Alternatives within the Mainstream II
Alternatives within the Mainstream II
Queer Theatres in post-war Britain

Edited by

Dimple Godiwala

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# TABLE OF CONTENTS

Acknowledgements ........................................................................................................... vii

Chapter One ....................................................................................................................... 1
Introduction: Queer Theatres in Post-war Britain
Dimple Godiwala

**Section I: Alternatives within the Mainstream: Gay, Lesbian and Other Queer Theatre**

Chapter Two ...................................................................................................................... 12
The Trouble with Queers: Gays in Plays 1945-1968
Ian Spiby

Chapter Three ...................................................................................................................... 36
Tears, Tiaras and Transgressives: Queer Drama in the 1960s
Kate Dorney

Chapter Four ...................................................................................................................... 59
Loving Angels Instead: The Influence of Tony Kushner’s *Angels in America* on 1990s Confrontational Drama
Paul T. Davies

Chapter Five ...................................................................................................................... 83
Did AIDS Paranoia Close *La Cage aux Folles*?
Simon O’Corra

Chapter Six ......................................................................................................................... 98
Days Gone By: Tracking AIDS Theatre and Queer Performance
Paul T. Davies

Chapter Seven ................................................................................................................... 124
Fear of the Queer Citizen: From Canonization to Curriculum in the Plays of Mark Ravenhill
Sarah Jane Dickenson
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chapter Number</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Eight</td>
<td>The Fluidity of Bodies, Gender, Identity and Structure in the plays of Sarah Kane by Selina Busby and Stephen Farrier</td>
<td>142</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nine</td>
<td>Transgendered Masculinities in Performance: Subcultural Narratives Laid Bare by Catherine McNamara</td>
<td>160</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ten</td>
<td>‘The Dialectics of Desire’: Aunt Mary and Transgendered Representations</td>
<td>180</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>by Dimple Godiwala</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eleven</td>
<td>Notes on Cheryl Moch’s Cinderella, The Real True Story</td>
<td>189</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>by Dimple Godiwala</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Twelve</td>
<td>Through the Looking Glass with Sarah Daniels</td>
<td>192</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>by Dimple Godiwala</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thirteen</td>
<td>Soap, Sexual Identity and Mid-life Crisis: Lesbian Drama</td>
<td>219</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>between Essentialism and Gender Trouble</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>by Kathleen Starck</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fourteen</td>
<td>We Sinful Dykes: Lesbian Sexuality and Racial Politics</td>
<td>239</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>in Valerie Mason-John’s Sin Dykes</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>by Ashley Tellis</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fifteen</td>
<td>Impermanence and Displacement in Weldon Rising, The Strip</td>
<td>248</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>and Never Land by Phyllis Nagy</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>by Kathy McKean</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Section II: Queer Television

Chapter Sixteen ........................................................................................................ 272
Non-heterosexual Characters in post-war Television Drama: From Covert Identity and Stereotyping, Towards Reflexivity and Social Change
Christopher Pullen

Chapter Seventeen .................................................................................................... 298
The Queer Subjects of Twenty-First Century Television Drama in Britain
Tony Purvis

Section III: Theatres of Difference

Chapter Eighteen ...................................................................................................... 322
Grey Silhouettes: Black Queer Theatre on the post-war British Stage
Victor Ukaegbu

Chapter Nineteen .................................................................................................... 339
A Visitor’s Guide to Glasgay!
Deirdre Heddon

Contributors .............................................................................................................. 362
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I would like to extend my acknowledgements to Andy Nercessian, Carol Koulikoudi, Amanda Millar, Vlatka Kolic and the team at CSP for their efforts in bringing these two volumes into publication.

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*This book is dedicated to the Labour government under the leadership of Anthony Blair for bringing in the Civil Partnerships Act.*
CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION:
QUEER THEATRES IN POST-WAR BRITAIN

DIMPLE GODIWALA

Critics of the English theatre have severally analysed post-war drama in terms of the new class egalitarianism that Clement Attlee’s Labour government brought in, in the wake of the values of the Welfare State which brought about equal University access. These critics have charted 1956 as the watershed year in the English theatre, a year which ushers in the new egalitarian values as reflected on the British stage.

1956 is also the year the Berliner Ensemble first toured to Britain. It must be pointed out that this year of Brecht’s death also was the year in which began the undoubtedly strong influences of Bertolt Brecht’s theatre and his theories of the theatre which contributed to the new class consciousness of the stage.

As I have noted elsewhere, in terms of gendered writing for the stage, the watershed year is 1958 with Joan Littlewood’s production of Shelagh Delaney’s classic A Taste of Honey, a play which brings to the stage all four of the most significant issues that the post-war British stage has grappled with: class, gender, race as well as alternative sexuality.

This book traces one of the most pertinent issues to haunt British society and its stage since at least the Wilde trials: alternative sexuality. Tracing the drama which takes the stage in the post-war years to the present day when another Labour Government – under the leadership of Tony Blair – has made Civil Partnerships legal in continuing the party’s long tradition of egalitarianism, this book begins with a period in living memory when it was still a criminal offence to be gay, a period in which lesbians were not legally visible, to a present moment which is celebratory in its legal acceptance of homosexual partnerships, signalling the beginning of another era of official and legal egalitarianism in British
society.

