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Abstract

This dissertation constructs an analytical history of gay theatre in Toronto from 1967 to 1985, a period that saw the radical reformation of the city’s gay community and its not-for-profit theatre industry. It undertakes this research using a cultural materialist theoretical frame that enables it to recover the history of gay theatre in Toronto and connect this history to the contemporary development of gay community and theatrical production in the city. By recovering the history of gay theatre in Toronto, this dissertation demonstrates its seminal importance to the history of gay culture in Canada, and to Canadian theatre history.

To construct its narrative of gay theatre history in Toronto, this dissertation focuses on three pioneering gay playwrights, John Herbert, Robert Wallace, and Sky Gilbert, historically contextualizing these within three distinct eras of contemporary gay history and Toronto theatre history. Chapter one addresses the years prior to the decriminalization of homosexuality in Canada in 1969, analyzing the theatrical development of John Herbert’s *Fortune and Men’s Eyes*, and the political significance of the New York production’s tour to Toronto’s Central Library Theatre in October 1967. Chapter two examines the rise of gay liberation and the
Alternative theatre movements, 1969 to 1976, recovering the production history of Robert Wallace’s long-neglected play, *No Deposit, No Return*. Chapter three investigates the backlash against gay liberation, the consolidation of gay community as a political minority, and the emergence of AIDS, 1977-1985, focusing on the early career of Sky Gilbert, and the significance of his play, *Drag Queens on Trial*. Paying close attention to the politics of gay identity and community in Toronto, and providing a thick description of the biographical, social, cultural, and political discourses that shaped the lives of these playwrights and impacted the production and reception of their plays, this dissertation reveals the important part gay theatre played in the reformation of Toronto’s gay community and its not-for-profit theatre industry in this foundational period.
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Introduction

Another problem Theatre Toronto has […] is the overemphasis on homosexuality in [its] plots. Ten years ago [homosexuality] might have been considered titillating – but today it’s as taken for granted as problem drinking or marital discord and not many people enjoy a constant repetition of those themes either. Although the spokesmen for the theatre protest that this sexual aberration has not been dominant in the dramas it has produced, it has been a part of five of the eight plays given so far.


In January 1968, Theatre Toronto was set to take the city by storm. It rose from the ashes of the Crest Theatre and Canadian Players, after these companies both ceased production in 1966, leaving a vacuum in Toronto’s professional theatre market. Appropriate to the growing metropolis in the 1960s, Theatre Toronto was to be a thoroughly modern venture, “a completely contemporary theatre, bringing to Toronto new plays that have attracted serious critical attention” (William Graham qtd. in Monette and Prosser 68). It hired British theatre director and actor Clifford Williams to be its artistic director; fresh from success at the Royal Shakespeare Company, Williams was to act as a theatrical “prophet” “lead[ing] [Toronto] out of the dramatic desert” (Blaik Kirby qtd. in Johnston 14).¹ Resident of the newly refurbished Royal Alexandra Theatre, the company hoped to become a Broadway-like house, producing professional theatre for the educated and affluent classes, and its ambitions were met with much good will. It garnered financial support from every level of government, corporate sponsors, and an excited public that eagerly bought more than

¹ Graham was Theatre Toronto’s board president and Kirby a board member.
11,000 subscriptions to a theatre company that had yet to produce a single play. A year later, at the beginning of its second season, the company was in a very different position. Its subscriptions dropped by 50% (Johnston 15). Williams resigned a couple of days after the opening of the season’s inaugural play, Christopher Marlow’s *Edward II*, a critical failure despite the talents of Stratford star William Hutt in its titular role. By season’s end, Theatre Toronto posted a deficit of $32,500 (Brissenden) and closed its doors, its board amalgamating with the still-under-construction St. Lawrence Centre for the Arts (Johnston 15).

Theatre Toronto’s spectacular failure is surely a complex matter, caused by various artistic, managerial, and political forces. But what are we to think of Dubarry Campau’s opinion? That Theatre Toronto’s downfall was at least partially due to an “overemphasis” on homosexuality in its plays? Coming from London, where, like in New York, a number of plays with homosexual characters and “themes” enjoyed success in the 1960s, Williams perhaps misjudged the tastes of provincial Toronto audiences when he programmed plays like *The Killing of Sister George* by Frank Marcus, which focuses on a lesbian couple, and *Edward II*. Weighing in on the matter, William Hutt took a different view than Campau, arguing the “problem” of homosexuality is a matter of public interest and misguided interpretation:

> I was not in Toronto last year, but I heard that the theatre was obsessed with homosexuality. The theatre is not obsessed with homosexuality—it’s a public obsession with homosexuality. […] *Edward II* is not a play about a

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2 Only two of the plays Theatre Toronto produced directly concerned homosexual protagonists, *Edward II* and *The Killing of Sister George*. In the other plays in which homosexuals figure, *Drummer Boy* by Jean Basile, *Little Murders* by Jules Feiffer, and *A Festival of Carols* by John Hearne, they play minor roles, often denoting the denigration and immorality of the societies represented.
homosexual relationship. It’s a play about the struggles between a king and his barons. (“Dr. Hutt and the Ills of Toronto Theatre”) ³

Despite differences in Hutt and Campau’s analyses, their comments substantiate homosexuality’s status as a disputed issue in 1960s Toronto theatre, as it was in the culture more broadly. Positing homosexuality as a cultural obsession, as a factor or a framework of dramatic interpretation, and as a theme whose overrepresentation is either morbid or boring and which could precipitate a theatre’s downfall, makes clear that homosexuality was a variously defined and contested issue, especially in the theatre. On the eve of the Stonewall riots in New York City in June 1969 and the transformation of Toronto’s “homosexual” subculture into a politicized “gay” community in the 1970s, the implications of their statements throw into relief questions central to this dissertation. Namely, what is the history of politicized gay theatre in Toronto, and what role has it played in the city’s gay community and its theatre industry?

To begin to answer these interrelated questions, this study constructs an analytical history of gay theatre in Toronto from 1967 to 1985, a period that saw radical change in Toronto’s gay community with the rise of gay liberation activism, and its not-for-profit theatre industry with the rise of the self-styled “Alternative” theatres. It charts this history by focusing on the lives and work of three pioneering gay playwrights, John Herbert, Robert Wallace, and Sky Gilbert, historically contextualizing these in relation to the lived, political realities of gay men in Toronto, and the city’s theatre history. It undertakes this research using a cultural materialist theoretical frame that enables it to recover the history of gay theatre in Toronto and to connect this history to the contemporary histories of gay

³ It is difficult to ascertain with complete certainty when Hutt suggests that last year “the theatre was obsessed with homosexuality” if he is talking about Theatre Toronto’s season in particular, or the whole theatre output of the city for that year. Regardless, the argument is too many representations of homosexuality are not desirable.
community and theatrical production in the city. Providing a thick description of the biographical, social, cultural, and political (most often legal) discourses that shaped the lives of these playwrights and impacted the production and reception of their plays, it demonstrates gay theatre’s seminal position in both the cultural history of gay men in Toronto and theatre history in the city.

Each of this study’s three chapters focuses on a specific playwright, play, and performance to elucidate and contextualize gay theatre’s role in this process of social, cultural, and political transformation. It situates these within three distinct eras of contemporary gay history and Toronto theatre history that, when taken together, constitute the first stage of the city’s contemporary gay theatre history, 1967 to 1985. Chapter one addresses the years prior to the decriminalization of homosexuality in Canada in 1969, analyzing the theatrical development of John Herbert’s *Fortune and Men’s Eyes*, and the political significance of the New York production’s tour to Toronto’s Central Library Theatre (CLT) in October 1967. Chapter two examines the rise of gay liberation and the Alternative theatre movements, 1969 to 1976, recovering the production history of Robert Wallace’s long-neglected play, *No Deposit, No Return*, staged by the WSGD Gay Theatre in New York in 1975, but for which Wallace was unable to find a supportive producer or publisher in Toronto. Chapter three investigates the backlash against gay liberation, the consolidation of gay community as a political minority, the emergence of AIDS, and the mainstreaming of the city’s Alternative theatres, 1977 to 1985, focusing on the early career of Sky Gilbert, the establishment of his theatre, Buddies in Bad Times, and the significance of his most successful play of this period, *Drag Queens on Trial*. The close to eighteen years that these

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4 The “WSDG Gay Theatre” was an extension of the “West Side Discussion Group,” an early homophile organization in New York City. The relationship between the West Side Discussion Group and the WSDG Gay Theatre is addressed in chapter two.
plays span saw homosexuality converted from a “theme” whose overrepresentation could trigger a theatre’s demise, as Campau suggests, into Buddies in Bad Times Theatre’s aesthetic and political foundation. This dissertation’s cultural materialist analysis documents the history of this development in the city. Paying close attention to the politics of gay identity and community in Toronto, it constructs a history of gay theatre in the city by revealing the parts of these playwrights and their plays in the reformation of Toronto’s gay community and its not-for-profit theatre industry in this important period.

Canadian theatre scholarship has done little to investigate the history of gay theatre and its practitioners, leaving the related histories of gay male culture and theatrical production incomplete. While a handful of anthologies of gay plays in Canada have been published, and scholarly essays on gay theatre written – with Peter Dickinson, Rosalind Kerr, and Robert Wallace’s work standing out – there is no sustained, historical investigation of gay theatre in Toronto or in Canada. This project begins to fill this gap by taking Toronto’s history of gay community and its not-for-profit theatre industry as the overlapping contexts of gay theatrical production in the city. In each of its chapters, this study posits politicized gay theatre as a performative site where questions and conflicts central to the city’s contemporary gay community are observable in theatrical action. It takes seriously the social, cultural, and political work done in theatrical performance, paying close attention to performance conventions, and contextualizing these within broader social, political, and epistemological frameworks. This dissertation follows Raymond Williams’ conviction that analyses of artistic form within broader social contexts – in this case gay theatrical

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5 See Kerr, Lesbian, and Queer; Wallace, Making; Gilbert, Perfectly; and Cole, Outspoken.
production and various contiguous, overlapping, or related social, cultural, and political processes – reveal what he termed new “structures of feeling.”

The idea of a structure of feeling can be specifically related to the evidence of forms and conventions – semantic figures – which, in art and literature, are often among the very first indications that such a new structure is forming. [...] as a matter of cultural theory this is a way of defining forms and conventions in art and literature as inalienable elements of a social material process: not by derivation from other social forms and pre-forms, but as social formation of a specific kind which may in turn be seen as the articulation (often the only fully available articulation) of structures of feeling which as living processes are much more widely experienced. (Williams Marxism 133)

As a scholarly approach a structure of feeling denotes concern for forms and conventions as deployed by an artist within particular material and social circumstances – a particular community – that makes these forms available, of which they are an expression, and within which they are lived and have particular resonance and meaning. In Drama From Ibsen to Brecht, Williams uses the phrase to describe theatrical performance, emphasizing “structure” as dramatic convention and “feeling” as forms of embodiment, experience, and living. For Williams, a structure of feeling describes discursive formations as ways of knowing – including the affective and the visceral – within particular social contexts, and suggests that these new modes of thinking and feeling are often first glimpsed in particular deployments of dramatic convention in the theatre.

In this dissertation, the social formation I am investigating is gay theatre in Toronto. I analyze it by charting the connections between Herbert, Wallace, and Gilbert’s plays and
their lives as out gay men living within Toronto’s gay community. Gay theatre, which I am defining here as plays by politicized gay men who use the theatre to engage issues of concern to other gay men, is a material and discursive production whose immediate contexts are the city’s theatre industry and its gay community – both of which influenced by larger social forces. Analyzing the connections between the artistic conventions of gay theatre and gay community and politics – what are new and “more widely experienced,” to quote Williams, social processes – is key to my project’s methodology, and its construction of a narrative of gay theatre history in Toronto in this moment. In the chapters that follow, I analyze these plays’ particular performance conventions as each relates to the changing status of gay identity, community, culture, and politics in the city: three plays and their performances within three specific historical moments in Toronto’s gay and theatre histories. I include in this analysis the effects of extra-municipal forces, such as shifts in Canadian law, medicine, gay activism, and a theatre industry that crisscrosses national boundaries. Employing this approach, I ascertain the specific interventions these playwrights made through their plays and how these related to the (new) ways gay lives were lived in Toronto. Linking these analyses together I assemble a narrative of gay theatre history in the city that illustrates the part of gay theatre in Toronto’s gay community and its not-for-profit theatre industry.

As a medium, theatre is both public and performative. In it, Herbert, Wallace, and Gilbert found a vehicle through which they could publicly embody the political struggles they faced as gay men, enabling them to take up literal and imaginative space toward political ends. Theatrical performance allowed them to act upon and affect existing ideas and narratives of gay identity and community. But theatre, it must be remembered, is also an industry that requires various financial and human resources. If we are to comprehend the
stakes of gay theatrical performance and its history in the city, it is vital that we understand the material conditions of gay theatrical production, especially when these playwrights were rejected and were unable to achieve production of their plays. Indeed, by examining the production histories of Herbert, Wallace, and Gilbert’s plays – what inspired them, how they were developed, where they were produced, and where they were rejected – we recover not only the history of gay theatre in Toronto, but the ideological underpinnings and politics of Toronto’s theatre industry, and the effects these commitments had in gay theatre and gay life in the city.

Nationalism, especially since the 1960s, has been a relatively overdetermined scholarly framework in Canadian theatre history. This is the case because “Canadian Theatre,” in comparison to “theatre in Canada” is a political, material, and academic construction that has its origins in the nineteenth century, and which was promulgated as a project of nation building in the post-War period. As Alan Filewod points out:

The idea of national theatre as an institutionalized industry that announces and enacts the historical presence of the nation through a canon of performed texts is a historical artifact originating in the nineteenth-century movements of popular nationhood. (Committing 6)

The notion of “Canadian Theatre” as a “national theatre” of this kind was “embedded in the Massey Report, the 1951 document that established the basis of public arts in the country” (Filewod Committing 6). In cities across Canada, pursuing “Canadian Theatre” as a “national theatre” project was the basis for building the regional theatres system in the 1960s, and the Alternative theatre movement in the 1970s, the two material contexts that together form the primary basis of the not-for-profit theatre industry in Toronto and across the country today.
Limiting this project to Toronto enables me to shift the frame from national to municipal, focusing on gay theatre’s immediate situation within Toronto’s gay community and its not-for-profit theatres. Concentrating on Toronto allows me to locate Herbert, Wallace, and Gilbert as out gay men actively navigating the material, ideological, and political currents they faced in the city’s gay community and its theatre industry. A municipal focus allows me to clearly link specific theatrical conventions to the city’s gay politics, and to better historicize the ideologies and politics of Toronto’s theatre industry by highlighting the local effects of extra-municipal discourses, such as the construction and promotion of “Canadian Theatre.”

While nationalist discourses dominated Toronto’s theatre industry, federal laws, and government policies, national and international currents in gay activism, and the AIDS pandemic are the primary extra-municipal forces that affected its gay community. Like discourses of “Canadian theatre,” I cite these national legal texts, these debates, and the AIDS crisis as macro-level discourses that played parts in determining the micro-level material contexts of gay life, politics, and theatre in Toronto. And it follows that as a temporal framework 1967 and 1985 mark not only the dates when Fortune and Men’s Eyes and Drag Queens on Trial were performed. These dates also signal important changes in extra-municipal forces, national and international, which ramified Toronto’s gay community and its not-for-profit theatre industry, impacting Herbert, Wallace, and Gilbert as gay men and as theatre artists.

At the end of 1967, within a few weeks of Fortune’s performance at Toronto’s Central Library Theatre, the Supreme Court of Canada upheld a lower court’s ruling against Everett George Klippert. Klippert had been deemed a “dangerous sexual offender” by
medical officials because he was a “repeat offender,” having breached the nation’s gross indecency legislation in Calgary and in Pine Point, Northwest Territories, and was considered likely to reoffend upon release. This pronouncement and the Supreme Court’s ruling effectively incarcerated Klippert for the rest of his natural life, prompting Member of Parliament (and subsequent “Greatest Canadian”) Tommy Douglas to call for reform of gross indecency laws.\(^6\)

Unlike some cities in the United States, where “homophile” associations such as the Mattachine Society and the Daughters of Bilitis began to organize in the early 1950s, Toronto had no formal gay/homophile groups until the founding of the University of Toronto Homophile Association in 1970, and the subsequent rise of gay liberation activism.\(^7\) In the pre-gay liberation context, the performance of *Fortune and Men’s Eyes* at the CLT, examined in chapter one, is the first example of gay theatrical protest – or any form of gay protest – in the city. Participating in what were, in hindsight, the beginnings of the political reformation of gay identity and Toronto’s gay community, *Fortune*’s run at the CLT not only anticipated gay liberation’s rise in the early 1970s, it inaugurated it. The play is the first public protest against the criminalization of homosexuals and the broad-based oppression of gay men made by an openly gay man in Toronto and Canada.

In order to understand the rise of gay liberation as a movement, and the primary political context of gay theatre in Toronto from the late-1960s to the mid-1980s, let me begin by returning to the Stonewall riots in New York, the movement’s iconic story of origin. On a

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\(^6\) Based on the BBC’s *Great Britons, The Greatest Canadian* was television show launched in 2004 that aimed at determining who was the nation’s “greatest Canadian.” Based on the votes of viewers, Tommy Douglas, who spearheaded Canada’s universal health care program, was deemed “Greatest Canadian.”

\(^7\) Formed in Vancouver in 1964, the Association for Social Knowledge (ASK) was the first “homophile” group in Canada. Inspired by the Mattachine Society in the U.S., it was established “to help society to understand and accept variations from the sexual norm” (McLeod *Lesbian and Gay Liberation 7*).
hot summer night in June 1969, a gay bar in Greenwich Village, the Stonewall Inn, underwent the kind of raid that bars like it regularly endured. Tired of this harassment, a number of its patrons resisted arrest and overcame the small number of police on the scene, starting a riot that lasted several days and caused significant damage. In the wake of this spectacular act of resistance, the Gay Liberation Front (GLF) was formed in New York and, within a year, gay liberation organizations formed in cities across the U.S., Canada, and Europe, taking Stonewall as the symbolic birth of their movement.

Despite the popularity and appeal of this narrative, most historians contend that gay liberation did not proceed fully formed from the Stonewall riots. Rather, it emerged out of the politics and consciousness of the New Social Movements of the 1950s and 1960s, specifically, the African-American civil rights movement, the anti-Vietnam war movement, the student movement, the Black Nationalist movement, and the women’s liberation movement. Indeed, the men and women who became gay liberationists—frequently people in their early twenties—were often former members of one or more of these movements, particularly the radical students’ movement (Adam 82).  

Gay liberation freely borrowed, combined and adapted the philosophies and theories of these older movements, similarly calling for “liberation” and “revolution.” It understood itself as indelibly different from the homophile movement that preceded it, disparaging the older movement’s perceived lack of militancy and its “assimilationist” tactics. Gay liberationists also took umbrage with the subaltern gay enclaves established in the post-War period in urban centres across North America, which, regardless of gay ownership or control, they accused of impeding radical political consciousness by providing a false sense of

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8 In the U.S. some homophile organizations engaged in political actions and protests, including picketing, protests, and confrontations with the police, in the years before gay liberation. See D'Emilio, “Stonewall.”
security (Nash “Contesting Identity” 121). Especially in the 1970s, gay liberation encouraged a revolutionary sexuality that was promiscuous – a term liberationists used positively – and freed from any form of moral, legal, or medical constraint. A radical social movement, it aimed for society-wide social change: a sexual revolution and liberation that would see the end of the nuclear family, masculine and feminine gender roles, and even the categories homo and heterosexual.

Gay liberation’s political commitments, philosophies, and ideologies formed the backbone of gay activism, and the reformation of gay community in Toronto between the early 1970s and early 1980s, and thus provided the primary social and political milieu for gay theatrical production in the city. Gay liberation’s early and idealistic years are explored here in chapter two, as the immediate context of Robert Wallace’s No Deposit, No Return. Its production at the WSDG Gay Theatre in 1975 incorporated gay liberation’s ideologies, utopian politics, and its challenges into its form, content, and artistic proposals. These elements make it not simply a play with gay characters, common on Toronto’s stages, but a gay liberationist play. Developed for and produced by a patently gay theatre, its gay liberation politics differentiate it from plays produced on Toronto’s stages in this period and, as I argue in chapter two, prevented both its production in Toronto and publication in Canada.

Although gay liberationists in Toronto were committed to society-wide revolutionary change, they also faced a highly conservative political culture in the city, and a homosexual community that was downtrodden, alienated, and had no history of political organizing. For these reasons, gay liberationists consciously decided to promote civil rights as a tactic whose

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9 See Dennis Altman, Homosexual.
primary aim was not attaining these rights, but rather was the mobilization of unpoliticized (completely closeted or leading double lives) gay men and lesbians. Gay liberationists were still committed to wiping out oppressive systems and creating new liberated and egalitarian ones, but they developed and advocated a “civil rights strategy” as a means to create a large and vibrant gay community. For gay liberationists in the 1970s, achieving equal civil rights was not the desired end of activism; rather, advancing civil rights as a platform was a necessary first step, a call to arms, that would facilitate their ultimate goal of society-wide sexual liberation. In the words of lesbian feminist, gay liberationist, and member of The Body Politic collective, Chris Bearchell:

How we saw the gay rights strategy was something that would radicalize... politicize, and mobilize people... The process of being radicalized and politicized and mobilized would mean that the people who were drawn into the process would realize that rights in and of themselves were insufficient ...
And I think the hope would be that, and making that realization, that they would ... understand the shortcomings of the way the world was organized.

(qtd. in M. C. Smith 46)

The civil rights strategy worked in Toronto, though not as gay liberationists like Bearchell had imagined and hoped. Similar to many other North American cities, Toronto’s gay community had reformed itself by the early 1980s, creating a visible and politicized gay and lesbian community that was becoming politically cohesive and “institutionally complete.”

The backlash that began in the late 1970s to curtail gay liberation only strengthened the resolve of gays and lesbians. More than ever, the backlash caused them to think of

10 Institutionally complete is a term used by sociologists to describe ethnic or religious communities that have developed to a point that the average member can fulfill most of his or her daily needs within the institutions of the community.
themselves as the oppressed constituents of a marginalized minority that needed the protections of anti-discrimination legislation and equal civil rights. “Operation Soap,” the raids on several local bathhouses in 1981, in which hundreds of men were arrested, is sometimes colloquially called “Toronto’s Stonewall” as it galvanized the various parts of the community like never before. With each passing year, Toronto’s gay community became more visible and more politically engaged, moving closer and closer to the centre of municipal life and politics. Despite some protests from Toronto’s old-school gay liberationists, the dominant ideology of gay activism was moving away from gay liberation’s radical and revolutionary tenets in favour of a liberal form of gay rights activism. Civil rights, which had been endorsed as an interim strategy by gay liberationists in the early 1970s, increasingly became the primary goal of gay politics in the 1980s, creating a visible and liberal mainstream within Toronto’s gay community.11

A number of forces contributed to the decline of gay liberation as the dominant ideology of gay activism in Toronto, with 1985 standing out as an important year. First, the backlash that began in the late 1970s was waged mostly by Christian conservatives and the Toronto Police Force, the former of which sought to curtail gay men and lesbians’ employment, and the latter of which cracked down on the places where gay men met (especially bathhouses). These attacks made anti-discrimination laws, in housing and employment, and civil rights inclusions a priority over other forms of oppression and marginalization. Second, members of Toronto’s gay community enjoyed tremendous success in court when they fought charges laid against those arrested in Operation Soap. These successes no doubt emboldened the resolve that, as a political minority, the gay community

could achieve justice and effect social change by having its day in court. Third, the emergence and escalation of the AIDS crisis called gay liberation’s focus on sexual liberation and promiscuity into question. With the cause of AIDS not being determined until 1984, the first years of the crisis were marked by heated debates about whether AIDS was a “punishment” for the sexual freedom that gay liberation had advocated. Finally, gay politics were radically changed by the passing of the Charter of Rights and Freedoms in 1982, with Section 15, which stipulates equality rights, coming into effect in 1985. While the Charter and Section 15 did not include sexual orientation, it promised this possibility. The Charter radically altered the terrain upon which gay activism took place and the strategies and tactics that gay activists assumed. For example, the still active and highly successful national civil rights organization Equality for Gays and Lesbians Every (EGALE) was formed in 1986 with its “origins in the parliamentary hearings of section 15 equality rights that were held in 1985” (M. C. Smith 77). Other groups with similar ideological commitments and goals also emerged to lobby the Federal and Provincial governments, eschewing the more radical politics of gay liberation in favour of gay rights activism.

These tumultuous years are the context for Sky Gilbert’s founding of Buddies in Bad Times, his coming out as a gay man, and his politicization as a radical gay artist. For years now, his iconoclastic sexual and gender politics, and his outspoken critiques of the moral and sexual conservatism of the gay community, have made him infamous; however, he has not always held these politics. At its founding, Buddies was not dedicated to gay and lesbian

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12 The delay was in place to give governments time to bring their legislation up to date (M.C. Smith 79).

13 In the lead up to the Charter in the late 1970s, when the Federal government was entertaining questions of civil rights, gay and lesbian communities lacked the organizational structures to respond. But after the backlash, which did so much to galvanize gay and lesbian communities, the Mulroney government’s hearings on the application of section 15 of the Charter in 1985 were met with a deluge of submissions from gay and lesbian groups (M.C. Smith 71-2).
theatre. As I trace in chapter three, these commitments emerged over the first six years of Gilbert’s and the company’s development. Gilbert’s and Buddies’ radical politics were forged in the debates about gay liberation versus gay rights, promiscuity versus monogamy, and gay mainstreaming versus radical gay community. *Drag Queens on Trial* is seminal to the development of Toronto gay theatre because it is with this play that Gilbert’s and Buddies’ radically pro-sex, pro-promiscuity, and sex-radical politics and aesthetics are articulated theatrically, setting the course for his theatre and the rest of his career.

1967 to 1985 also marks a period of radical reformation in Toronto’s not-for-profit theatre industry. This period sees the relative decline in the city’s local professional theatres of the 1950s and 60s, the rise of the Alternative theatres in the early 1970s, and their movement from the material and ideological fringes to the mainstream of theatrical production in the city by the early 1980s. Following the important recommendations of the Massey Report (1951), including the establishment of the Canada Council for the Arts (1957), theatre in Toronto was influenced by government interventions that sought to foster a national theatre, and which eventually established a network of regional theatres in urban centres across Canada to achieve this goal.  

14 Denis Johnston describes the St. Lawrence Centre for the Arts (SCL) as the “Holy Grail” of Toronto theatre in the 1960s, as many of the local professional companies vied to become the resident company of the new civic theatre. For an analysis of its effects on Toronto’s theatre scene in the 1960s, see Johnston, 11-16. For an analytical history of civically sponsored theatres in Toronto, which includes the SLA and the North York Performing Arts Centre, completed in 1993, see McKinnie.
canonical texts for Canada’s far-flung populations, and developing a Canadian repertoire (Massey).  

In the 1950s and 1960s, professional theatre in Toronto consisted of a handful of local theatres of varying sizes and mandates, most of which failed before the end of the decade. Crest Theatre (1953-66), led by Donald and Murray Davis, staged canonical classics and some new Canadian works. Canadian Players (1964-66), led by Marigold Charlesworth and Jean Roberts, presented classical plays at the Central Library Theatre, as well as a touring cycle. Toronto Workshop Productions (1958-88), led by George Luscombe, was a leftist political theatre modeled on Joan Littlewood’s Theatre Workshop. Theatre Toronto (1967-68), as already discussed, staged two short seasons before amalgamating with the St. Lawrence Centre for the Arts, the municipal theatre project built to celebrate Canada’s Centenary – but which did so three years late with the building’s opening in 1970.

In this theatrical context, the Alternative theatre movement arose in Toronto, and in cities across the country. It was made possible by the confluence of a number of historical forces, including increased government funding, the currency of Canadian nationalism, and

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15 Though not part of the regional system by virtue of their particular origins, operations, programming, and locations, the Stratford (1953) and Shaw Festivals (1962) are nevertheless examples of the ethos of Canadian culture building in this period. Dedicating themselves to major British playwrights, and backed by substantial government funding, these festivals saw themselves as fostering artistic sophistication and expressing the nation’s cultural maturity.

16 While I group TWP with the Crest, Canadian Players, and the Red Barn, it was, in fact, a much smaller, grassroots, and political company in the early 1960s. Unlike these other theatres, TWP did not take up the mantel of high culture, and was more active in staging original adaptations of classic texts, as well as collectively created new texts, most often written by resident playwright, Jack Winter. It would, however, become a larger and more important company upon its move to 12 Alexander Street.

17 The city also had two large “roadhouses,” the longstanding Royal Alexandra Theatre and the relatively new O’Keefe Centre (which later was renamed the Hummingbird Centre, and, at the time of writing, is called the Sony Centre), which hosted large-scale touring shows and various kinds of musical acts, mostly from the U.S. and Britain. In addition to these professional theatres, Toronto also had a number of bars and coffee houses, where various forms of performance took place. Chief among them was the Bohemian Embassy, which acted as a performance venue for a number of local artists, performers, and theatre companies into the 1970s. The city also boasted a number of active amateur theatrical societies, most notably Hart House, Trinity Players, and the Alumnae Theatre.
the worldwide resurgence in experimental theatre that sought to challenge the political and aesthetic status quo (Filewod *Collective* vii). In Toronto, the Alternative theatre movement is primarily identified with four companies: Theatre Passe Muraille (1968), Factory Theatre (1970), Tarragon Theatre, (1971), and Toronto Free Theatre (1972-1988). Often called “the Toronto Four,” the earliest of these, especially Theatre Passe Muraille, were part of an “underground theatre” movement in Toronto, much like the Off-Broadway movement in New York or the Fringe theatre movement in London. All four expressed their politics and aesthetics in terms of “indigenous” (as it was then termed) “Canadian theatre.” The Toronto Four articulated their commitment to Canadian nationalism in the terms of postcolonial liberation from an “oppressive” “colonial” (i.e. British) past, and a present threatened by an imperial American culture. Like those who supported the Massey Report and the regional theatre system, the Toronto Four also believed in the importance of regionalism to a national theatre culture; however, unlike the brand of nationalism of their predecessors, theirs was not predicated upon a centralized system through which great works were sent out to be staged across the nation. Instead, they based their idea of Canadian nationalism on a set of authentic regional cultures that came together to form a collective and cohesive “Canadian” whole. Focused particularly on developing a Canadian dramatic canon by supporting playwrighting,

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18 Beyond arts-specific government funding, the “Opportunities for Youth” and “Local Initiative Program,” two federally funded make-work programs, were tremendously important to the early growth of the Alternative theatres.

19 Toronto Free Theatre merged with Centrestage in 1988, forming the Canadian Stage Company.

20 According to Renate Usmani, The Festival of Underground Theatre encouraged “cohesion and common purpose among the participating groups” when it took place at the newly opened St. Lawrence Centre for the Arts in 1970. At the Festival, the term “alternate theatre,” which is in this context interchangeable with “alternative,” was coined by Tom Hendry (Usmani *Second Stage* 28).

21 Alan Filewod notes that between confederation and World War II, the Canadian cultural establishment was quite happy to define itself in terms of its own British identity, positing Canada as an important player within the broader British Empire. See Filewod, *Between*. 
the Toronto Four produced local and regional work, enacting what they saw as a truly “indigenous” theatre.²²

The Toronto Four grew quickly in size, stature, and importance, becoming the primary purveyors and producers of “Canadian theatre” by the mid-1970s. So successful were the Toronto Four that by the early 1980s their collective trajectory had brought them from margin to mainstream: from the underground and aesthetically radical fringe to the established, conventional, and nationalist centre of theatre production in Toronto by the early 1980s. Much like the gay community, once the Alternative theatre occupied the status of the established theatre in the city, a new crop of theatre artists emerged and defined themselves against the Toronto Four. This “second wave” of Alternative theatre companies expressed their aesthetic and political commitments in terms that differed from their Toronto-Four predecessors. These companies explored and articulated new forms of identity politics that laid the foundation for the renovation and reconceptualization of “Canadian theatre” as “Canadian theatres,” constituted by a plurality of Canadian identities in this period and into the current moment. The second wave includes companies such as Nightwood Theatre, Necessary Angel, and, most significantly for our purposes here, Buddies in Bad Times Theatre, all of which were founders of Toronto’s Theatre Centre in 1979. Though not dedicated to gay theatre or affiliated with Toronto’s gay community at its founding in 1979, Buddies quickly identified itself as a gay theatre, and by its 1985-86 season, it was also producing lesbian theatre.²³

²² Despite its radical rhetoric, on the whole, the Toronto Four’s dramaturgical practices and criteria of excellence were predicated upon the same liberal humanist assumptions of their “colonial forefathers” and “imperial oppressors.” For an analysis and description of the ideological texts that informed the “dramaturgical unconscious” of this period’s playwrighting, see Knowles, “Aristotle.”

²³ In Up the Mainstream, Denis Johnston takes the rise of New Theatre, Open Circle, and Phoenix Theatre, which emerged in the early 1970s and were all defunct by the early 1980s, as the “second wave” of Toronto’s
As I alluded to above, most Canadian theatre history scholars are skeptical of the construction of “Canadian theatre” and the history that I have just sketched. The paradigms of Canadian nationalism, the Alternative and mainstream binary, and the “emergence” of cultural pluralism in the 1980s have arguably limited the study of theatre in Canada. Alan Filewod, for example, encourages us to be skeptical of the “alternative/mainstream” binary, urging scholars to question the “orthodoxy” it establishes and the way it tends to “obscure rather than clarify historical forces” (Filewod “Erasing” 210). He writes:

The terms [alternative/mainstream] are employed with virtually no reference to the cultural formation of the theatre as an expression of community. Their pretension to dialectical coherence, and their bipolar axis mean that these terms do not admit analyses based on criteria other than their own premises. The most obvious exclusion is a consideration of the role of gender: when recent Canadian theatre history is analysed in terms of the politics of gender and sexuality (and it rarely is) the dialectic of mainstream/alternative as is has been constructed is extremely dubious. (“Erasing” 202)

This dissertation takes up Filewod’s arguments, participating in this revision of Canadian theatre history by focusing on gay theatre in Toronto. By invoking “Canadian theatre,” the

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24 For a critique of Canadian theatre scholars’ tendency to uncritically accept dominant narratives of Canadian nationalism, which have silenced marginalized voices, see Salter; see also Wallace, Producing.

25 Similar work has been undertaken with regard to racialized and ethnic minorities, who have not only been marginalized by racism, but through multiculturalist policies that have rendered “ethnic” art as amateur, prohibiting its access to government funding reserved for “professional” theatre and art. See Knowles and Mündel, “Introduction.” For a discussion of the divide between “ethnic” amateur theatres and “mainstream” professional theatres, see Gómez.
rise of the Alternative theatres, and the emergence of a “second wave,” this dissertation highlights these as discursive elements that *structured* the material and imaginative production of theatre in the city and in theatre historiography in Canada. This dissertation revises these narratives by recovering the histories of local playwrights and politicized gay theatre that existed in Toronto *before* the early 1980s, when Buddies in Bad Times took up the mantle of gay identity and community, and before a plurality of Canadian identities were recognized in theatrical production and scholarship. It intervenes into the progress narrative that these histories set up by recovering the untold history of gay theatre, demonstrating that “Canadian theatre,” as Robert Wallace suggests, was never unified in the way that theatre makers and scholars of the 1970s and 1980s depicted it (*Producing* 9-10). Indeed, Wallace’s voice as a politicized gay playwright is among those that were occluded for reasons that were patently political: his play articulated a specifically gay liberationist politic that was not supported because it came into conflict with the liberal humanist and nationalist politics current in Toronto’s theatre industry in the mid-1970s, as I argue in chapter two.

At the same time that this dissertation recovers histories that have been ignored or rendered invisible by the nationalist frameworks of Canadian theatre historiography, it is also self-conscious about how “gay theatre” helped to *create* a “gay community.” Indeed, this is one of its central arguments: that gay theatre in Toronto has been central to the reformation of gay community in the city. In the same manner that “Canadian theatre” functioned discursively as a public practice that “imagines” the nation, gay theatre has, when it has reached the stage, served a similar function.\(^\text{26}\) This is the case because, as Alan Filewod suggests, “theatre is not simply representation: it is an event both physical and symbolic; it

\(^{26}\) See Filewod, *Performing*.
transforms experience into a community narrative; and it materially constructs in the
audience the community it addresses in its texts” (*Performing* XVII). Similarly, gay theatre
in Toronto, especially in this period of community (re)formation, was not simple
representation. As a popular and performative medium, “gay theatre” sits at the apex of a
number of social contexts, and requires the support of producers, actors, and audiences. It has
been brought into being discursively and materially in Toronto and elsewhere through
theatrical performance and its reception. Gay theatre has been a cultural node through which
gay cultural production and community formation – including the creation of gay theatre as a
dramatic genre, a cannon of plays, and as organizations and real estate – has been fostered
and produced through theatrical performance.\(^{27}\)

It is, thus, not coincidental that *Fortune, No Deposit, No Return, and Drag Queens on*
*Trial*’s productions coincide with significant changes in Toronto’s gay community. *Fortune*
participated in a culture that was very much concerned with homosexuality as a criminal,
medical, and social “problem.” Through its production, Herbert protested the marginalization
and criminalization of gay men, calling for the kind of liberal reforms that occurred when
homosexual sex was decriminalized in 1969. *No Deposit, No Return* emerged from a gay
community that was in the process of reformation, politicization, and consolidation. Through
its production, Wallace invited the gay men gathered in a gay theatre to contemplate the
various issues of identity and community they now faced. *Drag Queens on Trial* questioned
the structures of power emerging in gay politics and community, including the limitations of
civil rights activism and identity politics, and the relative mainstreaming of the gay
community. Through its production, Gilbert critiqued the conservative trends in Toronto’s

\(^{27}\) On the topic of what constitutes a gay play, the formation of gay canons, and the problems that attend these, see Wallace, “Making out Positions.”
gay community, and defined himself, his politics, and his aesthetics against these. The stories of these plays and their production are important historical markers that bear witness to changing structures of feeling in gay life in Toronto and beyond, as the meanings of gay identity and community, and the material conditions of gay life, radically shifted in Toronto from the mid-1960s to the mid-1980s.

Although politicized gay theatre as I am defining it here dates back at least to Herbert, the number of politicized gay playwrights in Toronto – i.e. those who were out and actively engaging the current political issues of gay life through theatrical performance – are few in this period.\(^{28}\) When we examine Herbert, Wallace, and Gilbert’s biographies and plays in relation to contemporaneous gay politics in Toronto, we find they are unique in this context.\(^{29}\) Unlike their contemporaries, Herbert, Wallace, and Gilbert were politicized around gay issues, both in their quotidian lives and in their theatrical work. Herbert was a drag queen and an excon – incarcerated twice for gross indecency – who participated in Toronto’s subcultural gay life from the mid-1940s until his death in 2001. Wallace was an out gay playwright in the mid-1970s who was involved in gay liberation activities, wrote for *The Body Politic*, and would go on to publish many gay and lesbian plays in his role as drama

\(^{28}\) A study of queer sexualities and theatre and performance in Toronto prior to the 1960s would be an exciting project. It would likely need to move in two directions: representations of queers in the theatre and those that took place in subaltern venues, such as bars and coffee houses. I touch on the latter in chapter one as part of Herbert’s biography.

\(^{29}\) Gay playwrights in the 1970s, such as John Palmer and Larry Fineberg, while they included gay characters in their plays, were not out or politicized around gay politics – though Palmer would become so in the late 1980s. The only significant exception from this period is David Roach, who began to produce gay work in the early 1980s, and who was quickly incorporated into the Buddies scene. I do not treat his work separately here as he only produced a couple of plays in this period, “Dirt is my Profession,” first performed at Buddies’ Rhubarb! festival in November 1980, and “David Roach Plays with Himself” at Factory Theatre’s Brave New Works in 1981. The early 1980s are dominated by Sky Gilbert’s prolific theatrical output. Post 1985, there is a veritable deluge of new gay work, much of it taking place at Buddies.
editor at Coach House Press, and as editor at *Canadian Theatre Review*.\(^\text{30}\) Gilbert and Buddies were at the very centre of Toronto’s emerging queer theatre and performance scene in the early 1980s. These politics are mapped and analyzed in the chapters that follow through attention to the intersection of their biographies, gay politics, and the production histories, dramatic forms and contents of their plays.

Given these politicized gay playwrights shared similar contexts and subjectivities, as out, white gay men, working as playwrights and directors in Toronto theatre in the 1960s, 1970s, and early 1980s, it is not surprising that their plays also share some related dramaturgical features. First, they all concern a group (more than two) of marginalized gay men, and these men’s relationships with one another. This commonality is historically, politically, and dramaturgically significant because Toronto’s gay community was both marginalized and undergoing a radical reformation. In this context, these plays quite literally staged the difficulties and possibilities gay men faced individually and as a gay community in this period. Second, they all present an emancipatory view of theatricality and theatrical performance. The plays express this view through their deployment of metatheatrical conventions, with camp and drag being the most obvious and common. As I argue in each of the following chapters, this view of theatricality is noteworthy because it enacts the real-world faith these three playwrights had in theatrical performance, which they used to affect the political situation of gay men (i.e. their own situations), and to negotiate the complexities of a politicized gay community in formation. Third, although these plays were written by white, middle-class gay men, all include critiques of racism, racialization, class, gender, patriarchy, and their intersections current to their period. Beyond their consciousness of

\(^{30}\) Among the playwrights Wallace was the first to publish are Daniel MacIvor, Ann-Marie MacDonald, and Ronnie Burkett.
racial and gender discrimination, these inclusions signal the importance of the black civil rights, Black Nationalists, and women’s liberation movements as forbearers to gay liberation – especially in chapters one and two – and the ways in which, in the mid-1980s, the intersections of race, gender, sexuality, and class became defining issues in gay and lesbian politics – cultural currents evident in chapter three. Finally, all of these plays address gay men’s relationships with the law. This concern belies the regulatory power legal texts had in the lives of gay men between 1967 and 1985, and, as the primary target of political contest, the ways legal discourses determined forms of gay activism, gay community, and gay theatre.

Despite these similarities, the three plays that anchor this dissertation’s chapters do not share a common genre; rather, each play utilized and at times subverted specific genres and performance conventions to intervene into the gay politics of its day. In chapter one I employ Raymond Williams’ theory of liberal tragedy to argue Fortune’s naturalism and its liberal tragic structure are central to its protestation of Canada’s criminalization of gay men. Its performance at the CLT presented prison life using naturalism as the theatrical idiom of unmediated reality to sympathetically dramatize wrongfully criminalized gay characters. Combined with its liberal tragic structure, its naturalism lays bare the injustice and hypocrisy of the criminal justice system, citing it and the society that supports it as culpable for its characters’ downfall. Chapter two approaches Robert Wallace’s No Deposit, No Return through the contemporary ideologies and political practices of gay liberation. Like Fortune, its form is also realistic, but, through a dramaturgical structure that imitates “consciousness-raising” activities, it pursues a gay liberation agenda that encourages gay men to confront their alienation, to overcome the barriers that separate them, and to form politicized gay communities. Chapter three elucidates the ways Drag Queens on Trial parodies 1950s
Hollywood melodrama, and employs camp, drag, and other metatheatrical conventions to question the power structures inherent to stable theatrical genres and sexual and gender identities. Expressing the postmodern spirit of the mid-1980s, and anticipating the queer critique of gay rights activism and identity-based politics that would coalesce at the end of the decade, its drag-queen protagonists have little faith in a masculinist gay culture that marginalizes them, and no desire to be included within normative legal or medical frameworks. Instead, they call for a coalition of gender and sexual outlaws whose style, sexual practices, and marginal position will resist conformity – even among gays – and all forms of normativity.

As a dissertation that is first and foremost a history of gay theatre, this study highlights the particular interventions these plays made by comparing them to other related plays, and/or contemporaneous gay plays. It includes, for example, analyses of Jean Genet’s *Deathwatch*; Toronto Workshop Productions’ adaptation of Georg Büchner’s *Woyzeck*; the “monodramas” of David Watmough; Mart Crowley’s *Boys in the Band*; Michel Tremblay’s *Hosanna*; Arthur Schnitzler’s *La Ronde*; other plays by Herbert, Wallace, and Gilbert; and a number of plays produced by Toronto’s Alternative theatres in the 1970s that included gay characters. Comparing Herbert, Wallace, and Gilbert’s plays with other dramatic works also reveals other insights that bear directly on the city’s theatre history. One of its most important findings is that politicized gay plays of this period were more often hindered than served by Toronto’s politically aligned theatres, specifically Toronto Workshop Productions and its socialist politics in the 1960s, and the Toronto Four and their liberal humanist and nationalist politics in the 1970s. In its three chapters, but especially in chapters one and two, this dissertation analyzes when politicized gay theatre was and was not produced in Toronto, and
the conditions of this production or rejection. Understanding these plays’ development in relation to one another and the history of gay community in Toronto exposes the theatre as a contested medium for the negotiation of gay politics and community, to which these politicized gay playwrights did not always have access.

This dissertation focuses on gay men and does not consider lesbian theatre and performance for reasons that are primarily historical. Limiting the project in this way recognizes the significant differences that characterize gay male and lesbian politics in this period – differences that require separate investigations as the ramifications of sexism and patriarchy have had significant effects in theatrical production and on gay and feminist politics. As gay men and lesbians began to organize around issues of sex, gender, and sexuality in the late 1960s and early 1970s, they found that they were politicized around a variety of quite often different concerns – a separation that is borne out in this dissertation’s subject plays, which feature no women, do not address lesbian concerns, and were produced almost entirely in male contexts (i.e. very few women – lesbian or straight – were involved in their production as directors, producers, actors, etc.). While gay men and lesbians agreed on the civil rights strategy in this period, they differed considerably on issues of sex and safety.  

Alongside feminists, lesbians were deeply concerned about abortion rights, and violence against women in all its forms, which, for some feminists, both lesbian and straight, included pornography. Gay liberationists on the other hand were primarily interested in sexual liberation, which meant challenging the state control of sexuality through police intimidation and entrapment, the raiding of spaces where gay men met and had sex, censorship, and the age of consent. In her discussion of the differing philosophies and

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31 See Ross, “Like Apples and Oranges.”
priorities of gay liberation and lesbian feminism in the 1970s, specifically the lesbian response to the publication of Gerald Hannon’s “Men Loving Boys Loving Men,” an article about intergenerational love and sex among men published in *The Body Politic* (briefly discussed in chapter two), and which prompted a raid of the magazine’s offices and criminal trails of its publishers, Bekki Ross writes:

> Armed with a warrant, officers from the Metropolitan Toronto Police Force and the Ontario Provincial Police carted away twelve shipping cartons filled with documents and records: subscription lists dating back years into the past, distribution and advertising records, corporate and financial records (even the cheque book), classified ad records and addresses, manuscripts for publication and letters to the editors. [...] Importantly, unlike gay men, there was not the same tension between the local character political and everyday lives of LOOT [Lesbian Organization of Toronto] members and the extra-local and textual organization of gay male life instructed by the Criminal Code. Lesbian oppression was, and is not, primarily organized through official categories of “indecency” and “obscenity.” (Ross “Like Apples and Oranges” 147 n 4)

While some women remained committed to the sexual politics of gay liberation, with its primary focus on the regulation (often by the state) of sexuality, as a movement it was dominated by white gay men. While lesbians did have grievances with the state, in this period these complaints were not about censorship and sexual freedom – though these issues would arise for lesbians in the mid- to late 1980s.\(^\text{32}\) Political divisions between gay men and

\(^{32}\) Beginning in 1984, Canada Customs began to seize international materials destined for Glad Day, as well as Vancouver’s Little Sister’s bookstore, the censorship trials for which continued into the 1990s. Some of the materials taken included lesbian S/M magazine *Bad Attitude*. The Canadian Committee against Customs
lesbians continued to widen in the 1970s and early 1980s, with separatism coming to the fore of lesbian political consciousness and activism. Like women more generally, lesbians are significantly underrepresented on the nation’s stages, as they are in the theatre industry as a whole. The marginalization of lesbian theatre, and the separation between gay men and lesbians that characterizes this period, are succinctly revealed by the 1976 *Canadian Theatre Review* issue dedicated to “Homosexuality and the Theatre,” which I analyze in chapter two. A thin issue to begin with, it contains no women contributors, and almost no mention of lesbians or lesbian plays. An example of this oversight, which also speaks to the separation between gay men and lesbians in this period, is found in a panel discussion populated by local Toronto theatre personalities, actor Peter Jobin, playwright and director John Palmer, actress Elva Mai Hoover, and review editor of *The Body Politic* Ed Jackson. When Hoover asks the question “would a homosexual theatre [in Toronto] include women?” Jackson responds: “Perhaps in the future, but right now it would be difficult. Even within the gay community it is very easy for men to dominate the surroundings. I think at first it would have to be separate” (Palmer et al. 11). Palmer and Jobin come out as gay in the article but Hoover does not, leading one to presume her silence signals heterosexual identification, or that she is a closeted/unpoliticized lesbian – the latter of which being unlikely as she agreed to participate in the published panel discussion. Buddies in Bad Times Theatre began to include specifically lesbian programming directly

Censorship was established in 1986 to protest the actions of Canada Customs. See Cossman et al., and the film *Little Sister’s Vs. Big Brother*.

33 Political alliances between gay men and lesbians would, however, reemerge in the late 1980s, when many lesbians (as well as straight women) played important roles in AIDS activism. Additionally, the diminishing importance of gay liberation and the rise of gay rights activism brought gay men and lesbians together around the less gendered problems of civil rights, marriage, pensions, and adoptive rights, issues which gay men and lesbians could engage together.
after the closing of *Drag Queens on Trial*, another example of how this production marks a significant change in the theatre’s politics.\(^{34}\)

Since its emergence in the early 1990s, queer theory has usefully unsettled the ways in which desires, identities and sexual practices do not correspond in heteronormative ways, or, as Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick famously phrased it, queer can refer to “the open mesh of possibilities, gaps, overlaps, dissonances and resonances, lapses, and excesses of meaning when the constituent elements of anyone's gender, of anyone's sexuality aren't made (or can't be made) to signify monolithically” (9). Queer theory has been taken up most fruitfully in the humanities, especially in gender and sexualities studies, whose intellectual and methodological assumptions in the 1970s and 1980s emphasized the social construction and historicity of sexual identities but did not thoroughly interrogate the effects of maintaining gender and sexual binaries (Corber and Valocchi 2). Queer critiques tend to focus on categories of sex, gender, and sexuality not only as historical constructs but also as parts of broader normative discourses that discipline subjects and foreclose upon and marginalize nontraditional sexual and gender expressions.

Theatre scholarship in English Canada paid almost no attention to sexuality until the 1990s and, coinciding with the rise of queer theory, the subsequent body of literature is dominated by it as a methodological and theoretical approach. Peter Dickinson’s *Here is Queer: Nationalisms, Sexualities, and the Literatures of Canada* is perhaps the most significant book-length study to employ queer theory in the field, while Rosalind Kerr’s

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\(^{34}\) Fostering equality between gay men and lesbians in the theatre, and issues of sexual and racial diversity more generally, have been ongoing concerns for the company, and it has had both successes and failures on these fronts. For example, the first Four-Play festival in December 1985, following hot on the heels, so to speak, of *Drag Queens on Trial*, showcased three gay male playwrights, and only one lesbian playwright: *Home Hazards* by Jim Bartley; *Friendships* by Byron Ayanoglu; *If Betty Should Rise* by David Demchuk; and *Claposis* by Audrey Butler. The lesbian series comprised the last two as both Demchuk and Butler’s work concerned lesbian characters. For a discussion of the place of lesbian work in Buddies’ history, see Moynan King.
anthology *Queer Theatre in Canada* brings together a number of the field’s essays in one volume. In *Here is Queer*, Peter Dickinson focuses particularly on literary texts and their critical reception within Canadian literary history. He contends:

the idetificatory lack upon which Canadian literary nationalism has been historically constructed […] is in large part facilitated by, if not wholly dependent upon, a critical refusal to come to grips with the textual superabundance of a destabilizing and counter-normative sexuality […] that…”

I am labeling ‘queer.’ (5)

In this fashion he undertakes the important work of “queering” the canon of Canadian literature, and Canadian literary criticism, which, like theatre history, has focused on issues of national identity and has paid little attention to “(homo)sexuality” (4). His analyses include examples of gay theatre in Quebec, with the work of Michel Tremblay, Michel Marc Bouchard, and Rene Daniel Dubois, and of First Nations’ theatre, with the work of Cree playwright Tomson Highway, though he includes no analyses of Toronto’s gay male theatre culture. In a manner similar to Dickinson’s, I am “queering” Canadian theatre history by revising some of its seminal plays and its scholarly writing from the perspective of queer identities, specifically gay male identities, culture, and politics in Toronto. I am thus engaging in a form of queer scholarship by subverting the current literature on Canadian theatre by paying close attention to gay sex, sexuality, and politics.

This dissertation is not, however, a project of queer theory or queer historiography as it has been taken up within the academy. While still a malleable signifier, queer theory primarily aims at investigating the *limitations* of heteronormative constructions. Queer

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35 Of the twenty-one articles published in Kerr’s anthology, only two were published before 1994 and at least eleven are “queer” in their methodological or theoretical approaches.
theory, according to Michael Warner, has been “very good at redescribing nonnormative sexualities and the flaws of identitarian thinking” but, due to a dependence on psychoanalytic theory, it has been “somewhat less adept at describing the worldliness of sexuality and the conditions of social-movement form” (18). As I have already expressed, this dissertation is very much invested in the latter project: investigating the material conditions of gay theatrical production and situating its place within the history of the gay community and within theatre history in Toronto. I aim to describe as richly as possible the immediate social, cultural, and political contexts that produced these plays on their own historical terms. That is, in relation to the biographies of their authors, and the contemporaneous political, ideological, and epistemological currents and contexts within which they acted. I argue that these playwrights used theatrical performance particularly and politically. I tease out how each one deployed theatrical performance to intervene into the artistic and political specificities of their moment. I do so in order to construct a history of gay theatre, and to comprehend its political and cultural significance to the cultural history of gay men and theatre history in Toronto. Furthermore, because queer theory, identity, and politics are, in and of themselves, historical constructs whose energies and ideas coalesce as such in Toronto after 1985, employing a queer theoretical approach would spoil my project as a cultural materialist history whose first concern is the historical contextualization of social actors and theatrical performances within a framework conscious of politics.

