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Queering the Stage/Queer Stages – LGBTQ Plays from Canada

First Stages

Canadian theatre has a long and fruitful history of queer performances, not least through dedicated theatres like Buddies in Bad Times, Toronto. Queer visibility on the Canadian stage has not only increased but also diversified and is now engaging in more and more intersectional approaches that go beyond earlier queer plays and their fighting spirit by taking into account questions of gender, class, ethnic backgrounds, religion and so forth. In the introduction to his ground-breaking collection Making, Out: Plays by Gay Men, Robert Wallace clearly puts an emphasis on “gayness” (1992, 12), whereas the driving force behind the activist and theatrical endeavours has always been the non-normative, deconstructive power of queer. The understanding of ‘queer’ underlying the discussions in this essay focuses on ‘queering’ as an act of deconstruction, a questioning of normativities, a challenge to – in this case – the audience to question what has been seen as ‘normal.’ Where ‘gayness’ aims at an identity, a group identification, ‘queering’ by definition cannot establish an identity. As Lee Edelman has it,

[for queerness can never define an identity; it can only ever disturb one. […] I am proposing no platform or position from which queer sexuality or any queer subject might finally and truly become itself, as if it could somehow manage thereby to achieve an essential queerness. I am suggesting instead that the efficacy of queerness, its real strategic value, lies in its resistance to a Symbolic reality that only ever invests us as subjects insofar as we invest ourselves in it, clinging to its governing fictions, its persistent sublimations, as reality itself. (Edelman 2004, 17-18)

This understanding of queerness can – by necessity – be found more in what I would like to call post-gay plays from the mid-1990s onward as for example David MacIvor’s I, Animal with which I will start my discussion. Earlier plays, which were so important to the development of a queer theatrical subjectivity had to work with identity strategies, as they were coming from the gay rights, women’s rights etc. movements and needed a strong footing within identity discourses. The plays of Brad Fraser and Sky Gilbert tap into these identity discourses and will be of interest later in this essay. Questions of identity range from political identifications and positionings as in John Herbert’s Fortune and Men’s Eyes (1967) to the changing view of a gay (or queer) identity during the early AIDS epidemic in Raymond Storey’s The Saints and Apostles (1991). Historically, LGBTQ themes were introduced to the Canadian stage fairly early but then met with more adversity in the larger theatrical landscape, for instance, of the United States. As Rosalind Kerr states:

The play which is usually considered to have introduced the taboo topic of homosexuality to Canadian Theatre is the late John Herbert’s haunting prison drama Fortune and Men’s
I would like to argue that the importance of Herbert’s early play lies not only in the more or less open depiction of homosexuality on stage but also, and crucially, in an early and innovative gender approach that questions masculinity and femininity and suggests a fluidity which is a lot more queer than fitting it into any identity discourse (cf. Carson 1972).

Queer Theatres

Queer theatre in Canada has profited from a dedicated theatre scene with queer-specific theatres and companies enabling up-and-coming LGBTQ playwrights, actors and other theatre professionals to present their work on stage. Although there are a number of theatres that should be mentioned here, I will focus on the arguably most important venture here: Buddies in Bad Times Theatre in Toronto. Founded in 1979, Buddies (for short) has been, from its very beginning, one of the most important queer theatrical venues in North America. Founding member Sky Gilbert, the theatre’s first artistic director, is also a prolific playwright (see below), and in his eighteen years at the helm of Buddies transformed the theatre from a community endeavour into a widely recognised artistic presence in Toronto. In his brief history of the theatre, J. Paul Halferty divides the development of Buddies into three phases and calls Gilbert's artistic directorship the phase of "Radically Queer," a time in which "queer was used to critique the stability of ‘gay,’ ‘lesbian’ and ‘straight’ identities, as well as the ‘professional theatre experience’" (Halferty 2007, 239). The queering of the Canadian stage that was apparent at Buddies was rooted not only in LGBTQ themes and stories but also in the fact that Buddies very quickly became a theatrical synonym for experimental theatre, a 'queering' of its very own kind. Halferty sees a second phase ("Inclusively Queer") from 1997 to 2004, in which "queer was de-radicalised, and used as a rubric to interpolate and represent stable constructions of gay and lesbian identity and community" (ibid.). This certainly coincides with lesbian and gay politics of the time that were seeking to normalise sexual orientations, a time which gave rise to Lisa Duggan’s critique of homonormativity. A third phase ("Sexually/Aesthetically Queer") is, according to Halferty, a symbiosis of the two very different directions the theatre had taken so far, incorporating "an anti-normative aesthetic for the company" (ibid.). He claims that "Buddies’ current [2007], bifurcated definition of queer is of interest because it appeals to, and celebrates, stable conceptions of marginalized sexual identities, while it also de-sexualises queer to articulate it as an aesthetic that is ‘different, outside the mainstream, challenging in both content and form’ (Buddies Mandate 2004)” (ibid., 239-40). Halferty’s astute reading of the history of this important theatrical venue reveals how