Centuries of English drama have portrayed gay men in negative and stereotyped images. The criminalisation of gay sexuality, an offence partly repealed by the 1967 Sexual Offences Act which made legal homosexual acts in private between adult males in England and Wales paralleled the 1969 Stonewall bar incident (Osment 1989: xii). The latter half of the twentieth century was a period of rising awareness of discrimination in the gay community, preceded by the American Black movement and the women’s movement in Britain and America. In Britain the Gay Liberation Front (GLF) met regularly, making themselves visible through demonstrations and marches. Inevitably, the ideology and politics of the GLF were to affect the theatre. Bette Bourne formed Bloolips and Alan Pope and Drew Griffiths were to found Gay Sweatshop (Osment 1989: xiii). It was the latter company which was to prove ‘the power of theatre as a force of change and enlightenment’ (Drew Griffiths in Osment 1989: xxiv) through the country.

The twentieth and the twenty-first centuries have seen a sea-change in attitudes and laws pertaining to the practice of homosexuality in Britain. The history of post-war gay theatre in Britain which this book, in part, sets to chart out, is paralleled by a critical and analytical discourse called Queer theory which addresses the role of gays and lesbians in history. Queer theory comes to the fore in the 1990s with British critic Alan Sinfield’s prolific theorizing, with Americans such as Eve Kosofsky Sedgewick following closely on his heels. The precursors of queer theory are feminist/lesbian theory such as that of Monique Wittig and Hélène Cixous (of Jewish-Algerian heritage), later followed by Judith Butler’s seminal work on the performativity of gender. In this introduction I would like to briefly chart out some thoughts on gender and sexuality and the flux of oppositions which makes for as many categories of sexuality as there are, possibly, individual subjects-of-desire.

**Sexuality and gender**

**i. the Other**

Although I have, on occasion, used the term ‘Other’ as feminist and postcolonial critics do, to designate gendered or racialized identity, and although it is often used in this way to denote the oppositional relations of man/woman, black/white, whilst attempting to trace the fluidity of the boundaries of sexuality the term ceases to be representational.
It must be pointed out that Sartre, speaking of the ontological relations of consciousness, stressed that ‘Other’ was non-being, the ‘object’ was perceived to be non-consciousness itself. (Sartre [1943] 1992: 241). Thus when a feminist casts herself as an Other, or a person of race is termed Other, what is being articulated, in Sartrean terms, is a non-being of non-consciousness. Thus the act of such a non-being possessing the consciousness of a subject with agency, when for example, fighting for suffrage or black rights or writing about topics such as queer theory is an act of the negation of self when self is perceived as Other.

Other denotes a category separate from the Self. In identifying with our Others we see them as similar to or the same as ourselves. This leads to an acceptance of those we perceive to be most unlike ourselves, especially in terms of race, class, gender or sexuality.

In this first decade of the twenty-first century, it is fallacious to assume the British mainstream (in any sense of the term) is white, middle-class and heterosexual. In terms of the representation of race, class and sexuality we can find spaces in the mainstream which are alternatives to what has passed as normative.

ii. perception

In terms of the consciousness of occupying a place on the continuum of homosexuality, the ontological positions of gay, les, bi, trans cannot be perceived as oppositional in terms of conventional western binaries.

Instead, these identities must be seen as fluid and continually shifting; and even as they locate themselves on the continuum of homosexuality, they constitute in that space a continuum of their own. These internal spaces can be seen conventionally, as a gay man can be described as ‘camp’ or ‘straight-acting’; lesbians can be ‘butch’, ‘dyke’, ‘femme’. Persons sharing a triadic arrangement or partnership can occupy any of the positions on the homosexual continuum. However, each space on the homosexual continuum, whether gay or les or any other, unfolds an ever shifting space of newly-named identities which reveal homosexual subjects as infinitely various in their subject positions of sexual identity.

Queer identities are fluid and always in a state of flux, defying definitions and binary oppositions. When my lesbian friends see me as ‘butch’ and my male dates insist I am the acme of femininity, it is not I who has changed but their perceptions which impose on me apparently contradictory definitions.

It is social perception which makes an Other. A human being can
be the object-of-consciousness only through the mode of perception. The being of consciousness perceives another human being as an object: non-being; non-consciousness.

The self is composed of male-ness and female-ness in a yin/yang mode of inseparability, a polarised beingness we all inhabit. To be gay, les, bi or trans is in essence a freeing of a normative repressiveness which defines us as heterosexual and strictly ‘male’ or ‘female’.

To realise we are all ‘queer’ is a recognition of what is introduced as ‘Shadow’ in Nina Rapi’s 1989 play *Ithaka*.

Shadow: All extremes contain within them their opposites and can easily transform into each other.
Sula: Who are you?
Shadow: I am the one you can’t run away from. I’m Shadow.
Sula: Tell me what Shadow is.
Shadow: Shadow is the edge of time, is the crack of dawn. Shadow is a depth where you can only hang suspended, never reaching the end. Shadow is thoughts never formed in words, dreams that won’t go away, poems that refuse to be moulded. Shadow is the law of desire and passion, the Realm of the Underworld, the world of misfits, outcasts and rebels. Shadow is the time when every moment reveals a new possibility. Is the darkness that defines light, the hell that heaven is marked with.
Shadow is the eyes that couldn’t see, the lives that couldn’t be, the chains that were never broken. [Nina Rapi, *Ithaka*]

Shadow is where we begin to recognise the depths of sexuality (and otherness) we all possess. Shadow reveals normative repressiveness as obscurity, an opacity which casts us in a socially acceptable sexual role. To invite an introspection which rests on the shadowed self we need to recognise that our sexualities, however they may have been moulded are based on a certain opacity of self.

