-prop for the gay movement' and was 'reaching out to people who were themselves Mister Xs' (p.xx). In this sense, Gay Sweatshop was not only reflecting the lives of gay people but it was also seeking to

influence their behaviour. Kevin Elyot recalls how powerful the play was when he saw it at the time: 'Here was a clear message that reached out to every member of the audience whether gay or straight.'[2] This was, in fact, the first play produced by the company to go on tour. In the words of Osment: 'the five members of the company were like ambassadors for the Gay Movement' (p.xxiii). What is evident from the early plays is that Gay Liberation was viewed by those 'ambassadors' as part of a much wider social struggle that included feminism and the fight for social equality. Richard Hoggart's *The Uses of Literacy* (1958) and the radical booklet *With Downcast Gays* (Hodges and Hutter, 1974) had profoundly affected both Alan Pope and Drew Griffiths. They were equally conscious of how self-oppression worked in terms of both class and sexuality. The 'self' that was being fashioned here would be free of external oppression and self-oppression. This vision is indeed central to the project of modernity: the dialectic of the spirit, the emancipation of the worker and the classless society.

For such grand narratives to prevail, Fredric Jameson insists that we must locate ourselves historically. For Jameson (1983), this is the Marxist 'master narrative'; the story of 'society's collective struggle to wrest a realm of Freedom from a realm of Necessity' (p.19). There is a need to recuperate what has been lost. It is not surprising then that the founding members of Gay Sweatshop searched for ways of reclaiming their hidden past: 'Drew and Noel decided to examine the past in order to gain a greater understanding of the present' (p.33). A play of three parts entitled *As Time Goes By* links the oppression of homosexuality with wider events. Part One, set in Victorian England, examines the way in which society sought to control the behaviour of middle class men like Oscar Wilde who threatened the integrity of the working class youths whom they

[2] Kevin Elyot interviewed by L.J.Bathurst, Hampstead, 20th Aug. 2001. Appendix 2

took for lovers. This section illustrates how incompatible the 'exploitation' of working class youth was with the ideal of producing men who, in that time of increased militarization, were prepared to sacrifice their lives for their country and the values that it stood for. Homosexuality was thereby equated with both moral and political subversion. At the outbreak of the First World War, even Lord Alfred Douglas, once Oscar Wilde's lover, now married and a Catholic convert, called for England to be 'cleansed of sex-mongers and peddlers of the perverse.'[3]

Part Two showed the backlash against homosexuals in 1930s Berlin, where the greater freedom experienced during the Weimar Republic (which had enabled Magnus Hirschfeld to set up the Institute for Sexual Sciences), was being replaced by the Nazi witch hunt for sexual deviants. There was officially no place for homosexuality in either communist or national socialist ideology. Perhaps what was politically ironic for the audience was the union between Hans, a young, naïve communist party member, and Kurt, a drag queen. According to Osment, many heterosexual socialists found the connection between homosexuality and communism unpalatable and yet the message is clear; socialist politics and Gay Liberation should be linked. Although there were libertarian thinkers such as Havelock Ellis and Edward Carpenter within the early socialist movement, their work, which advocated a more enlightened view of homosexuality, remained on the periphery of a socialist ideology, which focused on inequalities of class, rather than of gender or sexuality. The presence of such libertarian thought within the socialist movement was to be examined later in Noel Greig's *The Dear Love of Comrades*

[3] Quoted from Neil Miller's **Out of the Past** . (1995, p.92) He attributes his references to Alfred Lord Douglas to two sources: Samuel Hynes's **A War Imagined** (New York, Athenium, 1992) and Montgomery Hyde's biography: **Lord Alfred Douglas** (New York, Dodd, Mead and Company, 1985) but is not specific.

(1979) (a representation of the life of the reforming homosexual socialist Edward Carpenter).

The final section, set in a Greenwich Village bar, comprises a number of monologues reflecting the struggle of the black civil rights movement, the women's movement and latterly, the Gay Rights Campaign. A symbolic moment occurs when a drag queen, exposed by an under-cover cop, refuses to be arrested. This clear allusion to Stonewall acts as a clarion call to the audience.

In 1938, Martin Heidegger in 'The Age of the World Picture' ('Die Zeit die Weltbildes') suggested that it is a distinguishing feature of the modern age that man seeks to 'conquer the world as picture.' Heidegger (1977) views this representation as a way in which 'man contends for the position in which he can be that particular being who gives the measure and draws upon the guidelines for everything that is' (pp.115-54). Griffiths and Greig are here defining a historical gay subject largely as social victim. They seek to resurrect homosexuals from heterosexual oppression. In this sense they mirror the purpose of modernity. Through representing these images they seek to gain mastery over and create ownership of an exclusively gay identity. Perhaps, in common with Jurgen Habermas (1976), they believe that they were contributing to an intersubjective 'communicative reason' that would lead to greater justice and democracy. Theirs is not the narrative of psychoanalysis, or the narrative of the dominant white culture (although it is steeped in the language of both), it is a counter-narrative in which the dissidents bestow their own meaning on the subject. Griffiths and Greig are indeed embarking on the modernist project of demystifying the subject, of rendering the invisible visible.

Philip Osment recalls how 'many commentators ridiculed the idea of a political message being mediated through characters such as Kurt or the New York drag queen and

dismissed the play as being ghetto theatre' (p.xxxv). The response from members of the theatrical profession was also restrained. While the message of feminist and black theatre was embraced by the political left as part of the wider class struggle, many considered sexual politics as a mere diversion from more important issues.

As Philip Osment points out (1989, p.xxxviii), the second Act of *As Time Goes By* inspired other gay playwrights to re-examine the place of gays in history. Martin Sherman attributes the origins of *Bent* (1979) to this play: 'I knew immediately that I wanted to write a play on the subject.'

If *As Time Goes By* showed that 'gays had not been onlookers in history', then The *Dear Love of Comrades* suggested that gay men, and one gay man in particular, had been central to the development of socialist politics in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Griffiths and Greig had discovered the life of Edward Carpenter while researching *As Time Goes By*. What must have been appealing to them was the fact that, not only had Carpenter played a major role in setting up the Labour movement from the 1880s onwards, but that he had openly declared his homosexuality and had forecast a change in social attitudes to the group of men he called Uranians. He saw a similarity between the struggles of the women's movement for emancipation and that of gay men:

> as these sufferings of women, of one kind and another, have been the great inspiring cause and impetus of the Women's Movement...so I do not practically doubt that the similar sufferings of the Uranian class of men are destined in their turn to lead to another wide-reaching social organisation and forward movement. (1984, p.23)

Perhaps for the first time in gay theatre, this play provided the opportunity for the dramatic representation of a domestic life in which gay men lived together. Philip Osment

also claims that the relationship of Carpenter and his partner George Merrill showed that 'within the working class and its organisations at that time there had been openly homosexual persons whose relationships were based on equality rather than prostitution' (p.xliii). Whether Osment found real evidence for the existence of such attitudes or whether he is merely romanticising about the working classes is difficult to determine. The vital connecting point for Noel Greig in his own writings about Carpenter was that there was evidence that the early socialist movement held 'open advocation of something even closer to me - my own sexuality' (p.xliii).

Carpenter is portrayed as a visionary influenced by Eastern religion and Marxism, whose utopian dream of a simple life in Yorkshire surrounded by devoted friends is constantly being interrupted by the demands of the labour movement for him to address public meetings around the country. Before Carpenter's relationship with Merrill becomes established, sexual encounters between Carpenter and his followers occur almost as a natural extension of their friendship. On returning from an extended trip to India, Carpenter invites his married friend George Hukin to move into his house Millthorpe accompanied by his wife, dismissing any possible problems with the arrangement with: 'She was never jealous when we slept together' (p.8). In the refrain spoken by both of these characters at the end of the scene, the utopia which 'George and George and Edward' seek is both social and sexual. We immediately understand that the title of the play refers to more than just the platonic love of brother in arms.

The traditional view of middle class men corrupting working class youths is challenged by Greig's representation of the relationship of Carpenter and Merrill. Merrill's working class credentials are made clear in the song 'One Night as I Lay

Sleeping' (p.15) which describes how a half-sovereign taken from his drunken father is used to buy bare essentials:

> I've fed and clothed your wife
> And starving son with it.

Yet it is Merrill who seduces Carpenter in a mock reversal of roles:

> *Merrill*: You're older than me, so you must take the lead.
> *Carpenter*: Well if I'm the 'older seducer', what does that make you?
> *Merrill*: Bloody impatient.

Although there is no overt treatise promoting the values of free love, casual sexual encounters occur frequently in the play, perhaps more reminiscent of the 1970s when the play was written, than the 1890s. What is evident in the play is that Carpenter's affection for George Merrill is a source of jealousy to his admirers. When Merrill turns up drunk at Millthorpe demanding to see Carpenter, Adams is merciless in his rejection: 'Leave Edward alone, he doesn't need you, he said so. So you won't be seeing him or the inside of this house tonight or any other night' (p.23). He then lies to Carpenter on the latter's return, claiming that Merrill moved away of his own accord. Carpenter's views on jealousy are expressed on page twenty two within extracts of his manuscript entitled: 'The Sex Passions: The Intermediate Sex': 'The feelings of jealousy may in time, equally naturally, die away and may do so without damaging the intimacy of the alliance.' Carpenter's loyalties are themselves put to the test when Hukin admits that he has slept with Merrill:

> *Hukin*: Do you mind?
> *Carpenter*: (*of course he does*) Of course I don't.

Greig refuses the temptation to portray life at Millthorpe as idyllic. These are three-dimensional characters with a wide range of feelings and emotions. While they endeavour to fulfil Carpenter's vision of the simple communal life at Millthorpe, the values and prejudices of the wider society are always present. Carpenter's publisher refuses to print *Love's Coming of Age* unless the chapter on 'Homogenic Love' is removed. Unwin is concerned that the trial of Oscar Wilde has led to 'changes in the social atmosphere.' He refers to the English gentlemen leaving the country on the Dover boat train because they 'wished to avoid notoriety' (p.30). Carpenter concedes.

The pressures from the outside world also come from within the Labour movement. When Frank Simpson visits Millthorpe at the invitation of Hukin, Carpenter's reputation as a writer has flourished. Far from coming to pay his respects to a man of letters, Simpson has come to witness for himself the unorthodox lifestyle of Carpenter and his friends. Because he has heard that everyone contributes to life at the house, he offers to help with the chores. He understands that the responsibility for work is shared. But his understanding of the sharing of tasks between the genders is at variance with the ethos of Millthorpe: 'Once we're in power, there'll be no women slaving on the benches any more, they'll be back in the home where they're needed' (p.39). He reflects the conventional view of how labour should be divided between the men and women, and admits to feeling insecure when these roles are discarded:

> This may be old-fashioned, but the world is divided into men and women. Now, if there's men who want to...well, be like Edward, fair enough. But to stop being men in the process, well it...unsettles me. (p.40)

Simpson feels that, while the liberal minded might turn a blind eye to homosexual behaviour, they would be less likely to tolerate any outward signs that might threaten

accepted gender boundaries. Simpson views Merrill's domestic chores such as darning socks to be the responsibility of women: 'I can't help feeling it's not right. It's like a husband and wife' (p.40). Hukin explains how, due to circumstances, it is necessary for women to take on a man's responsibilities, but this reverse argument doesn't convince Simpson: 'it isn't his job' (p.40). Engaging in household tasks traditionally completed by women is presented as being more threatening to social mores than the idea of two men sleeping together. The sacrosanct values of traditional family life are being undermined.

What is absent from *The Dear Love of Comrades* is any evidence of effeminacy or camp in the main characters. Unlike many early twentieth century plays such as Mae West's *The Drag* and Shairp's *The Green Bay Tree* there is no suggestion that homosexuals are somehow betrayed to the wider world by their effeminate behaviour or mannerisms. Carpenter is presented as being in complete control of his sexuality and of who knows about it. Merrill is presented as a strong, independent young man who enjoys drinking, but who liked to help his mother with her household chores: 'She never complained at all the washing and sewing and cleaning and cooking I did for her' (p.15). He volunteers to help in this way because that is his choice. Yet these are the signs that led his mother to say 'watch out George lad, you'll turn into one of those Mary-Anns' (p.15). It is evident from Carpenter's autobiography *My Days and Dreams* (1916) that Merrill was helpful in a variety of ways to the running of Millthorpe: 'George had an intuitive genius for housework.' What is also evident from his autobiography is that many of Carpenter's friends felt that Merrill would prove to be an undesirable influence:

> they had sad misgivings about the moral situation[...] A youth who had spent much of his early time in the purlieus of public houses and in society not too reputable would do me no credit, and would only by my adoption be confirmed in his own errant ways. (p.89)

This is reflected in E.M.Forster's conclusion to the play when he says:

> Carpenter found himself abandoned by many of his old friends whose distaste for the new arrangement at Millthorpe expressed itself in doubts as to whether the housework would get done without a woman there. (p.46)

Until George Merrill moved in, Carpenter had shared Millthorpe with couples, as if the mere presence of a woman brought some respectability to the house. In the final scene, Hukin implores Carpenter to have the courage of his convictions and live solely with his lover George Merrill: 'there's people living here now who'll thank you much more for doing the one thing that you're not supposed to do. Which is to be homosexual' (p.45). As E.M. Forster points out, they then lived together for thirty years.

What may be considered artificial about Greig's representation of Carpenter's life is the absence on stage of both women and children. Although George Adam's wife Lucy and George Hukin's wife Fannie are referred to, they do not appear in person. Philip Osment defends the decision to omit women in 'Finding Room on the Agenda for Love' by suggesting that 'female characters would have provided him [Greig] with an easy get-out' (p.xiv). Greig argued that the presence of strong women would have meant that any criticism of Carpenter would have been voiced by them and that he would have been judged by any feminist critique by the way in which the male characters treated women, rather than the way in which they treated each other. In fact, there is evidence to suggest that many women spent a great deal of time at Millthorpe over the years, notably Edith Lees, the wife of Havelock Ellis, who was bisexual. There is also plenty of evidence in Carpenter's autobiography to suggest that Millthorpe was more dominated by families than Greig suggests in his play - especially in view of the fact that Carpenter spent extensive periods away from the house, leaving the running of the property to its married

occupants. While George Adams is allowed to show an interest in the financial pressures of running the property by showing how growing particular crops can make profits, the opinion of his wife on such matters is not mentioned. Osment's decision to marginalise women suggests that Carpenter inhabited an exclusively male world, thus opening the play to justifiable criticism from the feminist lobby. According to Lillian Faderman in *Surpassing the Love of Men* (1981), Carpenter showed considerable interest in the feminist movement and lesbian relationships, noting that:

> It is pretty certain that such comrade-alliances - of a quite devoted kind - are becoming increasingly common, and especially perhaps among the more cultured classes of women who are working out the great cause of their own sex's liberation. (p.189)

Greig's attempt to depict Carpenter as a modern gay icon fails to reflect his empathy for the Women's Movement. Greig is guilty of re-fashioning Carpenter to accommodate the expectations of a 1980s' gay audience.

The first couple to live with Carpenter, the Fernehoughs, had two little children, a boy and a girl of about nine and ten. When George Adams replaced them, he too arrived with his family and was responsible for furnishing much of the house. We are aware of this because when they departed Carpenter's autobiography states that they 'had left the house largely denuded of furniture, and for some days we bivouacked with a trestle table for meals and a sanded floor' (p.89). By ignoring the presence of women and children, Greig has created a false impression of Millthorpe. Certainly it ignores what must have appeared to local outsiders as a more conventional home than is in evidence here. However, the play is faithful to the fact that Carpenter's dream of two men living together was only realised once George Merrill had moved in. Greig's play concludes with a positive image of a gay relationship. Not

only does it show that such relationships are possible, but it also shows that the acceptance of homosexuality is closely linked to wider social reforms.

The desire to explore the place of homosexuality within a wider social context is further reflected in Gay Sweatshop's production of *Poppies*. In the early 1980s the Peace Movement and CND were undergoing something of a renaissance in response to the ever-present threat of a nuclear holocaust. The involvement of the Women's Movement, (especially at Greenham Common) was well publicised. Philip Osment ventures to suggest that 'the roots of our lack of respect for the planet and of militarism lie in traditional male values which encourage competitiveness and aggression' (p.li). The assertion that men were therefore emotionally detached from the issue because of their gender left the Gay Rights Movement in a moral 'no man's land' (in every sense of the expression). Philip Osment suggests that *Poppies* 'put forward a response to the nuclear threat and militarism from a radical male perspective' (p.li). While some newspaper critics, including the critic for the *Financial Times*, were derisive of the play, Osment implies that this is because they simply refused to come to terms with the message that 'men kill each other because they do not know how to love each other' (p.liii). The *Financial Times* responded with the following criticism:

> Ultimately I can't help feeling that the author's conviction that world peace can be assured if enough men embrace on Hampstead Heath is a specialised viewpoint; and may even have been disproved already.

Although Osment's sentiments might be interpreted as being rather simplistic (if not 'romantic'), what was evident from other critics, notably Jim Hiley of *City Limits*[9], was

[9] Osment (1989) refers to both the Financial Times and the City Limits' reviews on page liii.

that, here, for the first time, was a gay play that was addressing the serious issues of the day.

Poppies was an important production in the resurgence of Gay Sweatshop since Arts Council funding had been withdrawn in 1980. A rationale for this particular play is included inside the Gay Men's Press publication of the script. After a staged reading at a gay CND weekend conference in London on 18th April 1983, members discussed ways in which new attitudes to masculinity 'could bring a new dimension to the peace movement.' They recognised that men needed to relate to each other in new ways if they were to contribute substantially to peace 'and new forms of social order' (p.li). The contribution that *Poppies* could make to such a dialogue justified a full production of the play.

Poppies departs from the naturalistic drama[10] of earlier Sweatshop productions in two ways: firstly, because of the split time narrative (jumping between 1939 and 1986) and secondly, because of the presence of two 'mouldy heads' that interrupt the narrative to make surrealistic contributions reminiscent of the head protruding from the ground in Act Two of Beckett's *Happy Days*.

In the face of imminent nuclear war, the ageing gay couples Sammy (in his sixties) and Snow (in his late fifties) arrive on Hampstead Heath. Their long-standing relationship is clouded by the past. Snow is haunted by the wife and two sons he has left behind in south London, while Sammy (a Second World War conscientious objector) idealises Flag, a young serviceman he met, who later died in the war. Heads One and Two act as a chorus reflecting on man's contribution to civilisation and his ultimate loneliness in this transient life. They threaten each other with guns of increasing size as they argue and disagree. They long to be loved: 'I'll be a young man in his twenties who never grows old, dressed

[10] The term 'naturalistic drama' is used to describe plays which seek to mirror life and events as the they occur.

in silk shirts and surrounded by the adolescent lovelies of both sexes, offering me their caresses' (p.15). There is little comfort to be had anywhere in the play outside the central relationship of Sammy and Snow. But, just as in Steinbeck's *Of Mice and Men*, Sammy's dream of owning 'A thatch and a garden' (p.15) can never become a reality. While Sammy is still partial to chance sexual encounters on the heath, Snow contents himself with running their bookshop and the certainty that Sammy will always come back to him. *Poppies* is groundbreaking in the sense that it is the first play to present a gay couple confronting middle age together in a world that is indifferent to their existence. It is also groundbreaking because Snow had to give up his conventional heterosexual married life when he told his wife about his relationship with Sammy. In effect, the choice was made for him: 'I didn't want to swap her for you, like I was changing suits...' (p.29). His rather naïve plea: 'I said I didn't want to clear off, I wish there was a way we could all be friends' (p.29) is a request for individual sexuality, whatever it may be, to be tolerated. 'It didn't mean I don't love her.' If Snow is indeed bisexual, there is no possibility for him to maintain such a life-style in a society that has only just recognised the existence of homosexuals. His wife had suspected his homosexuality 'for years' and had complained that he 'had not the guts to tell her and clear off etcetera' (p.29). There is no suggestion here that Snow has deceived anyone up to the point of recognising his sexuality, even if his wife is resentful.

Greig is one of the first playwrights to recognise that not everyone can be neatly defined within the gay/straight dichotomy. It is a recognition that sexuality can be more fluid than it is fixed. The apparent incompatibility of bisexuality and fatherhood is further compounded when Hippo, Snow's eldest son, says: 'Me and Tel, we should've had someone to look up to' (p.31). The suggestion here is that, had Snow been a 'normal' dad,

Tel wouldn't have ended up in prison and Hippo wouldn't have been roaming the streets with a gang setting fire to people's houses. Yet it is social convention that has forced Snow to choose. The breakdown of the relationship between Snow and his family is echoed in the intolerance and hatred that have created the wider conflict and threat of nuclear war.

While the two central characters confront the social implications of their relationship and their hidden jealousies, Snow decries Sammy's fatalism and snatches the box of memories that Sammy is intent on burying:

> Is that what life is for you? Do you think it starts and ends with young men who never grow old in the dark? I know the world doesn't want you or me in it, and I'll fight off my own jealousy and their laws to let you feel flesh you'll never even talk to. But it doesn't end there, it doesn't end there! (p.40)

Greig is aware that in order to create a better world, more is at stake than homosexual rights. While this is going on, Head Two who is preparing for rebirth into the world, wonders if he should try to improve things 'this time round.' Sammy justifies his pacifism and is adamant that dropping bombs on some 'Rolf or Pieter, or Klaus' makes no sense when, rather than 'ripping his guts out...we could have held him' (p.44). It is this message that led some critics to brand the play as 'simplistic'. Osment quotes the *Financial Times* critic who suggested that the idea that world peace would be achieved 'if enough men embraced on Hampstead Heath' (p.liii) was little more than an irrelevancy.

The theme of Greig's *Poppies* is similar to that of Ackerley's *Prisoners of War*, but here, the sexuality of the main characters is openly portrayed. The only certainty that survives this otherwise dark and often macabre play is the stability of Sammy and Snow's relationship and the optimistic message that we don't have to accept that the world order

has to depend upon weapons of ever increasing size being pointed at the enemy. Greig recognises that it is not possible to stand by and watch the inevitable arrival of the holocaust. When Snow and Sammy agree to join the Remembrance Day march in spite of the warnings to 'disperse and go home', they are making more than a political statement. They are advocating the overthrow of the current world order. While members of the government hide in their bunkers, a new world order will take power: 'They won't get back in. They won't ever get back in. They'll have to return to their caves under the surface, forever. We'll never see them again' (p.45). While such a call for revolution may be reminiscent of the rallying call of the student demonstrations of the late sixties, it also reflects the empowerment of ordinary citizens through the Green Movement, and the later scenes of jubilation at the destruction of the Berlin Wall. The success of the play on tour suggests that it went some way to capturing the public dissatisfaction with many of the policies of the rightwing Thatcherite government.

Gay Sweatshop's contribution to theatre about AIDS, *Compromised Immunity*, first reached production in 1985. This coincides with the year Kramer's *The Normal Heart* appeared on the New York stage. *Compromised Immunity* by Andy Kirby represents a stark return to realism after the experimentation and symbolism of *Poppies*; the harsh realism of the hospital isolation room of an AIDS sufferer. As I shall indicate in the next chapter, during the years between 1983 and 1985, a great deal was being learnt about the disease. *Compromised Immunity* reflects the comparative ignorance of the medical profession that existed during this period when it was still unclear how the disease was transferred from one person to another. It was still assumed that AIDS was associated only with the immoral behaviour of homosexuals, drug users and prostitutes. As Cheryl L. Cole points out in her paper 'Containing AIDS: Magic Johnson and Post (Reagan) America' in

Queer Theory/Sociology (1996, p.280), an AIDS patient 'was portrayed as guilty, diseased, contagious, isolated, threatening and deteriorating.' In many ways *Compromised Immunity* sets out to challenge these pre-conceptions. The play centres on the relationship between Peter, a heterosexual student nurse, and his AIDS patient Gerry Grimond. Gerry is the first AIDS patient to be 'farmed out' to the East London Teaching Hospital. Because this is the first encounter with an AIDS patient at the hospital, Gerry is isolated and treated as highly contagious on his arrival. Peter is expected to wear a mask and gloves to protect himself from possible infection. As Peter gets to know Gerry the barriers come down. The mask and gloves are removed at Gerry's request: 'I can't talk to a guy whose face I've never seen. And I'd like to Peter, I've never been so lonely' (p.60). It becomes apparent that Gerry's previous aggression towards the staff was a defensive response to their inhumane treatment of him. Peter begins to understand that Gerry's anger and isolation is caused by the negative attitudes of others. Even Peter's girlfriend believes that the disease can be passed on accidentally: 'It's the chemistry I'm worried about. I hope you're being tested or something' (p.64).

Gerry has been cast in the role of victim against his will. Even his ex-lover Hugh has ostracised him and refuses to visit the hospital. Hugh argues that Gerry has brought the isolation upon himself: 'This is the way that Gerry wanted it. Did he ever tell you that?' (p.65). Yet there appears to be a readiness to blot Gerry out of his life, as if his illness is something that his former friends would rather ignore as they attempt to carry on with their lives.

When Gerry is told that Peter is to be moved to another hospital, Gerry tries to end his life by cutting his wrists. It is because Peter has made the effort to try to understand Gerry that he has become indispensable. The hospital's decision to assign Peter to Gerry for the

remaining weeks of his life is in recognition that Peter has become more than simply a nurse in this situation. In the absence of family and other visitors, Peter has become more of a friend and confidant to Gerry. This becomes increasingly evident when Peter offers to take Gerry on an outing to a gay club. When Gerry refuses, Peter goes anyway. It is as if Peter is trying to piece together the life that Gerry has lived. When Peter befriends a young gay man from the club, he asks him to visit Gerry. This marks the beginning of a new period in Gerry's life. When Ian visits the hospital, Gerry has lost his self-pity and is eager to help this newcomer to London. He even helps him to find somewhere to live. Through this new friend, Gerry is able to make contact with other people from his past. By the end of the play Gerry has ceased to be the threatening presence that he was at the beginning. The play defies public misconceptions by showing that it is possible to die with dignity and for AIDS sufferers to come to terms with their own mortality. Essentially, the ending of the play suggests that being gay, or having AIDS should not prevent such patients being treated both humanely and as individuals: 'Gerry taught me a lot about nursing and being nursed, about being ill and about being more than an ill person' (p.79).

In 'Finding Room on the Agenda for Love' Philip Osment recalls the popularity of the production when it was performed at the Leicester Haymarket: 'tickets were sold out for the week before we arrived and the "normal" theatregoing audience flocked to see the play' (p.lx). The play subsequently toured the country playing to full houses, even in Devon where a local councillor tried to get the company's Arts Council grant suspended. Although there was a resultant cut in subsidy, the play had to be moved to a bigger venue because of public demand for tickets. He notes that it was especially poignant for nurses caring for people with AIDS and for those amongst the audience who had already lost someone to the disease. Osment recalls one such person who felt that it 'compared well to

Kramer's *The Normal Heart* which swamped the issue by resorting to political drama and intrigue' (p.ix). Perhaps the strength of the play is that it focuses on the issues that any terminally ill patient faces. Gerry represents Everyman in this respect. In contrast to the homophobic headlines labelling AIDS as a 'gay plague', Kirby has brought home the common humanity that binds all terminally ill people together irrespective of the nature or origins of their disease. The threatening yet inclusive identity of the dying patient coming to terms with their mortality thereby displaces the 'otherness' of the gay identity. In this way it becomes, in effect, a humanist play rather than a play about gay liberation. Perhaps this is why Kirby avoids the death bed scene that is present in most other plays about AIDS. Gerry's contribution to changing attitudes, especially those of Peter and his girlfriend, are what is important, rather than the inevitability of death. The significance of the omission of the death bed scene is that life, in one form or another, goes on. What is important is that attitudes to homosexuality and AIDS change.

At a time when increasing numbers of gay men were becoming HIV positive, it is perhaps not surprising that Kirby wanted to focus exclusively on the implications of the disease for the gay community. However, the play fails to recognise that the disease can be passed on by a single unprotected sexual encounter from one person to another, whatever their perceived sexual identity might be. The subsequent rise in infection amongst women and their babies was not only the result of drug addicts sharing hypodermic syringes, but also of the sexual activities of bisexual individuals. If, as I suggest in the next chapter, anal intercourse is not the only way of transmitting the virus, it is not exclusive to homosexuals. As Masters, Johnson and Kolodny (1995) point out: 'For this reason, many authorities now recommend the routine use of condoms for heterosexual anal intercourse as a means of reducing the risk of transmitting the AIDS virus' (p.423).

Plays like *Compromised Immunity* simply confirmed suspicions that AIDS was an exclusively gay disease and did little to challenge such preconceptions.

However, it is clearly evident that some Gay Sweatshop productions have sought to challenge conventional views of homosexuality. My remit is not to judge each production on its artistic or theatrical merit, but to assess the ways in which each one contributes to the representation of sexual dissidence[11] on stage. As Kevin Elyot suggested, the role of effective drama is in the challenge: 'You have to have a challenge, otherwise there's no point in going out.' There needs to be 'recognition or a challenge, or a moment or two in the evening they are uplifted. There has to be some sort of connection, otherwise there is no point at all' (Appendix 2). One of the last productions adopted by Gay Sweatshop for performance was *This Island's Mine* (1987) by Philip Osment. In many ways this production typifies the challenging nature of Gay Sweatshop's work which by this time had spanned much of the 1970s and 1980s. In 'Finding Room on the Agenda for Love' Osment explains how the performance style of the production represented a change from anything the company had produced before. Having worked with Mike Alfreds and Shared Experience, Osment adopted a style in which 'the actors spoke directly to the audience acting the story out at the same time' (p.lxii). While Osment admits that it was a difficult technique to learn, he nevertheless 'found it very exciting and liberating' (p.lxii). In *This Island's Mine* Osment uses this technique to allow the audience to gain entry into the intimate lives of a variety of very different characters, who are then later linked together by a series of events in which a Dickensian use of coincidence plays a vital role. Osment's intention was to create a disparate range of characters which would come

[11] 'Sexual dissidence' refers to the way in which characters can undermine and challenge dominant heterosexist values. In this sense it questions the very notion of what is dominant and what is subordinate.

together to reflect something of life in 1980s Britain. He also makes it clear that in many respects the play is autobiographical, since he wanted to deal with some personal issues concerning his early life in Devon.

As the play opens, we find Luke, a schoolboy considering how he is going to tell his mother that he is gay. Unwittingly, he is subjected to the abuse of another schoolboy who 'limply flaps his wrist'; a sign that Luke's sexuality is evident to others. Having introduced the dilemma of 'coming out' into the play, Osment immediately cuts to another controversial issue: the dangers of coming out at work during the AIDS epidemic. Mark, an assistant chef who has made the mistake of mentioning his boyfriend Selwyn to his work colleagues, is sacked by his boss because the rest of the staff 'have expressed some concern about working with' him (p.91). Although it is never explained in so many words why he has been given the sack, in an earlier scene his colleagues are seen gathering around a newspaper pointing to a headline. The implication is that, in the light of AIDS, Mark posed a health risk just by working in a kitchen with other chefs.

But this is not just a play about the plight of gay people. In Scene 4 the audience is introduced to a Jewish landlady Miss Rosenblum, an ex-piano teacher who was companion of an exiled Russian princess Mme Irina (who has spent all her adult life waiting for the communist regime in Russia to be overturned so that she may return to her homeland). What these characters share with the gay characters in the play is that they are only able to live their lives in exile. This is confirmed by Miss Rosenblum, when Luke runs away from his home to stay with his gay uncle Martin, who lodges at Miss Rosenblum's house:

> So once again the old
> house gives refuge to one in flight

As it has done many times before. (p.92)

Osment creates a bleak world in which each character is excluded for one reason or another. Martin has already been ostracised by his sister and brother-in-law because they once saw him on a gay march at Hyde Park Corner:

You were with all those queers
I hardly recognised my own brother. (p.95)

Ironically, when Luke runs to his Uncle Martin for counsel, Luke's parents have no option but to trust Luke to look after him.

Osment's play is littered with relationships that have broken down because of conflict of one type or another. Marianne, a lesbian, who has married Martin in order that she may become a naturalised British citizen, is in conflict with her American father because she opposes US bases in Britain. Mark's black partner Selwyn, whose acting career has just taken off, has left home because his brother threatened to kill him when he found out that he was gay. To add to his discomfort he is badly beaten up by three policemen on the way home.

Betrayal and infidelity are recurring themes in the play. Mark betrays Selwyn by sleeping with Luke. Luke is later cast aside and realises that what he thought was love was simply a one-night stand. Stephen has betrayed his wife by getting his maid pregnant. Only later do Marianne and Jody discover that they are half sisters. Osment's characters all have a story to tell, whether they are gay or straight. They are making the best of a difficult situation. There are no stereotypical gay characters. Any preconceptions about what it is like to be gay are in the minds of others, and are illustrated in the way they react to the main characters. When Maggie and Frank reject Martin it is because they have

allowed their preconceptions about homosexuals to cloud their judgement. When the police physically abuse Selwyn, it is a reflection of their bigotry: 'He's a poof. You a black pansy?' (p.98). When the crowd jeer at the gays and lesbians joining the miners' strike march, it is left to the reformed Frank to suggest:

> People should stick together.
> Help each other out.
> Not bash each other over the head. (p.112)

When the other chefs get Mark the sack from his job, after reading the homophobic article in the newspaper, it is not only a reflection of their own prejudice and ignorance, but also that of the press.

One stereotype which is perpetuated within this play, however, is the link between homosexuality and cross-dressing. Before Luke runs away to London he reflects on the times he has gone to 'his mother's dressing table' and paraded around her bedroom, 'decked out in his mother's finery' (p.88). There is the suggestion that the act of putting on women's clothes released 'the Pandora trapped in every man' (p.88). Whether Osment is simply trying to illustrate that every man has a feminine side, or whether he is suggesting that gay men like nothing better than to dress up in women's clothes is unclear. As Masters, Johnson and Kolodny (1995) point out, cross-dressing is as much the domain of the heterosexual as it is the homosexual: 'A transvestite is a heterosexual male who repeatedly and persistently becomes sexually aroused by wearing female clothing' (p.451). Clearly there is a tradition of drag performance that has existed in gay clubs and public houses, but drag as entertainment, in the form of female impersonation, has also been popular in straight variety shows. Cross-dressing from Shakespeare to Danny La Rue

or the Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence has an interesting and complex history, but it is not specific to homosexuals. It is much more about the relationship between the genders than it is about homosexuality. However, when Osment declares that there were autobiographical issues that he wished to work through in this play, it is possible that he is referring specifically to his own childhood and awakening sexuality. While Osment will have been aware of the long theatrical tradition of cross-dressing and its ability to threaten the gender binary, its use here contributes little to question concepts of masculinity. What is also clear from Osment's characterisation of Luke is that homosexuality is an innate rather than learned behaviour pattern. The assumption is that Luke has always known that he is gay. This is his destiny, whether he likes it or not. By confiding in his uncle who he already knows to be gay, he is consciously defining himself as homosexual.

What is perhaps much more significant about *This Island's Mine* is that it dared to tackle the issue of teenage sexuality at all; a topic that was not to be tackled in depth again until Jonathan Harvey wrote *Beautiful Thing* in 1993. At that time (1987), the legal age for homosexual sex between consenting male adults was still twenty-one. While Margaret Thatcher's government was preparing to ban local authorities from 'promoting' homosexuality through the introduction of Section 28, Gay Sweatshop was producing plays that challenged that very intention. In contrast to many pre-Gay Sweatshop plays, there are no 'victims' unable to come to terms with their sexuality. Each character whether straight or gay encounters personal difficulties, but they are never insurmountable. Even when Luke receives his letter of rejection from Mark in the final scene, the future beckons: 'Just two more terms/ Then I'll be out of this dump' (p.120). There is an overpowering sense of reconciliation leaving the audience optimistic about the future. Martin is reconciled with his homophobic sister and brother-in-law. Selwyn returns

to his family and forgives his brother for threatening him. Marianne forgives her father for failing to meet her expectations. Like Caliban, all the characters are hemmed in by controls and restrictions, 'while you do keep from me/The rest of the island' (p.120). *This Island's Mine* is about coping with and overcoming those controls and restrictions.

It is difficult to overestimate the contribution of Gay Sweatshop during the 1970s and 1980s. Although their productions rarely played in front of mainstream West End audiences, they reached communities around the country that would otherwise not have had access to Gay Theatre. As a dissident group, they threatened social boundaries and challenged regressive local councils and religious groups. Many of their plays reflected the lives of the 'invisible' majority of gay people who live within the confines of the predominant heterosexual society. They often drew attention to the dangers of homophobic prejudice and in contrast to many earlier stage plays, allowed gay people to celebrate their sexuality without fear of recrimination. Perhaps most importantly, they moved the representation of gay people forward by trying to avoid the use of stereotypical characterisations that had been so evident in the drama of the 1950s and 1960s. The fact that much of their work was completed without Arts Council funding is a tribute to those involved. It is also a condemnation of a society that, whilst tolerating some homosexual acts, at the same time sought to control them.

However, if Gay Sweatshop proved effective in raising the profile of gay people, it did so within the parameters of the traditional straight/gay dichotomy. There is little here to question or threaten the very nature of sexual identity or indeed the language that defined it. Because of its alignment with the Gay Liberation Movement and its fight for equality, Gay Sweatshop succeeded in confirming the difference between being gay and being straight. It has served to corroborate the definitions of sexuality laid down by the

sexologists and psychoanalysts of the early twentieth century. In the spirit of the Enlightenment it purports to tell the undeniable truth about sexuality. As such, perhaps unwittingly, they contributed to re-enforcing the strict limits that segregate those who commit homosexual acts from those who don't. There is little evidence of the crossing of boundaries here, and little to challenge the idea that sexual identity is fixed and immutable.

ACT 1

Scene Five

Crisis Drama: Creating New Stereotypes?