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1 At the time of writing (early 2018), Rosalind Kerr’s 2007 collection of essays is still one of the most relevant collection of scholarly essays on the topic. In late 2018, Playwrights Canada Press published a new book collection, Queer Canadian Theatre and Performance, edited by Peter Dickinson, CE Gatchalian, Kathleen Oliver, and Dalbir Singh, with a companion volume by the same editors, Q2Q: Queer Canadian Performance Texts. Neither of these volumes could be taken into consideration for this essay.
closely Buddies has been following the development of gay and lesbian identity politics and the queer counter-movement.

A Closer Look at Two Playwrights

Two important gay male playwrights over the years have been Brad Fraser and Sky Gilbert. Fraser, born in Edmonton in 1959, has been a playwright since the mid-1970s and has since worked in different genres like radio and television as well. He is probably best known to a general public as a writer and supervising producer on the US-American version of Queer as Folk. In his stage plays, Fraser has often focused on the intersectionality of sexual orientation, sexual expression and violence. This latter trope is particularly visible in his earlier plays, most notably in Unidentified Human Remains and the True Nature of Love (1989), turned into the film adaptation Love and Human Remains by Denys Arcand in 1993. In the play, gay actor/waiter David constantly tries to renegotiate his relationship with his straight friend Bernie who, eventually, turns out to be a serial killer of women in the Edmonton area. From early on in the play, the gruesome discoveries of the mutilated women’s bodies play an important role and actively discuss the liminal space between lust and violence in highly gender-sensitive complexity. A feature first seen in this script is the introduction of characters who will reappear in later plays, so that Fraser’s work has an internal intertextuality which is unusual in writing for the stage. In Unidentified Human Remains and the True Nature of Love, the busboy at the restaurant where David is working, Kane, is a naïve teenager who looks up to David because the actor had played a character in a TV programme the child Kane had enjoyed very much. David’s sexuality becomes something Kane tries to imitate in a typical teenage exploration of sexual orientation which leaves the boy confused. Both characters re-appear in True Love Lies (2009), in which Kane is married with a daughter, and David’s re-appearance threatens to destabilise his heteronormative life. As far as genre and intermediality are concerned, Poor Superman (1994) has widely been regarded as an outstanding contribution to intermedial dramatic storytelling as it employs comic’s captions in the staging. The AIDS epidemic of the 1980s/90s is a subtext of the play but is more explicitly focused on in Martin Yesterday (1997), a play which caused controversy not only because of the explicit sexual contents on stage (a feature of all of Fraser's plays) but more importantly by the depiction of the eponymous Martin Yesterday as a corrupt and immoral Canadian politician whose immorality is equally shown in his private sexual exploits and his political career. None of Fraser's characters has a clear-cut (and therefore stereotypical) sexual orientation; all of them struggle with it as well as with gender identities and roles, most notably his trans characters. But with the character of Dean in Cold Meat Party (2003), Fraser went one step further. Dean’s wish for castration is not rooted in a trans identity but in a

2 It should be noted that Fraser is one of the playwrights who openly and publicly criticised the Canadian theatrical landscape in the late 1990s and early 2000s as he saw the impossibility of getting non-mainstream plays, experimental theatre and issues of so-called marginal groups staged in any of the larger Canadian theatres. This discontent with Canadian theatre led to a strong and very productive relationship with British theatre, in particular the Royal Exchange Theatre in Manchester and artistic director Braham Murray which I have analysed elsewhere (cf. Heinze 2010).

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physical asexuality and an inability to deal with his physical masculinity and his heterosexual desires.