A cultural materialist framework, which noted Shakespeare scholar Graham Holderness calls “a politicized form of historiography” (qtd. in Barry 175) is thus the most effective approach for a project that aims at analyzing gay theatre’s dynamic relationship to Toronto’s theatre history and to its gay community. This approach allows me to contextualize
these works’ production histories, the material conditions of their performance or rejection, and the terms of their reception within the city’s contemporary gay politics and the material and ideological conditions of its theatre industry. A cultural materialist approach enables me to register and analyze the effects various direct and indirect public discourses had on these productions’ developments and their reception, such as theatre reviews and scholarship, current events, and changes in law and public attitudes. As an explicitly political approach to cultural history, it also permits me to assess the real impacts an unsupportive, even homophobic, theatrical infrastructure had on these plays and these playwrights. Cultural materialism is also a self-consciously political method of scholarship and I view this dissertation’s particular construction of a narrative of gay theatre in Toronto as an intervention into Canadian theatre history and gay community in Toronto. It is a recuperation that addresses gaps in the historical record and occlusions in scholarship that were and are political.

Although the stigma and marginalization that gay men face has diminished substantially in Toronto since the late 1960s, and representations of gay men are seen today in all areas of the city’s theatre, the trajectory this dissertation traces, though chronological, is not teleological: it does not progress ever forward and higher toward “liberation,” “acceptance,” “equality,” or the establishment of a gay theatre. Rather, this history aims at investigating the complex social, political, and aesthetic currents and occurrences that shaped gay theatre in Toronto from the mid-1960s to the mid-1980s, when the city’s gay community was transformed from a subaltern network into a politicized minority community at the centre of Toronto’s cultural and political life. And like theatrical performance itself, this study’s findings are also local. While its contextualization includes extra-municipal forces
and its history of gay theatre in Toronto is significant to Canadian theatre history, queer history, and studies of culture more broadly, its conclusions about gay theatre can neither be substituted for other Canadian cities nor for the nation. In the end, the history of gay theatre that this dissertation constructs is specific to these playwrights, plays, and to the development of Toronto’s gay community and to its theatre industry in this period.
CHAPTER ONE:

Theatrical Protest Before Gay Liberation: John Herbert and *Fortune and Men’s Eyes* at the Central Library Theatre

*The vilest deeds like poison weeds*

*Bloom well in prison-air:*

*It is only what is good in Man*

*That wastes and withers there:*

*Pale Anguish keeps the heavy gate,*

*And the Warder is Despair*

*Oscar Wilde*, Ballad of Reading Gaol

On 10 October 1967, in anticipation of the staging of the New York production of *Fortune and Men’s Eyes* at Toronto’s Central Library Theatre (CLT), John Herbert was interviewed on CBC television’s *The Day It Is*. It was common knowledge that Herbert’s prison drama, which opened Off-Broadway at the Actors Playhouse in February of that year, was autobiographical, based on Herbert’s experiences in Canadian reformatories twenty years earlier, when he had been incarcerated twice for “gross indecency.” A few days before the CBC interview, police in New York informed Herbert that as a known exconvict and homosexual he had to leave the country and that he was barred from returning, an event that was widely reported in the local media. On *The Day It Is*, the interviewer asked Herbert if his recent deportation

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36 The CLT was located on top of the old Central Library, at the corner of College and St. George Streets (the current home of the University of Toronto’s Centre for Drama, Theatre, and Performance Studies). Administered by the Toronto Public Library Board, it was a small rental venue for both professional and amateur companies established in 1961 to satisfy the increasing demand for theatre spaces (McCallum).

37 See “He Can’t See His Own Play”; “Author of Hit Play Is Barred from U.S.”; and “Playwright Can’t See His Own New York Play.”
from the U.S., because of his “indiscretion of twenty years ago,” contributed to his “bitterness against authority.” Herbert answered the interviewer’s question as follows:

You keep saying bitter, I’m not bitter. […] I was born a gentle creature. There are people who become natural victims. I was always the victim of the bullies, of the boys in the schoolyard. It took me a long time to learn to hit back. But I did hit back. I didn’t lie down and whimper, and I’m still not lying down and whimpering. Basically I’m a gentle soul. Because I hate injustice, and I hate brutality, and I hate cruelty, and I hate meaningless punishment, doesn’t mean I hate man or humanity. The people who truly hate man and his meaning in this world are those who perpetuate this kind of system. That’s hatred. (“Interview with John Herbert”)

The CBC interview, the deportation, and Herbert’s damning statement reveal much about Fortune at the CLT. First, the interview attests to the level of attention that Fortune was garnering, and the anticipation that attended its first presentation in Toronto. This anticipation was no doubt fed by the play’s success in New York, and by the knowledge that Herbert had been unable to find a producer in Toronto – a widely reported fact in the daily newspapers, and one that was addressed on The Day It Is. Second, its veiled allusions to homosexuality express the culture’s discomfort with speaking about the subject directly, a fact that greatly contributed to Herbert’s inability to find a producer. The interviewer’s use of “indiscretion,” for example, and Herbert’s invocation of “gentleness,” of being the “victim of [schoolyard] bullies,” and of “unnecessary punishment” are all, arguably, coded euphemisms for homosexuality. Finally,

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38 Neither the play’s representation of homosexuals, nor the word “homosexual” are mentioned directly in the interview. Herbert’s play is described as a performance that “deals frankly with the problems of men in prison, based on his own observations during his 6 month prison term twenty years ago.” When Herbert addresses its failure to find a producer in Toronto, he suggests it was because of the play’s “theme.”
Herbert’s passionate response, while also coded, is telling and pointed. He refuses the dismissive nomination of bitterness, identifying himself as a one-time victim, and now as an outspoken critic of a false society that not only tolerates but fosters injustice through its perpetuation of corrupt systems. In his response, Herbert communicates that he would no longer acquiesce to the people and institutions that had criminalized him in the late 1940s for being a homosexual, nor to a theatre community in Toronto in the 1960s that would not support his play because it represented these experiences as unjust. Herbert was fighting back. With *Fortune*, his other artistic work, and his statements in the press, he fought against a criminal justice system that did not reform “criminals” but created them through systemic malfeasance, which Oscar Wilde describes in his poem based on his own experiences in prison in *Ballad of Reading Gaol*.

In the years before the Federal decriminalization of homosexuality, and the inception of the gay liberation movement in Canada, *Fortune and Men’s Eye’s* staging at the CLT was the first time the theatre or any large-scale public venue was used to protest the marginalization and criminalization of homosexuals. *Fortune*’s presentation at the CLT is significant to both Canadian theatre history and to the cultural history of gay men because its representations of homosexuality protested the prevalent “social problem” paradigm, which held that it could be “solved” through either medical intervention or criminal legislation. Invoking tenets of liberal justice and subjecthood and the dramaturgical structures of tragedy, it cast homosexuality as a political problem, the root of which was inequality, hypocrisy, and the willful victimization and marginalization of “queers.” Its performance embodied the issues surrounding the changing and contentious definition of homosexuality at the heart of the Everett George Klippert case, and debates about the need to liberalize “gross indecency” laws in Canada. Klippert had been sentenced to prison for twelve years for “gross indecency,” having engaged in consensual sex
with other adult men in private. Because he was a “repeat offender,” he was also deemed a “dangerous sexual offender,” potentially imprisoning him for life. The lead up and fallout of Klippert’s case swept newspaper headlines across the country in November 1967, when it was heard by the Supreme Court of Canada. Fortune’s opening at the CLT in October of the same year theatrically represented the issues of this trial, revealing the corruption of the criminal justice system on its own liberal terms, protesting the “gross indecency” laws that were still part of the Criminal Code in 1967, indicting the middle-class audience for its hypocritical support/ignorance and complicity in these injustices, and making an impassioned demand for reform.

In order to appreciate the power and the threat Fortune posed at the CLT and elsewhere, it is necessary to understand how the play’s formal and generic conventions work to intensify the immediacy and significance of the social issues it presents. The play is an exposé of the corruption of the criminal justice system, employing the tenets of naturalism to position the subjects it represents as both current and “real,” and to incite direct identification between its characters and its audience. Formally, the play is what Raymond Williams terms “liberal tragedy,” because it posits society’s pervasive moral corruption and hypocrisy as the cause of its characters’ tragic ends. The play’s naturalism and liberal tragic structure thus intensified its pointed condemnation of Canadian society in the 1960s by placing responsibility for the injustice and corruption it staged squarely in the laps of its middle-class audience. Its naturalism is also expressed in the ways it investigates the effects of heredity versus environment, suggesting that the patriarchal and corrupt surroundings found in both prison and society warp the natural human drives for safety, and physical and emotional connection into violence. Through this concern it demonstrates the ways in which the middle-class conservatism and morality of the time served to
support the marginalization and criminalization of large swathes of Canadian society, including the poor, racialized minorities, and homosexuals. Indeed, its inclusion of homosexuals as marginalized subjects among an array of oppressed people constitutes its major political contribution to the cultural history of gay men in Canada, and to Canadian theatre history. Furthermore, the play dramaturgically positions the theatre and theatricality as a site and a means for gay men to protest their oppression through two metatheatrical drag performances. This view and use of the theatre was literally true for Herbert as he, in writing and staging *Fortune*, rewrote his own life narrative, using the theatre to change it from one characterized by incarceration, silence, marginalization, and tragedy, into one distinguished by iconoclasm, protest, fame, and empowerment. So revelatory, powerful, and inspiring was the play’s critique that in the United States it led to the founding of the “Fortune Society,” a criminal justice organization dedicated to supporting and advocating social justice among prisoners and exconvicts. 39

“The Good City”

John (Jack) Herbert Brundage, more widely known by his pen name “John Herbert,” was born in Toronto in 1926. He grew up in Mount Dennis, a suburb northwest of the city, surrounded by a large and loving family. His childhood and adolescence were “carefree,” and he was a “happy kid” (Daly 9-10). He excelled in school, and had a particular penchant for creative writing, art, music, and drama, which he felt differentiated him from many of his peers (Wagner and Cabrera). His happy childhood and family life were, however, irrevocably changed by his

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39 The Fortune Society’s founding actually occurred because of a conflict about the reality of the play’s depictions. According to David Rothenberg, in a talkback after one of the performances at the Actors Playhouse in New York, a member of the audience protested that this surely could not be an accurate representation of prison life, to which another audience member replied, “Not if my 10 years count for anything!” Rothenberg invited this man, Pat McGarry, to come on stage to speak about his experiences. The same man came back the next week, and brought some other exconvicts with him. That evening they conducted another talk back with both the actors and the exconvicts, a practice that continued weekly for the run of the show. Rothenberg then began to book speaking engagements for McGarry and the others at schools and in other public forums. From these early activities, the Fortune Society was born (Halferty, “David Rothenberg Interview 2”).
arrests in 1947 and 1948, at the ages of twenty and twenty-one, when he was convicted twice of gross indecency, sent to reformatories in Guelph and Mimico, and learned “how our system of so-called ‘justice’ worked” (Daly 9-10). His parents and family were always supportive of him, even during his arrests and trials, and they tried very hard to understand and accept his highly feminine self-presentation, which he performed with élan, and never diminished throughout the entirety of his life (Wagner and Cabrera). Despite a supportive family, Herbert, like so many exconvicts, left his home in Toronto upon his second release and lived an itinerant life at the fringes of society for nearly a decade.

Herbert’s experiences in prison and at society’s margins politicized him, and fed the rage that fueled all of his work, much of which is autobiographical. During the 1960s and 1970s, through the plays he wrote, adapted, directed, and produced, he launched many far-reaching attacks on “the establishment” in Canadian society. His work confronts a wide range of issues, including sexism, anti-Semitism, racism, classism, homophobia/heterosexism – although these are not necessarily the terms that would have been used at the time. While the issues that Herbert’s work addresses are varied, his oeuvre is united by a desire to expose the hypocrisy, violence, and repression that he understood as endemic to the middle and upper classes of Canadian society. So vigorous, broad, and effective was Herbert’s work in theatre in the 1960s that Bill Glassco, founder of the Tarragon Theatre, suggested that “because of his persistence, vision, and refusal to compromise, [he was] the single most important figure of the decade” (Hendry “The Canadian Theatre's Sudden Explosion” 26).

Herbert began to work in the advertising department of the Timothy Eaton Company at the age of eighteen, coming into the city daily from his home in Mount Dennis. He was young,
enthusiastic about life, art, and culture, and was seduced by the city’s seemingly “limitless variety”:

One could go to the Royal Alexandra on one evening to see the American Ballet Company or the Sadlers Wells from England, or to the Casino Theatre on Queen Street, where some good and bad clowns held forth against the death knell of vaudeville. (Herbert “The Good City” 181)

At this time he also began to play a part in the city’s homosexual male subculture. He was very flamboyant and “madly in love with ‘drag’” – his sartorial flare influenced by such contemporary feminine icons as Joan Crawford, Bette Davis, and Rita Hayworth. In drag he would often go with friends to the Devon Restaurant, located at the intersection of Church and Wellesley Streets, and which existed there until 2004, or to one of the bars where other queer men socialized (Herbert “Gay Village” 1-3). He and his friends, he would later recall, would spend all the money they earned at their day jobs on dresses, gloves, hats, and make-up to wear out in the evenings (Herbert “Gay Village” 4).

The homosexual male subculture in Toronto in the late-1940s and 50s was small, marginal, and segregated from mainstream culture along the interconnected lines of class, sex, gender performance, and race. The subculture was, however, “a community” according to Herbert, but “a very edgy, dangerous community” (Wagner John Herbert: Fortune). The dangers its members faced were not simply being ostracized by family, friends, employers, or landlords

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40 Herbert read this chapter, “The Gay Village is Fifty Years Old and the Enemy is Still Out There,” at Buddies in Bad Times Theatre in October 1995 as part of a fundraising program for the Lesbian and Gay Archives.

41 Class was not the only system of regulation through which some people were included/excluded from various establishments. David Churchill notes: “The LCBO file on Letros [an early gay bar] mentions a letter of complaint from two men of color who were denied entry to the bar. The men contended that their being refused entry was due to their race” (839). In the same article, Churchill writes that interracial couples were targeted at the Continental Hotel, where many lesbians socialized, by the LCBO in 1953, despite the 1944 passing of Ontario’s Racial Discrimination Act.
should their sexual orientation be revealed, though these were real fears; it was rather physical violence and/or the possibility of arrest and incarceration that were the greatest threats to their personal security and liberty. Under these risky conditions its constituents met furtively in movie theatres, bars, parks, public toilets, baths houses, and in private homes. The bars served as social environments, while the parks, movie theatres, and other locales were more sexually charged spaces. In bars and taverns men and women, in segregated drinking rooms, found spaces to meet, drink, flirt, and talk. Unlike today, these establishments were not exclusively or even predominantly “gay” but rather catered to straight, gay, and lesbian clienteles, whose sexual identities and dissidence were differently coded and read, enacted and received, depending mostly on the establishment’s class affiliation. Upscale establishments tended to serve a more conservative, “straight-looking” clientele, while working-class ones might sometimes have tolerated transgressive sexual and gender behaviors. In the latter spaces, hustlers and other sex workers met their clients (Churchill 835), queer men like Herbert dressed in drag, and lesbians affected various forms of butch and femme style (Herbert “Gay Village”; Egan and McLeod; Kinsman Regulation 156-66).

In the 1940s and 1950s, men who dressed and acted femininely were what Ester Newton in the American context calls “street fairies,” although Herbert always referred to himself and other men like him as “queens.” These men were more visible as queers than their masculine

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42 Even today it is difficult to pronounce a space exclusively “gay” because it’s arguably illegal to exclude patrons from public establishments based on their sex, gender performance, or sexual orientation. I say arguably because the one challenge to the law that I know of settled out of court. In 2007, Audrey Vachon was asked to leave “Bar Le Stud” in Montreal because of its “men only” policy. She left but subsequently lodged a complaint with the Quebec Human Rights Commission. In April 2008, the Commission mediated a settlement in Vachon’s favour. This said, in my own experience, many gay and lesbian bars do much to dissuade and even reject people from entering their establishments based on sex and gender performance. On the gendering and sexualizing of queer spaces see my article “Performing the Construction.”

43 Jim Egan writes about two transsexual prostitutes, “Frances and Geraldine,” who would “come to the Corners [two bars located at the corners of Queen and Bay Streets] in the evening to drink beer and look for clients” (Egan and McLeod 72-73).
counterparts, resulting in major differences in how they lived their social and sexual lives.\textsuperscript{44} According to Newton, street fairies were often jobless men who built their lives around gay cultures, living at least partially outside the law, and playing important roles in the fight for gay turf (qtd. in Kinsman \textit{Regulation} 226).\textsuperscript{45} Their feminine gender performance meant that these men were the most visible face of queer subcultures in a time of virulent homophobia, and, because of this, they were victims of harassment and acts of violence at the hands of both the police and other citizens. Speaking of his own experience, Herbert recalls:

\begin{quote}
The rouged and mascaraed queens were beaten up frequently. [They were] taken to the police station and beaten up! Taken up alleyways and beaten up. But it was dangerous [for everyone], because until 1969, as we know, it was all illegal. And you could go to jail, not just for a short time, as I was sent, but it was possible to be sent for very long sentences. (Wagner \textit{John Herbert: Fortune})
\end{quote}

Herbert documents the brutality with which “Toronto the Good,” as the city was then known, surveilled and controlled its sexually dissident subjects, and how its “goodness” was maintained, in an autobiographical short story about his first encounter with the police in 1944. Called “The Good City,” the story investigates the repressive violence that undergirded the city’s reputation as a bastion of Protestant morality. Its opening sentence reads: “Society seems to teach us to become liars and hypocrites, to present an image that will protect us no matter what our true selves may be. This calculated image presentation is often called ‘respectability’” (Herbert “Good City” 180). The story proposes that the state forces conformity among its subjects not only through the disciplining powers and presence of the police, but also through social and

\textsuperscript{44} In a thesis submitted to McGill University in Montreal in 1954, Maurice Leznoff details the lives and social structures of both “masculine” and “feminine” gay men in that city. See Kinsman, \textit{Regulation} 161-65.

\textsuperscript{45} George Chauncey also documents the lives of “fairies” in his book, \textit{Gay New York: Gender, Urban Culture, and the Makings of the Gay Male World, 1890-1940}.
ideological constructs such as masculinity, morality, and respectability. These latter forms of social control, the story suggests, are not simply “normal,” “healthy,” or “common sense,” but are constituted and maintained alongside more overt forms of state power to create mutually enforcing and malignant modes of social domination. More tacit, and thus more pervasive and pernicious modes of regulation, the story suggests that these modes of domination exclude or curtail the actions and freedoms of certain members of society because of their sexuality, class, or “race,” aspects of identity that Herbert characterizes as “our true selves.”

“The Good City” recounts Herbert’s first and second encounters with “Toronto’s finest.” In the first, he is stopped because he is, in the officer’s words, “a fucking queer,” and warned to never show “that sissy face of yours downtown again” (Herbert “Good City” 183). In the second, with the same officer, he is forced into a police car, driven up an alley, and beaten into unconsciousness.

Invoking the interrelated nature of police brutality and the societal norms that foster “respectability,” Herbert analyzes the injustice of the treatment he has endured, its hypocrisy in a society that is meant to be liberal and democratic, and the logical end of such brutal and violent social control:

Was it my fault that I had an appearance often described by others as sensitive-looking or aesthetic? Did I have less right than other people to live and breathe and walk downtown? If we were fighting and protesting brutality in Germany, could we condone it in uniform at home? (Herbert “Good City” 183)

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46 In the interviews that Anton Wagner compiled before Herbert’s death in 2001, Herbert reads a poem about an aboriginal prostitute whom he witnessed being harassed by police on Yonge Street in the 1950s. See Wagner and Cabrera.
Herbert’s reasoning here belies his belief in his own equality as a gay man, and his right to live a life free from harassment. Citing fascist powers in Germany, he invokes the logical end of such state-sanctioned violence: a government that sent its “sexual deviants” to prisons in mass numbers, and, ultimately, to concentration camps.

Given this early experience of police brutality, and the marginal lives that he and other gay men were forced to live, it is not surprising that Herbert felt from an early age that he would inevitably pay a severe penalty for living the open, out, and dignified life that he wanted for himself.

I think there was that feeling that I was going to have to pay some terrible price. I already saw and met characters, older people in the community, as small as it was or seemed to be in those days in Toronto, that I thought of as phantoms because they didn’t live openly, which offended me. I wanted always to live my life openly, and it offended me that they had become these phantom figures, that only existed by night. And in some way, even at their best, [they] were partially denying their own freedoms, their own right to freedom, their own identities even, that they could sometimes turn off the gay side of their character at the sight of a policeman a block away. (Wagner John Herbert: Fortune and Men’s Eyes)

47 Although it was published in 1978, this story was originally written in 1965 (a copy of which is held at the University of Waterloo archives) with this reference to fascism included. It is, therefore, difficult to know if Herbert was consciously making the allusion to the Nazis’ persecution of homosexuals during the Holocaust as this fact was not popularly known in North America, even in queer circles, until the publishing of James D. Steakley’s Homosexual Emancipation Movement in Germany in 1975.

48 Prior to 1933, when Hitler’s National Socialists came to power, Germany had one of the world’s most advanced and organized gay rights movements, and it was one of the most tolerant places for gay men and lesbians to live. Hitler, however, was determined to rid Germany of this “social problem.” From 1931 to 1934, the number of prosecutions against homosexuals in Germany numbered 3,262; from 1934 to 1939 this number ballooned to nearly 30,000 (Robert G. L. Waite 235).
In the fall of 1947, Herbert was the victim of a gang of youths who attempted to rob him. During the altercation, police came on the scene and the group of boys quickly claimed that Herbert had solicited sex from them. The boys testified to this effect in court and Herbert was convicted of gross indecency. He was sentenced to two three-month terms, to be served consecutively in a reformatory in Guelph, Ontario. He was twenty at the time of his first conviction, and celebrated his twenty-first birthday during his incarceration.

After his discharge from Guelph in 1948, Herbert was arrested once again in the spring of that same year (Wagner “John Herbert”). Dressed in drag, he was found in a parked car in Rosedale with a man who had picked him up on Church Street. In his unpublished memoirs, Herbert describes how he and the man were pulled from the car by two plain-clothed officers from the Morality Squad (Herbert “The Gay Village” 14). According to Herbert, the officers were looking for something with which they could charge him, first saying they would charge him with vagrancy. Herbert, however, told them that he had a rented room, a daytime job, and money in his purse. The officers did not believe him, so they drove to the rooms he shared with a roommate, Dene, who he had been out with earlier, and who was also still in drag. The officers decided to charge both Herbert and Dene with being “Disguised by Night,” which means being dressed in women’s clothing. At court, the charge against Dene was dismissed, but the two Morality Squad officers, in an effort to convict Herbert, promised the man they found in the car that he would go free if he would agree to testify against Herbert. “[They] threaten[ed] [the man] into giving evidence against me on the charge of ‘Gross Indecency,’” Herbert would later learn from the man.

49 That the officers assumed Herbert to be homeless speaks to the living conditions of queers at this time.
They promised, […] when it was too late to help my case, that he would go free, uncharged, if he would sign a paper saying that I asked him for money. The bullied, frightened man did so to save himself, and I was sentenced to two months imprisonment at Mimico Reformatory. […] With self-righteous admonitions toward me on the subject of my sexual preferences, the Judge, sounding for all the world like an evangelical minister condemned me to the hell of Mimico for the summer. And hell is what Mimico proved to be. (Herbert “The Gay Village” 16-17)

During his time at Guelph and Mimico, Herbert was raped and physically abused. At this time corporal punishment was permissible within penal institutions; Herbert recounts being clamped at the ankles and waist to a machine and whipped, and that he stopped counting at ten lashes (Herbert “The Gay Village” 23-25).

When Herbert left the Mimico reformatory he was an excon, socially disgraced, and his professional life was in shambles. In the years following, he took odd jobs in a number of cities and towns, working as a tobacco shipper in Toronto, a construction worker in Labrador, a builder on the Winnipeg dam, a carnival spieler, and a store clerk in Chicago (Perkyns “John Herbert”). Such were the effects of his excon status that Herbert, a man of many talents and intellectual abilities, was forced to engage in provisional and unskilled labour. His itinerant and marginal lifestyle did, however, allow him to encounter many ways of living, and supplied an “outsider’s” view of the world. For example, while working in Chicago in the early 1950s, he participated in that city’s African-American drag culture. Asked by a drag queen friend, he performed at “Joe’s De Luxe.” Located on the African-American south side of the city, he was the first white person

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50 For a history and a condemning argument about the political role of prisons in Canadian society, see Gosselin.
to perform at the club. An intelligent and unprejudiced man, Herbert must have been sensitive to the various kinds of oppression, classism, racism, and homophobia that would have characterized the lives of his peers at Joe’s. He must also have felt the tremors of agitation presaging the Civil Rights movement, which would begin within a few short years.

Herbert also worked professionally as a female impersonator, travelling across Canada in 1953 as “Carol Desmond,” his drag persona up until his death, in a burlesque show called “Paris After Midnight.” He procured this job through his friend Alan Maloney, who was an early Toronto drag queen called “Brandy.” Herbert knew Maloney from the time they served together at Guelph, the character of Queenie is at least partially based on him. While on tour, he and Maloney passed as women both on stage and off. Before his death, Herbert recalled that “if the sailors in Halifax at Navy Week had known that ‘Carol’ and ‘Brandy’ were men, they would have carried off the midway!” (Wagner “Fortune”). These experiences of bravery, fun, and danger brought about an awakening in Herbert’s consciousness. Speaking of the tour with Maloney, when he lived much of his life as a woman, Herbert remembered that “[It was at about] that time something in me said ‘God, it’s good to just be oneself” (Wagner “Fortune”). Herbert’s freedom to dress and live as a woman was a kind of liberation for him; it was a way to express what would be best described now, and perhaps even then, as a “queer” or transgender and

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51 The following is written in Herbert’s unpublished memoirs: “[A] drag-queen friend [asked me] to be guest performer at the club called ‘Joe’s De Luxe,’ on the South Side at 61st Street and South Parkway, a club known for its performers, all black drag queens—Dixie Lee, Nina Mae McKinny, Petit Swanson and many other talented singers and dancers. ‘Carol [Desmond,] Herbert’s drag name[,] was billed as ‘The Silver Queen from Montreal’ and sang Edith Piaf’s songs, ‘La Vie En Rose’ and ‘Je n’aime que toi,’ to that date the only white performer to be asked to share Joe’s stage with its stars” (“Biographical”). The name of South Parkway Boulevard was subsequently changed to “Dr. Martin Luther King Drive.”

52 Alan Maloney died at the age of 80 in April 2007. In Anton Wagner’s documentary John Herbert: Fortune and Men’s Eyes, he is interviewed by historian Elise Chenier, who asks him how he ended up in Guelph? Maloney responds, “I was working Sherbourne and Gerrard then, as a ‘lady of the evening.’ […] So it ended up I went to Guelph for hustling” (Wagner John Herbert: Fortune).
sexual identity: an alternative and anti-establishment gender and sexual positioning that he would eventually bring to his work in the theatre.53

In 1955, after nearly a decade of moving from place to place, Herbert dared to return to his home, Toronto. With the encouragement of his sister, Nana Brundage, he decided to pursue theatre seriously. He studied acting at Dora Mavor Moore’s New Play Society School of Drama, the city’s premiere acting school, from 1955-58, and ballet with the internationally renowned National Ballet School, from 1958-60. In 1959, Herbert read a collection of his poems at the Bohemian Embassy Coffee House on “the theme of homosexuality,” which, according to Herbert, was the first such public reading in Toronto (Herbert “Writer's History”). In 1960, he founded Adventure Theatre, and staged The Chalk Garden, by Enid Bagnold, at Centre Stage, and a production of Dear Brutus, by James M. Barrie, at the St. Luke Auditorium, located at Sherbourne and Carlton Streets (Herbert “Biographical”). In 1962, he founded the New Venture Players, and directed two of his own plays, Private Club and Household God, both at the Bohemian Embassy – plays that deal with anti-Semitism and materialism, respectively. In 1964, he mounted a production he called The Lady of the Camellias, an adaptation of Dumas’ Camille, which exposed the corruption of aristocratic culture, and its deadly effects on marginalized women, topics to which Herbert would return. In 1965, he founded the Garrett Theatre, located at 714 Yonge Street, which Herbert Whittaker called “a theatre of protest,” and directed Jean Genet’s The Maids, which poetically and metatheatrically investigates class relations and

53 In the 1960s “queer” was a popular epithet for homosexuals, or anyone who did not fit into various social norms, although these norms were most commonly organized and articulated around sexuality and gender. In the late 1960s and early 1970s, queer was losing some of its currency, but was reinvigorated in the late 1980s and early 1990s by “queer activists” and scholars who employed its loose signifying power to articulate what David Halperin has famously called an “identity without an essence.” In this case I use it somewhat anachronistically, invoking it as a kind of oppositional sex and gender politics for Herbert in the 1960s. It must be stated, however, that these contemporary meanings and articulations of the term are directly dependent upon the meanings it held in the 1960s and before.
oppression, and which was the first staging of a Genet play in Toronto ("Dreadful"). In 1968 at the Garrett, he produced Aiden Keogh’s *The Incident in Rosedale*, which is of particular interest because it tells Herbert’s rather than Keogh’s story, and is also an early critique of medical pathologization of homosexuality.\(^5\)

According to Herbert Whittaker’s review, *The Incident in Rosedale* takes place at a party in the home of a Rosedale couple. One of the guests is an openly “homosexual” playwright who has a play running in New York about the lives of prisoners in a penitentiary (sound familiar?). The playwright is verbally attacked by another guest, a psychiatrist, who suggests that he is “the scum of the earth and in desperate need of [the doctor’s medical] help” (Whittaker “Homosexual”). According to Whittaker’s review:

The playwright behaves with incredible nobility. He is sardonic but polite. The only other pure character in the play [is] the pretty little maid, [who] recognizes [the playwright’s] true value. […] When [the playwright] accuses the doctor of transferring his own latent desires, he wins the guests’ sympathy. But when he turns on them, they rejoin the doctor and beat him to death. (Whittaker “Homosexual”)

Similar to both Herbert’s biography and writing, in particular his *Pearl Divers*, which will be discussed below, *The Incident in Rosedale* aligns the lower-class servant and the homosexual against a vicious and murderous ruling establishment. Furthermore, the play is an early example of a gay man protesting against medical authorities that have deemed him “sick.” Like most of Herbert’s work, Keogh’s *The Incident in Rosedale* suggests that if one just scratches the surface

\(^{5}\) Herbert Whittaker notes in his review that Keogh worked on the play in two playwriting seminars with Herbert ("Homosexual").
of the ruling class’s veneer the murderously violent hatred that lies beneath a moralizing, and in this case pathologizing, façade will be revealed.

In 1969, Herbert produced and directed his most ambitious play in Toronto, an adaptation of Büchner’s Woyzeck, re-titled, World of Woyzeck. Herbert’s commitment to exposing the corruption and violence of society is expressed in the similarities he saw between Woyzeck and Fortune, particularly in their central characters. According to the playwright, both plays concern “the violence done to individuals by the organized violence of the world. Woyzeck as a hero is very much like Smitty – a gentle man in whom latent violence is called forth by the violence around him” (qtd. in Wasserman “Büchner” 187). Similar to Fortune, World of Woyzeck indict a society whose corruption fosters violence in its subjects. This aggressive and cruel turn is not inevitable, it suggests, but is the result of corrupt social forces that inevitably end in the destruction of all that is potentially good in the hero. While it achieved good houses, it was not well received by the press. Not feeling that he or his work were appreciated in Toronto, Herbert closed the Garret in 1970 and moved to London, deeding all of the theatre’s props, costumes and equipment to Ken Gass, who used these resources to establish the Factory Theatre Lab. After two years in London, Herbert returned to Toronto to mount Born of Medusa’s Blood, another play about a prostitute that was performed by an all-black cast at Theatre-in-Camera.

In 1974 Herbert produced an evening of one-act plays under the title Some Angry Summer Songs. This slate of plays included Beer Room, Close Friends, Pearl Divers, and The Dinosaurs. Beer Room concerns the lives of gay men and others who congregate in a local bar;

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55 As will be discussed below, Herbert was hired by George Luscombe’s Theatre Workshop Productions to adapt Büchner’s play; however, he and Luscombe had a falling out and parted ways. TWP produced its own version, called The Death of Woyzeck, adapted by company dramaturge, Jack Winter, in January 1965 (Carson Harlequin 64-7). Herbert’s version ran from May until October of 1969. For the importance of these adaptations of Woyzeck in the history of English-Canadian theatre, see Wasserman’s “Büchner in Canada.”

56 The slate of plays were subsequently published by Talon Books in a volume of the same name in 1976.
Close Friends is about the relationship of two men who were formerly lovers; and The Dinosaurs stages a confrontation between a Canadian actress, who has returned to Canada after a successful career abroad, and the critic who has viciously attacked her and her work. In each case these plays resonate with Herbert’s own life: the Beer Room and Close Friends present pessimistic views of gay male experience, while Pearl Divers and The Dinosaurs criticize those who abuse their positions of power over others, based on his own biographical experience.57

Pearl Divers is an autobiographical critique of middle-class morality that documents the kind of discrimination Herbert suffered as a visibly gay man when searching for employment. Originally titled “Queenie’s Job,” the play is based on an experience Herbert had applying for the job of dishwasher at a restaurant in Toronto.58 In the play, Herbert is replaced by “Queenie” (essentially the same character as in Fortune), who has been sent by Canada Manpower to “Childe’s” restaurant to apply for the job of dishwasher. Queenie is told on sight by the restaurant’s hostess, and then by its manager, Miss Burns, that he is not suitable for the position: “We don’t have people that look … unattractive serving our customers” (Herbert “Pearl” 15). Queenie, however, refuses to leave until Miss Burns has refused him in writing, “or they won’t get me another job or pay me any benefits” (Herbert “Pearl” 14). It is not until Mary, the working-class, Irish, and divorced woman who oversees the dish room, loudly protests that help is needed immediately that Queenie is finally and begrudgingly hired.

Pearl Divers reveals the interconnections of classism, sexism, and homophobia, as well as the hypocrisy of middle-class morality. It subverts common assumptions about class and

57 Anton Wagner notes that The Dinosaurs is based on the experiences Herbert had with reviewers, specifically Urjo Kareda and Nathan Cohen, when he returned to Toronto from London to mount Born of Medusa’s Blood. See Wagner “Review.”

58 Herbert recounts the experience upon which the play is based in an interview with Anton Wagner. Herbert’s account varies little from the play’s narrative (Wagner and Cabrera).
morality by suggesting that society’s rebels (i.e. queers and divorced women), and those who are its most marginal subjects (i.e. queers, the working classes, immigrants, women) are also its most ethical. The play achieves this subversion by aligning lower-class Mary and Queenie with justice, and the middle-class manager, Miss Burns, with patent injustice and hypocrisy. Foul-mouthed, uncultured, and divorced, Mary has kicked her husband out for being a drunk, a fact about which she is unashamed. Unbiased and unbigated, she wants to hire Queenie because he has the relevant experience, and he is not a drunk. Conversely, Miss Burns lives with a woman but does not reveal the nature of her relationship with “Cynthia.” Her middle-class hypocrisy, if she is indeed a lesbian, is manifest not only in her unjustified rejection of Queenie, who has “washed dishes from Vancouver to Halifax” (Herbert “Pearl Divers” 18), but in the homophobic jokes she makes at his expense. Casting Mary as the truly moral person, rather than Miss Burns, invokes the duplicity that Herbert saw in a middle-class morality that was not open about its “private” life, and that looked down on divorced, lower-class, immigrant women. In Queenie, Mary, and Miss Burns, respectively, Pearl Divers shows how class functions in tandem with homophobia to oppress visibly homosexual men, with sexism to alienate lower-class women, and how it demands false pretenses to maintain illusions of “respectability” and “morality” from the closeted Miss Burns.

Nearly all of Herbert’s plays were social critiques, through which he expressed the political awakening he experienced as a result of his incarceration, and living at society’s margins. When asked, he cited his own oppression as the primary motivation for his work as an artist. “Their system has bred a social critic,” he proclaimed in an interview in 1968, “and as long as I can sharpen a pencil I’ll continue to write out against it. They’ll have to hang me to stop me”
In the same interview he stated his political position on the still criminal status of homosexuality in Canada:

In sexual relationships, personal choice is the most important thing. The prison condition, which allows no choice, and the *laws on the books which create such conditions for homosexuals* are the most perverse of all. (Daly 10, my emphasis)

As Herbert implies, it is not too far a stretch to consider what he calls “the prison condition” beyond the walls of penitentiaries and into a society that continued to criminalize homosexuals. Indeed, Herbert made his understanding of the relationship between Canadian society and the prison world he depicts in *Fortune* explicit when he stated:

> As I see it, in this small setting of a reform institution cellblock the whole political situation is intensified. The same things are wrong with our [Canadian] society as a whole, but they rise to the crest in the cellblock. […] The manipulation and consuming of one human creature by another breaks through the surface.

(Dempsey “Play”)

Herbert began writing *Fortune* in 1963. Following more than a decade of almost total silence about his prison experiences, he decided that it was time to write about “the most traumatic event of my early life” (Wagner *John Herbert: Fortune and Men’s Eyes*). Like all of his other work, it is autobiographical and a vehicle of social critique that sought to expose the hypocrisy of a culture that had abused, marginalized, and criminalized him. Despite his other work in the theatre – or perhaps because of its blatant politics – *Fortune* was rejected by the theatre establishment in Toronto, particularly due to the nature of its representations of homosexuality, and the broad power of its critique. As we shall see in the next section, *Fortune’s* development and performance history inside Canada is drastically different from its reception and importance
outside the country. These differences reveal the conservative nature of the theatre community in Toronto, especially acute around representations of homosexuality, and its unwillingness to see the marginalization and criminalization of homosexuals as a legitimate political issue.

**Rejection in Toronto and the Status of Political Performance**

*Fortune* holds a paradoxical position in the canon of contemporary Canadian theatre, one that is evidenced by its inclusion in all three of the major anthologies of Canadian drama published since the 1980s, and the sparse attention it has garnered from both theatre practitioners and scholars in Canada.\(^{59}\) Despite its success in New York, and subsequent productions in London in 1968,\(^{60}\) Paris in 1971,\(^{61}\) and celebrity productions by Sal Mineo in Los Angeles and New York in 1969\(^{62}\) and James Baldwin in Istanbul, Turkey in 1969-70, and being made into a film by MGM Studios in 1971, it was not produced by a professional theatre in Herbert’s native Toronto until 1975 – a full eight years after it premiered off Broadway.\(^{63}\) The play did not fare much better at the country’s regional theatres. It was staged by the Vancouver Playhouse in its Stage Two venue in 1968, at the National Arts Centre in its Studio space in 1969, and at the Manitoba Theatre Centre in its Theatre Across the Street space, also in 1969. *Fortune*’s stagings

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60 Produced by Charles Morowitz, *Fortune* ran at the Open Space Theatre for seven months before being transferred to the Comedy Theatre in the West End (Herbert “Condensed”).

61 *Fortune* ran for nine months at the Théâtre Athénée, in a French translation by Alain Brunet, titled *Hommes* (John “Writer’s History”).

62 Unlike the premiere of *Fortune* at the Actors Playhouse, which had no nudity and represented most of its violence off stage, Mineo’s production was famous for depicting everything onstage.

63 It was staged in Toronto by the Phoenix Theatre in November 1975. Ironically, this production allowed Herbert to win the Chalmers Award for best “new” play that year, an honour that he refused.
in only three of the secondary spaces of the nation’s regional theatres signals the broad
ambivalence that attended the play nationally.64

Neither the handful of academic papers written on Fortune, nor the introductions to the
three anthologies in which it is published, include a thoroughgoing historical explanation for the
play’s inability to achieve production in Toronto in the 1960s. Furthermore, scholarship has not
accounted for the political, social, or historical significance of its singularly successful staging at
the CLT.65 Jerry Wasserman’s Introduction to Modern Canadian Plays is the notable exception.
His analysis cites the lack of enthusiasm for Fortune, or as Nathan Cohen saw it the “active
hostility” toward the play, as symptomatic of the entrenched conservatism of Canadian theatre
culture, and the failure of the Regional Theatre System to fulfill its mandate of fostering and
producing “indigenous” Canadian plays (Cohen “Prison”). His analysis situates Fortune’s
inability to find a producer in Canada, and its spectacular success elsewhere, as evidence that the
systems established to support new Canadian plays in the 1960s were broken. Wasserman also
positions Fortune along side George Ryga’s The Ecstasy of Rita Joe (Vancouver Playhouse,
1967) and Michel Tremblay’s Les Belles-Sœurs (Théâtre du Rideau-Vert, 1968), as examples of
the critical shift underway in Canadian theatre, arguing these plays are products of an era defined
by “the Age of Aquarius and the Generation Gap,” and by the sexual, musical, and drug
revolutions (Wasserman “Introduction” 15). He writes:

64 The play was produced by a number of amateur theatres across Canada, the most significant of which is the
Acadia University students’ production, which was among the finalists of the 1968 Dominion Drama Festival, held
in Windsor, Ontario. Herbert attended the festival, “in shoulder-length hair, earrings, a gold velvet sweater, cord
slacks and sandals.” As is the case here, Herbert’s sartorial flair is often detailed in the press, presumably because it
was considered spectacularly inappropriate (Lee). At the Festival Herbert was awarded the prize for Best New
Canadian Play, but refused it, suggesting that the “political maneuvering behind the scenes of the festival invalidated
the awards.” He also characterized the DDF executive as “socializing dilettantes” (Newberry).

65 Recently, Fortune has received some important recognition by scholars Peter Dickinson and Robert Wallace. Both
Dickinson and Wallace offer fascinating insights into the gender and sexual implications of Mona and Queenie’s
metatheatrical drag performances. See Wallace, “Defying”; see also Dickinson, “Critically Queenie.”
[These plays are] very much of their age, marked by strong social consciousness and critical, anti-establishment perspectives. The playwrights too, by virtue of their alienation from the mainstream, were in sync with the temper of the time. Herbert and Tremblay were gay men. Ryga and Herbert were outspoken and uncompromising in their social, artistic and political views. (“Introduction” 16)

While Wasserman’s analysis is convincing, there are crucial differences between *Fortune* and these two plays. Despite some setbacks, *The Ecstasy of Rita Joe* and *Les Belles-Soeurs* were supported through to production in the theatre communities from which they emerged, and both received significant productions elsewhere in Canada. And while Tremblay is gay, *Les Belles-Soeurs* did not address gay issues in the late 1960s, nor was he “out” about his sexuality at the time of its production. Furthermore, Tremblay’s political consciousness at this time was very much focused on the status of the Quebecois in Canada, just as Ryga’s was on the lives of First Nations’ peoples. *The Ecstasy of Rita Joe* and *Les Belles-Soeurs* both poignantly express the frustration, alienation, and oppression of particular women in the late 1960s, whose pain and marginalization were received as representative of their communities – both of which, while not contentious, were intelligible as legitimate political concerns. In comparison, *Fortune* at the CLT was far more radical. It asked its audiences to undergo a paradigmatic shift in their consciousness. In a time when there was neither a politically nor geographically organized gay community, and when the dominant paradigms for understanding homosexuality were still criminal and pathological, *Fortune* asked its audiences to see homosexuals as wrongly

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66 *The Ecstasy of Rita Joe* was the inaugural English-language production at the National Arts Centre in Ottawa in 1969, and was adapted into a popular ballet by the Royal Winnipeg Ballet in 1971. *Les Belles-Soeurs* was revived in Montreal, and was presented in its first English translation at the St. Lawrence Centre in Toronto in 1973. *Les Belles-Soeurs* was not, however, uniformly supported by theatre establishment. It was rejected by all but one judge when it was submitted to the Dominion Drama Festival in 1965, many of the play’s reviewers were not supportive of its use of joual, and the Quebec Ministry of Cultural Affairs refused a grant that would have allowed the play to be presented at the Festival des Nations, in Paris in 1972. See Usmiani, *Michel Tremblay*. 
marginalized and viciously victimized subjects who served as scapegoats for society’s shortcomings. The play challenged its audiences to take responsibility for a criminal justice system that created criminals, questioning the very foundations of our legal and democratic systems, and to view the continued criminalization of homosexuals as a grave injustice.

Although Canadian society was in the process of liberalizing its views around homosexuality in the 1950s and 1960s, *Fortune*’s representations of homosexuals were radical. This was the case because Canadian culture had not yet moved beyond an understanding of homosexuality as anything other than a sign of criminality or pathology, meanings that would continue to hold currency in some contexts long after the decriminalization of homosexual acts. *Fortune*’s depiction of its homosexual characters as cruelly marginalized victims of society, and in the case of Mona, highly moral people, was the primary reason it was rejected by the city’s theatre community. As Tom Warner suggests:

> The acceptance of homosexuality as a *deviant and tragic form of sexuality*, and the drawing of a clear distinction between tolerating and encouraging it, gradually gained widespread acceptance throughout the 1950s and 1960s. This represented a liberalization of mainstream attitudes, but still relegated homosexuals to a secondary status in [Canadian] society. They were to be treated with compassion and pity, *but such attitudes continued to perpetuate their underclass existence.*

*(Never 25 my emphasis)*

*Fortune* does not represent homosexuality as a “tragic form of sexuality,” as a “criminal menace,” as a vehicle for “zany humour,” or as a pathological condition. On the contrary, it

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67 The connection between homosexuals, Communists, and an underlying “criminal menace” is well established. See: Savran; Sinfield, “The All-American Family”; and De Jongh, “The Enemy Within: 1949-1958.”

68 Of the plays that represent gays and lesbians on stages in London and New York (many of which, such as *Staircase*, and *The Killing of Sister George*, were produced or toured to Canada), Alan Sinfield suggests that they
positions homosexuals as marginalized subjects whose tragedy is that they are scapegoats for others’ crimes. Viewing homosexuality as a problem of social inequality and injustice, which is to say a political problem, and not a problem to be solved by the medical or criminal authorities, is the principal reason Fortune was unable to achieve production in Toronto. This is most clearly demonstrated in the play’s rejection by George Luscombe and Toronto Workshop Productions, the city’s most politically engaged theatre, and further evidenced by its refusal at every other theatre/producer that Herbert approached in the city.

George Luscombe founded Workshop Productions in 1959, two years after his return from apprenticing at Joan Littlewood’s Theatre Workshop in Stratford East, London. In 1963, under Luscombe’s leadership, the company hired an ensemble of six actors, changed its name to Toronto Workshop Productions, and evolved from a part-time amateur theatre into a professional one (Filewod “Luscombe, George”). In Harlequin in Hogtown: George Luscombe and Toronto Workshop Productions, Neil Carson characterizes Luscombe’s politics as follows:

From the beginning, Luscombe envisaged his new company as part of an international contingent of artists determined to further their cause of socialism through art. He saw himself as part of a tradition which sought to bring about change by ‘educational’ rather than political or revolutionary means. The function of the artist was not to get out on the hustings or to man the barricades; it was to demonstrate the social and economic laws governing society. […] what was needed was original Canadian plays that would rip away the familiar surface of

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were “produced mainly through a Sixties vogue for ‘zany’ humour” (Out 271). He argues: “most of the lesbian and gay presence was created for the amusement of straights and had little to do with (what was to become) Gay Liberation. Indeed, the joke depended on lesbian and gay men staying more or less where they were. It is easier today, I think, to understand why The Captive in 1926, The Green Bay Tree in 1933, or Service Charge in 1954 was assessed as a profound psychological study, than it is to see how Staircase and Fanghorn, in 1966-67, could be thought significant and funny” (Out 277).
life to throw light on the ignored and unexamined corners of Canadian experience. (33)

*Fortune*’s first draft was completed in 1963-64, then called “The Christmas Concert,” and was sent to Luscombe (Wagner and Cabrera), who knew of Herbert’s other socially and politically critical plays, *Private Club* and *Household God* (Wasserman “Büchner”). If Carson’s analysis of TWP’s politics is correct, *Fortune* arrived at the theatre at the perfect time: just as the company was attaining professional status, a powerful new play by a Canadian playwright, which launched a complex and rigorous critique of Canadian society, including a class analysis, fell directly into Luscombe’s lap. TWP was the ideal setting to develop and stage this political play, which would educate audiences about the heinous practices fostered by their criminal justice system. It would demonstrate how the prison system served to oppress racial and ethnic minorities, the lower/criminalized classes, and homosexuals, as well as encourage their revictimization through recidivism. *Fortune* is the kind of play that Carson argues TWP was looking for: it exposes a shady corner of Canadian life, treating it as a microcosm for Canadian society, and it represents the real corruption and hypocrisy that underpinned our conceptions of “justice” and “morality.” Despite the play’s seemingly perfect timing, its flawless fit with the theatre’s political commitments, and TWP’s stated desire to foster new Canadian plays, *Fortune* was flatly refused by Luscombe. According to Herbert, making reference to the play’s depiction of homosexuals, Luscombe suggested “it would have been better set in a sauna than a prison” (Wagner and Cabrera).69

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69 Luscombe’s refusal is also surprising given the success of Brendan Behan’s *The Quare Fellow* at Joan Littlewood’s Theatre Workshop in 1957. These plays share much in their social critique and naturalistic performance conventions. The primary difference between them is that the issues of homosexuality and sexual violence within the prison receive far less emphasis in Behan’s play.
In Carson’s analysis, the primary reason for Fortune’s rejection was its realism, which he argues “was foreign to the theatre’s style,” but also diplomatically adds that “Luscombe felt personally uncomfortable with the [play’s] homosexual theme” (65). Carson continues by noting that Luscombe was impressed with Herbert as a playwright, and asked him to work with TWP as the writer of a new adaptation of Büchner’s Woyzeck, which was to open the company’s first professional season in 1964. Herbert agreed. It is ironic that Luscombe, who “felt drawn towards the central character [of Woyzeck], whom he saw not as a madman but as a victim of society” did not feel compelled to produce or even support the development of Fortune, in which each inmate, straight or gay, is depicted as a victim of corrupt social forces (Carson Harlequin 37). Of course, unlike Woyzeck, Fortune pointedly moves beyond class to include homosexuality, as well as racism, sexism, and patriarchy, as forms of social regulation, oppression, and victimization.

While Carson’s aesthetic argument for Luscombe’s rejection of Fortune has some validity – TWP’s work was very theatrical and expressionistic – several problems arise from its logic. First, Carson’s argument does not account for the fact that the play was in its first draft, and could have taken a very different course under Luscombe’s dramaturgical influence, and through his directorial decisions. Second, his argument does not account for the important metatheatrical aspects of the play: Queenie’s drag number, “A Hard Man Is Good to Find,” and Mona’s monologue from The Merchant of Venice. Third, if Herbert’s aesthetics were anathema to Luscombe’s, or to those developing at TWP, why would he hire Herbert to adapt Woyzeck? Indeed, according to Carson, Herbert had submitted a draft of his realistic adaptation of the play to Luscombe before he was hired (65). Carson’s admission of Luscombe’s “discomfort,” Herbert’s account of Luscombe’s homophobia, and the oddities of rejecting Herbert’s play for
aesthetic reasons but hiring him to adapt another play, all imply that it was not simply a matter of style; rather, it would seem that Luscombe’s discomfort with Fortune’s homosexuality at this time was so great that it overshadowed the play’s broad critique of the criminal justice system and Canadian society. All of this said, regardless of whether or not the reason for Luscombe’s rejection was aesthetic or his own homophobia, the fact that the city’s most ideologically aligned theatre, whose stated commitments were to staging politically conscious Canadian plays, would neither support nor produce Fortune, indicates not only the homophobia of the theatre community in Toronto, but that the oppression and criminalization of homosexuals was not considered a political issue by the theatrical left, or by the political left more generally, in this period. Indeed, it seems that Fortune’s inclusion of homosexuality as a political issue prevented its staging, and its broad critique of Canadian society at TWP.

Ironically, given its conservative reputation, Herbert’s first positive response came from the Stratford Festival. While working as a waiter at the University Club, Herbert served Robertson Davies, who how things were going at his Garrett Theatre. He told the novelist that the company was temporarily “out of action,” but he had a play that he was very eager to produce. Hearing a short summary, Davies recommended that he submit it to Douglas Campbell at the Stratford Festival (Lister 173). Herbert was excited by this suggestion because he had seen some of Campbell’s work, which he thought displayed a “social conscience” and “a very humane quality” (“Interview with John Herbert”). Campbell accepted the play for the 1965 Young Actors’ workshop, under the direction of Bruno Gerussi (Wagner “Fortune”). This time, however, the Festival’s opposition was blatant: the play’s subject matter was deemed unsuitable

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70 Herbert was fired from this job as a waiter when the news that his play was being produced in New York was published in an article written by Lotta Dempsey (“Play”). His firing was, of course, not because he was becoming a famous playwright, but because his play was autobiographical, which made his status as an excon and a homosexual public knowledge.
for Stratford’s middle-class audiences, and it was performed only once at a workshop for the company and invited guests, 1 October 1965.

Despite the limited engagement it received at Stratford, both Herbert and Gerussi were pleased with audience response, and decided to try to have the play produced in Toronto. Initially, they had some positive attention from the newly established York University Playhouse. Herbert had approached a member of the theatre’s selection committee who seemed interested after hearing of the workshop at Stratford; however, when Herbert attempted to send this person a copy of the text, she refused, vaguely suggesting that the committee had heard about the play’s content and that it was “too radical [for them] at this time” (Dempsey “Canadian’s”). Herbert and Gerussi also sent it to George McCowan at the CBC, who had produced George Ryga’s *Indian* for the public broadcaster in 1962, but he also rejected it. Again, that McCowan would support the social critique at the heart of *Indian*, which went on to become *The Ecstasy of Rita Joe*, but was not interested in *Fortune* signals the extent to which homosexuality was not commonly considered to be a legitimate political issue at this time.