Alan Sinfield’s extension of Freud in his dissident models of male sexuality (and Sinfield is right about the gay models pertaining also to female sexuality) are relevant here in that desire-to-be (‘a relative matter’) and desire-for (the person who confirms one’s own identity as our other) determine the sexuality of the individual subject (See Sinfield 2002). One can be formulated to desire-to-be A (androgynous), F (female or feminine), M (male or masculine) or B which I define as a certain fluidity of self where one is M, F or A in various roles or situations or circumstances. I would add to Sinfield’s theorizing that desire-to-be M is based on a certain opacity of the capacity to be F, and vice versa. A would denote a blurring of boundaries which is typically represented by a physical self which blurs the divide between M and F. However, the
physicality of the body-self need not determine the desire-to-be A. The representation of the typical physical A-self is merely a stereotype or indeed can be seen as symbolic of the consciousness of being-A.

Herbert Bless, Klaus Fiedler and Fritz Strack point out that in the construction of social reality, human beings strive for a consistency of perception (2004: 17). This is what has possibly led to the binary division in the perception of man/woman. Physically perceived differently, man is thought to be different from woman as a human subject. The traditional roles played by men and women have inevitably led to the genders being regarded as usually two (in some ancient cultures such as India, at least three). The encoding of knowledge (‘I am a woman’) leads to the behavioural responses deemed appropriate for the gender which leads in turn to the birth of stereotypes or social categories of gender and the idea that behavioural responses are gendered. Thus we possess prior beliefs about groups, such as men and women.

iii. transgendered identities

When the materiality of the physical body is in conflict with the subject’s perceived gender or, when the subject’s gender is not clearly defined in the materiality of the physical body (the interstitially-gendered body) there is an attempt to transform into what is perceived as another gender. The other gender is usually the perceived opposite of or different from the materiality of the physical self.

iv. social identities

In societies which continue to divide genders into two, where a physical deviancy is unmentionable and hidden, human perception and behaviour will gravitate subjects to conform to the occupancy of one or another gender category, i.e., man/woman. For the well-being of the human subject, the behavioural response in social groups must coincide with self-definition which is achieved in relativity as a response to the other/s. (See, e.g., Brewer and Hewstone 2004: 278 ff). Brewer and Hewstone point out that self-categorization theorists have suggested distinguishing between two basic forms of self-definition: the individual self (personal identity) and the collective self (social identity) (279). In terms of the consistency of perception we have spoken of, the individual self must need be consistent with the binary divide of gender in the collective group to establish the subject’s definition of a collective self.
The Civil Partnership Act 2004

Paul T. Davies wrote to me on 29 January 2006 to say he could not attend my National Theatre Platform talk with Pam Gems on 07 April as he was tying the knot with his partner Neville Edrich the next morning. Contributor Ian Spiby likewise emailed and said he had entered into a Civil Partnership. During the making of this book, like some of the contributors, hundreds of same-sex couples across the country were getting married. Although not termed strictly a marriage, the Civil Partnership Act 2004 which came into force on 5 December 2005 enabled same-sex couples to obtain legal recognition of their relationships. Same-sex couples are now ‘civil partners’ in a civil partnership.

Emerging mainstream social groups

With the Civil Partnership Act of 2004-5, homosexuality becomes recognised in its broadest sense of legality and thus enters mainstream discourse. At the current time, negative attitudes to homosexuality will linger in the social consciousness even as these newly recognised social groups emerge to take their place alongside the mainstream of heterosexuality to establish and determine new, equal status, inter-group relations.

The legalization of same-sex relations has long been a subject of debate and discussion in same-sex theory which is divided into the camps that insist that legalization is an assimilation into the normativity of heterosexual ideals whereas others insist it is a ‘vital stepping stone toward civil rights and state recognition’ (See, e.g., Bernstein and Schaffner 2005: xi). However, I see legalization as most importantly a step toward the social acceptance of groups considered minorities (low-status groups with low self-esteem and increased inter-group anxiety; see Brewer and Hewstone 2004: 287-288). Low-status groups which have been without a recognised voice or agency and thus far powerless to exert an influence except on the fringes of social acceptance need legal and state recognition to live in a society of freedom, tolerance and equal rights.

Undoing repression and the evolution of desire

We are all born bisexual. It is the self-same repression which underlies the unconscious constructions of individual minds and bodies determining whether individuals are gay or heterosexual. The heterosexual has had the gay/lesbian side repressed; the homosexual has repressed the
impulse attracting him or her to what is conventionally referred to as the opposite sex. Monogamous individuals must of necessity have suppressed one side as they forge intimate relationships with another, whether male or female.

Undoing repression consists of at least two responses to one’s constructed sexuality: firstly individuals must be able to embody and express positive behaviour traits conventionally regarded as strictly male and female; a kind of unisexuality. In this respect western contemporary popular culture is beginning to recognize that human subjects are not binarily divided: for example, boys can cry. Secondly, individuals must be able to desire another in terms of affective emotions rather than gendered sexuality; in effect, an evolution of desire is necessary in terms of ability to bond and share with another human being rather than a particular sexed gender. This would lead to desire for another human being rather than same-sex desire or opposite-sex desire, a kind of unisexuality rather than bisexuality or heterosexuality.

Although the British Civil Partnership act is an acknowledgement of queer sexualities, the bisexuality or (usually) repressed desire inherent in each and every human subject could only possibly be answered by the formation of dyads freed-from-gender-stereotyped behaviour patterns, or triads or, perhaps, quartets.