One of Canada's most prolific playwrights is Sky Gilbert, whose importance for Canadian theatre goes beyond his writing for the stage. In some thirty-three staged and published plays, Gilbert has been presenting to audiences a plethora of queer narratives which transcend identity discourses. Gilbert’s queering often happens in the context of a highly political form of drag. Not only his drag plays but also his drag alter ego Jane have been prominent features of Canadian theatrical and political life for many years. Jane, Gilbert’s drag persona, destabilises the boundary between the political within the theatre and the political realm without through her public ubiquity. Just like Fraser, Gilbert has tackled the topic of HIV/AIDS in a controversial manner. In his 2009 play I have AIDS!, the playwright deals with AIDS in its post-crisis phase of the first decade of the 21st century and challenges ideas of homodomesticity, promiscuity and Susan Sontag’s metaphorical use of HIV in her influential 1989 essay ”AIDS and its metaphors” (Sontag 2002). Gilbert’s dramatic work is generally characterised by a strong element of intertextuality. In his plays, he references and puts on stage historical figures as diverse as Truman Capote, Anton Chekhov and Ayn Rand. Alongside his plays, Sky Gilbert has published poetry, novels and an autobiography, Ejaculations from the Charm Factory: A Memoir, which is an important source both for the history of queer activism in Canada and for theatrical history. He is currently an associate professor at the University of Guelph.

**Lesbian and Feminist Perspectives**

Lesbian playwrights and lesbian themes have been present on Canadian stages for a long time, also thanks to early feminist writing. Ann-Marie MacDonald’s 1988 play Goodnight Desdemona (Good Morning Juliet), for instance, is an example of a play that combines feminist viewpoints and lesbian undertones. The work of Diane Flacks is also of particular importance to the development of a lesbian sensibility in Canadian theatre (Kerr 2006). B.J. Wray has discussed Shawna Dempsey and Lorri Millan’s 1997 performance piece The Lesbian National Park Rangers and has shown that this performance demonstrates a complex interaction with, and intervention in, the operations of normative national and sexual discourses. Dempsey and Millan humorously interrogate the "unnaturalness" of lesbian sexuality from within the confines of the state-sanctioned "naturalness" of Banff National Park. [...] The Lesbian National Park Rangers begins this process of resignification [of citizenship] through an exploration of the ways in which national identities come to be "naturalized." (Wray 2007, 95; 97)

What the piece does is to show the intersectional nature of the discourses of nationality and citizenship, gender, sexuality, and a culturally defined sense of nature, and it touches on homophobic arguments about “un-natural” behaviour and the counter-cultural re-naturalisation of lesbian and gay sexual identities. Moynan King has identified the paradoxical state of lesbian playwrights as being prominent in their field but not very often published (cf. King 2017, vii). Her anthology Queer / Play: An Anthology of Queer Women’s Performance and Play is a powerful attempt to rectify
this in combining performance scripts and interviews, conversations and a roundtable discussion on what it means to be a queer woman writer in contemporary Canada. One of the plays presented in the volume is Hope Thompson's *Trapped!*, a play which takes up a classic film plot but twists it through a homonormative setting. Jon Kaplan, in a preview for *NOW Magazine* has called the play an instance of "neo noir" and continues:

"Often there are undertones and subplots that just beg to be mined, especially those that have characters who carry some sexual baggage they can't talk about," says the author of *Trapped!* The play's about a married female couple and their doctor, also a woman. [...] I see this especially in noir films, where repression defines some of the most fascinating people. It's led me to create works of art that appear to be from another time but actually come from a contemporary point of view. In other words, I'm using the styles of past eras that seem like artifacts but in fact aren't. [...] Set in the 50s, *Trapped!* follows the not-always honest relationship between the rich and ill Claire (Carolyn Taylor) and her new wife and former secretary, Anne (Kat Letwin), who has more than a passing interest in Claire's doctor, Dianne (Sarah Joy Bennett) [...]. It has the feel of a film like *Rebecca*, a melodrama with a touch of pulp fiction. There's comedy here, too, that comes in part from the familiarity we have with this kind of set-up: rich spouses, hidden affairs, the possibility of double indemnity to secure what one wants. (Kaplan 2014, n.p.)