Of the rejections, Herbert explains that he and Gerussi, “ran into the same problem every time”:

As soon as [the committees] discovered the theme of the play – and they did not care if it was a good play or not – [they rejected it] because they could not ornament themselves with it. This is the Toronto theatre. The committees walk out when they can’t hang it around their neck like six strands of pearls […]. It’s socialite dilettante theatre, that’s what we breed here and perpetuate, and nothing

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71 The chair of the theatre committee at York University, Peggy Leitch, denies that the play had ever been considered, but Herbert rejects the claim (Dempsey “Setting”).

72 McCowan was an actor, director, and writer. He worked for the CBC, but left Canada for the United States in 1967, where he became a successful television director.
good is going to come out of this. Nothing interesting, nothing real, nothing any other country will respect in the way of artistic presentation. (Interview with John Herbert”)

While Herbert’s reference to the play’s “theme” is ambiguous, I read it as an allusion to homosexuality. Although it is difficult to think of homosexuality as a “theme” today, this is how it is often abstractedly described by critics and scholars alike in the late 1960s and 1970s, which will be discussed below, and how Herbert has referred to homosexuality elsewhere.\footnote{In a biography that Herbert prepared himself, and which I quoted above, he writes that in 1959 he read a collection of his poems at the Bohemian Embassy Coffee House on “the theme of homosexuality” (“Writer's History”).}

Eventually \textit{Fortune} made its way to Nathan Cohen, theatre critic at \textit{Toronto Daily Star}. Cohen liked the play but gloomily predicted that it would never receive a public performance in Toronto (“Interview with John Herbert”). Cohen then sent the play to David Rothenberg, a press agent in New York who was so excited by it that he instantly began to seek out producers. But, like Herbert and Gerussi, Rothenberg found that none were interested.\footnote{When I asked Rothenberg who the producers he approached with the play were, he said he could not remember.} Unwilling to take “no” for an answer, Rothenberg proposed that he produce the play himself. He found a number of backers, took a bank loan, and invested his own money to produce the play. In New York, it was the play’s social and political implications, its realist depiction of a broken criminal justice system that creates criminals, and criminalizes queers – the very things that had killed the play in Toronto – that fired Rothenberg’s and others’ desire to see it staged (Halferty “Rothenberg 2”). Rothenberg had the play workshopped in 1966 at the Actors Studio, led by Lee Strasberg (Wagner “Fortune”). Here \textit{Fortune} finally fell into the hands of an artist who thought its representations of homosexuality and prison life were important for their honesty, and realism;
Strasberg thought *Fortune* was a unique play that would open doors onto a previously taboo subject (Wagner “John Herbert”).

The play premiered at the Actors Playhouse in February 1967. The year of Canada’s Centenary, when Canadian culture was being spectacularly celebrated across the country, *Fortune* had to go to New York to find a theatre community to support it. It ran off Broadway for over a year, a first for a Canadian play, and the production was such a success that it toured to several cities in the United States and Canada, including the production at the CLT. The New York production of *Fortune* at the CLT was produced by Canadians Gil Taylor and Bill Marshall, who paid $4,000 to mount the production, and grossed $108,000 by the end of its fifteen-week run. At the CLT it received 120 performances, and was seen by 27,000 people (P. King). *Fortune* was published by Grove Press in 1967, and would go on to sell more copies than any other Canadian play.

In his Introduction to *Fortune* in *Major Plays of the Canadian theatre, 1934-1984*, Richard Perkyns rightfully suggests that “some of the greatest confusion arises from the nature of the play’s homosexuality” (77). This is absolutely true. *Fortune*’s representations of Mona and Queenie as wrongfully criminalized homosexuals, versus sexual domination and rape within the power structure of the prison, were especially difficult for critics and scholars to disaggregate and analyze because homosexuality had for so long been understood through sexual deviance and criminality. Scholarly writing on the play, completed mostly in the 1970s, usually addresses homosexuality within the play as a “theme,” or cites it as a metaphor. Ann Messenger, for

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75 Herbert was made a lifelong member of the Actors Studio (Wagner “John Herbert”).

76 *Fortune* opened at the CLT on October 19, 1967. From Toronto, the production moved to Montreal where it was the inaugural production at the Cultural Centre of Old Montreal (now the Centaur Theatre), 23 November to 10 December 1967. From Montreal it returned to Toronto where it ran for an additional eleven weeks, often turning patrons away, closing 11 February 1968. From Toronto it moved to Los Angeles and San Francisco (Heller; Cohen Angry Playwright”).
example suggests in her 1972 essay, “[Fortune] concerns itself with homosexuality, not as a theme valuable for its own sake but as a means of describing the death of a boy’s soul” (173). Unlike most other critics, Messenger understands that homosexual rape is “a primary weapon in the shifting power structure [of the prison],” but she characterizes the play’s representations of what she terms the “homosexual love” between Smitty and Mona, as a dramaturgical device, a “means,” through which the play “damns” its characters and rejects the possibility of love or redemption. In his essay “Sexuality and Identity in Fortune and Men’s Eyes,” also published in 1972, Neil Carson writes, “Fortune and Men’s Eyes is […] not about homosexuality in the tabloid sense suggested by the majority of critics and producers. Neither is it the story of the ‘depraving’ of a heterosexual” (“Sexual Identity” 214). He argues that the play “transcends sexual categories,” and, quoting Herbert, contends, that Fortune is “about the ‘cruelty and stupidity of force and violence’” (“Sexual Identity” 208 and 214). Carson’s invocation of Herbert’s explanation of the play rests on the (seemingly) universal issues of power and violence that the play does, of course, concern; however, this approach fails to see how the play is, in fact, about homosexuality. Especially through Mona and Queenie, the play depicts how gay men were treated by the law, society, and within prison hierarchies at a particular time and in a particular place. Divorcing the play’s representations of gay men from their social and historical contexts, in favour of the abstractions facilitated by a universal reading, denies the ways in which Fortune is about the socially sanctioned marginalization and criminalization of gay men, an issue of justice that Herbert, consciously or not, inscribed in his play.

Published in 1978, Brian F. Tyson’s “This Man's Art and That Man's Scope: Language and the Critics in Fortune and Men's Eyes” takes issue with the ways other critics have misread the play’s homosexuality. He argues an examination of the play’s language reveals that
“homosexuality, although one of the subjects of the play, can hardly be called its theme.” He continues:

Rather [homosexuality] is used to show inversion of another kind: the first is the need to satisfy a basic human appetite, starved among young healthy males deprived of the company of girls. […] The second […] is to illustrate the way in which the cell unit in the reformatory has become a family unit in imitation of its social counterpart. (36 my emphasis)

For Tyson, Fortune’s naturalistic and liberal tragic representations of homosexuals, in Mona and Queenie, and its depictions of sex as a mode of domination, in the relationships of Rocky and Smitty, and Smitty and Queenie, do not denote the realities that homosexual and heterosexual inmates faced within the prison’s corrupt system, as I argue here. Rather, although he calls it a subject, he really sees homosexuality as an extension of the prison as metaphor for an inverted and perverted society, the emphasis of which he ironically divides between “healthy” heterosexual-male sexuality, and heterosexual family. Perkyns also has difficulty reconciling the play’s representations of homosexuality, and agrees with Tyson. He writes:

Tyson rightly argues that Fortune and Men’s Eyes is not in favour of homosexuality. Herbert makes it clear that audiences have come to realize that the play is not specifically about homosexuality nor prison life, but rather about the reality of life and its great forces: ‘envy, destruction, masochism and sadism.’

(“John Herbert” 277)

Both Tyson and Perkyns misread the play because they seem unable to reconcile its subject matter and themes with its representations of marginalized and criminalized homosexuals in the

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77 Tyson is quoting Herbert here in an interview conducted by Rota Lister, Interview with John Herbert.
years before decriminalization. Tyson and Perkyns cannot seem to differentiate the play’s representations of homosexual identity from its depictions of rape because both were viewed as intrinsically related signs of corruption. It is also for this reason that they are confused about whether the play is “in favour” of homosexuality or not as it presents its homosexual characters as victims, but also invokes “homosexual” rape as the most heinous example of the prison’s violence. That is, these critics conflate an action for an identity because both were understood as criminal and corrupt. From this standpoint in time, it seems odd that homosexuality could even be considered a “theme” in the literary sense of the word, by which we mean a text’s central idea, and not its subject, explicitly or implicitly stated. Homosexuality is only a theme if it is understood to denote “perversion,” and/or “tragic pathology” – which it did for many critics in the Toronto press that reviewed the production at the CLT.

Ron Evans, theatre critic for the *Toronto Telegram*, for example, sums up the play in this way: “Mona and Queenie are both men. Both criminals. Both inmates of a Canadian penitentiary. And that should give you a fair idea about what *Fortune and Men’s Eyes* is all about.” He continues by describing it as “an ugly, brutally honest account of the perversion not only tolerated, but condoned and sometimes abetted by prison authorities.” For Evans, the differences between homosexuality and “perversions” are so minimal as to not require detailed explication. Even Nathan Cohen, the play’s greatest advocate, had difficulty untangling homosexuality as both a sexual identity and a marginalized group, from the forms of sexual violence that are part of the prison’s power structures. He writes “the basic plot […] is] a young man sentenced to penitentiary for six months [and] is converted during his incarceration into a thug and homosexual” (“Prison”). Cohen views Smitty’s “conversion” to homosexuality as part of his overall corruption by the criminal justice system. Although it may seem strange today, in a
society that on the whole does not view homosexuality as a pathological condition, the idea that a “healthy” heterosexual could be irrevocably “converted” to “homosexual pathology” through same-sex sexual experiences while incarcerated was current in prison discourses of the 1950s and 1960s (Kunzel 6). Thus, in a play that addresses how the criminal justice system converts an innocent boy into a vindictive criminal, it is somewhat understandable that critics in the 1960s and 1970s cited Smitty’s “conversion to homosexuality” – his proposition to Mona – as a sign of his tragic downfall.

Clearly, scholars and critics alike lacked the vocabulary necessary to disentangle the play’s naturalistic representations of criminalized and marginalized homosexuals from its depictions of sexual domination within the political economy of the prison. This lack of vocabulary is symptomatic of just how dominant criminal and pathological paradigms for understanding homosexuality were in Canada in the late 1960s, as they were in some contexts, especially law enforcement, through to the early 1980s. Furthermore, these critics’ limited vocabulary prevented them from recognizing homosexuals as a bona fide oppressed group within the culture, of which Mona’s and Queenie’s experiences in the play are representative. It is, however, precisely this lack of vocabulary, and the confusion, disagreements, and misreadings that have attended the play’s depictions of homosexuality, that belie Fortune’s trail-blazing originality. Indeed, the play’s inclusion of homosexuals as a wrongly criminalized group within its broader critique of Canadian society constitutes, perhaps, the most important political contribution the play’s performance at the CLT in 1967 made to the cultural history of gay men in Toronto, and to Canadian theatre history as well.
Theatrical Protest Before Gay Liberation

The immediate political context of Fortune’s production at the CLT was the sensational trials of Everett George Klippert. In 1965, during the course of an arson investigation, Klippert was questioned by RCMP officers. He told them that he had engaged in sexual acts with other men four times, all of which were consensual and performed in private, since arriving in Pine Point, Northwest Territories from Calgary a few years earlier. Based on these admissions, he was convicted of four counts of gross indecency and sentenced to three years for each count, twelve years total. A “repeat offender,” having already served four years in a Calgary prison on the same charge, Klippert was psychologically assessed by doctors who concluded that, while he posed no danger to anyone, he was likely to reoffend upon release. Based on this clinical analysis, his previous conviction, and the laws still current in the Criminal Code, Klippert was deemed a “dangerous sexual offender” by the Territorial Court, 9 March 1966 – potentially incarcerating him for the course of his natural life (Katz “Homosexuals Shocked “). Shocked and dismayed, Klippert appealed the decision, taking his case all the way to the Supreme Court of Canada.

In the interim, Canada’s first “homophile” organization, the Association for Social Knowledge (ASK), suggested in its June 1967 Newsletter that “If the [Klippert] conviction is upheld [by the Supreme Court] it means that any practicing homosexual in Canada can be convicted of being a ‘dangerous sexual offender’ and sentenced […] indefinitely” (qtd. in Kinsman Regulation 261). As extreme as such a prediction may sound, the Supreme Court of Canada upheld the Territorial Court’s ruling in a three to two decision, 7 November 1967. The Klippert decision created an uproar of debate in the media and in Parliament. In reaction to the decision, then Justice Minister Pierre Eliot Trudeau famously said, “The state has no business in
the bedrooms of the nation,” a statement that, while progressive at the time, like the bill itself, kept homosexuality safely locked in the private sphere (“Trudeau's Omnibus Bill”). It was the fallout from the Klippert decision that led the Liberal Government to include the decriminalization of homosexual acts between two consenting adults in private in its Omnibus Bill, Bill C-150, which liberalized several sections of the Criminal Code, and which was passed into law in May 1969. The decriminalization of homosexuality, combined with the new gay liberationist consciousness that was emerging in the late 1960s, and which would be ushered in with the Stonewall Riots in June 1969, led to the founding of gay rights organizations across the country, to new ways of expressing gay identity, and to larger, more visible and politically active gay communities in many of Canada’s largest cities – a movement whose history and effects I address in chapter two.

Less than three weeks before the Supreme Court’s shocking decision, Fortune opened at the CLT, 19 October 1967, where it ran for a full fifteen weeks to sold-out houses. Given the nature of this prison drama, its performance at the CLT was made that much more relevant by the spectacular trials of Everett George Klippert. Oddly, none of the play’s reviews in the city’s press draw any connection or comparison between its performance and the highly publicized verdict in the Klippert trial, with which Fortune was surely in conversation. This is surprising because, with its well known autobiographical subject matter, with its history of rejection by the Toronto theatre establishment due to its “homosexual themes,” and with its unprecedented success in New York, Fortune’s performance at the CLT was perhaps the most important public condemnation of the criminalized and pathologized status of homosexuals made in Canada. And yet, the failure of critics to connect the play to the Klippert decision is also not remarkable given

78 What Trudeau said after this statement, which never seems to be quoted, is equally important to the lives of queers at this time, and to the activism that would arise in the 1970s: “When it becomes public, this is a different matter.” A different matter indeed.
the extent to which the “rights” of homosexuals were not yet considered a political issue in the popular consciousness. Two years before the Stonewall riots in New York, four years before the first gay rights rally in Canada (held in Ottawa in 1971), and just three years after the establishment of Canada’s earliest homophile association, *Fortune*’s staging at the CLT inaugurates the use of the professional theatre by an openly gay man to engage with the realities of gay life, and to protest the criminalization, marginalization, and oppression of gay men in Toronto.

*Fortune*’s action powerfully displays how the criminal justice system, charged with administering justice and reforming criminals, actually creates criminals through its abuses of power, and through laws that unjustly criminalize various marginalized populations. It achieves this critique in performance through the interplay of its naturalism, its liberal tragic structure, the content of its narrative, and a handful of metatheatrical moments that self-consciously invoke the theatre as a site for gay men to protest their experiences of oppression and injustice – just as Herbert did himself most dramatically with *Fortune*. In the years before the advent of gay liberation activism, *Fortune*’s unambiguous inclusion of homosexual men among those who are victimized by the criminal justice system constitutes a seminal and dramatic act of theatrical protest at the CLT. Indeed, its representation of the unjust stigmatization and oppression of homosexuals by the state as an issue of political importance, combined with Herbert’s own open protests against the laws still on the books, served to pave the way for the gay liberation movement in Canada.79

*Fortune*’s plot presents four young men, Smitty, Rocky, Queenie, and Mona, and their guard, “Holy Face,” in a Canadian reformatory – what Herbert calls “prep school for the

79 I remind the reader of Herbert’s assertion, quoted above, that “the laws on the books which create [prison] conditions for homosexuals are the most perverse of all” (Daly 10).
penitentiary” (Herbert Fortune 7). It centres on Smitty, who enters the prison a moral person at the play’s outset – he’s been convicted of “stealing his father’s car” – and is transformed into an embittered and violent criminal by the play’s end, set on revenge against the society that has wronged him. In one of the plot’s most powerful moments, Smitty is violently forced into the prison’s inequitable hierarchy of aggressive “Old Men” and passive “Boys” by Rocky, a hardened repeat offender. Rocky initially cajoles and jokes with Smitty to persuade him to act as his “Boy,” but when this does not work he threatens and then violently rapes him into submission. Within the prison’s economy of power, it is imperative for inmates to make such alliances because, as Rocky warns, “You’re a sittin’ duck for a gang splash [gang rape] if you ain’t got a old man” (Herbert Fortune 33).

Rocky succeeds in subjugating Smitty, but only temporarily. With the help of Queenie, the cell’s other repeat offender, Smitty rebels against Rocky and initiates a new political and sexual relationship with Queenie. Unlike Rocky, Queenie is neither Smitty’s “Old Man” nor his “Boy,” but acts as a kind of “free agent.” Queenie is not tied to any single person, but functions as a go-between for the prison’s “Politicians”: “the hep guys … hippos, who are smart enough to make it into the office [and] get the best of it … good grub, new shirts, and jeans, lightweight boot[s] and special privileges…” (Herbert Fortune 19-20).

Quickly learning from these difficult lessons, Smitty negotiates a deal in the “Office” with an absent power broker called “Baldy,” and then offers to end his relationship with Queenie and become Mona’s “Old Man.” Mona, who is also a first-time offender, refuses Smitty’s offer because he believes the prison’s system of power, which constitutes and constrains all relations among its inmates, to be nothing less than soul destroying. Fostering no alliances, and being without any political influence, Mona is “public property,” the lowest level in the prison
hierarchy, a title that denotes neither “owning” nor being “owned” by anyone, and therefore having no recourse to retribution should he be victimized. During his incarceration, Mona has been the victim of gang rape by his fellow inmates, and corporal punishment by the prison’s guards. He explains his decision to remain “public property” by telling Smitty that he must continue to have “The right to say or be anything or everything or nothing to myself” (Herbert Fortune 89). Smitty can’t understand why Mona would choose to go on being victimized when he is offering him protection and greater access to material goods within the prison. The thoughtful youth explains his reasoning by having Smitty read Shakespeare’s twenty-ninth sonnet, from which the play takes its title. Through the sonnet Mona conveys the idea that he and Smitty must find ways to transcend their “outcast state” by not accepting or identifying with the degrading roles prescribed by the prison’s corrupt culture. Instead, they must find ways to nurture love and mutual respect where possible, and enact a kind of nonparticipation (akin to civil disobedience) by existing outside the prison’s power structure wherever and whenever possible. In reading the sonnet Mona thus suggests that while the world has deemed them “criminals” and “perverts,” this will only be true if they themselves accept and affirm this nomination through their own performative enactments – a powerful assertion for a gay man in the days before Gay Liberation.

This happy moment is interrupted, first by the entrance of Queenie and Rocky, and then Holy Face. Fearing that an alliance between Smitty and Mona will upset their power in the cell, Queenie and Rocky burst in and violently separate them. When Holy Face arrives on the scene, Queenie and Rocky make a scapegoat of Mona, accusing him of making a pass at Smitty, which they tried to break up. Holy Face then takes Mona to receive corporal punishment in the “kitchen,” while Smitty yells after them, pleading for Mona not to be taken, and admitting that it
was he who propositioned Mona. The play in New York, the same production that toured to the
CLT and elsewhere, ended here, leaving Smitty’s fate relatively undecided. In the subsequently
published text, however, and in the version that was read by Cohen and rejected by the Toronto
theatre establishment, Smitty’s fate is clear. Enraged by the turn of events, he swears to be
revenged upon Queenie and Rocky, and then turns to the audience, addressing them directly,
promising to be revenged upon them, too. In this moment of direct address, Smitty’s
transformation into a criminal is complete, with the fault clearly laid at the feet of Fortune’s
audience.

Naturalism and liberal tragedy are the two forms of generic classification that I will
employ here to call attention to Fortune’s performance conventions, its place in theatre history,
and the particular importance of these invocations of tragedy. Naturalism is, of course, a
movement in literature, theatre, and beyond, that begins in the mid- to late nineteenth century,
connecting the theoretical models of scientific objectivism and empiricism with, in the case of
theatre, playwriting and stage practices. Revolutionary in its time, naturalism has become the
standard by which most theatre defines itself, and continues to be a dominant theatrical form
today (Innes 5). Naturalistic plays express their objectivity in the ways they use theatrical
performance as a means to present a “true” or “real” representation of life, usually focusing on a
political or social problem, often characterized by tensions between heredity and environment.
This desire to truly represent reality translates into all aspects of mise-en-scène, and to the
creation of recognizable, psychological characters that speak in the argot of their particular social
type or class. Naturalistic dramas often have simple plots with a single action that unfolds over a
relatively short period of time.
Liberal tragedy is an historical classification of the structure of tragedy as theorized by Raymond Williams. In *Modern Tragedy*, Williams investigates and classifies forms of tragedy historically. Beginning with the Greeks, he examines the ways in which “tragedy” as an idea, a tradition in literature, and as theatrical genre, has changed in both structure and reception over time. A Marxist, Williams is interested in how dramaturgical structures express the political and social “truths” of their times, specifically, in this case, what is and what is not considered “tragic” and why. According to Williams, the genre of liberal tragedy begins with Ibsen in the late nineteenth century, and was waning with Arthur Miller in the 1960s.\(^8\) As a genre, it is marked by the transformation of the protagonist from a “tragic hero” into a “tragic victim.” As such, it does not conceive of tragedy as inherent to the human condition, to human relationships, as a force of the gods/God, or as a predetermined fate; rather, the tragic hero is victim because his downfall is an effect of societal systems that marginalize and abuse, and ultimately corrupt or destroy anyone who stands against them. According to Williams, liberal tragedies are plays that identify “a false society as man’s real enemy [and which name] in social terms […] the formerly nameless alienation” (*Modern* 95). Inherently political, liberal tragedies are thus “liberal” in their implicit faith that, by exposing and articulating society’s evils through theatrical representation, these ills can be redressed towards the empowerment and inclusion of its disenfranchised subjects, in an ever progressing narrative of the extension of liberal “rights” and “justice.”

Drawing on these two forms of generic classification (naturalism and liberal tragedy) allows us to see the political significance of *Fortune’s* naturalistic performance conventions, the structure

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\(^8\) According to Williams, Miller represents “a late revival of liberal tragedy, on the edge (but only on the edge) of its transformation into socialism” (*Modern* 103). He suggests that “what distinguishes Miller from the majority contemporary drama of guilt and breakdown is the retained consciousness of a false society, an alterable condition” (*Modern* 103).
of its tragedy, and the ways that the combination of these two formal elements functioned to constitute a powerful critique of Canadian society in the 1960s.\(^{81}\)

Generically, *Fortune* also incorporates aspects of classical tragedy into its naturalistic form – a common feature of naturalist drama, but not a defining element. The play has one dramatic action, the downfall of Smitty, which would have invoked a kind of catharsis – pity and fear – among its middle-class audience because he, unlike the other characters, is an average, middle-class kid who, in a short period of time, is transformed into a criminal. The play also finds similarity with classical tragedy in that all its major acts of violence are not depicted on stage: Rocky’s raping of Smitty, and Catsolino’s (a minor character, not represented on stage) and Mona’s whipping all take place off stage. Its naturalism manifests in its realistic set, in its focus on taboo subjects and marginalized populations, in its psychological characters, and in its verisimilar acting style. Its stage directions call for the “whole upstage wall to be barred so that we look into the corridor where the guard and inmates pass in entrance and exit” (Herbert *Fortune* 9). This design places the theatre’s fourth wall at what would be the back of the cell, and thus “imprisons” the audience with its inmates, fostering immediacy and identification between them. Like many examples of naturalism that focus on taboo subjects and marginalized groups, the plays of Ibsen, T.W. Robertson, and arguably Miller, for example, *Fortune* addresses the under-acknowledged subjects of homosexuality, and the atrocious treatment of the incarcerated through its sympathetic representation of the most marginalized groups in society: “queers” and “criminals.”\(^{82}\) *Fortune*’s naturalism creates identifiable characters that act and speak in the argot

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\(^{81}\) Like liberal tragedy, naturalism also exhibits its own kind of historicism. This is because naturalistic plays, such as *Fortune*, usually concern a particular social problem relevant at the time of their production. As Christopher Innes suggests, the “key plays of naturalism,” the plays of Ibsen, Chekhov, and Shaw, “from today’s perspective, are in almost every sense historical. Social circumstances are no longer the same as those they reflect. The burning legal or moral topics that preoccupy their characters have little in common with current concerns” (Innes 16).

\(^{82}\) I am thinking here of *Ghosts*, and *A Doll’s House*, by Ibsen, and *Society* and of *Death of a Salesman* by Miller.
of the prison, and in accordance with their particular class, creating a realistic prison world. Its characters are familiar social types – Smitty, the middle-class Canadian youth; Rocky, the common thug; Queenie, the street fairy; and Mona, the effeminate and artistic young man – with whom audiences could identify, or at the very least recognize as living in their world. Central to the play’s condemnation of Canadian society, Smitty, Rocky, Queenie, and Mona are represented in a sympathetic manner: each one is depicted as a real person, with a past, and, most importantly, with understandable motivations for his “criminal” actions. In performance in New York and at the CLT, this realism was fostered by Mitchell Nestor, the play’s director, and its actors, all of whom (including Nestor) were graduates of Lee Strasberg’s Actors Studio, the home of “the method,” a naturalistic school of acting, in the United States.

Fortune’s broader naturalistic concerns are also expressed in its investigation of the relationship between heredity and environment, while its liberal tragic structure is reaffirmed in its assertion that the prison system (i.e. environment) perverts the natural drives of its inmates. Fortune is unlike the plays of August Strindberg, Eugene O’Neill, or Tennessee Williams, which are similarly concerned with the relationship between heredity and environment, but whose tragedies are arguably found in human heredity, in the “blood” so to speak, which Williams calls “Private Tragedy.” Fortune’s liberal tragic structure positions the source of its characters’ downfalls in their environments, particularly state power, and middle-class hypocrisy. The play focuses on the deformation of two instincts in particular: the will to survive/safety, and the desire for sex/human connection, or love. In the first case, it suggests that prison, and society as a direct extension, warps the will to survive by pitting individuals against one another in a fight for limited resources. Such a system encourages violence, discourages empathy, and valorizes an
immoral, liberal-capitalist conception of the “survival of the fittest,” which is writ large within
the prison. In the second case, Fortune proposes that the human desire for connection or love is
perverted by a power structure that forces sexual intimacy without mutual consent. This aspect is
evident in its powerful depictions (or allusions, as they do take place off stage) of the sexual
violence that structures and maintains the prison’s hierarchy. This said, the play also shows how
these two instincts can become intertwined by a system that encourages the domination of others
– sometimes sexual and sometimes not – as a means to gain power and security within the
system.

Fortune’s naturalism and liberal tragic structure also set it apart from the most well
known contemporary play by an openly gay man to represent the lives of homosexuals within a
prison, Jean Genet’s Deathwatch. First performed at the Théâtre des Mathurins in Paris in 1949,
Deathwatch is not naturalistic. It does not protest against the criminal justice system or the
criminalization of homosexuals as a crime against liberal conceptions of justice. Rather, it
eroticizes the marginal positions of both criminals and homosexuals as outlaws who define
themselves against society through their criminality and sexuality, which are common features of
Genet’s early work.\footnote{Genet’s 1950 film, Un chant d’amour, is another example from the period that investigates homosexuality in the milieu of the prison. More so than Deathwatch, Un chant d’amour indicts French society for criminalizing both homosexuals and Africans through its depictions of the abuse and surveillance of the prisoners by a sadistic and jealous guard. But like Deathwatch, it is an erotic fantasy, interlaced with nearly expressionistic images of male bodies in scenes of sex and violence.}

Deathwatch’s stage directions read:

The entire play unfolds as in a dream. The set and costumes (stripped homespun)
should be in violent colors. […] The movements of the actors should be either
heavy or else extremely and incomprehensively rapid, like flashes of lightning. If
they can, the actors should deaden the timber of their voices. (Genet 103-04)
Of the play, Martin Esslin suggests: “the play is not intended to represent real events, but is a day dream, a prisoner’s fantasy come to life” (146). In its celebration of criminality, *Deathwatch* also valorizes (though somewhat ambiguously) the criminal hierarchy operative in the prison, which is based on the severity of the crime committed by the inmate (i.e. the more profound the crime the more respect gained within the hierarchy). Genet said the following of his time spent in Hitler’s Germany, the sentiment of which reveals his desire to completely reject a specifically liberal conception of morality, freedom, and justice through his criminality: “This is a nation of thieves […] If I steal here, I accomplish no special act that could help me realize myself. I merely obey the habitual order of things. I do not destroy it” (qtd. in Esslin 142). In a fascist society, “a nation of thieves,” that possessed no morality in the liberal democratic sense, Genet could find neither beauty in delinquency nor rebellion in marginality; through theft he merely upheld the status quo. But in a culture that conceived of itself as just and moral, being a criminal and embracing abjection were strategies of resistance for Genet. In comparison, *Fortune*’s naturalistic representations serve to reveal the injustice and hypocrisy of a society that thinks of itself as democratic, moral, and just – but is not – and to tacitly demand change within a liberal framework of inclusion and empowerment, particularly for homosexuals. Unlike Genet, Herbert’s depiction of prison life is not a daydream; it is a nightmare. No romance or redeeming quality can be found in criminality. Criminalization is rather an imposition, part and parcel of a corrupt society, completely devoid of merit, and an affront to any conception of liberal justice. 

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86 Ambiguously because when Lefranc tries to win Green Eyes’ affection and respect by killing Maurice, he is rejected. Esslin argues that this is actually a condemnation of a person who chooses criminality, suggesting that the illiterate Green Eyes, who confesses to losing control in killing the prostitute, has no choice, whereas the literate Lefranc, has choice (146).

87 Rothenberg cites this kind of liberal politics as the motivation for both producing *Fortune*, and founding of the Fortune Society: “The Fortune Society was created to educate the public because we thought it was the ‘60s and if the public became educated about the horrors of prison, and the difficulties people faced coming out then they would rise up and change the system – naïve” (Wagner John Herbert: Fortune)
Indeed, given that the common feature in Herbert’s work is a pointed critique of societal inequity, it is not surprising that Herbert chose to stage Genet’s *The Maids* at his Garret Theatre in 1965, rather than *Deathwatch*. Although *The Maids* is a highly complex, metatheatrical, and poetic piece, it lends itself much more easily to a theatrical protest of class repression than *Deathwatch* does the oppression of homosexuals, or the problems of the criminal justice system more generally.

The gravity and power of *Fortune’s* critique, especially in production at the CLT, is found in the ways that it posited its realistic representations of the prison’s power structure as analogous to those current in Canadian society in the post-War period. Within the play, the prison’s hierarchy, enforced through physical, verbal, and sexual violence, is ordered into a limited number of predetermined roles: “Generals” and “Guards/Screws,” “Politicians,” and “Public Property.” These roles, much like the economic classes in Canadian society, are hierarchically differentiated by their ability to exercise power over others, and by their access to material goods. The Generals are the uppermost level of the prison’s formal chain of command, while the Guards/Screws are their workers, following management’s orders and interacting directly with the inmates. Significantly for Canadian society in the late 1960s, the Generals are associated with the fading power of the British Empire, as well as the disciplined masculinity of the armed forces. The play achieves this by assigning the higher-level prison Generals English accents, and by aligning them with Canada’s British-colonial past.

These aspects of the prison’s administration, as well as the brutality of the racism it fostered, are described in a story told by Queenie. The story describes how the “Royal Sergeant,” the prison’s warden, makes a practice of challenging new inmates to a boxing match, “man to man, with no interference,” as a way to let “the prisoners know who’s boss” (Herbert *Fortune*
Queenie recounts the horror that ensued when a young Iroquois man took the warden at his word: “The second he an’ Bad Bess squared off at each other, two guards jumped Big Chief Running Blood, an’ the three British bully boys beat the roaring piss outa him. Heroes all” (Herbert Fortune 14). Queenie’s account of a false proposition made by a British “General” to an Aboriginal man invokes Canada’s history of bogus treaties and broken agreements, while the pleasure and fervor with which three “British bully boys” mete out their violent aggression recalls the brutal injustices committed against First Nations people by British/Canadian colonialism. His sardonic description of the story’s “heroism” directly indicts both the hypocrisy of the criminal justice system and the hyperbolic narratives of colonial “bravery” and “courage.” Furthermore, in performance at the CLT the anecdote directly linked the criminalization, marginalization, and oppression of First Nations people in the 1960s to the atrocities of Canada’s colonial past. This is also the case with Queenie’s bitter conclusion to the story, which brought its historical resonance directly to bear on issues of race and racism in the 1960s:

Oh, well—let’s look on the bright side o’ the penny; he’s in pretty good shape for the shape he’s in. After all he got a free nose-bob [sic] an’ can pass for a pale nigger now. A darkie can get a better job ’n redskin any day. (Herbert Fortune 14).

Queenie’s concluding remark adeptly invokes how racism economically marginalized First Nations and other racialized subjects, creating and maintaining racialized class hierarchies. It also highlights racism’s terrible caprice, limiting human beings’ potential, and denying them access to material goods and economic advancement based on the shapes of their noses and the colours of their skins.
Like the inmates, the guards are also trapped and sullied by the prison’s immoral systems. In the prison there are, according to Queenie, two kinds of guards: “the ones you can use like Holy Face […] and the fink screws that go straight to the General” (Herbert _Fortune_ 24). Neither role is nobler than the other: the former is corrupt, as Holy Face is, trafficking messages in and out of the prison for a fee, while the latter is sadistic, as reporting anything to the General will inevitably lead to either corporal punishment or solitary confinement, which Queenie describes as “a nice cold tower […] with no blankets or mattresses on iron bunks and a diet of bread and water to tame you” (Herbert _Fortune_ 24). Holy Face, for example, is not only dishonest and hypocritical, but complains of stomach problems: he has an ulcer, metaphorically representing the putrefaction of his soul, damned by both his participation in a fraudulent system and his own criminal actions. The guards’ penchant for corporal punishment is purely sadistic, according to Mona: “They don’t keep those little goodies [whips and constraints] because they have to but because they want to” (Herbert _Fortune_ 25). Their corruption and cruelty is seemingly without exception: “Don’t ever depend on protection from the guards, and don’t ever go to them,” warns Mona, “You have to solve your own problems” (Herbert _Fortune_ 24).  

The intergenerational cycle of criminalization, and how the broken social justice system plays a determining part in encouraging such recidivism, is expressed in the life of Rocky. Sadly, Rocky is resigned to his fate, and will continue to play his role in a system that will inevitably destroy him. He tells Smitty that he plans to make money by selling drugs with his father, “Tiger Tibber,” when he leaves the reformatory, and when Tibber is released from Kingston Penitentiary. Importantly at this point in _Fortune_’s action, Smitty does not think of himself as a

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88 Rothenberg recounts a story in which Herbert was asked about his representations of the guards during one of the show’s talk backs. The questioner argued that the guards had very difficult jobs, and if they were hard on the inmates it was understandable. According to Rothenberg, Herbert’s response was, “I’m a waiter, it’s a stressful and difficult job, does that give me the right to piss in the customer’s soup?” (Wagner _John Herbert: Fortune_)
criminal; he maintains that he will find legal employment upon his release to ensure that he will never serve time again. Rocky, however, has a better understanding of the trap in which they are both caught. He contends that Smitty will be unable to find a good job, or even a lousy job, because he will carry with him the stigma of being an excon. In fact, when Tennessee Williams came to see Fortune in New York, he met Herbert after the play and told him that in his eyes Rocky was by far the most tragic of the play’s characters because “he came from nowhere and he is going nowhere” (Wagner and Cabrera).

According to Rocky, those in power, especially the police, will continually reinvoke his criminality, and will never give him a break. As proof of his argument, Rocky cites Queenie’s experience after his first sentence in the reformatory. With the story, Rocky provides Smitty with a terrible example of how criminality is reinscribed, and the deleterious effects of this reinscription:

ROCKY: Well, ya better find somethin’ [Smitty], ‘cause y’ain’t gonna be able t’ git a decent job no more—maybe not even a half-assed one. Lookit Queenie! She wuz workin’ the counter o’ a Chinatown restaurant, after her first bit here. She wuzn’t there two weeks when Seven-Foot Tiny o’ the Morality Squad steps into the kitchen to scoff a free cuppa coffee. He catches sight o’ sweet Queenie playin’ tea maid t’ all them tourists ’n’ square Chinks, so sends down t’ the cash register fer the manager. He asks him does he know he’s got a queer an’ a thief workin’ fer ‘im. Dear Queenie, who planned on getting fat that winter, wuz out in the alley wit’

89 That this kind of treatment is not just a fiction created by Herbert is once again corroborated by the case of Everett George Klippert. Shortly after his arrival in Pine Point, having left Calgary after his release from prison because to stay would have brought shame on his family, Klippert was warned by local RCMP officers that his past record was known to them, and that he should “watch his behavior” (Katz “Gentle George “ 10).
the rest o’ the cats—before Big Tiny finishes his bummy cuppa coffee. (Herbert Fortune 80)

The catalyst for Queenie’s termination is not his employer’s dissatisfaction with his work or prejudice against homosexuals. It is rather the vindictive actions of a police officer who labels him criminal, denying him the opportunity for legal employment. Without a job, and with few prospects of procuring and keeping one, Queenie, Rocky, and Smitty will be forced to resort to illegal activities to survive, which will eventually and inevitably result in their reincarceration.90

Fortune demonstrates how the prison system destroys inmates’ ability to empathize by pitting them against each other in a fight to gain power, which is played out in Rocky’s relationship to Smitty. Both Rocky and Queenie engage in a power struggle that begins immediately upon Smitty’s entrance into the dormitory. But, as fate would have it, Queenie is sent to distribute books to the inmates, and Mona is enlisted to clean up the infirmary, leaving Rocky and Smitty alone in the cell. Capitalizing on both this stroke of luck, and Smitty’s naiveté, Rocky begins by charming, fooling, and ultimately intimidating Smitty into agreeing to let him be his “Old Man.” Rocky then invites Smitty to the shower room. Smitty, wise to where such an invitation could lead, reneges on his agreement. Rocky, who is described as having “a nature, driven by fear, that uses hatred aggressively to protect itself […]]”(Herbert Fortune 7), forcefully retaliates, giving Smitty two options: “It’s me or a gang splash” (Herbert Fortune 36). Desperate to take advantage of Smitty and to assert his dominance in the dorm, Rocky violently pins Smitty’s arm behind his back, and forces him into the shower room where he rapes him. This is not an expression of Rocky’s homosexual desire for Smitty; rather, it conveys how the prison

90 That Queenie works at a Chinese restaurant also implies marginalization along the lines of class and race. This is to say, Queenie could get a job in a Chinese restaurant, which is itself marginalized racially and economically. He would be less likely, however, to get a job in a more high-end restaurant, as Herbert explores in Pearl Divers. While this allusion is not overly emphasized within the play, it subtly conveys the imbrication of racial and class oppression in this era, which is in keeping with Fortune’s broader critique, and Herbert’s other work.
environment pits inmates against one another in a fight for power warps and sexual intimacy into violent domination. While Rocky’s actions are reprehensible and unforgivable, they are, at the very least, understandable within the power structure of the prison. This is because, unlike Smitty, who has the two options that Rocky enumerates, Rocky has three: be raped, like Smitty; be private property, like Mona; or rape Smitty and establish his dominance in the cell, thereby advancing himself in the social structure of the prison. While Rocky is most certainly responsible for his abhorrent actions, it is a system which pits inmate against inmate that is ultimately to blame.

Queenie’s life story also invokes flawed social systems as responsible for destroying his humanity and his ability to empathize with others. Like Rocky, he is a victim of poor parenting: abandoned by his mother, he has grown up as a ward of Children’s Aid. These early experiences, “shuffled around from foster homes to farms, to God knows what,” have given him “the advantage of early training” for life inside a prison: “I had farmers treat me worse ’n their dogs, and I learned before I was twelve that nobody gives a crap about you in this cruddy world. So […] Queenie looks after Queenie” (Herbert Fortune 26). Despite his tough words, Queenie’s desire for a familial relationship is revealed by the fact that he has tried to find his mother. Once again the pervasive and alienating nature of criminalization is reasserted: Queenie was refused information about his mother because of his criminal record. Queenie has learned through hard-earned experience that he must fight, plot, and manipulate others in order to live in society and in prison. His modus operandi has thus become sadistic as a means of survival. He victimizes others because, as an orphan, a homosexual, and an excon, this has been the best defense against becoming a victim himself.
Caught in the prison’s corrupt hierarchy, and at a disadvantage to Rocky because he has formed an alliance with Smitty, Queenie must find a way to use Smitty to his benefit. Once Queenie discovers that Rocky secured his relationship to Smitty by threatening him with the danger of gang rape, and then raping him himself, he convinces him to rebel. On Queenie’s instructions, Smitty is to overpower Rocky and gain the revenge he desires the next time the two go for a shower. But Smitty is learning the ways of the prison and asks why Queenie would want to help him. Hell bent on using Smitty to his own advantage, Queenie lies, telling Smitty that it is his hatred for Rocky that motivates him, when, in fact, the truth of Queenie’s motives are revealed when Mona arrives back at the cell as the rebellion is taking place:

MONA: But Rocky…

QUEENIE: Is getting a lesson he’s needed for a long time.

…. MONA: You planned this—to get Smitty.

QUEENIE: Right where I can see him—like I got all the other suckers on this street.

MONA: He could have been caught—or killed. You’re not even on his side.

QUEENIE: If he’s got a side! Shut your nellie jaw, before I blind you, bitch—an’ get me that goddam medicine bag.

MONA: Yes—I’ll get it. (*He does so*).

QUEENIE: An’ get ready to bow low, Miss Shakespeare. This block had a good queen; all it needed was a king. (*Exits triumphantly, leaving Mona looking lost and alone*). (Herbert Fortune 60-61)
As Mona suggests, Queenie has sympathy for neither Smitty nor Rocky, and Mona will also pay if he tries to interfere. This said, the play clearly posits Queenie’s selfishness, his plotting, and his disregard for the physical safety of his peers as learned behaviours, taught to him through years of abuse and victimization.

Despite Fortune’s naturalistic conventions, the class, gender, and sexual differences between Rocky, Queenie, and Mona, and white, heterosexual, middle-class spectators, might allow for the dismissal of these characters’ experiences as alien to their own. This is not the case with Smitty, however, who shared a similar social position with them before his incarceration, or, more poignantly, with their sons. Smitty, as his name suggests, is the play’s “everyman,” the protagonist through whom its action unfolds, and upon whom its primary critique is focused. By making Smitty its protagonist, the play concentrates more acutely on the middle classes; it powerfully shifts the problems of corruption, criminalization, and recidivism from Rocky, Queenie, and Mona, the “criminals” and “queers” of the play, to Smitty, the average middle-class youth. But the real indictment of middle-class Canadian society is articulated most forcefully in Smitty’s actual crime, the one he does “not regret,” and the one for which he is actually being punished: siding with his mother and challenging his father’s authority by stealing his car to help her escape from him (Herbert Fortune 87). In doing so, Smitty has rebelled against the patriarchal structure of society, which protects those in power, and punishes those, including men, who either fall outside its criteria of privilege, or challenge the inequitable structures upon which that privilege depends.

91 The most recent example of a prison drama continuing to use this formula is Orange is the New Black. In fact, the Netflix-produced series shares much with Fortune. First, it is autobiographical, based on the experiences of Piper Kerman, who documented them in a memoir of the same name. Second, it has a racially, ethnically, and economically diverse cast of women, but nevertheless centres on a white, middle-class protagonist who is accused of a relatively minor offence, Piper Chapman (Kerman’s analogue). Finally, its action (at least that of the first season – the second had not aired at the time this dissertation was written) concerns on how Chapman is transformed from a relatively innocent young woman into a person seemingly capable of violent acts.
SMITTY: I’ve made a few mistakes since the one that got me here, and that’s the only one I’m not sorry for. I stole a car—to get my mother out of town, away from my drunken slob of a father. I had to—he had the keys. I was helping her to run away with Ben—Ben’s a nice guy. They tried to get me out of this jackpot, together, but I slugged a cop when they were arresting me. My dear father got back at us all. He didn’t have a good word for me in court. After all, he was the respectable married man, a substantial citizen with his own business—the hardhearted bastard! Hard is a good word for him. He likes hard women, hard liquor, and hard words. For all he wanted from my mother, he might as well have hired a housekeeper and visited a prostitute regularly. (Herbert Fortune 87)

In Smitty’s defense of his mother from his father, the play demonstrates how the law fails to enact justice, favouring wealthy, white men. The play suggests the law’s primary function is to protect men, their capital, and their access to/ownership of women. In these aspects, the play expresses the emergent politics of second-wave feminism, with its critique of the inequitable power relations between the sexes in both the public and private spheres. It is this feminist critique of patriarchal ideology that lies behind the invocations of the married man versus an “adulterous” woman, the substantial citizen versus the young and rebellious son. Indeed, the play extends the metaphor of the prison to Smitty’s mother’s situation: she is also trapped in an inequitable and abusive relationship with another kind of “Old Man.” In detailing Smitty’s “crime,” and his reasons for it, Fortune once again contends that the inequitable power structures that obtain in the prison are also the power structures at work in the broader culture.

Connections to Canadian society are also evidenced in the character of Mona. As the only character imprisoned for “gross indecency,” Mona’s status as “public property” directly relates
to the position of homosexual men in Canadian society at this time. For being true to himself and not adhering to the predetermined roles of the prison culture, Mona has been deemed “public property,” which leaves him vulnerable to violence and assault. These are also the conditions that openly gay men confronted in Canada before decriminalization, and even long afterward. By being open, and rejecting compulsory heterosexuality and its attendant roles, one was liable to fall victim to an array of prohibitions, condemnations, and punishments, including incarceration or being subject to the “therapies” of medical authorities, without recourse or retribution. The justification for these abuses at this time is, simply, that the person is homosexual, and no further rationalization for their abuse or “reform” seems to have been necessary. This is also the case for Mona, whose victimization at the hands of the other inmates is justified because he is gay and because “might is right.” Discussing if Smitty could be the target of a gang rape, Mona makes the connection between his sexuality and his position at the bottom of the prison’s hierarchy clear: “They won’t do it to him. He doesn’t look gay, and he’s probably not here on a sex charge. They felt I had no rights” (Herbert Fortune 23). The justification for Mona’s victimization is that he is homosexual, on the one hand, and “public property” on the other. In both cases he has no “rights”: no means to protest, no avenue for redress, and no vehicle for retribution. Mona’s political status and the meaning of his identity as public property in the prison, and as an openly gay man in Canadian society in the late 1960s, is illustrated well by the character Roy Cohn in Angels in America, when he describes the position of “homosexuals” in American society in the early 1980s: “Homosexuals are not men who sleep with men. […] Homosexuals are men who know nobody and who nobody knows” (Kushner 45).

Similar to Herbert’s actual experience, Mona is imprisoned because a group of boys from his neighbourhood were attempting to rob him, and then, when police arrive, they accused him of
soliciting sex. From Herbert’s own life to the stage, the everyday banality of homophobic aggression by a gang of boys is transformed by state intervention into an indelible incarceration and unspeakable violence. The injustice of Mona’s arrest and trial prompts Smitty to propose that he should have had a lawyer. Mona indicts the justice system further when he replies that he did:

MONA: Oh, I had one—or did I? Yeah—too late, after he got his money—we saw he didn’t care—to tarnish his reputation. No real defense. A deal. Magistrate’s court is like a trial in a police station—all pals, lawyers and cops together! They threw me on the mercy of the court. Oh, Christ—that judge, with his hurry-up face, hear the neat police evidence and my lawyer’s silly, sugar-sweet plea. So halfhearted—I wanted to shout, ‘Let me speak; leave me some damn dignity!’ The fat, white-haired frown looked down at me—‘Go to jail for six months!—like I’d dirtied his hands, and that would wipe them clean. (Herbert Fortune 85)

Mona’s case baldly names the injustices gay men faced in society and within the criminal justice system at this time. First, Mona is innocent. He was not making advances on the boys. It was rather they who were harassing him. The judge’s perfunctory sentencing and his desire to wash his hands of Mona express both his and the broader culture’s desire to rid themselves of such defilement, making Mona’s sentencing more akin to penance for his “abnormal” gender and sexuality than criminal rehabilitation or even punishment for acts against society. Mona is thus falsely charged, criminalized, silenced and ultimately discarded by a judge and society who understand homosexual existence through competing discourses of criminality, degeneracy, perversion, sin, and pathology. Second, Mona is a scapegoat for the young hooligans’ actions.
He finds no justice in the criminal justice system and the play repeats this scenario of innocence being met with punishment at the play’s conclusion, when he is dragged off to be whipped for making a pass a Smitty, which he in fact did not make. Mona, thus, has no rights, no defense, no voice, and no dignity within society and within the criminal justice system because he is a homosexual, which automatically incriminates him and denigrates his character. He is a scapegoat: there to be used and abused, and to suffer for the sins of others. Third, the law itself is a travesty. As suggested in the “unclean” language above, “gross indecency” was a leftover of ecclesiastical law that had been reinterpreted in British law, fully articulated in the Labouchere Amendment in 1885, adopted into Canadian law in 1892, and expanded in the revision of the Criminal Code in 1953-54 (Kinsman Regulation 129). Finally, as a first-time “offender,” he will be marginalized because he is a queer and an exconvict, and forced to live at the margins of society. He and Klippert, like Herbert, are more than just examples of the failures of the justice system. Their stories convey the ways in which gay men were veritable targets, sitting ducks, for abuse in the years before decriminalization.

*Fortune*’s final damning of the prison system is enacted when Smitty asks Mona if he can be his “Old Man.” Mona refuses, explaining to Smitty that he will not partake in a system he

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92 Beginning in the late 1940s and extending to the 1970s, following its American counterpart, the Canadian government undertook a number of initiatives to identify and expunge gays and lesbians from civil service as “national security risks” (Kinsman Regulation 172). Given the timeline of *Fortune*’s development from personal experience to public performance, it might seem strange that the play does not deal with these activities. It must be remembered, however, that *Fortune* is very much a product of Herbert’s biography. Through the play, he redressed his own experiences of abuse and incarceration for gross indecency as a young man, and the subsequent marginalization and oppression he endured because of his status as both an excon and a queer. In comparison, the men who were fired from government jobs were rarely “out” in the manner that Herbert was before and after his incarcerations. Indeed, as John Sawatsky notes the government’s anti-gay campaigns did not “become public because most discovered homosexuals accepted their fate. Even the few who protested internally were frightened of possible public exposure. Most would sooner lose their jobs” (127). Unlike Herbert, these men were not “Street Fairies” or “Queers,” they were middle-class men, civil servants, who led double lives, but were not politicized around their sexualities or experiences of injustice, as Herbert would become in the 1950s. *Fortune* is very much based on Herbert’s own life, and positions itself against the “closeted” middle-class morality that characterized the lives of the men fired from their positions in government. Indeed, as middle-class civil servants, these men were imbricated in the systems and culture that alienated Herbert at a very early age, and which he was protesting against through his theatrical work.
views as completely corrupt. Mona knows that there is no liberty, no real choice, in the world of the prison, and thus there can be no real love. The lack of choice means that Smitty and Mona’s desire for connection, an attribute inherent to human beings gay or straight, will be warped into an inequitable relationship that will inevitably breed resentment and unhappiness between them.

MONA: [...] How do you feel [after sex] with Queenie [...]?

SMITTY: I could spit on her.

MONA: It would be the same with me; it’s not in your nature.

SMITTY: I came to you.

MONA: No! Just circumstance! You’re looking for a girl—not for me.

....

SMITTY: Should I ask you to do it with somebody else? Keep on being public property? [...]What do you do? Make comparison?

MONA: I—separate! Yes, that’s right. I separate things in order to live with others and myself. What my body does and feels is one thing, and what I think and feel apart from that is something else. (Herbert Fortune 88-9)

Mona’s rejection of Smitty reveals two important points: first, Mona’s actions, like Rocky’s, Queenie’s, and Smitty’s, are his personal strategy for survival within the prison; and second, the play positions homosexuality as an inherent part of an individual. In the first case, Mona clearly articulates that, instead of forming alliances and politicking to (potentially) ensure his comfort and corporal safety, he puts himself in harm’s way so that he may remain true to his sense of morality, ethics, and identity. When he says that he “separates,” he communicates his strategy for survival within the prison, making himself as numb as possible to the abuses his body endures in order to retain his sense of self (it also foreshadows the wisdom that will emerge in reading of
Shakespeare’s twenty-ninth sonnet). Mona understands that the roles that one must play in the prison are, in fact, soul destroying: they pit inmates against one another, force them into inequitable relationships, discourage empathy, and will inevitably transform them into the unethical criminals that society has deemed them. For Mona, the greatest threats of the prison system are the possibilities of losing his identity as a moral person, or being killed as he fights to save himself. In the second case, Mona’s argument about Smitty’s sexuality, that it is not in his “nature” to have sex with another man, reveals the play’s minoritizing view of homosexuality, and how the prison system deforms sexual desires that are inherent to homosexual or heterosexual people. Despite the various forms of homosexual sex that are alluded to in the play, Mona’s pronouncement about Smitty’s nature shows that the sex between men who are not homosexual is an expression of the prison’s corrupt systems: it is a perversion of their natural desires born out of either sexual frustration or the political necessity of forming an “Old Man/Boy” alliance within the prison. Furthermore, sex between men in the prison is nearly always a form of degradation because there can be no real choice, and therefore no real consent. While Mona feels genuine fondness for Smitty, he knows that to participate in a sexual relationship in order to procure safety, or to fulfill a sexual desire, is a deformation of both instincts, and will lead to enmity.

93 Rocky’s sexual identity, and its implications for the play’s view of discreet homosexual and heterosexual persons, is a question as he reports having had a relationship with another gay man before his return to prison. According to Rocky, he was not involved with this man for love, or to satisfy his sexual desire; rather, it was part of his “hustle,” a means to live: “[…] I latched on to this one homo first to make a fast buck. Took him for everything he had…almost! […] More money than bloody brains! Crazy about me! Old man’s a big shot millionaire […] It took some connin’, but I got in solid … weekly allowance, swell apartment, lotsa booze and company and a Cadillac convertible” (30). While one could argue that Rocky’s previous homosexual experiences, his vocal homophobia, and his relationship with Smitty are evidence of the play’s positioning of homosexuality as a universal potentiality, I would argue that Herbert includes this information about Rocky’s past to connect the oppressive power structures of the prison with those current in the culture at large. To view Rocky’s sexuality otherwise is to view his raping of Smitty (potentially) as an expression of repressed homosexuality, rather than a desperate act to maintain power and personal safety within the prison.
MONA: If I mattered, you’d be afraid of my feelings—not sure of them. You’re offering me—indifference. Well, I don’t want it.