If the plays referred to in the last three chapters were concerned with raising the profile of homosexuality and with informing the audience of what it was like to be significantly 'different' in a dominant heterosexist world, the brief period which followed the decriminalisation of homosexual acts allowed playwrights to explore issues of gay identity with comparative freedom. From 1968 until 1983, in what might be considered as the second phase of twentieth-century gay drama, it was possible to depict openly gay characters leading their lives, having successfully fought for and won a degree of emancipation. The decriminalisation of homosexual acts itself was significant because it allowed theatres to present plays that they might otherwise have rejected. Many of these plays still engaged with the same polemic, articulating the struggles faced by homosexuals in society, but they could do so comparatively unhindered. The identity of gay characters no longer needed to be concealed in ambiguity. Many of the American plays which ran in London's West End still reflected the legacy of guilt and uncertainty which prevailed in pre-Stonewall plays. Nevertheless, plays such as Mart Crowley's *The Boys in the Band* (1968), Harvey Fierstein's *Torch Song Trilogy* (1981) and the Harvey Fierstein/Jerry Herman musical *La Cage aux Folles* (1983) were responsible for introducing overtly gay characters and their often turbulent lives to a wide and largely straight audience. All three plays were subsequently made into successful films. There were important discourses to be worked through at a time when the gay community seemed to have more control of its own destiny. Even though the legal crusade had been partially won on this side of the Atlantic through the decriminalisation of certain homosexual acts, the struggle in America would continue to be fought state by state. The moral crusade for equal rights was still in its infancy.

Although many groundbreaking plays were produced during this period, (and I will be referring to some of them in more depth), it is important to recognize that the onset of AIDS set its own agenda for gay playwrights after 1981. This change in focus represents a third phase in the development of gay drama in the twentieth century. For gay people who lived through the second half of this century it is difficult to comprehend the changes they have experienced. In *The Burning Library* (1994) Edmund White sums up that experience succinctly:

> To have been oppressed in the 1950s, freed in the 1960s, exalted in the 1970s, and wiped out in the 1980s is a quick itinerary for a whole culture to follow. For we are witnessing not just the death of individuals, but a menace to an entire culture. (p.215)

To many heterosexuals the concepts 'gay' and 'AIDS' were synonymous and it became a matter of urgency that gay playwrights should address this issue. AIDS was viewed by many as a kind of divine retribution against gays. Donna Summer suggested in 1984 that 'AIDS has been sent by God to punish homosexuals.' The Revd. Tony Higton echoed the views of many people in Britain when he was quoted in *The Guardian* on 4th September 1987: 'There is a link between sin and sickness. God has spoken on the thing...God's judgment is written into the way things are. If we misuse our bodies we take the consequences.'[12]

What is important about the plays that were produced between 1968 and 1981, prior to the onset of the AIDS crisis, is that they interpreted and defined the developing gay sub-culture. This was crucial not only for a gay audience in its search for identity and cohesion, but also for the heterosexual audience whose perception and understanding of gay people was changing. As a consequence of changes in the law, the activities of gay people were no longer exclusively clandestine, but were becoming relatively mainstream. Gay bars which had formerly existed under constant threat of closure began to operate

[12] The Revd. Tony Higton's comments were quoted from *A Queer Reader*. Ed. Patrick Higgins. p.266.

openly alongside straight bars especially in the cosmopolitan inner city areas. Providing services for gay people was becoming a commercial proposition like any other. It was during the late seventies that the phrase 'pink pound' was coined, thus identifying gay people as targeted consumers. What images of gay people were being presented on stage at the time? What is important is that for the first time homosexuality provided an alternative life-style which, though still socially stigmatized, had established its place in society. The pressure to align oneself with this identifiable group in a sense polarized the 'difference'. The gay/straight dichotomy became more pronounced, thus perpetuating the myth that men had to be one or the other. This led to a resurgence of interest in theoretical discourse on the causes of homosexuality, especially in the media. In Foucauldean terms, the subjugated group has been identified and brought into the open for the purposes of closer examination and ultimately for control. At a simple level, the confessional process of 'coming out' though invaluable to many, served to expose individuals not only to the scrutiny of their friends, but also their employers and any other institution which sought to discriminate against homosexuals. While the Sexual Offences Act 1967, which applied to England and Wales, may have legitimised homosexual acts between consenting male adults in private, gays were still not protected against discrimination in the workplace. In the same way, plays that became labelled as 'gay' could be both liberating and restrictive at the same time. Any representation of gay characters will have a different significance for gay and straight spectators. While a gay spectator may recognize and be amused by camp effeminate characters, a straight spectator might view them as stereotypical examples of gay men. Gay drama of the 1968-83 period would inevitably both confirm and challenge sexual stereotypes.

One of the most successful plays of this period was Mart Crowley's *The Boys in the Band* (1968). Although written before the Stonewall rebellion, it ran for over one thousand performances before it was made into a motion picture in 1970. Kaier Curtin (1987) points out that, in the decade following its appearance: 'there were eighty-four plays performed

on New York stages containing gay characters or gay themes' (p.328). The *New York Times* critic Clive Barnes observed that *The Boys in the Band* was:

> not a play about a homosexual, but a play that takes the homosexual milieu, and the homosexual way of life, totally for granted and uses this as a valid basis for human existance. Thus it is a homosexual play, not a play about homosexuality. (*The New York Times*, 15th April 1968, p.27)

Innovative as it was, no recent play has attracted such contrasting criticism. Set in an apartment in the fashionable East Fifties of New York, the play centres on a group of gay men who gather together to celebrate the birthday of a friend. The playwright briefly defines the characters in terms which cover a range of gay stereotypical identities. Hank is described as: 'Thirty-two, tall, solid, athletic, and attractive' while Emory is: 'Thirty-three, small, frail, very plain'. Crowley admits in his 'Introduction' (1996) that all the characters were 'based on people I either knew well' or were 'amalgams of several I'd known to varying degrees, plus a large order of myself thrown into the mix' (p.ix). It is unlikely that Crowley could have been prepared for the success of this particular play, or that his characters would come under such close scrutiny.

What is evident from the onset, is that they all share a common experience of surviving a long period of oppression. This manifests itself in the dialogue of the play that often turns the language of the oppressors inwards against the characters themselves. Michael, the organizer of the party describes his invited guests as: 'six tired screaming fairy queens and one anxious queer' (p.9). Comparisons can be made between this gathering and the party scene in Mae West's *The Drag* (1927). The above quotation might easily have been drawn from that earlier play. However, what is fundamentally different here is that the gay characters exist within a defined space in which a variety of gay life-styles are taken for granted. There is a feeling that in some irrational way, they can help

each other to resolve the problems that have been set for them by an outside heterosexual agenda. Yet these sub-texts are treated with a healthy degree of mockery. Donald's ten year period of analysis is dismissed by Michael: 'Christ, how sick analysts must get of hearing how mommy and daddy made their darlin' into a fairy' (p.12). However, Donald's problem is not simply that he is gay, but that he, in common with many heterosexuals, has courted failure to gain his mother's sympathy and to escape his father's demands for perfection.

Crowley presents us with a multiplicity of stereotypes merely to knock them back down again. Donald ridicules Michael's almost obsessive references to the gay icons of the cinema: 'I can understand people having an affinity for the stage -but movies are such garbage, who can take them seriously?' (p.13). Michael is the 'spoiled brat' who wears expensive clothes even though they aren't necessarily 'paid for'. Donald, who chooses to work in a low paid job 'scrubbing floors' acts as a natural foil to Michael's extravagance: 'I work my ass off for forty-five lousy dollars a week scrubbing floors and you waltz around throwing cashmere sweaters on them' (p13). Michael lives in a postmodern world of bricolage, where images from the silver screen punctuate his own inadequate world which he tries to manipulate unsuccessfully as a writer. As an educated gay man with money, Michael travels extensively, although he prefers his time spent on the plane to what awaits him at his destination. He is obsessed with his appearance and the inevitable effects of aging: 'My hair without exaggeration is clearly falling to the floor' (p.10). Michael's Catholic background brings a sense of guilt that adds to his burden. He drinks too much, but his redeeming quality is his sense of humour. Both Michael and Donald appear to be dissatisfied with life. It is this negativity which drew a considerable amount of adverse criticism of the play. John M. Clum (1994) suggests that *The Boys in the Band*

was 'still presenting a picture of gay self-hatred when the Stonewall riot took place' (p.230). While a gay spectator might view the behaviour of these characters as understandable, since they were fighting a battle against a society which still regarded homosexuality as undesirable, or at best as a neurosis, a straight spectator might have had their worst fears confirmed, that gay people were self-obsessed, guilt-ridden wasters whose lives had little purpose beyond the next sexual encounter.

The confessional element in this play is mainly there to develop the characters, and while some are eager to distance themselves from their past, others are not so enthusiastic. When Bernard exposes Emory as someone who frequents the gay bars in search of casual sexual encounters, Emory responds by saying: 'You have to tell everything, don't you!' (p.37). The compunction to confess past sexual encounters and practices may add substance to the characters and contribute to the humour, but it also encourages straight audiences to exercise moral judgements of gay lifestyles. Whether consciously or not, the playwright is confirming the 'otherness' of his characters; the sexual becomes the index by which the subject is measured.

Yet there is much more substance to this play. The variety of characters, their contrasting backgrounds and experiences is in itself a testimony to the diversity of the gay community at the time. Far from simple stereotypes, their only common bond is that they are not heterosexual. Donald and Michael have both exhausted themselves on the gay bar circuit and are confronting the realities of life as gay 'thirty-somethings'. Michael is 'working through his Oedipus complex...with a machete' (p.70). Harold is struggling with the gay obsession with youth and external beauty. When referring to the beauty of Cowboy, he asks: 'How can his beauty compare with my soul?' Yet he admits that he would sell the latter 'in a flash for some skin-deep, transitory, meaningless beauty' (p.72).

Hank, a more sexually complex character who is seeking a divorce from his wife with whom he has had two children, does not dismiss his heterosexual past as simply a mistake: 'I really and truly felt that I was in love with my wife when I married her. It wasn't altogether my trying to prove something to myself. I did love her and she loved me (p.109). His apparent devotion to his new love Larry conflicts with the latter's determination to avoid committing himself to a monogamous relationship. Emory is the only character who is incapable of concealing his true nature from Alan (Michael's straight college friend) who is also in the middle of some personal crisis and who intrudes on the party. Emory is the camp black 'queen' who is the butt of all the jokes, but who seems to be the character most relaxed with his own sexuality. Just as he is unable to hide his colour, his sexuality is also clear for all to see: 'I've known what I was since I was four years old' (p.109). If a straight audience begins by identifying with Alan who appears to be the only straight character in the play, they soon realize that they have been deceived. They may become unsettled when he describes Hank as 'a very attractive fellow' (p.50). Larry has already claimed to have seen Alan in gay bars (p.46) and when Michael accuses him of sleeping with a friend called Justin when he was at college, the picture of a homosexual in denial is complete. Crowley is subtly suggesting that sexual preference is not always self-evident. While Alan is prepared to conceal his homosexuality behind the façade of a wife and two children, Hank has finally accepted his and subsequently left his family. For Crowley, Hank's crisis of sexual identity has been resolved. He seems to be suggesting to the audience that the very nature of heterosexuality is itself in crisis.

Many critics of the time focussed on the self-deprecating dialogue of the play. As Kaier Curtin (1987, p.328) points out, the critic Stanley Kauffmann thought that in this play the author was 'reflecting "the rot" of his own lifestyle' in contrast to previous

authors who had set out to 'distort marriage and femininity'. It is true that some characters notably Michael and Donald display elements of self-loathing. Yet this is something they are trying to come to terms with: 'If we...if we could just...not hate ourselves so much. That's it you know. If we could learn not to hate ourselves quite so very much' (p.128). They recognize that this self-loathing is not of their own making but that it has been projected upon them by a society that equates homosexuality with neurosis and narcissism.

The questions raised by *The Boys in the Band* are central to the challenge that faced the newly emerging gay community in both the U.S. and the U.K. in the late 1960s and early 1970s. I am not implying here that gay lifestyles were being developed simultaneously on both sides of the Atlantic, but the fact that the success of this play extended to London's West End suggests that similar stereotypical attitudes were being challenged in Britain. Having asserted themselves and gained some autonomy and freedom through changes in the law, gay people faced a range of opportunities for developing their lifestyle. If Michael is tired of his 'party to party, bar to bar, bed to bed, hangover to hangover' (p.14) existence, what does he replace it with? The play offers an alternative in the relationship of Hank and Larry. Although Hank, having been married for some years sees the future in a monogamous relationship, Larry is determined to maintain his independence: 'It's my right to lead my sex life without answering to anybody - Hank included' (p.111). In spite of this, they resolve to try to make their relationship work. Nicholas de Jongh (1992) suggests that 'this couple serve as positive role models' (p.139), thus providing a possible alternative to Michael and Donald's misery. There is no suggestion that by pairing off they are somehow aping heterosexual marriage. It is the possibility of such a relationship in which there is 'respect... for each other's freedom'

being successful which gives *The Boys in the Band* its optimistic ending. In this way it challenges stereotypical views of gay people. Not only are these characters presented with all their shortcomings, but they are also able to contemplate a future that holds many possibilities. The drama emanates from how they confront and deal with those possibilities. The 'truth game' played out in the second Act gives them the opportunity of coming to terms with their past; a process that is necessary before any of them can move on. While Hank and Larry successfully negotiate this theatrical mechanism, the failure of other characters to do so leaves the audience in no doubt that they have a long way to go.

In common with other plays of this period, *The Boys in the Band* presents us with characters that are faced with the option of continuing a promiscuous lifestyle or with trying to develop a basis for successful long-term relationships. Producing plays, which tackled such themes, became commercially viable in both London's West End and New York's Broadway. Playwrights at last had the opportunity to explore homosexuality in a wide diversity of social, cultural and historical contexts. In the period of new found confidence that characterised the following two decades Martin Sherman was able to show the plight of homosexuals in the German concentration camps in *Bent* (1979). Julian Mitchell was able to consider the connection between homosexuality and political treachery within the context of an English public school in *Another Country* (1981) and Hugh Whitmore to examine the social pressures exerted upon the Enigma code breaker Alan Turing to deny his homosexual tendencies in post-war Britain in *Breaking the Code* (1986). Such plays served to re-define and re-claim the homosexual experience and to create what Nicholas de Jongh describes as 'gay heroes' (1992, p145).

What is significant in my view about the plays of this period is that they did little to change public perceptions about what being gay actually meant. By this I mean that

homosexuality still exclusively implied the act of sodomy. Although the act of loving another man could manifest itself in a variety of sexual acts bringing mutual satisfaction to both parties, anal intercourse has been and continues to be thought of as the single intended act engaged in by homosexuals. *The Oxford Dictionary*, however, simply describes the homosexual as: 'feeling or involving sexual attraction only to persons of the same sex'. The assumption that penetration must be a part of sexual activity comes from the straight/gay dichotomy; the idea that somehow, gay and straight are the reverse sides of the same coin. While straight men impregnate women, gay men impregnate men or are themselves impregnated by men. This concept also perpetuated the myth that homosexuals had to play the active or passive role in gay relationships. I raise this issue for three main reasons: firstly, because it reinforces the archaic notion that gay sex is somehow inferior because it does not result in procreation; secondly, because it suggests that through acting out the active/passive roles, gay men were in fact aping heterosexual relationships and thirdly, because it was to have a crucial effect on how the wider public was to react to the onset of the AIDS epidemic.

The failure of central governments to recognize and respond to AIDS reflected a lack of concern for minority groups such as gays and intravenous drug users. Initially, the unexplained sickness was quickly labelled 'gay-related immune deficiency syndrome' or GRID for short. The new epidemic was called the 'gay plague' or 'gay cancer'. For example the *Daily Telegraph* (2 May 1983) ran the headline: '"Gay Plague" May Lead to Blood Ban on Homosexuals', and the *Daily Mirror* (2 May 1983) 'Alert over "Gay Plague"'. There was a general feeling that gay people had brought this disease on themselves as a direct result of their unnatural sexual behaviour. As Neil Miller (1995) points out in *Out Of the Past*, between 1983 and 1985 scientists 'had learned a great deal

about AIDS. They learned that it was spread through blood products, through sharing of hypodermic needles, and through sexual contact involving an exchange of body fluids. They determined that it could not be spread through casual contact and that unprotected anal sex was the most 'efficient' way to transmit the virus...' (p.440). When it was suggested that anal intercourse was the most likely vehicle for passing on the virus, it became easy for heterosexuals to believe that this was not a disease that needed to concern them. The gay/straight dichotomy was once again re-affirmed thus allowing a comfort zone of complacency to dominate the mid 1980s.

It has been suggested by Leo Bersani in his essay 'Is The Rectum A Grave?' (1986, pp.197-222), that the paranoiac and homophobic reaction of the media to the disease reflected a basic fear of male submission and indeed male masochism itself in a society which promotes the concept of male dominance through its culture and perceptions of sexuality. This attitude is conveniently expressed in the words of George Gale in *The Daily Mail*, 21 July 1989: 'The message to be learned - that the Department of Health should now be urgently propagating - is that active homosexuals are potentially murderers and that the act of buggery kills.'[13] Such views were commonplace throughout the 1980s and they were frequently expressed in the editorial columns of newspapers on both sides of the Atlantic.

In response to this blatant homophobia gay men became re-politicised. During the late 1970s there had been a marked decline in activism both from the Gay Rights Movement in Britain and in the United States. As Neil Miller (1995) explains: 'The counter-cultural visions of the gay liberation prophets gave way to a more mundane and middle-class gay world – the restaurants, discos, boutiques, softball and bowling leagues,

[13] George Gale's statement is quoted from *A Queer Reader*, Ed. Patrick Higgins, p.275.

marching bands and choral groups, churches and synagogues of the urban gay ghettos' (p.422). In a sense liberation had brought about a level of complacency amongst those whose lives had become relatively secure, especially within urban areas. Colin Spencer (1995) suggests that: 'The HIV epidemic forced the gay community to confront the anguish of losing friends and lovers long before their time; they had to cope with the long and painful process of dying and with death itself' (p.377). The Terrence Higgins Trust was formed in Britain in 1982, and in New York, the work of Larry Kramer and other activists led to an organization known as Gay Men's Health Crisis.

The formulaic assumption that homosexuality is synonymous with buggery led to a polarization of public opinion. Straights demonized gays for wilfully spreading the virus while gays saw themselves as the hapless victims of a disease which some believed to have been started on purpose. For example, Dr Alan Cantwell (1988) has written extensively about the links between AIDS and biowarfare experimentation.

While anal sex is an important part of many gay relationships, many heterosexual couples also enjoy it. In 1988 G.E.Wyatt reported in *Archives of Sexual Behaviour* (Vol.17: pp.201-239, Vol.17: pp.289-332), as many as forty three percent of white females and twenty one percent of Afro-American women surveyed at a large mid-western university, had experienced anal intercourse at some point during their lives (Masters, Johnson and Kolodny, 1995, p430). Conversely, there is some evidence to suggest an increasing number of gay men do not engage in anal sex. In *Homosexualities* (1978), A.P.Bell and M.S.Weinberg found that twenty two percent of gay males had not experienced anal intercourse in the previous year. It is quite likely that this percentage will have increased as gay men became aware of the high risk nature of this particular form of

sexual contact. Masters, Johnson and Kolodny (1995) even go as far as to suggest that 'other gay men find the idea of anal sex discomforting and repulsive' (p.430).

What is quite evident is that sexual practices do not necessarily conform to expectations and are far more diverse than might be suggested by the heterosexual/homosexual dichotomy. The fact that heterosexual anal sex was, and is still very much a taboo subject, probably contributed to the idea that AIDS was exclusively a 'gay plague'. The media also conveniently ignored the presence of bisexual men and women who might unwittingly have been passing the virus on to the heterosexual community. As a result of this plethora of misconceptions, the gay community was left on its own to respond to the disease. In this time of confusion several American playwrights, notable Larry Kramer, Terrence McNally and Tony Kushner confronted the issue of AIDS by making it a central theme of their work.

Larry Kramer's celebrated *The Normal Heart* (1985) presents its audience with a message, which was not favourably received by many in the gay community. Drawing on his own experience during the early years of the epidemic, Kramer wanted to bring home the urgency of the situation and ultimately alter the sexual behaviour of gay people. The theatre becomes a political vehicle for delivering that message. *The Normal Heart* is theatrical realism in its most potent form. In 1993, Larry Kramer points out in his introduction that three of the original cast actually died of AIDS. The play they acted out became their own reality. When the play was first performed in New York it was not without its critics. The artistic director Max Stafford-Clark saw the play in New York at Jo Papp's Public Theatre in 1985 before rehearsing and opening it at the Royal Court theatre in London in 1986. He admitted that: 'the melodramatic elements of the performance gave it a shallowness I did not like.'

Kramer's characters have a political dimension that was not evident in earlier plays. In the first scene, Ned Weeks, the central character based on Kramer himself, accompanies a friend to hospital to get the results of medical tests. When it is confirmed that he shares symptoms with some twenty eight other cases, sixteen of whom are already dead, the audience is left in no doubt of the seriousness of the situation. In contrast to *The Boys in the Band*, there is no attempt to categorize or stereotype characters in the opening descriptions. Mickey is simply described as being 'in his late thirties, intense and a bit unkempt' while Craig 'is in his mid-20s and very appealing.' Their conversation lacks the 'camp' banter that characterizes many earlier plays. However, Kramer is quick to identify the promiscuous element in gay life since it is this element that he is ultimately determined to change. Weeks' early conversation with Mickey confirms this: 'You've had so many [lovers] I never remember their last names' (p.3). Kramer distances his main character from mainstream gay politics: 'Gay is good to that crowd, no matter what. There's no room for criticism, looking at ourselves critically' (p.7). Another stereotypical element identified in the early scenes is that of gay as victim. Ned: 'I hate how we play victim, when many of us, most of us, don't have to' (p.8). The criticism here is that gays have reacted passively to the AIDS epidemic accepting the inevitability of death: 'Do you realize that you are talking about millions of men who have singled out promiscuity to be their principal political agenda, the one they'd die for before abandoning' (p.8). The assumption that gay men are sexually promiscuous is confirmed. Kramer himself confirms the caricature of the homosexual as sexual predator. Yet it could be argued that the high profile of cosmopolitan gays cruising bars and clubs for sexual partners was a misleading one. Colin Spencer (1995, p.373) suggests that the apparent promiscuity of gay men was no more than one element of the sexual revolution of the 1970s and 1980s. The social

ethic of the time was self-fulfilment and 'the gratification of inner needs and desires' whether heterosexual or homosexual. Even at the height of this period of sexual experimentation, one piece of research by Bell and Weinberg (1978) in a survey of 979 homosexuals found that only twenty seven percent of gay men could be classified as having a high number of sexual partners. In common with heterosexuals with multiple sexual partners, these were largely young people. Of those surveyed twenty eight percent were involved in single partner relationships (1995, p.393). If the public perception of homosexuals was influenced by the high visibility of cosmopolitan gays, research suggests that this is only a part of the picture.

The central character of Weeks is himself committed to the idea of monogamous relationships but he appears to be on his own. The judgement and expertise of Dr. Emma Brookner who presents the facts as she sees them to Weeks, is never in question. She is the instrument of enlightenment, the representation of medical impartiality and of humanitarian concern. She calls upon Weeks to 'Tell gay men to stop having sex' (p.9). While this message is likely to be unpopular with the gay community, it is easy to see how a straight audience might consider this to be an appropriate solution to the problem. It inevitably confirms a deep-seated suspicion that anal intercourse is both unnatural and unhealthy. The vigour with which Weeks takes up this message, is a reflection of Kramer's own dissatisfaction with gay promiscuity:

> Why is it we can only talk about our sexuality, and so relentlessly? You know, Mickey, all we've created is generations of guys who can't deal with each other as anything but erections. (p.23)

Weeks is also full of self-doubt; he's not even sure there is a viable alternative to hedonism: 'I don't think there are many gay relationships that work out anyway' (p.17).

There is an element of the self-loathing in Weeks that is common to several characters in *The Boys in the Band.* The common strand of therapy is also present in the background, reflecting an innate uneasiness about sexual identity. Weeks is unhappy even about his own past:

> *Ned*: No, I don't think much of promiscuity. And what's that got to do with gay envelopes?
> *Mickey*: But you've certainly done your share.
> *Ned*: That doesn't mean that I approve of it or like myself for doing it. (p.25)

In a sense he is reinforcing the view that heterosexual lifestyles are preferable to any gay alternative. Mickey confirms the stereotypical gay view that 'sex is liberating' and he accuses Ned of being a 'closet straight' because he is 'always screaming about relationships, and monogamy and fidelity and holy matrimony' (p.25). The speech in which Ned recites the names of famous historical 'homosexuals' represents a desperate attempt to claim a cultural identity beyond the purely sexual present. His desire to establish a canon of notable 'homos', to which he would presumably like to add his own name, marks the beginning of a wider and more grandiose project undertaken by many queer critics and theorists; to re-write history using twentieth century definitions of sexual identity. As Nicholas de Jongh (1992) points out, 'it is implausible to argue that these artists share an identity' (p.185). There can be no simplistic linking of historical figures through history based on modern notions of sexuality since the identity of each figure will be defined within their own particular social context. By drawing on history in this way, gay theorists create the illusion that a persecuted 'homosexual' minority has always existed within western society. Thus gay liberation becomes not only a watershed for twentieth century homosexuals, but symbolically for homosexuals throughout history.

The achievement of Larry Kramer's *The Normal Heart* was that it brought the reality of living with AIDS to the attention of a much wider audience. Intended as a clarion call to awaken the authorities from their indifference, Kramer covered the walls of the stage

set with details and statistics relating the latest facts and figures about the disease. Kramer, more than any other single figure, developed comparisons with the Jewish Holocaust. Just as more radical action on the part of the American government might have saved Jewish lives in the concentration camps, so too a more dynamic response to AIDS might save the lives of young Americans. The suggestion is also made that AIDS might indeed have been intended as the 'final solution' for homosexuals in America. The politically aware homosexual depicted in *The Normal Heart* was an entirely new entity, made more unexpected by the way in which the central character turns his vitriolic diatribes against the gay community itself. Ned's confession does not expose a past of promiscuous sexual encounters but one of failed relationships. It may be that Kramer felt that his political message, intended for gay and straight audiences alike, should be delivered by a character who shares some of the values of both communities in order to increase its potency. Not only are the authorities expected to turn all their resources into finding a cure for the disease, but gay people themselves are implored to change their sexual habits. In many ways the character of Weeks breaks new ground in the representation of homosexuals on stage. Yet Weeks is a complex character, struggling with his self guilt whilst trying to motivate others to recognize the disease that then threatened the entire gay community.

In the final scene in the hospital where Felix, Weeks' lover, is dying, the two main characters are joined together in a symbolic marriage ceremony. It is a gesture intended to create pathos and acceptance from the audience. Who could, at this stage, argue that two men in this situation don't have the right to use whatever social rituals are available to them to demonstrate their love? Yet this subversion of the traditionally heterosexual act of marriage is making an important statement; that gay men should have an equal right to formalize their relationship in a way that demands recognition from the heterosexual world. Is the gay political lobby that promotes the rights of gay couples to get married (whether in a church or in a registry office) contributing to the stereotypical view that gays simply want to ape heterosexual relationships? For Larry Kramer, this seemed to be an

appropriate conclusion for his play at the time of writing. The unfortunate consequence of the idea of gay marriage is that it perpetuates the myth amongst heterosexuals that, just as in heterosexual relationships, one partner has to be passive/feminine while the other must be active/masculine. As Masters, Johnson and Kolodny (1995) point out: 'The fact is, most gay men who participate in anal sex enjoy both roles' (p.430). Is Kramer 'playing' with the heterosexual institution of marriage in an absurd postmodern parody? It is more likely that this represents a personal plea to be allowed to come in from the periphery of society; to be included rather than excluded; to establish a semblance of 'sameness' rather than 'difference'.

It is significant that similar messages occur in the vast majority of successful AIDS related plays of the period. Defining gay characters as victims who reluctantly conform to monogamous relationships became a formula that proved popular with wider straight audience. The element of contrition for past misdemeanours was key to engendering pathos in these plays. There is much more to these plays than a desire on the part of the playwrights to 'represent the human reality of the epidemic' as Alan Sinfield (1999) suggests in *Out on Stage*. Yet Sinfield also points out that Ned's analysis of the AIDS crisis 'is undermined by his inability to endorse gay men as they currently are' (p.321). He is criticised for being 'obsessed with the approval of straight society' and for colluding 'in the notion that straight-acting role models should spearhead the campaign' to raise awareness of the dangers of AIDS. These are perhaps minor criticisms when we consider the vast challenge that faced Kramer in 1985. When the play was revived in 2004 at New York's Public Theatre to the acclaim of the critics, its run was cut short due to poor attendances. While it may have proved a too painful reminder for gay men who had lost many friends during the epidemic, it would also seem that its historical context had lost resonance with a wider audience.

If such plays provide a kind of therapeutic environment for gay people to work through the AIDS related issues that confront them, they also appeal to a straight audience

for acceptance, forgiveness and sympathy through passive acquiescence. By contrast, the plays of Robert Chesley, which re-affirmed the right of gay men to casual sexual relationships in the face of AIDS *Night Sweat* (1984) and *Jerker* (1986) rarely moved beyond gay fringe theatre.

Another play that polarizes the issues facing gay people in the AIDS crisis is William M. Hoffman's *As Is* (1985). Set in New York, Rich, a young writer is separating from his lover Saul who is a professional photographer. The play's opening scene presents them dividing up their possessions. Saul is leaving to live with Chet, 'a handsome, boyish man in his early twenties'. After some months of living with Chet, Rich discovers that he has the symptoms of an AIDS related illness. The immediate response of those around him is one of shock followed by rejection. Even Chet wants him to use a separate soap dish. Chet's rejection is complete when he starts to sleep separately and spend his evenings out on the town. Unlike Ned Weeks in *The Normal Heart* both Saul and Rich enjoyed the pleasures of casual sex during the pre-AIDS years:

> *Rich*: God, how I used to love sleaze: the whining self-pity of a rainy Monday night in a leather bar in early spring; five o'clock in the morning in the Mineshaft, with the bathtubs full of men dying to get pissed on and whipped;...
> *Saul*: And suddenly it's Sunday night and you're getting fucked in the second floor window of the Hotel Christopher. (p.27)

Rich wants to continue picking up men even after he is diagnosed and admits that he would put off telling them after candid admission led to immediate rejection. Like the characters in *Boys in the Band*, they talk nostalgically about former conquests. Once again, the open confession to sexual promiscuity confirms the 'otherness' of the central characters. Unlike the characters in *Boys in the Band*, Rich and Saul, by recounting their past sexual practices, reveal that they have potentially been party to spreading the disease to other people. The link between sexual promiscuity and pestilence is confirmed. However, this confession then makes redemption possible.

When Rich returns to be looked after by Saul he is financially as well as emotionally insecure:

> *Rich*: One thing. I'm embarrassed. I'm just about broke. The doctors. Tests.
> *Saul*: I thought you were insured.
> *Rich*: They're pulling a fast one. (p.32)

Hoffman attempts to show how society takes away any security that it once extended to gay men, as a result of the spread of AIDS. Once again we are presented with the AIDS patient as social victim. The only choice left for Rich is to fall back on the generosity of his ex-lover. As his health declines, both his estranged brother and friend Lily offer belated support. The message of hope, that society will rally round once it realizes the sheer voracity of this deadly disease and the way in which it decimates individual lives, seems over-optimistic. While Kramer's play ends with the bedside marriage of the two main characters, the relationship of Rich and Saul blossoms once again in the face of adversity. Their final reunion, a sexual encounter on the hospital bed while the hospital porter turns a blind eye, promotes monogamy over promiscuity. Nicholas de Jongh (1992) argues that Hoffman's play differs from *The Normal Heart* because it 'has no truck with the kind of gay spiritual identity that Kramer proposes' (p.185). He claims this play as a celebration of the 'gay promiscuity that Kramer so deplores and condemns' (p.185). Yet the endurance of the relationship of the two main characters is their salvation. A romantic reading of the play might suggest that in a sense they are pardoned for their past behaviour because they have chosen to be with each other.

The crisis of AIDS continued to be the central theme in gay drama throughout the 1980s and into the 1990s. In common with the plays I have mentioned, most portray gay characters as victims who, having confessed their transgressions, seek redemption within monogamous relationships. If on the surface they present to an audience the plight of gay people in the face of contagion, they do so in a context dominated by heterosexist values.

Without exception these characters are defined exclusively by their sexual difference and not as entities in their own right. The effect of AIDS drama has been to polarize that difference and reinforce stereotypes. The message of these plays is essentially political since they were written to awaken mainstream audiences to the threat of AIDS to all sections of society. While the threat of AIDS remains, that message continues to be apposite. If it should ever diminish, then the power of many of these plays to engage an audience may be lost. What is evident, with the benefit of hindsight, is that they have done little to challenge the traditional heterosexual/homosexual dichotomy.

In 1992 (according to the back cover of Nick Hern's London publication of the play) Tony Kushner's *Angels in America* was heralded by *Village Voice* as 'a landmark not just among AIDS plays or gay drama but in American theatre.' In 1993, the play was applauded by most theatre critics. The *New York Times* critic Frank Rich (5 May 1993) suggests that this is much more than a play just about AIDS. He draws attention to Kushner's conviction that the stage alone: 'is a space large enough to accommodate everything from precise realism to surrealistic hallucination, from black comedy to religious revelation.' He proclaims it 'a true American work in its insistence on embracing all possibilities in art and life, he makes the spectacular case that they can all be brought into fusion in one play.'

While two of the central characters are diagnosed as having AIDS, this is much more than a play about the effects of the disease and how characters cope with it. When the presence of the disease is revealed to the audience, the circumstances are unlike those we have come to expect from previous AIDS plays. Prior's revelation to his partner Louis that the lesions on his body are in fact Kaposi's Sarcoma (p.11), is made as Louis is burying his Jewish grandmother. The fact that he had abandoned his grandmother in her old age, and was subsequently experiencing feelings of guilt, prepares the audience for his negative response to Prior's illness: 'I pretended for years that she was already dead. When they called to say she had died it was a surprise. I abandoned her' (p.14). Louis rationalizes his

inability to cope with illness by arguing that it has no place within his 'neo-Hegelian positivist sense of constant historical progress towards happiness' (p.14). When he approaches the Rabbi to confess his ambivalence to sickness, the Rabbi refuses to accept his confession: 'You want to confess, better you should find a priest' (p.15). There is no simple absolution for Louis because: 'Catholics believe in forgiveness. Jews believe in guilt.' This negative attitude to sickness is one of many themes that give *Angels in America* the depth that most AIDS dramas lack.

Unlike previous AIDS plays, *Angels in America* breaks with the tradition of realism. Although there are scenes graphically depicting the pain and horror experienced by AIDS sufferers, there are also scenes of comic fantasy involving ethereal entities and metaphysical interventions. Prior is visited by his ancestors and by angels. He visits Heaven which is depicted as San Francisco after the 1906 earthquake and is ruled over by leaderless angels. It is indeed a vision that challenges classical concepts of Heaven. Any idea that these visions might simply be the delusions of a man in the advanced stages of illness is dispelled when other characters experience similar interventions. Harper, Joe's estranged wife, is transported to Antarctica to live out her days in idyllic isolation where her illusions are shattered. Roy Cohn is visited by the ghost of Ethel Rosenberg, the woman he put on death row. This slippage from the physical into the metaphysical unsettles the audience because it breaks with the tradition of realism that was characteristic of earlier AIDS dramas. Kushner puts forward the unpresentable in presentation itself. There is a real sense of what Lyotard describes as the creation of 'event' and a rejection of established conventions.

Kushner's four gay characters and the problems that they encounter are placed within a setting that is chaotic contemporary America. It is a society in which power rather than sexual orientation is examined. Roy Cohn, a potent figure within the state legislature, uses his power to manipulate those around him. As a conservative, he hides his own homosexuality behind a philosophy of patronage to younger men: 'The most precious

asset in life, I think, is the ability to be a good son' (p.40). He names Joe McCarthy as one of his own 'father' figures:

> He valued me because I am a good lawyer, but he loved me because I was and am a good son....I brought out something tender in him. He would have died for me. And me for him. (p.40)

Cohn is a complex figure who not only refuses to be defined as a homosexual, but who was also active against the homosexual political lobby: 'Homosexuals are not men who sleep with other men. Homosexuals are men who in fifteen years of trying cannot get a pissante anti-discrimination bill through City Council' (p.31). His refusal to identify with gay people, even when he discovers that he has AIDS, is based on the opinion that gay people have no power. In a society where power and influence are everything, minority groups are at the bottom of the pecking order. There can be no place for them except in the margins. It is ironic that the one character who appears to be beyond redemption challenges the gay/straight dichotomy by asserting himself as an individual: 'Because *what* I am is defined entirely by *who* I am' (p.32). But it is power, which allows Cohn to define his own identity. He never denies that he sleeps with men; he simply refuses to allow himself to be defined by that activity. In a sense, he is the victim of a society that deifies the lawmakers into beings who, unlike ordinary citizens, are beyond the power of the law. Through Cohn, Kushner acknowledges that confusion and chaos dominate such a society: 'I see the universe, Joe, as a kind of sandstorm in outer space with winds of mega-hurricane velocity but instead of grains of sand it's shards and splinters of glass' (p.4). Cohn is the living personification of America itself, with its manic energy, omnipotent power and endless capacity for both good and evil. In this disturbing world order where people have lost the capacity to love, Cohn pursues his own agenda. John M. Clum (1994) describes him as 'a postmodern Ahab' (p.318). To the audience he is an awe-inspiring

monster who dominates the stage.