Lois Fine's *Freda & Jem's Best of the Week*, first produced in 2014 at Buddies in Bad Times in Toronto, touches on topics at the heart of the queer debates of the early 21st century. It is the story of a lesbian couple who have two teenage children and who are splitting up. Through flashbacks, the play looks at the strains on their relationship over the years and how queer parenting has been a challenge. One of the couple's defining problems is the fact that Jem identifies as a butch and thereby seeks a non-normative identificatory model whereas Freda (played in the premiere by Diane Flacks) sees herself more in a non-identificatory queer discourse that challenges by deconstructing rather than by re-identifying. Jem's "I am a butch dyke. Think about it like this – I'm not a girl, I'm a boy. I'm not a man, I'm a woman" (Fine 2016, 3) harks back to lesbian and gay identity politics from the 1970s onwards and firmly roots her Otherness in a non-normative gender performance. Freda, on the other hand, seeks to destabilise rather than define: "Just a hint, Jem – when you get out there, you might find the scene has changed in twenty-one years, that's all. You might want to say 'queer' instead of 'dyke' and maybe try 'genderqueer' instead of 'butch"' (ibid., 12). This dichotomy between lesbian and gay rights in the more historic sense and a queer discourse of the 21st century is taken out of a purely academic and political context and shown to have implications in the personal. The play not only presents a way of queer parenting, it also challenges the concept as it portrays certain aspects of Jem and Freda's parenting as perpetuating gender stereotypes, thereby taking the edge off the queerness of this family construct. In line with the Child (in Edelman's understanding) as a marker of heteronormative (and thus non-queer) futurity, Jem exclaims towards the end of the play: "We never talked about kids back then – kids would ruin everything. Kids would be like what's the point of being a dyke if you're just going to do that – no, we were living outside of the mould. We were revolutionaries" (ibid., 57).

In Québec, LGBTQ themes had an early presence on stage, not least thanks to pioneers like Michel Tremblay and Michel Marc Bouchard. But plays particularly by
francophone writers combine LGBTQ themes with very different tropes, mostly very productively with the question of Québec's identity as a French-speaking nation. This national discourse, based on an assumption of national and cultural Otherness, lends itself particularly well to questions of sexual and/or gender difference. Interestingly, it confronts conservative and Catholic Québécois society through that very identification of the similarities between national and sexual politics. As Wallace has shown:

Bouchard, Chaurette, Dubois, and Tremblay eroticize the theatrical site through their homosexual gaze, so that it becomes a site of sexual as well as geographical difference. The eroticization of the theatrical site in contemporary Québécois theatre is one of the features that firmly distinguishes it from its English-Canadian counterpart. (Wallace 2007, 17)

Although "the rejection of naturalism by gay Québécois playwrights can be viewed as both a repudiation of the dominant theatrical mode of the American cultural hegemony and a defiant assertion of difference" (ibid., 24), it also needs to be taken into account that these playwrights' work is – in translation – an important part of all-Canadian LGBTQ theatre history and speaks to anglophone audiences on a certain level just as much as to a francophone national Québécois audience and thus transcends this context.

Québec Theatre

One of Québec's most prominent playwrights, Michel Tremblay brought to the stage one of Canada's most celebrated LGBTQ-themed plays in 1973. In Hosanna, the eponymous character is a drag queen who has, after years of longing to do so, been able to go to a drag ball dressed as Cleopatra as represented by Elizabeth Taylor. As she is generally disliked by the drag community of Montréal, she has been fooled by her fellow drag queens who have conspired to appear as Cleopatra (as represented by Elizabeth Taylor) one and all. Humiliated, Hosanna retreats to her home and starts arguing with her lover who goes by the name of Cuirette, a butch, biker-type gay man. They discuss a number of issues including cruising for sex in the public parks of Montréal, drag as a political instrument and the nature of their love for each other. What transpires is that Hosanna has been using drag as screen to protect herself, which is, of course, highly ironic as she has chosen a vulnerable image as façade to protect her even more vulnerable and insecure self. The play ends in a scene of self-revelation in which Hosanna and Cuirette turn into Claude and Raymond:

CUIRETTE: Take off your make-up…. Go on, take it off…. […]
HOSANNA: Cleopatra is dead, and the Park Lafontaine is all lit up!
She gets up, takes off her underpants, and turns slowly towards
CUIRETTE.
Look, Raymond, I'm a man…. I'm a man, Raymond…. I'm a man,
I'm a man…. I'm a man… (Tremblay 1991, 86-7)