SMITTY: Did you think I wanted your body? You make me sick. I wanted some kind of reaction to me, and only because I’m caught in this hellhole, you filthy fairy! You cocksucker!

MONA: You see? You see?

SMITTY (runs to the bars): Let me out of here! I’ll go to the bloody concert—anywhere—where there’s life— (Herbert Fortune 89).

In his proposition to Mona, Smitty reenacts the scene between himself and Rocky, but this time the roles are reversed: Smitty is doing the cajoling to convince Mona of the great opportunity he is proposing to him, while Mona is begging Smitty to not make such a terrible offer. As Wasserman points out, the relationship Smitty is offering to Mona is tantamount to the one he sees as deplorable between his father and mother, which he has just finished admonishing with Rocky (“John Herbert” 64). The similarity between son and father is not, however, the result of heredity, as Wasserman suggests. The play does not suggest that Smitty’s repressive actions are inevitable, and that they would emerge under any circumstances. Rather, this behaviour is drawn out by a corrupt culture that rewards those who can victimize others. The play posits the reoccurrence of this dynamic between father and son to demonstrate the cyclical nature of violence, in which the abused becomes abuser, aligning the prison system with society at large. Refusing Smitty’s offer, even though it may seem like a smart thing for Mona to do, brings this point into relief, and conveys the injustice of a society that enjoins people into false, inequitable relationships based not on their desires, but on fear and deceit. What Mona wants is a real connection with another man based upon mutual understanding, desire, respect, and choice,
something that is impossible within the prison, and that is equally difficult in a society that
demands compulsory heterosexuality, and criminalizes and ostracizes gender or sexual “deviance.”

Smitty’s actions in the scene demonstrate that he is scared, confused, and shell shocked: he has been psychologically damaged by being the victim of rape and subjugation, while his ability to form empathetic connections has been diminished in the pleasure of revenge that he felt in overthrowing Rocky. They also sadly express his desire for genuine connection, tragically articulated in his plea to be released, so that he can go anywhere “where there is life.” His final chance for redemption is found in a quasi-metatheatrical moment at the play’s end, when, in order to explain how he survives within the prison, Mona asks Smitty to read Shakespeare’s twenty-ninth sonnet:

When in disgrace with fortune and men’s eyes
I, alone, beweep my outcast state,
And trouble deaf heaven with my bootless cries,
And look upon myself, and curse my fate,
Wishing me like to one more rich in hope,
Featur’d like him, like him with friends possess’d
Desiring this man’s art, and that man’s scope,
With what I most enjoy, contented least;
Yet in these thoughts myself almost despising,
Haply I think on thee, and then my soul
(Like to the lark at break of day arising
From sullen earth) sings hymns at heavens gate;
For thy sweet love remembered such wealth brings,
That I then scorn to share my state with kings. (Herbert * Fortune* 90-1)

Through reading the sonnet, which juxtaposes physical and material circumstances of degradation with intellectual and emotional experiences of connection and love, Smitty understands that he and Mona, as prisoners and people, can, in their minds and in their actions, move beyond the limitations and corruption of the prison and society – their “outcast state.” *Fortune*’s liberal tragic structure pins its blame for the destruction of Smitty (and Queenie and Rocky before him) on a society that has abused and incarcerated him, and warped both his will to live/safety, and his desire for meaningful, empathetic connection and love. While the play does suggests that there is the potential for violence and hatred in each of us, it affirms that this instinct is brought out by corruption in our environments, that it can be resisted, and is therefore not inevitable. Indeed, in Mona we find the example of fighting against the baser instincts and fostering empathy, sympathy, and love. Mona communicates these attributes in his invocation of Shakespeare’s description of “the quality of mercy,” which “blesseth him that gives, and him that takes” and “is an attribute of God himself” (Herbert * Fortune* 76), when he sees the arrival of the new inmates and sadly states, “They’re all so young” (Herbert * Fortune* 11), and, in the reading of the sonnet. For Mona, life is not tragic in and of itself: life’s tragedies are the effects of unjust systems, abuses of power, oppression, marginalization, and lies. For Mona, the best way to fight against tragedy is to live a moral and ethical life. Even in his, the direst of circumstances, Mona finds hope for redemption and possibility in the writing of Shakespeare (which also acts as a rich metaphor for all things artistic, literary, and theatrical), and in loving, truthful, empathetic

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94 Indeed, this aspect of the play gives insight into why Herbert reacts so angrily in the CBC interview quoted at the opening of this chapter, when he is labeled “bitter.” For becoming bitter would be tantamount to being corrupted by the system, and losing both his moral sense and empathy. As he states in the interview, he was neither bitter nor hateful; he was angry.
connections with others, which he personifies in his honest rejection of Smitty. By reading the sonnet, Mona conveys to Smitty his strategy for survival in the prison: to think beyond his current circumstances, to nurture love and empathy, and to thus not allow the system to transform him into a criminal.

This redemptive moment is, however, interrupted by the violent entrance of Queenie and Rocky. Fearing that Smitty is going to alter the dynamics of power within the cell by creating an alliance with Mona, the two burst in and viciously try to separate them. Mona is struck and thrown aside by Queenie, “like a rag doll,” but, as the conflict ensues, Smitty is able to overpower the two aggressors. At this moment, with Smitty taking the upper hand against Queenie and Rocky, Holy Face enters, gun drawn. Queenie and Rocky both blame Mona, suggesting that when they arrived back from the concert he was making sexual advances towards Smitty. In an effort to protect himself and Mona, Smitty intimates to Holy Face that he knows that he has trafficked messages in and out of the prison, and will report him should the guard punish them. Smitty’s plan, however, backfires: Holy Face retaliates by believing the stories of Queenie and Rocky and takes Mona away to receive corporal punishment. Smitty tries to stop it, knowing that he is now at least partly responsible for Mona’s pain, but he is unsuccessful. This is where the play at the CLT ended, leaving the possibility of redemption open to Smitty as he has not yet become a criminal. The version that is published, and that was rejected by the theatre community in Toronto, which was changed at the encouragement of the play’s New York director, Mitchell Nestor, is one in which Smitty’s fate is unambiguously pronounced (Wagner and Cabrera). Hardened and without empathy, both Queenie and Rocky laugh as Mona is dragged away screaming, feeding Smitty’s rage. Before banishing them both to the shower room, Smitty informs them that through Baldy he has procured a place for himself as a “Politician” in
the “Office,” that he will be running the cell from this point forward, and that he will “pay them back” for their actions and lies (Herbert Fortune 96). Significantly, he then takes up his position as the new ruler of the dormitory, and the play concludes with a turn toward metatheatricality.

[Smitty] then walks, almost casually, down to Rocky’s bunk where cigarettes, which we have not seen him use before, and a lighter, lie on the side table. He picks up a cigarette, lights it, then stretches out on Rocky’s bed, torso upright against the back of it. Looking coolly out to the audience with a slight, twisted smile that is somehow cold, sadistic and menacing, he speaks his last line.

I’ll pay you all back. (Herbert Fortune 96)

In this moment, Smitty has become what Williams calls the “tragic victim,” which he describes as the once hero, who “define[d] an opposing world, full of lies and compromises and dead positions, only to find, as he struggles against it, that as a man he belongs to this world, and has its destructive inheritance in himself” (Modern 98). In his fight to save himself, he has capitulated to, and become a part of, the system, transforming himself into that which it had already pronounced him: a criminal. Smitty’s vengeful and violent treatment of Rocky, his dealings with Baldy, his attempt to blackmail Holy Face, and his sad proposal to Mona all illustrate that he has lost touch with the morality that motivated him to help his mother and fight against his father. As Williams suggests, and as Herbert does in his reading of Woyzeck, a literally criminal environment has succeeded in deforming Smitty’s inherent needs for security and love into hatred and violence. In this, the play’s final moment, its narrative arc, and its broader philosophical and political points are confirmed: Smitty, who entered prison as an innocent, is finally fully criminalized. Smitty’s direct address is central to Fortune’s critique because it implicates one community in the creation of another: the middle-class audience is
charged with fostering a criminal justice system that does not rehabilitate but criminalizes, does not integrate but marginalizes, and which is an extension of the inequitable power structures that govern society.

Williams’ conception of the other primary role in a liberal tragedy, that of “liberal martyr” is fulfilled by Mona. According to Williams, the liberal martyr is “the heroic liberator opposed and destroyed by a false society” (Modern 97). While Herbert’s version of the liberal martyr is less Romantic than that of Williams, Mona is not a “heroic liberator,” he is the character who most bravely fights against the system, and also pays the highest price for his commitment to his beliefs. Viewing Mona as a martyr makes the Christmas setting potentially meaningful; indeed, Ann Messenger suggests “it might not be going too far to consider Mona as a Christ figure” (178). I, however, argue that it is better to view Mona as an unwilling scapegoat punished equally for others’ crimes and sadistic pleasure. Positioning Mona as a Christ figure or a martyr also runs the risk of heroicizing him and the conditions he is forced to endure, when his experiences, both in the context of Fortune’s naturalism and Herbert’s biography, should be understood as those of many gay men within Canadian society before decriminalization – men like Everett George Klippert.

The casting of an African-American actor, Robert Christian, in the role of Mona, in both the New York premiere and in its touring production at the CLT, makes the dangers of valorizing Mona’s suffering that much more explicit. Indeed, in 1967, in New York perhaps even more so than in Toronto, to cast the play’s moral centre and its scapegoat with a black actor (and this is not a prerequisite of the script) is a powerful choice that invokes both the history of racism in the United States and the contemporary Civil Rights Movement. Mona’s active disengagement from

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95 Robert Christian was a gay man. He, like Producer David Rothenberg, was not out at this time, but would come out later.
the corrupt prison system echoes the kinds of civil disobedience practiced by Dr. Martin Luther
King and his followers, while the ways in which the play connects class and racial oppression is
in keeping with Dr. King’s analysis of the interconnections between class, economics, and
racialized oppression.

Rothenberg suggests that politics did not motivate Christian’s casting, and that he was
“just the best actor for the job,” a claim he supports by noting that Christian’s understudy was
white (Halferty “Rothenberg 2”). While this was no doubt their intentions, in a country still
struggling with desegregation in the South, as well as the demands for Civil Rights and economic
equality everywhere, this casting choice was politically charged and meaningful. Surprisingly,
Mona’s race was ignored by almost every scholar and newspaper reviewer, but I cannot think of
any image more damning to both American and Canadian society than Mona’s final exit: a
young, intelligent, and innocent African-American man, dragged away by a white police officer
to be brutally whipped.\footnote{The only scholar who addresses race in his/her analysis is Messenger. She briefly suggests that it was an error to
cast a black actor as it piles too much political weight on one character. According to Rothenberg, the critic from the
Amsterdam News, a black community newspaper in New York, felt that the portrayal of Mona was racist as it cast
the play’s weakest character with an African-American actor. I have not been able to find a copy of this review.
Other reviewers usually characterize Mona as a “sensitive negro.”}

Indeed, beyond the arguments I have been making here about Mona’s
sexuality, that the police officer is white and that Mona is to be whipped, one of the more iconic
forms of corporal punishment for African slaves, is a powerful and arresting image that indictsthe effects of slavery and racism. In 1967, a year after the formation of the Black Panther Party
and a year before King was assassinated, this casting decision adds a powerful racial dimension
to the play’s critique of the criminal justice system, as well as to the history of African-American
oppression in the U.S., and the contemporary racism of white America and Canada.

\textit{Fortune} furthers its political critique through a few instances of metatheatricality, the
most radical of which has already been explored: the play’s final moment, when Smitty
addresses the audience directly. The two others do not break the fourth wall with the same intensity, but are, nevertheless, equally significant to our discussion here as they situate the theatre/theatricality as a potentially powerful tool for gay men. The first is Queenie’s drag number, and the second is Mona’s recitation of the “quality of mercy” speech from *The Merchant of Venice*. In these scenes, both Queenie and Mona self-consciously use theatrical performance toward their own empowerment and liberation. Queenie’s is camp and parodic. It allows him to express his homosexuality and gender difference, which he performs to the affirmation of the play’s other characters. Mona’s performance is serious, earnest and unambiguously stages his maltreatment as an offense, which is met with censorship by prison authorities. These metatheatrical enactments are significant because they echo Herbert’s treatment by the theatre in Toronto in significant ways. First, as discussed in the biographical section of this chapter, he too dressed in drag and performed as a female impersonator, both inside and outside of prison, which he found to be empowering, and an important tool of critique. Second, the scenes dramaturgically position the theatre as site and theatricality as means for gay men to empower themselves, which Herbert achieved in spectacular fashion with *Fortune*. Third, just as Herbert was unable to find the support he needed in Toronto to stage *Fortune*, both of these moments detail the limits of theatricality as a form of resistance.

Queenie’s drag number demonstrates both the transformative pleasures that can be gleaned through transgender performance, and alludes to the limits of such performances within

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97 Herbert protested the failure of CentreStage, the resident company of the St. Lawrence Centre, to program Canadian plays by appearing in full drag at the opening night of the play that inaugurated the theatre’s second season: a ten-year-old Broadway comedy called *Mary, Mary*, by Jean Kerr. According to Herbert, if CentreStage was going to program Broadway shows, his alter ego, “Carol Desmond,” would provide the glamour that such an opening warranted(!). In his memoirs, Herbert richly details “Carol’s” outfit, and that he bought five tickets to the show to give Carol the illusion of sitting in a box. Herbert writes the following of the altercation that Carol and Leon Major, CentreStage’s artistic director, had as she exited the theatre: “Leon Major said: ‘Years ago, you might have been mildly amusing.’ In my best stage voice, projected to the far reaches of the lobby, I replied, ‘So might your production.’ Kate Reid, standing nearby in her full-length mink coat, applauded my exit all the way to the waiting limousine” (Herbert “Biographical Notes”).
a deeply heteronormative society. Presented as a rehearsal for the prison’s annual Christmas Concert, Queenie wears a platinum blond wig, looking “like a combination of Gorgeous George, Sophie Tucker and Mae West,” and his performance is described as a “parody of ‘A Good Man is Hard to Find’” (Herbert Fortune 70). Queenie’s opening line reveals at least his intended audience, but also subtly invokes the “immorality” of the relationships enjoined by the prison system: “Here is a story, without morals / An’ all you fags better pay some mind/ ‘Cause if ya find a man worth keepin’ / Be satisfied—an’ treat him kind” (Fortune 70, my emphasis). There is a double meaning here in Queenie’s invocation of “morals.” On the one hand, he is delighting in his ironic send-up of the “immorality” of homosexual relationships, and on the other, within the context of the prison, he suggests that there is good reason to hold on to a man who treats you well, as the truly immoral actions of physical abuse and rape are often the only alternatives. Indeed, in his opening, Queenie is advocating for a mode of survival, both within the prison and beyond, that is opposite to Mona’s. He suggests that if a “fag” finds a man who is not abusive, regardless of circumstance, that he should use this opportunity to his best advantage. But there is also a third meaning here, which would be Mona’s meaning, that the relationships Queenie describes are always already immoral, because they issue from a system corrupted by its lack of liberty.

Queenie’s performance/rehearsal is received positively by his peers, the stage directions for which read:

   there is spontaneous applause [at the end of Queenie’s number], from even Rocky and the Guard, for there is an all-embracing extrovert quality to Queenie’s performance that is somehow contagious, partly because of a warmth of feeling
Queenie “is happy within himself and his surroundings,” because he is allowed to perform his “true self” within a permissive and even encouraging context. While this performance is in every way marginal (after all, he is in a prison cell) he is not afraid to expose his sexual and gender difference. Rather, he is described as “controlled” and “confident” in his “sex-conscious movements” (Herbert Fortune 70), and it is precisely this camp theatricality, with its requisite edge of biting truth (Queenie is a gay man who loves to dress in drag) that transforms his obviously dire surroundings so totally that he may find “happiness.” In this theatricalized context, Queenie’s feminine gender performance and homosexuality can be provisionally affirmed and even celebrated. Thus, Queenie uses drag as mode of theatrical performance to empower himself within the prison, which demonstrates the extent to which theatricality is positioned within the play as a site of possibility and resistance for homosexual self-expression and apparent fulfillment. At this distance, Queenie’s satisfaction with himself echoes Herbert’s own experiences of drag, both in “Paris After Midnight,” and in his own Christmas concert drag performance, which he staged while incarcerated, and which is described in his autobiographical short story, “The Sissy,” as “engineered” by prison authorities for “public humiliation,” but which ends up “a truly remarkable triumph” (Herbert “The Sissy” 181). 98 Herbert also incorporates the limits of such performances through a warning from Holy Face: “No more surprises like [stripping at last year’s Christmas concert], Queenie, or your concert days will be

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98 In this autobiographical story, Herbert suggest that, while in prison, he affected a queerly feminine gender performance to rebel against prison authority: he altered his clothing to look more feminine, used carpenters pencils to accent his eyebrows, and mixed cold cream with soot to create homemade mascara. Like Queenie in Fortune, Herbert recounts performing in drag for the penitentiary’s Christmas concert: the performance was “as arrogant as it was vulnerable and as hated by the prison authorities as it was loved by the men deprived of their freedom” (Herbert “The Sissy” 192).
over. The conveners of this one had a hell of a time getting the General to trust you again”
(Herbert Fortune 73). At the previous year’s Christmas concert, Queenie used the opportunity to
launch an attack against the prison’s authority by transforming his funny drag act into an
aggressive and sexual strip tease, which he paid for by being sent to the “tower.”

Like Queenie’s performance, Mona’s is staged as a rehearsal for the Christmas Concert.
In the scene, he plays Portia from *The Merchant of Venice*, who, dressed as a lawyer, argues with
Shylock for mercy on Bassanio’s behalf. Putting readings of gender subversion aside – in a scene
that presents Mona, a boy, playing Portia, a girl, playing a visiting legal cleric, a man – Mona’s
call for mercy and tolerance staged through this metatheatrical performance powerfully positions
theatricality as a means for the oppressed to speak. After much taunting by Queenie and Rocky,
and some encouragement from Smitty, who says he knows the scene from studying it in high
school, Mona delivers his monologue: “MONA begins very hesitantly, stuttering (with comic
pathos and badly spoken)—as others giggle and roll eyes, etc. QUEENIE AND ROCKY interrupt
Mona’s speech throughout” (Herbert Fortune 75-76). Mona makes it partway through the
speech, but the catcalls from Queenie and Rocky cause him to lose his focus. Ultimately, Holy
Face cuts the rehearsal short, and Mona is pulled off stage by Queenie to join the other
performers for the concert.

Similar to the prohibition that Herbert himself faced in Toronto with *Fortune*, Mona’s
monologue is censored by prison authorities. He rehearses the monologue and goes to the
performance but, at the last minute, he is sent back: “[The warden] decided I shouldn’t do any
Shakespeare. […] [He] said they would only laugh at me and make life more unpleasant
afterwards” (Herbert Fortune 82). But these are clearly lame excuses. It is neither Shakespeare,

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99 Queenie does this in the film version of *Fortune*. For a reading of how it queerly subverts heteronormative
conceptions of sex, gender, and sexuality, see Dickinson, “Critically Queenie.”
nor a concern for Mona’s wellbeing that motivates this act of censorship. It is rather the content of the speech, with its message of mercy, tolerance, dignity, empathy and forgiveness, which is too much for the prison authorities to bear. In this scene, Herbert cleverly stages both the monologue’s message of compassionate mercy, through its rehearsal, and the limits of the theatre and theatricality, and the disdain of real criticism by the disenfranchised against those in authority, by displaying the censorship and false excuses that Mona faces, and which Herbert himself faced in his attempts to stage *Fortune* in Toronto.

When I went to New York to interview David Rothenberg, and told him I was looking at *Fortune* as an example of Canadian gay theatre, he more than once suggested that at the time of its production, and even for him today, as an openly gay man, the play was not intended to be a “gay play.” The play was rather a protest against the immoral treatment of people by the criminal justice system, and the various modes of social domination endemic to our society, for which the milieu of the prison acts as a microcosm (Halferty “Rothenberg 2”). This is undoubtedly true. However, included in the play’s broad critique of society are homosexual men, which is of particular political importance in the years before the decriminalization of homosexuality in Canada, and specifically for its production at the CLT in 1967, when the criminality of homosexuality was being debated in Parliament and in society. This is because *Fortune* incorporated homosexual men into the impassioned plea it made for legal reform in the years before the decriminalization of homosexuality in Canada, and through its representations of the injustice that homosexuals and other marginalized people experienced in the criminal justice system, and in society generally. By doing so, the play paved the way for the same kinds of critiques, analyses, and actions to be launched by the gay liberation movement. Despite Rothenberg’s or even Herbert’s intentions at the time, the production at the CLT provided, in
Cohen’s words, a look at the “realities of […] a society’s subcultures,” and “a stunning call for understanding and reform” (“Fortune”).

If the link between what was represented onstage and the lives of gay men in Toronto was at all tenuous for its audiences during its run at the CLT, it was most certainly not on Fortune’s opening night. At its premiere, not only was Herbert present but Alan Maloney arrived at the theatre dressed as his drag persona, “Brandy.” According to Rothenberg, “He was like a star!” (Halferty “Rothenberg 1”). “Brandy came to the opening night in Toronto in full drags […] and […] of course, Brandy was thrilled seeing himself onstage [in the character of Queenie], he knew it immediately!” (Rothenberg qtd. in Wagner John Herbert: Fortune). If there was any confusion that this play sought to highlight the oppression that homosexual men in Canada faced at this time, that it sought to create spaces for the lives of men like Maloney and Herbert, it would surely have been dispelled by Brandy’s presence. It is perhaps an anachronism to say that Brandy “queered” the space that night, but her presence would most certainly have acted as a para-theatrical performance of queer identity, one that undoubtedly echoed Queenie’s and Mona’s drag performances within the play, as well as with the protests it launched against the injustice of criminalizing and marginalizing of homosexuals. Brandy’s and Herbert’s presence, as survivors of the criminal justice systems, and, as very proud, out, and angry gay men, highlighted the direct relationship between the lives of the characters onstage and the people gathered in the audience. In every aspect of its staging, and most certainly on its opening night, Fortune at the CLT was a powerful act of theatrical protest against the criminalization and marginalization of gay men in Toronto, Canada, and beyond.

George Ryga would later characterize Fortune as “the ice-breaker in the channel,” (qtd. in Wasserman “Introduction” 15) referring to the deluge of new Canadian plays that would
follow in its wake. The same can be said of *Fortune* in relation to representations of gay men in Canadian theatre, and particularly in Toronto’s alternative/alternate theatre movement. As we will see in the next chapter, beginning almost immediately after its production at the CLT, the newly established Alternative theatre movement included a comparative superabundance of representations of gay males. The greater number of gay men represented on Toronto’s stages does not, however, denote direct connections between gay liberationists and the artists who came together to form the Alternative theatres in the city. The increase was due, at least in part, to the emergence of gay liberation and to the revolutionary idea that gay issues were political issues – a change in consciousness that was taking place for homosexuals and heterosexuals alike. But the nascent Alternative theatre had its own political priorities, which were fundamentally different from those of gay liberation. While *Fortune*’s production at the CLT heralded the way for the explosion of gay liberation activism in the city, and there were significant changes in the terms of reception for representations of gay men on stage, the criminal and pathological understandings of homosexuality were slow to lose their popular currency. Throughout the 1970s, gay men, politics, and community continued to agitate at the radical fringe of society, where they had, at best, an ambivalent relationship with Toronto’s Alternative theatre.

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100 From this point on, it will be referred to as “Alternative.”
CHAPTER TWO:

Nascent Communities, Conflicting Politics: Gay Liberation and Toronto’s Alternative Theatre Movement, 1967-1976

CUIRETTE: […] The important thing is that you be yourself, that’s all. I think that’s all….Claude….it’s not Hosanna that I love. […] Take off your make-up …. Go on, take it off …. 

HOSANNA gets up and sits down at her make-up table. She removes her wig, and then takes off her make-up. She looks at herself in the mirror. 

HOSANNA: Cleopatra is dead, and the Parc Lafontaine is all lit up!

She gets up, takes off her underpants, and turns slowly toward CUIRETTE. 

Look, Raymond, I'm a man… I'm a man, Raymond… I'm a man… I’m a man… I’m a man….

RAYMOND gets up, goes toward CLAUDE, and takes him in his arms. 

Slow fade. 

Closing scene of Hosanna, Michel Tremblay

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COOPER dashes to the wall and writes a number in large numerals above the urinals. 

SARA LEE: What is it? 

COOPER: My phone number. I want you all to call me. You, Meredith, Curtis… (To the Duke) You… (to the audience) whoever comes into this can: 

I want you all to call.
FLICK: You’re crazy, man.

COOPER: I want you all to come over – to my place. I want you all to come home. I want you all to march with me, dance with me, make love with me…

Closing scene, No Deposit, No Return, Robert Wallace

Michel Tremblay’s Hosanna and Robert Wallace’s No Deposit, No Return (NDNR) share a number of similarities. They are plays by Canadian playwrights written and performed in the mid-1970s. They are gay plays that traffic in similar, stereotypical gay characters, and share a number of performance conventions. It is, however, what differentiates these plays that marks their importance in a history of gay theatre in Toronto. In Claude’s proclamation of his true self, and Cooper’s metatheatrical and interrogative invitation to engage with anyone with him in the subway bathroom, where the play is set, or, indeed, in the theatre that night, we find the two ideological positions that inform the politics of the Alternative theatre and gay liberation movements in Toronto. The former represents a liberal, humanist politic of individualism, progress, and maturity, espoused and promoted by Toronto’s Alternative theatres and by its theatre critics in the 1970s. The latter expresses a Marxist- and feminist-influenced gay-liberationist politic, one based on the social and political imperatives of building gay community, and on “raising the consciousness” of an oppressed group. These ideological differences run through these two plays and their productions. Hosanna’s liberal humanist politics made it the most successful play of the decade in Canada; No Deposit, No Return’s gay liberation politics limited it to one staging at a gay-identified theatre in New York, and prohibited its production and publication in Toronto and Canada in the 1970s.
In Toronto in the 1970s, the gay liberationist position on art and culture came into direct conflict with the dominant liberal humanist one, held by both the new Alternative theatres and many of their Canadian nationalist forebears. The gay liberation stance was largely influenced by feminist politics, which proclaimed the “personal is political,” and Marxist politics, which focused on issues of community and class, and on the concepts of oppression and liberation. Gay liberationists emphasized the social and political nature of art, rejecting the universal and timeless for the specific and contextual, finding theatre’s value in its ability to raise political consciousness and to form community. Its narratives focused on community, and the relationships and conflicts that existed among gay men as a marginalized group, rather than the struggles of a single protagonist. Generally speaking, and there are some exceptions, Toronto’s Alternative theatres held a liberal humanist position on art in the 1970s. They understood certain “truths” about the experience of the individual to be both universal and transhistorical. Due to these timeless qualities, they conceived of good art as ultimately apolitical as it tells unchanging truths about the human condition, the nature of the individual (who is usually male), and affirms him as the most important social unit.

Perhaps paradoxically, the Alternative theatres took up liberal humanist ideologies as a form of political rebellion against an oppressive colonial (i.e. British) past, and a present threatened by an imperial and hegemonic American culture. Alternative theatre artists, and the critics and scholars who supported them, embraced a liberal humanist position because it allowed them to naturalize, and thus depoliticize, narratives of Canadian nationalism by affirming Canada’s position as a “maturing,” cohesive, and authentic nation. The work of these artists was to be distinct from their British and French forbearers and their American neighbours, but its importance and quality was to be measured by the same criteria. The
liberal humanist position allowed Canadian theatre practitioners to view their creation of “indigenous” Canadian theatre as both a political project of postcolonial liberation, and an inevitable process, the next step in an inexorable narrative national maturity.\textsuperscript{101} Liberal humanist ideology was flexible enough to allow Alternative theatre artists to peripherally engage what is really a Marxist narrative of class politics and national liberation, narratives that had been playing out all over the postcolonial world, within the quite different political context of the European settler cultures of Canada. What seems to be less apparent at the time was the way the revolutionary change from “theatre in Canada” to “Canadian theatre” actually upheld older theatrical forms and structures of power by simply installing new actors, so to speak, in the same roles held by their British and American forebears.

The history of the Alternative theatre movement, its social, political, and aesthetic innovations and their significance, are well documented in theatre scholarship, having been approached from a number of perspectives.\textsuperscript{102} Its many representations of gay men, however, and its relationship to gay liberation and gay community formation in Toronto and Canada have not been investigated.

Gay liberationist politics conflicted with liberal humanist discourses in Toronto and Canadian theatre. The Alternatives’ commitment to these politics and their attendant forms mitigated against the possibility of gay theatrical production that directly engaged the immediate political concerns of Toronto’s gay community, in spite of the comparative superabundance of gay characters represented on its stages. By comparing three

\textsuperscript{101} For an analysis of the extent to which such cultural productions, particularly Centennial and Expo celebrations, supported particular power relations, agendas, and goals for the creation of a specific vision of “Canada,” see Mackey.

representative case studies from this period in this chapter, we see the disconnects between gay liberation organizing in the city and representations of gay men on Toronto stages. We discern the ideological underpinnings of the Alternative theatres and the effects of these commitments on gay theatre in the city.

These currents are apparent in the production and reception of the most successful play to concern gay subjects staged in Toronto in the 1970s: the Tarragon Theatre’s production of Michel Tremblay’s *Hosanna*. *Hosanna* achieved tremendous popular and critical success because its production invoked a liberal humanist ideology that encouraged people to cast off false identities and accept their “true” selves, sentiments that resonated with the Alternative theatres in Toronto, who were eager to represent and affirm Canada’s status as a fully developed and mature nation, and their work as part of its similarly reputable national repertoire. The play, which focuses on a drag queen/transsexual and her leatherman lover, does not investigate the specifics of her world and life experience. Rather, it uses the image of the drag queen as the paragon of an identity in crisis, whose recognition of his authentic self/sex enabled the play to “rise above” its local milieu and tell a “universal truth.”

Given Tremblay’s Quebec-separatist politics and intentions for this play, it is ironic that this dramaturgy enabled *Hosanna* in Toronto to express the Alternative theatre’s fervent nationalism, which was based on an essentialized conception of Canada’s regions coming together to form a unified nation, which included Quebec. *Hosanna*’s production and reception sits in stark contrast to that of Robert Wallace’s *No Deposit, No Return (NDNR)*, staged in 1975 in New York at the WSDG Gay Theatre. Unlike *Hosanna*, *NDNR* was

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103 Hosanna’s subjectivity as a drag queen or a transsexual is both debatable and problematic. Indeed, Hosanna does say that he has wanted to “be” a woman since childhood, which one might associate with transsexual subjectivity, but he does not live as a woman full time, and, in the end, he rejects his femininity that undergirds both positions. For a discussion of how this ambiguity, as well as the narrative of rejection, elide the possibility of transsexual existence, see Namaste 109-18.
directly related to the politics of gay community, and gay liberation ideology undergirds its form and content, making it a gay liberationist play. These politics, I argue, prevented its production in Toronto and publication in Canada, which are investigated here through an analysis of *Canadian Theatre Review*’s (CTR) “Homosexuality and the Theatre” issue, edited by openly gay playwright and actor, David Watmough. Reviewing the issue demonstrates how a liberal humanist conception of art also informed Watmough’s editorial decisions, preventing the publication of Wallace’s play, and provoking a scathing critique in the pages of *The Body Politic: A Magazine for Gay Liberation* (TBP) by gay liberation activist and University of Toronto English Professor, Michael Lynch.

The last chapter’s historical contextualization of Fortune’s development primarily focused on Herbert’s biography, while its performance at the CLT was couched in the contemporaneous debates surrounding the decriminalization of homosexuality. Because this chapter addresses the political emergence of gay liberation and its effects within gay community and theatrical production in Toronto, we return to the same period in the city’s history but at a macro level. In this chapter, we contextualize these texts by investigating the politics of gay community in the post-War years, and the beginning of the reformation of gay community, which was prompted by the decriminalizing of homosexuality and the emergence of the gay liberation movement.

**Reforming Community: The Gay Liberation Movement in Toronto**

In the period between the end of the Second World War and the advent of gay liberation in 1969, “Toronto the Good” did not enjoy the “homophile” political organizing that developed in cities such as New York and Los Angeles. During this period, the city’s homosexual population was comprised of networks of men and women who, while not
organized in a political sense, did engage in various forms of social and sexual interaction, and subaltern forms of community, which we saw in the previous chapter.\footnote{\textsuperscript{104} The notable exception to Toronto’s lack of political origination pre-1970 is “Gay Magazine,” an anomalous yet significant exception. It was a gay tabloid based in Toronto, which published from 1964 to 1966. See McLeod \textit{Brief}.} David S. Churchill’s work on gay life in Toronto in the 1950s demonstrates how gay men in particular capitalized on their mobility by “coloniz[ing] and subvert[ing] certain spaces,” such as parks, bars, movie theatres and public toilets, “mak[ing] them part of a same-sex topography” (830). Significantly, these men exploited (and were exploited by)\footnote{\textsuperscript{105} The same tabloids commonly published the names of men who were arrested in such public spaces. See Churchill.} local tabloid and scandal sheets, which, according to Churchill, “provided a very public accounting of gay social space, informing readers about location, custom, and argot without divulging the specific autobiographical details of individuals” (827). The final caveat is tremendously important as it differentiates the nature of gay community organizing and consciousness in the city in the pre- and post-gay liberation/decriminalization periods. In the earlier era, anonymity and secrecy made a homosexual life, interactions, and community possible. In the years before decriminalization and gay liberation, running alongside the dominant social order and surreptitiously colonizing and subverting certain spaces were the primary strategies of gay life and community. In the years after, visibility, openness, and gay politicization (identity politics) constituted the new and most efficacious modes of community formation. As the political and epistemological terrain that underlay homosexuality changed, so too did the possibilities of gay life and living, of which the gay liberation slogan “out of the closets/bars, into the streets” is a cogent demonstrative testament.
The virulent homophobia of the time, and the broad epistemological shift in consciousness required for homosexual men and women to “come out” in the numbers necessary to produce any kind of legal, political, or social power, is most clearly expressed in the “national security” campaigns against homosexuals, which the government began to execute in the late 1940s, and, according to Gary Kinsman and Patrizia Gentile, extended to the late 1990s. Homosexuality’s long association with criminality included it within the continued purview of the nation’s legal statutes, and the agents of the law at national, provincial, and municipal levels. In the post-War period, following its American counterpart, the Canadian government undertook a number of initiatives that aimed at identifying and expunging “national security risks,” civil servants who could become targets of blackmail, including: alcoholics, compulsive gamblers, and people who engaged in a whole range of sexual taboos, such as hiring prostitutes, having extramarital love affairs, engaging in bigamy, and, of course, homosexuality (Sawatsky 25). Despite the broad sweep of their criteria, homosexual men were the primary target of the RCMP. In his study of the period, John Sawatsky writes:

The RCMP viewed homosexuality as a grievous moral offense and concentrated on this characteristic at the expense of the other practices even though the others posed equally great, if not greater, security risks. The Force’s bias was reinforced by the departmental policy of arbitrarily firing all discovered homosexuals without bothering to determine whether they actually were a risk. (125)

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106 For coverage of similar activities in the United States, see D'Emilio “Homosexual Menace.”
Incorporating the legal, medical, and increasingly political discourses through which knowledge about the homosexual was produced, the Canadian government characterized gays and lesbians as “subversives,” associated them with Communists, and charged them with exhibiting “character weaknesses,” all of which, they reasoned, made them easy targets for blackmail by Soviet agents, and unsuitable for any type of government employment (Kinsman “Constructing” 143).

The need to focus on the homosexual “threat” was considered so grave that the government instructed the Royal Canadian Mounted Police (RCMP) to create a special investigations unit, which was called “A-3,” whose mandate was to identify and purge homosexuals from within its ranks (Sawatsky 125).107 Beginning in 1961, it also invested funds to research and create a machine that could “scientifically” detect a homosexual through a battery of physiological stimulus and response tests. Dubbed the “fruit machine” by insiders at the RCMP, the government intended it to be a more efficient alternative to costly and time-consuming field investigation.108 During this period, the government fired hundreds of employees who were, or who it suspected of being, homosexual (Kinsman Regulation 172-74). Importantly for our purposes here, Sawatsky notes that the government’s anti-gay campaigns were not common knowledge at this time because most of the men discovered did not protest: “even the few who protested internally were frightened of possible public exposure. Most would sooner lose their jobs” (Sawatsky 127). This is significant because it demonstrates that in the period before gay liberation, “coming out,” having “pride,” organizing politically, and demanding rights, or even standing up against a

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108 Brian Drader wrote a play about this piece of Canadian history called The Fruit Machine.
wrongful dismissal were unfathomable to the middle-class men who lost their jobs as a result of the security campaigns.

According to Jim Egan, “Canada’s first gay activist,” “Toronto just wasn’t the sort of place [in the 1950s] where many gays would have supported an organized gay rights group” (43). This lack of activism was due to two factors in particular: the dangers associated with being caught, which are demonstrated in Herbert’s biography, and the relative availability of subaltern homosexual sex, networks, and community, if one sought them out. As Egan recalls, gay men had “to keep their sexuality hidden from family, friends, and the boss,” for fear of the damage that such a disclosure could cause, “but as long as that was done there were places to meet, places to cruise, and so on” (Egan and McLeod 43).

Egan’s activism is an important exception to the city’s lack of homophile politics in the period before 1970. Beginning in the late 1940s, he undertook his own brand of protest, writing letters to editors of local newspapers and magazines to take issue with the negative ways they represented homosexuality. He sent story ideas to a number of American magazines, pitching pieces that depicted homosexuality in a noncriminal, nonpathological, “honest and straightforward fashion” – all of which were rejected (Egan and McLeod 119). Writing both under his own name and pseudonyms, he published a number of pieces about being a homosexual in the local tabloids, and also played an important part in the early coverage of homosexuality in the mainstream press, which began with increasing regularity in the 1960s. In 1953 he began to correspond with members of the Mattachine Society in Los Angeles and, in 1959, attended the fifth Midwinter Institute of ONE Incorporated, a homophile organization and magazine established by some Mattachine Society members in

\[109\] For the original article, see Katz, “Homosexual.”
1952. Feeling alienated and ineffective, however, Egan would abandon his gay activism in 1964, when he left Toronto with his partner Jack Nesbit to resettle in Duncan, British Columbia. In his autobiography, he remembers that after more than fifteen years of nearly solitary activism in Toronto, he had become frustrated by the lack of effect his efforts were having within the city’s homosexual subculture. He recounts, for example, being at a local bar, the Music Room, in 1964, where a fellow congratulated him on a letter to the editor that was published in a local newspaper. When Egan thanked the man and proposed that he might write a letter of his own, “[the man] looked as though I’d stabbed him!” Egan continues:

He became very nervous and scuttled away. This was the sort of passivity in the community that infuriated me. […] I was becoming disillusioned with the congratulations I received for my activities, but no real support. (Egan and McLeod 91)

In short, Egan felt alienated. Despite his efforts, he had not been successful in creating a community of activists who would work openly to change society’s views of homosexuality, which he witnessed in cities in the U.S. In fact, Egan was approached by some well established, closeted gay men who urged him to stop his work as it would endanger the anonymity upon which Toronto’s gay world functioned (Egan and McLeod 84).

1969 was a watershed year in gay history, not only in New York, but in Toronto and Canada also. It is, of course, the year when the Stonewall Riots took place in New York City, when “gay liberation” emerged as a rubric under which new forms of gay thinking, consciousness, and community would be organized. In Canada, it is also the year that

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110 Although gay liberationists in the U.S. saw themselves as distinct from homophile organizers and activists, there were a number of demonstrations in the U.S. that had similar political aims that came before the Stonewall Riots. For example, the Mattachine Society staged its first demonstration at the White House in 1965, and the “Committee for Homosexual Freedom,” a group comprised of countercultural radicals, was formed in San Francisco in the spring of 1969 to protest the firing of a gay man from his job (Warner Never 62).
homosexuality between consenting adults in private was made legal. Prior to 1969, there was one “homophile” group in Canada, Vancouver’s the Association for Social Knowledge (ASK), founded in 1964. After 1969, there would be “homophile,” then gay organizations formed across the country around a large number of political and social concerns.111

Gay liberation, the political ideology that would energize gay-community organizing in Toronto throughout the decade, finds its antecedents in the feminist, black civil rights, anti-war, and countercultural movements in the U.S. in the 1960s. It was “launched,” so to speak, with the Stonewall Riots, and the establishment of the Gay Liberation Front (GLF) in New York, which followed directly thereafter. The movement quickly spread with similar groups established in other North American cities, in Western Europe, and in Australasia – each engaging the gay liberationist tenets of coming out, visibility, and community formation as the foundation of their activities in their own particular social, cultural, and political contexts. Unlike the American homophile movements that preceded it, which sought greater acceptance for homosexuals within broader society, the early gay liberationists called for a full-scale “revolutionary” sexuality, which sought the “sexual liberation” of society as a whole.112

The movement’s revolutionary sexuality was philosophically based on a mixture of Freudian psychoanalytic theory, specifically inherent bisexuality, and Marxist political

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111 In Toronto, where, as detailed above, there was no overt political organizing prior to decriminalization, the period between 1969 and 1975 boasts an unprecedented number of highly visible firsts in gay and lesbian community formation: the first gay student group, which was in fact the city’s first gay organization, the University of Toronto Homophile association (October 1969); the first non-university, political and service organization, the Community Homophile Association of Toronto (October 1969); the first literary gay press, Catalyst Press (1970); the first gay liberation political group, Toronto Gay Action (1971); the first gay liberation newspaper, The Body Politic: A Magazine for Gay Liberation (1971); the first gay youth group, Gay Youth Toronto, (1972); the first (and only) gay archives, the Canadian Lesbian and Gay Archives, (1973); and the first lesbian-specific political group, the Radical Lesbians (1974).

112 The GLF also sought to establish coalitions with other “revolutionary” groups, such as the Black Panther Party. Famously, Huey Newton, leader of the Black Panthers, wrote a letter of support for the GLF. This letter is published in The Gay Liberation Book, edited by Len Richmond and Gary Noguera.
theory. It envisioned the sexual liberation of society as an effect of a world free of
“homosexual stigma,” sexism, and patriarchy, which would take the form of a free-flowing
bisexuality and a more androgynous gender identification. Kate Millet, for example, argued,
“a sexual revolution would bring about the following conditions desirable upon rational,
moral and humanistic grounds: […] Unisex, or the separatist character structure,
temperament and behaviour. So that each individual may develop an entire – rather than a
partial, limited, and conformist – personality” (1). Similarly, Dennis Altman, in his early,
seminal book, Homosexual: Oppression and Liberation, which looks at the movement on an
international scale, but is primarily predicated upon gay liberation in the U.S., contends:

> In the long run, then, gay liberation will succeed as its raison d’être
disappears. We are, I believe, moving toward a far greater acceptance of
human sexuality and with that toward both a decrease in stigma attached to
unorthodox sex and a corresponding increase in overt bisexuality.

*(Homosexual 246)*

Following a Marxist teleology, gay/sexual liberation was thought to be part of a broad-based
liberation of society, which would culminate in the end of the nation state (they were rather
heady days, indeed). Thus, Altman would argue: “To see the total withering away of the
distinction between homo- and heterosexual is to be utopian. I suspect however, it will come
before the withering away of the state and may indeed be a necessary prelude to that”
*(Homosexual 246).*

The impact of gay liberation on the homosexual community in Toronto, as well as the
impetus and framework it provided for activism and community formation, cannot be
underestimated. In practical terms, its “revolutionary” rhetoric, though unquestionably held
by the movement’s activists, was slightly tempered in Toronto and Canada by the local
movement’s emphasis on community formation *through* civil rights rhetoric and agitating.
Indeed, from its beginning, the gay liberation movement in Toronto and elsewhere concerned
itself with, and organized itself around, the acquisition of civil rights. In early August 1971,
for example, a “Toronto Gay Action” – a resolutely gay liberationist organization, and which
differentiated itself from Community Homophile Association of Toronto on these terms –
prepared a brief that was endorsed by gay organizations across Canada, and was submitted to
the Federal Government. This brief begins with a preamble about the recent amendments to
the Criminal Code in 1969, Bill C-150, which legalized certain sexual acts between two
consenting adults in private, and how “this was widely misunderstood as ‘legalizing’
homosexuality and thus putting homosexuals on an equal basis with other Canadians.” “In
fact,” the brief continues, “this amendment was merely a recognition of the non-enforceable
nature of the Criminal Code as it existed. Consequently, its effects have done but little to
alleviate the oppression of homosexual men and women in Canada.” The 1969 Omnibus bill
that decriminalization of homosexual acts was not, after all, and anti-discrimination
legislation. The brief’s preamble concluded with this statement:

That prejudice against homosexual people pervades society is, in no small
way, attributed to practices of the federal government. Therefore we, as
homosexual citizens of Canada, present the following brief to our government
as a means of redressing our grievances. We demand: […]. (Jackson and
Persky 217)

These statements are followed by ten highly articulate and specific “demands,” which
include everything from the removal of terms like “gross indecency” and “indecent act” from
the Criminal Code, to “all legal rights for homosexuals which currently exist for heterosexuals.” The decriminalization of homosexual acts was not a de-pathologization of homosexuality, nor did it afford gay men and lesbians the same rights as their heterosexual peers. Following its submission, on 28 August 1971 over 200 gay men and lesbians rallied on Parliament Hill in Ottawa in support of the brief, the first such public demonstration in Canada. While it was organized by gay liberationist groups, the rally “demanded” civil rights inclusions (Jackson and Persky 217-20).

This civil rights action was followed by the high-profile nearly decade-long battle to reinstate John Damien and Doug Wilson, who had both been fired from their jobs for being gay, and by concerted attempts to have “sexual orientation” included in the Ontario Human Rights Code. In Toronto, fighting for civil rights as a means to build a social movement was imperative because the city lacked a history of gay political organizing. According to Tom Warner, the majority of gay men and lesbians in the early 1970s feared that gay liberationists’ focus on “visibility and militancy […] would generate a backlash that could threaten the few meeting places that they had been able to establish” (Warner Never 70). In comparison to the radical gay liberationists politics that sought the end of homo- and heterosexuality, rights-based activism emerges organically out of the already existing liberal discourses and frameworks that underlie all aspects of Canadian society and the state. Gay rights activists also profited from the work of earlier civil rights movements, making its demands clear and its tenets easily understood. Moreover, civil rights rhetoric allowed gay activists to align their grievances with previous civil rights movements, and to articulate these complaints in the same terms of justice and equality. Civil rights provided a practical
strategy to foster visibility, to raise consciousness, and to reach and politicize alienated homosexuals who lived closeted lives.

The Toronto movement’s focus on civil rights did not, however, mean it was uncommitted to the lofty goals of gay liberation. Many activists in the movement made it quite clear that they endorsed civil rights agitation only as a strategy for forming a strong gay community, which would in turn bring about the sexual liberation of society. The civil rights strategy was a topic of lively debate among gay liberationists in the early 1970s. Brian Waite, for example, made the following arguments about its importance to gay liberation:

I feel strongly that the movement in Ontario will greatly strengthen itself if we organize jointly to demand the inclusion of the term ‘sexual orientation’ in the Ontario Human Rights Code. Winning this demand will give life to the words ‘gay pride.’ It will impel and enable thousands more brothers and sisters to join us in future campaigns for full sexual liberation for humankind...children, adolescents and adults, no matter what their position on the sexual continuum. HOMOSEXUALITY IS A HUMAN RIGHT![sic]

Waite argues for civil rights strategy, while he also expresses a radical gay liberationist politic in his call for the full sexual liberation of “humankind” and his inclusion of children as a population that also needs to be sexually liberated – a controversial topic that upset many lesbians, and alienated them from the movement in this period. His call for the inclusion of sexual orientation in the Ontario Human Rights Code is also couched in the goals of “future campaigns for full sexual liberation for human kind.” For gay liberationists in Toronto in the early 1970s, where the gay community had no history of political organization, civil rights

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113 See Ross, “Coalition Politics.”
activism was an important strategy and provided a foundation upon which a gay community could be built.

_The Body Politic_ magazine is a tremendous compendium of the popular history of the gay liberation movement in the 1970s, providing insights into the nature of its cultural critiques and politics, especially in Toronto where it was based. Run by an editorial collective of gay liberationists, its articles cover many of the issues around which community members and activists organized to express their thoughts, feelings, and energies. Though the magazine was international in scope, because it was published in Toronto and its editorial collective was based here, _The Body Politic_ was one of the city’s primary locations for gay liberation activism. Indeed, the magazine and the articles it published were forms of activism in and of themselves, bringing gay liberationist theories of sexuality and gender to bear on all areas of social and political life.\(^{114}\) Articles such as Gerald Hannon’s “No Sorrow, No Pity: The Gay Disabled,” which, as the title suggest, investigates the struggles, prejudices, barriers, and pride of the gay disabled; Lorna Weir’s “Exorcizing Ghosts of Friendships Past,” which confronts the difficulties and rewards of negotiating friendships across sexualities, and coming to terms with one’s “straight” past; Michael Lynch’s “Forgotten Fathers,” which examines the issues of being an out gay dad. Pieces like these were published alongside coverage and commentary on the gay politics of the day, poetry, short stories, gay historical pieces, and cultural reviews. These intelligent investigations of the issues of gay life were very often personal accounts, wrapped in the flavour of testimony, and were, in fact, journalistic forms of gay consciousness-raising, a key strategy for community formation and politicization during this period.

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\(^{114}\) This is what Altman called gay liberation’s move toward “eroticizing everyday living” See Dennis Altman, _Homosexual_.

From its first issue, *The Body Politic* included a section devoted to culture and the arts, as the editorial collective knew that changing society’s views of homosexuality depended on a major shift in the ways homosexuals were depicted in various media. Proprietaryly titled “Our Image,” the section expressed ownership of gay identity by the nascent gay community, focusing on various representations of gay men and lesbians in popular media, as well as academic publications. Consistently written from a gay liberationist perspective, the section frowned upon any representations of gays and lesbians that were stereotypical, closeted, or what they deemed politically naïve or old fashioned (i.e. pre-1969).

Michael Lynch, professor of English at the University of Toronto and a longtime and prominent gay activist, for example, wrote an extended piece on the Stratford Festival in 1977. His article focuses on the festival’s interpretations of Shakespeare and its closeted actors, who would not grant interviews of any kind to *The Body Politic*, though one “ranking official of the Festival did talk […] anonymously” (“Actors and Shakespeare” 23). Lynch, in his usual fashion, gets to the heart of the matter from a gay liberationist perspective, which is both compelling and appropriate to its time:

I admire these actors and directors, I celebrate Shakespeare. But I’m also gay, and because of this a troubled and sometimes troublesome outsider. I’m writing this personal essay to help defuse what I see as the real bombshell – the one which denies us a voice, a visibility, a being. Shakespeare is largely on our side. And the forces that closed ‘his’ theatre in 1642, charging it with Sodomy and some lesser vices, are still against us. Sometimes, sad to say, they operate within us. Shakespearean theatre is, and since its origin has been,
one of the battlegrounds for what we now call gay liberation. ( “Actors and Shakespeare” 23)

While Lynch’s historiography might be called into question, his sentiments are exemplary of both his gay politics and the age in which he was writing. Following his gay liberationist politics, he calls for visibility and voice, arguing that culture is political and that all gay men and lesbians have an obligation to publicly confront their oppression, including their internalized homophobia.

Similarly, Gerald Hannon takes Theatre Passe Muraille’s 1975 production I Love You Baby Blue to task for its questionable sexual politics. A collective creation that charged itself with examining sex in Toronto, I Love You Baby Blue was one of Theatre Passe Muraille’s biggest and most infamous hits. In his review, Hannon criticizes the play for ignoring gay men completely in its investigation, and for its offensive representation of lesbians. Hannon recounts that the only reference to homosexuality is a lesbian who has been raped by a couple of motorcycle thugs, but “confess[es] to liking it.” “How’s that for breaking new ground?” asks Hannon (“I Love You Baby Blue” 12). In The Body Politic’s “up-front” style, to use the lingo of the day, Hannon spoke to Paul Thompson, the play’s director, about its lack of substantial gay and lesbian representation, to which Thompson replied: “Because of the present political implications of gayness, any such scene would be out of proportion to the rest of the show” (“I Love You Baby Blue” 13). While weak, and perhaps not illustrative of Thompson’s true intentions (or lack of thought about the sexual lives of gays and lesbians), his remarks are significant. They signal the increasingly political status of homosexuality and its representations in Toronto, when a visible and vocal community began to form and critique that which they found offensive in content or omission. It also expresses the
Alternative theatre movement’s continued disinterest in homosexuality as a resolutely political issue requiring sustained attention or redress.

At this point we should revisit what I mean by “politicized gay theatre” in Toronto, and differentiate it from plays that simply represented gay men, especially those of the Alternative theatres. In the wake of the sexual and aesthetic revolutions that took place in the late 1960s, the Alternative theatre in Toronto produced numerous plays that featured gay characters in the 1970s. These plays are not, however, politicized gay theatre, as I am defining it here because they were not connected to, nor informed by, contemporaneous gay liberation politics. Broadly speaking, the Alternative theatres were interested in pushing the envelope of sex, sexuality, and censorship in the city – of which *I Love You Baby Blue* is a primary example. This interest included the taboo subject of homosexuality, but it did not include analyses informed by the politics of gay liberation. Whether written by gay playwrights, such as John Palmer, Larry Fineberg, Louis del Grande, and Paul Bettis (none of whom were politicized around gay politics in this period) or straight playwrights, such as Martin Kinch, Tom Hendry, and Michael Hollingsworth, the plays produced by the Alternative theatres that represent gay men are, in Peter Dickinson’s words, “frequently daring in subject matter, staging, and dialogue [but] are for the most part pre-Stonewall in sentiment, focusing on doomed or disintegrating relationships and recycling familiar psychological clichés about homosexual experience” (“Gay Literature” 451). It is not that these plays’ “pre-Stonewall” sentiments are not important or deserving of scholarly attention;

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115 Dickinson notes that it was not until 1981, with the production of Tremblay’s *Les anciennes odeurs* that he “abandoned the allegorical baggage attached to most of his earlier gay characters” (Dickinson “Gay Literature” 451). John Palmer’s work also takes a more overtly gay turn in the 1980s, which he talks about in an interview with Robert Wallace; see Palmer “Introduction.”