Unlike Cohn, his assistant Joe (a young Mormon lawyer) is unable to rationalize his homosexual tendencies. His dilemma is that he cannot reconcile his inner emotions with the life he has chosen to lead. His unhappy marriage to Harper, a hardened Valium addict, leaves him seeking sexual gratification elsewhere. Joe's life has been dictated for him, since homosexuals have no place within either the Mormon faith or the ethos of Reaganite politics. He shares the self-loathing common to numerous gay characters in earlier AIDS drama. When confronted with his homosexuality by his wife, he doesn't deny it; he simply suggests that it is of no consequence: 'so long as I have fought, with everything I have, to kill it' (p.27). But these feelings are beyond his control. He would like to define his own identity and follow the example of Cohn, but his conscience wouldn't allow it. He is torn between what he sees as his moral obligations and immoral temptation: 'I pray for God to crush me, break me up into little pieces and start all over again' (p.34). Yet Joe is no stereotypical closet queen. His walks in the park; his separation from Harper and his eventual pairing with Louis are not the rites of passage that we normally associate with 'coming out'. He has also been duped into believing that the power wielded by Roy Cohn has something to offer him. Part of him wants to engage in Cohn's father/son relationship in order to gain a share of his power: 'The son offers the father his life as a vessel for carrying forth his father's dream' (p.40). To achieve that, he duly offers himself to Cohn: 'I love you, Roy. There's so much I want, to be... what you see in me, I want to be a participant in the world, in your world Roy, I want to be capable of that' (p.82). But his conscience will not allow him to bail Cohn out of the lawsuit that awaits him: '...I can't do this. Not because I don't believe in you, but because I believe in you so much, in what you stand for, at heart, the order, the decency.' A Lacanian reading would recognize that, for Cohn, the phallus is both metaphorically and literally the symbol of power.

Joe's relationship with Harper is more like that of a mother and son. While any sexual attraction has gone, he remains determined to 'look after her'. It is Cohn who

repeatedly tries to intervene by splitting them up. In Cohn's world, women are guilty of holding the men back: 'We've seen that kind of thing before, haven't we? These men and their wives' (p.46). As the Lacanian father figure, he tries to impose his values and 'language' on Joe. Cohn's is a language that has its own mores and taboos. In his world, male servitude and loyalty are everything. Refusal to comply will result in symbolic castration:

> When Washington calls you, my pretty young punk friend, you go or you can go fuck yourself sideways 'cause the train has pulled out of the station, and you are *out*, nowhere, out in the cold. (p.81)

What makes both parts of *Angels in America* stand out amongst gay plays about AIDS is that they relate personal issues with the political on a global scale. But this is not the political conscience evident in Kramer's *The Normal Heart*. Kushner considers the integrity of homosexuality against a backdrop of religion, democracy, justice and the break up of the American family. There is no room for stereotypes in a world where nobody has the answers and everyone is struggling to make sense of life. Belize, the black nurse who is also a drag queen, says: 'I still don't understand what love is. Justice is simple. Democracy is simple. Those things are very unambivalent. But love is very hard. And it goes bad for you if you violate the hard law of love' (p.76). And yet, if the future is bleak for gay men, it is portrayed as equally bleak for civilization.

The sheer scale of the Armageddon scenario is evident as the angels sit around in Act 5, Scene 5 listening to their antiquated radio set as the catastrophe of Chernobyl is reported. If the angels are powerless to prevent this, it is, as Prior points out, because God: 'isn't coming back' (p.89). The angels cannot even bring an end to the plague:

> Oh We have tried.
> We suffer with You but
> We do not know. We

Do not know how. (*Part Two, Perestroika*, p.88)

Within this context each character has a complexity of problems to deal with. Louis, one of the more established gay characters, having deserted his grandmother and Prior, eventually loses Joe as well.

In *Perestroika*, he is prepared to overlook Joe's Republican sympathies because they have something in common; they both walked out on their partners. Louis wants to believe that Joe is without remorse: 'You seem to be able to live with what you've done, leaving your wife, you're not all torn up and guilty' (p.19). He believes that his relationship with Joe will help to alleviate some of his own guilt. But as his wife Harper points out when she invades the privacy of the lovers' bedroom, Joe does 'have dreams. Bad ones' (p.20). There is no salvation for Louis through Joe, especially when it is revealed to him that Joe works for Roy Cohn. Louis is aware that Cohn has an AIDS related illness and is concerned that Joe might have contracted the virus from him. In their relative states of desperation, both men return to their original partners hoping to find some sense of consolation, but this is not a play that presents its audience with simple solutions. When Joe and Harper finally sleep together again, Harper has to admit that he keeps his eyes closed while they are having sex because he likes to imagine that he is with men. Thus, he is unable to console Harper any more than she is able to console him. In the end, the only consolation for Joe comes from Roy who appears as a vision to him. The father/son relationship is reinforced: 'Show me a little of what you've learned, baby Joe. Out in the world' (p.84). When Roy kisses Joe softly on the mouth, it is as a confirmation of one person's power over another.

Louis' attempt at reconciliation with Prior, which is perhaps to atone for his past disloyalty, ends in further rejection. The dissolution of relationships continues until, ultimately, there is no successful pairing, whether gay or straight. All relationships are placed on an equal footing and found wanting. The old ethnic communities and power

structures have little to offer. Yet the sense of guilt associated with homosexual tendencies in earlier plays is absent here, although most characters carry guilt of one form or another around with them. There is no real narrative of emancipation or even progress, since God removed himself from the equation. If there is hope expressed in the Epilogue, it is achieved in spite of the selfish actions of most of the characters within the play. Only Belize and Prior transcend the destructive spiral of desire and self-gratification that dominates the play. John M. Clum (1992) suggests that Belize represents 'the moral centre of the *Perestroika*' because he is able to 'enact what others theorize' (p.322). He is able to give Cohn invaluable advice about his treatment and is even able to forgive Cohn on his deathbed although he describes it as the 'hardest thing' to do (p.135). Belize is not only the real ministering angel, but he has the security of being on the periphery of the failed relationships that pervade the play. When Louis accuses Belize of jealousy because he was in love with Prior before Louis met him, Belize confidently replies:

> Just so's the record's straight: I love Prior but I was never in love with him. I have a Man, uptown, and I have since *long* before I first laid my eyes on the sorry-ass sight of you. (p.61)

Belize's love is for anyone who suffers with AIDS. It is this compassion for dying people that leads him to hate everything America stands for: 'I hate this country. It's just big ideas, and stories, and people dying, and people like you' (p.61). For his selflessness, Belize is the only character who enjoys the comparative security of a long-term relationship, even if it is external to the plot.

If Belize is the font of compassion in *Angels in America*, then Prior is the source of prophecy. After his unexpected and erotic encounter with an angel in Act One of *Perestoika*, he is filled with elation: 'I'm scared. And also full of...I don't know, Joy or something. Hope' (p.8). He sums up the significance of AIDS for America after he has

attended the funeral of a mutual friend with Belize. He suggests that the funeral ceremony is simply a parody since homosexuals don't really count in the American dream: 'we're just a bad dream the real world is having, and the real world's waking up. And he's *dead*' (p.21). Prior is the recipient of the angel's message that rails against the break up of an ordered world blighted by constant movement and migration and calls for a return to 'Stasis'. Only by undoing the evils of exploration and expansionism will God return again. Only Belize can see the flaws in such a theory: 'don't migrate, don't mingle, that's...malevolent, some of us didn't exactly *choose* to migrate, know what I'm saying...' (p.30).

For these two central characters the mere fact of being homosexual is not a problem. Unlike Louis or Joe, self-doubt or self-loathing does not subdue them. They do not deny their sexuality either to themselves or to the world around them. For Belize, the dramatic conflict is with AIDS and his role as a nurse is to bring comfort to the sufferers in his care. Even though he has AIDS, Prior survives throughout the play. Kushner avoids the melodramatic death bed scene typical of earlier AIDS dramas, thereby creating one of the first AIDS sufferers who refuses to be crushed by the disease. In the final scene of *Millennium Approaches* Prior asserts his will for life: 'my blood is clean, my brain is fine, I can handle pressure, I am a gay man and I am used to pressure, to trouble, I am tough and strong...' (p.90). Far from being the victim, he becomes a reluctant prophet. In *Perestroika*, Kushner sees AIDS as a symptom of the wider American malaise, in what has become a crisis point in its history: 'Maybe I am a prophet. Not just me, all of us who are dying now. Maybe we've caught the virus of prophecy' (p.31). Finally, when the angel in America, devoid of God, wants Prior to spread the message of anti-migration, he wrestles (like Jacob) for his freedom. The vision promulgated by the angel is too simplistic. It reflects the Middle American view that migration and racial intermixing are the causes of social fragmentation. For Prior, who has his own ideas about the problems facing America, this is not the answer: 'Anti-Migration, that's so feeble, I can't believe you

couldn't do better than that, free me, unfetter me, bless me or whatever but I will be let go' (p.78). Submission to the angel leads to orgiastic pleasures, but like all orgasms, the pleasure is ephemeral. It is significant that the angel turns his attentions to Harper, Joe's Mormon wife because she is more susceptible to the Anti-Migration argument: 'I've finally found the secret of all that Mormon energy. Devastation. That's what makes people migrate, build things. Heartbroken people do it, people who have lost love' (p.80). While Harper is taken in, Prior remains fiercely independent. For him there can be no simple solutions, and yet he is not without hope for the future that sets its own pace: 'We just can't stop. We're not rocks, progress, migration, motion is...modernity. It's *animate*, it's what living things do' (p.87-88). If the angel's poetic speech in Act 5, Scene 5, presents an inevitable apocalyptic vision of the future, Kushner is keen to counterbalance this message by challenging the meta-narrative of determinacy. Before Prior returns to earth after returning the Book of the Angels, he meets Rabbi Isidor Chemelwitz. Although a representative of one of the two religions which is criticized for lack of vision during the play, his final observations reflect Kushner's optimistic view of the future:

> So from what comes the pleasures of Paradise? *Indeterminacy*! Because mister, with the Angels, those makhers, may their names be always worshipped and adored, it's all doom and gloom and give up already. But still is there Accident, in this pack of playing cards, still is there the Unknown, the Future. You understand me? It ain't all so much mechanical as they think.' (p.91)

This optimism is shared by Harper, as she flies to the real San Francisco in the penultimate scene: 'Nothing's lost forever. In this world, there is a kind of painful progress' (p.96). The play is completed in the Epilogue when Prior addresses the audience directly, asserting the right of AIDS sufferers to be part of the community: 'We will be citizens. The time has come' (p.99). American survival depends upon social inclusion and acceptance.

John M. Clum hails *Angels in America* as a watershed in gay drama because it

embraces the broader themes of American history and literary culture. It is also remarkable because Kushner creates three-dimensional characters that are not simply defined by their sexuality. They are complex characters which have a credible history founded within the institutions, whether religious or secular, which have helped to create America. Even Roy Cohn, who represents everything that is undesirable about society, is allowed to justify his position. The audience can understand how the pursuit of power can become obsessional in a world which values power above all else. He chose not to identify with homosexuals because they were omitted from that power structure. But, like Belize, we pity him for his misguided philosophy: 'A queen can forgive her vanquished foe' even if it 'isn't easy' (p.82).

Kushner offers no simple solutions to determine how the 'Great Work' referred to in the final speech should be accomplished. What is clear is that gay people, along with other minority groups are to be instrumental in achieving it. *Angels in America* leaves its audience wondering how to respond. Alan Sinfield (1999) criticizes the play for sliding 'into the cloudiness of irony, symbolism and produndity at moments where clear elucidation would be valuable' (p.207). Linda Winer's review in *Newsday* (13 Nov 1992) points out that although the play is 'splattered across a broad canvas with outrage, healing and hope' it is the 'healing parts that don't seem to be working yet.' She suggests that 'Kushner has problems making his uplifting transformations as clear as his criticisms.' She even goes as far as to describe 'the outcome of the actual apocalypse' as 'surprisingly mundane.'

What is evident from the play is that the rhetoric of power and religion has become redundant. Kushner plays with the images of Judaism and Mormonism to undermine them. As narratives, they have effectively been deconstructed. They are rendered impotent by the very absence of God. He points to a future of shared responsibility and 'radical democracy.'

In *Angels in America*, crisis drama has, in a sense, come of age. There is no place for

the stereotypical victim, the ineffectual camp queen, the narcissist or the self-loathing middle aged clone. While elements of these long established caricatures may still be present, they do not define the character as a whole. Kushner has helped to move gay drama into a new era.

More recently, plays that have touched on the theme of AIDS, especially those produced in America, have considered the wider implications of this rampant disease on the gay sub-culture as a whole. The introduction of combination drug therapy in 1993 led to a reduction in the number of AIDS related deaths over subsequent years. In 1996 to 1997 the number of AIDS related deaths in America was reduced by forty two percent, but this dramatic reduction has not continued according to Dr. George Johnson in his medical column for the *St. Louis Post Dispatch*. According to Dr. Johnson (9 Sept 1999), the number of new infection with HIV 'appears to have stabilized at about 40,000' each year. The uncertainty of life expectancy for AIDS patients and for those who have contracted the HIV remains a major issue.

David Román (1998) suggests that the media has focused largely on the HIV-positive section of the gay community and that HIV-negative: 'has remained an unmarked category, the unexamined term in the HIV-negative/HIV-positive binary' (p.225). Román explains how the advent of antibody tests in 1985 led to a situation where those who tested positive were advised by 'progressive activists' to keep their results private, and those who tested negative were also encouraged to keep their results private because to announce one's negativity 'was constructed as insensitive, politically suspect, and ultimately as complicit in maintaining a binary between HIV-negatives and HIV-positives' (p227). For HIV-negative gay men to divulge their results was considered a 'divisive gesture' which made life difficult for those living with the disease. The focus of most gay activists was to protect the privacy and status of HIV-positive gay men. As a result, HIV-negative gay men were not able to celebrate their status as having survived the disease and neither was their experience of losing close friends the subject of much media

attention.

One play which allows its audience to look into the relationship between HIV-positive men and HIV-negative men is Terrence McNally's *Love! Valour! Compassion!* which was first produced at The Manhattan Theatre Club, New York on the 1st November 1994. The play's European premiere was staged at Manchester's Library Theatre in March 1998. As Ian Shuttleworth points out in his review (13th March 1998) for the *Financial Times*: 'This is an example of that already recognisable sub-genre, the gay country-house play' in which an assortment of gay characters assemble in couples as they escape from city life. Shuttleworth goes on to describe the predictable elements of the play: 'the obsessive aficionado of obscure Broadway musicals'; the 'smidgeon of extramural dalliance' and the fact that two of the characters who are 'in McNally's discreet euphemism, "not well"'. There are certainly aspects of stereotyping that are present in the characterisations, but they merely constitute facets to characters that are fully developed as the play progresses.

The eight characters meeting over three holiday week-ends represent a broad cross-section of gay life-styles. The youngest are in their twenties and the oldest are in their forties. There is a couple who have been together for fourteen years and there are two characters with AIDS who become lovers. The established couple of Arthur and Perry are teased for their domestic predictability but nevertheless they are role models who lend stability to the familial group of friends. As Bobby, who is blind, instinctively recognises: 'I think you love each other very much. I think you'll stick it out, whatever' (p.27). But McNally is also interested in how these two feel about surviving the AIDS epidemic. There is a scene towards the end of the play when Arthur and Perry are paddling in one canoe while Buzz and James, who are both HIV-positive, are paddling in another. Perry asks Arthur how he feels about surviving the AIDS epidemic. Arthur replies by admitting that, at first he was 'just scared' but then he felt 'massive' guilt. He cannot accept the fact that he has survived while 'the fellow next to me with his shoulder to the same wheel isn't

so lucky' (p.86). He describes the feeling that every HIV-negative gay man must feel: 'I will always feel like a bystander at the genocide of who we are. (p.86). David Román (1998) identifies this scene as a metaphor gay for men's relationship to AIDS. One pair, who are HIV-positive, paddle one way through the water, while the second pair who are HIV-negative, paddle a different way through the same waters. McNally has purposely given space for the voice of HIV-negative men which are rarely heard. However, Román goes on to criticise McNally for failing to develop the potential of these two central characters as role-models 'for a younger generation of gay men determined to remain uninfected' (p.255).

However, the final scene of the play illustrates how death finally, and sometimes unexpectedly, disposes of the binary division between the two represented groups. The younger characters die before Arthur and Perry, but Gregory outlives them all. It is his role to 'bury every one of them' (p.98). This is a negative ending in the sense that the death of the young generation signals the decline of the gay community. The only role left to be fulfilled is for someone to witness that decline.

Although McNally's tragic-comedy attempts to address the way in which the whole community lives and copes with AIDS, the success of the play lies in his creation of believable characters that connect with his audience. As Ian Shuttleworth explains: 'There is no reason why we should care about these characters, other than their obvious humanity, yet over three and a quarter hours we continue to do so, deeply'. McNally's play is very different from Kramer's *The Normal Heart,* which was referred to at the beginning of this chapter. While Kramer's play acted as a rallying call for America to respond to the unclassified disease that was mysteriously killing gay men, it also, albeit inadvertently, established the gay man with AIDS as a victim. McNally's play *Love! Valour! Compassion!* is a composed review of how gay men, in varying circumstances have reacted to living with the disease over many years. Instead of focusing on the fear and anger of the individual AIDS sufferer, McNally has identified the sorrow and loss that

a whole community feels, as so many of its members are prematurely torn from it.

ACT II

Scene One

Kevin Elyot: From Gay Community to Social Misfits

The following chapters each focus on the work of one of three leading contemporary British playwrights. The plays of Kevin Elyot, Jonathan Harvey and Mark Ravenhill represent the vanguard of home-grown talent dealing with the subject of male dissident sexuality that have been produced on the West End stage from the mid-eighties, through the nineties, and into the twenty-first century. It is also important to note that many of their plays have been performed on the American stage, with varying degrees of success. However, their work is not considered here to propose some homogenous trend in British drama, but to establish whether their representation of dissident sexual identities confirms or challenges conventional notions of the heterosexual/homosexual dyad. The sheer volume of their work would certainly challenge John M. Clum's (1992) criticism of British playwrights (which is referred to at the beginning of this thesis) when he suggests that: 'the gay man as a political creature[...]or as a person who has managed to create his own positive domestic and social space, does not seem to be viable material for contemporary dramatists (p.283). As Alan Sinfield (1999) pointed out, by 1994 the London press 'was complaining about an alleged flood of gay plays' (p.340). On the 30th of September in that year, Milton Shulman wrote an article for the *Standard* entitled 'Stop the Plague of Pink Plays.' As Sinfield points out, this title was specifically worded 'so as to mock our distress over AIDS' (p.340).

It is necessary here to consider the plot of each play in some detail to fully identify the ways in which each text either asserts or contests traditional concepts of male dissident sexual identity.

In an interview in the summer of 2001 Kevin Elyot refused to acknowledge the importance of *My Night With Reg* in the history of gay drama:

> If you do sit down and self-consciously try and forge a pattern or way through, you're too aware of what's going on, then you're probably not going to write a very good piece. I find it slightly suspect when people are grouped together. I find that theatre groups and critics at the moment are keen to find some sort of agenda that is going on, some sort of school of writing and I don't think that it's useful. I think a false criteria and a false agenda is being applied. I don't see myself as a part of anything. I never have. I see myself as out on a limb. I wrote *Coming Clean* in 1982 and that was done at The Bush Theatre. Nothing like that had been written before. I wasn't following in anyone's footsteps. I was just seeing if I could write a play. I wrote what I knew about. It hit the mark in a small way. (Appendix 3)

Nevertheless, the representation of openly gay characters, pioneered in the U.K. by Gay Sweatshop, was still relatively new. Their success proved that there was an audience, even in the provinces, for plays that dealt with the issue of homosexuality. The early 1980s was the beginning of an era in which theatre promoters started to recognise that gay plays could also be box office successes.

Kevin Elyot's first play *Coming Clean* (1984) demonstrated a new confidence in its depiction of gay identity on stage. It was also seen as 'challenging' by some critics because it includes a sex scene which many found to be shocking. Aleks Sierz (2000) remembers the 'charged intimacy' of the play when it was first performed at The Bush because of 'the close range eroticism of some of the scenes' (p.28). While the local newspaper headline 'Male Nudes Bring blush to The Bush'[2] reflects a conservative response to the spectacle of sex on stage, it is not simply the shock value of *Coming Clean* that makes it a landmark play.

[2] Sierz quotes this headline without reference to its source (p.28).

At a time when the full impact of AIDS had yet to become apparent, *Coming Clean*, like Gay Sweatshop's *Poppies* before it, explored the possibility of long term gay relationships. The central characters Tony and Greg have been living together in Tony's London flat for five years. While Greg, a writer, seems content with a domestic life at home punctuated with occasional trips to New York, Tony (under the influence of his friend William) still ventures out to gay pubs and clubs. The opening scene of the play in which William describes the disappointment of his latest conquest: 'I thought I'd tricked with Steve McQueen but I ended up with a leather clad Richard Baker', confirms that casual sex still dominated some gay relationships. Greg and Tony have an understanding that casual sex is permissible: 'We don't do it all the time, and we'd never bring anyone back if the other one was here' (p.37). Tony's attitude to sex reflects the naivety of the pre-AIDS era; an attitude which was as common amongst young liberal minded heterosexuals as it was amongst homosexuals after the sexual liberation of the late 1960s and 1970s. 'One night stands don't suddenly lose their appeal when you fall in love. The prospect of a new body's always exciting. Mind you, it is a transitory excitement' (p.15), admits Greg. If Tony and Greg are indeed proclaiming themselves as models of the new gay freedom, it is the tensions that lie within that freedom that are the focus of the play.

The convenience of this new found freedom is threatened when Greg starts seeing Robert, the out of work actor who cleans their flat. The difference between casual one night stands with strangers and one partner seeing a third party on a regular basis is all too obvious to Tony. It is Robert's commitment to Greg that threatens the relationship between Greg and Tony. Robert has already explained to Tony why he doesn't share their view on open relationships when he refers to an earlier boyfriend: 'If he'd felt the need to have other men, I'd have felt such a failure. If I couldn't have satisfied him, then what

price our relationship?' (p.37). Having understood something of the nature of Robert's attitude to relationships, it comes as more of a shock when Tony returns early from a weekend away to discover Greg and Robert together in the flat. It becomes obvious that they have been seeing each other for some time and Tony is conscious that an affair of this nature is very different from one night stands: 'The occasional bit on the side. All part of the arrangement. But I didn't think that arrangement provided for a ...four month affair' (p.58).

If Tony and Greg's promiscuous 'open' relationship was typical of the 1970s and early 1980s as Neil Miller suggests (1995, pp.423-427), Greg's infidelity was not. What is called into question in *Coming Clean* is the code of honesty that is broken by Greg. While it may be acceptable to have multiple sexual partners, it is not acceptable to deceive one's long term partner. In this sense *Coming Clean* is a comedy of manners in which the underlying etiquette allows sexual promiscuity but not pre-meditated deception. Kevin Elyot admits that dishonesty and lying 'have been recurring themes' in his work. Just as in English Restoration comedy, Elyot is here concerned with the behaviour and deportment of men living under a specific social code. It is also self-evident that he is concerned with that code in relation to white middle class homosexual men.

What Elyot is clearly saying in *Coming Clean* is that if gay men are to have positive long-term relationships, there are issues beyond the fact of simple sexual liberation which need to be considered. Greg admits that although he still loves Tony, he also loves Robert and is not prepared to give him up. Tony's expectations are that he should have Greg for himself, and is not prepared to share him with 'that little jerk' (p.61). Greg reminds him that their relationship has never been exclusive: 'We've shared each other round half the gay scene in London' (p.62). Greg argues that, however much we want things to stay the

same, they inevitably change. In this comedy of manners, Tony accuses Greg of changing the rules of their relationship but Greg disputes the existence of any rules: 'Changed the rules? What rules? What rules are you talking about?' (p.62). In a sense Greg is right because for the first time it has been possible for gay couples to live legally together relatively unconstrained by the mores of the dominant heterosexual society. In spite of this the dominant concepts of love and loyalty are still present. What remains to be explored is whether these are the remnants of heterosexual concepts or whether they are universal truths that are pre-requisites of any enduring relationship.

Tony and Robert share a romanticised view of monogamy in which they find the perfect partner, have great sex and live happily ever after. The myth of the ideal partner may be the fodder of teenage romance magazines, but it is also a myth that has been perpetuated within heterosexual society to promote marriage and childbearing as the desirable outcome of straight relationships. Greg rejects the trappings of a monogamous 'marriage' when he says:

> And that touching little domestic scene you describe – I don't want that. I never have... I'm not suddenly going to ask you to lay out my pipe and slippers. (p.64)

Conscious of the equal rights movement which sought the right for gays to marry into a relationship as legally and morally binding as a heterosexual marriage, Elyot is clearly making the statement that aping heterosexual marriage is not necessarily the way forward. Nevertheless, when Greg's parents phone unexpectedly from America, he is all too ready to play the role of happy stable lover for their benefit: 'We're looking forward to seeing you too...Tony's very excited' (p.85). The point is made that gays cannot exist isolated from the heterosexual world to define their own identities as if in a vacuum. Gays still have a pre-determined role to play within the family, at the workplace and within society

as a whole. All these roles continue to place demands on the individual and influence the way in which we construct our own identities.

Tony's threats to leave Greg if he doesn't abandon Robert come to nothing and before the play ends he is back to one night stands when Greg isn't around. Jurgen, his leather clad conquest, admits to once having been in love, but his lover 'went off with a woman', thus confirming that in this unstable world anything can happen. *Coming Clean* asks many questions about the nature of gay relationships, but avoids drawing comfortable conclusions. The audience is left to assume that Tony and Greg are still together and that Tony continues to use the openness of their relationship to enjoy casual sex.

Desire for the chance sexual encounter dominates the play, overriding the need for more stable relationships. From early on in the play it is made clear that Greg and Tony have not enjoyed sex together for some months. Yet their sexual roles are presented as conventional in the sense that Greg performs penetration while Tony is always submissive. While Greg appears happy with this arrangement, Tony is finding it difficult: 'I feel inadequate. As if I'm failing him. I suppose I'm terrified of losing him' (p.37). The pressure of having to perform the submissive role fails to give him the pleasure with Greg that it once did and he blames himself. However, this doesn't stop him reverting to role when he encounters Jurgen at the end of the play: 'I wonder how many arses you've fucked...hundreds...thousands...and mine will be one more notch on your cock' (p.71).

Fifteen years after the decriminalisation of male homosexual acts in England and Wales, Elyot's depiction of gay identity reflects both the period and the setting. The sexual revolution that permitted promiscuity, especially in metropolitan areas, provides William and Tony with the opportunity to indulge in casual sex. They continue the endless search for new sexual encounters and the 'perfect fuck.' At the same time they both value

the idea of long term stable relationships. William is envious of Tony's relationship with Greg. What is evident in *Coming Clean* is that successful homosexual relationships are never going to ape the monogamous model of homosexual marriage. The suggestion here is that gay men can have the best of both worlds if they want it, even if it does lead to conflict when long term relationships are attempted. When the play ends with Tony experiencing another transient moment of sexual pleasure with a stranger there is no moral condemnation of that act. The main moral focus of the play is on the importance of honesty. The long term relationship can only work if both parties are honest with each other. Like all good comedies of manners, the pivotal point of conflict arises when one character tries to deceive the other. Deception remains a central theme throughout Elyot's work. Elyot admits that both *Coming Clean* and *My Night with Reg* are about 'infidelity in general and in honesty and lying' but he also denies that he is applying any moral judgement to the behaviour of his characters:

> The one thing I try not to do, is to make any sort of judgement. I try to show people in as difficult a light as possible to not make it easy for an audience, but equally, I would hate to make any judgement (Appendix 2).

In *Coming Clean* Elyot has created a world where 'otherness' has become the norm. Sexual identities are immutable and there is an acceptance by all characters that they are part of a social community that, while it shares many of the ethical values of the dominant heterosexual hegemony, is nevertheless totally exclusive. While in effect, there is no questioning of sexual identity, the play explores the mores of sexual behaviour within that identity. Just as in heterosexual relationships, monogamy is presented as a conceptualised ideal which all characters fall short of achieving. Elyot accepts the inside/outside trope that marginalizes gay people and has reversed it. Heterosexuals have been marginalized by their very absence.

When *Coming Clean* was revived in 2005 by Be-Jou Productions at London's Pentameters Theatre, in his review for *UK Theatre Web* (3 May 2005), Gene David Kirk suggested that the play was dated and did not have 'much to say to an audience today.' He criticises the play for being 'contrived' and for attempting to be sensational 'without really hitting the mark.' More seriously he criticises the production for having straight actors playing the main parts: 'What we were given in the main, were homosexuals as straight men saw them' which led to 'an affected performance.' This would appear to be a diversion from Elyot's own preference. In 2001 he suggested that asking straight actors to play gay characters was 'rather like asking a white actor to black up as Othello.' Although he admitted that there was still 'something of a stigma for some gay actors who are not necessarily "out" to play openly gay parts' he stressed that his preference 'would be for gay actors.'

Gay exclusivity is further developed in Elyot's second play *My Night with Reg* (1994). Elyot's second play, and perhaps his most successful, has played to audiences in many countries in addition to Britain and America. In 1994 it won the Writers' Guild of Great Britain Award for Best Fringe Theatre Play. It also won the *Evening Standard* and Laurence Olivier Awards for best comedy. When the play was premiered Johannesburg in 2004, Paul Taylor in the *Independent* (4 March 2004) described it as a 'sharply witty and humanely wise drama about gay manners and morals in the age of AIDS.' He even goes so far as to say that it is 'the best new play I've seen since I started reviewing.'

Once again the characters are drawn from urban gay society where it is possible to lead an entirely separate existence from the dominant heterosexual culture. The essential difference here is the presence of AIDS in the background. The action takes place in Guy's stylish London flat where the secrets and desires of the main characters are

gradually revealed. The first guest to arrive at Guy's dinner party is John who Guy met at university. It very quickly becomes clear because of Guy's effusive greeting that he still has strong feelings for John even though they have only once 'passed each other on the escalator at Camden Town' (p.5) in recent years. Guy admits that his sex life has deteriorated: 'I think it's given me up, to tell you the truth. But one does need to be so careful. Don't you think?' (p.9). John, on the other hand, is not the settling kind and admits to the second common fear of gay men: 'I can't face getting old' (p.11). While it may be argued that all people fear growing old, gay men are bombarded more than most by images of youth through the gay media.

Guy and John share a sense of lethargy about work, having both drifted from one career to another. However, Guy has benefited from the wills of both parents, allowing him to lead a comparatively comfortable life. They are of the same social class as Tony and Greg in *Coming Clean*. In contrast to these central characters, Eric, who is only eighteen and comes from Birmingham, is in the background painting the conservatory. When Daniel, another friend from university days, arrives, the three of them reminisce about university conquests and it becomes clear in the conversation that Daniel is the boyfriend of the absent Reg. Since we never get to meet Reg, the details of his life-style only become apparent as the characters on stage reveal their connection with him.

Again, this is a comedy of manners in which gay moral codes are challenged and broken. While the university code of promiscuity and partner swapping has been replaced by a surface desire for the stability of a single relationship, underneath the veneer lie infidelity and unrequited love. In this play, gay partnerships are represented by both Daniel and Reg and Bernie and Benny, but it becomes clear that, like Tony and Greg in *Coming Clean*, neither of these relationships has been completely successful.

Ironically, Daniel believes Reg to be the shy one in their relationship: 'You will look after Reg won't you? You know he's a bit shy' (p.27). When Daniel leaves for Australia, John confesses that he has been secretly dating Reg for the past nine months. For Guy this comes as a bitter disappointment as it means that, even after all the years that have passed, he is still not going connect with the man he thinks he really loves. While Daniel thinks he has found the right relationship, John is riddled with guilt because he is betraying his friend. However, even in the middle of his unhappiness he still follows Eric when he leaves the flat, on the pretence that he is going to the shop for vinegar. At the end of Scene One, the doorbell rings as Guy is left alone in the flat and the audience is left to wonder whether this is the arrival of the absent Reg.

In Scene Two at Reg's funeral, both Bernie and Benny reveal that they too slept with Reg independently of each other. Neither considers their indiscretion as a threat to their long-term relationship with each other and they are confident that it will continue: 'Bernie and I get on fine. Like a fucking institution after all these years. He'd never leave me' (p.42). The problem facing each character who has slept with Reg (who they now realise has died of AIDS) is of course, that they too might have contracted the disease, especially if they had unprotected sex. Elyot himself denies making any moral judgement of those gay men who still engage in unprotected sex. He is simply making a statement about how many gay men were still prepared to take the risk without considering the consequences:

> *Bernie*: Was it worth it? ...and I have to answer 'No'. It certainly was not. Once, that's all! Just the once! And I might die because of it. (p.45)

By the end of the scene we realise that even young Eric has succumbed to the charms of Reg. He was even deluded, like Daniel and John, that Reg was the special person he was

looking for: 'What he said to me, what he did to me, even though it was only the first time we'd met, I thought, this is the one' (p.65). Like all the other characters he becomes disillusioned with his search for the ideal sex object. When the scene ends with Eric agreeing to share Guy's bed for the night, we are conscious that, even with twenty more years experience as a gay man, Guy has no more confidence in his own sexual identity and his ability to form relationships than Eric.

When the final scene opens, we only gradually realise that this is the morning after Guy's funeral. Guy has left the flat and all his possessions to John as a token of the love that was never expressed or returned. John is left bemused and unable to come to terms with Guy's affections for him: 'I'd never realised before. I must be mad' (p.76). His overwhelming feeling is that he wished 'it had been Reg.'

Elyot has created a gay world in which no-one gets what they want and all are dissatisfied. While it is of course true that happy, contented characters do not make good drama, there is an underlying questioning of roles and identities in *My Night With Reg*. For example, the partnership of Bernie and Benny is destined to fail because Bernie wants his partner to be more domesticated and submissive. Benny, conscious that he cannot fulfil that role, continues to sleep with other people. When eventually Bernie throws him out, he forms a relationship with Conrad and ironically becomes 'like a little wife. Just what Bernie always wanted him to be' (p.70). In effect, no character, with the exception of Reg, is able to respond to the needs of others. John cannot admit to Daniel that he slept with Reg over a nine month period and is content to continue to play the role of old university chum to Daniel. Guy, who has the freedom to be promiscuous, wants the only relationship that he cannot have. Even Eric, who has the advantage of youth and good looks, rejects the advances of others and after having given up hope of finding the ideal

partner after Reg, is more concerned with revitalising the Frog and Trumpet than with looking for a suitable partner.

In one way or another Reg has played an important role in the lives all of these characters. He is the stable, shy partner to Daniel; the nine month passionate love affair to John; the opportunity of escape from monogamy for Benny and Bernie and the idealised yet inadequate sex object to Eric. When the extent of his infidelity is fully recognised he is condemned as irresponsible: 'What the hell was he playing at? It was so irresponsible. Even the vicar told me what a good fuck he was outside the crematorium' (p.59). If Reg's promiscuous life-style isn't judged here, the disastrous consequences of his sexual encounters are self-evident. Elyot argues that the characters are based on aspects of gay men that he knows, and that his play is no more than a reflection of the life-styles that they lead. Just as in *Coming Clean*, there is a constant slippage/re-alignment of sexual relationships suggesting that gay identity does not depend upon secure monogamous relationships. It is the sexual act that defines gayness, together with the constant search for erotic pleasure rather than any desire for permanent partnerships. There is a clear rejection of heterosexual models and there is an unquestioning acceptance that gay people are different. The straight/gay binary is never threatened. To Elyot: 'there have always been essential differences between gay and straight people.'

However, the play illustrates quite clearly what happens to gay men who continue to exercise their right to enjoy unprotected sex. AIDS is the apocalypse that marks the end of that freedom. But unlike Larry Kramer's *The Normal Heart*, there is no intention here to judge or influence behaviour. When talking about Kramer's play Elyot says:

> It is not one of my favourite plays. The one thing I really try not to do is to make any sort of judgements. I try to show people in as difficult a light as possible to not

> make it easy for an audience, but equally I would not make any judgements. I don't think I really do. (Appendix 2)

John M. Clum (1994) sees little to recommend this play in terms of its contribution to gay drama. Although he concedes that it is 'witty' and 'well-written', he is confused about Elyot's intentions: 'is this the dark side of human behaviour that fascinates British audiences, a vision of people who operate outside the Victorian dicta of manners and sexual propriety?' (p.277). He sees it 'as a dark vision more because of the lovelessness than because of the shadow of AIDS.' Clum's criticism seems to be based on the idea that gay drama should represent gay identity in a positive light. He views it as a flagship for an alternative lifestyle that refuses to acquiesce to heterosexist normative constructs. Clum implies that if homosexuality is to be validated, it must mirror heterosexual values in which long term relationships and monogamy are promoted as the ideal. Elyot is not concerned with promoting this ideal, but is more interested in confronting some of the more challenging notions of what it is to be gay in an urban society where the opportunities for casual relationships still abound. By exploring these challenges and by confronting pre-conceptions about sexual desire and satisfaction Elyot does more to unsettle and destabilise concepts of homosexuality than many of his contemporaries. In this way he contributes to Foucault's 'sexual mosaic' (1976, p.64), rejecting the prohibition and restriction that others would enforce (and I include John M. Clum here). This is not a play representing the 'reverse discourse' (p.101) of homosexuality against the controlling power, but a play that confronts the implications of the 'multiplication of pleasures' to which Foucault refers. *My Night with Reg* examines the consequences of 'the economy of bodies and pleasures' that Foucault invokes in *The History of Sexuality*.

Elyot's two more recent plays The *Day I Stood Still* (1998) and *Mouth to Mouth* (2001) mark a departure from gay exclusivity. From a gay world in which gay characters exist independently of heterosexuals, exploring their own possibilities and setting their own codes of behaviour, Elyot turns to consider how gays interact with their heterosexual contemporaries. His assertion that he 'didn't sit down thinking, oh well, I've done a hermetically sealed gay play and now I'll do something about a gay person in a straight society' is tempered with the afterthought: 'In fact, that might be what I have done.'

Although he denies that this is a conscious recognition that gays are a part of the wider community and therefore must consider their position within that community, there is no doubt that these plays represent a sea change in content. Sexuality is examined in a wider context and although gay characters remain centre stage, the needs and desires of each character whether gay or straight are central to the plots. The theme that continues to thread through all four of his stage plays is the passing of time and how it affects the characters' self-awareness and their perception of the world around them.

For Elyot, *The Day I Stood Still*, first performed at The Cottesloe auditorium at the Royal National Theatre on the 22nd January 1998, is 'as much about time passing as it is about gay sexuality or any sort of sexuality. It is about a moment in time, the nature of time and the questioning of time' (Appendix 2). The particular moment in time that is central to the whole play occurs when Horace, the main character, a seventeen year old schoolboy, tempts his friend Jerry back to his home while his parents are away with the sole objective of declaring his undying love for him. The potential of this moment is spoilt because Jerry has invited his new sixteen year old girlfriend to join them. Because Horace and Jerry are photographed together on the balcony of the flat in an apparent state of drug

enhanced delirium, the moment becomes immortalised in Horace's mind: 'One of those moments in your life when you realise, "Ah, that's what it's like to be happy"' (p.57).