If the individual is freed from the repression of desiring the same sex (gay and lesbian) or the other sex (heterosexuality), a marriage or partnership could be one of more than the heterosexually arranged conventional dyad. Two men and two women could meet the needs of same and other sexual partners (in this regard see my chapter on Aunt Mary and triadic arrangements amongst queers).

Of course, free or freed individuals could meet each others’ need in dyads if the masculine and feminine selves could be free to be expressed in individual subjects. This would entail a non-stereotyped self which performs (in terms of the performativity of gender) the same as well as the other gender-as-constructed. These are, of course, theoretical answers to the unconscious mechanisms which govern repressiveness that heterosexuality and same-sex partnerships are both based upon, but, as in the Pam Gems play, Aunt Mary, could possibly work in terms of permanent partnerships as opposed to the experimental communal living attempted (largely unsuccessfully) in 60s and 70s Britain.

With a planet-wide population explosion, the need to ‘go forth and multiply’ may have itself worked its way to completion, and reproductive behaviour need not determine the seeking of sexual partnerships. The theoretically ideal answer is a kind of unisexuality which
would lead the individual to find a partnership based on mutual love, trust, bonding and sharing regardless of gender. This would make the still stereotypical categories still in play – heterosexual, gay, lesbian, bisexual, queer – redundant and obsolete as individuals and societies strive toward a sharing based on affective bonding behaviour rather than sexually gendered responses to individuals. Exploring the shadows in the repressed constructions of our sexualities may lead to a freeing of individual minds and bodies as we accept an other sexually, regardless of gender and also the other factors that sometimes determine sexual bonding: for example, a rigid adherence to the preference for the same class and race.

**Alternatives within the Mainstream II**

This book is an appraisal of queer theatre on the post-war British stage, some notable American influences, with additional chapters on television drama and an overview of Black queer theatre. Each chapter is prefaced by an author’s synopsis to aid in an appraisal of the chapter contents. There is some degree of overlap between the first volume *Alternatives Within the Mainstream: British Black and Asian Theatres* (CSP 2006) and this one. For chapters on queer black theatre see, in Vol. I, especially Chapter Nine: ‘Black and Female is Some of Who I Am and I Want to Explore It’: Black women’s plays of the 1980s and 1990s’ by Kathleen Starck; Chapter Ten: ‘The Search for Identity and the Claim for an Ethnicity of Englishness in Jackie Kay’s *Chiaroscuro* and Valerie Mason-John’s *Brown Girl in the Ring*’ by Dimple Godiwala.

*Alternatives Within the Mainstream II* follows from the first volume’s dedication to a critical appreciation of and a tracing of trajectories of the theatres of our Others on the British stage. The first volume *Alternatives Within the Mainstream: British Black and Asian Theatres* traced a history of Black and Asian British plays, playwrights, theatre companies and theatre voices. The two volumes celebrate the plurality on the post-war British stage in terms of class, gender, race and sexualities.

*Alternatives Within the Mainstream II: Queer Theatres in Post-war Britain* is aimed as an introductory text which introduces the several plays, playwrights, theatre companies and queer theorists to students and scholars of contemporary queer British theatres.
Works cited


Websites


SECTION I:

ALTERNATIVES WITHIN THE MAINSTREAM: GAY, LESBIAN AND OTHER QUEER THEATRES
CHAPTER TWO

THE TROUBLE WITH QUEERS:
GAYS IN PLAYS 1945-1968

IAN SPIBY

Synopsis

The chapter begins with a discussion of ways of thinking about homosexuality during the period 1945-68 and the strict censorship which applied to the theatre, moving on to an interrogation of the idea of secret “codes” supposedly hidden within certain plays to indicate a queer subtext. A number of plays are examined in detail to demonstrate the different ways in which playwrights dealt with queer characters and themes both in the commercial theatre and in the club performances which evaded the strictures of the Lord Chamberlain. It is concluded that while isolated examples of changes in attitude to queers can be cited, their representation on the stage as a whole differed very little from the 1940s to the 1960s.

Introduction

In Cynthia Lennon’s book about her former husband, John Lennon, she recounts how in 1963, he had gone on holiday to Spain with his gay manager, Brian Epstein. When he returned he faced a series of ‘sly digs, winks and innuendo’ which ended in a brawl at a party with a friend who accused him of being queer (2005:154). Earlier in the book she comments on how in those days ‘if you were gay, you kept it secret’ because you were “disliked and distrusted” (104). While no one could claim that in contemporary society, homophobia has ceased to exist, the anecdote does indicate the extent to which attitudes have changed. But it also offers a timely warning that in studying the drama of the earlier time we need to be aware of the very different ways of thinking that were
current. For reasons that will become clear, in viewing the plays that were written between 1945 and 1968, it is not easy to assess the extent of the virulent homophobia that existed or to appreciate fully the way in which the idea of homosexuality itself was regarded. A collection of essays published in 1955 under the title, *They Stand Apart: a Critical Study of the Problems of Homosexuality* offers some insight. Routinely throughout the book, homosexuals are referred to either as perverts or invert and the ‘problem’ of the title is that homosexuality is a medical condition which needs to be addressed. Indeed W. Lindesay Neustatter, a consultant psychiatrist, who contributes the chapter ‘The Medical Aspects’, categorises it as a psychological disorder alongside depression, schizophrenia and psychopathy. While he attempts a survey of possible causes of homosexuality, Viscount Hailsham, the author of the second chapter, ‘Homosexuality and Society’ is in no doubt. ‘Male homosexuals are made and not born’ (21) - and they are made by older men preying on young men or adolescents and infecting them with the disease:

No doubt homosexual acts between mature males do take place, just as other acts of extraordinary sexual perversity take place in other ways. But the normal attraction of the adult male homosexual is to the young adolescent or young male adult to the exclusion of others (28)

This attitude is one which, while plainly absurd to present-day sensibilities, found favour among the authorities of the time. When the actor John Gielgud was fined for importuning in a public lavatory in 1953, the magistrate, E.R. Guest ordered him to see a doctor and take whatever advice he had to offer ‘because this conduct is dangerous to other men, particularly young men…’ (Brandreth 2000:96).

Homosexuality, or more precisely, homosexual acts, either public or private were of course, illegal, and Lord Hailsham argues strongly for the retention of legal sanctions. In support of this, he cites the fact, ‘beyond dispute’, that ‘Male homosexual practices known to the police are running at a rate between four and five times that of 1938’ (1955: 21). Other commentators, nearer to our own time testify to the fact that there was considerable alarm not only by this apparent explosion but about homosexuality itself. The Kinsey Report, which had been published in 1948, stated that a larger number of men than had hitherto been dreamed of, had had homosexual experiences. Moreover the spectacular deflection to Russia of the apparently respectable and ‘normal’ civil servants, Guy Burgess and Donald Maclean served to increase the unease felt about the whole question: ‘Who’s queer and who isn’t’. Dan Reballato refers to the series of articles entitled ‘Evil Men’ (1999: 157) published by the *Sunday
Pictorial which attempted to expose this disease at the very core of society while Nicholas de Jongh quotes from a report on Tennessee Williams’ play Suddenly Last Summer by the Lord Chamberlain’s office:

‘There was a great fuss in New York about the references to cannibalism at the end of the play, but the Lord Chamberlain will find more objectionable the indications that the dead man was a homosexual’ (2000: 82)

It is clear then, that the seismic shift in attitude that was to occur over the next half century was beginning to happen during this time. Homosexuals could no longer be placed neatly in an easily-recognised, effeminate stereotype as the sort of man you would ‘meet … one day in Piccadilly with a painted face’ (Shairp, 1984: 92). They were ubiquitous and hidden (the term ‘hidden menace’ was often used) and that fact had to be faced.

The Lord Chamberlain

As far as the theatre was concerned, any open discussion of queer issues was hampered by the Lord Chamberlain’s establishment. This representative of the Royal household, apart from his other duties acted as the official censor and was responsible for licensing all plays before they could be performed publicly. Both the journalist, Nicholas de Jongh and John Johnston, a former member of the Lord Chamberlain’s office, have written detailed and full length accounts of how the institution worked and the effect it had upon the theatre of the time. A number of factors have a significant bearing on our discussion. Firstly, until 1958, the Lord Chamberlain disallowed completely any play which contained homosexuals or dealt with homosexual subjects. After the Wolfenden Report was published in 1957 which recommended the legalising of relations between consenting adults, he allowed restricted representation of gays on stage as long as they were necessary to the action, there was no violence, that there were no embraces between them and the plays dealt seriously with the subject (Johnston 1990: 172). So while in a sense there was a move towards liberalisation, he nevertheless kept a tight grip on the limitations of what he would permit, which in its turn led to many tussles with theatre managers. One method of circumventing censorship (and it was a way which had been used for decades) was to present plays in private theatre clubs to members of that club only, membership having to be sought some time before a ticket was sold. In certain highly publicised cases, West End theatres were ‘converted’ into clubs for the run of a play
which would otherwise have been banned. Club presentation, however, limited the number of people who could actually see the piece and was therefore only used by commercial managers occasionally. Furthermore, theatre clubs had to take seriously the threat of prosecution if they overstepped the line – made even more difficult by the fact that the line was unspecified. The Lord Chamberlain made it clear that while he approved of bona fide clubs, he was opposed to what he saw as the flouting of the law when legitimate theatres were turned into clubs for particular plays (Johnston 1990: 210-217). Both the censorship of plays and the threat of prosecution then, led to playwrights being circumspect in dealing with queer themes which in turn leads to the question of codes.

The Question of Codes

Most commentators on Queer Drama in the 1940s and 1950s claim that the plays contained codes that were discernible to any gays in the audience but which would be undetected by the average theatre goer. This notion however, presents certain difficulties, not least because the word has different meanings according to who is writing. The idea of the secret code known only to the initiated is an attractive one – indeed it has been the subject of more than one best-selling novel but whether it stands up to scrutiny is another matter. Polari, the queer cant of the time, made popular in the BBC Radio series’ Beyond our Ken and Round the Horne is often cited in support of the argument. Words such as lallies (legs), varda (look) or trolling (cruising) are used to great comic effect by the characters Julian and Sandy. In this instance, however, the idea of a code is undermined by the fact that instantaneous translations are frequently provided for the audience by Kenneth Horne (who always took part in the sketches) and by the fact that both Julian and Sandy, in their language and behaviour conform to the stereotype of the effeminate homosexual.