116 John Palmer came out publicly in the 1976 “Homosexuality and the Theatre” issue of *Canadian Theatre Review*, in which he was part of the “Local View” panel.
indeed, pre-Stonewall structures of feeling and gay cultural practices, as well as pre-sexual identifications with gayness have been fecund sights of scholarly investigation. This dissertation’s concern, however, is the theatre’s place in the reformation of gay identity, and how “out” gay playwrights deployed theatrical performance to intervene into the politics of gay life – their own lives – during the reformation of gay identity and community that occurred in the city between the mid-1960s and the mid-1980s. With the exception of Fortune and Men’s Eyes, no play written by a Toronto playwright or produced by a local theatre company was a true example of politicized gay theatre as I am defining it here – despite the sexual orientation of its author or its representation of gay men. Ed Jackson, member of The Body Politic editorial collective, bemoaned this fact and advocated for politicized gay theatre in the 1976 Canadian Theatre Review issue dedicated to the topic of “Homosexuality and the Theatre” (the production and content of which I will be analyzing below):

There are, of course, plenty of plays [in Toronto] with homosexual characters in them. I would say that the typical play in this city has to include at least one troubled homosexual character, who adds a little spice to the play and provides something kinky for the suburbanites in the audience. But that is not the same thing as actually dealing with the gay experience. […] [And] it strikes me as irresponsible to write [a play that includes homosexuals but does not deal with their oppression] in our present society. I would like to see plays which show that homosexuals are oppressed in certain ways; and which try to deal with that oppression. […] The theatre rarely deals with the difficulties of

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117 See essays in Traub and Halperin. See also Miller.
being gay, and the way in which gay people are trying to overcome those difficulties. (Palmer et al. 9-10)

In the wake of the Stonewall riots and the decriminalization of homosexuality, the epistemology of gay identity in Toronto changed fundamentally. Gay men and lesbians began to organize politically, to address social inequity, and to create a visible and vibrant gay community. These activists knew that cultural representations played an important role in their oppression, and they critiqued the ways in which gay and lesbian characters were most often used as symbols and metaphors, and for titillation and zany humour, rather than being depicted as actual social subjects. While there was a comparatively large number of plays that included gay characters written and produced in Toronto in the 1970s, other than Wallace’s No Deposit, No Return, which could not find a supportive producer in the city, none engaged the political realities of gay life as they were being theorized and articulated by gay liberation activists. For our purposes here, plays that were pre-Stonewall in their sentiments, as Dickinson suggests, but post-Stonewall in their dates of production demonstrate the extent to which the Alternative theatres trafficked in older conventions, narratives, and affects of gayness, but did not support plays whose formal conventions and content were based in a gay liberationist political consciousness, such as No Deposit, No Return.118

118 Examples of such plays are Hendry’s How Are Things with the Walking Wounded, which was Toronto Free Theatre’s inaugural play; Palmer’s Memories of my Brother, Part 1, and A Touch of God in the Golden Age, produced at Theatre Passe Muraille and Factory Theatre Lab, respectively, and his The End, produced at Toronto Free; and the very successful Me? by Martin Kinch, which was subsequently made into a movie. Hendry also wrote a play called The Missionary Position, which features a gay character and, to my knowledge, has never been produced in Toronto, though it was in Vancouver. While Hendry is straight, his inclusion of gay men in a matter-of-fact way within his dramas may be at least partially an expression of his longtime collaboration and friendship with John Hirsch, who was quite openly gay, though not politicized nor involved in gay liberation. For a biography of Hirsch, see Martz and Wilson.
In the early 1990s, John Palmer, who directed No Deposit, No Return, and who was one of Toronto’s most important theatre makers in the 1970s, reflected on the sexual politics of his work and the theatre industry in Toronto in the early 1970s. Speaking specifically about the representations of a gay man, Ju-Jube, in his play The End, Palmer recalls:

It’s interesting to me that when Ju-Jube in The End first enters, he has a speech about blowing an eleven-year-old in Cairo in which he complains that the bleach this kid uses on his pubic hair hasn’t even intimidated his crabs. This is just tossed off. It never occurred to me that it might be shocking; I just thought it was amusing, right? At the time [when I wrote ] (we’re talking about 1972) I knew I was gay, but if anybody had used the word ‘gay’ to me I would have thought they meant light-spirited and fun. It hadn’t occurred to me to take sexuality of any kind at all seriously. In other words, at the age of 30, I hadn’t even come out. It’s not that people didn't know I was ‘homosexual’ they didn’t want to deal with ‘gay’—just like they didn’t want to deal with women’s rights. It was a bit like eighteenth-century France; you know, as long as you didn’t talk about it, it was fine. But, in the intervening years, I had to deal with my sexuality […] Once I knew that I was gay, I had to figure out how that affected my life. Does it matter in the Canadian theatre, which is where I wanted to work, whether I’m gay or not? And, indeed, I found it did matter. (“Introduction” 13)

What Palmer’s comment signals is the divide that existed between the Alternative theatres and the emergent politics of gay liberation. A site of contest, homosexuality was defined in several conflicting ways, with sin, criminality, pathology, and liberation all current to some
extent within particular contexts. When we examine plays with gay characters performed by
the Alternatives, we find plays that included homosexual figures, but toward the Alternative
theatre’s own aesthetic and political ends. When we examine the lives of the people who
made this theatre, we find men like Palmer who were quite successful, and were relatively
open about their sexual orientation, but were not politicized. What we do not see are
productions that promoted visibility and politicization around gay identity and community or
that critiqued and challenged homophobia. With the exception of John Herbert, who never
again enjoyed success in Toronto after *Fortune and Men’s Eyes*, we do not see prominent
theatre artists coming out publicly or politically.

The disconnect between pre- and post-Stonewall politics and sentiments obtained in
the 1970s because Toronto’s Alternative theatres’ gay plays were not expressions of gay
liberation or gay community. Rather, these representations communicated the Alternative
theatres’ own political commitments and ideology. As Martin Kinch recalls:

> there existed a definite bond between the [Alternative] theatre[s] and their
> audience [whose] concerns were the concerns of ‘the sixties’: the breaking of
> sexual taboos, the problems of individual freedom, and the yearning for
> community. (qtd. in Wallace *Canada* 8).

For the Alternative theatres, homosexuality was just one sexual taboo among many. The
problems of the individual they sought to address were not those faced by gay men, lesbians,
or even heterosexual women, as Palmer suggests, and the community they wished to foster
was not focused on these marginal identities either. In admittedly simple but still true terms,

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119 Other examples inside and outside the Alternative scene are director John Hirsch, critic Robert Whittaker, playwright Larry Kardish, director Bill Glassco, and actor William Hutt. I would like to make it clear that I am not passing judgment upon these people. What must be noted is what happened to out and politicized gay men such as John Herbert and Robert Wallace.
the Alternative theatres’ “sixties concerns” that Kinch articulates were approached from a primarily white, male, and heterosexual point of view: the “universal” subject position underlying liberal humanism and the aesthetic theories and rhetoric it informed.120

In comparison, gay liberation was really a “seventies concern.” Its proponents were interested in addressing the inequalities and oppression gays and lesbians faced, the political reformation of gay identity and community, and in creating its own gay theatre and audiences – for which many calls were made on the pages of The Body Politic. In this period, politicized gay plays had to go elsewhere, most significantly to New York, if they were to achieve production – which is where both Fortune and Men’s Eyes and No Deposit, No Return found support.

**Illusion and Reality: Hosanna at the Tarragon**

Though not written by a local Toronto playwright, the Tarragon’s production of Michel Tremblay’s Hosanna is perhaps the best example of a play staged by an Alternative theatre that deals with gay subjects but which had relatively little to do with gay liberation ideology, gay politics or the gay community in Toronto. Hosanna’s liberal humanist ideology and aesthetics resonated with the nationalist politics of Toronto’s Alternative theatre, of its critical establishment, and with its audiences, making it one of the most successful plays of the decade.

The world premiere of Hosanna, was in Montreal and in French at the Théâtre de Quat’Sous in May 1973, directed by Tremblay’s longtime collaborator and lover André Brassard. It was quickly thereafter translated into English by John Van Burek and Bill Glassco, and directed by Glassco as part of the Tarragon Theatre’s third season, in May

120 See Dolan, *Feminist Spectator*. 
1974. It starred Richard Monette as Hosanna, and Richard Donat, as Cuirette. *Hosanna* was the third Tremblay play that Van Burek and Glassco translated, and the second that they staged at the Tarragon, having mounted a production of *Forever Yours, Marie-Lou* the previous season, and having translated *Les Belles-Sœurs* for production at the St. Lawrence Centre in 1973. *Hosanna* was a hit. It ran for six sold-out weeks that season, and, in preparation for its transfer to the Bijou Theatre in New York City, was remounted at the Global Village for another sold-out run in September 1974. In New York, it was less of a success, but would nevertheless tour and be produced across Canada. It was successfully remounted at Toronto Workshop Productions in 1977, directed once again by Glassco and starring Monette.

*Hosanna* begins with Hosanna/Claude Lemieux, a drag queen/transsexual hairdresser, returning to her cheap bachelor apartment in the Plaza Saint-Hubert, after an evidently traumatic event. She is crying, angry, and dressed as Elizabeth Taylor playing Cleopatra in the 1963 film of the same name. Hosanna is, however, “infinitely more cheap [sic]” than Taylor; she is “a Cleopatra-of-the-streets” (*Hosanna* 8). She is followed shortly thereafter by her boyfriend, Cuirette-Raymond Bolduc. Dressed in the macho leather attire of a biker, he is an “old stud” whose muscles have turned to fat, and whose studly “arrogance and easy self-assurance” have the effect of making him appear “rather ridiculous” (*Hosanna* 10).

Two months earlier, Hosanna’s arch nemesis, Sandra, announced that the theme of this year’s Halloween party, held at her bar, would be “Great Women of History.” Hosanna

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121 There was, it seems, at least one person who did not appreciate the play. In his memoirs, Richard Monette recalls: “Audiences, the only critics who count, received us enthusiastically, though I do remember that on opening night one resounding “Boo!” rang out from the auditorium. I was surprised, and a little disappointed, to be told later that it had come from the playwright John Herbert, whose *Fortune and Men’s Eyes* I had workshopped at Stratford. I never did find out what it was, particularly, that he objected to” (Monette and David Prosser).
was thrilled by the news. Since childhood she has been obsessed with Elizabeth Taylor, specifically Taylor in the film *Cleopatra*, and she tells her audience that when the ball was announced, “there wasn’t one person, not one, who dared mention Elizabeth Taylor. Because Elizabeth Taylor ... is mine! And they know it” (*Hosanna* 65-66). For years Hosanna has imagined making her own glorious “entrance into Rome,” like that of Elizabeth Taylor/Cleopatra in the epic film. Decked out in her best drag finery, and echoing the Cleopatra’s magisterial assent to Rome’s throne, she would confirm her rightful status as Montreal’s fiercest drag queen, and through pageant, performance, and spectacle, Hosanna’s dream, her fantasy image of herself, would finally become real at Sandra’s bar.

In the second act, speaking directly to the audience, Hosanna recounts spending weeks preparing her costume and herself. When the night finally arrives, and Hosanna makes her entrance into Sandra’s bar, she is not received by her adoring fans, lauding her with respect and praise. Instead, she is greeted by the laughing jeers of every drag queen in Montreal dressed as Elizabeth Taylor in *Cleopatra*. And the worst thing about it, Hosanna tells the audience, “every one of them [was] dressed better than me! Everyone made up better than me!” (*Hosanna* 79). At this moment, when Hosanna has finally revealed what has happened to her, Cuirette returns to the apartment, and the play reverts to the fourth-wall realism of its first Act. Cuirette confesses to Hosanna, “When I was cruising around on my bike a while ago, I was thinking about what you told me […]. The important thing is that you be yourself, that's all. I think that's all ... Claude ... it's not Hosanna that I love ...” (*Hosanna* 87). After Cuirette says this, the stage directions dictate that Hosanna, who has spent most of the play dressed in her bra and panties, wig, and full makeup, “gets up and sits down at her makeup table. She removes her wig, and takes off her makeup. She looks at herself in the
“mirror” and says: “Cleopatra is dead […] Look, Raymond, I'm a man ... I'm a man, Raymond ... I'm a man.” The closing stage direction reads: “RAYMOND gets up, goes towards CLAUDE, and takes him in his arms. Slow fade.” (Hosanna 87)

Hosanna’s conclusion is one of self-acceptance, placing all that has gone before as points on the titular character’s personal trajectory, leading to this moment of recognition, maturation, and authenticity. Hosanna/Claude’s personal crisis is not one of sexuality. Claude is and remains gay. Rather, his identity crisis is one of gender identification, which is set out in the play as a lifelong struggle. At one point in his childhood, Claude realized that being “queer doesn’t just mean that you act like a girl, but can also mean you really want to be a girl, a real girl, and that you can manage to become one” (Hosanna 52). As soon as Claude turned sixteen he left Ste-Eustache, the rural community in which he lived, for Montreal, to make his dream of becoming a woman a reality: “step by step … little by little … I became Hosanna … Hosanna, the biker’s girlfriend! Hosanna, the stud’s favorite hairdresser! Hosanna, the motorcycle queen!” (Hosanna 52). “Hosanna” is a child’s fantasy. The still immature Claude continues to play at living through her, actions that relegate him to the margins of society.

Hosanna’s unreal position, caught between the two sexes that are understood to constitute reality, is echoed in the setting within which she lives and reigns, Montreal’s Rue Saint-Laurent. “The Main,” as it is called colloquially, was traditionally the home of Montreal’s sleazy bars and strip joints, and is literally the street that separates English West Montreal from the French East. Hosanna, not Claude, exists here, in this liminal space, between the city’s two bona fide worlds, populated by actual men and women. She has become the queen of this fantasy world, with all the power and glamour that such a role
obtains, until a crisis is precipitated by subjects who have revolted against her. At this moment, Claude is forced to recognize that his life as Hosanna is a fantasy.

And right there in the middle of the stage, with everyone laughing at me, and whistling, and calling me stupid names, I said to myself, ‘Cleopatra is a pile of shit! Elizabeth Taylor is a pile of shit! You asked for your pile of shit, Hosanna-de-Ste-Eustache. Well, here it is. Your big pile of shit!’ Now listen, Cuirette, I wasn’t Cleopatra anymore I was Sampson, do you hear me? Sampson! And right there, I completely destroyed my papier mache set!

Because you had completely destroyed my papier mache life. (Hosanna 83)

On the stage of Sandra’s bar, hearing the jeers of a hateful audience, Claude must be a man (Sampson) and destroy both the identity and world of illusions that he has created. In short, he must grow up and face reality, which he does by “killing” his false identities, Cleopatra, Elizabeth Taylor, Hosanna, and by accepting his true, male/masculine identity.

In Hosanna, Tremblay traffics in representations of the drag queen/transgender identity in order to effect a dualism between authentic and inauthentic identity, reality and illusion, which he intimates is an allegory for the experience of the Québécois in Canada. Given the far-reaching changes of the “Quiet Revolution” in Quebec in the 1960s, the emergence of the Front de Libération du Québec (FLQ), whose activities came to a dramatic zenith in the October Crisis of 1970, and the election of René Lévesque's separatist Parti Québécois (PQ) in 1976, it is safe to say that francophone Quebecers were undergoing a paradigmatic reconceptualization of their identity at this time. In her seminal study of cross-dressing, Vested Interests: Cross-Dressing and Cultural Anxiety, Marjorie Garber’s
articulation of the transvestite bears directly on Tremblay’s invocation of the drag queen/transsexual in *Hosanna*:

the unexpected or supplementary presence of a transvestite figure in a text (whether fiction or history, verbal or visual, imagistic or ‘real’) that does not seem, thematically, to be primarily concerned with gender difference or blurred gender indicates a *category crisis elsewhere*, an irresolvable conflict or epistemological crux that destabilizes comfortable binarity, and displaces the resulting discomfort onto a figure that already inhabits, indeed incarnates, the margin. (17)

Living and writing during a time of seismic change in Quebec, Tremblay was cognizant of the cultural meanings attached to trans bodies, which Garber would later articulate. In this respect, Hosanna’s status as a transvestite can be read as enacting Garber’s theorization of identity crisis, which Tremblay understood as simile for the historical position of the *Québécois* in Canada: marginalized by religion, language, ethnicity, and class, they tried to be something which they were not: “Canadian.” Or in Tremblay’s words: “For the past 300 years we were not taught that we were a people, so we were dreaming about being somebody else instead of ourselves. So *Hosanna* is a political play” (Anthony 283). This crisis of category/identity, however, is represented in *Hosanna* as something that they can (or have) overcome by embracing their true “*Québécois*” identity, which Claude does by accepting his masculine/male identity at the play’s conclusion.

Tremblay constructs this narrative in a typically Aristotelian fashion. In the span of a few hours, Hosanna experiences a reversal of fortune and suffers an ensuing identity crisis, which is resolved with the recognition of his true identity. This linear narrative is realized in
Hosanna’s anticipation of the drag ball, the change of fortune (reversal) she undergoes when she realizes that she is not the queen of the Main, and the crisis of identity that follows as a result, which is resolved when Claude declares that he is a man (recognition). This narrative is realised in performance by positioning gender, Hosanna’s drag, as an unreal fiction, and sex, Claude’s nude body, as the stable and indelible truth upon which proper subjects form naturalized identities, both homosexual and heterosexual.

_Hosanna_ thus presents a naturalistic, quasi-oedipal narrative, whose conventional form enabled it to be enjoyed by audiences, and taken up by critics as “great” because they deemed it “universally” significant. Instead of battling with his father, Claude, a gay man who has no father – a situation commonly cited as a psychological cause of male homosexuality – must kill the fantasy identity that he has created for himself in the form of Hosanna/Cleopatra.122 According to Ric Knowles, such Oedipal and classically Aristotelian narratives and dramaturgical structures are typical of English-Canadian theatre in the 1970s. Knowles argues that their currency was based in their affirmation of the existing patriarchal order, and the dominant Canadian nationalist position, regardless of their conscious themes or subjects (Theatre of Form 31). He contends:

[…] variations on patriarchal, socially affirmative dramatic and narrative structures (and their mutually affirmative social formations and structures of consciousness), while they have dominated the Western world since Aristotle first articulated them in _The Poetics_, were particularly influential in Canada in the years following the centennial celebrations of 1967. Reversal and recognition of a unified, preexisting subject were seen to provide, through

122 On this Oedipal relationship with absent fathers gay theatre in Quebec, see Dickinson “Pour.”
empathy with central characters, a satisfying and socially affirmative purging
of potentially disruptive emotions, allowing and inscribing a *return* to
(reversal) and *recognition* of a preexisting social ‘norm.’ (*Theatre of Form* 31)

Like the plays Knowles investigates in his study, David French’s *Leaving Home* and *Of the Fields Lately*,¹²³ and Michael Cook’s *Jacob’s Wake*, the Tarragon’s production of *Hosanna* employed naturalistic, psychologically real characterizations – with a short detour into direct audience address – to encourage identification between its central character and its audience. It is a naturalistic, two-character, chamber piece with psychologically real characters, and which upholds the unities of time, place, and action. Through the course of the play it purges the inauthentic identity, Hosanna/Cleopatra, and reinstalls an essential subject, Claude, who has, in fact, been there all along. As Knowles argues, these kinds of narratives were celebrated in this period because the “dramaturgical unconscious of most playwrights, directors, theatre critics and theatre audiences” in Canada was formed by an imbrication of Aristotle, Freud, and *Oedipus Rex* (*Theatre of Form* 25). This approach to theatre, with its emphasis on a particular structure, psychology, and genre, provided a very specific criteria for the achievement of “excellence” during this period, which *Hosanna*, despite its subject matter, achieved with spectacular success (Knowles *Theatre of Form* 26).

When plays such as these included cultural “others,” these inclusions did not substantially challenge the underlying rhetoric of their narratives and dramaturgical structures, nor did they mitigate their affirmative political effects. The universal truth that these plays revealed and affirmed could be extrapolated from the protagonist’s struggle for authenticity and/or maturation, regardless of their particular identity or social situation. At

¹²³ It is noteworthy that both of French’s plays premiered at the Tarragon and were directed by Bill Glassco, *Leaving Home* in 1972 and *Of the Fields Lately* in 1973.
this time, these stagings of “difference” within traditional forms were particularly potent as they enabled “Canada” to affirm its cohesion and maturity as an individual nation among nations by invoking its multicultural diversity, and at the same time, allowed it to keep its engagement with this diversity relatively shallow. Thus, from such an ideological position, Claude and Raymond’s affirmation of their true selves could be, and were, read as universal truths applicable to anyone. There was no need for artists or critics in Toronto to undertake a thorough analysis of Hosanna’s relationship to gay politics, life, or community in the city, or even to the Quebec politics that its author vocally promoted, because the play wasn’t really about them anyway. Its message was about “Man,” timeless and universal.

In Establishing our Boundaries: English-Canadian Theatre Criticism, Anton Wagner comes to conclusions about theatre criticism that support Knowles’ arguments about narrative and dramaturgy. He classifies the period from the end of the Second World War to the 1980s as the age of “Cultural Nationalism,” and argues critics’ nationalist politics were undergirded by a liberal humanist view of art. He writes:

The liberal-humanist world-view of critics led them to perceive human nature – like goodness, truth, and beauty itself – to be universal, unchanging, and ahistorical and to favour playwrights such as Shakespeare, Chekhov, Ibsen, Shaw, O’Casey, and contemporary realist dramatists who express optimism about the human condition. […] This preference for realism and affirmative human values in turn privileged the ‘real’ characters of Canadian playwrights such as Robertson Davies, James Reaney, and David French […]. (Wagner Establishing 36)
In the 1970s, critics in Toronto supported the project of creating a “Canadian theatre” by valuing new Canadian plays that, by virtue of their similar structures and dramatic conventions, could be included in an international pantheon of great works. The liberal humanist approach that Wagner describes shares much with New Critical theories of literature, also dominant in Canada at this time, which privilege the structural, universal, and transcendental, and which were viewed, quite paradoxically, as the apolitical criteria of greatness. Despite most critics’ invocations of universality, and their eschewing of historical or political readings, their view of art did very specific political work in post-Centennial Canada. These plays were examples of Canada’s newly forged cultural maturity as a nation.

*Hosanna*’s critical reception is a case in point: the critics in Toronto who reviewed the Tarragon’s production upheld these liberal humanist critical ideals and used them to contain the play’s potentially subversive gender and sexual difference, not to mention ethnic, linguistic, and class difference, by appealing to notions of excellence and universality. In more specific terms, the reviewers contain the play’s homosexuality through subtly homophobic warnings about *Hosanna*’s subject matter, and through reassuring praise about the performance’s artistic merit. For example, *Toronto Star* theatre critic, Urjo Kareda, who would go on to become the Tarragon Theatre’s artistic director, writes: “*Hosanna* is about homosexuality only in the way that *Othello* is about miscegenation—that is, the social reality provides the framework, or metaphor, for a study of more elemental matters” (Kareda “Shimmering” F12). Herbert Whitaker, theatre critic at the *Globe and Mail*, takes a slightly different approach, though the results are similar. In his review, he suggests Tremblay’s artistic excellence compensates for what might be considered unsavory characters and subject matter.
Tarragon calls *Hosanna* a Quebec play, as if to reassure its more staid Toronto audiences that such persons [the titular drag queen and her leatherman lover] can’t exist here, but the device is naïve. […] It is more likely the language than the subject that will startle, but by the end of the evening the sight of the two males embracing happily in the nude has taken on all the aspects of the conventional happy ending. Such is Tremblay’s skill in fashioning a drama. (“Hosanna”)

With this pithy little statement – which completely ignores the idea that *Hosanna*’s original production was intended to promote Quebec’s separation from Canada – Whitaker reveals the play’s homosexuality, its foul language, and nudity. He then suggests that despite all this, Tremblay’s skills are such that he is able to rise above these vulgarities and achieve the kind of excellence he associates with a conventional happy ending. In both Kareda’s and Whitaker’s reviews, the seemingly inappropriate subject of homosexuality is conveyed to its reader, and then contained by invocations of universal and conventional, and thus apolitical, dramaturgy.

Newspaper critics also read the play through a psychoanalytic lens, a strategy that allowed them to see universal truth in both Claude and Raymond’s experience of illusion and authenticity. Writing on the remount of the play at the Global Village in 1974 – staged in preparation for its production at the Bijou theatre in New York – Kareda states:

Interestingly, the play has grown in both its specific and generalized implications. That is, it seems both more and less about homosexuals. The characterizations are now so fixed that Tremblay’s story about a Montreal transvestite who undergoes humiliation and renewal is extremely detailed
psychologically. […] such that] the [play’s] more overriding themes of illusion and reality, of self acceptance and courage, are felt most movingly. (Kareda “Beautiful”)

Ironically, given his earlier argument that Hosanna is as much about homosexuality as Othello is about race, here Kareda asserts that by probing with greater psychological sophistication into the homosexual characters’ lives, the play has become more universal, which means, to requote Kareda, it is “both more and less about homosexuals.” Kareda’s liberal humanist ideological position meant that this play, at whose visual and diegetic centre are two gay men, could only be justified, and its excellence affirmed, if it achieved “universalit-y,” which it did through its expert construction of a classically complete narrative and dramaturgical structure. But the real upshot of Kareda’s critical position was to implicitly define how such plays, at their core, addressed white, straight, Anglophone, middle-class Torontonians.¹²⁴

The discourses of recognition, maturity, and growth that structure Hosanna and underlie its many positive reviews, are significant because they also run through Canadian theatre scholarship in the 1970s. As Alan Filewod elucidates in his introduction to the CTR Anthology, Don Rubin employed these tropes in his CTR editorials to both foster and describe the rise of a professional Canadian theatre industry in this period:

We’re speaking here about developing a culture and the fact is that until we have a strong culture of our own to share with the world, we must be extraordinarily careful not to let its potential disappear through colonial thinking or misguided liberalism. The Massey Commission was well aware of

¹²⁴ For the one Toronto review to invoke Quebec politics, see McCaughna.
this danger nearly a quarter of a century ago and it aided immeasurably in planting the seeds for a truly Canadian culture. But we have no real culture until these seeds reach some kind of maturity. And theatrical maturity means the creation of a drama (playwrights) as well as the continued growth of a theatre (actors, designers, directors). Canada does have a Canadian theatre right now, and the possibility of creating a Canadian drama to go with it is closer now than ever before. (qtd in “Introduction” xii emphasis mine)

Not surprisingly, Canadian theatre criticism and history employed the same language and ideas that were enacted upon the nation’s stages. Just as Hosanna’s naturalistic form and causal linear structure support Claude’s journey of maturation and self-recognition, which is for him a harrowing and difficult experience, Canadian theatre – and as an extension Canada – also perceived itself as suffering an “identity crisis,” which it was overcoming by fostering positive theatrical enactments with the same or similar narratives: from immaturity to maturity, from illusion to reality, and from counterfeit colonial identity to an authentic and cohesive national culture.

In Toronto theatre, and especially at the Tarragon, this authenticity was to a great extent dependent upon an essentialized conception of Canada’s regions, its ethnic diversity, and the invisible, unmarked status of the middle-class, heterosexual Anglo-Canadians. Not coincidentally, these were the people who, for the most part, ran the theatres, directed the plays, produced the shows, and wrote the scripts that constituted the Alternative theatre movement in the city. In Canadian politics of the 1970s, this idea of diversity was promulgated formally by the Trudeau government’s “Multiculturalism within a Bilingual framework” policy of 1971, a policy which stipulated, “although Canada ha[s] two official
languages ‘there is no official culture, nor does any ethnic group take precedence over any other’” (Mackey 64). This sentiment and these politics were most certainly true at the Tarragon, whose founding mandate was to “nurture Canadian playwrighting talent” (Glassco qtd. in Johnston 150). The Tarragon reached out to all regions of the country to fulfill its mandate. The breadth of this reach helped to confirm the authenticity of its particular conception of “Canadianess,” vis-à-vis the regional cultures of Quebec, Newfoundland, and rural Ontario, to name the most obvious examples from this period. As Filewod argues, in English-Canadian theatre in the 1970s, “regional difference was the defining condition that proved the existence of a Canadian culture” (“Introduction” xiii). The Tarragon produced plays from across the country, but never really questioned the politics of multiculturalism, or the represented region’s particular, often politically charged, relationship to the mainstream Anglo-Canadian culture of which the Tarragon was the prototypical example.

_Hosanna_ at the Tarragon presents an excellent example of how multicultural Canadian nationalism was fostered even in theatrical performances that might destabilize it in this period. _Hosanna_ was nominated “a Quebec play” in its Tarragon program, which, one might read (as I naively did) as a sign of its support for Tremblay’s Quebec-separatist politics in the 1970s. However, when I asked John Van Burek about the politics of this designation, he responded by saying:

The fact that it was a Canadian play at the Tarragon was a foregone conclusion. There was never any doubt about that. This [designation] gave it a

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125 Examples of playwrights who epitomized Canada’s regional cultures in their work from this period are Tremblay, David French, and James Reaney.

126 It should be noted that at this time Tremblay did not allow his plays to be performed in English inside Quebec.
specific colour, and it was also a way of reminding people that this was a play about Quebec. (Halferty “Van Burek “)

That the play was “Canadian” was not in question. Its status as a play from Quebec, as Van Burek suggests, merely coloured its broader and more important political motivation and effect: by staging plays that expressed the cultural authenticity of its regions, the Tarragon Theatre brought “Canada” and “Canadian theatre” into theatrical existence.

*Hosanna* at the Tarragon tacitly affirmed the dominant position of what Eva Mackey in her study of Canadian nationalism calls “Canadian Canadians”: the unmarked, tolerant, and benevolent Canadians who are implicitly defined in relation to the ethnic, racialized, and, in this context, regionalized and sexualized “others.” Following Mackey’s line of argument, plays like *Hosanna* simultaneously bolster white, Anglo-Canadians’ sense of themselves as cosmopolitan and tolerant through their representation of the “other,” but do little to question the underlying privilege, unmarked status, nor the power relationship that being “tolerant” implies. In this moment, the governing attitude toward difference, especially in Toronto, was the emergent multiculturalism that envisioned Canada, and English Canada in particular, as a multicultural nation that tolerates difference, without naming exactly who it was that did the tolerating, or the political value of this benevolence in differentiating Canadians from their very similar southern neighbours.

The extent to which *Hosanna* was taken up as an unproblematic affirmation of Canadian national maturity in Toronto, and the anxiety that attended national identity in the city at this time, is found in the complete absence of critical commentary on Tremblay’s and the play’s Quebec politics. Only one out of the six reviews written about Tarragon’s 1974 production even mentions that its author intended the play to be a political statement, and that
its performance was spoken about in these terms in Montreal when it was produced a year earlier. Not surprisingly, the New York critics who reviewed the play’s performance at the Bijou theatre, who had no investment in Canadian nationalism, recognized Hosanna’s status as an allegory for Quebec, and spoke about the Quebec-separatist context from which it emerged when it was staged in Montreal in 1974. Tremblay himself acknowledges the very different meanings made of the play in Toronto and Montreal, saying: “Hosanna signifie au Canada anglais tout à fait autre chose” (Hosanna signifies for English Canada something else entirely) (Dickinson Here 111).

While the Alternative theatres were promoting Canadian nationalism, gay liberationists were working towards creating a vibrant and cohesive gay community. Their primary strategy in this regard was fostering visibility, which was enacted most significantly by coming out, and calling upon others to do the same. In this context, perhaps the single greatest cleavage that existed between Hosanna at the Tarragon and the gay liberationist community in Toronto was that its primary artistic agents, Bill Glassco, its director, Michel Tremblay, its playwright, and Richard Monette, its star, were closeted at the time of its production. Tremblay is a relative exception as he was somewhat open about his sexuality, though he did not come out publicly until 1977 (“Take 30”). To the best of my knowledge, neither Glassco, who died in 2004, nor Monette, who died in 2007, ever publicly proclaimed their homosexuality toward any political end. The gay community in Canada in the 1970s was not yet included within the state’s legal and linguistic multicultural mosaic, nor was it commonly viewed as a cohesive political force within Toronto or the nation. Although the Tarragon and the other Alternative theatres in Toronto represented gay men, they did so in a

\[^{127}\] For an example of such a review from New York, see Barnes. For a Montreal example, see Dassylva.
metaphorical manner, the aim of which was to bolster its primary goal: encouraging Canadian theatre and a sense of Canadian national identity by producing plays that were meaningful within the liberal humanist frameworks of excellence, maturity, and nationalism.

*Hosanna* at the Tarragon was, thus, not a gay liberationist play. It was not addressed to the gay community and the Tarragon was not a gay theatre. It was not created by theatre artists who were politicized around gay issues. It did not present concerns relevant to the gay community, nor was it received as such by the gay press. In Gerald Hannon’s review of *Hosanna* in *The Body Politic*, he argues the following:

*Hosanna* is a play concerning the scaffolding of illusions which sustain human lives. As such, it is as much ‘about’ homosexuality as *The Ice Man Cometh* is ‘about’ Skid Row. A dead-end bar for alcoholics on the one hand, a sexual orientation on the other – both are merely the culture from which the dramatic situation must grow; and both, once accepted, become unimportant.

(Hannon and Le Derff 12)

Interestingly, Hannon cites the same dramaturgical structures using the same vocabulary as the mainstream critics but, from his gay liberationist perspective, they signal political oppression and impotence, rather than the trappings of “excellence.” For Hannon the play is “subtly homophobic” because once the specifics of the context are accepted, it becomes allegorically *about* something else, making its action politically unimportant to the subjects it directly represents.

Before moving on to my analysis of *No Deposit, No Return*, it should be noted that *Hosanna’s* inclusion of gay men as individuals whose personal narratives could be universally significant, and thus meaningful within liberal humanist frameworks, is an
important development in Canadian theatre and the cultural history of gay men. Hosanna’s inclusion of gay men within these narratives and dramaturgical structures both portends and participates in the incorporation of gays and lesbians as minority subjects within Canada’s liberal legal discourses, and within its still nascent multicultural paradigm of national identity. The reception of homosexuality in Fortune forms an important point for comparison in this regard. As explained in the previous chapter, critics and scholars read homosexuality as a sign of corruption and pathology, rendering homosexual men irrevocably outside liberal citizenship. Although, from a gay liberationist perspective, Hosanna’s use of the drag queen and gay man as modes of allegory did not address the specifics of their oppression, its naturalistic telling of a liberal humanist narrative of maturation and authenticity through the personal story of a drag queen, who ultimately accepts his true identity as a gay man, is a paradigmatic change. This epistemological shift, whereby a “universal story” could be told in a naturalistic fashion through the lives of gay men, and that it was received as such by the country’s critical establishment, signals the possibility that gay men (and lesbians) could be included within other liberal humanist frameworks, such as legal personhood and citizenship. If for no other reason, the inclusion of gay men within these frameworks

128 For a history of these developments in Canadian law, see Lahey.

129 It is also significant and telling that Hosanna’s narrative and dramaturgical conventions, especially its invocation of the naked male body as indelible “truth,” effect the inclusion of gay men within liberal humanist discourses at the expense of transgender identity. As Vivian Namaste argues: “[In Hosanna] transvestites function to represent the national identity crisis of Québec, but they cannot be its citizens. This thesis exemplifies the erasure of MTF transvestite and transsexuals in culture, in which these individuals can only ever exist as rhetorical figures, never as literal referents Namaste, . The play’s rejection of a transgender subjectivity foreshadows the ways in which trans people would continue to be marginalized, pathologized, and, due to the fact that many trans people find procuring employment difficult, criminalized within Canadian society. The scapegoating of the transgender person, or in this case a trans identity, to legitimate a gay person, or gay identity, demonstrates liberal humanism’s need of a subject who lives outside its boundaries, and who is denied the rights that others enjoy.
makes Hosanna’s production at the Tarragon, and its successful staging across the country, significant to the history of gay theatre in Toronto and Canada.\textsuperscript{130}

\textbf{Gay Liberation Theatre: No Deposit, No Return}

In 1974, Robert Wallace went to New York, where a reading of his \textit{67 a Play} had been arranged by Ira Zuckerman, who was associated with Joe Chaiken’s experimental New York theatre company, the Open Theatre (Halferty “Wallace”). ‘67 included among its characters a gay man whose experience of his homosexuality forms one of the play’s storylines. After the reading, Wallace was approached by Doric Wilson, who, according to Wallace, was interested in producing ‘67 for his new gay theatre, The Other Side of Silence (TOSOS). Wilson had established the gay theatre earlier that year, and was looking for new plays to produce.\textsuperscript{131} Wallace, feeling a fidelity to Zuckerman, declined Wilson’s offer. He also thought that while ‘67 had a gay character, it was not a “gay” play written specifically for a gay theatre or audience. But as an out and politicized gay man, Wallace was very keen to write such a play. He was eager to stage a play about the men he encountered in the gay worlds in which he traveled and lived in Toronto, in New York, and elsewhere. He offered to write a new play for Wilson, one that would be about gay life, politics, and that would be staged by a gay theatre. Wallace returned to Toronto and wrote \textit{No Deposit, No Return} (Halferty “Wallace”).

According to Wallace, he sent the script to Wilson, who, while he liked the play, was not entirely sympathetic with its message, especially its representation of a gay “leatherman,” and declined to produce it. When I interviewed Wilson, he said he had only vague memories

\textsuperscript{130} For investigations of the status of homosexuality as marginalized sexual identity in the discourses of Quebec nationalism see Schwartzwald, “From Authenticity,” “Fear,” and “Symbolic.” See also Pigeon.

\textsuperscript{131} The company billed itself as the “first professional theatre company to deal openly and honestly with the gay experience” (Wilson, “Biography”).
of the play, but that as a playwright himself he never vetted the work of other playwrights. Rather, he suggested that at that time another TOSOS artist, director Peter de Valle, read the plays, and that it was most likely his decision to not produce *NDNR* (Halferty “Wilson”).

With a new script and no producer, Wallace went back to Zuckerman to seek advice. Zuckerman recognized that the play had been written to be staged for a specifically gay male audience, and recommended that he approach the WSDG Gay Theatre, who, as Zuckerman thought, were interested, and quickly began work toward staging *NDNR*.

In comparison to Toronto, New York had a larger, older, and more established gay theatre community, which was, of course, predicated upon the city’s large and well organized gay community and theatre industry. Joe Cino’s Café Cino, for example, was an important off-off-Broadway venue for gay work in the 1960s. It produced plays by William Inge, Tennessee Williams, Oscar Wilde, Jean Genet, Lanford Wilson, Robert Patrick, Doric Wilson and William Hoffman. The Café Cino would beget the Playhouse of the Ridiculous, formed by director John Vaccaro and playwright Roland Tavel in 1965, and which would in turn give rise to Charles Ludlam’s Ridiculous Theatre Company, when he broke away from Vaccaro in 1967 (*Sinfield Out* 297-99). New York was also home to Wilson’s TOSOS, founded in 1972, and to the Glines, a theatre “devoted to creating and presenting gay art in order to develop positive self-images and dispel stereotyping,” founded by John Glines, Barry Laine, and Harry Tobin in 1976 (“The Glines”).

Unlike these other theatres, which were more properly based in the off and off-off-Broadway theatre scenes, the WSDG Gay Theatre emerged directly from New York’s homophile movement. The West Side Discussion Group (WSDG), the home of the WSDG Gay Theatre, was established in 1956 by the Mattachine Society, as one of seven discussion
groups in various parts of New York City. It began with meetings in private apartments on Manhattan’s Upper West Side, and, over time, grew in size and scope. In 1965 it severed its relationship with the Mattachine Society, and in March 1972 it moved into the WSDG Centre, which was located at 37th Street and Ninth Avenue, in the meat packing district on New York’s Lower West Side, an area known for its gay bars and sex clubs. Shortly thereafter, in October 1972, the WSDG Gay Theatre premiered its first production, and it was, according to their program and newsletter, “the first time anywhere in the United States, an openly gay company was presenting gay theatre, not only to the gay community, but to the general public as well” (Theatre). Indeed, following a typically “homophile” politic, the WSDG Gay Theatre aimed,

to provide quality gay entertainment for the gay community, to educate the general public and to point out that despite his or her lifestyle, the homosexual is a human being with many of the same needs and desires as his [sic] ‘straight’ counterparts.” (Theatre)

The WSDG Gay Theatre was an Equity Showcase venue that was accepted as a member of the professional “Off-Off-Broadway Association” (Itkin). Unlike the theatres mentioned above, which often served as vehicles for the work of one of its members, such as Wilson, Ludlam, or Glines – which is also the case of Sky Gilbert and Buddies in Bad Times Theatre, discussed in the next chapter – the WSDG Gay Theatre was, from its inception, a more community-oriented theatre, primarily focused on fostering gay community through its performances.

It is not surprising, then, that No Deposit, No Return found sympathetic producers at the WSDG Gay Theatre as the play primarily concerns the complexities of gay community
formation. Specifically, the play asks how an emergent gay community can unite and effect change when its constituents hold various understandings of their own sexual and gender identities, and are separated along lines of race, class, gender performance and age. The play does not offer answers to these problems; rather, it highlights the problems of identity, positing them as a construction that must be negotiated so that gay men can truly liberate themselves and form a diverse and strong gay community. Wallace proffers this view of gay community in his CTR essay, “Image and Label: Notes for a Sense of Self,” which is really a companion piece to the play. He states: “What is important is that the unity of a group remain distinct from conformity to an image. Gay liberation is a cause with an ideal, not a costume on a stand” (Wallace “Image” 31). In this statement, Wallace addresses the conflicting issues that attended gay community formation as a social movement in the 1970s, suggesting that community development need not require conformity. Extending these philosophies to theatrical production, Wallace advocates for a form of gay liberation based in a community united by common ideals and purposes. He calls for gay playwrights and gay artists to engage one another to foster gay community by encouraging the positive growth of gay theatre.

Gay drama that is valuable as interesting, informative, and innovative theatre will develop in this country only when playwrights address themselves to gay audiences, ignoring the commercial (usually censorial) requirements of straight theatres. This may demand the development of patently gay theatres if straight theatre continues to refuse gay plays for fear of commercial failure or public condemnation. (Wallace “Image” 32-33)
In his statements, Wallace does not address the economy of such theatres, whether they will be “professional” or “amateur,” or how they will negotiate the difficult questions of representation, politics, and censorship. Nevertheless, it is the idea of a gay theatre that is a visible expression of the existence of a gay community that is important here. Profit and pleasing a straight audience are, for Wallace antithetical to what the primary purpose of a gay theatre should be: to foster gay community through politically current and engaged theatre. As opposed to a theatre that occasionally produces the work of a gay playwright, or stages plays that have gay characters, Wallace calls for a patently gay theatre that dedicates itself to interrogating issues relevant to gay men for an audience who is primarily comprised of gay men. He had experienced just this kind of theatre at the WSDG and elsewhere in New York, but Toronto’s Alternative theatres, up to this point, did not share nor were they sympathetic with these politics. Indeed, Wallace’s call for a gay theatre in 1976 portends the formation of Buddies in Bad Times Theatre, which, within five years, would begin to address itself and its work directly to Toronto’s gay community.

*NDNR* was directed by Toronto playwright and director John Palmer, who enlisted the help of Saul Rubinek, who played “Sara Lee,” and Kate Lynch, who was production coordinator and stage manager (Halferty “Wallace”). Together with Wallace, they traveled to New York to mount the production. The rest of the casting was done in New York, and the play opened at the WSDG Centre on 14 June 1975, and sold out every night it was performed (Halferty “Wallace”). The play is set in the men’s toilet of the Christopher Street-Sheridan Square subway, and concerns the interrelationship of six male strangers. Cooper, a young gay liberationist; Flick, a young Black Nationalist; Sara Lee, a gender-fuck performer/drag queen and hustler; The Duke, an ad executive who leads a double life as a leatherman; Meredith, a
fat and balding deeply Christian widower in his sixties; and Norman, a young stereotypical WASP (Wallace “No Deposit” 1).  

All of the characters are gay and go to the toilets for sexual encounters, except for Flick, who contends that he goes to the toilets to watch examples of white civilization’s decay, and thus feel superior to it—a motive that the other characters consider dubious.

*NDNR* belongs most properly to the genre of realism, which is expressed in its psychologically motivated characters, a set that was verisimilar, including sinks, toilets and urinals, and its causal and linear action. Its two Acts are, however, differentiated by the degree of their respective commitment to realism: the first suggests the “reality” of each character’s identity through its naturalistic acting style, depictions of sex, and the characters’ proper execution of his stereotypical gay identity (with the exception of Sara Lee’s entrance, which will be discussed below). In comparison, the second starts with a drag performance by Meredith, the conventions of which extend into the Act as each character strips off his clothes and dons that of the others. Thus, the first Act represents the lived realities of sex and identity that each character brings into and performs within the bathroom, whereas the second, beginning with a metatheatrical inversion of gender (Meredith’s drag), effects the deconstruction and renegotiation of these identities. In the second Act, the characters literally strip away the trappings of their identities and engage in meaningful exchange, which dramatically realizes the consciousness-raising exercise in which they are all engaged, and the possibility of a utopian gay community that could exist in the broader world above if they are able to take this newly found consciousness with them.

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132 The text of the play actually designates, “The men’s toilet at the downtown stop of the IRT Subway, Sheridan Square New York City.” As IRT (Interborough Rapid Transit) is no longer in common usage, I simply refer to it here as the subway.
NDNR’s gay liberationist concerns are evidenced by its focus on the difficulties of forming community within a gay-male world, specifically addressing the intersection of sexual desire and sexual identity. The opening scene and most of the first Act sets up this dichotomy by being graphically sexual. It depicts Norman performing oral sex on Cooper, while Cooper inhales poppers and both Meredith and Flick watch. Of the play’s sexuality, Wallace advises:

For the play to realize its maximum effect […] these acts and actions must at all times appear absolutely real. The sexuality and nudity that occurs in the play does so because it occurs in the toilet. A director should not attempt to exploit this situation (this is not intended as a ‘sex piece’), but he should not attempt to conceal it either. (No Deposit ii-iii).

This “tea room” scene is interrupted by Sara Lee’s theatrical entrance, a character who is described as “an apparition come to life” (Wallace No Deposit 9). As Sara Lee enters, he immediately collides with Cooper and accidentally spills the contents of his queen-sized purse, as it were, all over the floor of the bathroom. The stage directions dictate that Sara Lee’s first line, “That’s what I call an entrance!” is directed to the audience. This momentary slip into metatheatricality by Sara Lee, whose gender identity is the most obviously blurred, foreshadows the use of the same drag convention at the start of the second Act. Norman, who has already rejected The Duke for his leather “drag,” is equally dismissive of Sara Lee. Indeed, Norman is only interested in Cooper, whose youth, race, and masculinity most resemble his own. Norman, becoming increasingly distressed by the characters’ performances of gender and sexuality, storms out of the toilet in a fit of self-hatred and homophobia. He slams the door, yelling, “Perverts! Perverts! Faggots, fruits and queers!”
(16), trapping all the other characters inside. While it is not clear if he jammed the door purposely, it is a subtle but significant indictment of a presumably closeted and homophobic gay man acting against other gays because of their particular sexual and gender performances, as well as their race and age.

Once Norman’s particular discomfort with everyone but Cooper is made evident by his exit, the other characters slowly begin to reveal the ways in which their particular sexual identities are actually manifestations of their own inability to fully engage with other men. Despite his radical, gay liberationist political analysis, in whose terms he accuses Sara Lee’s drag of being “sexist,” Cooper does not kiss other men, does not bring men home to the gay commune in which he lives, and, in fact, does nothing beyond allowing men to perform oral sex on him in bathhouses, parks, and bathrooms.

[...] Now I organize parades and distribute well-written tracts. And I haven’t kissed anybody for about two years. [...] It’s been easier to talk than to face the problem. Like, I seem to have divided myself into parts, you know?

Separating my sex life from my ideas, my ideas from my feelings, my friends from my tricks [...]. (68).

Similarly, The Duke cannot seem to make any relationship work, would secretly like to be sexually penetrated, but proves his masculinity to himself and the gay world by enacting his macho leather identity. Meredith, who was once married, has sex with no one, lives a reclusive and solitary life, and goes to places like the toilet to fulfill his voyeuristic desires.

The idea of performing an identity in the “real world,” and the ability to move beyond this identity is echoed in the play’s form, particularly the differences between its first and second Acts. The first Act posits the “reality” of a performed identity in its use of verisimilar
theatrical techniques, including a realistic set, depictions of sex, realistic acting style, and in its characters’ investment in maintaining these particular identities. In the second Act, these identities are deconstructed, which is achieved by beginning the Act with a metatheatrical drag number, performed by Meredith. In the second Act, aided by inhibition-reducing marijuana, the characters engage in talk, arguments, jokes, intimate conversation, and debate – in stark contrast to the anonymity of the tea room set up by the first Act. They literally strip off their “costumes,” and thereby their genders, their political stripes, their class, and their sexuality, and mix and match their identities through the mixing and matching of their clothes. The limits of the metaphor, and the realities of the world outside, are, however, invoked by Flick, who reminds them that he cannot take off his skin. This kind of talk and divesting of identity is only possible in the marginal world of the bathroom. Above their heads, in the racist world of politics, money, and power, sides must be chosen:

None of us should be here, that’s all I’ve got to say: we’re playin’ into their hands….Sittin’ here we’re forfeitin’ that authority you was talkin’ about – like, we’re dependent on them waitin’ for the man [to come release us from the toilet], don’t you see? Half an hour after we’re out of here, it will be business as usual in their head, faggots linin’ up to pay their dues to a System than [sic] keeps them underground. And I don’t mean the I.R.T. If you didn’t come here, I couldn’t come to feel better than you. But you do and I did…. […] I tried to explain it to you, man. I feel black – you don’t know what that means. (86-7)

Flick reminds the men that their perceived honesty with one another, as well as their disagreements, can only exist in this subaltern place. In fact, he suggests, this talk and
infighting plays into the hands of the “System,” the only true escape from which will be found in its complete dissolution.

By highlighting the experience of gay identity, as well as its limitations, *NDNR* shares much with the practice of “consciousness-raising,” a popular feminist mode of political praxis that was adopted by gay men to encourage politicization (i.e. a change in consciousness), personal growth, and community formation. By forcing these men to confront each other beyond a marginalized and subaltern sexual encounter, *NDNR* does not denigrate casual sex nor their various identities; rather, in a typical gay liberationist fashion, it asks gays to raise their own awareness, and to become conscious of their oppression, by confronting their individual experience and sharing it collectively, especially through sexual encounters which were thought to be the basis of the gay community. And because gay liberation was a movement that saw itself as part of other revolutionary movements (i.e. the Black, women’s, and those of the post-colonial world) it also asks them to deal with ways in which they oppress each other within a homophobic, racist, patriarchal, and capitalist society. According to Altman:

> there are those who see ‘the heart and soul of the movement’ as consciousness-raising or awareness groups, small groups of gay men or women (and sometimes both) who together explore the meaning of their lives, their experience, their oppression. (D. Altman *Homosexual* 147)

Indeed, the following text, which describes the experience of a consciousness-raising group from New York in 1970, could easily describe *NDNR*’s action, as well as the playwright’s intention in staging the play at a gay theatre.
While we began as nine isolated, alienated people, we have become a group politicized by the study of our experience. We found that our problems are not individual illnesses, but are generated by our oppression as a class. This discovery negated one of the most effective weapons of our oppressors, the false division between the personal and the political. Whether or not we’d had any previous political involvement none of us saw homosexuality in political terms. The sharing of our experience has brought us to a collective consciousness as gay men. (qtd. in D. Altman *Homosexual* 147)

Consciousness-raising sought to awaken gay men who were alienated from other gay men, who suffered a false consciousness, who realized neither the nature of their oppression nor the common connection and situation they shared with others of, as Christopher Isherwood termed it, “their kind.”

While *NDNR* traffics in issues of identity, **its** overt focus on gay sex, politics, community formation, and consciousness-raising differentiates it significantly from *Hosanna*. **These elements also** differentiate it from the most well known gay play of the day, Mart Crowley’s *The Boys in the Band*. **Crowley’s play** reflects the pre-Stonewall milieu and historical moment within which it was produced: New York in the 1960s. In this metropolis gay men had created various kinds of social and sexual networks, both subaltern and increasingly visible, in the years leading to the advent of the gay liberation movement. **The play** is set in the domestic sphere of Michael’s Manhattan apartment. **Its** characters are a group of friends gathered together to celebrate Harold’s birthday. **The party**, however, comes under some strain by the surprise arrival of Michael’s college roommate, Alan, who does not

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133 Isherwood’s memoir, covering his sexual awakening in Berlin from 1929 to 1939, was published in 1976.
know that Michael is gay, and makes efforts to ignore the fact that he has happened upon a party of gay men.

Like *NDNR*, *Boys* focuses on a relatively diverse group of gay men who, though not actually trapped in Michael’s apartment, are in a sense stuck together, forced to confront the intersection of their sexual and other identities. *Boys* does not focus on consciousness-raising nor does it advocate the kinds of gay liberationist politics that *NDNR* would seven years later; indeed, it does not even portend them as *Fortune and Men's Eyes*' resolutely political form of theatrical protest. The play does not critique the society that marginalizes these men because they are gay, and/or Black, Jewish, or effeminate, and neither does it do much to investigate the intersection of class or other social and political differences that foster isolation among homosexuals. Rather, *Boys* focuses on Michael’s self-loathing, the play’s central character, and his dysfunctional relationships with his (almost) equally self-hating gay friends. Unlike *NDNR*, the societal politics that have determined these men’s oppression is not critiqued, and a new form of community is not called for at its conclusion. Conversely, both the party and the play end with Michael having a tantrum, and then guiltily leaving to try to catch a midnight mass. *Boys*’ ending does not implicate its audience in any way. It rather leaves them with the question “will Michael ever overcome his self-hatred,” with his exodus to the sanctum of a Catholic mass boding negatively.