Unlike the characters in Elyot's previous plays, sexual encounters have become problematic. Horace is not a typical gay character for whom casual sex is a way of life. Having idolised his friend Jerry, no sexual encounter in later life lives up to his expectations. Even his attempt to satisfy his sexual desires by paying for Terence (who himself is racked with the pain of having lost his lover while he was in the Marines in Northern Ireland), fail dramatically. Terence is no more able to fulfil his role as prostitute than Horace is to be his client. In *The Day I Stood Still*, both characters and relationships are presented as dysfunctional. Horace is unable to move on from his adolescent infatuation just as Judy (Jerry's girlfriend who later becomes his wife) is unable to maintain a stable relationship with any of the men she dates. As Jimmy (the offspring of Jerry and Judy's marriage) admits: 'Mum's got through a few blokes in her time. They pass through so quickly, it's hardly worth getting to know them' (p.51). Judy's confession to Horace about her failed attempt to live with Jerry suggests that Jerry was an extremely complex character; and an extremely gifted pianist: 'But he wouldn't play the game. He had it all and, for some God-forsaken reason, he didn't want to know' (p.27) Jerry was temperamental and a difficult person to live with. Nevertheless, Jerry is the one with the talent and charisma that everyone wants to exploit and the failure of his relationship with Judy suggests an unfulfilled destiny. Jerry's failure to make his mark artistically reflects a wider malaise in his life. His search for sexual gratification is not limited to heterosexual relationships as he himself admits: 'A bit of mutual's okay, but sinking your prick into some pussy – fuck!' (p.72). The sexual act for Jerry centres on self-fulfilment rather than mutual satisfaction. He is impressed with Judy because: 'She can get the whole thing into

her mouth' and because 'next time she's going to get my balls in as well. Can you imagine?' (p.72). Jerry is Elyot's first bisexual character on stage who admits to seeking his pleasure wherever he can get it. Horace hopes that there is still a chance for him, but he is not extrovert enough for Jerry. When Judy is eager and willing to satisfy Jerry's desires, he doesn't need to wait around for shy Horace to pluck up the courage to proposition him. There seems little doubt that if Horace had been the extrovert, he would have had more success in the competition for Jerry's affections.

In this play sexual identity is not so rigidly defined. Although the central character is attracted to men, it is one man in particular that he worships. All the evidence in the play suggests that Horace has yet to confirm his sexuality through the sexual act. By idolising Jerry and by remembering what might have happened between them, the development of his identity has been arrested: 'I want to do it. I want to do it with you.' For Horace, there never will be anyone else in his life:

> *Jerry*: There'll be someone else.
> *Horace*: No, I don't think there ever will. (p.83)

Horace admits that his sexual drive isn't very strong. Even his concept of being a gay man is weak:

> Every now and again, I think I should do something about it, so I suppose that's what this is [referring to Terence's visit]. I'm not the most adventurous person, but once in a while, I feel I ought to push the boat out. (p.38)

Terence, whose earlier homophobic ranting proved to be a sign of his own latent homosexuality and predilection for young boys, is more certain of his own sexual desires: 'You can always get one for a packet of fags, a couple of quid. No problem' (p.41). There is a stark contrast between Terence's obsession with 'shagging' young boys and Horace's

romanticised vision of love for Jerry. What Elyot has moved away from in *The Day I Stood Still* is the codified stereotypical gay characters of his earlier plays. For them, the central dilemma was whether they should pursue monogamous relationships or play the field. Horace's 'moment in time' is remembered by him as some ultimate possibility of pleasure that is never realised. William Simon in *Postmodern Sexualities* (1996) considers the relationship between pleasure and satisfaction:

> Do pleasure and satisfaction necessarily war with each other? Is satisfaction the imposition of the past upon the present? Is pleasure a constant threat to the present moment? Martin Jay's characterisation of the millennial postmodernist as wanting to stand forever at the very edge of an end that never comes is something the contemporary sexual experience prepares us for. (p.147)

In this sense Horace displays the ultimate characteristics of postmodern man since the unique subject of his desire and the satisfaction that he pursues can never be realised. However, Horace's dilemma has not provided convincing theatre for some critics. Steven Oxman in his *Variety.com* review of the US premiere at The Elephant Theatre, Hollywood (17 Jan 2002) suggests that the play 'feels vague, obvious and strangely uneventful' and that it was: 'Neither amusing as a comedy nor affecting enough as a drama.' Elyot's portrayal of the victim of unrequited love may be too tame for American audiences. Oxman maintains that the 'backward structure serves to reveal details that could barely be less interesting, and his depiction of a man frozen by love is a lot more pathetic than potent.' Oxman may be reflecting the views of an audience that is familiar with, and perhaps expects a far more overt, positive representation of gay people on stage. Sheridan Morley emphasises this cultural distinction in his review for the *International Herald Tribune* (4 Feb 1998) when he observes that Horace 'remains chronically closeted in a

curiously English prison of guilt and sheer embarrassment at the demands of his heart and body.'

In *The Day I Stood Still* sexual identity itself has become problematic. While Terence may be the only character who is comfortable with fulfilling his own sexual desires, there is little doubt that his attraction to young boys is intended to make the audience uneasy. There is also little doubt that Elyot's intention was to challenge the audience with Terence's confession, but what is really unsettling in the play is the absence (with the exception of Terence) of any character who is secure within the boundaries of a sexual identity with which either a gay or straight spectator may identify. In a sense Elyot has thrown out conventional concepts of sexuality that might inform the behaviour of his characters and replaced them with characters that defy classification and challenge pre-conceptions and leaves a range of questions unanswered. How can Horace be gay if he doesn't engage in sex with other men? Can Terence be considered gay if his chosen sexual partners are children? Is Jerry really straight if he enjoys mutual masturbation with other boys?

When Jimi (Jerry and Judy's son) arrives at Horace's flat in Scene Two, having run away from his boarding school, Horace is captivated by his resemblance to Jerry: 'You know you're quite like your father, don't you?' (p.49). When Jimi reveals that he has enjoyed a passionate relationship with another boy at his school, it becomes clear that he has come to Horace because he mistakenly believes that Jerry and Horace were once lovers: 'I wanted to meet you, the guy my dad had his arm round in that picture, the two of you looking like the cats that got the cream' (p.52). The sexual imagery betrays Jimi's desire to confirm that his own father was gay and like him had enjoyed the pleasures of sex with other men. Horace, however, can only confirm that they 'became mates' (p.53).

In his attempt to discover his own sexual identity Jimi is searching for role models. Horace describes Jerry as 'truly gifted' as a pianist and goes on to refer to a concert he organised at school; a Monteverdi duet in which two eleven year old boys 'were declaring undying love for each other' (p.53). The duet is a symbol of mutual romantic love that neither Horace nor Jimi can emulate, although it remains a state that both characters aspire to: 'And to have somebody, have somebody to believe in. That's the thing! To have someone to grow strong with. I mean, not everyone lets you down do they?' (p.59).

The breakdown of relationships within *The Day I Stood Still* suggests that the pursuit of ideal relationships whether gay or straight is futile. The comparative stability of some gay relationships in Elyot's earlier work has been replaced with the uncertainty of shifting desires and unrequited love. If Jerry is to be considered the most successful character in terms of his sexual encounters, it is because he is an egotist who exploits others for his own gratification and is in turn used himself. The relatively secure gay environment of *Coming Clean* and *My Night with Reg* has been replaced with a world that is less certain and less clearly defined. At the end of Scene Two, when Horace has discovered the lost gold chain that had been given to him by Jerry, he fastens it around Jimi's neck. The audience is left wondering if Jimi has now supplanted Jerry as Horace's object of desire. Does Horace believe that he can be the person that Jimi 'can grow strong with?' This question is never answered as the audience is taken back in the final scene to that 'moment in time' that has so dominated events in the first two scenes. The moment of intimacy is interrupted and Guy's love for Jerry becomes frozen in time.

If this play is indeed as Elyot claims 'about passing time' rather than 'about gay sexuality or any other sort of sexuality', it nevertheless undermines and challenges the concept of gay identity that was taken for granted in *My Night with Reg*. Sexuality is

presented for the first time in Elyot's work as a shifting concept that has become problematic.

The theme of problematic sexuality is further developed in his subsequent play. *Mouth to Mouth*, first produced at the Royal Court Jerwood Theatre Downstairs in February 2001 (before transferring to the Albery), opened to complimentary reviews. Kate Stratton for *Time Out* (22 May 2001) observes that the play 'brims with merciless comedy as it explores personal relationships at their most private and unspoken.' John Peter for *The Sunday Times* says that Elyot's 'masterly play coalesces slowly, almost reluctantly, like a recollected nightmare.'

Mouth to Mouth centres on the relationship between a middle aged gay writer with AIDS and the heterosexual family that has adopted him. Frank is isolated by his illness and by the fact that Gompertz his doctor rarely listens to him. Again, there is no wider gay community in this play and just as in *The Day I Stood Still* the main character Frank is haunted by a moment in time that has changed his life. Laura and Dennis, the parents in Frank's surrogate family, have a fifteen year old son Phillip (although we later find out that Phillip's real father is Dennis's brother Roger). Frank, who apparently has not been involved in any recent long term relationship, has been secretly obsessed with Phillip ever since he rescued him from drowning in a reservoir when he gave him the kiss of life. There is some disagreement between Frank and Phillip about what actually happened on that occasion:

Frank: You'd be dead if it wasn't for me. (p.47)

Phillip suggests that Frank's motives were far from altruistic: 'Since when did resuscitation involve a tongue down the throat?' (p.47). Phillip claims that Frank got him 'pissed' before attempting to seduce him. Frank remembers the event as a reciprocal act: 'You enjoyed it....You were all over me like a cheap suit.' But Phillip blames his own mixed emotions: 'I'm at that sort of age. I'd shag a rat given half the chance' (p.47).

By introducing the idea of underage sex, Elyot is dealing with one of the last sexual taboos in contemporary society. Making Phillip only fifteen was a provocative decision that was intended to shock. According to Elyot, the critic Nicholas de Jongh found the idea challenging:

> He was writing another book on censorship, so this new one fascinated him. He was obsessed in his review although I tried not to read all the reviews. He was obsessed with the audience's reaction, which was gasping most of the time. When you saw him kissing the boy before they were going to the larder. He just got obsessed with that. He just kept going on about it. A man in his middle age with AIDS, who kisses an underage boy. I was very aware of the age thing and also I think with Eric in *My Night with Reg*. I can't quite remember how old I made him but I was quite deliberate about making him under the age of consent. I think I was twenty one when I wrote that. I think he is supposed to be eighteen. I was very aware of that. (Appendix 2)

Like Jimi in *The Day I Stood Still*, Phillip is experimenting with his sexuality, but has been persuaded whilst on holiday in Spain, that his real interest lies in women; he has been seduced by an older woman and bears her name in a discreet tattoo on the inside of his leg. If we consider both Jimi and Phillip as teenagers uncertain of their sexuality, it would appear that Elyot is suggesting that early encounters, whether heterosexual or homosexual, if satisfying, help to determine sexuality. In effect, teenagers are open books onto which others may try to imprint their own sexual identity. There is no suggestion here that sexuality is pre-determined at birth. Frank attempts to rekindle his relationship

after Phillip returns from holiday by emotionally blackmailing him: 'I need support, I need comfort – I really do. At the reservoir, I know you were a bit drunk and I know we probably shouldn't have, but it was all right wasn't it?' (p.49). When Phillip finally agrees to show Frank his tattoo in the pantry, Frank is unable to control his desires; he touches it then 'licks it', but his attentions are interrupted by Laura coming into the kitchen. He is shocked by his own lack of self-control: 'Oh my God! What the fuck am I ...? Jesus...Jesus.' (p.50). Once again the object of desire is unattainable.

When asked whether the fact that in three of his plays the object of desire dies reflects an ultimately pessimistic view of how the thing that we most desire is always unattainable, Elyot's response is unequivocal:

> The thing one most desires is unattainable and I think the really difficult thing is that if it is attainable, then it's not what you most desire. So I don't think you can ever get what you really want.

In *Mouth to Mouth* the object of desire is a fifteen year old boy. Was this an intentional act to shock the audience?

> This age business pisses me off, so I was quite deliberate about that to see how people would respond. I only did it gently by lowering it by one year. He is coming up to his sixteenth birthday. It's not like it was an eight year old.

The irony of Phillip's age is that, while he may have been kissed by a man much older than himself, he has in principle broken British law (although of course it happened in Spain while Phillip was on holiday) by having sex with a twenty three year old woman. While in fact the former would undoubtedly have raised eyebrows, especially amongst the straight members of the audience, the latter is more likely to be an act that would be

approved of. Elyot is subtly pointing out the inconsistencies in society's attitude to same sex relations.

Elyot argues that the play is about much more than sexual identity:

> When Cordelia brings the statue- the original carving from Australia – she says; 'I think it's called the kiss, but we're not sure and we think it's by Gumgarngari but we're not sure about that either': Is it a kiss or isn't it a kiss? And then Frank talks about the time he saved Phillip from drowning and gave him the kiss of life. He insists that Phillip put his tongue down his throat. Maybe he did, maybe he didn't. Anyway it doesn't matter. Anyway nothing happened. So you never quite know. It's like shifting in the sands. As soon as it has happened it is past. It is past, so you create as you wish. That's interesting. (Appendix 2)

It is the uncertainty surrounding Phillip's response to Frank that leaves an element of doubt over his sexual orientation. Although Frank would want Phillip to be gay so that he might return his attentions, the audience is left along with Laura to assume, because of the tattoo that spells out the name 'Adelaida', that he has experienced sexual relations with her: 'The point is that this Spanish harpy has seduced my son and left her trademark on his testicles' (p.40).

Laura's reference to Phillip's testicles reveals much about her own over-protective relationship with her son. There is something far too intimate about the tango dance they perform together. In *Mouth to Mouth* no relationship is what it seems to be. When it is revealed that Roger is Phillip's natural father, and later, when Dennis tells Frank that he is leaving Laura for a much younger woman, we realise that everything is shifting in the play and nothing is secure. Elyot has created a tragic world in which no relationship is successful. Laura and Roger are punished for their moment of passion when Phillip is killed in the motor bike accident. The speech impediment that plagues Laura thereafter is further evidence of punishment for past sins.

Elyot's fourth play is fundamentally different from *Coming Clean* and *My Night with Reg*. The presence of a separate gay community in which the characters interact has gone. The monogamy versus casual sex question has been replaced with much more personal dilemmas. In *Mouth to Mouth* Frank is just another character making life-changing decisions. The fact that he is gay is all but irrelevant to the plot. On the surface he plays the role of family confidant entrusted with their secrets and private aspirations while all the time he is discreetly pursuing the object of his own desire – Phillip. His intentions are never revealed to the other characters and he continues to masquerade as Laura's loyal friend until the final moments of the play when she unburdens her feelings of personal guilt for her son's death to him. His controlled, measured response to the confessions of other characters in the play is interrupted only by his own moment of uncontrollable desire: 'You were attached to my face before I could say a word, like something out of *Alien*', Phillip asserts when recalling the kiss at the reservoir (p.47). Frank has become that alien presence within the family.

In his criticism of *The Day I Stood Still*, John M. Clum (2000) admits to being angry with Elyot for writing a play in which characters never seem to connect: 'The patterns do not offer meaning or solace, they are merely repeated pratfalls and missed connections' (p.279). He lambasts Elyot for offering up 'existential despair rather than meaningful connections of any kind.' He suggests, perhaps unkindly, that Elyot's play 'inhabits a hermetic world of post-Pinter British drama, echoing plays rather than life, disconnected with the real problems facing gay men' (p.279). Such accusations could also be levelled at *Mouth to Mouth* for precisely the same reasons; that characters never seem to connect.

Elyot is aware that his plays may be criticised for their negative and retrogressive representation of gay people:

> I quite enjoy that because I really haven't got much time for political correctness. I think it's more challenging to write what you describe as retrogressive than to write something very upbeat and positive suggesting that we're all happy now we're out and gay...how terrible that would be. There wouldn't be any drama. (Appendix 2)

If *The Day I Stood Still* and *Mouth to Mouth* don't fit conveniently into Clum's exploration of the relationship between gay drama and gay culture, it is because he has purposely avoided confronting the unpalatable truth that threads through these plays. It is precisely because sexuality and the sexual act have become problematic, and the objects of desire obscure, that Elyot has reflected an important change in social concepts of sexuality. William Simon in *Postmodern Sexualities* (1996) argues that 'the hallmark of the sexual in contemporary society is the frequency with which it is accompanied by the problematic at virtually every stage' (p.31). It is the complexity of the post-modern world and the 'absence of predictability and order...surrounding the individual that leads him/her to desire the unpredictable and to originate alternatives to what the world of others expects' (p.32). Horace's fixation with the dead Jerry and Frank's fatal attraction to Phillip illustrates the endless capacity of the individual for fantasy in response to a society that has normalised 'heterosexuality', 'homosexuality' and even 'bisexuality' through the scripts that permeate the media, and especially through advertising. Elyot's brand of anti-hero has rejected these managed identities and has chosen a self-identity that is both liberating and isolating at the same time. For both Horace and Frank, the conflict arises from their attempts to reconcile their self-identities and chosen objects of desire with the expectations of those around them. William Simon quotes Auden's *The Dyer's Hand* to illustrate this conflict:

> The image of myself which I try to create in my own mind in order that I might love myself is very different from the image which I try to create in the mind of others in order that they may love me. (p.33)

Clum's criticism of Elyot's plays arises because these plays do not comply with the delusional model of sexual homogeneities to which he subscribes. His frustration with *The Day I Stood Still* leads him to ask a series of questions which reflects his desire to impose a normalised concept of sexuality upon the play: 'Why does Horace remain indifferent to the unhappiness of his less fortunate companion Terence?...Why does Horace's not-so-gay homosexuality seem to justify an uninteresting inertia?' (p.279). Both Horace and Frank are isolated because their chosen objects of desire are unconventional and threaten our pre-conceptions about gay behaviour.

Although Elyot himself is reluctant to accept that his later works challenge our basic ideas about constructs of sexuality: 'when push comes to shove, gay people are always gay people and they work and live within those confines and parameters', the plays themselves seek to undermine those very 'confines and parameters.' Questions are being asked about sexual identity and chosen objects of desire that neither John M. Clum nor the audience can answer.

ACT 2

Scene Two

Jonathan Harvey: 'Coming Out' and Beyond: From Box Office Conformity to Shifting Sexualities and Back Again.

With an output of only four stage plays in twenty years, Elyot's contribution to gay drama has nevertheless been significant. By contrast, Jonathan Harvey, whose meteoric career began in 1987 with *Cherry Blossom Tree,* has written no fewer than ten scripts for the stage. Although his plays have experienced varying degrees of success, he has still become widely recognised as one of the leading contemporary gay dramatists. When Michael Wilcox, the editor of *Gay Plays*, first read the script of *Beautiful Thing* he contacted Methuen publishers straight away and demanded that they include it in the next edition. If the dust-cover plaudit: 'The new theatrical voice of his generation' seems strong, the success of *Beautiful Thing* in 1993-94, which was later made into a Channel Four film, led to a long and profitable West End run at the Duke of York's Theatre, thus establishing him as a major British playwright.

Jonathan Harvey is relevant to this study of dissident sexual identities not only because he is an openly gay playwright but also because his plays have reached a wide audience and have contributed much to public perceptions of sexuality and difference. They have also been performed on both sides of the Atlantic.

What needs to be established here is the extent to which Harvey has inherited established representations of gay people and developed them further or whether he has merely reinforced traditional notions of the gay/straight dichotomy. Is there evidence, as there is in Elyot's plays, of the problematizing and destabilizing of sexuality and the object of desire? Does a play like *Beautiful Thing* become popular because it re-enforces

stereotypes or because it challenges them? Does Harvey reflect the proliferation of sexual identities that abound (albeit at the margins) of our post-modern world?

Harvey's *Beautiful Thing* is about the blossoming love of two sixteen year old lads who live on the south London Thamesmead council estate. First performed at the Bush Theatre on 20 July 1993, it is his first play to reach a wide audience and was quickly praised by many critics. John M. Clum (2000) describes it as 'a breakthrough for British drama in the nineties' (p.227). This 'urban fairytale' (as it is later described in the Channel Four film blurb) certainly challenged attitudes to being gay since the central characters are fifteen/sixteen at a time when the legal age of consent for homosexual acts was still twenty one. Harvey admits that 'the age of consent is an issue close to my heart, and by choosing to make the boys in the play sixteen and under I hope I've done my bit to fight the status quo' (1994, p. 210). *Beautiful Thing* is therefore very much a play of the moment. Changes in the law have since legalised homosexual acts between sixteen year olds. Because of this, the political statement the play makes has lost some of its significance to a contemporary audience.

Harvey's *Beautiful Thing* has been performed at a variety of venues ever since its first appearance at the Bush Theatre. Almost without exception, critics have lavishly praised it. Les Gutman's *Curtain Up* review (15 Feb 1999) of the production staged at The Cherry Lane Theatre in New York compliments Harvey's 'elegantly structured, keenly written script.' He draws attention to the fact that although it is 'thought of as a story of the discovery of young love between two boys' each of the five characters 'is fully developed, and the story of each has its own arc.' He also notes that Harvey 'manages to illuminate the path towards sexual identification with poignancy but without even a hint of either sappiness or titillation'. Hedy Weiss, in her *Theaterland* review (23 July 2002) is also

impressed with the scenes of intimacy which she says are 'heartbreakingly lovely and exquisitely played.' She identifies the central them of the loss of innocence: 'and the terrible vulnerability (and ultimate strength) that comes with its loss' and she suggests that it has 'rarely been more touchingly or accurately portrayed.'

The action of the play takes place in Jamie and his mother's flat and on the balcony walkway in front of the flat. Sandra (Jamie's mother who is a single parent), currently has a boyfriend called Tony (who is described as 'Middle class trying to rough up') and is concerned about Jamie because he truants from school during games lessons. Jamie's lack of interest in sport suggests that he is different from the other boys. Harvey is drawing upon the stereotypical idea that boys who don't enjoy sport are somehow lacking in manliness and even slightly effeminate. His mother certainly sees this as an indication that something is wrong. If Jamie re-enforces this particular gay stereotype, then Ste challenges it. Jamie is envious of his neighbour Ste who enjoys games and wants to work at a sports centre when he leaves school. At the beginning of the play all the characters are isolated and fail to connect with each other. Leah, the girl next door, also truants from school and whiles away her time singing songs by the Mamas and the Papas. Sandra considers it unnatural: 'For a girl of her age to be into Mama Cass' (p.152). Although each character seeks approval each finds little or no support. There is a strong sense of animosity and lack of communication between characters, suggesting that their attempts to survive the hostile environment of the estate take all the energy they have. Ste is in the most unenviable position because he is regularly beaten by his drunken father and older brother. There is a reluctance to show love or affection since they have all grown up having to deal with their own problems without support:

Ste: She's only tryina help.
Leah: Tell him Ste.
Jamie: Yeah well I don't need fuckin' help. (p.154)

When Jamie describes his relationship with Sandra's boyfriends to Tony it becomes clear that he has not had a stable male role model in his life. It is also made clear that Jamie's real father, who Sandra suspects is the man whose photograph appeared on *Crimewatch*, was prone to committing criminal acts. Harvey is again relying on the stereotypical argument that gay men often have absent or ineffectual father figures. The absence of a stable heterosexual role model in Jamie's childhood and the presence of an aggressive ineffectual father in Ste's family, confirm the stereotypical view that the absence of an appropriate father figure inhibits boys from developing 'properly'. Harvey's depiction of both families seems to mirror the neo-Freudian emphasis on homosexuality as pathological. Jamie explains how he once became close to Richard (one of his mother's former boyfriends): 'I used to sit on his knee' and 'he used to put his arm round me when we walked down the street'. But when he suddenly disappeared, leaving Sandra with two black eyes, Jamie was left wondering how transient relationships can be: 'it's weird innit? When somin' can just stop like that.' (p.163) Although Tony engages in conversation with Jamie, there remains a distance between them. When he lights up a joint and offers it to Jamie, it becomes clear that Tony is not going to be the role model that Jamie needs. There is the feeling that they are both trying to make the effort for Sandra's sake.

Tony, although good hearted, remains on the periphery of the drama. Although perhaps attracted to the ready made family and the possibilities it might offer him for stability, he only ever plays at being the father figure. When he offers Jamie the football, there is never any real conviction that he will actually play football with him. Jamie is

desperate to connect with someone and when Ste stays for the night after he has received a particularly nasty beating from his father, Harvey creates a tender scene in which both characters express concern and interest for each other. John M. Clum (2000) views their blossoming relationship as a gay rite of passage: 'from their first sexual overtures to their first reading of a gay magazine to their first attempts at camp behaviour when they see themselves as Cagney and Lacey' (p.227). For Clum, this is a romantic example of young gay love expressing itself. He explains knowledgeably: 'Like many young gay couples, Jamie and Ste's romance begins with sex, then a struggle with accepting their gayness, then an affirmation of their love' (p.227). Actually, Harvey's romance is really about two teenagers devoid of love and affection who fill that void by caring for each other. In an environment where loving relationships appear to be unattainable, Jamie and Ste become the unlikely role models for the other characters. It is a play about a number of characters who search for love wherever they can find it. Sandra has had a succession of boyfriends in her attempts to establish a lasting relationship. It is only when she realises that Jamie and Ste have found a loving relationship that she decides to end her unsatisfactory arrangement with Tony. Although she enjoys his attentions, she knows that she doesn't love him.

In his depiction of Jamie and Ste's teenage romance, Harvey has sensitively and successfully created characters with whom the audience (for one reason or another) empathise. Under-age sex between gay boys remains one of society's final taboos and yet Harvey recalls how he watched the play on the opening night with the West Yorkshire Playhouse packed with 'school kids, hen nights and bin men conventions' and how he 'saw the audience embrace the characters and will things to work out for them' (p.211). The sexual content of the play is never over-stated. When Ste sleeps in the same bed as

Jamie for the second time, Jamie massages Ste's bruised back with his mother's Body Shop Peppermint foot lotion and then asks Ste if he can lie the same way as Ste. After an initial reluctance, Ste 'gets the pillow and moves round to lie next to Jamie, head to head' (p.181). Ste has been worried about his feelings for Jamie and what the implications of this might mean:

> *Ste*: Do you think I'm queer?
> *Jamie*: Don't matter what I think.
> *Jamie switches off the bedside light.*
> *Jamie*: Can I touch you?
> *Ste*: I'm a bit sore.
> *Jamie*: Yeah.
> In the darkness, *'Sixteen Going on Seventeen'* from *The Sound of Music* plays
> (p.181)

Apart from any particular resonance this reference to 'The Sound of Music' might have for a gay audience, its inclusion not only alludes to the loss of innocence of two young people, but it also reminds us that, whilst such liaisons were permissible for heterosexuals, they were still illegal for homosexuals. What is important here is that the audience is never certain if any particular sexual acts have occurred between them, but simply that their emotional bond has developed into a physical one. Harvey succeeds in making this developing relationship seem natural. What the audience sees is that two young people have chosen to share an intimate moment, thus confirming their love for each other. It is this 'beautiful thing' to which the audience responds.

Harvey's choice of a working class setting for this play is a positive attempt to redress the imbalance of what he saw as the proliferation of middle and upper class gay role models on television in the 1980s: 'Two public school boys punting through Cambridge in cricket whites might have been exciting to watch, but it had very little to do with my personal experience' (*Gay Plays: 5*, p.210). He was concerned with the preconception that

young working class gay men were 'kicked out onto the streets' and ended up selling their bodies 'for two Woodbines and a bar of Caramac.' In the positive response of Sandra to her son's sexuality, Harvey shows that the qualities of tolerance and understanding are just as likely to be present in working class families as they are amongst the middle classes. Equally, the homophobic response of Jamie's school contemporaries and the inevitable response of Ste's brother and father to finding out that he is gay illustrate that prejudice is still just as likely to be present. Jamie and Ste's story is about the triumph of a gay relationship against all the odds. In Act Two, Ste experiences a sense of guilt about what has happened, but a period of homophobic self questioning ends when he buys Jamie a knitted hat and presents him with it. Having both accepted their feelings for each other, they search out the nearest gay pub to visit. It is this evening outing that finally exposes their relationship to Sandra.

If Harvey's portrayal of teenage gay love is groundbreaking in many ways, it is also guilty of perpetuating some stereotypical ideas about the origins of sexual orientation. Jamie's attempts at camp behaviour when he recites extracts from *Cagney and Lacey* might be viewed as contributing to the perception that all homosexuals can be identified by their camp or effeminate mannerisms. While this may still be a widely held perception, American research suggests that it is largely inaccurate. I refer to American research because of the absence of any British equivalent. Voeller (1980, pp.232-234) found that no more than 15% of the homosexual population were likely to 'carry themselves in an effeminate way' and that such behaviour was also to be found in many heterosexual men. Certainly, the same could not be said of Ste who enjoys football and going to watch boxing.

By making the two boys no older than sixteen, Harvey avoids any notion that one party has been seduced by the other into entering the relationship. Although Jamie does initiate the first moves, Ste's compliance is not forced upon him. He is left to make up his own mind. The implications of Jamie's awareness of his own sexuality are evident in his exchanges with Sandra: 'You think I'm too young. You think it's just a phase. You think I'm...I'm gonna catch AIDS...and everything!' (p.196). If Jamie has thought through these implications, he is also aware of how others will react to his sexuality. Once he has fallen in love with Ste, he doesn't care who knows about it. When they dance together in front of everyone on the balcony it is as a public statement; a demonstration of pride and an assertion of their individuality.

Some psychological theories about homosexual orientation have suggested that the likelihood of young men developing into homosexuals increases when the father figure is either absent or ineffective. Bene in 'On the Genesis of Male Homosexuality: An Attempt at Clarifying the Role of Parents' (1965, pp.803-813) found that homosexual men had relatively poorer relationships with their fathers than heterosexual men. It might be suggested that both Jamie and Ste fall into this category. However, according to Masters, Johnson and Kolodny (1995), research on this subject is at best inconclusive. However, the psychoanalyst Irving Bieber (1962), having evaluated the family background of 106 homosexual men and 100 heterosexual men, found that many of the homosexual men 'had overprotective, dominant mothers and weak or passive fathers' (p.382). Later research by Bell, Weinberg and Hammersmith (1981) found no evidence to support this theory. Marmor Judd (1980) found that although there was some evidence to suggest that young men exposed to this kind of family background were more likely to become homosexual,

not all people who have this background do become homosexual. He does however note that:

> Homosexuals can also come from families with distant or hostile mothers and overly close fathers, from families with ambivalent relationships with older brothers, from homes with absent mothers, absent fathers, idealised fathers, and from a variety of broken homes. (p.11)

It is possible that Jamie and Ste's homosexuality can be attributed to a combination of several of these factors. However, it would not be fair to suggest that Jamie was gay because of his overprotective mother. Sandra is portrayed as a career woman who is all too aware that she has spent little time with her son. 'You're all right. Okay, so you got me for a mother, but who said life was easy?' (p.178). In truth, the cause of their homosexuality is irrelevant. Their naivety and innocence leaves the audience in no doubt that their love is both natural and desirable. There is no sense that anyone is to blame or that they are in some way victims in a situation that is not of their making. John M. Clum views the play as a celebration of homosexuality. He describes it as 'unabashed, optimistic and romantic, a charming unlikely mix of comedy, sentiment, and urban realism that elicits joyful cheers from staid British audiences' (p.228). It is perhaps because of its universal message of celebration that Channel Four decided to make it into a full-length film. It remains the only British film that has been on general release to depict an underage homosexual relationship in such a positive way. However, it must be pointed out that both characters seem to accept that, because they love and care for each other, they must therefore live out the identities that have been enforced upon them. Jamie openly admits to Tony that he is 'a queer, a bender! A pufter! Brownhatter! Shirtlifter!' (p.197). There is inevitability in the way that they accept such definitions. There is also an assumption in

the play that once they have accepted this identity, it is only natural that they should read gay magazines and search out the nearest gay pub. While the point of all this may be to demonstrate to Ste that he is not the only gay boy on the planet, it also perpetuates the myth that this is what all gay people do. Harvey's young lovers may challenge attitudes to teenage gay sex and stand firm in the face of homophobic abuse, but they do so from within the confines of the gay identity that they have inherited. When Sandra and Leah dance together at the end of the play, they discuss what kind of 'dyke' Leah is going to meet when they join Jamie and Ste on a visit to the gay pub. The audience is left with the feeling that these characters are open to change and that, should the opportunity arise, they might well fall in love with a lesbian. At the very end of the play Harvey is suggesting that the individual has a choice of sexual acts and sexual partners and that these may not be pre-determined. In *Beautiful Thing* it is the sexual act rather than sexual identity that is important. However, by including the examples of ineffective male parenting models, irrespective of whether there is any medical evidence to support the theory that absent or inadequate father figures influence the sexual development of boys, Harvey can be accused of perpetuating stereotypical perceptions of the causes of homosexuality. As the play draws to an optimistic close, the audience realises that the search for love and happiness does not have to be limited by the boundaries and prejudices of the people around them.

While Elyot's characters are drawn from middle class backgrounds, Harvey's are mainly members of a displaced working class. In *Rupert Street Lonely Hearts Club*, first performed at The Contract Theatre Company, Manchester, on 27 September 1995, four characters are thrown together in seedy rented accommodation in east London. Matt Wolf in his *Variety* review (27 Nov 1995) describes this play as Harvey's 'most ambitious play

yet.' From the list of characters, we are told that Shaun is 'twenty three, a pretty, straight lad from Liverpool' and his brother Marti is 'thirty three, his louder, camper, elder brother.' If the reader is left to work out for themselves that 'camp' can be read as 'gay', in the opening sequence the audience is treated to a camp rendition of two film extracts (one from *Mildred Pierce* and the second from *Whatever Happened to Baby Jane?*) with Marti taking the lead. Marti's acerbic yet comic rebuffs and Shaun's references to his lack of familiarity with the female anatomy lead to the assumption that at thirty three, Marti is not interested in women. A passion for Hollywood female icons and a sharp wit are only two of many traditional signs that permeate the history of drama dealing with the theme of homosexuality. What is alarming here is that such signs were usually incorporated at a time when it was impossible to openly declare that certain characters were gay. Unlike Elyot, Harvey has drawn on stereotypes to establish his gay character long before we become acquainted with him as an individual with a story to tell. However, Harvey uses Marti as an important vehicle for camp humour in the play, setting him against each character as they appear, using him to expose their frailties and their secrets.

The two brothers are clearly close. When Shaun describes how he feels about his girlfriend going to Barbados for a month, Marti is sympathetic and he 'sits on the bed with him and hugs him' (p.12). Marti admits to having had many difficult relationships himself. His method of dealing with such situations is to keep his feelings in: 'Oh, I'm a bitter old queen, I know, but I've had a lot of knocks, haven't I? Been let down more times than a lilo' (p.12). This shared experience of emotional setbacks suggests that gay and straight relationships are given equal status and are treated as if they share common characteristics.

As in Elyot's later plays, Harvey has created an environment shared by both gay and straight characters. For Harvey there is no hermetically sealed gay world where heterosexuals don't need to be encountered. What is evident from the introduction of each character is that they share certain experiences. Having been introduced to Shaun and Marti's experience of relationships, we learn that George, the female friend of Juliet (Shaun's girlfriend), has herself recently split up with her boyfriend Malcolm. Emotional loss provides a point of contact for all three of them.

Harvey's other characters are equally zany and unpredictable. When Clarine arrives from the upstairs flat for Shaun to cut her hair (he is a hairdresser by trade), we hear of her love of Jesus and the guitar on which she plays the tune of 'The House of the Rising Sun' whilst singing 'Amazing Grace' and trying to convert members of the Kilburn Working Men's Club to Christianity. Although it becomes clear in later scenes ('they'll put me in a straight jacket' (p.31)) when she adopts different names and personae that she is mentally ill, she is the character who knows what to do at the end of the play when Marti cuts his wrists. When she takes on the persona of Zoe Wanamaker, it is a sign that the hyperreal has replaced the real; that she somehow becomes more real through adopting a media personality. This suggests that, far from being mad, in a crisis her classic schizophrenia is no more debilitating than the 'madness' that engulfs all the other characters.

Dean, who enjoys dressing up as sex kitten Fifi Trixabelle La Bouche, is in love with Marti. For Dean, to be gay is the norm, which is evident when he meets Shaun for the first time and asks him: 'When did you realise you were straight?' (p.29), thus turning the original classic enquiry 'When did you realise you were gay' on its head. In this play, the essential 'difference' displayed by each character is either ignored or accepted. Like Clarine, all the characters adopt roles and personae that are designed to disguise their

isolation and loneliness. When George goes on demonstrations with the Socialist Workers Party it is a pretext for meeting men rather than expounding high socialist principles: 'I met this guy on a demo on Saturday. Asked for my phone number. On the pretext of sending me some SWP paraphernalia. But I don't know...' (p.61). This is just another persona that has been chosen for convenience.

The role of deserted (and later jilted) lover played by Shaun is also based on an illusion. Although he has convinced himself that Juliet feels the same way about him, the audience is never really convinced when he describes her as 'The woman I'm gonna keep' (p.79). There has already been a question mark over why she has gone to Barbados for four weeks. Marti asks: 'Do you think she's crying in Barbados?' and suggests that 'She certainly won't be sitting in a messy flat feeling sorry for herself' (p.11). Juliet has been responsible for changing Shaun from the violent, homophobic young man that he was into an educated, tolerant adult. Marti recognises the importance of her influence: 'It was all her doing. You were nothing 'til you met her and now you're nothing again' (p.103). We have already heard how Shaun attacked Marti and put him in hospital when he found out that Marti was gay. Juliet's influence clearly changed his attitude to Marti: 'And then Juliet's on the scene and suddenly you're Romeo. And I'm all right. Welcomed in with open arms. But I knew' (p.103).