Alan Sinfield has misgivings about such codes. Taking the word ‘Bunbury’ from Oscar Wilde’s The Importance of Being Earnest, he interrogates the assertion made by Patricia Flanagan Behrendt that it was a term for ‘promiscuous sodomite’, by Linda Gertner Zatlin that it stands for a ‘homosexual pickup’ and by Joel Fineman that it means a ‘male brothel’ and a ‘desire to bury in the bun’. He finds all of these explanations wanting (1990:27) and far more sensibly locates such interpretations in the minds of the audience and their ability to negotiate meanings from their engagement with the text. An example of this occurs in Michael Wilcox’s book, Benjamin Britten’s Operas, (1997). In the chapter on Albert Herring, first performed at Glyndebourne in 1947, Wilcox seeks to
demonstrate that along with Swan Vest a matches in the opera, references to whistles and the jingling of such items as keys show that ‘beyond all doubt, Albert is homosexual’ (42). His argument is based on the claim that such signals were used at that time by queer men for picking one another up in the dark. However, he glosses over the fact that the whistles in the opera are very firmly linked to the courting couple, Sid and Nancy – Sid whistles for her and Nancy responds. Albert, watching them go off together, makes up his mind that he wants to do what they are doing, practises a whistle of his own and goes off in search of someone, after first muffling, not jingling the shop door bell. Instead of Wilcox’s notion that he will spend the night in the arms of a shepherd lad, a more straightforward and less tortuous reading has him going off in search of a girl (Herbert 1989: 161).

Knowing the strictures under which playwrights were operating, it seems that rather than putting in secret codes, their plays contain intimations and omissions. Gay characters and gay issues are hinted at but mostly it is what is not said that provides the information, rather in the way that sex scenes in popular novels of the time were often indicated by three dots. The audience is left to work it out for themselves and they will do this according to how well aware they are of the conventions under which the author is operating. This is not new of course; in Ibsen’s *Ghosts*, nowhere is the word ‘syphilis’ mentioned, yet the critics in the audience of the first London production were sufficiently attuned for the newspapers to greet it the following day with howls of disgust.

Playwrights could also call upon a long tradition of signifying queer characters through stereotypes. The effeminate homosexual already referred to is an obvious example but there were many other more subtle representations. Sensitive or artistic men, anyone with long hair or wearing flamboyant clothes, men belonging to certain professions such as interior designers or hairdressers could all be placed within a context which would signal to an audience that they were queer. Alan Sinfield cites Dodie Smith’s 1935 play *Call It a Day* in this respect (1999:21) where the character, Roger is keen to put an end to his seventeen-year old son Martin’s friendship with twenty-year old Alistair. Alistair is perfectly presentable, respectable and amiable but for one thing – he is an interior decorator, which makes him an unsuitable companion for the teenager. In addition to stereotypes, Nicholas de Jongh (1992) also refers to a whole series of hints available to the playwright to indicate queer goings-on. Fingers touching briefly but held a second too long, one man stroking another’s hair, a hand held on the shoulder and eyes meeting are all signs which can be used. And because they are non-verbal they were more
The Trouble with Queers: Gays in Plays 1945-1968

difficult to censor.

Now Barabbas

William Douglas Home’s play Now Barabbas provides us with a text book example. First presented at a commercial theatre in London in 1947 it is set in a prison and while there is a subplot concerning a condemned prisoner who during the course of the action is hanged, the concern of the main plot is the queer relationships between a group of the inmates. Paddy, a 33-year-old ‘tall, thick-set, rough-featured Irishman’ (24) is in prison for terrorist activities. He is married and misses his wife greatly. Medworth, ‘60, thin hair, horn-rimmed glasses, small pointed beard, well spoken’ (25) is an ex-schoolmaster and his crime is unspecified although it becomes clear fairly early on through hints and inferences that it was for homosexual activities. He is unmarried. Neither of these two conforms to a homosexual stereotype, particularly Paddy; nor does the first newcomer, Roberts, ‘young, fresh, good-looking, Scotch’, (24) in prison for embezzlement and engaged to a young woman, Kitty. The second newcomer, Richards, however is a fully-fledged effeminate queer. He is ‘tall, very long hair elaborately arranged, theatrical gestures’ and ‘speaks with a precious accent’ (27). His occupation is ‘choruses’ and ‘a bit of ballet dancing’ (41). It is his first time inside although his crime is never referred to – presumably it is too obvious to mention. From his first entrance he attracts both mockery and insults from the other inmates but does not moderate his manner of speaking and fairly quickly they accept him, awarding him the rather affectionate nickname, Polly.

From the beginning, both Medworth and Paddy are attracted to Roberts. Paddy’s first remark to him dictates in a stage direction that before speaking, he has been ‘looking’ at him (25) while to Richards, on the other hand, he says ‘[t]hey ought to hang the likes of you.’ (28). Medworth cultivates Roberts’ friendship, playing draughts with him and encouraging him to talk. His queerness is signalled by his reference to the ‘lovely eyes’ (52) of another prisoner and his telling him the ‘beautiful’ story of David and Jonathan who ‘loved each other very much’. These overtures are lost on the other man who responds in a jocular fashion but Medworth begins to read his hand, telling him his girl will let him down and that he will need ‘love and friendship then … like sunshine to a flower’ (55). Paddy, who has entered and heard the end of this, interrupts them violently and sends Medworth off and while Roberts is packing away the draughts, he looks at him hard.