The question of self-hatred and its effects are also addressed in *Boys*’ other characters. Harold and Emory, for example, are as damaged and as self-hating as Michael, and their ability to ever love themselves or anyone else is not reconciled, though the fact that Harold is going home with his birthday present, Cowboy, a prostitute hired for the occasion, does not bode well. Alan’s sexuality is left ambiguous. If he is straight, as he purports to be,
he will go home to his wife and presumably find true happiness in the only place it can actually be found, a heterosexual nuclear family. If he is a closeted homosexual, he is just another variation of gay self-loathing, with no apparent way out.

_Boys in the Band_ does not directly investigate the issue of class among gay men, nor does it examine the ways in which other forms of identity and difference figure in gay community formation. With the possible exception of Cowboy, the play’s characters are all middle class. It does broach cultural and gender differences, represented in the characters of Bernard, who is Black, Harold, who is Jewish, and Emory, who is effeminate. The play does not, however, investigate these identities to understand the social stigmas that attend such subject positions. It uses race, religion, and gender performance as fodder for the vitriolic jokes that each queen uses against the other. The nastiness of the banter, and the ways in which Michael, in particular, uses race, effeminacy, and Jewishness to strike out against his guests further indicates that staying at the party involves a certain level of self-loathing. As Harold states:

> What I _am_, Michael, is a thirty-two year old, ugly, pock-marked Jew fairy—
and if it takes me a while to pull myself together and if I smoke a little grass before I can get up enough nerve to show my face to the world, it’s nobody’s god-damn business but my own. (Crowley 46)

In its characters, _Boys_ presents a series of portraits that belie the effects of a world that has treated these men so horribly; in its action, it displays how these men have elected to do the same to themselves and to each other. And while it ends with Michael deciding to go to midnight mass, as I alluded to above, we understand that he is unlikely to find any redemption there.
In comparison, *NDNR* takes place in a bathroom, a public space, but also a space of anonymity. It concerns a group of strangers, linked only by their (homo)sexual desires. The play invokes their differences in age, race, class, and gender performance, and posits the toilet as the *only* place that these men would ever likely meet. Age is cited by both Meredith and The Duke, who feel alienated from the new gay liberationist activism, of which both Cooper and Sara Lee are advocates. Race is expressed by Flick, who has little faith that the gulf between white and black Americans can be crossed, or that their troubled (sexual) history can be reconciled. Its discussion of class is contained in the dialogue of Sara Lee, who finds that his experience of growing up in poverty is not truly addressed by Cooper’s white, liberal, college-educated and idealistic understanding of liberation, which seemingly has answers for everything.

*NDNR*’s positioning of public toilet as tea room functions as metaphor for the situation and problems of gay men at this time: marginalized into an underground world that is predicated equally upon desire and anonymity, gay men were both trapped together and alienated from one another. In its form and action, and in the style of a gay consciousness-raising session, *NDNR* actually celebrates sex as the form of connection through which gay men can come together. Through sexual encounter, and by connecting with one another in other ways, they can potentially overcome their own particular sex and gender differences, and confront the barriers of age, class, and race, which they must do if they are ever to create meaningful connections and community. In this way *NDNR* is prototypical of the gay liberationist position whose “cutting edge” in the early 1970s, according to Jeffrey Weeks, sought to,
critically challeng[e] the existing ‘gayworld’ [sic] for its ‘ghetto mentality,’ its emphasis on sexuality to the exclusion of wider cultural issues, its erection of a ‘pseudo community’ which refused the implications of a wider sexual and social oppression, and hence the meaning of true community. (qtd. in D. Altman *Homosexual* 9-10)

While the play does not provide answers *per se* – the gay community continues to struggle with these same issues today – *NDNR* challenged gay men to recognize their differences, to begin to dialogue and understand one other, to work together toward their own personal and collective empowerment through community formation, and to do this publicly. *NDNR* was, thus, not simply a gay play with gay characters by a gay author; it was a resolutely gay liberationist play. It is an example of politicized gay theatre designed to investigate and provoke debate among gay men. It highlighted the difficulties of gay community formation and challenged its audience to work toward it in their own lives – a variation of which they could experience through theatrical performance in a gay-identified theatre.

The end of the play expresses these sentiments and the possibility of personal transformation through community engagement in both its content and form. As alluded to in this chapter’s opening, the play’s conclusion, when the men are about to be freed from the locked toilet, Cooper refuses to put his clothes back on. The other characters plead with him to do so because if he is found in the nude they will all go to jail for engaging in public sex. At the last moment, Cooper finally concedes, and the play ends by presenting the possibility of personal redemption through gay community. Cooper writes his phone number on the bathroom wall, saying:
I want you to call me. You, Meredith, Curtis… (To the Duke) You… (to the audience) whoever comes into this can: I want you all to call… […] I want you all to come over – to my place. I want you all to come home. I want you all to march with me, dance with me, make love with me… (Wallace No Deposit 97)

Gay community, according to the tenets of gay liberation, must be based on both a positive perspective on sex and fully realized, fully public relationships with other gay men. By having Cooper write his telephone number on the bathroom wall and inviting all of these men into every aspect of his life—political, social, and sexual—the play posits gay community as the only answer to the alienation and various forms of oppression these men face. It reveals the possibility of personal healing, consciousness-raising, and the potential for positive change because Cooper has earlier divulged that he only engages in casual, anonymous sex in subaltern locations such as this.

Despite his work with other gay liberationists, Cooper finally “comes out – in the full sense of the words,” as a result of his experiences in the bathroom. He continues to describe this experience and his desires, saying: “Because it’s not enough, you see: I’m not getting enough. I’m not giving enough, so I’m not getting. I want more, because there is more. I want a future” (Wallace No Deposit 68). This moment is also metatheatrical; when Cooper writes his name on the wall he not only asks the men in the toilet into his life, but also invites the audience of gay men gathered in the WSDG Gay Theatre into his life as well. In doing so, and in recounting his “true” coming out experience, he challenges them to also “come out,” to come together, and to create their futures collectively and openly. The play’s conclusion also causes us to reconsider the play’s title, No Deposit, No Return, indicating
that gay men will only get from gay community, and from one another, what they are willing to give.

NDNR’s metatheatrical ending emphasizes the difficulties of gay community, leaving its challenges in the hands of those gathered in the theatre. By ending with an invitation to dance, march, and love, the play does not conclude its action neatly. It does not, as with Hosanna, resolve its crisis with a typical denouement, through which this predicament is finally and completely resolved. Rather, NDNR presents unknown possibility. With the promise of release moments away, the play leaves its characters and its audience asking what will happen next? Having come through this experience, which has changed the consciousness of its participants, what will these men do? How will they incorporate what they have learned here, in this literally subaltern place of secrecy and marginality, into their own lives? How will they pass this knowledge on to their gay brothers and to the world? How will they negotiate their various and different identities, sexual or otherwise, with one another? In short, how will they form gay community? These were the central concerns of gay liberationists in this period, as they tried to create a newly politicized and cohesive gay community in Toronto, and elsewhere, and these were questions members of the audience were prompted to ask themselves. NDNR’s interrogative ending is, perhaps, its most politically vital element, and the part that belies its gay liberationist politic most clearly.

Wallace wrote NDNR for a patently gay theatre – a kind of theatre that did not yet exist in Toronto. Upon his return, however, there was some buzz about the play in the city, which he attributes to positive New York reviews and to the involvement of Rubinek and Palmer, who were already well known. With a relatively successful production in New York, Wallace decided to shop the play around to a number of local Alternative companies with the
aim of mounting a production in Toronto. The theatres he was most interested in were Toronto Free Theatre, and Paul Bettis’ Theatre Second Floor. Wallace felt that the former was the natural home for his play, as Palmer was an associate artistic director of the company, and because it had already produced and presented work that challenged conventional notions of sexuality. Wallace was, however, unsuccessful, which he attributes to the play being “too sexy, too gay, and […] too nude” (Halferty “Wallace”).

When I asked those involved why NDNR was not produced in Toronto, each person gave a different response. Wallace recalls that Martin Kinch, then artistic director of the Toronto Free Theatre, was not interested in it because of the play’s gay subject matter; however, when I asked Kinch about it, he said that he didn’t recall the play ever being considered for production. He remembered that Palmer directed it in New York, and that he read it, but nothing more. When I asked Palmer, he responded, “Yes, why was it not done?” (Halferty “Palmer”). But he also does not remember if he wanted to produce it when he returned to Toronto. When I suggested to Kinch that perhaps the play was not produced because it was too risky, given its explicit gay sex, and that this was not long after the Clear Light debacle – the Michael Hollingsworth play produced by Toronto Free Theatre that was closed by the Morality Squad in 1973 – he conceded that this may have been the case. Kinch also surmised, however, that “if John had brought the play and said I’m going to [do it at Toronto Free Theatre] [no]one would have said no” (Halferty “Kinch”), a point with which Palmer agrees (Halferty “Palmer”).

There can be little doubt that the state of obscenity laws in Canada at this time, as well as the general attitude of police, were not only overtly homophobic but generally anti-
sexual, and that these forces worked against NDNR’s production. Reflecting upon NDNR’s failure to be published in Canada, Anton Wagner writes:

> Despite the fact that *No Deposit, No Return* had received a professional New York production and Wallace was a member of the Playwrights Co-op, the Co-op, fearing obscenity laws existing at the time, refused to publish the play because of its perceived decadent and homosexual subject matter. (Wagner *Establishing* 56 n 89)

Locally, Toronto police turned a blind eye to the harassment of queers or took overt actions against the gay community themselves. Law enforcement’s desire to repress any approbation of homosexuality, which they continued to associate with criminality, was evident in the Canadian Association of Police Chiefs opposition to the legal reform that decriminalized homosexuality in 1969 (Kinsman *Regulation* 264). In Toronto, this repression was expressed in the raids on a number of bathhouses in the 1970s, the offices of *The Body Politic* in 1977, and “Operation Soap” in 1981, when police carried out raids on four Toronto bathhouses, resulting in the largest mass arrest since Pierre Eliot Trudeau used the War Measures Act during the October Crisis of 1970.

Beyond the homophobia of the police, Canadian law, and society generally, Wallace’s experience with Paul Bettis at Theatre Second Floor demonstrates the complexity surrounding the decision to *not* stage a gay liberation play like *NDNR*. According to Wallace – and as Bettis passed away in 2005 it is impossible to confirm this from his point of view – Bettis liked the play and wanted to produce it, but was not sympathetic with its second Act and wanted it changed. At the time, Bettis was interested in sexually explicit work. For him, in Wallace’s recollection, the first Act was exciting because it was sexual, while the second
sold itself out by trying to address interpersonal issues, gay community formation, gay men’s relationships with religion, and the ways in which gay men related to one another beyond sex – the very elements that make this play particularly significant to nascent gay liberationist communities. It is relevant to note here that Bettis was not out as a gay man at this time, and was thus not politicized around gay liberation, whereas Wallace was. From Wallace’s account, it seems he was interested in pushing the sexual envelope, as many were in the Alternative theatres of the 1970s, but not in the direction of gay liberation. In this light, Sky Gilbert’s recollection of Bettis’ *Jekyll Play Hyde*, staged at Theatre Second Floor in November 1977, is instructive of Bettis’ sexual aesthetics and politics:

[I] went with my friend Danny Zanbilowicz to see a Theatre Second Floor production called *Jekyll Play Hyde*, directed by Paul Bettis. […] I don’t remember much about the production except that the two male actors […] were naked most of the time, writhing about the floor. At the end of the piece the room was plunged into darkness except for a disco ball. Bettis pumped up the disco music and the boys danced. Danny and I were outraged. I was shy, but Danny was particularly provocative, and went up to challenge Paul. ‘What was that supposed to mean?’ demanded Danny. ‘Are you saying that life is just a disco?’ Paul grinned that cat-who-ate-the-canary smile of his and said, ‘Yes.’ (Gilbert *Ejaculations* 13)

Gilbert’s account seems to corroborate Wallace’s: Bettis was interested in representing sexual freedom but not under the banner of gay liberation or any other cohesive politic. Like the many other overt representations of sex, sexuality, and homosexuality, Bettis’ play seems to be an extension of the free love ethos of the 1960s and early 1970s. His play was not
staged in an effort to confront the difficulties, issues, or problems of a gay community in formation in the city, nor to advance a gay liberation identity politic.

*NDNR* is unique to Toronto gay theatre because it is not simply a play that represents the lives of gay characters. In its intent, the material conditions of its staging, and in its form and content, *NDNR* is a gay liberationist play. Like the movement and consciousness from which it emerged, and which engaged and supported it in New York City, it encouraged gay community by “coming out,” being staged by a gay theatre within a gay community centre, and posing difficult questions about sex, identity, and difference. While it is untenable to argue that plays that represented gay men in Toronto in the 1970s did not also serve as nodes around which gay community formation could be enacted, *NDNR* is different in kind. It is singular in the history of gay theatre in Toronto in the 1970s. It was the first and, to my knowledge, the only play written by an openly gay playwright that purposefully addressed a gay audience, albeit a New York gay audience, in an effort to both advance and challenge the formation of gay community. Its failure to achieve production may have been because it was “too gay,” “too sexy,” and “too nude,” as Wallace contends, or for any other number of personal, political, financial, legal, or artistic reasons. Regardless of why it was neither staged nor published, the unavoidable point is this: *NDNR*’s explicit gay sex and politics, combined with its overt orientation toward gay men, set it apart from any play written by a local playwright that was produced in Toronto during the 1970s. Because these are the factors that differentiate the play, it is logical to assume that these are also the factors that mitigated its production.

Despite my arguments about the singular nature of *NDNR*, and the absence of political gay theatre produced by the Alternative theatres in the early 1970s, it would be
inaccurate to say that no play or performance in other contexts addressed the gay community specifically. *Tubstrip*, by American playwright Jerry Douglas, was staged at the Global Village in 1974. Charles Ludlum brought his adaptation of Camille to the Factory Theatre in 1976. At the fourth Annual Gay Conference, held in 1976, for example, there was a Coffee House that, according to Ed Jackson, included short vignettes by local playwrights, Graham Jackson, Robert Wallace, and Michael Riordan. Graham Jackson also wrote and staged a play called “To the Hollow” at Victoria College, University of Toronto, in 1970, which portrayed the lives of a group of gay and lesbian students (McLeod Lesbian and Gay Liberation 50). There were, of course, drag shows and costume parties held in Toronto’s gay bars that, since Herbert’s time, constituted both gay performative practices and forms of political resistance. These theatrical activities were expressions of Toronto’s gay community, local in flavour and practice. These examples were, however, not written by local artists, or were performed outside the realm of the city’s Alternate and professional theatre.

When *Canadian Theatre Review* published an issue in Fall 1976 dedicated to the topic “homosexuality and the theatre,” issues of representation, gay liberation politics, and liberal humanist conceptions of art once again came into focus. The issue was edited by David Watmough, an English-born novelist, playwright, and actor who still lives in Vancouver, and who served on the editorial board of *CTR*, but would resign after the issue was published due to the fallout that attended the publication. With only 34 of its 145 pages directly addressing the topic of homosexuality and the theatre, it was a rather unambitious effort. The articles that directly take up the issue’s theme are as follows: an introduction written by Watmough called “Setting the Stage”; a transcript of a conversation between gay members of Toronto’s theatre community, namely, director John Palmer – the first time
Palmer spoke publicly as a gay man – actors Peter Jobin and Elva Mai Hover, and the review editor from The Body Politic, Ed Jackson, interviewed for CTR by its managing editor, Forester Freed, titled “A Local View”, an essay by Eric Bentley, who had recently come out of the closet, which posits homosexuality as anathema to a culture based on fertility and purpose, not nonprocreative pleasures titled “The Homosexual Question”; a short piece by Vancouver playwright and satirist Eric Nicol, who tries to find humour in his negative experiences in the theatre with “a bunch of goddamn fairies” (24), but only succeeds in coming off as laughably homophobic; a thoughtful meditation by Robert Wallace that addresses what it meant to be nominated, and to nominate oneself, a “gay” playwright, titled “Image and Label: Notes for a Sense of Self”; and, finally, a short review of homosexuality in literature, by Graham Jackson, called “Theatre of Implication.” As is customary for CTR, this issue also includes a play, though this play is not by a gay author, nor does it have any gay content. Ken Gass’s The Boy Bishop is a historical play about eighteenth-century Quebec and, according to its author, was an allegory for the current state of Canadian theatre and politics (Usmani Second Stage 34).

According to Don Rubin, general editor at CTR, who had suggested the issue as a possibility to the editorial board, Watmough was “very out” at the time, and had, in fact, perturbed some people within the Vancouver theatre establishment with his “outness” (Halferty “Rubin”). Watmough was a successful and well known performer, most famous for his “monodramas,” a series of one-person shows that present the life experiences of his alter ego, “Davey Bryant.” Watmough’s/Bryant’s homosexuality is addressed in the monodramas

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134 According to Don Rubin, general editor at CTR, it was he, not Watmough, who asked Forester Freed to set up this panel for the issue (Halferty, “Don Rubin Interview”).
and novels, many of which are loosely autobiographical.\textsuperscript{135} Watmough did not, however, represent his/Davey’s homosexuality to cite some injustice or inequality, as Herbert had done, nor to foster gay community. As Ross Labrie contends, “Davey’s homosexuality is almost incidental; the focus falls on his individuality […]. It is as if Watmough depicts Davey’s gayness to be true to his character, rather than to make a political statement” (Labrie 1197). As already suggested, Watmough was not closeted about his sexuality, he had been open about it for years, but he regularly deflected readings of his work that categorized it or him as “gay,” or “Canadian” for that matter, eschewing these labels as he feared they would diminish the universality of his work.\textsuperscript{136} In his own words: “I like being called a gay writer as much and as little as I enjoy being referred to as a Canadian writer. […] I soon fret if it is employed as a restriction to the catholicity I fervently seek” (Wasserman “Watmough” 364).

In the CTR issue, Watmough seems caught among the conflicting ideologies of the age: the homophile movement’s desire for tolerant acceptance, gay liberation’s call for revolution, and his own presumably long-held liberal humanist views about the nature and function of art and the artist. He states the following as his goal for the CTR issue: “if the present volume does nothing other than point to a few of the variances [within the gay world] and raise some of the larger questions surrounding homosexuality in our theatre (and in society at large) it will have more than served its function” (Watmough “Homosexuality” 7). Such sentiments align him with the homophile approach to gay rights, as represented by Vancouver’s homophile organization, the Association for Social Knowledge, whose goal was

\textsuperscript{135} See in particular, Watmough. Ashes, and No More.

\textsuperscript{136} In his rebuttal to Lynch’s critique of the CTR issue, Watmough notes: “In 1954 I was responsible for the first B.B.C. radio broadcast ever on the subject of homosexuality, while through four published books of fiction and plays, innumerably on C.B.C. radio and television, in magazine and newspaper interviews and as my interviewers from TBP can attest, in my performances which number over a thousand, I have stood fair square for gay rights and pride… All in all, I think my record stands” (“Letters” ellipsis original).
“to help society to understand and accept variations from the sexual norm” (McLeod Lesbian and Gay Liberation 7). He does not approach the CTR issue from a gay liberationist standpoint, as he is more concerned with his individuality, “universal themes,” and his relationship to the broader community. He addresses his commitment to his art’s universal appeal, and the ways that his homosexuality seemed to put this in danger, when speaking about a piece called “Scar Tissue,” a short monologue from his monodrama Ashes for Easter. “Scar Tissue” recounts his experience of incarceration for gross indecency as a young man, but of the piece he insists: “You want to find the universal elements in the experience—the things we share with straights. If it doesn’t escape the gay ghetto experience, I feel it has failed” (Blumenthal and Warner 24).

In his introduction, Watmough makes a number of confusing and somewhat contradictory arguments that seem to belie both a personal conflict, and the broader contested relationship of politics, sexuality, and art. He cites the social and the political when he suggests that the “difficulty in obtaining more broadly based representation [in this issue] is in large part the result of a harsh but simple reality: still in 1976 the personal declaration of homosexuality in our Canadian theatre can easily lead to unemployment” (Watmough “Homosexuality” 6). Yet through his arguments and his editorial decisions, Watmough – unwittingly, one assumes – supports this status quo. At a time when people feared the ramifications of coming out and making their sexuality a political issue, he contends that to privilege the contribution that homosexuals have made to the theatre, or to make this CTR volume an affirmation of gay theatre, is to only ever be propagandistic.

It is possible that some of our gay readers, particularly the militant young, will see in this issue a less than trenchant affirmation of the homosexual
contribution to the dramatic arts. And while I am somewhat inclined to agree with them, I did not construe this particular issue to be a propagandistic weapon for gay rights, anymore than I wished it to merely sit on the fence.

(Watmough “Homosexuality” 7)

Watmough’s logic is difficult to follow here because it seems to contradict itself. By his own acknowledgment, the issue is not an approbation of “the homosexual contribution” to theatre, because that would be “propagandistic.” This said, he wants the issue to have an unambiguous and, one would assume, positive political position. But how is such an ambivalent position possible?

In fact, the issue does have a clear political position: it puts Watmough’s conception of “good theatre” as “high art” ahead of any political project, or loyalty to a gay community undergoing a radical political reformation. The thorny problem of the politicization of homosexuality for artists like Watmough is represented most clearly in the issue’s rather conspicuous failure to publish a gay play. In his introduction, Watmough takes “full” responsibility for this decision, framing it in terms of merit, excellence, and by invoking the unimportance of a playwright’s sexuality in relation to his work.

It may be objected by some, as it was by at least one of our contributors, that the issue contains no gay play. Here I take full responsibility. Having seen four drearily self-conscious gay plays in a row in London this past Spring, and having read a dozen more in the course of the year, I don’t want to see another gay play – Canadian or otherwise – unless it captivates by excellence. Then I can and will feel proud of the work of a gay brother or sister, and not feel that I have simply been conscripted (by virtue of my sexuality) into a
propagandistic movement, often with political overtones where to disagree is to be arrogantly labeled a homosexual ‘Uncle Tom.’ (Watmough “Homosexuality” 7)

Watmough will not concede to community pressures in his decisions about what plays deserve critical recognition, as doing so would be tantamount to participating in propaganda; however, he does not see the politics at work in his understanding of “good” and “bad” art. He fails to see that his own liberal humanist conceptions of “greatness” and “universality” also exist in the realm of politics, which feminists, gay liberationists, and others began to theorize in this period.

Watmough’s liberal humanist position, and the extent to which this position is “common sense,” is made evident in the vagueness of his explanation for why he chose not to publish a gay play. First, what does Watmough mean when he says the “gay” plays he saw and read were “drearily self-conscious”? And why does this preclude excellence? Does this signal the nature of the content in these plays? Are they too overtly focused on particularly gay concerns, and thus not universal enough? Or perhaps Watmough is speaking about form? Do the plays use meta-theatrical conventions, such as parody or drag, which had and continues to have currency in gay theatre? Or does self-conscious refer to the consciousness-raising activities of feminists and gay liberationists? Were these plays too much like such meetings, where groups of women, lesbians, and gay men met to discuss and theorize their own oppression, and to cultivate their own political consciousness?

In his explanation of why he did not publish a gay play, Watmough does provide an important caveat that signals the overriding political orientation of theatre and publishing at this time: “Canadian or otherwise.” This qualification foregrounds that there was a plausible
argument for publishing a play that did not achieve the highest standards, however they are defined: namely, because it was *Canadian* in a time when there was a strong political imperative to publish new Canadian plays.\(^{137}\) Watmough does not seem to be sympathetic to this politic either. He believed that an artist should neither be limited nor wrongfully privileged because of social identity and/or politic.

Watmough’s decision to not publish a gay play in the *CTR* issue is particularly significant to this discussion because among the gay plays he rejected was Robert Wallace’s *No Deposit, No Return*, whom I presume to be the contributor he refers to who took umbrage with the lack of a gay play in the issue. According to Michael Lynch, who interviewed Wallace as part of his rather scathing critique of the *CTR* issue, when Wallace submitted his play for publication he was asked by Watmough if he would write a piece that addressed what it means to him to be called a “gay playwright.” Watmough published Wallace’s essay but rejected his script, and “ruled against publishing *any* script in this issue, on the grounds that he did not want to be responsible for any gay play being labeled as ‘gay’” (Lynch “Canadian” 16).\(^{138}\)

Lynch’s response to the *CTR* issue provides us with an example of a prevalent gay liberationist position on the politics of art and culture at this time. In his review, Lynch argues that the issue is a failure because it does not provide analysis on three important areas that very much needed redress: “homosexuals or homosexual ‘themes’ in plays; plays by homosexuals (and possibly for homosexuals) dealing with the gay experience; and gays in

\(^{137}\) It was, for example, the policy of the Canadian Playwright’s Co-op to publish any Canadian play that had had a production – a topic I return to below, with reference to *No Deposit, No Return*.

\(^{138}\) Perhaps not surprisingly, the first anthology of plays by gay men to be published in Canada, called *Making, Out: Plays by Gay Men*, was edited by Robert Wallace. Wallace was also instrumental in publishing gay work in his role as drama editor at Coach House press, and, again ironically, at *Canadian Theatre Review*. 
theatre industry.” In calling for analyses of these three subjects, Lynch’s response is typical of a gay liberationist perspective. It is informed by the feminist conception that the “personal is political,” specifically in its call to investigate the nature of the representations of homosexuals in theatre and (implicitly) their relationship to the lives of homosexuals in the social world. It concerns the importance of fostering community among homosexual subjects by creating works that deal with their experiences, and which might be aimed solely at homosexuals themselves. And finally, it holds a Marxist perspective on the material importance of the conditions of production, namely the circumstances of gays working in the theatre. In all cases, Lynch calls on Watmough and the CTR issue to respond to, and advocate on behalf of, a politicized gay community, which would include the publication of an overtly “gay play.” It is possible that the players in this particular drama, Wallace, Lynch and Watmough, may have inadvertently or purposefully misrepresented themselves. Watmough’s view of theatre and art, however, specifically his “ardent belief that there is no such thing as a gay play [or a straight play],” corroborates Lynch’s quotation of Wallace: that Watmough was not inclined to publish a gay play because he did not want to be responsible for labeling any play as “gay.”

Following the publication of the issue, and in his response to Lynch’s critique, Watmough resigned from the CTR editorial board. In his resignation, he disassociated himself from the issue, stating:

This is to inform your readers that the random collection of items appearing under the title of Homosexuality and the Theatre in the Fall 1976 issue of CTR was not the result of my editorial judgment and industry. In fact, I wish to publicly disassociate myself from it. I had prepared what I considered to be a
relatively balanced compilation of contributions on the subject of homosexuality in the theatre: writing matter which reflected among other things, a heterosexual critical viewpoint and the perspective of international experience. However, without my knowledge, let alone my permission, such vital constituents were dropped. I feel I have been manipulated into letting the gay world down. (“To the Editor” 148)

It must be acknowledged that Watmough may have not found a “gay play” that he felt was worthy of publication, including Wallace’s. But, again, in a manner that echoes John Herbert’s experience with George Luscombe, when Luscombe was not interested in Fortune and Men’s Eyes, but was happy to have him write another play, it is odd that Watmough declined Wallace’s play but invited him to contribute an essay to the volume. Why not just publish Wallace’s play? The content of Watmough’s resignation also strikes me as odd. His introduction to the issue details each article published, but his letter does not mention the names of the “dropped” articles. In fact, the two he does make reference to, it seems, were included, namely the pieces by Eric Nicol and Eric Bentley, which constitute “the heterosexual critical viewpoint and the perspective of international experience,” respectively.

I contacted Watmough and he agreed to answer questions via e-mail regarding the CTR issue. I asked him two questions: why he did not publish Wallace’s script, and if he recalled the pieces that had been “dropped.” His response was laconic: “I stand by what I said then. I researched the matter at the time and then felt [sic] wholly vindicated. I do so now” (Watmough “David Watmough”). When I asked Don Rubin, CTR’s editor at this time the issue was published, he said no content was dropped (Halferty “Rubin”). Why Watmough
did not publish a gay play and how he was “manipulated into letting the gay world down” remains a question.

Watmough is obviously cognizant of homophobia and its affects on the political complexities of theatrical performance and the material circumstances under which theatre is produced (or not produced). It may be that he simply did not want to publish a “gay play” as he felt he would be doing a disservice to the playwright by assigning him this label. Yet, from the textual evidence left that I have found, it also seems he was a man caught in a paradigmatic change. He seems unable to reconcile the aesthetics and politics of an emergent form, politicized gay theatre, with his liberal humanist understanding of art and its function. He acknowledges that the decision to come out in the theatre at this time could have negative material effects. By not publishing Wallace’s play, or any other gay play for whatever reasons, he did not fight the theatre establishment’s homophobia, he conceded to it. However unintentionally, by not publishing a gay play, he hindered the promotion of gay theatre and gay artists, and mitigated the production of gay theatre in Toronto, and Canada in the 1970s. Whatever the case may be, the fact that the first issue of a Canadian theatre journal to address homosexuality does not contain a gay play by a gay playwright, in a magazine that customarily publishes a play that addresses its theme, and that this decision was made by a gay man, reveals the intracommunity complexities of gay politics and art at this time. Furthermore, it foregrounds the competing discourses of individualism/universality and identity-based politics that were emerging in theatrical production and reception in the 1970s.

Before concluding, it is important to note that the discourses of Canadian nationalism ascendant in this period, which I have used here to frame *Hosanna*, are also present in *NDNR*. Despite the play’s New York setting and characters, its focus on the problems of
forming diverse constituents into a “community” based in political identity, rather than race, class, religion, or ethnicity, is a typically “Canadian” concern at this time.\(^{139}\) As I have argued here, *NDNR* was interested in addressing how to negotiate various forms of difference toward forming a coherent, but not conformist, gay community. In this way, it shares much with the rhetoric of Canadian multicultural nationalism, which sought to find ways to encourage a sense of Canadian national identity through the liberal construction of an imagined, multicultural community, based in mutual respect for its regionally and linguistically different constituents. Within these concerns lies the possibility that *NDNR* could also have been read, received, and assimilated by a liberal humanist framework; however, its unabashed nudity and sex, its concentration of gay politics, and its formal concern for a group of men (rather than an individual) all seem to have mitigated the possibility of this reading. In its form, content, and conditions of its production, *NDNR* confronted the realities of gay life and community formation in its moment directly. Its representation of gay men was about these politics in ways that *Hosanna’s* production at the Tarragon simply was not.

As Hannon, Wallace, Jackson, Lynch and others argued, if gays and lesbians wanted a theatre that could begin to represent their interests and issues from a particular point of view, their point of view, they would have to build it themselves. As we will see in the next chapter, Sky Gilbert’s establishment of Buddies in Bad Times Theatre, and its nomination as the city’s gay and lesbians theatre, is part of both his artistic and political development, and the significant growth the gay and lesbian community underwent in the 1970s and early 1980s. Paradoxically, the community’s growth was encouraged by a backlash, as the

\(^{139}\) Vincent Massey addresses these concerns in his famous report, noting that “Canada is a unit only in a political sense,” but that “a characteristic feeling, manner or style, [is] possible that could be called Canadian” (60).
Christian Right, the police, and other government agencies aimed at taking back the ground won by gay liberationists in the early years of the decade. The events that constituted the backlash became flashpoints, examples of oppression that were vehemently and spectacularly resisted by activists and the growing community. In this period, the gay community in Toronto would become increasingly complex and large enough to have both a mainstream and a radical fringe. Gay liberation versus gay rights activism would become an important debate, and the emergence of AIDS would present the increasingly consolidated community with unforeseen obstacles and challenges. Buddies’ and Gilbert’s early development and career navigates, and was affected by, these significant changes in gay community. Eventually, he and his theatre would take up a position at the margin of both the gay and lesbian community, and the Alternative theatre industry in the city, the details of which will be explored in the following chapter.
CHAPTER THREE:


On 17 October 1985, an event that would have determining effects within gay history and gay theatre in Toronto occurred at a porn cinema on Bloor Street: Sky Gilbert did drag for the first time. The occasion was the opening night of his play *Drag Queens on Trial: A Courtroom Melodrama*. In his memoirs, he recalls:

I arrived with [my friend] David Pond as my escort. It was my first experience with drag, and I must have looked a treat. I didn’t even apply any foundation (I wouldn’t leave the house in drag without foundation these days, but of course I’m much older now!). With David Pond’s help, I applied a little rouge and made up my eyes, and plopped a punkish fright wig on my head. It was lovely having my little skinhead boy on my arm and sitting down right in front of the critics. ‘Well, this is the end of my career,’ I thought. ‘But, fuck, this is a funny play. And I’m going to go down in all my flaming glory.’ (*Ejaculations* 92)

Thankfully, Gilbert’s grim prediction did not come to pass. In fact, the very opposite occurred: when read in relation to the politics of Toronto’s gay community, to Gilbert’s biography, and to the early history of Buddies in Bad Times Theatre, *Drag Queens* stands out as a radical turn in Gilbert’s playwriting and theatrical politics. Its performance foregrounds the turbulent and transitional politics of Toronto’s gay community in the late 1970s through to the mid 1980s, a period marked by crises, consolidations, and a movement away from revolutionary gay liberation and toward a resolutely liberal form of gay rights activism. It is also the play with which Gilbert’s sexual, aesthetic, and political commitments reach their maturity.
From the time that he came out as a gay man in 1980, Gilbert began writing and staging plays about gay love, sex, and culture. Based mostly on the biographies and works of historical gay poets, these plays emerge out of the sexual politics of 1970s gay liberation. They explore Gilbert’s newly embraced sexual identity and culture, and embody the euphoric feelings of sexual freedom that attended this revelation in his life. Their success also express the unprecedented visibility and solidarity Toronto’s gay community had achieved by the late 1970s, which created a market for explicitly gay theatre. Gilbert’s early works, and his nomination of his theatre, Buddies in Bad Times, as a “gay” theatre in the early 1980s, reflect his development as a politicized gay artist, and the emergence of an “institutionally complete” gay and lesbian community within the city’s political, social, and cultural life.

In comparison to these earlier plays, *Drag Queens on Trial* critiques straight and gay culture alike. In form, content, and politics, it marks a departure from Gilbert’s previous work. Set in a courtroom, it is a highly parodie and metatheatrical adaptation of a 1950s Hollywood melodrama that cites the hypocrisy of society’s liberal institutions, especially the legal establishment, and indict the liberal assimilationist trends in gay culture and activism emerging in this period. A parodic critique of everything and anything Gilbert deemed “mainstream,” the performance rejects realism for theatricality, naturalism for drag, self-consciously parodying the conventions of melodrama to demonstrate how both straight and gay cultures regularly and violently delegitimize nonnormative gender expressions and sexualities, anticipating Judith Butler’s theory of gender performativity as well as other aspects of the queer theoretical and political critique that would emerge at the end of the 1980s. Especially through its critique of society’s liberal institutions, *Drag Queens* reacts against gay rights as the emergent form of gay activism, whose underlying political philosophy was not sexual/gay liberation, but rather a
liberal politics of civil rights reform, supported by an increasingly large number of politically mainstream gays and lesbians. This conservative turn was, no doubt, also encouraged by the advent of AIDS, which threw the pro-promiscuity politics of gay liberation into serious question. With its premiere in 1985, Drag Queens intervened into these politics. The first locally produced play to confront the epidemic, it celebrates promiscuity through safe sex practices, which Gilbert had uncharacteristically critiqued in The Dressing Gown, the play that directly precedes Drag Queens, and which stands out as a transitional play in Gilbert’s oeuvre. Drag Queens also intervened into current AIDS discourses by parodying melodramatic form to show how dominant narratives of disease, sickness, and death – dramatic or otherwise – were predicated upon the debasement of feminine genders and sexualities, including those of gay men.

Part of Drag Queens’ importance is found in the way its production also marks a watershed moment in Buddies’ programming and politics. It directly precedes both its inaugural “Four-Play” festival, the company’s first explicitly gay and lesbian programming, and its first independently produced Rhubarb! festival since 1980. By promoting the sacred place of promiscuity through safer-sex practices, critiquing the emergent mainstream of gay community and its increasing commitment to civil rights politics, and celebrating non-heteronormative sexual and gender expressions, Drag Queens on Trial embodies the theatrical inauguration of Gilbert’s blatantly sexual, queer, and coalitional politics, setting the stage for the rest of his career.


The backlash against gay liberation was an international phenomenon, occurring across the United States and Canada in the late 1970s and 1980s. Its beginning in both countries is commonly marked by Anita Bryant’s “Save our Children” campaign. Launched in 1977 to repeal
an anti-discrimination ordinance in Dade County, Florida, the famed American country singer’s organization aimed at fostering “traditional” role models in schools by prohibiting employment of gays and lesbians. It waged a relentless battle across the United States, and was successful in five of the six jurisdictions that it targeted. Bryant also undertook a national tour of Canada, organized by Ken Campbell, Christian minister and founder of Renaissance International, an anti-gay rights organization based in Milton, Ontario. In response to her campaign, the Coalition to Stop Anita Bryant (CSAB) was formed in Toronto in June 1977. In January 1978, a day before Bryant spoke at the People’s Church in Scarborough, the CSAB organized a protest that saw more than 800 people march loud and proud along Yonge Street, the largest gay and lesbian rally in Canadian history to date (Warner Never 136). The size of CSAB’s protest signaled a striking shift in gay politics in Toronto in the late 1970s: what had been a handful of radical gay liberation activists agitating at the fringes of the city’s political life in the early 1970s was becoming a popular social movement.

The six months leading up to Bryant’s Canadian tour were turbulent for Toronto’s gay community, marked by a series of significant events. The first was the murder of shoe-shine boy, Emanuel Jaques. Sexually assaulted and killed by four men on 28 July 1977, Jaques’ body was discovered on the roof of a sex shop on Yonge Street two days later. As historian Gary Kinsman suggests, the incident quickly turned from a grisly and tragic murder into “moral panic” (Regulation 336-8). It provoked a barrage of homophobic coverage in the press, which called it a “homosexual murder,” among other equally dubious designations. On the day of Jaques’ funeral, 4 August 1977, protestors held a rally at City Hall and demanded the “eradication of

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140 Bryant was only unsuccessful in Orange Country, California, where Proposition 6 was defeated in 1977.

141 Similar anti-Bryant groups were formed across Canada. For more on the rise of the Christian Right and social conservatism in Canada, see Warner Losing.
The second was the raid of *The Body Politic*'s offices on 30 December 1977 by the Metro Toronto Police Force. The raid was undertaken in reaction to an article written by Gerald Hannon entitled “Men Loving Boys Loving Men,” published in the November 1977 edition of the paper. Given the rhetoric that gay men and lesbians were a danger to children – propagated by Bryant’s “Save our Children” campaign and the rhetoric swirling around Jaques’ murder – the article’s investigation of consensual sexual relationships between adult men and young boys was politically gutsy, expressing the more sexually radical aspects of gay liberation politics. Rick Bébout, member of *The Body Politic* collective, characterizes the decision to publish Hannon’s article by saying, “So long as kids & sex, however linked, remained a hot button issue (forever, maybe?), the time would never be right, never perfectly safe. But, we realized, we'd never been into playing it safe” (“Promiscuous”).

The raid of *The Body Politic* was the catalyst for Mayor John Sewell’s first public support of the gay community, which he recognized as being under attack, and which would help facilitate its entry into municipal politics. When he spoke at *The Body Politic*’s “Free the Press” rally early in 1979, the controversy quickly spread to municipal politics. In his address, this young, progressive, and famously bike-riding mayor (those were the days!), took up the minority model of the gay community, suggesting that it, like other “ethnic” communities, “contribute[d] significantly to the vitality and versatility of the city” (Hannon “Sewell” 8). The Mayor also emphasized the importance of the alternative press:

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142 As noted in the last chapter, political activities around the age of consent and the extension of sexual liberation to children created real division between gay men and lesbians in this era. For analysis of the lesbian feminist reaction to this incident in particular, see Ross “Like Apples and Oranges.”
The trial now going on in regard to *The Body Politic* is seen by many as an attack on the freedom of the press. I wrote the Attorney-General some months ago. Following the seizure of documents from *The Body Politic*, stressing that very concern […]. I hope that my attendance here tonight can help ensure that an attack on the alternative press in Toronto must not be countenanced and that we all must act strongly when any kind of attack is suggested. (Hannon “Sewell” 10)

Although Sewell intended his appearance to “help calm the political atmosphere so that issues could be clarified,” his presence and his remarks had the exact opposite effect (Hannon “Sewell” 8). Following Sewell’s appearance at the rally, evangelical minister Ken Campbell appeared on the Christian television program *100 Huntley Street*. In a melodramatic performance of his own, he cried as he recounted his experiences as a witness for the Crown in *The Body Politic* trials, while the telephone number of the mayor’s office flashed regularly across the screen. The following day, the mayor met a barrage of hateful callers, and Sewell would eventually have to leave City Hall under police protection, having “believable and detailed” death threats (Hannon “Sewell” 8).

Despite this negative attention, Sewell made alliances with members of the gay community, greatly impacting Toronto’s 1980 municipal election, signaling the gay community’s movement toward the mainstream of the city’s politics. On 3 September, Sewell announced his endorsement of George Hislop, the first openly gay man to run for city council. Hislop competed in Ward 6, the municipal district that includes the intersection of Church and Wellesley Streets and that portion of Yonge Street between Charles and Carlton, the neighbourhood where most gay businesses were located and where many gays and lesbians lived. His candidacy was established with the support of the Association of Gay Electors (AGE).
Formed in the summer of 1979, AGE’s mandate was to foster visible gay and lesbian involvement in municipal politics (Nash “Toronto's Gay Ghetto” 238). Sewell’s primary rival in the race, Art Eggleton, stoked the flames of homophobic fear in the city by accusing Sewell and Hislop of pushing their way into City Hall, and “facilitating San Francisco-style gay power politics in Toronto” (Jackson 9). Both Sewell and Hislop lost their bids with popular hostility toward “the rise of ‘gay power’” in Toronto being widely cited in the media as the primary reason for their defeat (Warner Never 139). Despite their loss, the large-scale media attention cast on the gay community by their campaigns helped to establish it as a “minority” within the city’s municipal politics, and within popular consciousness (Nash “Toronto's Gay Ghetto”). Among many gay men and lesbians, this election confirmed the efficacy of a liberal politics of participation and inclusion.

Seeing these comparatively assimilationist movements take shape in the midst of the charged atmosphere of the backlash, some old school gay liberationists argued that the civil rights strategy was beginning to have negative affects on their more utopian project. They feared that the civil rights strategy was in danger of making the gay community too liberal, and too easily contented by inclusion within existing social and political frameworks. Michael Lynch advances his arguments against civil rights activism in an article entitled “The End of the ‘Human Rights Decade.’” In it, he insists that, with the advent of a vibrant, visible, and politically active gay communities across North America, the civil rights strategy had served its purpose. Lynch published his article in July 1979, and cites the recent political turmoil into which San Francisco was plunged when Harvey Milk, the first openly gay man elected to public office in the U.S., was shot and murdered by fellow city supervisor, Dan White. On the evening

143 This is the basic thesis that Nash elucidates in her dissertation.
of Milk’s tragic murder, 27 November 1978, San Francisco’s gay community mourned with a massive candlelight vigil, attended by tens of thousands, marching from Castro Street to City Hall. But on 21 May 1979, when White received the lightest sentence possible for his crime, “voluntary manslaughter,” the community rioted, burning police cars, and vandalizing City Hall.

In contradistinction to the gay rights activists involved in what Lynch calls the “human rights lobby,” he encouraged gays to embrace the San Francisco riots as “[their] own,” likening them to the Stonewall riots and arguing that a new strategy for revolutionary politics be similarly born in their wake. For Lynch, the San Francisco riots marked a time for retrospection and radical renewal: “looking back on ten years of Canadian gay politics we can see that the human rights strategy has in fact been so successful that it is no longer necessary” (emphasis original). Lynch argues the civil rights strategy was reducing the revolutionary potential of gay liberation by transforming the community into a rights-oriented, liberal movement that “seeks assimilation, legislation, and isolation – the isolation of this one issue from all the rest that concern us.” Lynch suggests that a new central focus might be the “containment of totalitarian power, particularly that of police.” He advocates for such a focus because it would encourage coalition among “women, gays, non-white and poor [people],” and curtail the power of the police as “the strongest arm of racism and patriarchy.” Lynch suggests that if gays continue on the civil rights path, they “risk the fate of the abolitionist movement after Emancipation, the feminist movement after the franchise, [and] the black movement after the Civil Rights Act of 1964.” He feared that gay liberation’s utopian goal of society-wide sexual liberation would evaporate if the movement equated its success with legal recognition and civil rights. Indeed, Lynch suggested that “the greatest danger in continuing to seek human rights above all is that we might get them.”
Similarly, Ken Popert, stalwart gay liberationist and important member of *The Body Politic*’s editorial collective, wrote an article called “The Dangers of the Minority Game,” in 1982. In it, he outlines the various ways that homosexuals have been viewed historically, as a “third sex,” as a “lifestyle,” and now as a “minority community.” As one of the most outspoken advocates of gay liberation politics in Toronto, he argues that gays should not struggle to fit themselves into the world, but that they should conversely work toward “reshap[ing] the world, so that it will fit us” (“Dangers” 139).

Looking at ourselves as a minority community has definite survival value. But it is a precarious shelter which can be demolished at any time, for it is easy to show that gays are not just another tile in the multicultural mosaic. And the analogy can blind us to our own realities. But it cannot cancel them out. (“Dangers” 139)

Popert recognizes the “strength in numbers” afforded by identity politics, which appeals to an easily understandable and efficacious framework through which community, visibility, and political organizing can be effected. He also concedes that its rhetoric fits well within civil rights discourses, and the broader system of governance designed to accommodate difference in Canada: the multicultural paradigm that had been gaining currency since it was passed by Pierre Trudeau’s government in 1971. But Popert also emphasizes the historicity of the minority model. He cautions against a view of identity politics that casts the gay and lesbian community as analogous to other “ethnic minorities,” suggesting that fitting gays and lesbians within existing frameworks impedes their ability to see the problems inherent to their own community formations.

It’s important to note that Lynch and Popert were not *against* civil rights activism and identity politics when they were deployed to foster gay community as an expression of gay
liberationist philosophies. What they opposed were the ways civil rights activism combined with identity politics and encouraged an inward-looking and isolated political praxis. They did not want gays and lesbians to adopt “heterosexual” paradigms, such as marriage or monogamy, or be content with civil rights inclusions. Rather, they wanted gays to be true to the tenets of gay liberation by encouraging a broad-based sexual liberation of society. They wanted gays to “liberate” themselves and straights by creating new forms of living and community through investments in a sexually free gay culture.

Shortly after the 1980 election, which did so much to consolidate the gay and lesbian community as a minority within the city’s political culture, came the most spectacular attack Toronto’s gay community has ever experienced: “Operation Soap,” or as it is more widely known, the “Toronto bathhouse raids.” Late in the evening of 5 February 1981, the Metro Toronto Police Force launched simultaneous raids on four downtown bathhouses, arresting 304 “found-ins” and twenty others as “keepers of a common bawdy house.” Police used hammers, crowbars, and shears to rip open lockers and break down doors, intimidating and harassing bathhouse workers and patrons, and causing more than $35,000 in damage (Warner Never 110).

The raids were the largest attack ever faced by Toronto’s gay community and were met with a massive revolt. Over 3,000 gay men and lesbians marched down Yonge Street on the evening of 6 February, and diverted to 52 Division’s headquarters on Dundas Street, where they chanted “NO MORE SHIT” and “NO MORE RAIDS.” Met at the station by hundreds of police officers, the crowd very nearly rioted before taking their protest and their anger to Queen’s Park, where the most radical among them broke down the doors of the legislature.

144 The owners and those who were working for the baths were charged as “keepers” of a “common bawdy house,” while the patrons were charged as “found-ins.”
The raids were interpreted in the press and on the street as a stunning attack on a minority community by the State. The huge number of arrests was rivaled only by the October Crisis of 1971, when the *Front de libération du Québec* (FLQ), a terrorist organization, kidnapped labour minister Pierre Laporte, and British Trade Commissioner James Cross, killing Laporte, and when Trudeau invoked the War Measures Act, temporarily rescinding citizens’ basic civil rights. The raids forced gay men and lesbians from all walks of life to realize their need to organize collectively, and to fight back against malevolent social forces, including agencies of the State.145

Before the raids, the gay community in Toronto was still somewhat fractured and isolated, comprised of activists who mostly congregated around *The Body Politic* and the Gay Alliance Toward Equality (GATE), and “bar fags,” the gay men of various backgrounds who frequented gay bars and baths, but who were un politicized (Knegt 20). “What the bathhouse raids did,” in the view of gay activist Tim McCaskell, “was bring [these] groups together” (Knegt 21). One of the “found-ins,” John Burt, describes his experience of gay identity before and after the raids:

> For the first time I started conceiving of myself being a member of a gay community. Prior to that, I mean, when I heard people talk about a gay community I always laughed, because we were basically a group of strangers who only knew each other from the waist down, and that’s it. I mean I have nothing in common with these individuals except sex, a very casual sexual encounter. But now I realize that there were forces afoot in the world that were now picking on us as a minority, and whether we liked it or not, whether we thought of ourselves as a minority, we were a minority through adversity. (*Track Two*)

145 In *Track Two*, Burt also speaks about how his experience of the raids – being forced into the street naked, being called degrading names, and feeling completely at the mercy of a malevolent state authority – made him understand “for the first time” the kind of experiences his parents must have faced during the Second World War as Jewish survivors of the Holocaust.
Many within the gay community began to understand legal protections and civil rights as the *only* real defense against discrimination, which ultimately diminished the currency of gay liberation’s more lofty goals.

In the years that followed the bathhouse raids, the gay and lesbian community deeply distrusted Toronto Police. Moreover, it viewed the legal establishment and the criminal justice system as agents of a conservative, heterosexual morality, which sought to maintain its privileged position by criminalizing its nonconforming constituents – concerns addressed in *Drag Queens on Trial*. The police attempted to justify the raids by associating gay bathhouses with other “criminal” activities, specifically prostitution, offenses against minors, and organized crime, though they were unable to convincingly make these connections in court (Kinsman Regulation 314). As many argued in this period, parts of the legal and political establishment in Toronto continued to associate gay men and community with criminality. Despite the fact that social attitudes toward homosexuality had improved, gay men and lesbians continued to experience discrimination in housing and employment, and held little legal recourse to address these injustices.146

In this difficult context, a transition was underway in Toronto’s gay politics. No longer simply a strategy for community formation, civil rights, and the liberal philosophies of equality and inclusion upon which they are predicated, were beginning to supersede gay liberation as the primary underlying political philosophy of gay activism in the city. The events of the backlash facilitated this shift by enlivening larger numbers of gay men and lesbians, for whom civil rights protections, rather than large-scale sexual revolution, were the primary motivator of political

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146 The John Damien case is the most well known example of employment discrimination from this period. Damien had been a horseracing steward and was fired by the Ontario Racing Commission when his homosexuality was revealed. See Warner, *Never* 144-5.
action. As Lynch and Popert’s articles make clear, this trend was visible in the late 1970s and early 1980s; however, it would be significantly strengthened by the emergence of AIDS. In the most urgent terms possible, life and death, AIDS would call into question the pro-promiscuity sexual politics and philosophies of gay liberation, and require new forms of political philosophy and practice to fight the epidemic.

“To make dying gay”: Early Responses to AIDS

AIDS came to public attention in a now infamous New York Times article published 3 July 1981. The Times’ story, “Rare Cancer Seen in 41 Homosexuals,” describes clusters of Kaposi’s Sarcoma cases among gay men in New York and San Francisco. The article links this cancer to gay promiscuity, reporting that these men “had multiple and frequent sexual encounters with different partners, as many as 10 sexual encounters each night up to four times a week” (L. Altman).

Following so soon after the bathhouse raids, gay activists in Toronto were understandably skeptical of a “new cancer” that only affected promiscuous gay men. Even as late as July 1983, when the AIDS Committee of Toronto (ACT) was established – and there were twenty-seven reported cases in Canada, only nine of which were in Ontario – many of the city’s most experienced gay liberation activists were conspicuous in their absence (Silversides 44). These activists felt AIDS organizing in Toronto to be “unnecessary and counterproductive to the

147 I say infamous because the article is cited in popular representations of AIDS such as Larry Kramer’s play The Normal Heart (1985) and the early AIDS film Longtime Companion, directed by René Norman (1989), the latter of which begins with a montage of different people in various New York locations reading and responding to the Times article.

148 It is now known that there was a rash of uninvestigated AIDS deaths in the 1970s among intravenous drug users, which, at the time, was called “junkies’ pneumonia.” Cindy Patton notes that AIDS was not recognized in this population because junkies were already considered sick and unhealthy, making their untimely deaths unremarkable (27-8).

149 By comparison, four months earlier, in March 1983, when Larry Kramer wrote his famous article “1,112 and Counting,” there were more than five hundred AIDS diagnoses in New York City, of which 195 had died.
growth of the gay community” (Robert Wallace qtd. in Silversides 44). Even No Deposit, No Return’s author Robert Wallace, who was ACT’s first media coordinator, recalls being “ambivalent” about the epidemic until a visit to San Francisco early in 1983, which brought him face to face with the potential scale and fallout of the new health crisis (Silversides 44).