Shaun admits that he left Liverpool to find himself, but before he could achieve that he found Juliet instead: 'Well I didn't find me, I found her' (p.101). The suggestion here is that Juliet has been exhausted by the emotional demands put on her by Shaun. She has had to work too hard to heal the scars that remained from his childhood: 'He was stifling me in the end and coming out here I felt such a release' (p.97). Both Shaun and Marti admit that they have developed their own defence mechanisms for dealing with the difficulties that

they encounter in life: 'you know the other day, when you said you'd built up the camp bit to protect you from the knocks. Well, that's what I did with me fists' (p.103). Both sought love but were unable to give it effectively.

The main focus of *Rupert Street Lonely Hearts Club* is the blossoming relationship of the two brothers. Having put behind them the negative experiences of their earlier relationship they now find that they can support each other more effectively. In this world of inadequate people and shallow relationships at least they can depend on each other. Yet the climax of the play suggests that even this goal is hard to achieve. When the idea is suggested that they might actually 'love' each other, Marti feels that it might make up for the lost years: 'I spent most of me life hating you. Why can't I spend the rest of it loving you?' (p.102). Yet when Shaun tells Marti that he is allowed to love him now, Marti is confused and finds it difficult to separate the love he has for 'his fellas' with the love that he feels for his brother: 'All the time I wanted yer for meself. And now I've got it. And it's not what I want at all. I find it so hard it fucks me up' (p.103). While both characters struggle to articulate their feelings towards each other, there remains a question mark over what they both actually mean by the word 'love'. The tension of the moment when Marti finally admits that he does love Shaun and: 'He kisses him. It's half a snog. They have a snog for a split second. Then Marti pulls away' (p.104). The realisation that something amounting to more than mere brotherly love has occurred leaves Marti 'gasping for breath.' Shaun, by contrast has not over-reacted and has simply gone to the bathroom to gather his belongings as he is leaving to return home to Liverpool. This is the point when Marti, unable to understand the nature of what he has done, goes into the kitchen where he 'slits his wrists.' As Clarine comforts Marti while they wait for the ambulance to arrive, all Shaun can do is sit 'on the bed smoking in a daze' (p.105).

Harvey's bleak yet comic play highlights the difficulties faced by young people who move away from their families and home towns. In their search for themselves and for independence they have become desensitised to the needs and feelings of others. They adopt protective mechanisms and put up defensive barriers. In social terms, all the characters with the exception of Clarine are employed: Shaun is a hairdresser, Marti sells cushion covers, Dean works in McDonalds and George is a teacher. Their ability to earn gives them equal status. Apart from the references to Shaun's earlier homophobia, sexuality whether gay or straight, is no more of a problem for one character than it is for another. What they have in common is that they are all in search of a relationship that will give their lives more meaning. While there is some optimism towards the end of the play when George entertains Daffyd in her downstairs flat and when Marti and Dean declare their love for each other (even if Dean can only give it 'In a friendship way' (p.95)), there is no certainty that either of these relationships will prove more secure or rewarding than Shaun and Juliet's. The unsettling conclusion, when the nature of Marti's relationship with his brother Shaun is brought into question, leaves the audience confused. After all the years of rejection from Shaun and the subsequent isolation that has brought him, Marti cannot come to terms with the new status of their relationship. In the end, their history has rendered a conventional brotherly relationship impossible. Marti has become used to relating to men on a sexual level and knows that this will undermine their relationship in the future.

In *Rupert Street Lonely Hearts Club*, sexuality is never questioned; it is simply accepted. In *Boom Bang-A-Bang*, first performed at the Bush Theatre on 19 July 1995, Harvey moves on to examine the theme of sexuality more closely, using it as a vehicle for deception and dramatic confusion. Ian Shuttleworth, in his review for the *Financial Times*

(21 July 1995), admits that Harvey 'writes palpably better about sexuality than other issues.' He suggests that *Boom Bang-A-Bang* 'mixes personal and impersonal difficulties, an air of elegiac comedy à la *My Night With Reg*...with outright farce.' Shuttleworth's allusion to Elyot's play is confirmed by the presence of a copy of the playscript of *My Night With Reg* on the coffee table. Whether this is a satirical reference or a genuine deference to Elyot's play is uncertain, but it does nevertheless draw attention to their common theme of individual sexuality. The difference here is that the sexuality that is being explored is not exclusively homosexual.

Lee, whose partner Michael has recently died from a huge brain tumour, has invited several friends to his flat to continue a long established tradition of watching the Eurovision Song Contest on television. It is clear from the offset that although they might all be Lee's friends, they do not necessarily get on with each other. Steph, who is described as a camp Londoner in his mid-thirties, is the first to contribute to the discord in the play by referring to Lee's sister (who is preparing food in the kitchen) as 'that vile bitch from hell, Wendy' (p.117). Although there is clearly some animosity between them, they try to get along with each other for Lee's sake.

As with Marti in *Rupert Street Lonely Hearts Club*, Harvey utilises familiar signs to establish Steph's gay credentials. He cruises Hampstead Heath: 'When you're bored with the Heath m'darling, you're bored with life', and shops at Clone Zone, where he has bought a Tom of Finland print which he thinks is appropriate for a flat-warming present for Lee. Steph boasts about his one-night stands and rough trade and is very secure within his identity as a London clone. The other characters are: Roy, a young gay man who is under the influence of E tablets; Nick, a minor actor who arrives with his partner Tania, who does not relish an evening of the Eurovision Song Contest; and Norman who lives

upstairs and is described as an 'ugly Liverpudlian' of about thirty. When they assemble, there is supposedly a mix of gay and straight characters. During the course of the play it becomes clear that sexual identity is not as predictable as the audience might have originally thought. Steph already has his suspicions about Nick: 'I read this article the other day in this magazine. "Straight Men Who Suck Dick." It sounded like a character description of Nic' (p.118). Although the title of the article itself is meant to shock, it also threatens conventional notions of heterosexuality, suggesting that there is a group of men who consider themselves as straight but who nevertheless indulge in oral sex with other men.

Steph purports to have some insight into hidden sexuality as he also has his suspicions about Lee's sister Wendy: 'She's the first straight woman I've seen that can play pool' (p.121). He then suggests that 'if she starts wearing sandals and humming Patsy Cline don't say I didn't warn you.' Steph's assumptions may be based on impressions that draw on stereotypes but they nevertheless turn out to be true. Throughout the play Steph's is the voice of reason and insight. Although cynical at times, he knows what he wants in life and has no illusions about how to get it:

> I'm not knocking love; I'm just saying that till you find it you should get some hot sex. The human machine has three carnal drives, to eat, to shit and to mate. I love restaurants, I love a good crap and I like hot sex. I'm completely normal. (pp.122-123)

At the beginning of the play sexual identities appear to be established and beyond transgression. As in *Rupert Street Lonely Hearts Club*, there is an acceptance of difference that is evident to the audience. This acceptance is undermined when the sexual identities of Nick and Tania (who as an established couple are supposed to be straight) are called

into question. Nick has been particularly supportive of Lee after the recent loss of his lover and Steph finds this male bonding highly suspicious:

> *Lee*: There's nothing odd about a gay man and a straight man being mates.
> *Steph*: I think it's unnatural.
> *Roy*: I think it sounds dead nice.
> *Steph*: And nothing's happened between you two?
> *Lee*: Steph.
> *Steph*: Well, I think there's something you're not telling us. It'll all end in tears. (p.133)

Following this dialogue, even Steph confesses that he has slept with a woman although he admits that he had to close his eyes 'and think of Jason Orange' (p.134). Suddenly the sexual act and chosen sexual partner becomes a matter of personal choice rather than a pre-ordained certainty. Roy wonders if he may have 'missed out on something' by deciding to be gay. He too admits to 'snogging' with a girl at Michael's funeral. In this way Harvey forces the audience to question their own notions of sexual identity. If Steph (who is the archetypal gay character in the play) can admit to having slept with a woman, thereby subverting the gay/straight boundary, then it is possible that other characters in the play who have so far conveniently been categorised into two groups, also have secrets to reveal. It isn't long before these secrets are revealed.

Tania's relationship with Nick appears strained from the minute they appear on stage. She constantly mocks his acting career and seeks to undermine their partnership in front of other characters. When Nick enters the conversation Tania interrupts, suggesting that nobody is interested in what he has to say. The reason for her indifference to Nick becomes evident when Roy spots her kissing Wendy when he is out on the balcony having a cigarette. It soon emerges that Tania has been going to see Wendy on the pretext of

visiting her mother in hospital. At the same time Nick is expressing his affections for Lee: 'Christ, Lee, why can't I be gay?...We'd make a great team' (p.170). He even suggests that he could learn how to be a good sexual partner for Nick: 'I'm a quick learner.'

Within a short space of time three characters have admitted that they are either already in same sex relationships or (in the case of Nick) would like to be. There is a clear and purposeful crossing over of accepted boundaries. Not only does this case of confused sexual identities act as a vehicle for the comic element in the play but it also confirms that sexual identity is not an immutable concept. Harvey is transgressing the boundaries to challenge the preconceptions of the audience and to challenge the dominant discourse. Harvey has become part of a wider post-modern movement by challenging that discourse. Elizabeth Wilson (1993) in paraphrasing Michael Foucault suggested that such transgression leads to new boundaries which in their turn need to be transgressed:

> What you then have is a transgressive spiral which at least in theory is interminable. From that point of view, transgression can define no final goal, and there can never be any final mastery; it is rather a process of continuously shifting boundaries, the boundaries of acceptable behaviour, the boundaries of what may be shown in terms of sexually explicit representations for example. (p.110)

What is especially interesting about Harvey's portrayal of Nick, Tania and Wendy is that, far from simply exchanging a heterosexual identity for a homosexual one, their identity remains undetermined beyond the end of the play. While Steph wants to firmly place them within the boundaries of the sexuality that he has chosen for himself, even he is prepared to recognise that sexuality is not always that predictable when he describes Nick as 'S.B.S.C. ...Straight but sucks cocks' (p.133). If he considers such men to be 'closet' homosexuals there would be little point in his own confession to having had sex

with a woman. This constitutes a wider recognition that sexual behaviour and the identity of the self are fundamental areas of personal conflict.

When it is revealed that Lee and Nick have been seeing each other, once again Steph is quick to judge Nick: 'If you chopped him in half he'd have QUEEN written through him like rock' (p.193). Steph dislikes the deception and confusion which he views as a personal betrayal and an attempt to undermine his own need to simplify matters of sexual orientation: 'I don't like what you've done to our friendship. I don't like any of you any more. And if anyone's taking minutes let it just be said that I don't wholeheartedly approve' (p.192). Steph's decision to withdraw to a gay bar with Roy reflects his own need to return to a safer environment where his own values won't be threatened.

When Tania asks Wendy to take her to the hospital where her mother has just died, it is based on practical considerations; Wendy has only had one drink while Nick is covered in sick. When Wendy returns in the final scene it is to ask Nick to go home with Tania and her. There is some confusion over what these arrangements might signify:

> *Nick*: Where?
> *Wendy*: Your place.
> *Nick*: Both of us?
> *Wendy*: She reckons it's cheeky but. You'd be on the couch.
> *Nick*: Where would you be?
> *Wendy*: Not sure yet. (p.196)

Although Nick has committed himself to moving into Lee's flat, there is still uncertainty surrounding the nature of their relationship. Nothing is confirmed before the curtain falls. After all the characters have left Lee alone on stage, he remembers that Norman (the neighbour from upstairs) is still in the bedroom where he was tied up earlier by Steph. The scene ends with Lee picking up the whip from the settee and going into the bedroom and

shutting the door behind him. The audience is left believing that he intends to avenge the failure of the British entry in the Eurovision Song Contest by taking it out on Norman.

Boom Bang-A-Bang is refreshing and groundbreaking because it offers a range of sexual identities, none of which fits conveniently into conventional categories. The possibility for change and adaptation is always present, defying notions of fixed sexual identity. In effect each character is in a position of freedom to choose sexual experiences and objects of desire as they would select any other commodity. Whether Nick finally sleeps with Lee; whether Wendy and Tania begin a long-term relationship or whether Roy broadens his sexual experience to include women are all questions to which the answers are irrelevant. What is important here is that Harvey has the insight to see that sexual experience is not limited by historical notions of sexual identity. In this way he is contributing to a post-modern concept of sexuality in which indeterminacy and transgression are the key characteristics. Attempts to define and categorise sexuality are as fruitless and futile as are any attempts to understand the self or the 'other':

> *Steph*: Oh, everyone thinks they know me. When really. No one knows no one. Anybody. Whatever. (p.123)

In *Boom Bang-A Bang* characters defined within accepted sexual boundaries interact with characters for whom those boundaries are irrelevant. Individual desire displaces interpretation and creates the unpredictable. Ambiguity and anarchy are beginning to replace determinacy and the master narrative that seeks to define and categorise sexuality.

When *Boom Bang-a-Bang* finished its run at the Bush Theatre, Simon Edge wrote an article for the *Independent* (13 Sept 1995) entitled 'Whichever way it swings, the play's the thing. Pull the other one' which asked if 'gay' drama was on the decline and raised

questions about the use of the terms 'gay' theatre and 'gay' plays. In his article, Edge asks Neil Bartlett if he is surprised when he hears comments about 'the irresistible rise or sudden death of gay drama.' Bartlett questions what constitutes a 'gay' play. He cites the example of Somerset Maugham's *The Letter* which, whilst it was written by a gay man and is currently being directed by a gay man (Neil Bartlett), nevertheless is 'a story about a woman who shoots someone.' He asks the obvious question: 'Is that "real life" or is it gay life?' Bartlett also suggests that the 'gay' label has been used in the past to 'put his work down'. In Edge's article, Kevin Elyot says: 'you can't lump all us gay writers together...All of us should be judged in comparison with any other dramatist.' Having established a genre that has been easily recognisable to critics and which has become conveniently pigeon-holed, the breaking down of boundaries and the tendency of gay playwrights to write plays that are less 'homocentric' has led to confusion and uneasiness amongst those same critics.

In *Guiding Star*, Harvey returns to examining the relationship between dysfunctional families and dissident sexual identity. First performed at the Everyman Theatre, Liverpool on 25 September 1998, *Guiding Star* focuses on a Liverpool family scarred by the after effects of the Hillsborough football disaster. Having watched the television coverage of the event and having had relatives involved in it, Harvey was concerned with the adverse publicity produced by the tabloid press which seemed to be more intent on denigrating scousers than in examining the causes of the disaster. In his introduction to the play, Harvey admits that he was appalled by the way in which *The Sun* 'dragged out of the filing cabinet...all the Liverpool stereotypes' (p.x), spreading rumours that corpses had been robbed of their wallets and that fellow supporters had urinated over the bodies.

> I knew the reality to be different and, in *Guiding Star*, wanted to show how the tragedy affected an ordinary family. An ordinary family where in fact no one died. Yet, nearly ten years later, Terry Fitzgibbon hasn't shaken off the haunting images of that day. That day has shaped his family's development ever since. (p.x)

Having escaped from the disaster, Terry is haunted by feelings of guilt, convinced that in the panic of trying to save himself, he had actually trampled on a child who had fallen down:

> that little lad. When we…I could tell he was a young lad coz of his voice. Shouting for his mam. Me foot went on his chest. I couldn'e see him. Then that safety barrier went and we all ended up on top of him. The life squoze out of him. (p.48)

In the years after the event Terry's relationship with his wife Carol has deteriorated, he has resigned from his job, refused to drive his car and rarely leaves the house. He has withdrawn from his role as father, leaving Carol to bring up their two sons Lawrence and Liam. When Carol returns one night from an evening out, Terry seems unconcerned that his two sons are still out of the house at twelve o'clock: 'Someone rang for Liam and he went out. I didn't notice the time go by' (p.8). Terry's annual depression leads to the fracturing of the family. Carol is left to work all hours to raise the money necessary to keep the family afloat. Lawrence, the elder son escapes into a relationship with the flamboyant Gina who lives her life around the Rickie Lake chat show and remains oblivious to the real pain that surrounds her. Just when the audience might be forgiven for thinking that Harvey has avoided issues of sexual identity in the play, it becomes clear that both Liam (Terry and Carol's younger son) and Wayne (the neighbours' son who dies after a long struggle with Cystic Fibrosis) are suspected of being 'different'.

Harvey returns to exploring the relationship between parental influences and emerging homosexuality, first raised in *Beautiful Thing*. After Wayne's funeral, his father

Charlie discusses this issue with Terry: 'Do you think Your Liam's a puff?' When Terry denies this, suggesting that Liam may be 'a big girl's blouse but he's fuckin' sound' (p.47), Charlie then goes on to consider whether their wives have had too much influence in the upbringing of their sons: 'Do you think Carol dotes on him a bit much?' Both men seem to accept the preconception that over-protective mothers can in some way arrest the development of boys into 'real men':

> *Charlie*: Our fuckin' Marni. Doted on Wayne. Spoilt him rotten. The lad never heard the word no from her. Can't blame her, like. But. He was never gonna be a man. I seen it from the word go. (p.47)

As in *Beautiful Thing* these assumptions are linked to other secondary signs of effeminacy, like playing the violin, a dislike of football and an 'unhealthy' enthusiasm for old songs and musicals:

> *Charlie*: The happiest I ever saw him was when he got *My Fair Lady* out of the video library. (p.47)

Once again Harvey succumbs to perpetuating old stereotypes by presenting his young gay characters in this way. He may be reflecting working class prejudices here, but he does little to challenge them. Lawrence's first inclination that his younger brother is gay is entirely based on such prejudice. When Liam is spotted dancing in his bedroom by Gina, Lawrence accuses him of being 'a queer an' all', and that only 'queer spazzies can dance' (p.30). While it is true that such accusations may simply be an everyday part of an armoury of insults used by siblings to undermine each other, it still confirms that

homophobic prejudices are rife in working class families. However, because Terry has survived the traumatic experience of Hillsborough, he realises that children remain a blessing whether they turn out to be gay or straight: 'I don't care what they are. I've got 'em. Don't be angry with your Marni. Be angry with the cunt up there who lets this happen' (p.49). Terry is referring here to the tragedy that ended so many lives, which is much more important than any possibility that one's son might be gay. In effect, he has got things in perspective.

When Liam starts walking an elderly neighbour's dog late at night on 'the Backy' (a well known cruising ground for gays), it becomes clear that he is going to watch the activities that are going on there. Any doubts that he is gay himself are dispelled in Act Two, Scene Two when he meets a man jogging in the forest near Tenby during a family holiday. Liam purposely waylays the man on the pretext of having lost his dog. When the man gives him the opportunity to commit a sexual act with him, Liam is reluctant at first, confessing that he has never done anything like it before: 'I mean, I've watched. There's this field back home. I've seen. But. Never. I mean. I want to. But...' (p.73). The scene ends with Liam dropping his trousers and inviting the man's attentions: 'Well, what are you waiting for?' (p.74). There is no suggestion here that Liam has been coerced by the man to engage in sex. In effect, it is Liam himself who has initiated the liaison. What is significant in this scene is that when the man asks what his name is, he replies by giving the name of his friend Wayne. This is symbolic since it suggests that although Liam was aware that his friend was gay, he was also aware that, because of his illness, Wayne was unable to fulfil his sexual desires.

When, at the end of the play Liam is eventually arrested by police for soliciting on the 'Backy', he faces the very real possibility of being thrown out of his home. Liam returns

from the police station with a caution, but when the rest of the family realise what has happened they look for someone or something to blame. Terry suggests that 'he hasn't been right since Hillsborough' (p.103), but Laurence understands that it is 'nothing to do with that'. Carol resorts to blaming Terry: 'This is your fault, coz you weren't strong enough as a father' but Liam is adamant that 'no one did this to me' (p.105). Harvey includes all the stereotypical ideas about what causes homosexuality here: the weak father; the doting mother and the overbearing older brother. It is even implied that his homosexuality is a result of his dislike of football due to the Hillsborough disaster. Once again, Harvey draws on the old stereotypical idea that gay people don't like sport. Uncharacteristically it is Laurence who stands up for Liam by suggesting that he went to the Backy simply 'Coz he enjoyed it probably.' When Carol points out that he is only sixteen years of age, Laurence reminds her that at fifteen she was already pregnant. By drawing attention to this hypocrisy, Laurence is confirming the final message of the play; that at sixteen Liam has as much right as a gay man to engage in same sex relations as a heterosexual man has to engage in heterosexual sex.

Although Terry refuses to kick Liam out of the house:

> I thought I'd lost yous and I hadn't. And I vowed to meself that day that I wasn't gonna fucking lose yous if I could help it. So I won't be kicking no one out. (p.106)

Liam decides that it is the right time to leave home anyway. The enforced recognition of Liam's homosexuality acts as a catalyst for other characters to come to terms with their problems. Terry finally admits that he has been wrongly blaming himself for the death of the boy at the Hillsborough disaster. He then re-asserts himself as the father figure of the house and insists that both boys apologise for the problems they have caused their mother. Symbolically, he then takes Carol out in the car he has refused to drive since the disaster.

The play ends optimistically with Liam leaving home to begin a new life on his own terms.

Guiding Star is an interesting exploration of the legacy of the Hillsborough disaster, but it links awkwardly with the gay sub-plot of Liam's developing sexuality. If Liam's homosexuality is incidental and unrelated to the unfortunate history of the family, as Laurence suggests, then there would be little point to including it as a sub-plot at all. Perhaps Harvey is trying to show that, in comparison to genuinely tragic events, the disclosure of homosexuality is relatively unimportant. If, like Jamie and Ste in *Beautiful Thing*, Liam is searching for the love and affection that was lacking in his own childhood, it is unlikely that he will find it on the 'Backy'. At the end of the play he denies having experienced any kind of sexual relationship with Wayne before he died, yet there is the possibility that the close friendship that they had would have become something more if Wayne had survived. After the challenging representations of dissident sexualities in *Rupert Street Lonely Hearts Club*, Harvey has returned to the more rigid structures of a gay 'coming out' drama. While it is likely that working class young men who engage in sex with other men experience similar problems in coming out to their families, this text does little to challenge age old stereotypes and merely serves to confirm the traditional boundaries that define the gay/straight dichotomy.

Harvey's *Hushabye Mountain*, first performed at the Lyceum Theatre, Crewe, 3rd February 1999, is a post-combination therapy AIDS drama. As he admits in his introduction: 'After losing friends in the early nineties to AIDS I then realised with the advent of combination therapy that other friends were surviving. Amazing new feelings were being experienced' (p.xii). Connor has lost his boyfriend Danny to the disease and finds himself once again in a relationship with the younger Ben who also has AIDS. This

disjointed play explores Connor's relationship with his brother Lee and his wife Lana. It also examines the negative influence of Danny's mother Beryl and his estranged father on their lives.

Lana and Danny's friendship pre-dates his relationship with Lee's brother Connor. They are presented as being very close friends. While their relationship is never sexual, it represents a love that transcends sex. While sharing a bath, they declare their affection for each other:

> *Lana*: I love you, Danny Dominica.
> *Danny*: I love you, Lana Lasagne. (p.27)

As in Harvey's earlier play *Boom Bang-a-Bang*, gay and straight characters mix together and support each other. There is no artificial separation or mutual suspicion based on old prejudices. When Danny announces to Lee and Lana that he is HIV positive, there are no recriminations, only consternation that they weren't told before. Lee complains that he is always the last to find out about his brother's life:

> It was the same when you started seeing each other. Oh no, don't tell Lee. Lee can't handle it. Let's let him find out by catching us down the beach. Nice one. And lately you've been going round like there's a fucking cloud over your head. I fucking love you, Connor. You're the best brother in the world. (p.60)

The only signs of homophobia in this play are displayed by Danny's father who rejects him when he finds out he is gay. Danny's mother Beryl is told that she must leave her husband if she has further contact with her son. The pressure of having to keep her letters to Danny a secret from her husband contributes to her mental decline. Once again Harvey

is establishing links between pathological behaviour of a parent and homosexuality. There are traces of her husband's prejudice in her letters. Her excuse for not inviting Danny to visit them at their cottage reflects this:

> I'd invite you to come and stay but there's your cousin Raymond to consider. He's very young for thirteen and I'm not sure I want you seeing too much of him yet. He's a little wary of homosexual people, being a teenager. (p.34)

There is the suggestion that homosexuality is an infectious disease that should be kept away from young impressionable developing teenagers.

However, *Hushabye Mountain* is a predominantly optimistic play that shows the importance of love in its widest sense. The relationship between gay and straight characters is often based on misdirected attentions. Lana admits that she was in love with Danny while they were at university: 'Danny was so sexy. I was in love with him' (p.101). She also admits that Danny had been in love with Lee who he thought 'was sexy.' She suggests that his attraction to Lee was partly why he fell in love with Connor: 'I was hardly surprised when he fell for you. The gay version' (p.101). The play makes the point that love is not restricted by concepts of sexuality. Unrequited love contributes to the closeness of the central characters. Sex itself is often portrayed as problematic in the play. Lee is concerned when Lara confesses to Danny that their sex life has deteriorated. Similarly, Danny and Connor experience a difficult period once it is established that Danny has HIV. However, just as in William M. Hoffman's *As Is* when Saul and Rich re-consummate their sexual relationship on the hospital bed, Danny and Connor re-establish their sexual relationship after Danny has chosen the music for his own funeral.

Although the play echoes so many earlier plays about AIDS, the survival of Ben (the new man in Connor's life), who has to come to terms ironically with the idea that he isn't

going to die, leaves the audience feeling more positive about the future. This is confirmed when Connor finally writes to Danny's mother giving her some support, realising that she wasn't the terrible mother figure that she had always appeared to be. As a result Danny's purgatory is ended.

While Harvey has chosen not to develop the concept of shifting sexualities first posited in *Boom Bang-a-Bang*, he has in effect transcended the idea that sex itself defines personality and identity. Harvey's characters exist within a world where sexuality is irrelevant. The relationship between the gay and straight characters is strong and supportive. We experience the effects of bereavement on lover, friend and brother alike. While earlier plays about AIDS portrayed its effect on the gay population, in *Hushabye Mountain* Harvey shows how the consequences of AIDS affect everyone. The fact that this play did not progress from the Lyceum Theatre, Crewe to the West End suggests that, by 1999, commercial theatre impresarios viewed plays about AIDS as poor box office material. Indeed, as Harvey explains in his Introduction:

> I got my agent to show it to the Almeida, the National and the Royal Court – they all passed on it. (A common excuse with my plays usually goes along the lines of 'We've done a Kevin Elyot play this season, so we've kind of "done" the gay thing.') But then my old favourites, English Touring Theatre, came up trumps and before you could say 'Combination therapy's great' the show was in rehearsal. (p.xii)

In *Hushabye Mountain*, Harvey has in effect resurrected the stereotypical image of gay man as victim. If the future of gays with HIV is now more hopeful, the final message appears to be that their continued good health is dependent upon developments in medical science. Homosexuality itself is defined by the disease that continues to haunt it. What is never recognised in this play is that HIV now poses a serious threat to heterosexuals in the UK.

> The number of heterosexually acquired HIV infections diagnosed in the UK has risen hugely over the last 15 years. In 1999, for the first time, the rate of heterosexually acquired infection overtook the rate of infection in men who have sex with men. During 2003, there were 3,975 reports of heterosexually acquired HIV and a total of 24,173 at the end of September 2004. (*Avert/Org* Website)

What is evident is that, in addition to the number of drug addicts who contract the virus through sharing infected needles, there are bisexual carriers who have the potential to pass on the virus to men and women irrespective of their sexual identity. Yet this possibility remains hidden because of the received perception that heterosexuals and homosexuals always constitute entirely separate identities.

The image of the gay man living with HIV returns in Harvey's most recent play *Out in the Open.* First performed at the Hampstead Theatre on 15 March 2001, the play (directed by Kathy Burke) moved to Birmingham and after a successful run returned to the Hampstead Theatre for a further month. In her review for *Curtain Up* (21 March 2001), Lizzie Loveridge describes *Out in the Open* as 'a tender, well acted, often moving and caustically witty play.' She identifies the central theme of the play as one of 'secrets and lies, the kind of secrets that everyone knows but has to pretend that they do not.' Harvey has once again included characters of different sexual orientation but the central love triangle focuses on three gay men.

Tony, who is HIV positive, recently lost his lover who ironically was struck by lightning on Hampstead Heath, and has formed a new relationship with a young man called Iggy. As the play develops the audience is made aware that Iggy was in fact the secret lover of Frankie (Tony's dead boyfriend). Iggy's liaison with Tony begins with a desire to see where his dead lover lived and to meet the partner with whom he shared his life. This intention becomes complicated when Iggy and Tony sleep together and what should have

been a brief encounter becomes a more serious commitment. Iggy's true identity is revealed by Monica, a friend of Tony and Frankie, who recognised Iggy whilst on holiday in Mykonos[1], having seen a picture of him with Frankie. While Monica and Kevin (Tony's lodger) endeavour to keep Iggy's true identity a secret to avoid upsetting Tony, it eventually becomes clear that Tony knew who he was all the time. This farcical and complex plot focuses on the lies that even the closest of friends tell each other.

Once again, Harvey draws on themes that are already familiar. The idea of revealing the duplicity of a dead partner is reminiscent of Elyot's *My Night with Reg*. As in so many representations of gay partnerships that have gone before, Tony admits that they allowed each other to have one night stands: 'I knew he shagged around. I've shagged around. But we used to have this agreement. More than once and it's an affair. And that was breaking the rules' (p.96). Harvey thereby perpetuates the notion that gay men are incapable of monogamous relationships. There is little to challenge perceptions of sexual identity in *Out in the Open*. Iggy is described as looking 'like a rent boy' in the opening description of the characters. Kevin, Tony's gay lodger, is secretly in love with Tony but hasn't the honesty to admit it, even to himself. The only character who challenges traditional notions of sexual identity is Monica, who describes herself as a lesbian but who hasn't actually slept with a woman:

> *Kevin*: But you haven't slept with a bird yet?
> *Monica*: Do I have to pass a test or something? Being a lesbian's not like driving a car, you know. (p.23)

[1] Myconos is an exclusive Greek island destination popular with gay holidaymakers.

Having identified herself as a lesbian, she reveals that she is considering acting as a surrogate mother for a gay couple she met in Mykonos.

> *Monica*: I'm gay. Does that mean I can't have kids?...Colin and Vince would love to father a child. (p.24)

But Monica, who is potentially an interesting character, is never really developed. Because of her weight and the fact that she has delusions about becoming a successful actress, she is little more than a caricature and an object of derision.

Having used drama to present challenging images of gay people in plays such as *Beautiful Thing* and *Rupert Street Lonely Hearts Club*, Harvey has contributed little to developing his audience's understanding of sexual identity any further. This is perhaps exemplified in his creation of Tom Farrell in the television comedy *Gimme, Gimme, Gimme*. Although popular, especially with straight audiences, Harvey has created the archetypal camp failed actor, drawing on a history of familiar camp T.V. personalities and characters. Dreyfus's Tom Farrell owes much to Larry Grayson, John Inman and Kenneth Williams to enable straight audiences to laugh at him. Harvey has been condemned by many critics and playwrights for what they see as a retrograde step in the representation of gay men in the media. Kevin Elyot's view is unequivocal:

> Jonathan has gone on to write for television in *Gimme, Gimme, Gimme* in a way that I think betrays the integrity of his stage work. I think it's crap. The two main characters don't connect in any way. The Dreyfus character puts the image of gay people back thirty years…I think there's a danger in trying to appeal to mass audiences. The temptation to resort to well worn stereotypes or to unnecessary sensationalism must be tempting. It's not something that I want to do. (Appendix 2)

Michael Wilcox, who originally insisted that Methuen publishers include Harvey's *Beautiful Thing* in their fifth collection of *Gay Plays*, suggested in an interview conducted in November 2002 that Harvey had made a mistake in writing for television:

> I said to Jonathan 'Watch out, you're terribly young. If you're going to be a playwright for the next forty or fifty years it is very difficult to sustain a career, watch out, don't be tempted to go into television because if you do, you will make lots of money and you will lose your freshness, your originality'. I just find *Gimme, Gimme, Gimme* completely awful. I don't find it funny. (Appendix 3)

Elyot criticises Harvey's television sit-com because it resorts to formulaic stereotyping, yet some elements of that stereotyping are also present in Harvey's stage plays. The sport hating youths and the inadequate or absent male heterosexual role models are examples of this. While Harvey was successful in bringing two teenage gay characters, Jamie and Ste, before a mass audience in the Channel Four film of *Beautiful Thing* in 1994 at a time when the age of consent and Section 28 needed to be challenged, most of his gay characters have confirmed the 'otherness' of gay men and have sought to confirm rather than undermine public perceptions of sexual identity. With the exception of Nick and Wendy in *Boom Bang-a-Bang* Harvey's characters conform to type. Sexual identity is fixed in a dramatic world in which each character remains firmly and conveniently on one side or the other of the traditional boundary.

ACT 3

Scene Three

Mark Ravenhill: Consumerism and Diversified Sexualities

The first performance of *Shopping and Fucking* on 26 September 1996 at the Royal Court Theatre was a significant moment in the representation of dissident sexual identities on stage. For many critics, it was the shock of its content that gave it its notoriety. Les Gutman, in his *Curtain Up* review (2 Feb 1998) of the New York Theatre Workshop's production sums up the reputation of the play:

> If the title doesn't frighten you away; if the signs outside the theatre warning of explicit language and sex don't send you running to the hills; if simulations of (unsafe) homosexual sex don't offend you; if the sight of blood, regurgitation and a food fight that can extend into the first row of the audience doesn't gross you out; then by all means sit back, relax and enjoy the show.

Not only does this play confront our pre-conceptions about traditional constructions of heterosexuality and homosexuality, but it also questions the very nature of the relationship between individual sexuality and the consumerist culture of a late capitalist society. If, as Aleks Sierz points out in *In-Yer-Face Theatre*, 'Ravenhill denies knowing much about postmodern theory' (2000, p.133), there can be little doubt that *Shopping and Fucking* is nevertheless a post-modern play. In a *Guardian* article entitled 'A Touch of Evil' (22 March 2003), Ravenhill encapsulates what motivates him to write:

> To capture the truth of this new world we live in is an exciting ambition. To write about the virtual markets of images and information spinning around us and threatening to drag us into perpetual postmodern giddiness. To write about the hypocrisy of our calls for universal freedom and democracy as we destroy the world for profit.

Not surprisingly, therefore, *Shopping and Fucking* is not simply a play about sexual identity, but it is about survival in a world in which consumerism defines existence. It is a

play in which the only morality is the making and using of money to gratify one's immediate desires. Mark Jonas confirms this in his review of the Rude Guerrilla Theatre Company's production for *The Write Word* (12 March 2001) at the Empire Theatre, Santa Ana: 'Ravenhill's message is simple: humanity is now on sale. It's not that we can be bought, it's that we have been bought.' Yet at the same time *Shopping and Fucking* also questions the nature of desire. To identify how Ravenhill achieves this, it is necessary to consider the plot and characterisation of the play in some detail.

The central characters Robbie, Mark and Lulu, who share a flat, open the play eating from a carton of take-away food. The recurring image of the consumption of pre-prepared food is symbolic of their desire for immediate solutions to all their problems. Mark, a drug addict, feels that he has lost his control over life: 'I can't control anything. My[...]guts. My mind' (p.2). He believes that by being admitted into a rehabilitation clinic he can cure his drug addiction: 'I want to get myself sorted. I need help. Someone has to sort me out' (p.4). There is a superficial closeness about the relationship of these characters. These three characters have bonded together in a makeshift alternative family unit but as in all family units there is conflict. Robbie and Lulu feel rejected by Mark because he thinks that they cannot help him to solve his problem.

> *Robbie*: I thought you loved me. You don't love me. (p.2)

Robbie and Lulu fall back on each other for support, reminding Mark that he doesn't own them: 'We exist. We're people. We can get by' (p.3). Lulu's use of the idea of ownership refers back to Mark's earlier speech when he recites the story of their first meeting in a supermarket. When Mark first spots the couple and catches their attention there is a

mutual understanding: 'I'm watching you. And you're both smiling. You see me and you know straight away that I'm going to have you. You know you don't have a choice' (p.3). The liaison is only completed when a 'fat man' comes up to Mark, offering him the couple (as if they were just another product for sale in the supermarket) in exchange for twenty pounds. This unusual transaction sets the tone for the rest of the play. Sex and relationships have both become consumable goods that can be purchased for a small sum.

This transaction is made without any explanation of what it is that Mark desires. Ravenhill purposely ignores the significance of the nature of this ménage a trois, leaving the audience to draw their own conclusions. Sexuality and gender are irrelevant. Mark sees something he wants and he simply buys it. His purchase is made irrespective of any cultural norms or concepts of identity. These have no place in Ravenhill's materialistic world.

In order to survive, Robbie goes to work in a fast food restaurant and Lulu auditions for a television sales programme. Lulu is interviewed by the middle-aged Brian, whose influence dominates much of the action in the play. Brian's motives are already questionable because he demands that Lulu remove her jacket and blouse when she acts part of a scene for him. Ironically, she is more concerned about revealing the stolen ready-made meals she has concealed inside her jacket than revealing her body to him. In order to assess her ability as a salesperson, Brian gives her three hundred E-tablets to sell.

Ravenhill uses every opportunity to emphasise the superficiality of emotions and relationships in *Shopping and Fucking*. When Lulu performs for Brian she chooses an extract from Chekhov which questions the very nature of existence and seems to reflect the lives of the characters in the play:

> One day people will know what all this was for. All this suffering. There'll be no more mysteries. But until then we must carry on working. We must work. That's all we can do. (p.11)

When Brian '*stifles a sob*' we are never quite sure if he has been moved by the nature of her performance, the underlying message of the piece or the sight of her semi-naked body. Brian's brutal yet subsequently benevolent presence dictates the underlying values that permeate the play. When Robbie gives away the E tablets in a nightclub under a drug-induced desire to spread happiness, Brian comes to their flat to recover his lost money and to spread his message of materialism. After showing them a video of his son playing the violin, Brian again becomes emotional. The message to Robbie and Lulu is that such 'beauty' and 'purity' comes at a price: 'Because at the end of the day, at the final reckoning, behind beauty, behind God, behind paradise, peel them away and what is there' (p.46). When Robbie finally concedes that the answer is 'money', Brian's philosophy of life becomes clear: 'Yes. Good. Excellent. Money' (p.46). To repay the money, Brian forces them to sell telephone sex and leaves them with the threat of torture if they fail again. The message of materialism is once more confirmed when Brian returns after they have successfully raised the money to repay him. He recalls the moment when his father asked him what the first words of the Bible were: 'And he looks at me, he looks me in the eye and he says: Son, the first few words in the Bible are[...]get the money first. Get. The money. First' (p.85). Brian repeats this formula like a mantra and then inexplicably gives the money back to Robbie and Lulu on the pretext that they have finally learnt the importance of money: 'You understand this (*Indicates the money*) and you are civilised' (p.86). Brian's message has a profound effect on Robbie and Lulu whose only motivational force so far has been their instinct for survival.