Meanwhile, after his initial reaction, Paddy has forged a
relationship with Richards. In one episode which if it were between a man and a woman would almost constitute a conventional falling-in-love scene, Richards is combing out his hair while the other man talks about his wife and how he came to be in prison. At one point Richards sits down close to Paddy and after one of his angry remarks about England, gently puts his hand over the other man’s mouth. Later on Paddy walks over to Richards and looks down at him; he then takes the comb and pulls it through the other one’s hair before turning away and asking him ‘Why don’t you break it up – and find a girl?’ Richards, after declaring that he doesn’t like women, relates something of his miserable childhood and Paddy ends the scene by giving him cigarettes, a present which it has been emphasised earlier, amounts to gold in prison.

The action then, concerns the relationships between these four characters and in particular, the bitter, jealous rivalry between Paddy and Medworth. The climax of the play occurs when Medworth denounces Paddy and Richards to the prison governor, who arranges to have Richards moved to a local prison where, it has been made plain, conditions will be much harsher. Later, Roberts is left devastated when his fiancée, Kitty throws him over, and at the same time, Medworth leaves the prison, having come to the end of his sentence. In the last scene, Paddy commiserates with Roberts and, standing behind him, looks down at his hair. ‘His hand steals out towards it, but he checks himself’ (p 109) He then gives him cigarettes and, after putting his arm through Roberts’, they go off to exercise together.

Seeing the plot described in such a bald fashion, a reader might be justified in asking how it was able to escape censorship and the answer lies in the fact that Douglas Home makes skilful use of ambiguity. Even the final act of walking off arm in arm could be interpreted as innocent friendship – it was fairly common at the time for two men to do just that without the implications which would accrue in a twenty-first century setting. Within the context however, it is easy to see that it signifies the start of a queer relationship, particularly after Paddy has reached out to touch Roberts’ hair and Roberts has accepted his cigarettes, the same seduction technique which had been used with the blatantly queer Richards earlier.

In Medworth’s denunciation to the prison governor an equally fine line is trodden. Medworth begins by saying ‘I’ve - tried very hard to start again since I’ve been here … I want to start afresh. And help others to – as well’ (73) which immediately focuses the audience on the fact that we are talking about homosexuality. He then, after many hesitations, accuses Richards of having an ‘evil influence’ on O’Brien (Paddy). In the
subsequent interview with Paddy, the Governor talks about his ‘friendship’ with Richards and asks him to ‘cut out this lad … give him up’ - when he chooses a friend it should be a ‘good one. Not a rotten little - ‘ (75). Paddy’s interruption prevents him from completing the insult but the Irishman’s refusal to comply with this order results in Richards being sent to another prison. Once again on the surface it could be interpreted as an innocent befriending of a young man by an older one, but with the hair touching and lingering looks elsewhere in the play, the meaning is clear for those who wish to see it.

The attitudes to queerness portrayed in the play range from suspicion to antagonism, particularly from those in authority although they are largely tempered with compassion. Even Richards’ dismissal to a local prison by the Governor is done without harshness while his treatment of Paddy is positively sympathetic. And as mentioned earlier, the use of Richards’ nickname ‘Polly’ by the other prisoners is more affectionate than hostile.

**Tea and Sympathy**

Matters are very different in Robert Anderson’s play, *Tea and Sympathy*, written in 1953 but presented in London in 1957 under club conditions to avoid the censor, after a considerable commercial success in New York. The setting is an all-male establishment, but this time a boy’s boarding school and the plot concerns the hounding of a seventeen-year old pupil, Tom, because of a suspicion that he is homosexual. His schoolfellows ostracize him and taunt him with the nickname ‘Grace’ refusing to shower with him and putting pressure on his roommate to move out. Everyone is involved in this harassment including the teachers and his father - the words ‘queer’ and ‘fairy’ are used freely in connection with him - and he is only saved from believing himself to be queer when his housemaster’s wife, Laura takes him to bed.

A number of attitudes can be discerned in the play, some overt, some hidden. Firstly, and probably most importantly, while there is a strong case made by the author for tolerance and the avoidance of prejudice, it does not extend to an actual acceptance of homosexuality - even Laura regards that as a ‘terrible thing’ (251). Rather as if Tom had been charged with being a thief or an embezzler, Anderson’s main concern is that he has been accused wrongly without evidence and on the basis of appearance alone – the crime itself is not condoned. Tom is thought to be queer because he is not like the other boys – an ‘off horse’. He wears his hair long rather than in a crew cut, he walks ‘sort of light’, (276) his
musical tastes are different from the others and most condemingly of all, he has played women’s roles in the school plays. Interestingly, although he doesn’t like sports such as football or baseball he excels at tennis and is not only the school champion but also the champion of his club at home. But this is not enough to redeem him. His father, Herb complains that he doesn’t ‘play tennis like a regular fellow. No hard drives and cannon-ball serves. He’s a cut artist. He can put more damn twists on that ball’ (257). So it is more important to be a ‘regular fellow’ than to win. What Anderson does is to link masculinity firmly with heterosexuality and femininity (long hair, artistic tastes, subtle tennis playing) with homosexuality. In the final analysis, however, Tom, after first failing disastrously with a local good-time girl, Ellie, and trying to commit suicide, is proved to be straight because he has sex with Laura.