In the fevered years before the discovery of the HIV virus, journalists, doctors, and scientists in the straight and gay press fervently debated what caused AIDS. Hypotheses of its etiology before 1984 ranged from divine retribution to international conspiracy: from a gay plague brought about by an angry God, to a Soviet plot that aimed at destroying capitalism (Treichler 33). Two scientific theories emerged out of the fields most closely associated with the new syndrome, virology and immunology. Virology proposed the “single agent” hypothesis. Now the medically accepted theory, it holds that there is a human immunodeficiency virus (HIV) that is contracted through a transfer of bodily fluids (blood, semen, vaginal fluid, pre-ejaculate, or breast milk). HIV causes the breakdown of the immune system by attacking the body’s white blood cells, leaving it susceptible to an array of diseases. Immunology proffered the “overload” or “promiscuity” theory, which held that the causes of AIDS were multiple and environmental. According to this hypothesis, the breakdown of the immune system was due to a combination of factors present in the “lifestyles” of certain gay men. It hypothesized that acquiring and reacquiring multiple sexually transmitted diseases, combined with recreational drug use, and, quite literally, too much gay sex, caused the weakening of the immune system and the onset of AIDS (Patton 61). The immunology hypothesis reasoned that gay men had “overloaded” their

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150 Immunology and virology were the primary medical fields of research because AIDS illnesses were those usually found in people with impaired immune systems, on the one hand, but its spread seemed similar to that of a virus, such as syphilis or hepatitis.

151 One hypothesis suggested that immune system breakdown among men may have been triggered by exposure to too much semen, though it was not thought to be a danger to women (Patton 61).
immune systems by “polluting” their bodies, making them as “dirty” as the “third-world” slums whose unsanitary conditions fostered other immunological diseases. The overload theory also “explained” why AIDS had appeared among Haitians, who suffered some of the world’s lowest living standards, and who were labeled a “high-risk” group, along with hemophiliacs and gay men in this period. While proponents of the immunological theory may not have been morally or politically motivated, the “promiscuity” theory could not help but be associated with, and taken up by, those who wished to recriminalize, repathologize, and further stigmatize homosexuality by medically and morally yoking gay sex to sickness and death.

_The Body Politic_ began to publish critiques, opinion, and commentary on AIDS immediately following the publication of the _New York Times_ article. Its first major coverage came in the November 1982 edition. “Living with Kaposi’s” and “The Real Gay Pandemic: Panic and Paranoia,” written by Michael Lynch and Bill Lewis respectively, advocate gay liberation-inspired, pro-sexual views on the first year and a half of the crisis, challenging media and medical authorities inside and outside gay communities that connected AIDS to “the gay lifestyle.” The articles got the magazine’s top billing, with its front cover dedicated to them, reading: “A Special Ten-Page Feature. The New Diseases Among Us. The Case Against Panic: Getting the Information We Need to Make Choices about Sex, Risks, and Being Ill” (“Front Cover”).

Lynch, as I have indicated, was a longtime gay liberationist who, in the intervening years, became an important AIDS activist. Steeped in gay liberationist politics, he understood “the

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152 No comprehensive history of AIDS in Toronto (or Canada) has been written, which means, once again, the journalism/activism published in _The Body Politic_, and the many letters to the editors that contested the various views expressed therein, is the best source for gauging political reactions among gay men to the epidemic in the city. The notable exception is Ann Silversides’ excellent biography of Michael Lynch, _AIDS activist: Michael Lynch and the Politics of Community_. Bibliographical data has also been compiled Mark L. Robertson, the details of which are listed in the Works Cited.
whole barely charted field of what is now being referred to as AIDS” as both a medical and political concern. His article makes an impassioned plea for gay men and the gay community to remain autonomous, to hold on to the sexual freedoms they had fought for, and to not allow themselves to become subject to medical authorities.\textsuperscript{153} He writes:

Another crisis coexists with the medical one. It has gone on largely unexamined, even by the gay press. Like helpless mice we have peremptorily, almost inexplicably, relinquished the one power we so long fought for in constructing our modern gay community: the power to determine our own identity. And to whom have we relinquished it? The very authority we wrested it from in a struggle that occupied us for more than a hundred years: the medical profession. (Lynch “Living” 31)

The article is written in three parts. The first looks at Lynch’s friend who, with his supportive partner and family, had been “living with Kaposi’s” for over a year. Its narrative covers moments of fear and difficulty, strength and community, with an especial emphasis on “living,” as its title suggests. The second provides an historical overview of homosexuality as a discursive formation since the end of the nineteenth century. It takes medical authorities (some of them gay) and the gay press to task for what Lynch viewed as the politically regressive ways that AIDS was linked to “the gay lifestyle” and the repathologization of gay men. In the third section, Lynch issues a call to arms to the gay community:

We must launch an all-out campaign, of the scale undertaken during the Bryant attacks, to fight the equations that gay equals pathology. We can only protest the inaccuracy and inhumanity of the anti-sexual straight press, but we can demand

\textsuperscript{153} Lynch was an American by birth, having immigrated to Toronto to take a post at University of Toronto. He spent a lot of his time with friends on Fire Island, and in New York City, where he also conducted some of his academic research.
that the gay press give fuller human pictures of support groups and first-person experience. We must challenge the medical profession whenever it attempts to regain its power to define us, or to cloak a moral programme in medical terms. (“Living” 37).

In the article, Lynch does not minimize the seriousness of AIDS as a medical concern, which he deals with in intimately personal detail through the story of his friend. He is, however, as concerned about gay men ceding their autonomy, and diluting their sex-positive political philosophies and cultures, as he is with the medical threat. Guided by his gay liberationist politics, he preaches the virtues of gay community and insists that gay men confront this new threat with solidarity, and as a culture.

We [have] to take our lives and our self-definitions back into our own hands. We have to make illness gay, and dying gay, and death gay, just as we have made sex and baseball and drinking and eating and dressing gay. […] This is the challenge to us in 1982 – just as the doctors are trying to do it for us. (“Living” 37)

Bill Lewis’s article is similarly gay liberationist in its orientation, articulating an approach to AIDS that is about knowledge, autonomy, and risk reduction. A former member of The Body Politic collective and professor of surgery and microbiology at the University of Toronto, Lewis sifts through the barrage of medical “information and misinformation” unleashed since the publication of the New York Times article a year and a half earlier (Lewis “Real Gay Epidemic” 38). It begins with an overview of the current scientific knowledge about AIDS. Like Lynch, Lewis takes issue with media representations that characterized AIDS as a “gay plague,” which suggested it was “spreading like wildfire,” and which argued it was “probably only a matter of time” before it passed from gay men to heterosexuals (“Real Gay Epidemic” 39).
Lewis concedes that the risk of contracting AIDS or any sexually transmitted disease increases with greater numbers of sexual partners, but he also contests the promiscuity theory by citing the fact that some of the men who seroconverted had relatively few sexual partners. Lewis also reports that many of these men were not drug users, which was cited as a contributing factor to immunological collapse (“Real Gay Epidemic” 40). Coming out on the side of the single-agent theory, Lewis told his readers, “as with any sexually transmitted disease, having only a moderate number of sexual partners is no guarantee that AIDS will be avoided.” Echoing Lynch, gay liberation politics, and anticipating the tenets of “safe sex,” Lewis argues for an informed and autonomous approach to sex, noting: “If, as is most likely the case, AIDS is caused by a communicable agent such as a virus, we can still attempt to evaluate risk in order to arrive at decisions about our own sexual conduct” (Lewis “Real Gay Epidemic” 39).

In New York, where the epidemic was much more acute, advocates of both the single-agent and the immunological hypothesis voiced their theories most prominently on the pages of the city’s most important and widely read gay publication, the New York Native. As if it were planned, the Native published an article advocating the “promiscuity theory” on the same day that the Lynch and Lewis articles hit the newsstand. Michael Callen and Richard Berkowitz’s “We Know Who We Are: Two Gay Men Declare War on Promiscuity,” is a scathing, some might say guilt-ridden attack on gay promiscuity. The article begins with the following statement:

Those of us who have lived a life of excessive promiscuity on the urban gay circuit of bathhouses, backrooms, balconies, sex clubs, meat racks and tearooms know who we are. We could continue to deny overwhelming evidence that the present health crisis is a direct result of the unprecedented promiscuity that has
occurred since Stonewall, but such denial is killing us. (Callen, Berkowitz and Dworkin)

Callen and Berkowitz promote the immunological theory in their article by answering a series of questions about what they think causes AIDS, and by mounting arguments to counter the single agent/virology hypothesis. They write:

We, the authors, have concluded that there is no mutant virus and there will be no vaccine. We veterans of the circuit must accept that we have overloaded our immune system with common viruses and other sexually transmitted infections.

*Our lifestyle has created the present epidemic of AIDS among gay men.* But in the end, whichever theory you choose to believe, *the obvious and immediate solution to the present crisis is the end of urban gay male promiscuity as we know it today.*

(Callen, Berkowitz and Dworkin 23, my emphasis)

As this statement makes abundantly clear, Callen and Berkowitz cautioned that AIDS was caused by a promiscuous gay lifestyle, and the drugs and partying that were thought to go with it. The promiscuity theory that they promulgated pronounced the consequences of gay liberation, of not following the moral imperatives of heterosexual monogamy, to be disease and death. Callen, Berkowitz and other believers in the promiscuity theory, gay or straight, in effect blamed the “gay lifestyle” for the epidemic.

With the bathhouse raids still so fresh in the minds of gay activists in Toronto, finding ways to remain true to gay liberation politics, to battle those who would demonize promiscuity and gay men, and to confront the epidemic sensibly and proactively, were of paramount importance. Responding in *The Body Politic* to a letter to the editor written by Michael Callen, shockingly titled “AIDS: Killing Ourselves,” Bill Lewis wrote “AIDS: Discounting the
Promiscuity Theory,” which, as its title suggests, took aim at the many anxious condemnations of gay promiscuity. The article begins with this statement: “Promiscuity. That’s the key word in the current debate about AIDS – the acquired immune deficiency syndrome in which the body’s natural ability to resist infection collapses.” The article explains the “promiscuity theory,” elucidates a number of arguments against it, and cites the dangers the theory posed to gay men’s health, and to the gay community. Lewis maintains that, “although it remains to be proven, all scientific data currently available overwhelmingly support the theory that AIDS is caused by a communicable agent such as a virus.” Lewis concedes that he is medically more concerned about AIDS than he had been six months prior, when he wrote “The Real Gay Epidemic: Panic and Paranoia,” but he also emphasizes his alarm at the ways AIDS was being characterized as a moral punishment for promiscuity by gay men like Callen, voicing his worry that these arguments would be used against gays and lesbians. Lewis recounts the shock he felt when one-third of participants at a gay-organized AIDS conference in Dallas responded affirmatively when asked about closing backrooms and bathhouses as a means to fight AIDS by deterring the “promoti[on of] multiple sex partners.” Arguing against those who said “adopting a new sexual ethic we could end the epidemic,” Lewis calls for gay men “to seek ways of making sex as healthy and risk-free as possible” and to protect gay community by “defend[ing] the existence of our sexual meeting places.”

As Lewis’s article suggests, “safe sex” practices were developing in the grassroots activities of gay communities at this time. Not unironically, the concept of safe sex is commonly attributed to Michael Callen and Richard Berkowitz, who, with physician and scientist Joseph Sonnabend, published a pamphlet called “How to Have Sex in an Epidemic: One Approach,” in

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154 The promiscuity theory was dangerous to gay men’s health because it held that AIDS could not be contracted through a single sexual encounter, and that if gay men changed their lifestyles, the epidemic would end.
May 1983. According to Berkowitz, he and Callen realized that gay men were going to continue to have sex and what they needed were methods of engaging in sexual pleasure that did not spread diseases (Wein). As its title suggests, the pamphlet details ways to have sex in the age of AIDS, and, crucially, it is not anti-promiscuity. It advises:

The key to this approach is modifying what you do—not how often you do it nor with how many different partners…As you read on, we hope we make at least one point clear: Sex doesn’t make you sick—diseases do… Once you understand how diseases are transmitted, you can begin to explore medically safe sex. Our challenge is to figure out how we can have gay, life-affirming sex, satisfy our emotional needs, and stay alive! (qtd. in Patton 45)

At this time condom use was quickly becoming the central focus of safe sex education. But condoms had never been part of gay male sexual cultures, and needed to be introduced, explained, and, most importantly, used. AIDS organizations such as ACT, public health departments, and gay magazines, as well as the dances, cabarets, and theatre performances that were organized as fundraisers, were essential to disseminating information about safe sex and how to do it in this period.

In April 1984, when Federal officials in the U.S. announced that the HTL-III virus, later renamed HIV, was the probable cause of AIDS, gay communities in the U.S. and Canada received this news with ambivalence. Many gay men were happy that progress was being made but they also worried the test could facilitate discrimination against “antibody positive” people in

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155 For an account of both the development of safe sex practices, and how safe sex has been negotiated among gay men, see Halperin, *What Do Gay Men Want?*

156 The first campaign undertaken by Toronto Public Health began in August/September 1983; the first ACT educational pamphlet was published in December 1983 and the first AIDS Awareness Week was launched in June 1984; *The Body Politic* had, of course, been publishing information about AIDS since 1981, but the first full-scale “safe sex” article appears in its December 1983 issue, Rick Bébout’s “Is there Safe Sex?”
the name of public health. In March 1985, in advance of the release of the enzyme-linked immuno-sorbent assay test (ELISA), which tested for the presence of HIV antibodies, the National Gay Task Force, along with multiple AIDS service organizations in the U.S., issued a statement encouraging gay men not to take the test. In Canada, at the first national AIDS conference, held in Montreal in May 1985, Vancouver AIDS activist Gordon Price asserted that concern about AIDS among gay men would soon shift from “How can I avoid AIDS?” to “Should I take the test?” (Popert “Taking Aim” 14).

In an editorial written on behalf of The Body Politic collective, Ed Jackson and Andrew Lesk examined the difficult predicament into which gay men were placed by the development of the test. Because those in “high-risk” groups (prostitutes, drug users, and homosexuals) had few rights under Canadian law, Jackson and Lesk recommended that these people should not take the test:

The message to individuals in high-risk groups is the same regardless of the test results: practice safe sex. [...] As long as [medical] advice to antibody-positive and antibody-negative individuals remains the same and until more is known about the meaning of the results, don’t take the test. (Jackson and Lesk 8).

It is no coincidence that Jackson and Lesk’s advice is couched in legal and medical terms. In the absence of anti-discrimination legislation, HIV-positive people could easily be denied services, housing, and employment. In light of the recent backlash, neither politicians nor the legal establishment could be trusted with the welfare of gay men. Similarly, the medical establishment, which had pathologized gay men for so long, were not to be depended upon.

The politics that Gilbert espouses in Drag Queens on Trial arise out of the turbulent currents that mark these years in Toronto’s gay history – currents that indelibly influenced his
early development as a gay man, and as an artist. Set in a courtroom where its sexually promiscuous and ribald drag queens are on trial for being drag queens, his play invokes the ways gay men and gay male sexualities, from Anita Bryant to the bathhouse raids to AIDS, were under attack in Toronto. In 1985, it reacted against liberal assimilationist trends in gay activism by critiquing society’s liberal intuitions, positing them as hypocritical and corrupt, and rejecting the mostly legal inclusions that civil rights activism promised – changes in law that would mean almost nothing to our drag queens, who are marginalized socially, politically, and economically because of their gender performance. It intervened into the debates that blamed gay male promiscuity for AIDS by refusing and criticizing this rhetoric, and by affirming a guiltless form of sexual liberty. Although these are the politics that Gilbert would champion for most of his career, they were not fully formed when he founded Buddies in 1979, and came out as a gay man in 1980. Along with his theatrical aesthetics, these politics developed in relation to the changing currents in gay life, community, and politics in the early 1980s. In order to appreciate this evolution, it is necessary now to investigate his biography, and to analyze some of the works he produced in this period. Through this investigation, we can understand Drag Queens on Trial’s seminal importance to Gilbert’s growth as an artist, and the ways it laid the foundation for the rest of his tenure at Buddies, and beyond.

**Becoming Radical: Sky Gilbert and the Early Years of Buddies in Bad Times**

Schuler Lee Gilbert was born in Norwich, Connecticut in 1953. At the age of six he moved with his family to Buffalo, New York, where his father, a manager at the Travelers Insurance Company, had been transferred. With his mother and younger sister, he lived an idyllic, “Leave it to Beaver existence” (Gilbert Ejaculations 5). But at the age of twelve this peaceful life changed suddenly when his parents divorced. Following the divorce, his mother
decided to move him and his sister to Don Mills in Toronto. He and his sister had been involved with figure skating in Buffalo, and his parents had been avid curlers. Gilbert’s mother thought that Don Mills, with its good ice rinks and good schools, “would be an ideal place for us to start our new life” (Gilbert *Ejaculations* 5).

For most of his childhood, Gilbert was bookish and eager to please his parents and teachers. In high school, he became interested in Ayn Rand and classical music, and was “a passionate loner,” spending much of his time writing poetry, listening to Rachmaninoff (Rand’s favorite composer), and searching for what he calls “inspired feelings” (Gilbert *Ejaculations* 7). Gilbert played cello in his high school orchestra, and during a production of *Annie Get Your Gun*, he discovered he could experience these inspired feelings in the theatre. “It seemed that being a part of this production was so enthralling that it took me away from my adolescent anxieties and propelled me into a moment of ecstasy. I thought, *this is the way I want to feel all the time*” (Gilbert *Ejaculations* 7 emphasis original). With this discovery, Gilbert made his first step away from the middle-class existence that was both expected and laid out for him by dedicating himself to high school theatre arts. He wrote a play about the Vietnam War, *The Mark*, which won a Simpson’s Drama Festival Award for “distinctive merit,” and with its success he felt he had “found a home” in the theatre (Gilbert *Ejaculations* 8).

After high school, Gilbert was accepted to York University’s acting program, but switched into playwriting and theatre criticism at the end of his first year (Gilbert *Ejaculations* 8). At York he produced musicals and cabaret evenings with the York Cabaret Theatre. Under the auspices of an unincorporated amateur group called the Cabaret Company, he and his friend Matt Walsh staged some of these productions at libraries downtown, and at the 519 Community Centre, and it is from one of these performances that the name Buddies in Bad Times was
derived. At this time, Gilbert was obsessed with the French Surrealists and their poetry, specifically the work of Jacques Prévert. He and Walsh produced a musical called “Buddies in Bad Times,” based on the poems of Prévert and Joseph Kosma which, according to Gilbert, enjoyed success when it was staged at the University of Toronto and then at the Harbourfront Theatre (Gilbert Ejaculations 10-13).

Gilbert had battled his homosexual feelings since childhood (Gilbert Ejaculations 4), had gay fantasies in high school, and was quite ashamed of them: “Ayn Rand didn’t approve of homosexuals, and I knew that my family wouldn’t either” (Gilbert Ejaculations 7). Having finished his undergrad degree at York, he took a Masters at the Graduate Centre for Study of Drama at the University of Toronto. After his Masters he briefly enrolled in the Centre’s doctoral program, following a path that would most likely have led to a career as a theatre professor. Gilbert longed, however, to come out and to be an artist: “I think I left the Drama Centre because I was yearning to come out. I just couldn’t do it there […] For some reason, being heterosexual was linked with university life; leaving there would mean I would have to be myself” (Gilbert Ejaculations 10).

Having said goodbye to the straight-laced world of academia, Gilbert incorporated Buddies in Bad Times Theatre with Walsh and Gerry Ciccoritti in 1978. The theatre’s original mandate was “to explore the relationship of the printed word to theatrical image in the belief that with the poet-playwright lies the future of Canadian theatre” (Wallace “Theorizing” 143). Buddies’ first performance, Angels in Underwear, was written by Gilbert and produced in

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157 Since resigning from Buddies in 1997, Gilbert has continued to write and produce work in Toronto under the auspices of the Cabaret Company. He also founded a theatre company in Hamilton, where he resides, called Hammer Theatre.

158 Ironically, when Gilbert resigned as artistic director of Buddies in Bad Times in 1997, he once again enrolled in the doctoral program at the University of Toronto and eventually became a professor of theatre at the University of Guelph.
September 1978 at the Dream Factory. Following the company’s mandate, and Gilbert’s own poetic predilections, the play explored the poetry of the Beats, Jack Kerouac and Allen Ginsberg. The company produced its first Rhubarb! Festival of new works in January 1979, also at the Dream Factory. But Buddies did not hold everyone’s interests equally. Walsh was primarily an actor; he left after the company’s first Rhubarb! Ciccoritti was interested in film; he left in 1980, and went on to have a significant career as a television and film director (Boni 22-3). Following these departures, Gilbert became the sole force behind the theatre, and he began to explore his sexuality more overtly in his life and in his theatrical works. He was twenty-eight years old, had just come out as a gay man, and was establishing himself as a professional artist. He was, in his own words, “free at last” (Gilbert Ejaculations 2).

In 1980, Gilbert and Buddies joined forces with four other companies, Nightwood Theatre, A.K.A Performance Interface, Theatre Autumn Leaf, and Necessary Angel, to form the Theatre Centre. An artist-run space, the Theatre Centre provided rental facilities to its member companies, as well as other independent companies. According to Robert Wallace, the establishment of the Theatre Centre marks the beginning of the “second wave” of Alternative theatres in Toronto, and became “the main locus of the city’s new and experimental groups, particularly after its move in 1984 to the centrally located Poor Alex Theatre” (Wallace Producing 102). Its artists defined themselves against the “Toronto Four,” “espous[ing] formal innovation and multidisciplinarity as [their] central priorities” (Wallace Theatre 45). Theatre Centre artists eschewed the first wave’s conception of regionalism as the basis of Canadian nationalism and political theatre, which were basically synonymous. These artists began to explore new theatrical forms and to espouse new politics. Of the Theatre Centre’s companies,

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159 The Dream Factory was run by Vincent Kambrek and Ari Giverts, housed in an old brewery on the north side of Queen Street East at Sumach Street (Boni 17).
Buddies and Nightwood would, in Alan Filewod’s words, exploit “the principle of regional
difference but freed […] of geographic determinism.” They would explore the “‘region’ of
experience,” or identity politics, examining gay, lesbian, and women’s identities as the basis of
their work (“Introduction” xv). By 1981, Buddies had begun to nominate itself a gay theatre,
organizing itself and its theatrical productions around a politics of gay identity and community.

Gilbert and Buddies’ “coming out,” and their success as a gay-identified artist and theatre
in the early 1980s, was possible because of the gay community’s increasing size, visibility, and
its yearning to see itself represented on the city’s stages. Economically speaking, by the late
1970s, Toronto’s gay community constituted a market for gay work, which is evidenced by the
large number of gay shows that toured to the city, and by the not insignificant number of local
productions of international gay hits. In the early 1980s, the events of the backlash encouraged
gay solidarity, and made investments in gay culture politically pertinent. Despite this market for
gay work, Gilbert was one among a very small number of artists in the city who was “out,” and
the only one (other than Robert Wallace) who was positioning his work as “gay” in the early
1980s.

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160 For a history of Nightwood, see Shelley Scott.

161 For example, Charles Ludlam and his Theatre of the Ridiculous Company brought their drag adaptation of Camille to the Factory Theatre in 1976; David Rabe’s Streamers toured to the St. Lawrence Centre in 1977; Hosanna was revived by Richard Monette at Toronto Workshop Productions in 1977; Quentin Crisp’s An Evening with Quentin Crisp: The Naked Civil Servant, was staged at Toronto Workshop Productions in 1978; and Lindsay Kemp’s Flowers and Salomé toured to Toronto Workshop Productions in 1978 and 1979, respectively. The last four plays at Toronto Workshop Productions are particularly significant, and signal the radical changes that had taken place in gay community and politics in Toronto, because this was the company, still under the artistic direction of George Luscombe, which would not support John Herbert’s Fortune and Men’s Eyes a little more than a decade prior. Productions of international gay hits were also numerous: Boys in the Band and The Killing of Sister George were both staged by Toronto Truck theatre in 1977; Doric Wilson’s A Perfect Relationship was mounted by Equity Showcase in 1979; Terrence McNally’s Next was produced by Solar Stage in 1979; Tremblay’s La Duchesse De Langeais was staged at the Tarragon in 1980; and Martin Sherman’s Bent was staged at the Bathurst Street Theatre in 1981. A handful of local productions on gay themes also began to emerge, for example Paul Bettis’ Jekyll Play Hyde was staged at Theatre Second Floor in 1977; Marin Kinch’s Me? and Maxim Mazumdar’s Oscar Remembered playing at Toronto Workshop Productions in 1977 and 1978, respectively.

162 The notable exceptions from the 1970s are Larry Fineberg, John Palmer, and Paul Bettis, though, as noted in the previous chapter, none of these playwrights overtly positioned their work as “gay,” in a political sense, in this
Gilbert’s early plays express the tenets of gay liberation, and his own evolution as a newly out gay man negotiating contemporary gay life. These plays explore gay life through the recuperation of historical gay icons, employing what Gilbert calls his “‘poet-and-his-boys’ model.” Following his interest in poetry, Gilbert typically selected a gay poet and used the bard’s verse to explore his sexual relationships. With these plays, Gilbert arranged the poetry and added his own writing when necessary to create the theatrical whole. It was not that Gilbert was interested in history or even the biographies of these poets, per se; rather, as he suggests in his memoirs, he was interested in poems about the beauty of “boys.” Referring to Cavafy, or The Veils of Desire (1981), a play about Greek poet Constantine Cavafy, he writes: “[Cavafy’s] poems were a revelation. Of course I wasn’t interested in the ones about Greek or Egyptian history (like later, when I similarly ignored [Pier Paolo] Pasolini’s writing about fascism [in my play Pasolini/Pelosi (1983)] – no, I was interested in poems about boys” (Ejaculations 45). With these plays Gilbert was teaching himself about his own history as a gay artist, learning about gay love and sex, and embracing his new position as an openly gay man. Although activists like Lynch and Popert were sounding alarms about the liberalizing elements in gay community at this time, as a young, newly out gay man, Gilbert was exploring himself in relation to gay identity, culture, and history, and was not yet ready or interested in critiquing the politics of a world he was experiencing for the first time. Echoing his own personal life, Gilbert’s plays from this period seem content to revel in gay love and sex, and to challenge various forms of homophobia.

By the early 1980s, Robert Wallace was working primarily as a theatre critic, academic and teacher, and editor. He was no longer writing or producing new plays for the professional stage, though he did sometimes write and mount plays with his students at Glendon College, York University. Palmer would begin to identify his work as gay in the 1980s; for his view on being a gay theatre artist in Toronto in the 1970s, see the interview between him and Robert Wallace in the anthology of his plays, The End/A Day at the Beach. The other notable gay artist doing gay work in the first few years of the 1980s is David Roche. He, however, would quickly become part of the Buddies scene. Additionally, Brad Fraser would hit the theatre scene in Toronto with his play Wolf Boy in 1985, produced at Theatre Passe Muraille.
His poet-and-his-boys plays adhere to the tenets of 1970s gay liberation: they celebrate gay love, sexuality, and promiscuity; they concern issues of oppression and homophobia; they recover gay historical figures; and they openly use the theatre as a site to create contemporary expressions of gay community.

_Lana Turner Has Collapsed!: A Theatrical Extravaganza of Gay Life and the Movies_ is the first significant example of this genre.\(^{163}\) With it, Gilbert became Toronto’s most visible gay artist, and Buddies its primary gay theatre. _Lana_’s success garnered him his first mainstream press review in the _Globe and Mail_, and, more importantly, his first profile in _The Body Politic_.\(^{164}\) Written by David Roche, _The Body Politic_ byline reads: “Seems you can’t go anywhere in Toronto without running into this fresh young upstart, heady with success” (27). As the play’s title suggests, _Lana_ investigates the life of pre-Stonewall gay poet Frank O’Hara. _Lana_ was first performed at the Theatre Centre in September 1980, and Gilbert regards it as his first truly _gay_ play because it published the word “gay” in its title, and on its poster – inclusions he thought to be “very bold” at the time (Ejaculations 31). _Lana_’s structure is episodic and thematic. Its nonlinear scenes primarily revolve around gay love, Hollywood movies, and gay men’s attraction to female celebrities. Its twenty-one characters, which include O’Hara and Turner, and the friends that peopled O’Hara’s life and poetry, Larry Rivers, Willem DeKooning, Jane Freilicher, and Kenneth Koch, were performed by a cast of four men and one woman. It cleverly staged a number of O’Hara’s gay love and sex poems, whose structure and conversational tone lend themselves to both theatrical performance and the creation of images on stage (poets and theatrical images still being central to Buddies’ official mandate). For example,

\(^{163}\) It should be noted that Gilbert received “seed money” to produce _Lana_ from Theatre Passe Murriaille (Ejaculations 31). The extent to which this was given as a way to support specifically gay theatre is difficult to determine.

\(^{164}\) For Gilbert’s first review, see Conlogue.
O’Hara’s well known poem “Having a coke with you” is said as a monologue by a character called “Man,” with the rest of the cast animating the poem’s imagery, which are mostly art-historical references (O’Hara worked as a curator at the Museum of Modern Art in New York), such as The Polish Rider, an example of Futurism, and drawings by Leonardo da Vinci and Michelangelo.

Lana’s performance exemplifies the sexual and political doctrines of 1970s gay liberation in Toronto. One poem in particular, “Ave Maria,” illustrates this point. The scene in question has a character called “Lecturer” enter from off stage and announce:

Would everyone sit down please. I am going to do a lecture on child molestation, how to do it, where to do it, etcetera, please sit down, don’t push. (pause) Only kidding! What I have to say is serious and discursive and concerns the movies and it’s especially directed to you Mothers! (Gilbert Lana 23)

The Lecturer then recites O’Hara’s “Ave Maria,” a poem that encourages mothers to allow their children to go to the movies where they might have their first sexual experience. The poem advocates for a view of family and motherhood that are quite contrary to conventional definitions of both, and aligns perfectly with the more radical views of gay liberation.

they may even be grateful to you / for their first sexual experience / which only cost you a quarter / and didn’t upset the peaceful home / they will know where candy bars come from / and gratuitous bags of popcorn / as gratuitous as leaving the movie before it’s over / with a pleasant stranger whose apartment is in the Heaven on Earth Bldg / near the Williamsburg Bridge / oh mothers you will have made the little tykes / so happy because if nobody does pick them up in the movies / they won’t know the difference / and if somebody does it’ll be sheer
gravy / and they’ll have been truly entertained either way / instead of hanging
around the yard / or up in their room / hating you. (Gilbert Lana 23)

While the poem’s approach to sexual awakening and family is ironic and funny, it also echoes gay liberation’s focus on the sexual liberation of everyone, including children, and its view of the nuclear family as an oppressive institution, especially for (gay) children. In Toronto in 1981, with an audience of gay men cognizant of the trials of The Body Politic for publishing Gerald Hannon’s Men Loving Boys Loving Men, and of the bathhouse raids, the poem/scene would have humorously linked O’Hara’s recollection of childhood to continued sexual oppression and the need of gay/sexual liberation in the present.

Gilbert continued to use the poet and his boys’ genre to investigate themes of gay life and affirm gay community for the next few years. For Gilbert, making plays that represented gay men, their lovers, and a gay past for a gay community in Toronto were radical gestures. Having recently come out, he was rebelling against everything he was brought up to be by embracing a life in the theatre and his gay identity. During these years he built his and Buddies’ profile in the gay community and the Alternative theatre scene, gaining a small but significant following, especially among gay men and experimental theatre fans, and achieving regular operating grants by the end of 1984 (Gilbert Ejaculations 71). Dealing almost exclusively with gay issues, his early work had very different political and ideological implications than a touring gay company, or a local “straight” theatre producing a “gay play.” Staged under the aegis of a

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165 On the difficulties of dealing rationally with childhood sexuality, see Jane Rule’s “Teaching Sexuality,” which she wrote in response to the “Men Loving Boys Loving Men” controversy.

166 The Toronto Star, for example, would not review the play “on the grounds that [it] is ‘a family newspaper’” (Roche 27).

167 Examples of these plays are Cavafy or the Veils of Desire, based on the poetry of Constantine Cavafy (1981); Marilyn Monroe is Alive and Well and Living in Joe’s Head, based on the poetry of Joe Brainard (1982); Murder/Lover (1982) based on the poetry of Patti Smith, which concerns her relationship with playwright Sam Shepard; Pasolini/Pelosi (1983) based on the life and poetry of Pier Paolo Pasolini; and Life without Muscles (1983), based on the painting of David Hockney and the poetry of Thom Gunn.
gay-identified theatre, Gilbert’s poet-and-his-boys plays expressed local struggles and the character of gay life – that is, Gilbert’s life – and community in Toronto. However, by the mid-1980s, after a couple failed relationships, a few failed plays, and the escalating AIDS crisis, his love affair with gay men, culture, and promiscuity gave way to personal pain, artistic anxieties, and a fear of sickness and death (Gilbert *Ejaculations* 78). He describes the arc of his experience, and the increasing influence of AIDS on his life and work by saying: “In 1981, for us in Toronto, AIDS was just a terrifying rumour. It certainly frightened me, but I didn’t really believe it was a serious disease that could affect me until sometime in 1984” (70). He continues: I don’t want to underestimate the effect that AIDS had on myself or anyone else in those days. For me, it was awful because only three years earlier I had joyfully come out. Was my happiness to be cut short, then? The news scared me and I knew, quite consciously, that I had to fight off feelings of guilt. It had taken me 28 years to come out, and now, suddenly, being gay was dangerous. (*Ejaculations* 69-70).

Disenchanted with gay love and community, and faced with a new and deadly disease, Gilbert began to question his earlier embrace of all things gay, especially gay promiscuity. Additionally, he felt the predictability of his poet-and-his-boys plays had placed him in an artistic rut. These conflicted feelings, which emerged out of very difficult times for Toronto’s gay community, resulted in *The Dressing Gown*, the first play in which Gilbert was critical of gay men and culture, and which he describes as “a kind of revenge fantasy” (*Ejaculations* 78). While its

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168 Gilbert details the practical significance of having an overtly gay theatre company producing gay work in this period in his memoir. He writes that Peter Caldwell, an acquaintance of his, told him that attending *Lana* was “the first time I’ve ever gone to see a play and felt comfortable about holding my boyfriend’s hand” (*Ejaculations* 33). In a manner unlike any other artist or company in Toronto in the early 1980s, Gilbert and Buddies created a space that fostered local, 1970s-style gay community and politics in the theatre, where he was also creating a space for himself as an openly gay and sexual artist.
critique arose out of Gilbert’s “first hurts in love […] and fresh from being hurt by the gay community (because they did not come to see [his two most recent plays]),” its success cannot be divorced from the anti-promiscuity rhetoric that characterized the first years of the AIDS crisis in gay and straight cultures alike (Ejaculations 78).

*The Dressing Gown* was Gilbert’s first major “cross over” hit (i.e. it was a hit in the straight and gay press and its audiences were both straight and gay). It was nominated for a Chalmers Award for playwriting, was Gilbert’s biggest box office success to date, and was remounted later that same year. These accolades aside, the reason it holds a determining place in Gilbert’s *oeuvre* is because its many successes prompted him to seriously examine his own sexual and aesthetic politics. In the introduction to the play, which was published in 1989, five years after its premiere, Gilbert writes:

> The plays I wrote before *The Dressing Gown* were romantic celebrations of gay promiscuity (*Cavafy, Pasolini Pelosi* etc.) Suddenly, in *The Dressing Gown* it seemed to people that I was looking at my own kind with a critical, cynical, one might say even jaundiced eye. And I cannot help feeling that the fact that this play was seen as being critical of the ‘gay lifestyle’ has in fact had very much to do with its success with the straight press. (Gilbert *Dressing* 9)\(^{169}\)

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\(^{169}\) Although it is not surprising, it is a bit odd that *The Dressing Gown* was a box office success and nominated for the prestigious Chalmers’ Award, but it took five years for it to be published. In his memoirs, Gilbert attributes this delay to homophobia: “I had to fight to get the Playwright’s Union of Canada to publish [*The Dressing Gown*]. For five years they rejected it, then, after I begged, pleaded, cajoled, and wrote nasty letters, they finally gave in. Why the resistance? I think it’s because the work was both gay and sexual” (Ejaculations 41). Subsequent to the publishing of *The Dressing Gown*, Gilbert’s next published play was *Capote at Yaddo*, which was included in the first anthology of Canadian gay plays, published by Coach House Press, and edited by none other than Robert Wallace. Wallace also published an anthology of Gilbert’s plays, *This Unknown Flesh: A Selection of Plays*.

\(^{170}\) When it was published in 1989, Gilbert actually rewrote one of the scenes, changing “‘Eliot’s’ little lecture about the gay lifestyle [in which] there was a lot of talk about penises being ‘evil’; of the ways in which men’s psychological makeups [sic] cause them to be cruel” (Gilbert *Dressing* 8).
The “sudden,” as Gilbert characterizes it, transition in his work was also taking place in Toronto’s gay community in this period. The backlash had politicized greater numbers of gays and lesbians than ever before, but these people were not interested in sexual revolution, as gay liberationists had been, they were interested in civil rights protections. In addition to these cultural currents, by the mid-1980s the sexual liberation and pro-promiscuity tenets underlying gay liberation were cracking under the pressure of an escalating AIDS crisis. In Toronto and elsewhere, these forces contributed to the emergence of a politically liberal gay mainstream, which would very quickly supplant gay liberationists as the primary purveyors of gay activism in the city and the country. And it is arguably the currency of these comparatively conservative and anti-promiscuity discourses – in gay and straight culture alike – that made The Dressing Gown such a box office success.

The Dressing Gown’s structure is based on Arthur Schnitzler’s La Ronde (1892), the infamous fin de siècle play comprised of ten two-handed scenes that see each couple having sex, and one partner from each scene moving on to the next, constituting one part of the following sexual partnership until it has come full circle (thus, “la ronde”). According to Gilbert, adopting La Ronde’s relay structure “was a direct result of my talks with Christopher [Newton],” the artistic director of the Shaw Festival (1979-2002), who sat on Buddies’ board, and was one of Gilbert’s influences at this time (Ejaculations 77). Following Newton’s advice, Gilbert looked to theatre history for a model that would allow him to be “challenging in content but accessible in structure” (Ejaculations 77). Like La Ronde, The Dressing Gown is a series of seven two-handed scenes with one person from each scene moving in relay to the next until it comes full circle, though not all of the couples in The Dressing Gown have sex.
La Ronde presents a snapshot study of sex among socially positioned types, rather than fully developed, psychological characters, and suggests that our sexual actions are comprehensible expressions of our heredity and socialization, our psychologies. Its characters would have been culturally recognizable to turn-of-the-century Viennese society: the Soldier, the Count, the Young Wife, the Husband, the Actress, the Prostitute, etc. These characters’ actions are depicted as an expression of their particular psychologies, which are determined by their gender, class, and social position or role. Indeed, the psychological nature of the play, and Schnitzler’s writing more generally, was famously affirmed by Sigmund Freud. A contemporary of Schnitzler’s, the father of psychoanalysis wrote to him on the occasion of the playwright’s sixtieth birthday, telling him that what he learned through years of careful work and research, Schnitzler seemed simply to intuit with his plays.

In comparison, The Dressing Gown implies that our sexual desires and actions are impacted by unknowable and almost magical forces, which it conveys in the form of a mystical garment, the dressing gown, which is passed from person to person in the relay. The gay men who wear or are allured by the garment become victims of their uncontrollable sexual urges. The play makes gay male sexual desire – not love, but sex – material in the form of the dressing gown, which it depicts as a malevolent force beyond exerting power that is beyond their control. Indeed, The Dressing Gown’s most problematic element is this central conceit: that the dressing gown has magical, aphrodisiac qualities that negatively affect gay men. Whereas La Ronde was a study of sex, class, gender and psychology, The Dressing Gown suggests that gay men are under the spell of their sexual urges and cannot, therefore, love or respect one another, and will inevitably kill themselves and their sexual partners.
These questionable sexual politics are most clearly displayed in the last scene of act one. The scene depicts Larry, an S/M top and a banker in his thirties, and Jim, a submissive bottom in his early twenties. The two are engaged in an ongoing, purely sexual sadomasochistic relationship (Larry has an open relationship with his boyfriend, Barry, whom we see in another scene being equally abusive to another young gay man). The scene shows how Larry and Jim’s relationship is quite literally fueled by Larry’s sadism and Jim’s self-destructive masochism. In the scene, Jim is wearing the gown and asks the older man to inject him with MDA (methylenedioxamphetamine). He says: “Please sir please sir I beg you sir. Some MDA please […] Don’t worry about cleaning the syringe sir. (pause) I mean if it’s too much trouble” (Gilbert Dressing 54-55). While calling him a number of degrading names, Larry injects the MDA into Jim’s arm and the young man quickly and violently overdoses, which is blamed on the “dirty needle.” Neither the scene nor the play mentions AIDS, nor do they elaborate exactly what a “dirty needle” is. The play’s point is nevertheless clear: Larry and Jim are not healthy, sexually liberated adults engaging in consensual sex; rather, this form of sexual play is dangerous, pathological, and typical among gay men. In the first years of the AIDS crisis, the scene and the play suggest that gay sexual practices outside monogamy are abnormal, unhealthy, and, potentially, deadly. Whatever ill befalls these men, the play suggests that they have brought it upon themselves by being slave to their sexual desires.

*The Dressing Gown* received excellent reviews in the straight press, and its anti-promiscuity politics were not even condemned by *The Body Politic*’s reviewer. The closest thing to criticism that the play received came a few months later when Robert Wallace quite evenhandedly wrote, “The honesty and relevance of Gilbert’s perceptions in the play transcend their political and psychological naiveté to make it an artistically rewarding experience”
(Wallace “Playing” 33). Its success leads one to believe that its sex-negative sentiments and its nearly homophobic representations of gay life were part of the zeitgeist in 1984. Indeed, the play’s success seems at least partially predicated upon elements in gay and straight culture that, in the first years of the AIDS crisis, blamed the epidemic on how some gay men understood and pursued sex, pleasure, and freedom.

Following almost directly after The Dressing Gown, Drag Queens on Trial stand out as a radical turning point in Gilbert’s career. It dramatically revolts against everything he seemed to promote with The Dressing Gown. The play humorously rails against essentialist conceptions of gender, indicts the mainstreams of both straight and gay culture for their marginalization of the sexually promiscuous, and the “gender deviant.” In Gilbert’s own words:

I had just read Queer Theatre by Stefan Brecht […]. It’s a history of drag performers and filmmakers in the USA. It’s also a cogent analysis of the rebellion that fired John Waters, Jack Smith (Flaming Creatures), and Charles Ludlam. […] My knowledge of drag performance was pretty much secondhand […] but [Brecht’s] book gave me a theoretical approach. I could understand that Genet’s queens were in fact, rebelling against a whole society that supported the status quo, that drag undermines patriarchal power structures. At the time, I remember thinking that Toronto “The Good” needed a kick in the ass – that it should have its own drag queen theatre. (Ejaculations 85)

Parodic Politics: Drag Queens on Trial

Drag Queens on Trial: A Courtroom Melodrama is the story of Marlene Delorme, Judy Goose, and Lana Lust, three drag queens and occasional prostitutes who spectacularly resist the grinding oppression of their quotidian lives through a pointedly comedic, parodic, and
metatheatrical staging of a Hollywood courtroom melodrama. It begins with a dynamic and humorous opening sequence that appeals to performance conventions typical to theatrical/cinematic melodrama and gay male drag. This is followed by an ongoing backstage scene, which shows the three queens preparing to stage the courtroom melodrama. In these backstage vignettes, the three address the audience directly, quote lines from classic Hollywood melodramas, and sing and lip-synch popular songs. Importantly, in these backstage scenes they also complain about the ways masculine-acting gay men, and the gay community more generally, reject and degrade them for being drag queens, and speak frankly about safe sex and the current issues they face regarding AIDS.

The backstage drama is perforated by the staging of the courtroom melodrama. In comparison to the backstage scenes, which are relatively verisimilar, “just three girls [...] shooting the shit,” the three courtroom scenes are histrionic, employ voiceover, and parody the generic conventions of melodrama. Each courtroom scene self-consciously deploys the exact same structure: Marlene, Judy, and Lana state their pleas – Marlene and Judy pleading not guilty to being drag queens, and Lana pleading guilty – and are cross-examined by the prosecuting attorney. In each case, this testimony is spectacularly interrupted by the arrival of a surprise witness, an evil woman from each character’s past who contradicts Marlene, Judy, and Lana’s statements before the court. Following the damning evidence of the surprise witnesses, each character delivers a highly melodramatic monologue in which she defends herself, and then the scene ends. After the three trial scenes, the performance of the melodrama concludes with the queens collectively taking the roles of the prosecuting and defending attorneys, casting the audience as jury. In these roles, and speaking chorally, each attorney states his case and the

171 Marlene Delorme was played by Doug Millar, Judy Goose by Leonard Chow, and Lana Lust by Kent Stains.
audience is left to determine the queens’ guilt or innocence. Following the audience’s decision, the performance ends with a final metatheatrical backstage scene in which the three sing Judy Garland’s *Get Happy*, because, as Lana contends, “a drag queen always leaves you tits up, humming a tune” (84).

As discussed in chapter two, the formal conventions at work in Michel Tremblay’s *Hosanna* promoted the liberal humanist aesthetics and politics of the Alternative theatres by positing the “fantasy” of Hosanna’s drag identity and the absolute reality of Claude’s biological sex. Conversely, *Drag Queens* eschews the “truth” of biological sex, and critiques liberal institutions, aesthetics, and discourses within straight and gay culture by parodying melodramatic conventions, and privileging theatricality. Formally, it achieves this critique by rejecting realism for metatheatricality, drag, camp, and parody. It deploys these performance conventions to show how Marlene, Judy, and Lana’s drag identities are rendered “unreal,” “abnormal,” and “untrue,” parodically casting the queens’ theatrical drag identities using the same essentialist language commonly reserved for “real” men and women, gay and straight people, and racialized subjects. *Drag Queens* thus reverses the dramaturgical logic of *Hosanna*; it revels in theatricality and espouses a performative conception of identity, making a spectacular display of the social processes through which some identities are rendered “real” and others “fake.” For Marlene, Judy, and Lana, “reality,” civil rights, and gay community are, thus, of little interest as these have only excluded and degraded them. Theatricality, pleasure, and the adulation of applause are what they desire, which they earn through the performance of their parodic version of a courtroom melodrama that, following the conventions of the genre, demonstrates their innocence and the corrupt nature of straight and gay culture.
Parody, metatheatricality, and melodrama are the primary performance modes through which *Drag Queens* staged its particular political interventions into gay politics in the mid-1980s. Parody is a practice in use across various genre and media, and, according to Linda Hutcheon, it is “one of the major modes of formal and thematic construction of texts [in the twentieth century]” (Hutcheon 2). Hutcheon understands parody as a mode through which a whole range of modern artists have “com[e] to terms” with texts and forms from the past. For modern artists, parody “signal[s] less an acknowledgment of the ‘inadequacy of the definable forms’ of their predecessors than their own desire to ‘refunction’ those forms to their own needs” (Hutcheon 4). According to Hutcheon, all parody employs some kind of “ironic inversion”: parodic texts exploit the conventions of other works of art and/or particular genres in a bifurcated manner that simultaneously cites and critiques discourses associated with the “original.” For Hutcheon, modern parody is defined by its “ironic playing with multiple conventions.” It is an “extended repetition with critical difference” that also “has a hermeneutic function with both cultural and ideological implications” (Hutcheon 7 and 2). In modern parody, these inversions, repetitions, and critical differences are not always enacted at the expense of the parodied text; they can, as *Drag Queens* does in its parody of 1950s Hollywood melodrama, celebrate, even revel in aspects of the genre (Hutcheon 6).

Metatheatricality most often refers to plays that stage a play within a play, or privilege the philosophical idea that “all the world is a stage,” *theatrum mundi*, or employ performance conventions that highlight their own construction. All of these practices are at work in Gilbert’s play, and are used to critique liberal society and the ways its essentialist construction of identity and reality degrade the “fake” identities of the drag queens. *Drag Queens* stages a play within a play, the courtroom melodrama the queens perform to display their innocence, and liberal
society’s corruption. *Drag Queens*’ performance rejects naturalism, and the liberal politics that undergird it, for theatricality and a performative view of reality: *theatrum mundi*. The play highlights every aspect of its performance through its self-conscious staging of the courtroom melodrama, which is brought into relief by juxtaposition with its backstage scenes, and by the queens playing all of its parts. It also privileges *theatrum mundi* at the level of character: the queens’ male identities are not positioned as their “real” identities, based in some kind of gendered core that is inherently and indelibly linked to biological sex. Rather, the queens’ feminine drag identities are as real, and as important – perhaps more important – as their male identities.

Hollywood melodrama’s generic conventions, thematic concerns, and historical period provide the basis for *Drag Queens*’ parodic critique of heteronormative conceptions of sexuality and gender, and society’s liberal institutions. Melodrama commonly focuses on female protagonists, the domestic sphere, and issues of gender and morality, which has made it of particular interest to feminist scholars. A broadly democratic genre, its villains are usually those who enjoy societal privilege and power, while its heroines most often hail from the disadvantaged strata of society, and are oppressed by virtue of their status as women under patriarchy. Its plots are characterized by coincidence, chance, strange twists of fate, and typically “turn less on the triumph of virtue than on making the world morally legible, spelling out its ethical forces and imperatives in large bold characters” (Brooks 49). Its ethical messages depend on a simple construction of morality, with its characters being either innocent and absolutely good, or guilty and absolutely bad.

*Drag Queens*’ political deployment of drag and parody also undoes the direct relationship between sex, gender, and sexuality, anticipating Judith Butler’s theory of gender performativity.
Butler argues that the idea that there is an internal, metaphysical, “gender core,” and that masculine and feminine gender issue from this internal essence, is a discursively produced fantasy. She suggests that gender is rather “performative,” an imitative practice of signification as well as a thing done, though never completely or correctly. She argues that the “essence or identity that [gendered acts and gestures] otherwise purport to express are fabrications manufactured and sustained through corporeal signs and other discursive means” (*Trouble* 173 emphasis original). In other words, gender is performative in the sense that linguist J. L. Austin intended when he coined the term: it is a signifying practice that brings into being that which it names.

Because gender is performative, and embedded within a process of signification, Butler contends that some agency is inherent to the contingencies of its signification, specifically its repetition. She cites drag, as well as “cross-dressing, and the sexual stylization of butch/femme identities,” as potentially subversive practices because they parody the idea of an original, primary, or stable gender core through self-conscious repetition (*Trouble* 174). She argues, “in imitating gender, drag implicitly reveals the imitative structure of gender itself—as well as its contingency” (175 emphasis original). Butler contends that gender’s contingency is emphasized by the ways drag and gender parody highlight its imitative structure, but also by the ways it demonstrates the “failure” of everyone to “do” their genders properly. Inherent in this failure is the possibility to do gender differently. She writes:

> In a sense, all signification takes place within the orbit of the compulsion to repeat; ‘agency,’ then, is to be located within the possibility of a variation on that repetition. If the rules governing signification not only restrict, but enable the assertion of alternative domains of cultural intelligibility, i.e., new possibilities for
gender that contest the rigid codes of hierarchical binarisms, then it is only within the practices of repetitive signifying that a subversion of identity becomes possible. The injunction to be a given gender produces the necessary failures, a variety of incoherent configurations that in their multiplicity exceed and defy the injunction by which they are generated. (Trouble 185 emphasis original)

*Drag Queens'* metatheatrical role-play is a prototypical example of Butler’s formulation of drag as political practice. Through its imbrication of drag, parody, and metatheatricality, and the primary dramatic action of its performance – the queens staging a Hollywood melodrama in which they are on trial for being drag queens – it critiques liberal society and aspects of gay culture for their complicity in rendering the queens’ drag identities “abnormal” and “fake.” It spectacularly and self-consciously deploys drag and theatrical performance to display how the queens reject the injunction to be masculine gay men, and how they are forced to suffer for it by gay and straight culture alike.

In its production at the Toronto Cinema, *Drag Queens’* parodic practices began with its set and venue of performance. Its set was an identifiable court of law with all the basic accoutrements: a judge’s bench, attorneys’ desks, and witness box, but twice their normal size. Towering over the actors, the set’s looming largeness represented the law as an intimidating, malevolent, and somewhat ridiculous force in the lives of the innocent queens. Its other most obvious “ironic inversion” is the substitution of melodrama’s innocent and chaste but misunderstood feminine heroines for equally innocent but terribly vulgar and blatantly sexual drag queens, who, as I have mentioned, are also occasional prostitutes. Indeed, its emphasis on the drag queens’ illicit sexualities was heightened by being staged in a pornographic theatre, a location with which many “respectable” theatregoers might not like to be associated.
Hutcheon also contends that parody cites aspects of a text or genre’s original historical circumstances, ironically invoking the characteristics associated with that time toward political ends in the present. *Drag Queens*’ parody cites 1950s Hollywood melodrama and the post-War American culture from which these films emerged. Some remember the post-War period nostalgically, as a time of great prosperity, simplicity, and moral purity: a time when middle-class nuclear families, with working dads and stay-at-home moms, moved into new, safe suburban communities, and enjoyed high standards of living – much like the childhood Gilbert describes. For many others it is remembered as a deeply repressive time: a time when sexual and gender norms were aggressively reinstituted and social “abnormalities” were intensely scrutinized, surveilled, pathologized, and criminalized. In this period, state agencies were brought to bear on the sexual and “moral” lives of American and Canadian citizens in the most pervasive and intrusive ways. These aspects of the 1950s are inferred by the “witch hunt” tactics employed by *Drag Queens*’ prosecutors, surprise witnesses, and its courtroom setting. As Hutcheon suggests, these aspects allude to similar crackdowns on gay men that were current when the play was staged: the police raids on Toronto’s bathhouses and *The Body Politic*; the increasing surveillance of gay sex in the name of public health in the age of AIDS; and the potentially discriminatory dangers associated with the invention of the HIV test.172

*Drag Queens*’ first courtroom episode, the trial of Marlene Derlorme, critiques the legal establishment’s corruption, and highlights the ways in which it criminalizes particular social identities rather than crimes. The scene begins with Marlene pleading not guilty to being a drag queen, which, of course, is funny because she so obviously is a drag queen. Her plea, however, is an attempt to evade punishment by a legal system that has already criminalized her with bogus

172 The most famous example of such State repression in the U.S. is the House Committee on Un-American Activities, which was convened in 1945 by Senator Joseph McCarthy. For an analysis of this period in the in U.S., see D’Emilio, “Homosexual Menace”; in Canada, see Kinsman and Gentile.
charges that equate drag with lying about one’s true identity. When asked to give an account of her childhood, she tells the court exactly what she thinks it wants to hear, describing an “idyllic” life in Winnipeg, “much like that of any blond-headed little boy” (37). But Marlene’s prosecuting attorney, played by Lana, is incredulous of her story. Obviously, she conjectures, Marlene has “made some fatal, ultimately tragic decisions,” otherwise how did she end up moving to Toronto and becoming “the rudest most obnoxious drag queen in Eastern Canada?” (38). Caught in this logic, Marlene parodies heteronormative discourses of gender and sexual identity by using its terms to defend herself, declaring: “I base my not-guilty plea on what I consider to be my God-given traits – my colour sense, and of course, my passion for accessorizing which I inherited from my grandmother […] I am a drag queen, and proud of my inherited traits” (40). Marlene’s humourous appeal to heredity as constitutive of her drag identity parodies essentialized conceptions of gay identity and the trite stereotypes (a keen fashion sense, for example) on which these ideas are so often based.