The theme of sex as a commercial transaction is developed when Mark elects to pay for 'Lick and Go' sex in the showers at the rehab clinic. He is thrown out for having a personal relationship with another inmate. He cannot understand why he has been penalised: 'I paid him. I gave him money. And when you're paying, you can't call that a personal relationship, can you?' (p.22). Mark is afraid of personal involvement and prefers to isolate sexual acts from any emotional ties. When Robbie offers the same sexual act to Mark he refuses with the excuse: 'No. With you[...]there's[...]baggage' (p.17). However, this doesn't stop him falling for the first rent boy he meets on the streets. Gary is a fourteen-year-old street-wise prostitute who believes that sex in the future will be 'virtual', using only holograms. Mark justifies his intention to pay Gary for sex: 'I want to experiment with you in terms of an interaction that was sexual but not personal, or at least not needy' (p.23). When Mark discovers that Gary is bleeding he is shocked and wants to leave, but Gary breaks down and explains how he was repeatedly raped by his stepfather and how he just wants someone to watch over him. Mark is reluctant to admit that he would like to fulfil that role and Gary is reluctant to let him think that he could. Mark agrees to stay with him for a while so that they can go shopping together with the money that Gary has won from the fruit machines. The whole of scene seven is acted out with the sound of fruit machines paying out in the background, thus re-emphasising the status of money in the play. Money punctuates their every-day lives.

When Mark and Gary go shopping, Mark is constantly sexually aroused by the experience. Gary exploits the situation by tempting Mark to kiss him. After an initial peck, the second kiss becomes more 'sexual' and Mark realises that he has once again been drawn into being too close to someone. Gary is triumphant: 'I knew it. You've fallen for me' (p.53). Mark's attempt to de-personalise sex has failed. When Gary asks Mark if he

loves him, Mark tries to rationalise his feelings. He refuses to define the word 'love' and explains his feelings in terms of 'desire' and 'wanting': 'There's a physical thing, yes. A sort of wanting which isn't love is it? No. That's, well, desire. But then yes, there's an attachment I suppose. There's also that. Which means I want to be with you. Now, here, when you're with me I feel like a person, and if you're not with me I feel less like a person' (p.53). There is a confusion here that on the one hand reflects a desire for ownership, a transaction that will lead to erotic involvement, and on the other hand a notion that the presence of Gary somehow makes him more complete: 'more of a person.' This reflects the mechanistic ideology of consumerism: the promise that the purchase of the next consumer object will somehow make one's life more complete when the reality is that such a purchase merely serves to draw attention to other objects of desire. The link between consumerism and desire is confirmed by Mark's constant erection while he is shopping with Gary:

> *Gary*: Must be aching by now. Up all day. Is it the shopping does that? You gotta thing about shopping? Or is it 'cos of me? (p.52)

Gary's story of rape is one of many stories told in the play. What is unsettling about these stories is that the audience can never be sure if they are based in reality or whether they are conjured from some hyper-reality created consciously or subconsciously by the characters who recount them. Do we believe that the fat man in the supermarket really sold Robbie and Lulu to Mark? When Lulu returns to the flat after being given the tablets, she has witnessed a knife attack on a shop assistant at the 7Eleven store. This account is given dispassionately and is concluded with Lulu taking a bar of chocolate while the attack was in progress before leaving the shop. She is aware that she may have been

caught on the CCTV cameras and claims that she cannot understand why she walked away without doing anything. On this occasion the blood on her face suggests that the event really took place and yet, as she admits herself: 'It's like it's not really happening there – the same time, the same place as you. You're here. And it's there. And you just watch' (p.27). Reality and hyper-reality have become confused even in the minds of the characters. Robbie's response to the story is equally distant: 'They must be used to it. Work nights in a shop like that, what do they expect?' (p.29).

When Robbie returns from the nightclub having given away the tablets, Lulu asks him to describe his attackers: 'Sort of describe what they did. Like a story' (p.33). After explaining how in his drugged state he gave away pills to one person and then another, he justifies it with an ideology that seems alien to the rest of the play:

> And I see the suffering. And the wars. And the grab, grab, grab. And I think: Fuck money. Fuck it. This selling. This buying. This system. Fuck the bitching world and let's be beautiful. Beautiful. And happy. You see? You see? (p.37)

Robbie's rejection of capitalism is short-lived when he is confronted with the real choice of paying back the lost money to Brian, or of facing the unpleasant consequences.

Brian's stories about himself, his son and his father have been carefully chosen to illustrate his personal philosophy. They are stories which justify his materialism. The purity and innocence of the son playing the violin only exist because he has paid for them. Again we cannot be sure that this story is meant to be taken metaphorically or whether this is really meant to be the human face of capitalism.

In *Shopping and Fucking*, individual stories replace grand narratives. The absence of certainty and the proliferation of individual narratives of questionable authenticity contributes to the postmodern 'slippage' of the play. Robbie confirms this:

> I think we all need stories, we make up stories so we can get by. And I think a long time ago there were big stories. Stories so big you could live your whole life by them. The Powerful Hands of the Gods and Fate. The journey to Enlightenment. The March of Socialism. But they all died or the world grew up or grew senile or forgot them, so now we're all making up our own stories. Little stories. But we've all got one. (p.63)

Ravenhill intentionally parodies Lyotard's postmodernist lack of faith in the grand narratives. Yet some critics have viewed the play as a representation of one of the grand narratives that *Shopping and Fucking* seeks to displace. An anonymous critic writing for the *LA Weekly* (17 march 2000) identifies 'a Marxist critique' within the play and suggests that *Shopping and Fucking* 'simply recapitulates the cynical theme crooned many times by a famous leftist philosopher and Berlin cabaret MC: "Money makes the world go round."' This clearly contradicts the sentiments expressed by Robbie, promoting the personal 'little stories' over the 'big stories' of the grand narratives.

The confirmation that individual sexual identity is uniquely related to these personal narratives comes in the climax of the play. When Mark returns with Gary to Robbie and Lulu's flat they play a game which is supposed to help Gary work through his problems. The game is also presented as a financial transaction: 'Pay me and you'll get what you want' (p.64). After Mark tells the unlikely story of his sexual encounter with Diana and Fergie, Gary is encouraged to tell his story. As the story unfolds it becomes clear that the man who raped him was his father. His experience is of violent sadistic sexual encounters. Gary is in search of someone who will treat him in the same way. The scene becomes

horrific when both Robbie and Mark sodomize him at his own request. In spite of his apparent acquiescence, this is a re-enactment of the rape he experienced at the hands of his father. But it is not enough; he wants to be sodomized with a knife or a screwdriver. When Lulu and Robbie refuse to do it because it might kill him, his request is justified with the materialistic logic that dominates the whole play: 'When someone's paying, someone wants something and they're paying, then you do it. Nothing right. Nothing wrong. It's a deal. So you do it. I thought you were for real' (p.83).

If we are to accept that sexual identity cannot be limited within heterosexual-homosexual boundaries, we also have to accept that the experience of the individual can lead to dysfunctional sexual outcomes. Ravenhill is criticising sado-masochistic sex, and is showing how isolation from the world and each other can lead to the nihilism of the self. Gary wants to destroy himself because he has 'got this unhappiness. This big sadness swelling like it's gonna burst. I'm sick and I'm never going to be well' (p.83). Gary's earlier enforced sexual encounter with his father makes him the unwilling victim, yet Ravenhill argues that he in turn renders Robbie, Lulu and Mark victims 'because he's led them to a point where he expects them to do something which horrifies them – and they've got to do it.' He maintains that there is something much more complex going on than the working out of the relationship between oppressor and oppressed: 'It's more ambiguous.' (Aleks Sierz, 2001, p.131).

Ravenhill ignores the language of heteronormativity. Sexuality is never defined in terms of 'gay', 'straight', 'heterosexual', 'homosexual' or even 'queer'. He rejects terms that seek to define or restrict sexual identity. The notion of family has also become irrelevant in this new world where consumption defines all. The only examples of familial relationships are confused or exploitative. Brian produces the video of his son to justify

materialism and his own exploitation of others. Gary's brutal relationship with his father leads him in a pursuit of sexual activity that could ultimately kill him. Ravenhill's play is disturbing to audiences because there is no moral judgement, no projection of values beyond the logic of commodification. There are no stable, coherent or embodied identities in *Shopping and Fucking* for the audience to recognise. At the end of Scene Thirteen, when Mark agrees to fulfil the sexual fantasy that Gary has described, the audience is never told of Gary's fate and he doesn't appear again. In the final scene, Brian confirms the only consistent message in the play: 'What we've got to do is make the money' (p.87). After his departure, Mark concludes with one final story which transposes the earlier supermarket encounter into the future. On another planet the narrator is sold a mutant 'with a three foot dick' whom he then sets free. The mutant protests that it will not be able to survive: 'I've been a slave all my life. I don't know how to...I can't feed myself. How will I find somewhere to live? I've never had a thought of my own' (p.88).

Mark is describing Baudrillard's postmodern condition in which the individual flees from the 'desert of the real' in favour of the 'hyperreal' where 'a state of terror' exists 'characteristic of the schizophrenic' (Bertens, 1995, p.150). He is unable to resist the 'ecstasy of communication' generated by the ideology of profit-making. The play ends optimistically with Mark choosing to free his mutant irrespective of the consequences: 'And I say: That's a risk I'm prepared to take' (p.88) and then Mark, Robbie and Lulu return to their ready made meals and feeding 'each other' thus mirroring the opening scene of the play.

In *Shopping and Fucking* Ravenhill has finally broken with the didactic tradition of gay drama which has customarily sought to present homosexuality as an alternative and equally valid identity. The sexuality of each character is never questioned or debated. It is

simply one facet of their identities. As Ravenhill says in response to Andrew Davies' criticism that the characters were lifeless: 'They are not the product of accumulated detail, but are quite pared down and spare; they're the sum of their actions' (2001, p.131). Temple Lentz's review (5 May 2001) of the play at the Chicago Bailiwick Theatre also found the characters to be inadequate: 'His characters are shallow cartoons that make trite observations about the dirty, greedy world around them.' The audience is not asked to empathise or even sympathise with them; it just has to accept them on their own terms. A gay spectator expecting some affirmative message about homosexual equality will be disappointed. These identities are individual and self affirming without conforming to 'type'. Similarly a liberal straight spectator expecting some comfortable confirmation of the 'otherness' of homosexuality will also leave confused and unsettled. All will recognise elements of this nihilistic contemporary world in their own lives. As Les Gutman points out in his review (2 Feb 1999) for *Curtain Up*: 'The playwright has styled himself a sexual contrarian and a "post-gay" man.' He refers to an interview he gave in the *New York Magazine* in which Ravenhill anticipates that 'gay audiences will dismiss his show because the images are so negative.' Gutman dismisses this suggestion and insists that 'there is little to be gained from this sort of conscious speculation about how one is going to be perceived.' He maintains that Ravenhill should spend 'less time posturing and more time developing his theme.'

Self-mutilation continues as a theme in Ravenhill's second controversial work *Faust: Faust is Dead.* Whether he views such masochism as the ultimate statement in a world where only the body remains under the control of the individual or whether he sees it as the ultimate test of what is real and what is hyper-real is unclear. Certainly the increase in incidents of self-mutilation amongst adolescents and young adults in western society is

self-evident. Body piercing has become chic and the fashion for scarring one's body appears to have become acceptable within certain youth culture groups. In a conversation with Maria Delgado in 1998 at the Queen Mary and Westfield College, London, Ravenhill explained his own feelings on this issue: 'There's a lot of rather trendy performance art in which people cut themselves, but I find it repulsive' (Sierz, 2001, p.137). When he was told in L.A. that cutting has almost taken over from anorexia, his conclusion was that 'people who are powerless find that the only thing they can control is their bodies, however perversely' (p.137).

If *Shopping and Fucking* appears to be informed by postmodern theory, then *Faust: Faust is Dead* touches on some of these ideas in a much more overt yet at the same time playful and satirical manner. Ravenhill bases his main character Alain on the French philosopher Foucault and draws on his experiences while lecturing in America. Like Foucault, Alain appears on several chat show programmes to publicise his new book entitled *The Death of Man*. After upsetting a Japanese sponsor at the university, Alain is warned about his conduct. He decides that enough is enough and that it is time to 'live a little' (p.3). Alain has been tempted to sacrifice knowledge for pleasure, although there is no obvious Mephistopheles character to tempt him. Based on the story of how Foucault drove to Death Valley with a student where they took LSD and had sex, Ravenhill's protagonist teams up with Pete, the son of a computer magnate. He too is escaping because he has stolen a computer disc belonging to his father that contains a program that would 'give his product the lead for, like, centuries into the new millennium' (p.14). Ironically the subject of the disc is 'chaos'.

Once again, sexual identity is not a focus of the play, although Pete, convinced that Alain is a record producer, is prepared to satisfy Alain's desires if he agrees to promote his

musician friend Stevie. Ravenhill compares Stevie to Kurt Cobain of the group Nirvana, who himself died in the act of sexually motivated self-asphyxiation (an ominous comparison that further contributes to the macabre atmosphere and the sense of impending doom in the play). Pete's willingness to offer sexual services in exchange for the advancement of his friend echoes similar transactions in *Shopping and Fucking*. Pete admits that he is not used to having sex with other men: 'It's not like I have a prejudice or, or a problem you know...with the whole guys thing. It's just like, it's not totally me, okay? Sure if you were gonna sign Stevie, but otherwise...' (p.9). Once again sex has become nothing more than a means to an end.

Ravenhill's play is full of literary and philosophical allusions. Alain poses one of Baudrillard's riddles about a woman who rips her own eyes out to send them to her lover. He asks who the seducer was: the woman or her lover. Pete's question about how, if she was blind, did she find the mail box, illustrates Ravenhill's flippant treatment of Baudrillard's nihilistic philosophy. While Ravenhill appears to mock some of these ideas, the substance of the play seems to give them credit. Baudrillard's universe of hyperreality is present in the banal TV interview when Alain appears alongside Madonna, the disc that has the power to create chaos and in the internet website that introduces them to Donny 'who reveals a torso that has been carefully scarred with a blade' (p.26). The confusion is complete when Pete questions the authenticity of Donny's scars:

> Everything's a fucking lie, you know? The food, the TV, the, the music...it's all pretend. And this is supposed to be the one thing that's for real. Like you feel it, you mean it. (p.27)

Pete reveals that he too cuts himself and he arranges to meet Donny to compare cuts. It is of course ironic that Pete doubts for the first time the truthfulness of the internet as a medium that he has hitherto taken for granted as genuine. When Alain and Pete engage in the first sexual act of the play in the desert at night, Pete videos the act of oral sex in order to 'make it like on TV.' He feels nothing as the act comes to a climax. He describes the experience as 'so cool' because he 'didn't feel a thing' (p.19). Pete has become Baudrillard's 'pure screen, a pure absorption and reception surface' in which reality is lost in the endless recording and re-telling of events. Representation has superseded real life.

Although Alain sodomised Pete at the end of the scene, there is little evidence that Alain has seduced him. There is a confusion of roles with no clear indication of who is Faust and who is Mephistopheles. Both succumb to temptation although their respective desired objects are different. Pete is motivated by greed and boredom while Alain is motivated by lust and the need for new and different experiences. For both, sex is one way of achieving their goals. While Alain is in search of real experiences, his freedom is limited by the technology that intrudes into their lives. Alain wants to go to the shop to buy food because he sees this as a real action, but Pete warns him that 'they have cameras watching you', and he explains that they can order food on the phone or over the internet without leaving their motel room. Ravenhill's world of virtual interaction is both sterile and dehumanising. When Pete makes contact with Donny over the internet, there is no real communication between them. There is no trust or understanding, only mistrust and suspicion of what is real and what is not. Ironically, Pete arranges to meet Donny so that he can 'see some reality' (p.27). When the Chorus describes Donny's difficult childhood at the beginning of Scene Fifteen it is related as a first person narrative. Although he doesn't understand why he was sent away from his mother, why he had to leave school,

why his mother had cancer or why he cuts himself, he believes that Jesus would be able to explain things to him because 'Jesus had a few cuts too by the end' and he 'reckons he understands why I do this to myself' (p.29).When he announces to his internet viewers that he is heading out for 'a real meeting' he promises that in order to prove his authenticity he will 'go for the jugular' this time. Both Donny and Pete are victims of the medium of the internet. In their isolation they are absorbed by the illusion of contact with other people. Pete believes that if Donny had read the information on the relevant internet sites, he would not have cut his jugular. What he doesn't realise is that Donny has become disillusioned with virtual contact and that his indulgence in self-mutilation is a simple act to prove to himself and to others that he does exist. Pete remains unaffected by the death of Donny, only concerned with the possibility that this event will spoil his plan to blackmail his father with the stolen disc: 'I haven't got this [the disc] and held onto it all this time for some...kid, who doesn't know how to use a blade fuck it all up for me, okay' (p.32).

Ravenhill's parody of postmodern theory in *Faust: Faust is Dead* is perhaps bleak and cynical rendering it much more than simply a 'gay' play. The relationship of Alain and Pete is never developed beyond that of two isolated people exploiting each other for different motives. After Pete shoots Alain because he has taken the disc and refuses to 'keep on running' from their pursuers, he sits by Alain's hospital bed and repeats back the message of Alain's book, adding his own examples of 'original thought.' He may have become a disciple, but this doesn't stop him from doing a deal with his father with the chaos disc so that he can become his 'number two' on the company board. Pete admits that, while he fully understands the Death of Man argument, such a nihilistic philosophy which 'got us Donny' doesn't really lead anywhere. If this is the only alternative to his

father's capitalism then he would choose the latter. There is a confused hope at the end of the play suggesting that there may be some merit in his father's determination to solve problems and 'improve' the lives of others. But this argument is never convincing. When Pete shows some genuine concern for Alain asking him to take his pills and get better, Alain concedes that he doesn't want to recover. Pete leaves Alain with a shoe-box containing Donny's eyes, thus echoing the earlier story of the woman who ripped her eyes out and sent them to her lover, reminding him that Donny is the logical conclusion of his philosophy.

While Ravenhill's parody of post-modern thought in *Faust: Faust is Dead* may seem contrived, it does reflect the critical situation of the individual in a world where reality is always deferred and disrupted by the intrusive power of technology and the media. *Faust: Faust is Dead* confirms Ravenhill's ability to shock his audience. David C. Nichols, in his review (21 Oct 2003) of the Empire Theatre production for the Santa Ana *Times,* concurs: 'Ravenhill's disturbing, specialized voice is, as always, a direct assault on audience complacency. Yet, although squeamish souls should beware, fans of renegade allegory, no matter how gory, may find "Faust Is Dead" unsettling and representative.'

In *Handbag*, which was first performed at the Lyric Hammersmith Studio on 14th September 1998, Ravenhill examines the crisis of parenting and the notion of alternative families in contemporary society. The right of gay couples to adopt or parent children using surrogate mothers or fathers is seen by many as one of the final battles on the road to homosexual equality. It is because such alternative families threaten to undermine the traditional concepts of the heterosexual marriage and parenthood that strong resistance to change remains. Rosemary Hennessy (2000) in *Profit and Pleasure* analyses the Marxist assertion that links marriage and proliferation of a labour force that is essential to the

development of capitalism: 'In order for a worker to exchange his labour power for wages, he needs to have the capacity for his labour power to be continually nurtured and reproduced' (p.64). Traditionally the state has promoted the importance of the patriarchal normative family and the gender based division of labour within that unit because it suited the means of production. Hennessy also points out that the movement of married women into the workplace has happened in response to economic necessity rather than as a result of any movement towards gender equality. She argues that while capitalism has a vested interest in the preservation of the traditional family unit, it also develops new markets by promoting images of alternative sexualities to exploit the 'pink pound'. Capitalism is therefore morally ambivalent to alternative sexualities and lifestyles.

In *Postmodern Sexualities* William Simon (1996) argues that:

> three relevant features of current social conditions contextualize the contemporary family: pervasive change in almost all aspects of social life; unprecedented permeation of the total society by centralized, yet diversified media systems; and high levels of individuation.(p.79)

As a result the family has become a 'pluralized institution' which exists in many forms. Ravenhill acknowledges that when he wrote the play 'stories about destructive nannies, baby-stealing and artificial insemination were very much in the air, and then a rash of baby plays appeared' (Sierz, 2000, p.142)

In *Handbag*, two gay men and two lesbians agree to jointly parent a child. In her *smh.com* review (12 June 2005) of the recent Focus Theatre production at the Downstairs Theatre, Seymour Centre, Chippendale, Lenny Ann Low interviews the co-founders of the company. Pete Nettell highlights the significance of the baby in *Handbag* and the wider implications of the play:

> What are we doing with our culture, particularly with babies, and our responsibility towards other people? We neglect that. We make choices for selfish reasons and we buy into this whole idea that we're just individuals. We're heading down a path of loss.

Nettel and his co-founder Alice Livingston view the 'fetishisation of babies – children as objects rather than offspring – as an ominous modern phenomena.' The treatment of the baby is indicative of a far wider social malaise.

The actual process of conceiving the child is presented as both functional and absurd. In the opening scene, while Tom is offstage masturbating into a cup, Mauretta the potential mother, David and Suzanne wonder whether a helping hand or some porn might help Tom complete his task. If the act of conception seems cold and dispassionate, Mauretta explains the rationale behind the act. She tells the story of how her own father walked out when she was a child and people said: 'It's not right. A mum and dad's best for a kid. A kid's gotta have a mum and dad.' Mauretta believes that having two mums and dads will make the child 'doubly blessed' because if one parent 'decides to pack a bag and move out' the child will have more than enough parents 'to be going on with' (p.3). But Ravenhill resists the temptation to use his play as a propaganda tool for gay parenting. Although the four gay parents begin with the romantic idea that they can be better parents than many heterosexual couples: 'We can do better than that. We can create something calm and positive', the play reveals how the greed and selfishness of contemporary society renders all parents ineffectual. Ravenhill makes comparisons with the Victorian parenting ideal by presenting a parallel narrative loosely based on Oscar Wilde's *The Importance of Being Earnest*. In this allusion to Wilde's play, Ravenhill explores the reasons why the character of Jack Worthing came to be abandoned in the celebrated 'handbag'. Ravenhill was drawn by the darker side of the play which underlies its absurdity. When Constance

gives birth to her baby, the responsibility of nurturing the child is immediately handed over to Prism the nanny. The father (Moncrieff) conveniently sums up the bourgeois Victorian attitude to parenting: 'Thank goodness the modern age has realised the importance of dividing up our lives...Now we men can play billiards in the billiards room, smoke in the smoking room and relax in the library. And the ladies...well the ladies have their own worlds too' (p.24). The 'world of childhood' becomes 'the burden' of the nanny, but in this case the nanny is more interested in novel-writing than child rearing.

Into this compartmentalised Victorian world comes Cardew, a philanthropist who looks after lost boys. His over-attachment to the boys is suspected from the moment he appears in search of Eustace who has run away from Cardew's home. Moncrieff observes: 'A great many boys run away from your home. What can you be doing to them?' (p.24). Although Cardew is never proved to be a molester of children, he is hounded by a crowd who burn his house down. Ironically it is for Cardew that Prism leaves the baby in the handbag on the Brighton line platform at Victoria Station. In the final scene Prism justifies her actions by saying: 'To he who wants the child, the child shall be given. That is what justice means' (p.80). Clearly, Ravenhill is not advocating paedophilia here, but is suggesting that loving environments suitable for the rearing of children are rare indeed and wherever they exist they should be encouraged.

In the contemporary narrative, the four gay parents have proved to be as ineffective as their more conventional Victorian counterparts. David leaves Tom and takes in Phil, a homeless drug addict, while Suzanne's attentions have turned to Lorraine, a young woman who she meets while filming a 'fly-on-the-wall' documentary. Having inadvertently caused Lorraine to become homeless, she takes her into the family home where she acts as nanny to Suzanne and Mauretta's baby. When Mauretta discovers that Lorraine has been

entertaining her boyfriend while baby-sitting, she throws her out. Lorraine leaves, concealing the baby and sets up home with her boyfriend, who just happens to be Phil. This coincidental turn of events leaves the audience observing a couple in a heterosexual relationship with a baby who is needier than they are. It becomes obvious that neither is in any position to cope with the demands of a small baby. In his panic to solve the baby's apparent breathing problems, Phil burns it with a lighted cigarette. In a horrific repeat of this drastic act, Phil burns the baby's eyes and it subsequently dies. This is the tragic fate of a baby in a world in which the adults are too self-absorbed to tend to the baby's needs. In effect these adults have not resolved their own childish needs. Ravenhill is suggesting that there is no clear right of anyone, whatever their sexual orientation, to bring up children. The conventional concept of parenthood has been destabilised and babies have become disposable like any other commodity. Real emotional attachment has been displaced by role-play and hyper-reality. Phil's dream of becoming a conventional father is merely an illusion, just as Constance's attempts to form a loving bond with her baby are an illusion: 'No. It will come. Hold him long enough and it must come...Should see love. This is quite the proper thing to see. So why?' (p.78). Just as Pete could not feel anything during his moment of orgasm in *Faust: Faust is Dead*, Constance cannot feel the bond of mother and child.

Ravenhill's observations of contemporary culture reveal a fissure in human relationships. Families have become unstable and dysfunctional because of the society in which they try to survive. Real emotions have been displaced by idealised 'designer' feelings, prescribed and promoted by the media.

The displacement of genuine emotions is also evident in *Some Explicit Polaroids*, produced in September 1999 by Max Stafford Clark's Out of Joint Company. Once again

there is a familiar isolation about the main character Nick, who has recently been released from prison after serving several years for violent assault. Having been sent to prison in the 1970s, he is bewildered by the changes that have occurred in the intervening years. Nick's left-wing student dream of a socialist revolution has come to nothing and on returning to visit his one time comrade Helen, he finds that she has become part of the establishment as a local councillor. His idealism is crushed in the face of Helen's pragmatism. Helen's reality is improving the local bus services because 'the only way to get to the shops is a bus' (p.7) and when Nick tries to suggest that she should be aiming at 'the big targets' she sends him away: 'There's a whole big bad world out there waiting for you. Fuck off' (p.8).

Nick returned to Helen in the hope of rekindling their relationship but he soon learns that she no longer shares his heterosexual ideals. She has had girlfriends as well as boyfriends but has never been married. If the grand narrative of socialist reform has been lost, so too has the normativity of heterosexual marriage. The diversity of sexual identity of the characters is an integral part of the play. When Nick meets Nadia, the audience has already been introduced to her friend Tim, who is HIV positive, and Victor, his Russian boyfriend, who he has found on the internet and brought to England with Tim's money. Victor is obsessed with western trash culture and is terrified of the idea of experiencing any 'real' relationships. He relates to others through a narcissistic desire for the perfect body: 'Many boyfriends. They go crazy for my body. But also my father, yes? My father and my brother go crazy for my body' (p.9). The Polaroid photos of Victor's body have been posted across the world via the internet. He is proud that his body conforms to a global construct of the body beautiful.

Victor is horrified when Nadia tells him that Tim 'has a lot of love to give', preferring to believe Tim's website which describes him as '100% trash.' He declares that there is no meaning to life and that 'everyone in London gave up on that meaning bullshit years ago' (p.11). Ravenhill once again returns to the notion of ownership as a metaphor for contemporary relationships when Tim states: 'But I paid for you. I own you' to Victor. Just as Mark, Robbie and Lulu fed each other in *Shopping and Fucking*, so Tim feeds Victor in *Some Explicit Polaroids*. Not only does this act reflect an excessive level of dependence, but it also suggests a childlike need for comfort and support. Victor is the child who refuses to grow up, demanding more and more from those around him without giving anything in return.

Nick acts as the catalyst for each character to examine their shallow existence. When he saves Nadia, from being beaten up by the boyfriend she sleeps with now and then, she is reluctant to get involved with him. If there is any suggestion that Nick's appearance is unequivocally heterosexual, this is dispelled by Nadia who humorously states that he looks 'like a convict or a poof' (p.19). In contrast to Nick (who 'doesn't care about appearances') Nadia uses her body to make a living as a lap dancer. She mimics the language of psychoanalysis in a shallow attempt to make sense of the behaviour of those around her: 'Don't censor yourself. First thing that comes into your head' (p.21). Ravenhill's characters exist on a superficial level, absorbed in the trivia and frenzy of city life. Because of this there is nothing stable in their identities. When they interact with Nick they begin to question their own motives. For example, Nadia realises that she has been perpetuating her destructive relationship with Simon merely because she is lonely.

The modern dream of progress is decried by Victor who, in one of his few coherent moments, suggests that society is 'rotting':

> All the time you know it is rotting, but all the time. Everything is getting better. Everything is for the best. The people are marching forward to the beat of history. This lie. This deception. This progress. Big fucking lie. (p.41)

When Nick finally meets Jonathan (the victim of his aggression and the reason why he went to prison in the first place), it is symbolic of the meeting of the old revolutionary face of socialism and the ever persistent face of capitalism. Like Brian in *Shopping and Fucking*, Jonathan holds the power, yet it is hard to dislike him because of his charitable acts in Eastern Europe. When Jonathan states that the free market is 'the only thing sensitive enough, flexible enough to actually respond to the way we tick' (p.81), Nick can only ask vaguely 'is there nothing better?' In spite of this, Jonathan does concede that capitalism may have had too easy a ride: 'It's all been rather easy for me these last few years' (p.81). The scene ends with an uneasy truce between two men who were once diametrically opposed in their world views. When Helen accepts Nick back into her life she wants him to rekindle the old anger in him even if it does go against 'what grown ups think' (p.84).

Once again, Ravenhill ends his play with unexpected optimism. When Tim finally succumbs to AIDS, Victor realises that he really was in love with him. Even in the midst of this world of trash and superficiality genuine emotions are possible. Ironically, it is Tim who cannot admit that he loves Victor except when he is helping him to reach orgasm. There is hope too for the reunited Nick and Helen, who have learnt much from each other. While Nick has learnt to make concessions and contribute to the improvement of society in smaller and less ambitious ways, Helen wants to feed off his anger and return to some of the principles of her earlier beliefs. For Ravenhill it is possible to recognise the debilitating power of capitalism and still work within it to achieve social improvements.

While there may no longer be a grand narrative of socialism, the narratives of individual lives are still important.

Again, some critics have suggested that the characters in *Some Explicit Polaroids* are shallow. Shirley Dent of *Culture Wars* reviewed a Chelsea Players production at the Putney Arts Centre in July 2003. Dent describes the characters as 'cut-outs, off-the-peg creations that act as conduits for a basic trot through a basic introduction to the-horrible-world-of-capitalism' and concludes that the play 'is neither shocking nor intellectual enough.' In his review (7 Nov 2001) of The Black Box Theatre production in Dallas for *talkinbroadway.com*, John Garcia criticises the 'long-winded speeches about society, politics and the status of the world.' However, in contrast to Shirley Dent, he found the character's engaging and praised the characterisation of Nick: 'To see his character come to accept what his actions have wrought is remarkable, due to Morgan's acting and stage presence.' Neither of these critics commented on the sexuality of any of the characters in the play.

Sexual identity is almost incidental in Ravenhill's plays. Whether heterosexual, homosexual or bisexual, his characters are all under pressure in a society that prioritises greed and survival over equality and fairness. In an interview with Aleks Sierz on 14 January 2000 (2001) Ravenhill rejects the idea that he is a 'gay' playwright writing for a gay audience: 'For a long time, gay playwrights were expected to be witty, warmhearted and feelgood' (p.151). He suggests that audiences have moved on from expecting a 'coming out speech or AIDS related plot' (p.151). He argues dismissively that gay drama simply tried 'to prove that gay people are just like straight people, only with better soft furnishings' (p.151).

By positioning himself outside the group of gay playwrights that includes Kevin Elyot, Jonathan Harvey and Michael Wilcox, Ravenhill makes a symbolic departure from the traditions and the polemic of gay drama. He does not identify with the plays and the playwrights who have pioneered the representation of gay identities on stage. There is no strident message of defiance or demand for equality. There is no assertion of gay rights or promotion of gay culture. Ravenhill's characters are not categorised by their sexuality, nor is their sexuality questioned or threatened. Time and again he emphasises the importance of individual stories and the uniqueness of personal experience. By presenting sexuality in this way Ravenhill defies the boundaries of 'otherness' and obviates any necessity to identify with one group or another. This represents a major break from overtly gay playwrights who have utilised their position to normalise gay identity. Elyot's view that: 'when push comes to shove, gay people are always gay and they work within those confines and parameters' is challenged in Ravenhill's work. In this sense his work may not only be considered as post-modern but also post-gay.

The term 'post-gay' is increasingly used by critics in reference to Ravenhill's work. In his review of *Mother Clap's Molly House* (17 Sept 2001) for the *New Statesman*, David Jays describes Ravenhill's musical 'extravaganza' as 'a post-gay play where everything's up for sale.'

Mother Clap's Molly House is described on the dust cover of the script as 'a celebration of the diversity of human sexuality, an exploration of our need to form families, and a fascinating insight into a hidden chapter in London's history.' First performed at the Lyttleton Theatre at the Royal National Theatre on 24th August 2001, *Mother Clap's Molly House* examines the phenomenon of the molly house in 18th century London, but he also returns to the split historical narrative used in *Handbag* by

interrupting the main narrative with scenes from a contemporary private party where various characters have come together to indulge in sexual 'play'. There are many parallels to be drawn between the two narratives. The clearest statement that the play makes is that sexual dissidents have always come together in private to pursue their sexual preferences.

When Mrs Tull, who has recently lost her husband, realises that there is very little money to be made in struggling to maintain the tally shop that she has inherited, she is persuaded to open her house to men who will pay good money for the opportunity to dress as women. Although her decision is initially a financial one: 'if your sodomite is a good character, then that is where I shall do my business', she very quickly becomes the mother figure of the mollies, acting as confidant and matchmaker for them. Once again, capitalism is presented as the benign force that allows sexual dissidence to flourish:

> For that is the beauty of the business. It judges no one. Let your churchman send your wretch to Hell, let your judge send him to Tyburn or the colonies. A businesswoman will never judge – if your money is good. (p.54)

In both narratives disapproval of sexual dissidence is voiced, but it comes from sources that are easily discounted. When the cross-dresser Princess Seraphina, who eventually assists Mrs Tull in the running of the molly house, points out in disgust that 'these men are sodomites', she is immediately accused by Mrs Tull of hypocrisy. In the contemporary narrative it is the multi-pierced Tina, the moll of Charlie (who supplies the drugs to the party-goers), who voices her disapproval:

> Get your hands off me. You fucking poof! I hate you. I hate your money. I hate your big houses. And I hate your fucking sofas. Fucking sticking your fists up each other. Fucking disgusting/ Fucking sick. (p.65)

Both objections are dismissed as offensive and hypocritical.

The importance of cross-dressing in the molly houses is problematic for a contemporary audience. While some characters such as Orme, Kedger and Phillips are at ease in female attire, others such as Lawrence are reluctant to conform: 'But I in't the type' (p.70). The act of cross-dressing is not an act of satire as contemporary drag often is, but it is an act of liberation. The adoption of female names completes a transformation that allows them to leave behind the social and sexual inhibitions and restrictions that were enforced upon them as men. As Ravenhill suggests in *Inside the Molly House*, it is the very existence of the molly houses and the 'free space' that they provided that 'raises questions about now' (p.10). While some characters become queens in dresses, others remain men in dresses. There is no clear link here between cross dressing and effeminacy or passivity. It is the costume that creates the sense of carnival, allowing playful anarchy overseen by Mother Clap as the maid of misrule. While currently, cross dressing may not play an important role in sexual dissidence in European countries or in North America, it is still common in South America and some far Eastern countries. Alan Sinfield (1998) explains that traditional assumptions that men who cross dress adopt 'feminine' submissive sexual roles in homosexual acts may be too simplistic: 'there is evidence that sometimes the *maricones* ("effeminates") of Mexico are called upon, privately, to play the "masculine", inserter role.' He also cites Brazil as an example, where 'the insertee role is ascribed to cross-dressing *travesties* by the dominant sex-gender ideology' (p.190). Sinfield makes the point that neither the gender nor the sexuality of the cross-dresser is

'beyond negotiation.' As with the *travesties*, adopting different gendered identities allows the mollies to cross boundaries and experiment with a range of sexual roles.

In *Mother Clap's Molly House*, characters in both narratives are intent upon exploring sexual acts in the pursuit of pleasure without restrictions. For Martin and Orme this results in a firm monogamous commitment after Orme realises that the pleasure to be gained from multiple sexual encounters is ephemeral. For Tom, the young man who has only recently 'come out', the sex party in the sub-plot provides an opportunity to test his own limits. When he is taken advantage of by Will, who forces Tom to perform oral sex, he realises that this is perhaps a step further than he wanted to go. While he admits that 'people doing what they want to do' is 'the future' he also learns that having sex without emotional involvement isn't what he wants: 'People doing what they want to do. Being who they want to be. So why…? Why do you have to make it wrong?' (p.86). Ravenhill is suggesting that it is only by experimentation that one can really establish an appropriate personal sexual identity. Each character gets his/her satisfaction in different ways. Lawrence, the pig-man, merely wants someone to act as a sperm receptacle after he has driven the pigs to market and he isn't fussed about who performs the task as long as he can mount them as he would a sow: 'like an animal. Like a big old sow. Titties hanging down and all them little pigs sucking on you' (p.94). Even Mrs Tull herself finds satisfaction when Princess Seraphina finally takes off his/her dress and tells her that he has feelings for her. Mrs Tull reciprocates, explaining that she finds his feminine side just as attractive as his masculinity: 'man…woman…hermaphrodite. Want them all. All of you. Oh, lustful thoughts' (p.99).