**Cat on a Hot Tin Roof**

There is a hint that things may be more complicated in that at the end of the play Laura accuses her ultra-masculine husband, Bill of repressing the queer side of his nature whose reaction to her outburst is to say that he expects her to be gone when he returns – the marriage is over. In Tennessee Williams’ *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*, the main character, Brick’s response is similar except that when his wife Maggie refuses to leave, he takes to drink. The play appeared in London in 1958, once again under club conditions and while it is more complex than *Tea and Sympathy* with an intertwining of several themes there are a number of resonances between the two. During the play we are told that Brick had been a professional football player and together with his best friend and team mate, Skipper, had achieved some success. Maggie recounts that after their marriage she noticed that the relationship between her husband and Skipper was more than just friendship and after she confronted the latter with it, he made a ‘pitiful, ineffectual little attempt’ (135) to prove that it wasn’t true by making love to her. Later, he confessed his true feelings to Brick over the telephone and afterwards killed himself. The links with Tom in the earlier play are clear. Accepted wisdom of the time it seems, dictates two imperatives: the only way to prove you are not queer is by sleeping with a woman and if that doesn’t work, commit suicide. But the central dilemma and the one that Williams probes relentlessly is the reason for Brick’s moral and emotional deterioration, starting at the point where Anderson left off with his character, Bill.

Brick is crippled, physically by a sporting accident, mentally by alcoholism and emotionally by Skipper’s confession and suicide. In the
first confrontation with his wife, where she recounts the circumstances leading to his friend’s death, he is both defensive and violent. He claims that the ‘one great, good, true thing’ in his life was his friendship with Skipper and she is ‘naming it dirty’ (134). Reciting conventional understanding, he asks ‘Why would I marry you, Maggie, if I was - ?’ but she cuts in, saying at first that it was only Skipper who ‘harboured even any unconscious desire for anything not perfectly pure between you two’ (author’s italics) but afterwards saying that ‘something was not right … between you’ (135). He throws his crutch at her, causing him to collapse on the floor and shortly afterwards the first act ends. In Act Two, however, the attack on his defences is renewed, this time by his father, Big Daddy. In a brilliantly constructed scene, the conversation moves round and round until Big Daddy closes in, noting that Brick only started drinking after Skipper died and suggesting that there was something not ‘normal’ in their relationship (p 167).

Unlike Tom’s father in the earlier play, Big Daddy treats the idea of such associations lightly, implying that he engaged in them in his youth. But Brick violently protests his innocence, describing how he and others had forced a queer student to leave when he was at university. The crunch comes when Big Daddy wrests the truth about Skipper’s phone call from his son and then delivers his final blow: ‘You! – dug the grave of your friend and kicked him in it! – before you’d face truth with him!’ (173) Brick’s response is ‘His truth, not mine!’ but in revenge tells his father the truth about his (Big Daddy’s) terminal cancer and the play veers off in another direction.

At the beginning of this final altercation, a detailed stage direction begins:

Brick’s detachment is at last broken through. His heart is accelerated; his forehead sweat-beaded; his breath becomes more rapid and his voice hoarse.

Quoting from a contemporary book entitled Homosexuality, Nicholas de Jongh demonstrates that these were the symptoms which were thought to be characteristic of ‘repressed homosexual inclinations’ and from this argues that the playwright is indicating that Brick is indeed a latent homosexual (1992: 75). However, later in the same stage direction, Williams states that ‘some mystery should be left in the revelation of character in a play’ which should ‘steer [the playwright] away from ‘pat’ conclusions, facile definitions which make a play just a play, not a snare for the truth of human experience.’ (1957:167-8). So Brick may not be the victim of ‘repressed homosexual inclinations’ but be consumed by guilt
and remorse at his part in the death of his closest friend. It is plain, though, that Williams is examining both the notion of queerness as well as conventional and unconventional reactions to it. Skipper is a football player, not ‘artistic’ like Tom, yet he desired Brick. Brick’s disgusted reaction causes him to lose the friend he loved as well as setting him on the road to self-destruction while Big Daddy who has not only ‘bummed around’ in his youth but spent a considerable portion of his life working for the two gay owners of the property he has now inherited, does not regard queerness as such a big deal. Williams may be making a plea for tolerance and covering some of the same ground as Anderson, but he does it in an infinitely more subtle and complex way.

**Quaint Honour**

In contrast to such pleas, *Quaint Honour* by Roger Gellert reads almost as a manifesto for the overthrow of traditional ideas and an acceptance of queerness on its own terms. Presented yet again under club conditions in 1958 despite the relaxation of the Lord Chamberlain’s strictures we return once more to the all-male establishment of a public school, albeit this time in England. Tully, an eighteen year old prefect sleeps regularly with, among others, fifteen year old Turner, who persuades him to seduce the innocent and ‘dreary’ Hamilton, also fifteen, for a laugh. Against all expectations, they fall for one another and when the affair is discovered, Hamilton proves to have wisdom and maturity beyond his years. Tully is expelled, but not before delivering excoriating attacks on conventional morality and religion and defending his queerness with spirit. All three boys are portrayed without effeminacy; Tully and Turner are keen and vigorous sportsmen while Hamilton is studious and naive rather than that most damning of descriptions - artistic.

The central scene in the play is where Tully seduces Hamilton, not just to persuade him into his bed but to bring him from mouthing conventional platitudes to a state where he starts to think for himself. Sex is something pleasurable between them, something shared on equal terms and he later rejects his housemaster, Hallowes’ accusation that he forced Hamilton to take the part of a woman for his personal gratification (89)

Why do you assume that every sexual act must have a male and a female to it … if you want to know, when Hamilton and I lie together, there’s no submitting, there’s no top dog and substitute bitch - (89)

Hallowes’ depiction of homosexuals as ‘pathetic half men … with painted faces and womanish gestures’ is seen to be hopelessly fuddy-