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The Complications and Perseverance of LGBTQ+ Theatre

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Introduction
The presence of homosexuality in American theatre is a complicated and controversial issue. There’s a struggle for gay actors to get cast, and critics of theatre fight to explain why a comparatively large portion of male stage actors are gay. And when there are those few plays that feature a developed gay character, the playwright often fails to write the gay person accurately and honestly. And even when a playwright manages to accurately capture queer characters and themes onstage, a new conflict arises— is it worth possible audience alienation to be honest? What level of attention does ticket sales deserve? These authors try to make sense of the complicated issue of accurately representing the LGBTQ+ community onstage.

Goodhand and Ivtzan’s “The Relationship between Socioeconomic Factors, Wellbeing, and Homosexuality in the Theatre Profession” attempts to explain why a lot of men who participate in theatre are gay. They examine a possible socioeconomic explanation, which states that they’re gay because they’re poor and thus undesirable to women. After studying 121 men straight performers and 121 men who realized their homosexuality during their performing years, Goodhand and Ivtzan were able to conclude that money has nothing to do with being gay. And while they couldn’t provide their own explanation for why many male actors are gay, they did reduce the number of pieces in the puzzle.

Darren Patrick Blaney and Rebecca Gavril both argue for playwrights that they feel deserve more credit for the work they put in when it comes to advancing homosexual theatre. Blaney advocates for Landford Wilson and Robert Patrick, while Gavril supports Robert Chesley. Blaney’s argument for Wilson and Patrick stems from how those two playwrights were some of the first to have plays produced that featured gay characters that were also received well by critics and audiences for their honesty and positivity. Chesley campaigns for Chesley on the basis that even though Chesley wrote plays that featured gay characters affected by AIDS, the plays were not sob stories- in fact, they gave hope at a time where an AIDS diagnosis not only meant certain death but was also heavily misunderstood and frowned upon.

Conversely, Ariel Nereson argues on behalf of Mae West, who was a straight female playwright struggling to get her plays staged in 1920s New York. West was subjected to mass criticism and legal issues for writing plays focused on homosexuality and cross-dressing. West helps provide perspective to the argument for gay theatre as while clearly strides have been made since she was locked up for writing flamboyant gay characters in “The Drag,” there is still progress to be made for LGBTQ+ theatre today. Furthermore, Mae West’s success despite censorship helps prove Sunny Drake’s argument that there is always an audience who craves theatre that explores sexuality.

When it comes to Sunny Drake, he provides the unique perspective of a playwright who actively tries to increase representation, yet is frequently conflicted for fear of alienating audiences, especially young ones. He ultimately justifies it by saying that even the most conservative audiences receive truthful work positively since a well-written gay play will have multi-faceted characters that have traits far beyond just being gay. The gay theatre community refused to give up when accurate representation was a rarity, but there are still many strides needed in terms of both academic research and actual progress on the stage.

Bibliographic Entries


This journal article aims to explain why so many male performers in the theatre world are gay. The authors discuss an argument put forth in 1972 that argues that theatre actually turns men gay due to them having a low socioeconomic status, thus being undesirable to women. The authors’ main argument is that this claim is wrong.
for numerous reasons. The authors support their argument by conducting a study that consisted of 121 men who recognized their homosexuality during their performing years, and 121 men who perform but are straight. After reviewing the results, it was clear to the authors that there was no indication that socioeconomic status was at all related to turning male theatre performers gay. This article continues other approaches to this topic because there has always been a great deal of interest on why a significant amount of men who do theatre are gay. The authors’ approach to this topic was novel because they were able to eliminate one possible factor for homosexuality in theatre (socioeconomic status).


This journal article argues that the origination of homosexual representation in American theatre began in two one-act, Off-Off Broadway productions in 1964. To support this argument, the author details how these two short plays, Landford Wilson’s “The Madness of Lady Bright” and Robert Patrick’s “The Haunted Host,” were some of the first plays featuring openly gay characters to be positively received by audiences. Furthermore, the author supports his argument by drawing on an interview he conducted in 2008 with Joe Cino, who opened and operated the theatre space where Wilson’s play premiered. Cino himself said in the interview, “None of us were really aware at the time...that we were making history.” The author also comments on how homosexuality was rarely presented on stage in a positive light before these two plays in 1964. His evidence includes that in the 1920s, Mae West wrote a play called “The Drag” that asked for sympathetic treatment of homosexuality in society; this play was panned by critics, censored in future performances, and West was arrested. This article continues scholarship by providing an origination to gay representation in American theatre, and it challenges other articles by containing interviews and quotes from the specific people who were involved in these historic events.


This journal article argues that playwright Robert Chesley made significant advances not just in gay theatre, but also including the impact of AIDS in plays that focused on homosexuality. His points include that Chesley’s play Night Sweats was the first full-length AIDS play in the United States. Furthermore, Gavrila says people choose instead to focus on Larry Kramer’s plays, but this is a mistake as not only was Chesley’s play written first, but Kramer’s plays about gay males are “weepy.” Gavrila thinks that Kramer’s plays are too focused on being sad rather than being truthful about the gay male experience. The author challenges other approaches to this topic by clarifying that Chesley’s plays were not anti-sex; in fact, in the face of the AIDS crisis, Chesley “refused to renounce joy.” Gavrila even goes so far as to argue that queer theatre critic David Román missed the mark when he said that Chesley’s play alienated audiences looking for positivity or heartbreak.


Ariel Nereson’s journal article explains that Mae West’s contribution to gay theatre in 1920s New York paved the way for gay theatre today, as she was subjected to a level of censorship that no longer exists. Nereson supports this argument by pointing out how West and her cast were arrested, judged, and threatened- yet people still bought tickets, showing that there was a demand for content focused on cross-dressing and homosexuality despite public outcry. West sought to fill that void regardless of a widespread attempt at censorship. Nereson also supports her argument by commenting on how West’s plays “Sex,” “The Pleasure Man,” and “The Drag” provided a kinship not just for the audience members, but also the cast and crew involved in the show, as they were united against a common enemy- censorship and homophobia. These issues also made the performers
closer to the audience, as it created a deep level of openness and intimacy. This article provides a unique perspective, as it focuses on the historical relevance of a straight female playwright whose taboo plays allowed for more openness and inclusivity in theatre today.


Sunny Drake’s article “To Blow or Not To Blow?” provides a unique perspective on the playwright’s duty/right to censor their work depending on the audience. Drake’s main point is that while it is the playwright’s discretion whether or not to censor their work, works that feature queer themes shouldn’t be censored because a large audience can relate to it. His main point is that even though some people who come to his shows may have homophobic or transphobic beliefs, they still enjoy his work because his writing has more depth, realism, and nuance that allows it to resonate with even his more close-minded audiences. He also supports this by saying that the presenters who organize these events tend to be wary of showcasing queer work, yet the audience reception is almost always superb. This challenges the idea that playwrights should shape their writing to their audiences since that’s who’s buying tickets.