Ravenhill continues to graphically represent the sexual act in its many forms on stage but these are never acts between two fully consenting adults. When Will engages the

young Tom in oral sex, 'Tom tries to pull away but Will pushes him down and holds his head hard' (p.85). Not only is Tom being exploited by Will but he is also being used by Edward who appears with his camcorder to record the event. Ravenhill never uses the sexual act on stage as an affirmation of consensual love. Sex continues to be a commodity that can be bought and sold. The audience is left with a sense of despair that the sexual act itself leads to no happy endings. It is just another transaction.

Throughout *Mother Clap's Molly House* the songs are shared by the chorus, God and Eros. They provide a backdrop to the play re-enforcing their respective messages. God admits that 'Morality is history / Now profit reigns supreme' while Eros concedes that now 'love can speak its name out loud/ Now business loves a queen' (p.56). It is 'business' that 'lights the darkness' and when Mrs Tull finally moves on she sells the business to the prostitutes who were her customers in the days of the tally shop. Amelia dons the title of mother to the mollies and assures them that while there is a profit to be made, the molly house will carry on. Ravenhill makes the point that nothing has changed when in the final scene, the dancing mollies take off their dresses and 'the molly house now becomes a rave club as the lights fade to nothing' (p.110).

Michael Billington suggested in his review in *The Guardian* (6 Sept 2001) that in *Mother Clap's Molly House*, Ravenhill 'attacks the commodification of sex and the resultant loss of love.' It is true that this theme echoes through each of Ravenhill's plays, yet his judgement of capitalism is always ambiguous. Without the molly houses or their modern profit-making equivalents, the opportunities for sexual dissidents to meet in their pursuit of love and sex would be greatly reduced. Ravenhill's plays recognise that commercial capitalism dominates western culture and material greed is central to the lives of many people. As David Jays points out in his review for the *New Statesman* (17 Sept.

2001), 'Nothing is free, whether our romance, our yearning for kin, our most private fantasies: we've become consumers of our own consumption.' Within that context the sexual act itself has become problematic. Michael Billington confirms this when he writes: 'the innocent games have turned into fetishistic rites, and that a onetime celebration of otherness has now led to a world of pink pounds and commercialised sex in which love is a precarious survivor.' Sex never occurs in these plays as an integral part of any loving relationship, but is often violent, exploitative or ineffective in nature. Nevertheless, several of his plays end with a hint of optimism, just as Mrs Tull and Princess Seraphina find contentment in their unlikely relationship at the end of *Mother Clap's Molly House*.

Mark Ravenhill is perhaps the most conspicuous of a new generation of dissident playwrights for whom the presentation of homosexuality on stage is not the *raison d' etre*. While Michael Wilcox has argued that this never was the central purpose of his own plays: 'When I was doing "Rents", my "Rents" was a view of Edinburgh through the eyes of two rent boys, but it was a play about money and survival. It wasn't primarily a play about being gay' (Appendix 3). Nevertheless, the characters that were gay maintained fixed sexual identities within that parameter. Wilcox, Elyot and Harvey remain playwrights who embrace the notion of being identified within the gay dissident sub-group.

What is important here is that Ravenhill has taken a fresh look at contemporary sexual identity without limiting himself within the boundaries of the straight/gay dichotomy. Alex Vass, in his review for *studentbmj.com* (10 Sept 2001), observes that *Mother Clap's Molly House* 'sets out to reflect the diversity of human sexuality' and while it 'celebrates homosexuality, it targets the commodification and commercialism of sex.'

Michael Billington confirms this in his review (6 Sept 2001) for the *Guardian*. He observes that it is the satirist in Ravenhill that 'attacks the commodification of sex and the resultant loss of love.' It is Ravenhill's recognition of the diversity of human sexuality in his work that places him within the postmodern landscape. By rejecting the word 'gay' and adopting the word 'queer' he is the first playwright to ignore conventions and present his audiences with a concept of sexuality that is fluid and beyond convenient definition. While many gay plays of the eighties and nineties played their part in the emancipation of gay people and in raising the profile of gay identity on stage, Ravenhill writes for a new generation that doesn't feel the need to be protective about the terms with which it defines itself. Ravenhill's *Mother Clap's Molly House* plays with concepts of gender and sexuality in ways that are challenging and unsettling for both gay and straight members of the audience.

Conclusion

Postmodern Uncertainties: The Future of Dissident Desire Onstage

In the earlier chapters I have outlined the way in which plays representing gay identities have reflected the historical situation of homosexuals in society. Plays produced prior to 1967 under the restrictions of censorship gave a limited impression of the 'otherness' of homosexuality, often portraying an innate self-loathing or self-deprecation which resulted in the shaming or even the death of the gay protagonist. Essentially such representations could not undermine the dominant heterosexist hegemony. Homosexuality was permitted if it was shown to be negative and ultimately destructive, not only to the individual concerned but also to the fabric of society that surrounded that individual. The only alternative was to create characters of ambiguous sexual identity using a range of sign systems that would leave an 'informed' audience in no doubt, but which would not be sufficiently 'overt' to incite censorship from the Lord Chancellor. I have also indicated how such dramas contributed to the desire for discourse on sexuality that typifies a period when the modern agenda was to control, examine and explain deviancy.

Since 1967, dramatists have had the freedom to represent a sexuality that had been legitimised, albeit with certain constraints. Progress to homosexual equality has been slow but the recent lowering of the male homosexual age of consent in England and Wales to sixteen, in line with heterosexuals, signals a watershed in that process. As Michael Wilcox observes:

> Times have moved on a bit from then. I think audiences, gay people are a bit more sophisticated now about what they see, but there have been fantastic changes in the

> last twenty five years, I mean absolutely unbelievable changes in the general public perception of gay people, gay people's representation on television and on the stage. Just simply the legal situation. I would not have believed twenty five years ago that the age of consent would have been lowered to sixteen and would have been the same for men and women. I'm very pleased it's happened; it's a remarkable event and one of the best, one of the most important things the present government has actually achieved in terms of social policy. Anyway, so I suppose my writing career has spanned a period when gay people were still part of a great subculture, basically criminal. We were all practically when I started whether we liked it or not, I mean I was born a criminal and you were whether we liked it or not. (Appendix 3)

The sense of subculture[1] and group identity amongst those gay people who have considered themselves a part of the movement towards gay equality is palpable. It is therefore not surprising that Neil Bartlett and Kevin Elyot echo Michael Wilcox's sentiments. However, it is also important to note that all three consider this moment of comparative gay strength as a time when alternative sexual identities may be given space. When questioned about the position of bisexual identity within current representation, Bartlett points to the work of Mark Ravenhill and Sarah Kane: 'They live in an imaginative world in which lesbians, gay men, heterosexuals and bisexuals actually have equal dramatic status.' Michael Wilcox argues that gay identity has never been the central theme of any of his plays:

> If you go back 25 years and look at *Rents* again you'll see it's actually not about the issue of being gay at all. Actually my plays have never had that sort of political polemic. I agree with that. I can probably see the great issues of today dramatised with credible complex sexually ambivalent real life characters. (Appendix 3)

[1] The word 'subculture' denotes here an organised dissident group within the dominant heterosexual culture with its own distinct behaviour, beliefs and attitudes. Use of the word remains contentious since it implies a level of conformity and exclusivity within that group and the exclusion of others. Thus 'gay subculture' has been used to refer to men who share homosexual beliefs and values. 'Queer subculture' remains problematic because of the disparate nature of the dissident identities that make up that group. Such a term becomes ambiguous since it might refer to anything that isn't 'straight' or sometimes anything that isn't 'gay' or 'lesbian'.

Bartlett's final comment perhaps points the way to the future: 'We are now in a position of such cultural strength that we can afford to embrace more' (Appendix 1).

The position of 'cultural strength' to which Bartlett refers has been permitted and encouraged by the dominant heterosexist power base through regulation and legitimisation to achieve a level of normalisation and control. The once transgressive act of being identified as homosexual has become one of compliance and submission. As Foucault (1984) suggests, it 'reflects a need to subject that activity to a universal form by which one is bound, a form grounded in nature and reason, and valid for all human beings' (p.238). In effect one becomes the sexual position that one is said to occupy. Judith Butler in *Bodies that Matter* (1993) calls for us to resist 'such a reduction.' She argues that it is the challenge that faces feminist and queer theory to 'assert a set of non-causal and non-reductive relations between gender and sexuality' (p.240). Most importantly, she suggests that not one term (such as 'homosexual' for example) 'can serve as foundational, and the success of any given analysis that centres on any one term may well be the marking of its own limitations as an exclusive point of departure' (p.240).

If gay theatre has been influential in establishing gay identity as acceptable and even 'respectable', it has also succeeded in restricting notions of sexuality within the boundaries that have been constructed and controlled by the dominant heterosexist culture. Having normalised this identity, the conflict that has been central to so many plays in the second half of the twentieth century has in many ways been resolved. As a result, drama about 'coming out' or living with AIDS is limited to the historical period it was written for. Such plays have become the artefacts of a crusade that has (on one level) been fought and won. For those people who recognise and adopt the reductive identity of

'homosexual' as their own, this is a period of unparalleled freedom. Yet there remain those who refuse to be categorised in this way.

There are still men who lead heterosexual lives with wives and children but also enjoy sexual encounters with men. Gay emancipation has not changed their position. They are not necessarily tempted to relinquish their straight lifestyle simply because it is now acceptable to be identified as gay. As Alan Sinfield (1998) points out in *Gay and After*:

> They do not reveal a dissident lifestyle on the computers of the electoral register, taxation and social security offices, credit card and insurance companies, banks. They are not seduced by advertising into spending money on designer clothes and standing around in discos. (pp.191-192)

Sinfield argues that, because they 'resist conventional categories', 'They are the dissidents; they are both pre- and post-gay.' Refusal to be categorised becomes the ultimate transgressive act. Sinfield cites Roy Cohn in *Angels in America* as an example of a man who is reluctant to relinquish the power he has gained through politics by allowing himself to be identified as homosexual. Cohn is the monster who succumbs to corruption in Kushner's play. Cohn is demonised because he won't conform. This reflects the antagonism felt by many gay people towards those in positions of power who use that power to hold up progress to gay emancipation while engaging in same sex relations themselves. Michael Wilcox confirms that even in the theatre today there are powerful impresarios who remain 'closeted': there are 'a hell of a lot of gay people involved in the West End theatre and they do not wish to be outed' (Appendix 3). Such people are resented because of their hypocrisy and for the threat they pose to the establishment of fixed sexual identities. The fact remains that not all people who cross or ignore the

barriers that confine sexual identity pose a threat to those who define themselves within them.

As we have seen in the chapters on the work of Jonathan Harvey and Mark Ravenhill, it is possible to present believable characters on stage who threaten the gay/straight dichotomy. In *Boom-Bang-a-Bang*, Harvey presents his audience with three characters who unexpectedly cross the heterosexual/homosexual divide. Mark Ravenhill suggests in *Shopping and Fucking* that by rendering the sexual act as a commercial transaction sexual identity becomes irrelevant. In *Faust: Faust is Dead*, the sexual act itself becomes problematized by the destabilising hyperreality of television and the internet. Ravenhill's own refusal to be classified as a gay playwright in itself is an act of transgression that threatens the established order. Are we therefore reaching a point where playwrights are beginning to address the issue of the changing nature of sexual desires? Are we now, in the twenty-first century, able to reflect the diversity of sexual behaviour and sexual identity that exists within contemporary culture?

The commercial success of playwrights such as Elyot, Harvey and Ravenhill is partly due to their ability to say something about sexuality that has a resonance with their audiences. While it is true that at one time gay people would go to see any play that represented gay identity, even in a negative light, it is also likely that plays which deal with bisexuality or which threaten conventional sexual identities will also be well received by those in the audience who do not view their own sexuality as a fixed construct. Whether we agree with Freud (1911) when he stated in his 'Psycho-Analytic Notes on an Autobiographical Account of Paranoia' that: 'every human being oscillates all through his life between heterosexual and homosexual feelings' or not, the idea of sexual indeterminacy will be particularly apposite to members of the audience who have

experienced desires for both men and women at some time in their lives. To watch such experiences being acted out on stage is therefore an invitation to consider one's own sexual identity; to look into the mirror of the play and see one's own reflection. It invites internal recognition. However, this is only possible if the mirror of the play contains familiar representations that may be shared by the audience. There are still aspects of sexual orientation that do not engender such recognition.

In 1986 the Lyric Studio in Hammersmith produced a play by Michael Wilcox called *Massage*. Although all three characters in the play are supposedly heterosexual, the plot focuses on the relationship between Tony Dodge, a bicycle maker, and a young boy called Simon. As the play progresses it becomes clear to the audience that this relationship has at one point been of a sexual nature. Tony's confession to Simon's mother that they had sex during their camping trips together is a defining moment for the representation of paedophilia, on stage. Like many paedophiles, Dodge tries to justify his behaviour by suggesting that it was to satisfy Simon's curiosity: 'There was nothing bad about it. He was curious. Interested. You said so yourself. That's all there was to it' (1997, p.250). In contrast to the character of Cardew who is accused of being too close to the boys in his care in Mark Ravenhill's *Handbag*, Dodge does not only admit to his actions, but he tries to explain them. Wilcox admits that this led to some people viewing the play as 'an apologia for paedophilia' to which his response is that he 'never intended it to be' (1996, p.xvi). In attempting to explore the motivation of a child abuser, Wilcox undoubtedly offended the sensibilities of many who saw the play:

> Plays dealing with the sexual activities of minors have always been difficult. One area which remains difficult is the exploitation of children. Paedophilia is still a taboo subject. When I wrote *Massage* in the eighties I wanted to explore how the

> mind of the paedophile works. You know, how they always justify their actions and try to make out that they are the innocent party. I got a lot of criticism for that. One newspaper critic suggested that it made paedophilia look acceptable. I don't think he saw the play at the Lyric. If he had he would have known that it was a play which tried to explore how the mind of the paedophile works. I often wonder if the subject of *Massage* was too ahead of its time. It didn't have a long run. I think it affected any chances I had of getting a play into the West End. It's difficult to see when there will be a time when a playwright can write thoughtfully about this topic. (Appendix 3)

Child sexuality and paedophilia remain topics with which theatre impresarios and audiences are reluctant to engage. As we have seen, while it may be considered acceptable for a fifteen year old to be the object of desire in *Mouth to Mouth*, it is quite another to explore the reasons why a pre-pubescent child may be the object of an adult's desire. Despite the recent reduction in the age of consent for male homosexual acts, public attitudes to the sexuality of minors remain ambivalent. While underage sex leads to a growing number of teenage pregnancies in Britain, where male heterosexual juveniles are involved, few are prosecuted. Society even appears to tolerate liaisons between ageing rock stars and underage girls. Yet the tabloid newspapers are obsessed with revelations about any male celebrity who is accused of having sex with underage boys. While there can be no defence for the exploitation of children by adults (whether heterosexual or homosexual), there are issues of hypocrisy and double standards that need to be explored. Kevin Elyot's decision to make the age of his protagonist's object of desire lower than the age of consent in *Mouth to Mouth* challenges our concepts of sexual maturity and the age at which individuals should become responsible for their own actions.

While the role played by the theatre in aiding the crusade towards gay emancipation has been considerable, most of the plays referred to in this thesis are indelibly linked to the historical period in which they were written. The battle for recognition and against

prejudice has been largely won. Now we are in a position to examine the very nature of sexuality itself and the way in which sexual identity has been constructed. While playwrights such as Mark Ravenhill and Jonathan Harvey have gone some way to deconstructing the categories of homosexuality and heterosexuality, audiences still have to be convinced that both sexual behaviour and sexual preferences are varied and that they resist definition. As Peter Tatchell (1999) points out in 'It's Just a Phase: Why Homosexuality is Doomed': 'Sexuality can embody multiple, competing passions' (p.52) Playwrights now have the opportunity to transgress boundaries and to challenge our preconceptions and prejudices concerning sexuality. Is it possible that the Enlightenment's pretence to progress through scientific analysis and control can be replaced with a refusal to define and construct identities, thus empowering the individual with the freedom to choose their own?

It is possible that the proliferation of sexual imagery that dominates the postmodern mediascape which Baudrillard (1993, p.196) refers to as the endless 'simulacrum', has rendered any discourse on sexuality obsolete. If there is an 'implosion' of individual and group sexual differences as Baudrillard suggests, the representation of the homosexual man on stage may itself be confined to history. In its place, personal narratives relating individual experiences that elude the boundaries and structures that previously restricted sexuality may predominate. However, such representations must confront the postmodern pressures of hyper-reality and the influence of the media in the perception and construction of our sexual selves.

Introductory Note to Appendices: In the following transcripts I have tried to retain the speech patterns and rhythms of the men interviewed. There has been some reorganising of sentences for the sake of clarity, but I have maintained the free flow of ideas as they occurred in the interviews. By adopting this approach, I believe this represents an accurate version of what was said in the interviews. The interviewees did not ask to read or edit written copies of the interviews prior to their inclusion in this thesis, although they were offered the opportunity to do so.

Appendix 1

Interview with Neil Bartlett. 18th August 1998.

Commentators on gay drama such as Kaier Curtin, Nicholas de Jongh and John M. Clum have charted the development of twentieth century gay theatre in terms of the plays that deal covertly or overtly with the theme of homosexuality. On several occasions, notably in the preface to Night After Night, *you have stressed that there has always been a gay presence in West End and Broadway productions that do not necessarily* **say** *anything about homosexuality. Do you think that the process that has been adopted by these commentators of establishing a tradition of gay theatre is therefore based on a false premise?*

From where I'm standing that's a really good clear question. From where I'm practising, as someone who runs a theatre and also someone who makes theatre shows, I'd have to say yes, that I think that the notion that gay theatre is defined exclusively by content, i.e. in the presence of gay characters who talk about being gay in the course of a

piece, is extraordinarily limited as a way of writing about our culture. For a start it excludes all kinds of other sorts of performance in which gay men have been not just influential but central. For instance, one would have to ignore Diaghilev, which is a rather odd thing to do. One would also have to ignore Frederick Ashton, which is also a rather odd thing to do. In my own works for instance, you would have to say that these seven, eight, nine, ten pieces are gay, while these other twenty pieces aren't gay, which certainly I would find as an artist bewildering. Would you include any of Sondheim's work? Just to choose the most obvious examples.... and then would you go on to say you'd exclude *Gypsy* and *West Side Story* despite the fact that not only the prime creative movers behind those shows but also to an extraordinary degree the audience for those shows were gay. They were both shows that were very important for gay people both as live events and, as recorded events and as movies go, historically important. A lot of older gay men talk about the choreography for *West Side Story* as being a breakthrough moment in their own perception of themselves as gay men in the same way as my generation would talk about seeing Lindsay Kemp make his entrance in *Flowers* as being a moment which changed one's perception of oneself. So I think historically it is a very odd position to take up. But I would qualify that by saying that it is a very understandable position because mainstream cultural commentators, the press and indeed audiences have fixated on this notion of the transition point between covert and overt depictions of homosexuality. Now the way that comes about relates to the nineteenth century problem play, which was based on the idea of the moment of revelation of a woman's sexual past or sexual future; whether that's a downmarket example like Oscar Wilde's comedies or an upmarket example like *The Doll's House*. After the turn of the century you began to have plays in which that female theatrical crisis was replaced by a gay male theatrical crisis where the revelation that

someone was gay or maybe even more than one character was gay became the crux of the drama of the evening. That then gets expanded into a larger historical narrative, i.e. was there a point at which gay drama ceased to be covert and became overt, so I know why it's there.

Presumably some of it has to do with censorship which to a certain extent controlled what could and could not be produced on stage.

Yes, but the mistake historically is to say that, with the removal of self-censorship and state censorship, therefore comes the possibility of speaking the truth. I'll buy that as far as it goes, but then that idea gets trapped back through history to say that a work which doesn't declare, i.e. speak literally that they are gay, that that work is somehow inauthentic, inexpressive and inappropriate. If I am profoundly moved by *Eugene Onegin* because I think it is a work which speaks deeply to me as a gay man, or I am profoundly uplifted by some of the songs in *Follies* for the same reasons, that somehow I'm wrong or I'm dumb and that all those queens who felt that the greatest gay artist of the twentieth was Maria Callas are stupid old queens. I would say that that is not my experience. That would be my response.

On the subject of censorship, do you think there are still constraints on what can be produced on stage or are the only constraints commercial ones?

No, in fact in London at the moment it is probably the other way around. What ten years ago would have been considered as hardcore gay imagery is now probably a selling

point in advance publicity. *Shopping and Fucking* being a classic example of that. Actually, in the staging of *Shopping and Fucking* nothing actually happened, even if it is suggested in the script. We're about to open the world premiere of Mark Ravenhill's new play and the same questions are being asked. How do you tell people at the box office that there is going to be simulated or gay sex in the piece? It's not a problem because most people will think that is a good thing not a bad thing. The imagery of sex has always been good box office in whatever form or whatever ethos one is talking about. Tits always sell, of whatever variety, whether they're upmarket or low market. There's a show on at the National Theatre at the moment which has a very well placed pair of breasts which is doing wonders for the public perception of that show. What isn't acceptable now is any kind of hard-core political discussion. What used to be meant by the politics of gay, i.e. insisting on foregrounding an extreme level of dissatisfaction with the lives of gay people in this country, reflecting a lot of anger...a lot of resentment. That is nowhere to be seen now. What is foregrounded instead is either hedonism or alienation, which are the flipside of each other. If you said that you have this really great idea for a show....you really want to show what it is actually like to be discriminated against and how mad people get, that isn't going to get you anywhere and it is effectively going to be censored, whereas if you have a gay feel-good show or a gay fuck-good show, you're onto a bit of a winner at the moment.

In the light of the success of plays such as Jonathan Harvey's Beautiful Thing *and Kevin Elyot's* My Night With Reg *which deal openly with homosexuality, as more gay writers produce for mainstream audiences, is there a chance that there is a danger that they are*

going to lose touch with gay grassroots? Are they simply writing for commercial success and ignoring any political message or is the political message now irrelevant anyway?

Certainly the politics of theatre which I was brought up in (which was gay theatre) fitted with something which was called women's theatre and something which was called black theatre and something which was called disabled theatre. I think these were minority theatres which were necessarily excluded from the mainstream. The reason why we had to try to gain access to the mainstream was so that we could air the very particular minority politics of those groups and theatre was a tool at the service of a political struggle. That sounds terribly cut and dried but it really was that tightly formulated. That no longer pertains. I don't know anybody who misses it... that whole idea that theatre is at the service of politics... that one is the sugar round the pill of the other. I find that at best incomprehensible and at worst reprehensible as a way of thinking about making entertainment and making art.

Does that mean that to a certain extent Gay Sweatshop or groups like that have got a limited future or do they have to go in new directions?

Gay Sweatshop doesn't exist anymore. Consenting Adults in Public who I worked for when I first came to London. I think the real ground-breaking thing art can do is create new images, and fracture old ones; art can inspire and outrage and those things are continuing to be done by lots of different forms of artistic practice. If I put together my list of gay artists who have really done that, really got to people and enabled people, empowered people, changed people, I am much more likely to talk about Michael Clark,

Derek Jarman, Lee Bowery, Lloyd Newson (just to pick ideas off the top of my head), than social realist playwrights. So, for instance, a play like *Beautiful Thing*, which other people read as some kind of liberationist statement, I had no emotional response to the characters or the situation. It just didn't do anything for me. That's probably to do with a very specific thing about generation ...I just couldn't believe in or click into those particular young people's lives that were being portrayed in that very social realistic way. So I don't think that politics, i.e. that sense of art having an urgent and passionate relationships with gay people's lives as opposed to just commercial 'we'll write a play and make some money, that would be nice, thank you.' I don't see that has in any way disappeared. I just think it keeps on migrating and moving and coming up in different places and in the most amazing and surprising places. For example Lily Savage is having an enormous impact in the way people perceive gay people because there is something about Lily's act which no other mainstream T.V. drag queen (of which there have been many now) has ever really done before. He is preserving an authentic quality of 'you can either take me as I am or you can frankly fuck off because I don't need it!' His tone is intangible. On paper Lily's is the most apolitical act ever conceived - he's doing *Blankety Blank* for God's sake - but the tone is exactly the same as it used to be when he was doing drag down the Vauxhall Tavern ten or fifteen years ago. It's that tone and quality which has all the old agenda of confrontation and non-integration and empowerment and the use of a very, very traditional kind of gay culture and an assertion of self from within the culture. It's non-assimilationist. It's anti assimilationist and I think it's amazing what he has achieved. So I don't feel that the old politics has disappeared, it just re-invents itself in every new decade because we have got different problems now than we had in 1970 when Gay Sweatshop was formed. As to the long term significance or impact of things like

Beautiful Thing and the fact that *Tales of the City* is on the television – I think it is very complex, because I think potentially they are very powerful. I think if you saw *Beautiful Thing* on tour, if you were in a town with only one theatre and it came to that with all the credibility that a West End hit has, I think it would be really powerful. I grew up in a small town, Chichester, so I know what it's like and I can imagine people finding it brilliant and saying 'I'm really proud to be here and it's going to really make a difference'. By contrast in London, oddly enough, it comes across as low-key and soft-core and middle-brow, but that's all to do with their presence in London. You always have to be careful with work like that to talk about where it is being presented, because *My Night With Reg* is like lots of other plays. The fact that it is about gay male characters as opposed to heterosexual adultery doesn't actually alter anything about the direction, the writing, or the conception of the piece, unless it is being played on tour in Middlesbrough, when I think it would be electric and that is where I would want to see it. But when you see it just on the tele, it's another one of those rather well written, rather well directed, really very well performed plays. There you go.

As time moves on, do you think that plays concerned with coming out or AIDS are becoming dated? Are gay audiences losing interest in these themes because they have been done so many times before?

They are both very topical themes, aren't they? They are very specific...that's my feeling. There's a great danger in saying that there is a new trend in British playwriting. Stephen Daldry (bless her) is the one who comes out and says such things. He is on record as saying last year it was gay theatre and this year it's Irish theatre. Actually, Irish theatre

has lasted two years and is still fashionable. Everyone is saying that there is a whole new wave of Irish theatre when in fact it is down to commercial managements in London. If you get one hit, they look for the follow-up and then usually the National will do the third one. That's exactly what's happened with *My Night With Reg* and then *Beautiful Thing* and *The Day The Earth Stood Still.* It's not necessarily a historical trend.

If I could move on to your own work; many of the gay plays of the seventies by Gay Sweatshop and Consenting Adults in Public were collectively written; they were constructed out of a shared experience of what it is like to survive within a heterosexual society. In many ways Gloria has sought to continue that tradition in plays like A Vision of Love Revealed in Sleep. *How did the group come together and how do you see it developing in the future?*

It's interesting that you see it in that light because, actually, two of Gloria are straight. Gloria is four people; Nick and I are both gay but Simon Mellor is a straight man and Maire Houseman is a straight woman and we never thought of it in any sense as being a gay company. In the ten years that Gloria has existed we never described any of the work as gay because we felt it wasn't anything to do with that other tradition that you have just mentioned (which is a tradition that I was on the tail end of because I did work for Consenting Adults in Public), of the politicised, collectively devised agit-prop theatre of the middle to late seventies, so I never see the connection between those two things. But other people do because they see the gay element and think that it must have something to do with Gay Sweatshop, but actually, formally or artistically, I don't think it has anything to do with it.

But in terms of the way in which the group works; for example there was no actual script of A Vision of Love Revealed in Sleep *and what appears in the* Gay Plays Collection *is simply an example of what might have occurred on one night. The performance changed from night to night. That seems to me to reflect a particular method of working.*

That's coming out of a very different tradition based on our background. Leah's background is in dance and there's never a script in a dance piece; choreographer, composer and indeed the dancers always collaboratively devise it. Nick is a musician and my background is very much in performance art, so there was never a notion in Gloria that there was a writer, even when there was a piece which appears in the end with my name on the script, like *Night After Night*. It's a formality of crediting. We never worked on the script first; the script was always the last thing that happened, unless we were doing a translation.

Does Gloria have any further projects in the pipeline?

There aren't because Gloria has been running for ten years and we have just wound the company up for a set of very particular reasons. When we started we did a show called *Lady Audley's Secret* and there were four of us with one stage manager, and we had no money to pay for child care. We did all the making, technical work and touring ourselves. We could only have a piano on stage. We toured small-scale arts centres and then did two weeks at the ICA. That presented us with a huge number of problems in terms of how our work was going to develop aesthetically, and in particular it presented us with a huge

problem about audience, because in the middle to late 1980's there was a very definite sense that we were starting to play to the same people. There was a very closed art house performance circuit of which the top gig was two or three weeks at the ICA. We would keep on sneaking off to see musicals or go to the theatres which you were really not supposed to do. That was illegitimate and was very frowned on by the cultural thought police of the time. There was this other whole audience which isn't about 100 people sitting in an arts centre watching basically the same show as they saw last year, but you're back again with a new Arts Council grant. So we decided that we would set up a company to see if we could get bigger and stronger because we don't believe that there is this unbridgeable gap between the mainstream and what was then called 'the fringe'. There was a very definite way of talking about things at the time; fringe was good - it was experimental, political, progressive - while mainstream was dead, conservative, apolitical and nasty. We kept asking why it was that a lot of the works which excite, alarm and move us most as artists are coming from the mainstream. Why do we get excited about Frank Lachen's architecture, about classical pre and post-war British plays, about British thrillers and novelists like Ruth Rendell, about pre-Raphaelite painting, about any of the things that we have taken our work from? They are inspired by mainstream forms. Gloria's last project was to perform in Southwark Cathedral with a twenty-seven-piece orchestra and a cast of over two hundred people. The technical crew alone had more people in it than the cast of our first three shows put together. Now that's not in itself a virtue, because the show before that one had one performer, one technician and a production budget the size of this table; minute. So scale in itself isn't a virtue for us, but we have taken the journey to where we have answered our own question. Simon and I are running the Lyric Theatre, Hammersmith, Leah is directing at the Coliseum, and Nick's

last piece was commissioned to be written for the East of England Orchestra. So we've reached a point where that division between mainstream and fringe no longer pertains. In concrete terms, if I said I want to do an experimental piece with a performing company entirely made up of gay men, choreographing a silent performance piece to a very obscure score by Benjamin Britten and put it on at the main house at the Lyric Theatre, Hammersmith; I've just done that.

Appendix 2

Interview with Kevin Elyot. 20th August 2001.

Let's start off with how you view your work as a contribution to gay theatre. After the changes in the law regarding homosexual acts in the late 60's, plays dealing openly with the theme of homosexuality, ranging from Gay Sweatshop productions to Torch Song Trilogy, *were more widely staged. Do you view your own contribution as a continuance of this tradition of post emancipation gay theatre?*

I remember when the National Theatre did their 'One Hundred Plays of the Century' season. They had this vote of what the 100 plays of the century were. *My Night with Reg* was one of them. Steven Daldry chaired the discussion about it. We got the original cast together and read a few bits of it. Steven asked me whether I was aware of the effect the play was going to have and where it stood in the history of gay drama and I answered then as I would answer now; I haven't a clue because I think it is very hard to write a play. Just to get an idea is difficult enough and then to craft it into a play and then to get the play done and to sit down thinking because Gay Sweatshop has done this, or such a writer has done that, I'm going to continue this theme, is unthinkable. I don't think it works like that. It is far more arbitrary than that. If you do sit down and self-consciously try and forge a pattern or a way through, you're too aware of what's going on; then you're probably not going to write a very good piece. I find it slightly suspect when people are grouped together. I find theatre groups at the moment and critics are keen to find some sort of agenda that is going on, some sort of school of writing and I don't think it's useful. I think

a false criterion is applied and a false agenda is applied. I don't see myself as a part of anything. I never have. I see myself as out on a limb. I wrote *Coming Clean* in 1982 and that was done at the Bush Theatre. Nothing like that had been written before. I wasn't following in anyone's footsteps. I was just seeing if I could write a play. I wrote what I knew about. It hit the mark in a small way.

Were there any particular plays or playwrights that inspired you to start writing?

I studied English at A-level. I did Drama at Bristol University and studied Shakespeare, Chekhov, the Restoration, Orton and Coward. They were the writers that informed me when I was learning.

Did you find Orton interesting and particularly challenging?

Yes, because he was quite distinctive. I think a good litmus test for a writer is whether they create their own world and create their own language. With someone like Orton, you instantly know almost within the first line from any of his plays, that you are in his world. It's absolutely distinctive and quite genuine even though it's very highly stylised. It is centred in a sort of truth. I think he was incredibly impressive.

Is it because the content of the plays was particularly risqué?

Of course. Yes. The attitude to sex and gay sex and homoeroticism which threaded through his plays to a greater or lesser extent was very exciting for a teenager in the 60s. That was part of the whole liberation thing along with what was happening in music and films, like *Midnight Cowboy* and Andy Warhol. It was all part of the same movement I think.

Do you think in general the West End is more accessible to openly gay playwrights than it was 20/30 years ago?

One can be very precise about this. When the Lord Chamberlain was got rid of, you would not have been able to have quite a few of the plays subsequent to his demise from about 1968. That has had an effect on what was shown on stage. Producers are not altruistic beings at all and they are not promoting liberal mindedness. They just want to make money. So they only put a play on if they think it will make some money. If it happens to be about cats - that's all they are worried about. They are completely in control of that.

Do you think the fringe is as lively as it was in the seventies and eighties?

I don't know really. I don't go much now. I think probably not. I think the fringe, when it started, had more to fight for. Now there is so much on, all the time, it's kind of past its sell-by date. One needs to find other things to do and other new forms. It is also interesting to think about people like E.M. Forster and the gay artists who have done a lot, who were fighting huge censorship and how they managed to get across their world view

and emotional view. In a way I don't think they necessarily suffered at all. They probably had to be more inventive. There is stuff in Forster that is as erotic as anything that has been written since. It is very restrained yet engaging.

Maurice *wasn't published until after his death.*

Then you have got *Where Angels Fear to Tread* - you have got the description of the Italian man, whose name I cannot remember, infused with eroticism. It's touched in and very powerful because he couldn't say what he would have felt. Whereas now, we get plays like *Shopping and Fucking* or *Wiping my Mother's Arse* which I think is Ian Hayter's new play and it is quite disgusting and awful. There's no mystery about it.

That leads nicely to the question of censorship. When you write, do you feel you are limited in any way?

No. I have never not written anything because I thought I couldn't get away with it.

Have you ever been asked to tone something down?

I was once with my television play *Killing Time*, which was based on Denis Nielson and one of the boys he murdered. The BBC produced it. It was Aiden Gillen. I was asked to tone down the language. In fact it didn't harm it. There were lots and lots of 'fucks' in it. There was nothing physical, nothing gay. It was just the language. It was called *Play on One* – a strand at the tail end of the Pebble Mill years. Fantastic drama came out of Pebble

Mill from David Rays and Michael Waring, who was the executive producer, and that was exciting drama. *Killing Time*... that was the only time I was asked to tone it down.

Do you feel you lose control of your script once it goes to the director?
Do you have influence there still or do you even want influence?

It depends. If you are with the original stage piece as opposed to a television script you have much more control. The great thing about play writing as opposed to writing poetry or writing novels is that it is a collaborative process. As soon as you hand it over, you have lost a certain amount of autonomy. It is all a question of negotiation. First of all, the director and then the designer, a bit like a sound designer or composer and then of course the actor's constant negotiation. It is give and take. One has to be careful about choosing people you work with. I have been very lucky. I really enjoyed the two-way thing. It can be painful as well. You do have tussles and fights, but basically I do enjoy that when it works with a group of people who are trying to make something work.

During the early years of Gay Sweatshop there was some controversy over the idea of straight actors playing gay men. It was somehow thought to undermine the good work that the theatre group was doing. Is it important for you to have gay actors representing gay characters?

That's a very hard question to answer. In a sense it's rather like asking a white actor to black up as Othello. There are so many good black actors around now so the idea seems anachronistic. There are certainly enough good gay actors about but I'm sure there is still

something of a stigma for some actors who are not necessarily 'out' to play openly gay parts. I think my preference would be for gay actors.

I was going to draw a similarity between Boys in the Band *and* My Night with Reg, *which are essentially about a group of gay characters at a social gathering and their interaction. Crowley's play describes the characters in great detail before everything starts. They are kind of stereotypical characters from the word go and you've got the black queen. Whereas I felt in* My Night with Reg, *there weren't the stereotypical characters, although they had some traits that we all recognise. Do you think, when the actors took those parts on, that they were looking for something to hang their hat on?*

It is interesting, but I think the most fascinating example of that is John Sessions with Daniel. He didn't want to play a screen queen. I actually hadn't written it as that anyway. However, it has been played as that in various other productions that I have seen around the world. It need not be that at all and he said that he is a wild boy and I said that is absolutely fine. He was determined to get this energy going with hardly any sort of camp. I thought that was fine. Equally it also works well with a strong element of camp. Did you see the second cast? Hugh Bonnerville took over from John. He was quite straight about it, but it was still very restrained. In other words he did not come along thinking this is a screen queen and therefore I will play it as such. They both made interesting choices. The original cast all made interesting choices. They were very good actors. Did you read the Ken Macdonald Diary? The guy who played Benny died two weeks ago of a heart attack. I also noticed Neil Bartlett said that all the characters were recognisable - stereotypes up to a point. I personally would not get very upset about that. It is true what he says about

drama being about recognition. It is very, very hard when you see someone on stage. When I saw David Hare's *My Zinc Bed*, I couldn't recognise any of the characters. There were only three and I had a real problem with the play. I thought, who are these people? I think you have to help the audience up to a point. Then you start playing around with things and take them in another direction. That is what I did with Frank in *Mouth to Mouth* which is to create this gay character. You see this first of all, as almost an architect - the gay friend who is single, who listens to everyone. Everyone confides in him. He is very similar to Guy in *My Night With Reg* but then this thing comes out, that he is desperately, obsessively trying to seduce his best friend's underage son. The last scene picks up where the first scene breaks off, where I want the audience to be seeing the same thing, but with a completely different view of him. There, I was trying to play around with the idea of the stereotype and it was straight up in the air.