The court’s corruption is confirmed by the appearance of Anita Hrupki, Marlene’s surprise witness. Parodying the conventions of the surprise witness and melodramatic stock characters, Anita is just plain bad. She is in cahoots with a legal system that is hellbent on conviction rather than justice. Following the melodramatic conventions of chance and dramatic revelation, she arrives just in time to confirm the prosecutor’s conjecture: Marlene is a drag queen who has perjured herself by lying about her past. Anita tells the court:

JUDY [ANITA]: Well, you see, this silly Bobby Fitch is making up these lies about his background just so that he can get off scot free. But he is guilty of being a drag queen. […] The reason I say this is because, this so-called Marlene
Delorme was never the blond-headed little boy she, sorry – he, claims to be. In fact, he once had brown hair, and I was the first one to dye it.

[...]

LANA [PROSECUTOR]: And you have not been coached or paid any money to make this unexpected surprise confession.

JUDY [ANITA]: (very memorized) No your prosecutor. I have not been coached. (she looks at judge, smiles) Not to my knowledge.

She steps down and then stops to talk to the prosecutor. [The Prosecutor] slips her some money. She smiles at the judge and moves on. (42)

Parodying melodrama’s obvious construction of good and evil, Anita knowingly participates in a legal system that is determined to criminalize poor, innocent Marlene Delorme. The ridiculousness of the kangaroo court is also emphasized by the trite nature of the truth that Marlene is accused of contravening: hair colour and the biographical details of her childhood.

In light of Anita’s damning testimony, Marlene defends herself by reversing the seemingly straightforward differences between truth and lies and, in so doing, privileges theatricality, promoting the performative conceptions of identity that run through the play. On her way to the stand, aping the filmic conventions of the voiceover and melodrama, Marlene’s thoughts are broadcast in the theatre:

MARLENE: (voiceover) As I approached the stand, every nerve in my body quivering, I reviewed the accusations. They said I had lied, and I began to think about the lies, the years of lies, of living like a non person in Winnipeg, of gazing up at the clear blue sky and feeling small, ever so small. Yes, my life had been lies, nothing but lies, but wasn’t that the essence of being a drag queen? And
wasn’t the drag queen somehow the lie that tells the truth? […] I had to make a
stand and tell the truth, the truth in all its bitterness, its violence, its sordid detail. I
had entered that courtroom Marlene Delorme, and whatever the outcome, I
refused to leave it a cringing Bobby Fitch. (43)

Marlene’s monologue posits her gender identity – indeed any identity – as not inherent but
socially constructed, suggesting that there is no right or wrong way to “do” one’s gender.
Marlene’s description of the “truth” as bitter, violent, and sordid conveys the coercive ways that
masculine and feminine genders are naturalized as “reality.” It conceives of gender as a means to
control a subject’s actions and behaviours in service of reifying the power and morality of a
heteronormative social order. Her assertion that her drag identity is simultaneously truthful and
fictive reveals the shift toward a social constructivist conception of gender and identity occurring
in queer communities in this period; indeed, through its performance, Drag Queens participated
in this discursive change.173

The play also extends its parody of normative gender performance to the gay male
community, once again using essentialist language to highlight the hypocrisy of marginalizing
those who do not perform their genders appropriately.174 This critique occurs most emphatically
in the backstage scenes, when the queens talk about their everyday lives and the abuses they
suffer at the hands of other gay men. In the second backstage scene, for example, Judy tells Lana
and Marlene the story of an altercation she had with a man whom she picked up while dressed in

173 Gilbert may have got this phrase from a book published in 1984 by Philip Core, called Camp: The Lie that Tells
the Truth. If this was the case, his decision to switch the focus from camp to drag specifically reveals his and,
presumably, the culture’s renewed interest in gender.

174 While Drag Queens does not include lesbians within its critique, some feminists, including lesbian feminists,
viewed gay male drag as misogynist. Marilyn Frye, for example, writing in the early 1980s, argues “gay men’s
effeminacy and donning of feminine apparel displays no love of or identification with women or the womanly. For
the most part, this femininity is affected and characterized by theatrical exaggeration. It is a casual and cynical
mockery of women, for whom femininity is the trappings of oppression, but it is also a kind of play, a toying with
that which is taboo” (137).
her masculine role. When she informs the man that she is a drag queen, he demeans her and invokes a normative view of gender identity: “Drag queens [a]re the lowest of the lows,” he says. “[I’]d never go out with a drag queen and [are you] a man or what?” (50). As his interrogation of Judy suggests, exhibiting a properly performed masculine gender, one which is continuous, (i.e. it is never *not* performed), self-identical (i.e. it is an expression of one’s “true” self), and clearly masculine, is also necessary if one is “to be a man” within the mainstream of gay culture. If a gay man performs both feminine and masculine personas, as drag queens do, or if his masculinity is insufficiently performed, he potentially forfeits his ontological status as a “real (gay) man.” Ironically, Lana supports Judy and critiques essentialist conceptions of gender by appealing to essentialist language herself: “[You] should have told him off” she says. “He maligned our *race*” (50 emphasis mine). Lana characterizes drag identities as the ontological equivalent of racialized identities, ironically privileging “theatrical” drag over the supposedly constant and “indelible” markers of racial identity. In performance, this idea was doubly ironic because Leonard Chow, the actor who played Judy, was Asian, while Kent Stains, who played Lana, was white, and, therefore, would not be considered *to be* the same “race.” While comical, the scene’s focus on sex and dating indicts the ways gender, racialization, and sexuality intersect in gay male subcultures, and the ways mainstream gay culture often reinscribes the racism and misogyny of the broader culture.175

During the ongoing backstage scenes, the play also participates in educating audiences about condom use, which was an urgent issue for gay men and others in 1985. In these interchanges, it rearticulates the kind of safe sex advice offered by Michael Lynch and Bill Lewis, and later Michael Callen, and Richard Berkowitz, which sought to affirm gay sex and

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175 Racism and its relationship to gay male desire was also an issue of debate in the pages of *The Body Politic*. See McCaskell; and see Popert, “Race.”
(potentially) promiscuous behaviour, while also maintaining personal sexual health. In the second backstage scene, for example, the realities of AIDS and condom use are frankly discussed:

MARLENE: [...] (pause, to JUDY) Did he fuck you?

JUDY: I wouldn’t let him. You know. AIDS.

MARLENE: I know. I always make them wait until the second date before I let them fuck me. And then they have to use a condom—ribbed.

JUDY: Ohhhhhh. Condoms I hate them.

MARLENE: But it is the only thing that saves you from AIDS, besides not fucking, and you can forget that.

LANA: Yes darling. It’s one thing to being fashionably self-destructive, but actually killing yourself and other people, well I draw the line there—

JUDY: But don’t you have trouble getting them on?

MARLENE: No, and you can accessorize, see? (pulling out a pack of fiesta condoms) They come in lovely different vibrant colours to go with your bracelets and lingerie. I am particularly fond of a black bra with black condoms. I think the accents go quite nicely with my new dark lashes— (48)

By 1985, condom use was in the process of becoming the primary strategy for HIV/AIDS prevention among gay men. Condoms were not, however, part of gay male sexual cultures. Kevin Orr, staff member of the AIDS Committee of Toronto, for example, wrote on the topic in The Body Politic in December 1984, cautioning readers, “the first thing you have to remember is that you are a gay man. These things weren’t made for you; you’re using someone else’s toy. Don’t avoid a package because it looks more heterosexual.” Like the article, Marlene and Judy’s
dialogue humorously cites the clumsy newness of condoms for gay men, but affirms that if gay men are to continue to “have sex in an epidemic,” and to care for themselves and one another, condoms were as nonnegotiable as sex itself. Both the scene and the article signal the paradigmatic cultural shift gay men were effecting in their sexual practices during this period. In fact, because Drag Queens encouraged safe sex practices at the time when safe sex education was first being actively promoted, the performance participated in the dissemination of this strategy during a tremendously important period in the history of the epidemic.

Judy’s courtroom scene, which follows this backstage vignette, focuses on the educational establishment. It condemns this seemingly benevolent liberal institution by showing how it coercively forces children into heteronormative gender identities by stigmatizing and pathologizing “abnormal” behaviour. Like the other courtroom scenes, Judy achieves this critique through the appearance of a surprise witness, Hermione Rosemount. A typical stock character of 1950s Hollywood melodrama, Hermione is a matronly teacher who pretends to be kind and moral, but is, in fact, mean spirited, intolerant, and evil. She tells the court that when Judy was a small boy named Billy Bunt, he exhibited “pathological” behaviour, not liking gym class and not wanting to change his clothes in front of the other boys. Because of these departures from “normal” masculine behaviour, she placed Billy in a “special class,” but he did not fit into this class either. Hermione informs the audience that at this point “Billy’s descent into madness began” (50). She continues her damning testimony, saying: “Well in case you haven’t noticed—Billy is mad. Not only is Billy a drag queen, living a lie, pretending to be a woman, but somewhere around grade three he went completely bonkers, and I do not use this term lightly” (59). She advises the court that Judy has suffered from such delusions since childhood and that
her contemporary identity as a drag queen, a person who cannot differentiate between reality and fantasy, is a continuation of this childhood pathology.

LANA [HERMIONE]: [...] What we have here, in fact, is the tragic end for the child who refused to adjust to normal life, and hides in fantasy. Billy is a misfit, and he has finally gone insane.

[...] We guidance counselors have our trials too, you know. But just so that one little child out there can be pulled from turning to drugs, excessive sex, or punk rock music, and become a useful, normal, productive member of society, for the sake of that misguided child for whom there is still some hope, unlike Billy, it is for he/she that I speak. (60)

Hermione’s testimony demonstrates that even childhood fantasies must be constrained by a heterosexual moral imperative that does not include effeminate boys or masculine girls. Her testimony shows how educators pathologize children who do not exhibit “normal” gender performances. The scene illustrates how these “signs of pathology” were posited as means to control gay men and other queers by placing their identities outside dominant models of mental and physical “health.” In Hermione’s final piece of testimony, when she cites taking drugs, having “excessive” sex, and listening to punk rock music as other examples of “madness,” Drag Queens accuses the educational system of hypocrisy, suggesting that its primary task is not educating and caring for children, but maintaining middle-class morality by punishing and weeding out any manifestation of sexual or gender nonconformity in children.

In the final court scene, Lana’s truthful and complex expression of her gender identity and sexual practices parodies the “justice” of the legal system. Unlike Marlene and Judy, she
pleads guilty and is completely transparent about the complexities of her gender identity, and the nature of her sexual practice. On the stand she says, “being a drag queen is my life […] I love to dress as a woman. I always have. It makes life thrilling for me, somehow. Who knows why? But for me, male clothing is boring, restrictive, impractical, it’s a contradiction, isn’t it” (71). By contending that she is following a desire that she has always had, Lana characterizes her drag identity as “internal” and “abiding,” and ironically demonstrates how the law privileges some identities, which are also based in desire and gender performance, but disqualifies others.

In the same manner, Lana’s truthfulness about her sexual practices are degraded by a legal system that privileges heterosexual monogamy and marriage by criminalizing other forms of sex and not recognizing other types of relationships. When asked if she has “sleazy sex with men in back alleys, toilets, steam baths and other dark and disgusting and dangerous places,” she campily responds “as often as humanly possible” (71). Lana’s honesty affirms her innocence and throws into relief the injustice of a legal system that does not punish people for doing harm to others or to property, but for their non-heteronormative sexual practices and gender identities. Parodically playing the role of melodramatic heroine, wrongly accused by an unjust society, her testimony indict the law for deploying its resources to morally regulate queer identities and sex, with the Toronto bathhouse raids serving as the most egregious real life example.

Lana’s liberated honesty echoes the difficulties faced, and the tactics of resistance employed, by Toronto’s gay community in the wake of the bathhouse raids. Based on Lana’s candid statements, the prosecuting attorney concludes that the court has no choice but to find her guilty of being a drag queen. Following the conventions of melodrama, however, Lana interrupts the attorney and states that she has something to say in her own defense. At this moment the audience hears her inner monologue while she histrionically enacts her own thoughts: “Well it
suddenly occurred to me something about belonging, and well, I always think of Joan Crawford’s words at the end of ‘A Woman’s Face’ [...] I want to belong to the human race” (73). In a conventional melodramatic plot, Lana would now deliver her climactic, emotional monologue. She would confirm her innocence while demonstrating the corrupt nature of the legal system and society that has so maligned her. This narrative arc would be especially rousing because it follows the same trajectory as those criminalized by the bathhouse raids: Lana’s proud identification of herself as a promiscuous drag queen who has sex in public places is tantamount to the legal tactics and the “crimes” of the many “found-ins” arrested during Toronto’s bathhouse raids, with more than 90% of the accused having been acquitted by the time the play was staged (Spalding). Like them, Lana is now set to defend herself against the legal system that must, in typical melodramatic fashion, recognize her innocence. Her own proud humanity will prove that the law is duplicitous, unjust, and the real fraud in this scenario. But in a way that once again echoes the lives of gay men in Toronto, Lana’s narrative is cut short by the arrival of her surprise witness, Dr. Dimchick. Just as the gay community was forced to face serious questions about promiscuity and sexual liberation by the arrival and escalation of HIV/AIDS, Lana is suddenly and unceremoniously confronted by Dr. Dimchick, who has arrived to self-righteously condemn her for her sexual history by delivering the most damning testimony possible in this period: Lana has AIDS.

Dr. Dimchick’s entrance into the courtroom is yet another parody of Hollywood cinema, one that has been quite famously adapted by gay male culture, and which positions her as evil incarnate. ”MARLENE enters as Dr. Dimchick. She resembles Margaret Hamilton, the Wicked Witch of the West in ‘The Wizard of Oz’” (73). Dr. Dimchick’s arrival so disturbs Lana that she melodramatically takes out a gun and threatens to shoot. Dr. Dimchick is, however, unmoved.
“Don’t worry,” she says as she calmly approaches Lana: “No weapon is dangerous enough to protect you from the brutal truth. Sit down right now, you depressing, self-defeating, unfortunately-dressed, promiscuous slut” (74). Dr. Dimchick tells the court that she has been Lana’s doctor since he was a “tiny effeminate child” named Davey Dollop (74). She informs the court: “Miss Lust has been avoiding me, refusing to answer my calls. Well I have finally caught up with her” (75). She proclaims to the court that Lana’s “years of loose living, of flaunting authority” have all caught up with her (75).

Dr. Dimchick: […] Miss Lust has always favoured promiscuous sex, in which she has been the passive partner. She has swallowed busloads of male sperm, as well as drugging herself into a semi-conscious state every evening in order to loosen up her so-called inhibitions […]. There is, in fact, no need to convict Miss Lust, for this human dogshit is going to perish anyway, and for all intents and purpose, by her own hand. Like many modern homosexuals, Miss Lust has committed a form of suicide due to her promiscuous habits, and now she must pay the price.

(75)

Dr. Dimchick characterizes Lana’s seroconversion with the same moralizing arguments that circulated in this period, even among gay men. She blames Lana for her illness and, much like Callen, Berkowitz, and other advocates of the immunological theory, cites promiscuity, too much semen, and taking drugs as the causes of AIDS.

Dr. Dimchick’s public declaration of Lana’s diagnosis also resonates with the immediate political situation confronting the gay community in Toronto when the play was produced: the politics of the HIV test. As detailed above, when Drag Queens was staged at the end of 1985, the HIV test was becoming widely available in Canada. In the absence of legal protections, whether
or not gay men should take the test was becoming a pressing issue. Positing Dr. Dimchick as a malevolent medical authority that, like the court itself, is hellbent on persecuting the queens, the play expresses the gay community’s suspicion of medical as well as legal authorities, and its anxieties about the possibilities of HIV stigma in this period.

Lana is stunned by the knowledge that she has seroconverted. Fragile, she wonders, as some gay men did, if what the doctor said could be true. Was she the architect of her own demise? Could this be a punishment that she deserves for her moral violations? Faced with what she initially sees as the “facts,” Lana once again approaches the stand.

LANA (voiceover) […] Surely every drag queen nay every homosexual dreams this nightmare. The sadistic doctor with the facts, the brutal facts, the balance sheet where it says in cold, hard computer printout – I was a passive partner in sex, as if all my passivity, all my femininity, all my womanliness which I always treasured was the essence of my disease, my heartbreak, my tragedy (75).

Identifying her illness with her femininity, Lana’s testimony calls upon the cultural narratives that have traditionally connected the spread of sexually transmitted diseases to women, and which were redeployed in new ways in the context of AIDS. In his study of the representation of disease, Sander Gilman connects gender to sexually transmitted diseases, arguing that the context for early depictions of AIDS was the “almost five-hundred-year-old iconography of the syphilitic” (248). Drawing on historical examples of visual sources, Gilman details how, by the time of the Enlightenment, the exemplary “image of the syphilitic shifted from male to female, but then only with the female as image of the source of infection” (253-4). In the nineteenth century, Gilman argues, the gendered character and the moral overtones of these images intensified. In representations from this period, “the female is seen as the source of
pollution, but also as the outsider, the prostitute, the socially deviant individual” (Gilman 256). Gilman argues that this history of representation underlies early depictions and thus understandings of people with AIDS, but with a significant alteration: “The male is not only the sufferer but also the source of his own pollution. [With AIDS] we have the conflation of the male and the female images traditionally associated with sexually transmitted diseases such as syphilis” (Gilman 258).

As a gay man in drag, Lana’s thoughts about her doctor’s diagnosis turn on the history of the representation of sexually transmitted disease that Gilman elucidates. While ironic and parodic, her thoughts cite common conceptions of contagion, which follow from this gendered, sexualized, and moralized history. By specifically invoking tragedy, and because the performance was both a parody of melodrama and highly metatheatrical, Lana’s reactions also link these conceptions of contagion, gender, and disease to the histories of tragedy and melodrama as theatrical genres that have rehearsed these narratives. Lana’s reaction ironically exposes the often unconscious ideologies and values that underlie and produce specific effects and narrative constructions within a particular epoch – what Raymond Williams calls a structure of feeling. The “structures” that Lana’s reaction makes evident are those of sexism, misogyny, and homophobia, and the ways in which these have been historically imbricated with medical and moral discourses. Her thoughts parodically posit how older epistemological paradigms, such as theatrical tragedy, melodrama, and representations of disease, are taken up and recoded through various modes of representation in the present. While obviously melodramatic, Lana’s guilt-ridden reaction demonstrates how these older paradigms insinuated themselves into the lives of people living with HIV/AIDS, while Dr. Dimchick’s line of argumentation shows how
these epistemological forms were used to justify the punishment of those who transgressed dominant narratives of masculinity, femininity, and monogamous heterosexuality.

As Lana reapproaches the stand, she notices “an attractive young man in the audience” that “a spotlight picks out,” enabling the entire audience to witness their improvised interchange (76). With her thoughts once again broadcast in the theatre, the audience knows that she senses that “[he’s at a] turning point in his life when he has to choose between becoming a normal productive member of society, or being a drag queen” (77). Though she is sick, weak, and fragile, attributes typical to a melodramatic heroine, her empathy for this young man gives her strength to go on. For his sake – and in this moment of metatheatrical direct address, for the sake of every gay man gathered in the theatre – Lana decides that she will not succumb to despair, defeat, or silence.

LANA: Yes, it’s strange, isn’t it? I suppose I should be repentant, but I’m not. That is what we are like, those who don’t live as others do – the different ones, those who do not surrender their mind and souls, their originality and spirituality to the multitude.

JUDY: Don’t you think this is a trifle pretentious? Perhaps you forget that you have admitted that you are a common prostitute.

LANA: And who are you, who is anyone to judge? Yes, I am a drag queen and yes I am dying of AIDS. Perhaps I have made choices many would not agree with but I followed my heart […] I have not been afraid to look inside myself, to live on the edge of morality, society, of the world itself and if I must die for it, so be it. And to all the little boys out there who don’t want to wear their blue booties but pick out pink ones, to all the little girls who would rather wear army boots than
Lana’s sentiments are melodramatic, iconoclastic, and rousing. Despite being a person who is sick and downtrodden, she bravely encourages others to live their lives, to rail against conformity, and to assert the inviolate importance of personal choice with no regrets for doing so. In her call to gay men, lesbians, and anyone who has challenged authority, she promotes solidarity amongst those at society’s maltreated margins.

In Toronto in 1985, Drag Queens’ AIDS politics were audacious and pioneering. On the one hand they follow the traditional gay liberationist activism in the city, while on the other they herald the way for new forms of AIDS activism. Drag Queens was the first play staged in Toronto to address AIDS and the sexual politics associated with the syndrome, and Gilbert himself has stated that the play is primarily about “AIDS prejudice,” though no one seemed to notice it at the time (Ejaculations 93). Its treatment of AIDS echoed the pro-promiscuity and sexually liberated politics of gay liberationists, like Lynch, Lewis, and others at The Body Politic. By citing people living with AIDS, gender-variant men and women, and by calling upon “anyone who has ever challenged authority,” Drag Queens champions the kind of coalitional politics that later arose around AIDS activism, specifically with the founding of the AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power (ACT UP) in New York, and AIDS ACTION NOW! (AAN!) in

176 Its AIDS message was, however, noticed by John Glines, whose New York theatre company, “The Glines,” had successfully produced William Hoffman’s AIDS play As Is in March 1985. According to Gilbert, Glines expressed interest in producing Drag Queens but on the condition that he delete its references to AIDS. The crisis in New York was at least two years ahead of Toronto. Along with San Francisco, New York was the epicenter of the epidemic in North America. In the absence of universal health care, and with municipal and federal governments that were belligerently negligent in their response, it was hit very hard by the epidemic. Gilbert was, of course, overjoyed by the possibility of having a professional production of his Drag Queens in New York, but he refused to change the play: “I can’t do that, it wouldn’t be my play anymore if I did that.” According to Gilbert, Glines refused to produce the play as too many people were dying in New York, and “people want to see positive stuff” (Ejaculations 94). The Glines subsequently produced Drag Queens in 1994 with its AIDS elements intact.
Toronto, both of which defined their mandates in broad terms, avoiding the exclusions inherent in identity politics.\textsuperscript{177}

Gilbert’s use of theatrical performance to intervene into AIDS politics is not unusual, though his radical sexual politics are. As Linda and Michael Hutcheon note in \textit{Opera: Desire, Disease, Death}, there is an historical precedent for employing performance to redefine disease. Writing about AIDS plays in particular, they argue that this practice has been redeployed in significantly new ways.

With AIDS and its gay activist politics, the tone and tactics have changed […]

This taking control of the mechanisms of making meaning is often done openly, didactically, even outrageously – with irony and humour. It is also frequently eroticized, perhaps in an attempt to restore something of the hard-won liberation of pre-AIDS sexual life. (Hutcheon and Hutcheon 200)

The Hutcheons’ analysis is convincing, though it is important to emphasize that the subjects of their investigation, Tony Kushner’s \textit{Angels in America}, William Finn’s \textit{Falsettos}, Larry Kramer’s \textit{The Normal Heart}, and William Hoffman’s \textit{As Is}, are, in comparison to \textit{Drag Queens on Trial}, mainstream gay plays, produced by more established theatres, in larger and more conventional venues.\textsuperscript{178} Among other affirmations of liberal ideologies and cultural values, these plays tacitly prescribe monogamy as a defense against AIDS through their affirmative representation of monogamous gay coupledom, and their negative representations of casual or

\textsuperscript{177} ACT UP defined itself as a “diverse group[s] of non-partisan individuals” who were “united in anger and committed to direct action to end the AIDS crisis” (Crimp 13). AIDS ACTION NOW! defined itself as “an organization of people living with AIDS or HIV infection, our friends and our supporters. Together we are fighting to ensure the best possible care and treatment for everyone with an HIV-related illness” (“AAN! Brochure”).

\textsuperscript{178} \textit{As Is} enjoyed a critically successful run at Toronto Free in Theatre in January 1986, shortly after \textit{Drag Queens on Trial} was produced. It was a coproduction between Toronto Free and Shaw, and was the play’s Canadian premiere. The TFT/Shaw coproduction toured to the National Arts Centre in February.
promiscuous sex. Unlike 

*Drag Queens*, these plays tend to affirm liberal ideologies, and a faith in “progress.”

In comparison, *Drag Queens* rejects both monogamy and inclusion of gays within liberal legal frameworks, which was the ultimate aim of the emerging paradigm of gay civil rights activism in this period. Its parody undoes liberal society’s conceptions of truth and justice by highlighting the ways these institutions construct their power, while its metatheatricality adds yet another layer of self-consciousness and critical distance. It *shows* how the educational, legal, and medical establishments are predicated upon structures that need a scapegoat by literally, and melodramatically, *making a show* of the process through which these institutions define norms, rights, and their own authority by oppressing and criminalizing marginalized subjects. *Drag Queens*’ form sidesteps the trap of reaffirming liberal ideology (a charge feminists following Brecht lodged against realism in this period) by deploying the double-pronged practices of parody, camp, and self-conscious metatheatricality. These performance practices, indeed the parodic and self-conscious staging of a courtroom melodrama, allow the queens to demonstrate their lack of faith in these institutions and the realist modes of representation, whose narrative conventions and dramaturgical structures have been charged with tacitly maintaining them and the political status quo by theatre theorists since Brecht. Like the queer activists and theorists who would follow them, Marlene, Lana, and Judy reject the assimilationist and exclusionary identity politics that the legal establishment represents. They do not want inclusion within the gay cultures and social institutions that have always victimized them. Rather, by self-consciously staging their own Hollywood melodrama, they want their innocence, maltreatment, and talents confirmed by adulation and applause.

179 See Diamond; Dolan, “Lesbian,” and “Practicing.” This argument about the politics of naturalism also undergirds Ric Knowles’ arguments that I used to analyze *Hosanna* in the last chapter.
Despite the radical politics that I have elucidated here, the straight press received and promoted *Drag Queens* as a critical success.\(^{180}\) The straight press viewed its championing of the underdog, and its coalitional politics, using the same liberal humanist conceptions of universality they employed a decade earlier to celebrate and contain *Hosanna*. The straight press failed to comment on the political complexities of its parodic and metatheatrical staging, its invocation of AIDS, or the ways in which it critiqued the legal establishment. Although the press recognized the play as an example of radical performance, it only did so in terms of “taste” and “decency.”\(^{181}\) Henry Mietkiewicz, critic at the *Toronto Star*, for example, prefaced his review by writing,

First, a word of caution. Although it does not actively promote homosexuality and chooses instead to advocate tolerance toward society’s fringe elements *Drag Queens on Trial* is not for the faint-hearted. […] Rarely does a minute go by without a four-letter word or some off-colour reference to genitalia or sexual deviation. (“Drag Queens”)

Mietkiewicz ends his review by returning to the liberal values he views as the common denominator of his readership. He posits the queens as beyond the pale of middle-class life, typically calling on universalizing rhetoric to justify the performance’s value. He writes, “many of us will leave the theatre still convinced the drag queens are freaks. But that’s hardly the issue. Gilbert has spoken eloquently about society’s persecution and misunderstanding of

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\(^{180}\) Other than the introduction written by Jerry Wasserman, which accompanies the play in the fourth edition of his anthology, *Modern Canadian Plays*, no sustained scholarly attention has been paid to *Drag Queens on Trial*.

\(^{181}\) The only real exception is found in Jay Scott’s review in the *Globe and Mail*, though he does not really investigate the play’s politics. Scott, who was also gay, thought that the queens’ protests against both straight and gay culture were genuine and courageous.
nonconformity – and that’s a theme that goes beyond the specifics of homosexuality” (Mietkiewicz “Drag Queens”).

Critical reception in the popular press generally lauded the play, and recognized it as a watershed in Gilbert’s career. The critics failed, however, to see the ways in which it actually solidified his desire to remain marginal and iconoclastic. This tendency is evidenced in a subsequent article, also written by Mietkiewicz:

There are certain occasions in artists’ lives which, when viewed in hindsight, are recognized as obvious turning points. Rarer and more exciting, however, are events whose importance is revealed not after many years, but at the moment they occur. Such a milestone, against all odds, is Drag Queens On Trial, which should finally earn writer/director Sky Gilbert the broader acceptance he deserves after scrabbling for years on the fringes of Toronto’s experimental theatre scene.

(Mietkiewicz “Sky”)

Despite the positive crossover rhetoric that Mietkiewicz espouses here, such a reception is not engendered by the play, nor is it what Gilbert intended. We get a sense of this when, at the end of the article, Gilbert acknowledges the “similarities” between queers and straights, but also states, “there are many fundamental differences.” He continues by elucidating his anti-assimilationist politics: “The key is not to lie and say he’s just like you, but to recognize the difference and understand it doesn’t automatically mean there’s something wrong with him” (Mietkiewicz “Sky”). Although Mietkiewicz is, in fact, attempting to honour the play by including the queens in the value system of the dominant culture, his commentary erases both the play’s and its author’s politics. Clearly Gilbert did not intend to write a universal story. He staged a self-conscious parody that critiqued the hypocrisy of straight culture’s liberal institutions, which
represented gay male misogyny and racism, and intervened into debates about promiscuity, sickness, and the tendency to blame the victim in the context of AIDS.

By the mid-1980s, following years of steady artistic growth, Gilbert took stock of his own theatrical politics. He was unsatisfied with the form of his poet-and-his-boys plays, and the simple celebration of gay culture through reclaiming gay history that these plays effected. He was also skeptical of the unprecedented success of The Dressing Gown, which was written in reaction to a few failed plays and relationships, and which seems to promote the increasingly conservative, homophobic, and anti-sexual currents that, especially with the advent of the AIDS crisis, were running prominently through straight and gay culture alike. In these overlapping biographical and political contexts, Gilbert established his new, politically self-conscious aesthetics and politics with Drag Queens on Trial.

In its form, content, and politics, Drag Queens embodies the “queer” politics that Gilbert would eventually overtly espouse, and which would come to prominence at the end of the 1980s at Buddies and beyond. “Queer,” according to David Halperin, “is by definition whatever is at odds with the normal, the legitimate, the dominant. There is nothing in particular to which it necessarily refers. It is an identity without an essence. 'Queer' then, demarcates not a positivity but a positionality vis-à-vis the normative” (Halperin Saint Foucault 62). Drag Queen’s self-conscious theatricality, its parody of melodrama, and its celebration of the multiple, mutable, and performative identities of the drag queen, embody the fluid form of an “identity without essence” that queer politics and theory would later privilege, especially in its embrace of Butler’s theory of gender performativity. Its critique of both society’s liberal institutions, and the assimilationist trends in gay culture, similarly portend the queer critique of gay community, its essentialist tendencies, and its increasingly mainstream aspiration for “normality.” Drag Queens’ advocacy
of a broadly coalitional politics foreshadows the queer call for alliances among the sexual and
gender outlaws at the fringes of gay and straight cultures. Though he did not, could not, name it
as such in 1985, Drag Queens is the play that established Gilbert’s and Buddies’ queer politics
and the birth of their queer “positionality vis-à-vis the normative.” It is the play that set the stage
for the rest of Gilbert’s tenure as Buddies’ artistic director, and for the rest of his prolific career.

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Coda: After Drag Queens

In the wake of Drag Queens’ success, Buddies began a new, more independent and
politically radical chapter in its history. In 1985, Buddies parted ways with Nightwood Theatre
and began to produce Rhubarb! independently. The reason for their split is significant as it
reveals Buddies’ developing commitment to boundary-pushing sexual politics. According to
Gilbert:

[the] problem was I felt that [Nightwood’s] politics weren’t as sexual as Buddies. I
know they objected to some of the [pornographic] images used in a Rhubarb!
show. And that was problematic. Because Buddies had started the festival, I felt
strongly about reclaiming it. […] if they had their own sexual politics, they should
have created their own festival. And they did. They started Groundswell. I did not
think there was any room for the censoring of a piece in terms of sexual content at
Rhubarb! or at Buddies. They agreed, and they decided they didn’t want to be part
of Rhubarb! any longer. […] At the same time Nightwood left Rhubarb, I began
to see the importance of supporting lesbian work. It was hard trying to get
lesbians interested in what was at the time, a very male-identified company.

Although, the company did have some lesbians involved. (Boni 18) 

Following *Drag Queens*’ extended run, and speaking to Gilbert’s desire to support lesbian theatre, Buddies produced its inaugural “Four-Play” festival, its first programming officially mandated to both produce lesbian and gay plays not written by Gilbert. 

With *Drag Queens*, Gilbert began to define himself and his theatre against the political commitments of the mainstream gay community, rejecting its increasing respectability, and embracing an overtly pro-sex, and pro-promiscuity attitude. As artistic director, Gilbert made these politics explicit through his articulations of “queer” art, politics, and culture. He and Buddies are, perhaps, the earliest users of the term “queer” in Toronto, which they invoked in the name of their inaugural “Queer Culture” festival in 1989. Celebrating all things queer, the festival was multidisciplinary, multi-site, and produced by partners from a number of gay and lesbian institutions. Gilbert made his views about queerness and queer theatre clear in the 1993 Queer Culture guide, where he wrote:

Let’s talk about Queer, because it does not always mean gay or lesbian. It means sexual, radical, from another culture, non-linear, redefining form as well as content. [. . .] If I were a nicer sweeter guy, I’d call Buddies in Bad Times a ‘lesbian and gay theatre for all people.’ But I’m not that nice. [. . .] I feel compelled to call something queer what it is. (qtd. in Wallace, “Theorizing” 147, my emphasis).

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182 In his memoirs, Gilbert cites Doug Durand’s *Persona Non Grata* (1982) as the pornographic play at issue (*Ejaculations* 64).

183 Gilbert had produced other gay plays through Rhubarb! but they were never marketed or positioned as such.
In the wake of *Drag Queens on Trial*, Gilbert used queer to define the company against mainstream culture, including segments of the gay and lesbian community, with increasing regularity. The term was officially included within the company’s mandate in 1993, when it was re-written in anticipation of its move into the 12 Alexander Street Theatre in 1994. Up until his resignation as Artistic Director in 1997, Gilbert invoked queer to convey a sexual, radical, and overtly political aesthetic that did not always speak to issues of lesbian and gay identity or community.

Following in the footsteps of John Herbert, Gilbert would also become a drag queen himself, aligning himself with the sexual and gender margins of queer communities in Toronto. Not long after his first foray in drag at *Drag Queens’* premiere, Gilbert’s drag alter ego “Jane” emerged and has become both a celebrity and a political activist in her own right. In 1990, for example, Jane played the central role in a simultaneously theatrical and very *real* performance that saw her charged, and have her day in court. In January of that year, Jane was *en route* to a theatre benefit in a taxi in the west end of the city (R. Smith). As the cab was traveling through the Queen and Ossington area, which, in 1990, was not a good part of town, the police stopped it, apparently for a burnt out headlight (Glick). Gilbert recounts what transpired in his memoirs:

> [The police officers] were very rude to me and searched my purse and my

‘person.’ I was in a notorious area of town and I think they thought I was a

transsexual, drug-addicted hooker. A chick with a dick. When they couldn’t find

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184 For a history of the term queer as it has been articulated in Buddies in Bad Times Theatre’s mandate, see Robert Wallace “Theorizing,” and my “Queer and Now.”

185 In 1997, Gilbert would resign as artistic director of Buddies, three years after it became resident company of the 12 Alexander Street Theatre Project. In his memoirs, Gilbert cites the necessity of appeasing conservative elements in the gay community in order to keep the theatre afloat as the primary reason for his resignation.

186 Gilbert still regularly appears as Jane at theatre functions such as the annual Dora Mavor Moore awards. I, for one, took great pleasure in seeing Jane walk up to the stage at the 2011 award ceremony, having received the Dora for best new play in the independent theatre division for *The Situationists.*
any drugs on me, they finally gave me a ticket for not wearing my seatbelt.

(Ejaculations 167)

As fate would have it, when Gilbert related the details of the story to Tim Jones, Buddies’ General Manager, Jones realized that the court date coincided with the theatre’s 1990 Queer Culture Festival. Jane’s court date, it was decided, would become a piece of political theatre: Gilbert would go to the trial as Jane, and her appearance on the stand in the very real world of an Ontario Courthouse would be included in the Queer Culture festival’s brochure as one of its many “performances” (Ejaculations 168).

On the day of the trial, Jane was chauffeured to the courthouse in a rented limousine. On her way, she and her small entourage sipped champagne and watched pornography on the limo’s television. When she arrived at Old City Hall, she was greeted by a group of fans who made their way with her into the courtroom. As one reporter described the scene:

It was now traffic court as a performance art installation. Jane sauntered over to the stand in that fluffy shag white coat, that peroxide wig, that make-up that made Tammy Faye look like a nun. […] Jane opened by stating to the judge that she was dressed in drag to make a statement, to show how she was dressed the night she was busted… to demonstrate how anyone who dresses or looks unusual is a target for the TO [sic] police. (Glick)

In the end, Jane got off on a technicality: it is not illegal for a patron to ride in a taxi without wearing a seatbelt. The judge, Brian Hudson, said that Jane/Gilbert “is a reasonable individual and was a passenger in a strange cab. The charges are dismissed” (R. Smith). With this performance, Gilbert staged a performative critique of the law, similar to the one he made five years earlier in Drag Queens on Trial, and, by appearing in drag, he positioned himself alongside
other marginalized queers, the transsexuals, drag queens, and prostitutes, who were still regularly hassled by the city’s police.

Gilbert and Buddies’ positioning of themselves as marginal to the mainstream of gay and lesbian community and politics in Toronto in the late 1980s and early 1990s was possible because of the simultaneous decline of gay liberation, and the emergence of a comparatively conservative gay and lesbian mainstream. In Toronto and Canada, the death of gay liberation as the central political philosophy of gay activism can be dated to 1985, the year section 15 of the Charter of Rights and Freedoms, which delineates equality rights, took effect. While section 15 did not include gays and lesbians, it promised this possibility. Its passing radically altered the nation’s political environment, making what Miriam Smith calls “rights talk” the dominant rhetoric of gay activism in Canada. As she suggests:

The Charter greatly encourages and reinforces [rights talk] because it has substantially enhanced the chances of legal success for lesbian and gay rights claims before the courts. Because it privileges the law, rights talk does not have any broader transformative vision or strategy. Rights talk assumes that changing or strengthening the law is in itself a means to the achievement of social change and that legal changes are thus the proper goal of political struggle and organizing. Rights talk thus defines social and political change as legal change.

(75)

The passing of the Charter resulted in the birth of many rights-talk oriented gay and lesbian organizations, the largest and most successful of which is Equality for Gays and Lesbians Everywhere (EGALE), a national organization located in Ottawa and formed in 1986. EAGLE has primarily focused on issues of taxation, public pensions, and spousal benefits, “mak[ing] no
pretense of subscribing to lesbian and gay liberation principles” (Warner Never 242). Whereas the founding of gay liberation activism was influenced by the countercultural politics of the anti-war, women’s liberation, and Black Nationalist movements of the 1960s, EGALE and groups like it were firmly entrenched in a middle-class ethos. Indeed, the kind of activism they undertook, lobbying and litigating the provincial and federal governments, required skills and resources that are largely held by middle-aged and middle-class educated professionals. Significantly, EGALE tended to avoid the “less respectable issues,” such as censorship, pornography, issues of public sex and sexuality, and the age of consent. In Brenda Cossman’s words, “EGALE has been successful, precisely because it is mainstream; precisely because it presents a relatively unthreatening face. It is a decent, fit and proper face of the gay and lesbian community. It is the face of respectability” (Warner Never 242).

In the wake of Drag Queens on Trial, Buddies embraced these “less respectable issues,” and began to occupy an aggressively marginal position vis-à-vis both the gay community and Alternative theatres in Toronto. As detailed in this dissertation’s three chapters, its taking of this position was possible because of the significant growth that the gay and lesbian community and the Alternative theatre industry underwent in the 1970s and early 1980s. By 1985, both were large and established enough to have obvious centres and definable margins, features neither had in the mid-1970s, when these social formations still inhabited the radical fringes themselves. Drag Queens on Trial’s metatheatrical form and its parodic politics helped distinguish Buddies’ position as marginal to both Toronto’s theatre establishment and its changing gay culture. Its critique of gay men’s misogyny and racism, its focus on bawdy and ribald drag queens, and its rejection of society’s liberal institutions inaugurated what would become Buddies’ queer critique of the mainstream of gay and lesbian community and politics in Toronto. Its production signals
an important moment in the development of gay theatre, politics, and community in Toronto. In
the most self-consciously melodramatic manner possible, it embodies the end, or perhaps more
accurately, the transformation of gay liberation into queer politics.
Conclusion: More than a Stage

This dissertation is a study of the “political stages” of gay theatre in Toronto. It covers the rise of gay theatre as a social formation in the city from the cusp of the gay liberation movement, inaugurated by the performance of Fortune and Men’s Eyes at the Central Library Theatre, to the beginnings of a new social formation, the queer critique of liberal assimilation and gay identity politics signaled by the performance of Buddies in Bad Times Theatre’s Drag Queens on Trial at the Toronto Cinema. By placing Fortune, No Deposit, No Return, and Drag Queens’ particular deployment of theatrical performance in the context of the biographies of their authors, gay politics in Toronto, and the city’s theatre history, I have recovered and demonstrated the seminal role gay theatre has played in the cultural reformation of gay identity and community in the city.

This dissertation makes a significant contribution to the fields of gay history and theatre studies through its elucidation of gay theatre’s emergence as a discursive formation in the late 1960s, its formation in the 1970s, and its establishment in the mid-1980s – indeed, its institutionalization as part of Buddies in Bad Times Theatre’s mandate. Little attention has previously been paid to the fecund intersection of sexuality and theatrical performance by theatre scholarship in Canada and it is my hope that the history documented here might inspire more interest in this productive cultural and political site. The decades that follows this dissertation’s conclusion, for example, are marked by an explosion of new queer work. Similarly, the performative practices of queers who populated various subaltern worlds in the city before this dissertation’s point of departure, of which John Herbert’s drag performance is one example, is a rich archive. This dissertation’s attention to gay history and theatre provides a starting point for these other, yet to be written histories.
In writing this history of gay theatre in Toronto, I do not intend my chronological narrative to be mistaken for one predicated upon an idea of “progress.” Rather, by employing a cultural materialist approach that places emphasis on formal analysis and political context, I have rendered these playwrights as subjects acting within specific cultural, ideological, and material contexts. In doing so I have made arguments that elucidate how their actions were determined by their cultural conditions, material context, and social location. At the same time, I have demonstrated how their deployment of theatrical performance enabled them to play determining roles within Toronto’s gay community and its theatre industry. In this sense, this dissertation is also an argument for the power and possibility of gay theatre, culture, and community.

In 2011, an article titled “Dawn of a New Gay” was published in Toronto’s Grid magazine to much notoriety and consternation within Toronto’s gay community. Written by Paul Aguirre-Livingston, the article argues that, for gay men in their twenties today, “sexual orientation is merely secondary to [their] place in society,” and that decades of gay activism have “produced a whole new type of gay,” the “post-modern homo,” or “post-mo.” These “post-mos,” Aguirre-Livingston suggests, don’t “hate gay culture”; they “just don’t have that much in common with it anymore.” In the article, Aguirre-Livingston argues that greater acceptance of gays by their families and in other areas of social life, such as government policy and popular culture (it seems the broadcast of Will and Grace in the 1990s was a formative text for post-mos) has made actively participating in gay culture less important to these young gay men. He also contends that the rise of the internet has affected how younger gay men meet, relate, and experience identity and community:
While gay men were once relegated to sexual encounters in dark parks or in the hidden comforts of a bathhouse, we came of age on our computers, from the safety of our bedrooms. I met my first guy online when I was 13 years old.

I’m almost 25 now, and a man has never asked me out without a screen between us, let alone in a cute little café.

No doubt virtual spaces, new forms of communication, and the encounters and practices they make possible are changing the terrain upon which gay social identities and communities are formed. Gay neighbourhoods, with their bars, restaurants, cafés, and community services (including gay theatres) seem a little less necessary in a world in which a new generation of gay men meet each other online, and make their social lives outside of the city’s gay enclaves.187 These social changes in Toronto’s gay community are also noticeable in buzz about “the death of Church Street,” as young gay men feel less need to go to the neighbourhood to find the community, companionship, and safety it offers. While I find Aguirre-Livingston’s arguments to be derivative and solipsistic – they have been made before, and he speaks as if his apparently middle-class urban Toronto experience is the norm, leaving little room for differences in race, class, or gender – his article and the furor that attended it suggest that gay culture in the city is undergoing another significant shift in the wake of gay marriage, and attaining equal civil rights. What is the importance of the minoritized yet diverse gay community that has arisen so prominently in Toronto since the 1970s, and whose first phase I have traced here through a study of gay male theatre? What are we to think when young gay men write that they and their peers have no interest in gay

187 These arguments have been made elsewhere and earlier. See Bert Archer, The End of Gay: (and the Death of Heterosexuality); Andrew Sullivan, Virtually Normal: An Argument About Homosexuality; and Bawer, Bruce. A Place at the Table: The Gay Individual in American Society.
community, and when the Conservative Minister of Foreign affairs includes gay rights in his portfolio of human rights, berating other countries for their poor records in this regard? Is gay culture, let alone gay theatre, unnecessary or obsolete in this age of virtual space, greater social acceptance, and equal rights?

In response to these currents in gay life in Toronto, this study emphasizes the importance of gay theatre, community, culture, and history. Investigating *Fortune, NDNR,* and *Drag Queens* in relation to the ideological underpinnings of theatre production in the city, this dissertation has traced the changing political status of homosexuality in theatrical representation, and how this has impacted theatrical production in the city. While it may make me old fashioned, this dissertation argues that gay theatre was, and continues to be, an important site for community formation and interrogation, that its history is important to queers and others, and that gay theatre *remains* an important site of gay cultural production. In fact, equal rights, greater social acceptance, and online communication do not portend the “end” of gay community; rather, they signal its expansion and proliferation into new areas of social and political life.

Theatrical performance remains an important site for gay cultural production, where new social processes continue to be examined and experienced theatrically. That this is the case is evidenced in the 2013 Toronto Fringe Festival, an annual festival of theatre that produces hundreds of performances in venues across the city, and which produced no less than eleven separate plays about queer life and culture, the majority of which also concerned online dating and the various sexual, social, and cultural practices that attend it.188 While this

188 These plays are: *vgl 5'4” Top,* by Lucas Brooks; *Stealing Sam,* by Steven Gallagher; *MSM,* by Indrit Kasapi; *Esspresso Yourself,* by Lorenzo Pagnotta; *Spoon,* by Spencer Charles Smith; *Liza Live!,* Jennifer Walls; *One Side of an Ampersand,* by Julie McCann; *The Effects of Time Travel on Neurotic Homos,* by Neil Cameron;
may seem to be fodder for Aguirre-Livingston’s arguments, I think it is very important that these young artists (many of whom are contemporaries of Aguirre-Livingston’s) went to the theatre to address these issues in gay culture. One play in particular, MSM, which I saw performed at the Randolph Theatre, used theatrical convention in innovative ways to address online and “real world” sex, interactions, and communities.

Conceived and directed by Ingrit Kasapi, and produced by his theatre company, Lemon Tree Creations, the performance is a hybrid dance-theatre piece, featuring a diverse cast of gay men. Its title, “MSM,” is a term coined by researchers to describe men who have sex with men, but neither identify nor live as gay or bisexual – a style of living greatly facilitated by online technologies because it does not require MSMs to go to gay spaces to connect with other MSMs. According to Kasapi, he chose the title because it also conveys a sexual openness that he has observed online, which he finds less apparent in the “real world” of the gay community (Halferty “Kasapi”). For Kasapi, online interactions are more blatantly sexual and less constrained by ideas about identity, fostering frank discussion about sexual needs and desires. The limits of this non-identitarian thinking are, however, posited by the play when some of the men express who they are, and who they are not, interested in sexually, using the terms of racialization and gender presentation. While the online world that MSM invokes may present possibilities for sexual relations that occur outside of a gay-straight binary, it seems rife with racism, and often participates in the stigma and alienation these “preferences” effect.

The performance contrasts the physical world of the theatre with the online world through its staging, mise-en-scène, and dialogue. It takes place on an empty stage, save an

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Baggage 2, Shaun McCarthy; Stop Kiss, by Diana Son; and Fort Isabel, a collaboration by Blood Orange Theatre and Deviant Productions.
upstage centre table at which a scantily clad DJ stands using sound equipment to play and mix music typical of large gay dance clubs, and which we hear loudly in the audience. On stage with him is the cast of about ten performers, all openly gay men, dressed in average street clothes (Halferty “Kasapi”). They are there when the audience arrives, and dance around the space, making physical and visual contact with one another – that is, they cruise one another – but make no verbal contact. Through their movements and cruising, and the music played by the DJ, the theatre is transformed into a gay club: the stage becomes a dance floor, and the audience voyeurs, visibly enjoying both the music (I was tapping my feet), and the display of tacit desire on stage.

The club-like space is juxtaposed with the online world through language. The performers’ dialogue is all verbatim transcripts from Kasapi’s experiences of chatting with other men online, and is either directed to the audience, or mediated through them (i.e. the actor is addressing the audience, or two characters engage in dialogue but physically face and address the audience rather than one another). When speaking the verbatim dialogue, the men signal that they are separated from one another physically, and, because it is not naturalistic dialogue, peppered with the slang common to online sex chats, it alienates its audience, standing in stark contrast to the silently sexualized interactions of the performers present on stage. This does not mean the dialogue is not also highly sexual. In fact, the anonymity of online engagement seems to release the performers from the constraints of gay identity. One man, for example, reveals desires and practices that do not revolve completely around sexual identity. He says he has sex with women in his “real” life, but online he meets men and masturbates to online images of their feet. These verbal vignettes are contrasted with the presence of the performers within the gay club/theatre space and effect MSM’s primary
artistic proposal. The performance asks audiences to consider what is lost and what is gained when gay men connect online and in the real world. What do online interactions enable? What do we gain when we interact collectively, and create visible, sexualized gay spaces as the sites of gay culture? How are our sexual desires and practices constrained by this culture, identity, and architecture?

No doubt changes in technology, community, and economy will produce new cultural practices that in turn will create new forms of consciousness, identity, and community. These material and imaginative changes will affect the ways in which sexuality, theatricality, and identity overlap, and how these ideas are practiced online and in the real world. Kasapi was quick to emphasize that he, as a gay man in his late twenties, did not want to degrade online spaces, resources, or interactions because, especially in his teen years, they provide him with means to explore his sexuality, and contact other gay men and MSMs. In his words, “I came to terms with my sexuality online in a solitary environment and I am so grateful that [the internet] was there, because it allowed me to learn so much about who I am” (Halferty “Kasapi”). Similarly, I do not want to denigrate the possibilities of online media and culture, especially for people younger than myself, and for whom these media may be their only form of connection with other queers. But I do want this dissertation to contribute to this broad-based discussion of gay culture, on- and offline, and its possibilities, by recovering and elucidating how Herbert, Wallace, and Gilbert also engaged in theatrical performance toward particular political and cultural ends. As I have demonstrated, these playwrights used theatrical performance as a vehicle of critique, as a site to negotiate the meaning of gay identities and the problems and possibilities of gay community, and as a medium for gay cultural production and interrogation. The authors’ faith in the theatre as a public,
performative, and political medium is embodied in the forms of their plays, each one privileging theatricality as a mode through which gay men empowered themselves and engaged other gay men, as well as broader society. In this sense, these plays in and of themselves are arguments for theatre’s importance as a site of performative effect. For Wallace and Gilbert especially, theatricality was a mode through which they were able to ask other gay men difficult questions about community, identity, and difference. In the case of MSM, and the artists at Lemon Tree Productions, the theatre continues to serve this function for a new generation of gay men as they contend with current issues in gay life, community, and culture.

In 2010, I confronted the currents of contemporary Toronto gay theatre and culture personally, when, as the president of Buddies in Bad Times Theatre’s board, I led the search committee for a new artistic director. In October of that year, the company hired Brendan Healy. As the president of the board, and as a person whose knowledge of the company and its history is not insignificant, I often spoke with Healy about leading the company into its next chapter. Gay theatre history, and Buddies’ place within it, has been key in my discussions with Healy. We have discussed this history to better understand the material realities of running Buddies today, its relationship to lesbian, bisexual, gay, and transgender (LGBT) communities, and the challenges it faces in this age of increasing performative engagement – from gaming to Grindr.189

In his first season brochure, Healy chose “To be queer is to be a sublime outcast,” as the season’s tagline, which was printed boldly in neon orange and green on a black background. When he told me this, I said it reminded me of John Herbert, Fortune and

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189 Grindr is a gay “geosocial” networking application used on smart phones. A user uploads a profile, complete with pictures of himself, and can see and chat with other Grindr users who are close by – their proximity listed to you as part of their profile. It is used to connect, most often for casual sexual encounters, with other gay men.
Men’s Eyes, and Shakespeare’s twenty-ninth sonnet: “When, in disgrace with fortune and men’s eyes/ I all alone beweep my outcast state.” Based on this conversation, Healy decided to print the sonnet on the inside cover of the final page of the brochure, to reference John Herbert as a truly queer, sublime outcast, and as an inspiration:

In 1967, John Herbert (1926-2001) [staged] Fortune and Men’s Eyes, one of Canada’s earliest queer plays. A seminal play in our history, Herbert opened doors for other gay and lesbian playwrights to openly depict the lives and struggles of queers on stage. (“2010-11 Season Brochure”)

It is my hope that the history of gay theatre in Toronto that I have constructed here might offer such insights into the past for other queers, especially those queers who care about theatre, as we negotiate the politics of identification and community in the present, and create for ourselves what I hope will be both theatrical and queer futures.
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