Was that an intentionally mischievous act to make the lad 15?

Yes, just at the age of consent

Did you get any kind of response?

De Jongh wrote something. He is writing another book on censorship, so this new one fascinated him. He was obsessed in his review. I tried not to read all the reviews. He was obsessed with the audience's reaction, which was gasping most of the time. You saw him kissing the boy before they were going to the larder. He just got obsessed with that. I don't quite know what he thought about it. He just kept going on about it. A man in his

middle age with AIDS who kisses an underage boy. I was very aware of the age thing and also I think with Eric in *My Night with Reg*. I can't quite remember how old I made him but I was quite deliberate about making him under the age of consent. I think I was 21 when I wrote that. I think he is supposed to be 18. I was very aware of that.

To a certain extent there is a political content.

Have I denied that?

No. Do you think that some of the things which came out in the 70s and 80s like 'coming out' plays or plays which deal with HIV and AIDS or with homophobia are going to continue to be of interest to an audience or do you think they have been worked through?

You have to approach these themes within the life of what is actually happening. A 'coming out' drama would be a bit pointless, but it depends on how good the play is. In *Mouth to Mouth* all the stuff with the doctor is very much down the line in terms of combination therapy. Whereas in *My Night with Reg* which is set in the mid-80s which some people misunderstood. Is it about an unknown, unspoken monster lurking? Whereas in *Mouth to Mouth*, it is very practical about the side effects of all those wonder drugs. We do take those into account, but much more important is the quality of the writing, and so why not write a play set in the 50s about someone trying to come out? As long as it is good. I think a lot of people forget that.

Thinking of some of the Gay Sweatshop productions, which clearly were written for a

particular purpose... I have read a number of them, like the plays written by Philip Osment. I liked The Dear Love of Comrades, *which is about Edward Carpenter. But these plays haven't been revived. I wonder if it is because people see them as period pieces, which maybe one day will be revived but which are not appropriate now. Did you read* Mister X*?*

Yes. I thought that was a fascinating piece because it was very much of its time. It very bravely went round the country performing in all sorts of places, when gay theatre was simply unheard of. I think that did an enormous amount of good. It was terrific. They did it in a church hall once and the vicar came in with all his supporters and interrupted it. Have you spoken to A!an Pope who was in that? He played Mister X.

Your leading characters tend to be remorseful and introspective. Some would say they are rather stereotypical in the sense that they are angst-ridden. They might even be considered as retrogressive in the sense that they don't present very positive views of gay people. Two of them are attracted to underage boys. Have you had that kind of criticism?

I have and I quite enjoy that because I really haven't got much time for political correctness. I think it is more challenging to write what you describe as retrogressive than to write something very upbeat and positive suggesting that we're all happy now we're out and gay. How terribly dull that would be. There wouldn't be any drama. It is much more interesting to see some of his concepts fucked up.

Perhaps the nature of the conflict makes the drama.

Yes. It is not really that it is a gay character who might be full of angst. It's how well the character is written. I stand by the way I have written for all of those characters. I'm showing warts and all. I would never believe it if Reg didn't have these massive faults. I find them quite similar. I think the Woody Allen characters are all variations on a theme and so far that's what those three characters are. They are variations on a theme.

When I interviewed Neil Bartlett, he suggested that gay plays of social realism and political comment are outdated.

If you did *Mr X* now you might find it a little dated. Maybe there is another version that you could do. One is dealing with a massive amount of homophobia all the time in the media. What Neil Bartlett said about *My Night with Reg* in Middlesbrough - how he would like to see it somewhere like that -I agree with that. I am not remotely complacent about how acceptable or not gay life is. I don't actually think that it should be a central issue for playwriting.

You claimed My Night with Reg *is exclusively about the lives of a group of gay men. Your most recent production* Mouth to Mouth *has one gay central character and it focuses on his relationship with members of a heterosexual family. Was this a conscious effort to explore the position of gay men in relation to a dominant heterosexual society and to move away from the constraints of the idea that gay theatre is about gay people for an exclusively gay audience?*

What I said at the very beginning - if one was too self-conscious about it, I probably would not have written the play. One can only judge these things when you've written it and when people like you put it into a context and see it happening in relation to what's gone before. If the writer, when he is appraising it, is too aware, it will all go pear shaped. I think a lot of writing is to do with tapping into the unconscious, which is very hard to do. I didn't sit down thinking that I've done a hermetically sealed gay play and now I'll do something about a gay person in a straight society. In fact that might be what I have done, but there may be other things going on in the plays.

My Night with Reg *is about the effects of AIDS but more importantly it is about infidelity, guilt and confession. John admits in the play that he never faced up to his responsibilities. If by confessing, the sin is somehow absolved, is this making a statement about 'promiscuity' (and I use that word in inverted commas) of many gay men or is it a statement about the consequences of infidelity in general? Are you making a comment about it?*

I think it probably is about infidelity in general, in dishonesty and lying. The reason I've used, in that case, a gay character, is because that is what I wanted to write about at that time. My first play *Coming Clean* is all to do with that. It is a recurring theme.

Do you think, in the context, it clearly is about the sexual activity of gay men? Is there a judgement in the play?

I hope not. I hope that is something I have never done.

I am thinking of Larry Kramer's The Normal Heart, *which was more or less a plea, at the time for gay men to stop having sex.*

It is not one of my favourite plays. The one thing I really try not to do, is to make any sort of judgement. I try to show people in as difficult a light as possible to not make it easy for an audience, but equally I would hate to make any judgement. I don't think I do really.

I find when I am writing this thesis, I am constantly thinking –am I making a judgement here? From what angle am I coming? Everybody comes from a particular angle.

But you have to draw some conclusions because of the nature of your work. Maybe I don't.

Many of the plays produced in the 90s by gay playwrights examined gay sexuality against a wider cultural background. I'm thinking especially of Mark Ravenhill's Shopping and Fucking *and* Some Explicit Polaroids. *They examine sexual identity in a consumer-led world, in which sex is just another commodity. In many ways the definition of gay and straight in those plays has become blurred because sex is treated in this way. An example of this is the use of homoerotic images to sell products in the media to both men and women. There is a kind of blurring of who is being appealed to and for what reasons. When I suggested to Neil Bartlett that this might constitute part of a postmodern shift to a more fluid definition of sexuality, he viewed this as a threat to the social and political position of strength that gays now have. He doesn't like this idea of queer politics, of*

merging sexual dissidents together and watering down the gay message or the gay identity. Do you think there is a change in attitude to sexuality? I.e. are we now perhaps no longer one thing or the other and here is the line of divide?

It's a difficult one. I don't think I particularly address that subject when I write but I think that might be happening in certain areas. What it comes back to is - when push comes to shove, gay people are always gay and they work and live within those confines and parameters. It does not mean they cannot be accepted as that. Just as men and women. Just as there are gender differences. You cannot possibly hope that everyone will have the same attitude to life and see things in the same way. The older I get the more I see the differences between men and women. That's great. There will always be a fight and a conflict, but there can also be a fantastic bonding. I don't think one would get very far if you tried to fuse everything into one lovely sort of mass.

The background of my writing is kind of Foucauldian. He saw the legalisation of homosexual behaviour as a control mechanism rather than as a liberation, i.e. if you bring gays out into the open, you control what they do.

Did he think we should be much more underground about it?

No, he does not argue that. It is a kind of warning, that liberation is a double edge sword, because on the one hand it allows certain behaviour to exist in limited ways, but on the other hand it allows further control and observation because it is out in the open. Far from becoming a more liberal society, we seem to be becoming more of a controlled

society. That is the background for my examination of contemporary plays. To what extent plays are reflecting a change from what in the 70s was very clearly - those are gay people and those are straight people, to plays which perhaps are considering young people who may be bisexual or may be changing their sexual identity. The question that it's a rigid construct - that is what I am looking at, to see if there are hints of this. Alan Sinfield, a cultural theorist from Brighton, has written about the club culture and how music and dance clubs are for both, not for one, where gays and straights go to the same place. It has become the music and culture which is shared rather than, I am going there because I am gay and I am going there because I am straight. This suggests there is a movement to greater acceptance, greater fluidity.

I am not sure whether, at the end of that, things get watered down and you end up back where you started. I still come back to the fact that there is this essential difference between gay people and straight people. There will forever be that gap, however much one is accepted or liked or patronised or whatever. I have my suspicions about it all fusing successfully and being totally accepted.

Peter Tatchell wrote an article in a book called Anti-Gay, *which suggested sexual emancipation will be brought about because the divisions will cease to exist and people will, as they did in days gone by, commit certain sexual acts, but it would not necessarily classify them as a particular type of person. That seems to make some sense. Although it is a worry that it goes back under the carpet. People do what they want. There is that danger in dissolving the clear-cut division. It becomes very confused. I am not saying this*

is what is happening. I think Mark Ravenhill's plays are a good example of how sex is a commodity. It is sold and it is bought. It is offered in an unemotional way just like any other commodity.

In The Day the Earth Stood Still *the characters and relationships are presented as severely dysfunctional. Horace is unable to move on from his adolescent infatuation, Judy is unable to maintain a stable relationship. Jimmy seemingly about to follow the same patterns as Horace, having had his boyfriend chuck him. There seems to be an implication that the origins of this instability are the liberalised late 1960s, because of the drugs. The final scene in the play is set in the 60s when they are teenagers. Do you view that as a time of liberation or as a time when social, sexual structures were dismantled, leaving a vacuum?*

That's an interpretation that you can put on it now, but I didn't see it like that at all. I think the play is as much about time passing as about gay sexuality or any sort of sexuality. It was about a moment in time, the nature of time and the questioning of time. If you see it in the light of gay abrasion or sexual abrasion, it becomes a different thing. It's not quite what I meant. I cannot stop anyone putting that interpretation on it.

You have been linked with what has been described as 'In your face' theatre. When you write plays, do you set out to challenge and shock your audience? Should gay theatre encourage people to question their values through being shocked?

I think with *Coming Clean* there was a little scene, there was a sort of blow job in that and there was a rimming scene. It was at the Bush. It is very intimate. People were sweaty and moist. That was quite deliberate. As the plays have gone on, I don't think it's that sort of 'in your face.' This age business pisses me off, so in *Mouth to Mouth* I was quite deliberate about that, to see how people might respond to that but I only did it gently doing by lowering his age by one year. He is coming up to his sixteenth birthday. It is not like it was an eight-year-old. In general terms, the whole point of going to a theatre is that it should make people sit up and think. You have to have a challenge, otherwise there's no point in going out. I hope that in some way or other, there is a recognition or a challenge, or a moment or two in the evening they are lifted. There has to be some sort of connection, otherwise there is no point at all. Challenge is therefore part of that, yes.

Your plays are described as tragic comedies. The tragic element, in each of the three plays that we have talked about, is brought about by the death of the desired object, the desired person. Reg in My Night with Reg, *Jerry in* The Day the Earth Stood Still *and Philip in* Mouth to Mouth. *Is this just a theatrical device or does it reflect an ultimately pessimistic view of how the thing that we most desire is always unattainable?*

The thing one most desires *is* unattainable and I think the really difficult thing is that if it is attainable then it's not what you most desire. So I don't think you can ever really get what you want. The interesting thing in *The Day the Earth Stood Still* is the memory that lingers on for Horace, of his boyhood infatuation. It never diminishes in his mind. It's always there. I think that it speaks to a lot of people, as many people had that kind of

experience and over the years it becomes perhaps embroidered, and it becomes idealised with the passing of time. And of course nothing happened. No, but then when he looks at his son and you feel he says 'I thought for a moment it was Jerry.' This is what I was going back to in *Mouth to Mouth*. When Cornelia brings the statue, the aboriginal carving from Australia — she says 'we think it's called "the kiss" but we're not sure and we think it's Gumbaingari but we're not sure about that either.' Is it a kiss or isn't it a kiss? And then Frank talks about the time he saved Phillip from drowning and gave him the kiss of life. He insists that Phillip put his tongue down his throat. Maybe he did, maybe he didn't. Anyway is doesn't matter. Anyway nothing happened. So you never quite know. It's like shifting in the sands. As soon as it has happened, it is past. It's passed so you create as you wish. That's interesting.

Mouth to Mouth *is a serious yet amusing play. The banter was very comic. It just seems to work. Do you find it becomes easier as you work on each play to create the comic element?*

I like writing comedy and I do think comedy is my forte. It's an Italian genre. I did want to write this six-hander in the middle of the long scene in *Mouth to Mouth*. I set out to just have six characters that are going at each other for about half an hour. I wanted to see if I could keep the ball in the air. I was setting myself a little challenge like a sextet.

They all come alive very well. Your work has often been linked to that of Jonathan Harvey and Mark Ravenhill. Is this just because you are three successful gay writers who happen to be around at the same time or is there more to it?

I really resent this connection. My first play came out in 1982 when there was really nothing else like it. I think we have very different agendas. Jonathan has gone on to write for television in *Gimme, Gimme, Gimme* in a way that I think betrays the integrity of his stage work. I think it's crap. The two main characters don't connect in any way. The Dreyfus character puts the image of gays back thirty years. I was asked to write some episodes for *Queer As Folk* but I refused. I think there's a danger in trying to appeal to mass audiences. The temptation to resort to well-worn stereotypes or to unnecessary sensationalism must be tempting. It's not something I want to do.

Writers are often central characters in your plays. Are they an intentionally humorous parody of yourself? For example, when Horace talks of writing, it is of 'Obsessive desire. Bleeding humanity. The tragic inexplicability of existence. The usual.' Is this sometimes how you view your own work?

I suppose to a certain extent that's close to the mark. Perhaps I had better stop having writers as central characters! The important thing is that there are elements of me in all of the characters at times. In a sense I am playing around and elements of myself pass from one character to another. I wouldn't say that any one of the antiheroes is actually based on me.

Appendix 3

Interview with Michael Wilcox. 11th December 2002.

I thought we might perhaps begin by talking about your own start in writing plays. In terms of your own writing, were there particular playwrights who inspired you in the beginning?

Yes, the first playwright I really got to know well was C.P. Taylor (Cecil Taylor). I met him when I was still a school teacher as Head of English in a Newcastle comprehensive school, back in the late sixties and early seventies and I got involved in the theatre in Newcastle. A lot of my students appeared with the Tyneside Theatre Company in professional productions. It was a Repertory Company in those days and there was a new production every four weeks. Really quite wonderful. I got to know C.P. Taylor at that time and decided in 1974 that I had had enough of teaching and was going to terminate my career as a teacher and become a playwright, so I sent off my passport to have my job description changed before I had actually written a single play. I didn't actually start writing plays (professional) in any shape or form really until I was in my early thirties.

Do you think that West End theatres are more accessible to openly gay playwrights now than they were say, twenty or thirty years ago, or do you think that has tailed off a bit now?

Well I think, the London West End is pretty homophobic even though there are vast numbers of old queens who busily work there, but they are certainly more so than when I started off, because a lot of people wanted to put on *Rents* (a play I wrote in 1976), which was first performed in 1979 at the Traverse. They wanted to put that in to the West End theatre. Although there was a West End option taken out on it, none of the theatres in the West End would touch it because of the subject matter. 'Not in my theatre you won't' was the general attitude. Terrible shame really. I think Nicolas de Jongh in one of his books makes quite a hoo-ha about the first outwardly gay play to go in the West End. I can't remember the name of the play now, by Jimmy Chin, I think it was, I can't remember, that was not that long ago, must have been seven or eight years ago.

Well we've had things like My Night with Reg.

Yes, that came after but there have been one or two fairly polite plays. I suppose *Bent* also went into the West End with Ian McKellan.

Yes, that was at the National where it had a successful run.

But I think even then, I remember it was quite difficult. If Ian McKellan had not been in the cast and insisted, I don't think it would have transferred into the West End. You can check that one out if you want to, but I think the West End has probably become a little more gay friendly but only up to a certain point. The fact that a play hasn't got gay content doesn't automatically mean it is going to do terribly well. I mean recently that *Mrs Molly Clap's Mother House*.

Whatever it was, that went into the Aldwych and naturally didn't do very well at all. They had to close it down early. There was a time when almost any play with gay content got an audience because people were so desperate to see any sort of gay material, whatever its quality, actually on the stage. Times have moved on a bit from then. I think audiences, and gay people in general are a bit more sophisticated now about what they see, but there have been fantastic changes in the last twenty five years. I mean absolutely unbelievable changes in the general public perception of gay people, gay people's representation on television and on the stage. Just simply the legal situation. I would not have believed twenty five years ago that the age of consent would have been lowered to sixteen and would have been the same for men and women. I'm very pleased it's happened; it's a remarkable event and one of the best, one of the most important things the present government has actually achieved in terms of social policy. Anyway, so I suppose my writing career has spanned a period when gay people were still part of a great subculture which was basically criminal. We were all practically when I started whether we liked it or not. I mean I was born a criminal and you were whether we liked it or not. That is no longer the case; here we are sat in Newcastle in a very smart bar. When I first started going round the gay scene, to get into any gay place you had to bang on a door, be recognised through a little port-hole, be let in, sign books if you weren't known. You can not believe the difference now. Being gay is now mainstream; it may not always be so emphatically, so let's enjoy it while we can.

There are a number of questions here that might touch on that. I've mentioned the West End. If you look at the fringe, for example. At one time Gay Sweatshop and Consenting Adults in Public produced a number of plays through the fringe theatre in London and across the country touring. The fringe had an important role to play. Do you think it is still contributing that 'cutting edge' in terms of gay plays?

I'll tell you what the fringe can always do. It can put on a new play at very short notice and on a relatively small budget. I have never had a commercial production in the West End...never have done, not a single one, ever. In fact relatively few playwrights have. Most playwrights' experience is working in the subsidised theatre, often being forced to write for terribly small casts and on a budget of absolutely nothing. I may say when I first started writing plays the first fee I ever had for a full length play was seventy five pounds. We then managed by forming various playwright unions to force that figure up to around two thousand pounds and even today in 2002 the sort of standard rate for a new play is about five or six thousand pounds. That's all. It's very difficult still to make a living as a playwright. You need to do two productions a year to get out of the poverty trap or to earn more than the poverty line.

Clearly one or two playwrights, like Kevin Elyot and Jonathan Harvey, have broken that barrier.

Sometimes it's just luck, timing. Everybody loves Jonathan Harvey's *Beautiful Thing*. It was a charming play that made a very charming film as well. I don't particularly like Johnathan's subsequent work. He's still very young, of course... about thirty years old,

but he has made tons of money doing that thing on television (*Gimme,Gimme, Gimme*). Unwatchable.

He has written quite a lot of plays for such a young man.

Oh yes, I remember saying very early on when I spotted *Beautiful Thing* before the play was published. I managed to get it into one of the *Gay Plays* volumes. As soon as I read it, read the manuscript, I picked up the phone, phoned up Methuen and said 'Get this guy now. At last I'd read a play that was fun and I really enjoyed it after all these dreary things you've been sending me.' I said to Jonathan: 'Watch out. You're terribly young. If you're going to be a playwright for the next forty or fifty years, it is very difficult to sustain a career. Watch out. Don't be tempted to go into television because if you do, you will make lots of money and you will lose your freshness, your originality'. I just find *Gimme, Gimme, Gimme* just completely awful. Don't find it funny.

And it draws on stereotypes that some would say we are trying to get away from?

I mean, the actors are very good in it... very good.

The script is funny.

Well, some of it is funny. It has its little moments. Honestly I'm very disappointed the way Jonathan's career has gone, to be honest. However, he is desperately talented. Maybe he will pull himself round and write something really important again.

You mention the possible effects of Section 28, I think, in the third volume of gay plays. How restrictive do you think in retrospect it's turned out to be?

I think it's....I actually went down to lobby ministers in Whitehall on this very subject. Everybody says 'Oh it's never really made a lot of difference.' I think it's made a difference for two reasons. One, the fact it exists at all and that people actually could vote for such a Bill, so it's a frame of mind which was simply deplorable. I mean it's a frame of mind that assumes automatically that gay people are somehow wicked or corrupting or abusive or a hundred and one really negative things, which is completely untrue. Gay people are no more abusive than anybody else...no more than any other sort of person might be. There are wicked gay people around but there are also wicked straight people around. The example I gave to the minister was that a lot of plays were performed around schools about HIV, critical sort of plays that were really didactic in purpose, but which tended almost entirely to focus on heterosexual transmission of HIV rather than homosexual transmission, simply because it would have been unacceptable in a school to show a homosexual relationship to the students. They knew perfectly well that this was primarily a gay problem in this country. They believe it to be a gay problem and a drugs injecting problem, that sort of thing. But they also were aware that the school was only presenting it as a heterosexual problem and that meant that gay people had to sit there knowing full well that instead of telling their story, their story had to still be kept under wraps. I think teachers and everybody else would latch on to Section 28 to make the excuse for making that sort of decision. Although there may not be many examples of schools saying 'no, because of Section 28, you can not do this on our premises,' there is a

kind of rather sinister sort of process of a sort of censorship that has gone on simply because it's there on the statute book. It has made it difficult for gay teachers to come out to their students and very difficult for students themselves to come out to their peers as well. I think it is a most pernicious piece of legislation. The fact that people argue about it has not made a lot of difference. I think it probably has made some difference, but the fact it is there at all is wicked, and it's still there and still causing tremendous controversy. People of all political persuasions simply have not got it in them to repeal this damn thing. I think it is a truly scandalous piece of law and anyone who voted for it should be thoroughly ashamed of themselves.

Although the censorship of the Lord Chancellor has ceased to hold sway, do you think that censorship remains in more subtle forms controlling what is seen and not seen on stage or do you think anything goes now?

I think it is very difficult. I can't think of many things that one can not do on stage right now. To be honest, I think it is extraordinary. I don't feel when I am writing, that there's anything I couldn't write about or anything I couldn't actually do. I couldn't act out. Heaven forbid we should ever see such things. There is a slight difference between acting something out and actually doing it for real. Heaven forbid anyone should do a 'snuff' play. I suppose there are boundaries which have yet to be crossed but in terms of subject matter I think there is nothing that limits subject matter in a play now. Something like *Shopping and Fucking* which links sex and violence is shocking and worrying. There's also the underage aspect of it.

Yes, Gary is only fourteen.

Plays dealing with the sexual activities of minors have always been difficult. One area which remains difficult is the exploitation of children. Paedophilia is still a taboo subject. When I wrote *Massage* in the eighties, I wanted to explore how the mind of the paedophile works...how they always justify their actions and try to make out that they are the innocent party. I got a lot of criticism for that. One newspaper critic suggested that it made paedophilia look acceptable. I don't think he saw the play at the Lyric. If he had he would have known that it was a play which tried to explore how the mind of the paedophile works. I often wonder if the subject of *Massage* was too ahead of its time. It didn't have a long run. I think it affected any chances I had of getting a play into the West End. It's difficult to see when there will be a time when a playwright can write thoughtfully about this topic.

Massage *is very much a play about deception and confession. Sexual identity is never really clear. Rikki is a masseur making money from his punters, but he wants to have children of his own. The audience assumes along with Dodge that he is gay, but he isn't really sure what he is. Dodge, who like many paedophiles, sleeps with women but is attracted to young boys. You describe the characters in your introduction as 'living off each other like sexual cannibals.' Is the message here that no-one ever really understands their own sexuality and that everyone has the potential to lose control of themselves in the pursuit of desires that are often hidden even from them?*

I think that's true. The whole point of the play is that each character is out to get what they can from whoever they can. There is often a difference between how people perceive their sexuality and what they actually desire.

There has been a tendency for many playwrights (e.g. Kevin Elyot, Jonathan Harvey and Mark Ravenhill) to move away from plays exclusively about gay men (such as Boys in the Band, My Night With Reg, *and many of the plays produced by Gay Sweatshop) to dealing with the relationships of gay men in a wider social context (e.g.* Rupert Street Lonely Hearts Club, The Day I Stood Still, Guiding Star, *etc). Does this reflect a new confidence in the status of gay men in society, i.e. reflecting the greater visibility of gay people and that now perhaps we are more comfortable in our interactions with heterosexuals?*

We ought to be more confident because we are more accepted now and less legislated against now than has been the case for over a hundred years. I think writing plays in which somebody's sexuality, sexual identity, is the issue of the play, is a very narrow sort of play. I'd rather see plays which have a far, far more complex standard range of issues and textures in which the sexual identities of all the characters and all their complexity are a contributory part.

Does this mean that the time of gay plays influencing political and social attitudes has passed?

I think it's changed. I certainly think it has changed. The sort of plays, twenty five years ago, *Mr X* and the sort of Gay Sweatshop type plays were very important within the

context of their focus. I saw *Mr X* at a gay club in Newcastle performing to gay people who were very thrilled to see themselves. If you looked at it now you would think it is a pretty flimsy sort of piece, to be quite honest. It was much more important for what it was, for what it represented at the time than for the play itself, if you see what I mean. I think I said in my introduction to *Gay Plays Volume One,* and I got a lot of criticism for saying that but it is pretty obviously true now. Anybody looking at that now... it looks like common sense. Today writers, when they are writing for a gay perspective, or whatever perspective they are coming from, have the opportunity now of writing characters with much more complex sexual identities and simple issue plays about say, the age of consent, is no longer relevant now. I think where the age of consent is now, we've done it, we've achieved it. I was never a writer that was writing a political polemic in any of my plays, I don't think. When I was doing *Rents,* my *Rents* was a view of Edinburgh through the eyes of two rent boys, but it was also a play about money and survival. It wasn't primarily a play about being gay. It was a parade of either funny or lonely people.

I was going to ask you about that, because that was very much a forerunner. That was 1976?

It was doing the rounds from '76 onwards and eventually the Traverse picked up on it in about '77 and put it on in '79.

It was at the Lyric at one time or was it the Birmingham Rep?

No, it was first done at the Traverse. Then two years later, because the West End rights had been bought by somebody, the play wasn't performed at all...a disaster for me. Then finally the West End rights ran out and it was then done again at the Lyric Hammersmith in the Studio, but then a second production at the Lyric Hammersmith, one by Chris Parr and the other by William (Bill) Gaskill in the main house but once again, there were a number of West End people like Michael Codderington who loved the piece, but would not put it to the West End. Terrible shame... simply because basically, they're shit scared of doing anything that's gay in the West End.

In a sense you included Playing by the Rules *by Rod Dungate which kind of takes a similar stance.*

This is son of *Rents*...

But in a sense so is Shopping and Fucking *because it's about sex as a commodity. Taking that as a theme and certainly in a kind of postmodern context the idea that sex is just a commodity, you say the main difference between* Rent *and* Playing by the Rules *is that your rent boys had a job, a career, a second job.*

Yeah, one worked in a run down men's shop.

Is the fact that in Playing by the Rules *sex is their full-time job whereas the characters in* Shopping and Fucking *get by selling drugs or selling sex as a commodity. Do you think*

that that reflects a real change in society in that sex is becoming much more dominant in the sense that it is a commodity like any other?

Well I think sex has always been an exploitable commodity whether today, yesterday or a hundred years ago. It's nothing new. They talk about it being the oldest profession. I think when I am writing a play I'm not thinking quite like that. I wrote *Rent* by accident really because I happened upon a good story and I had a good situation and I wrote it basically in ten days.

Accounts, *which you describe as a rural version of* Rents, *some of the characters are very reluctant to come to terms with their gay image. Does this reflect an ongoing antipathy to gays in rural Britain or are there still battles to be fought and won there?*

Yes, there probably are. True country people are much more proud, at any rate, about all manner of things, not just the gay issues. I know because I live out in the country myself. I really do know what it's like. I'm completely out to the public about being gay... always have been, which has never been a problem to me. No one has ever been rude or negative about that. But there is clearly a difference in a hundred and one ways of living in the country and living in a city.

I was going to ask how the Hortwhistle Young Famers' Club reacted to the concept of the play.

They didn't do the whole of the play. They only did the jelly throwing scene... the last twenty minutes of Act I basically. They loved that. One of the farmers next door to where I live played one of the parts. People in the country are very grown up about it really. Once again I'm surprised that this play wasn't more successful. It just shows the lack of real interest in country issues, rural issues. Yes it's not a play for the West End really, which is a shame really, because it's the whole situation with BSE. Yes, yes I know, the whole business of diversification, the rest of it, was once again way ahead of its time in terms of what it was about. I would love to see *Rents* and *Accounts* done in tandem together, just as I would love to see *Lent* and *Massage* done in tandem in repertory with each other so it could be seen as intended, as complimentary.

One of the obsessions of sexologists, sociologists and psychologists having conveniently classified men who engage in same sex relations as homosexual has been to explain its cause. Much has been claimed by Freud and Irvin Bieber about over- protective mothers and ineffective and absent fathers being connected with the causes. In a play like Beautiful Thing *which you included in one of the* Gay Plays *collections, clearly both of the main teenage characters have either absent of ineffective fathers. Is that a stereotype you are conscious of or is that something that needs to be explored?*

I certainly think young men who have been deprived of a father often need some sort of surrogate of an older man. That doesn't in any way mean that it need have a sexual content. I don't think losing a father makes you homosexual. The idea that one is made homosexual is complete bollocks really. I've got young friends, sort of late teens, early

twenties, to whom I'm an important person, who I look after. It's not necessarily a sexual thing.

So you don't agree with people who look for cause and effect arguments?

The idea that if somebody is gay something terrible must have happened to their lives and therefore they are somehow damaged is complete nonsense.

But nevertheless, this was the tradition in gay plays before 1968.

It's been a perception, but I just think some people are simply born gay, period. I think it is just genetically there. I am one of those. There is no doubt in my mind that I am profoundly gay. I've no particular sexual interest in women at all. Other people may have... we're all different, that's all I can say. I know any number of men who have families and their own children. Such men often seem to require other men to fuck them. They are terribly passive.

On the one hand they refuse to fit in to categories, firstly because they don't wish to admit in some cases, but in a sense they might because they don't fit into those categories, i.e. if they are married, they have children and they engage in sexual activities with other men. It kind of makes them 'bisexual,' because they are different, but this is an artificial term.

I think the term 'bisexual' is nonsense, misused, unless you have got breasts ***and*** a cock.

I thought we were all bisexual and therefore we negotiated the various Oedipal complexes.

As I said earlier, people's sexuality is very complicated. I think we are all capable of the most profound relationships with members of our own gender (whether we regard them on the whole as gay or not), which may or may not have some physical expression. I can't see any difference between really loving a person of your own gender, whether you have sex or not. To me the fact that you love them is the important thing and the bonding that exists between you. If you see footballers on a football field or take part in anything, when you're part of a 'band of brothers' doing something together, you do love and care for each other in a very profound way. It's a shame really that the idea of being homosexual or not homosexual was ever an issue in the first place. It's a big red herring really.

Neil Bartlett has argued the concept of gay theatre is an artificial one since it implies that such drama is defined by its gay content. He suggests that such a definition ignores the influence of people like Diaghilev and Frederick Ashton. How would you define gay theatre?

It was convenient at the time to talk about such things. I agree with Neil Bartlett actually. There is just theatre and drama. Where it is coming from is a secondary interest. We needed 25 years ago to bash on with plays on out-and-out gay themes and to publish gay plays even though the label was not at all satisfactory, simply to try and change the

law and change public perception, and in a way we have been very successful. This has played a very important role. There is now a gay relationship in *EastEnders* and mainstream popular television will show gay relationships as being interesting, messy, and sometimes ephemeral or exploitative. It's been very important because people watching it identify; they know the truth. They know what's happening in their own lives, their own friends and everybody is aware of friends being gay anyway. They may not talk about it, but in every family there will be gay and lesbian people. Now drama has helped, certainly through television which is watched by millions of people. It helped to take away the fear of being branded gay. You must remember in the '50s and '60s and particularly how terrified men were of being 'outed'. If you were caught in a toilet or something and people got a small fine, they went off and hanged themselves, because of the shame. They could not face up to the fact anyone had known what they got up to.

Tom Driberg managed it and got away with it.

God knows how.

There is a long history of effeminate gay characters, camp characters in twentieth-century plays, right from Mae West's party-goers in The Drag. *Do you think there is still a place for that stereotypical camp gay male in contemporary drama or is this now politically incorrect and would you avoid it?*

There are in real life people like that around. The reason why that was deemed acceptable, and why there was a tradition for the camp characters, was because that was

the way in which gay people could be portrayed on the stage and they could get away with it, to be quite honest. You could be John Inman on *Are you Being Served* but if you were Inspector Morse....

That's a perfect example.

Well Morse was a very enigmatic person.

There is a thesis in that.

Well I wrote one of the Morses, as you are probably aware.

I'm sorry, I wasn't aware.

There was a time when it would have been less acceptable to portray a homosexual as not a figure of fun. Personally I can't remember whether I've ever done a figure of fun type gay character.

Looking through the plays that I have managed to get hold of I would say that it seems you avoid stereotyping people and certainly have not included that kind of camp figure. Something like My Night with Reg *and* Boys in the Band *certainly has that kind of camp character. Do you think it actually contributes to mainstream audiences' perception of gays or do you think in this day and age it is detrimental to our cause?*

I think if it was all that one saw, it would be rather demeaning…rather insulting. The time I look forward to is the time when some of our premiership footballers come out of the closet and are accepted by the ….

Well we know what happened to one of those… Justin Fashanu.

Yes we do. I say it was a shame; it was a tragedy. I'm sure there are plenty of gay footballers knocking around. Actually it is quite interesting at the moment how David Beckham has been quite open about his own identity. You see in David Beckham a sort of gender complexity. He's very feminine and a loving father to his children. He is very beautiful actually.

He's an icon for both...

Yes, actually …

Which kind of breaks barriers?

It's very interesting if he has. The way he's carried it off is quite remarkable. He's been totally honest. We know he loves his best friends as well. In a way he is a good example of a new sort of young man. He has a complete confidence in his own sexuality and gender, is a remarkable leader of men on the field and is a very good captain of England. He is one of the most interesting public figures in sport at the moment that there is, anywhere in the world.

Which is why I think so many people from different backgrounds like him. Do you think we are heading now in what some cultural theorists would describe as a period of 'post gay', in the sense that Mark Simpson, Alan Sinfield and even Peter Tatchell have suggested? Should we be working towards a situation where sexuality is not limited within the conventional background most of us have grown up with? Is that the ideal we should be working towards? It's not in a sense anti-gay because gay is old hat, it's a sense that this is the way we move forward now.

Yeah, I think I have been there for years, haven't I? Isn't that exactly where I started from? If you go back 25 years and look at *Rents* again, you'll see it's actually not about the issue of being gay at all. Actually, my plays have never had that sort of political polemic. I agree with that. Actually I can probably see the great issues of today dramatised with credible, complex, and sexually ambivalent characters as in real life characters.

Do you think, coming back to what you said about how Kevin Elyot and Jonathan Harvey have broken through that West End barrier. Is it, do you think, because they kind of confirm in some way the preconceptions of gayness... that maybe something like Beautiful Thing *is presenting a sexual identity which is a bit dated in a sense, but it is what the public wants to see? 'This is OK, I can handle this. This is fine. It's OK. I'm happy with that.' Do you think it reflects something like that?*

Yes, it was a cosy sort of theme.

Well, I felt it was fifteen years too late.

Yes, but anybody watching that play would care about those young lads as they were lovely boys, and you just wanted to see them grow up happy. The other people around them were basically were very good-natured apart from the bullying father. The women were strong and interesting. So you were glad at the end of the play to see that, if not everything was resolved, at least there was a positive future to it. It did not end in disaster. That was nice.

I guess what I am trying to say is that perhaps the West End is happy to have these kinds of representations. It's just finally arrived... this idea of gay drama as something that can be promoted and be a box office success. Perhaps what you have been doing is much more challenging. That kind of concept of gayness and straightness, and that maybe that is a reason why your plays have not been quite so attractive to West End impresarios?

Yes, maybe the West End is about making money, actually.

Which one can forgive, I suppose.

You know, basically it's a commercial operation. It's there to make money and it's also because there are so many closety old queens involved in it, they've been basically rather …

Who have their empires?

Yeah, they don't want to queer their own little pitches. I can think of one or two of them. Profoundly closeted gay people. I won't tell you who they are, but a hell of a lot of gay people involved in the West End of London and they do not wish to be outed.

Even today?

Even today!

Incredible.

Yes it is incredible... a real sickener really.

I've got a final question that I think rolls on from the things you've been saying. I'm trying to couch it in terms of the postmodern theorists that I am quite keen on. Ihab Hassan in 'Towards the Concept of Postmodernism' cites indeterminacy as a key element; he points to the vast will to unmaking traditional ideas of the body politic and erotic and of the individual psyche. Ideas of sexual difference are no longer written about by academics in gay and lesbian studies faculties but by 'queer theorists'. This is the way the academic scene has moved on to represent a range of sexual dissidence. Given that all who have been involved in political gay movement, and in gay theatre, have contributed a great deal to establishing some form of gay equality, is there a danger now that this work may be diluted and maybe undone under this banner of queer theory which nobody seems to quite understand ? Is it a force for good, or is it taking us back?

I haven't the slightest idea. I live out of the cities. I live out in the country in the north of England. I have never read a single book about 'queer theory', whatever that means. I'm going to let other people worry about this. I don't know what it means. I get fed up when...it's rather like being dropped into a huge great big bowl of cold porridge and I just don't wish to... you know, I'm much more interested in...

But is it the title of it rather than what it is trying to do? If I could just read you the...the term 'queer' seeks to disrupt the discrete fixed location of sexual identity. It seems to me you've already admitted that is the kind of theme that you contribute towards...

I'm going to let queer theorists decide on that. I'm not trying to avoid answering your question, but my particular sort of brain, such as it is, simply clouds over when people start talking to me like that. I don't know what they are talking about really. Nothing would induce me to go on a weekend course with people who wanted to talk about such things. I'd almost rather do line dancing for an hour, which is something I really hate. I'm sorry, I am much more interested in ordinary old everyday type things. I am not a great political philosopher type academic type person really. Not in those terms at all. Which is maybe why I write the sort of plays I do. I try not to write with people looking over my shoulder to see if I'm being politically correct or not. I just think that's so poisonous and I don't have anything to do with it. That's why I get very scared about students who are studying some course or other in some queer theory or whatever it is. I just don't want to go near it. I'd rather walk down the street. I would.

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