It is not only Claude (Hosanna) who takes off his drag here, it is also Raymond who takes off his macho drag by realising that the era of cruising seems to be coming to an end. As a metaphor for Québec, Claude stands not only for a gendered and a sexual self-discovery ("I'm a man" which must be read as "I'm a gay man"), he also stands for
Québec’s self-realisation as an Other national self within the Canadian nation state. As Renate Usmiani has put it, Tremblay’s themes are explored in the mode of the grotesque, with the transvestite as both the central symbol of alienation and an embodiment of the crisis of identity. […]. The resulting proliferation of homosexuals and transvestites in the dramaturgy of Tremblay has occasionally caused criticism. It must therefore be emphasized very strongly at this point that we are not dealing with realistic plays, regardless of the sometimes deceptive surface of naturalism. Rather, we should look at these works as parables in which the basic plot or situation is a springboard to other meanings. The symbolism obviously functions on several levels, since alienation can be viewed as a universal problem – the major trauma of modern man – or else more specifically as a disease related especially to Quebec. (Usmiani 1982, 79-80)

Elaine Pigeon has rightly challenged reading Hosanna as a purely political metaphor as [political readings […] see it as an allegory, but for the most part deny its homosexuality by interpreting Claude’s feminization as a consequence of colonization by the English and his final declaration of manhood as an assertion of Quebec nationalism. Precisely because of the heterosexist bias that pervades western discursive practices, including nationalist discourse, the homosexuality intrinsic to the play simply vanishes. (Pigeon 2001, 78)

Another playwright who has engaged fiercely with Québec society, identity politics and its inherent religiosity on a metaphorical level is Michel Marc Bouchard, whose 1987 play Les feluettes ou la répétition d’un drame romantique is another classic of Québec theatre. A prisoner makes his confession to a bishop who, years ago, was his schoolmate at a boarding school and part of a love triangle with yet another young man. The bishop, it turns out, is responsible for this latter boy’s suicide. What makes the play important in terms of staging and theatricality is that the scenes of the prisoner’s confession are played out by the prisoners. Not only is the meta-textual realisation of these scenes a signifier of the metaphoric nature of the play; it is also the fact that – by necessity – all characters have to be played by men in drag that politicises the personal tragedy and firmly re-roots it in the politics of gender and sexuality. In Bishop Bilodeau, the hypocrisy of Catholic Québec is denounced just as much as in the image of Saint Sebastian as a queer icon.

More recently, Steve Galluccio, an Anglophone playwright of Italian extraction cast a critical look at Québec as an immigrant nation through the filter of Italo-Québécois attitudes to homosexuality. Mambo Italiano, first produced in a French translation by Michel Tremblay in 2000 and then in its original English version in 2001, is an autobiographically influenced family comedy. It plays with stereotypes just as much as it touches on serious issues of coming-out and the closet. Angelo confronts his immigrant Italian parents when he wishes to move out of the family home before being married. He confounds them further by coming out as gay shortly afterwards. The ensuing comedy and underlying tragedy of the character comes to pass because his boyfriend Nino, a stylised butch policeman, is not ready to come out of the closet and live an openly-gay life in the conservative and Catholic Italo-Québécois society they

3 The play was adapted into a mainstream film by Émile Gaudreault in 2003.
live in. Whereas the comedy is derived from the conversion and matchmaking attempts and exaggerated mournful disdain of the parents, the tragedy derives from Angelo’s repeated unsuccessful attempts to break free of the closet without losing the man he loves. At one point, Angelo reproaches his mother: “I served almost thirty years in this prison. […] This prison of guilt, of fear, of lies and of abuse, I’m not about to come back” (Galluccio 2004, 83), and later on, he rants about the effect the closet has on a gay man:

Waking up every morning hoping that I would get through the day without being humiliated […] I spent the formative years of my life feeling like a piece of shit, ma. Feeling ashamed. Trying desperately to fit in, but my paesani they never let me in because I was a fag. And you know what they do to fags in Italian high schools, ma? Do you? They kill them! Not physically, but mentally they destroy them by chipping away at their dignity day after day after day, ‘till you don’t care anymore. ‘Til you’re so numb that all you wanna do is disappear. Go somewhere where no one is ever gonna bother you again. But there is no such place ma. There is no such refuge. (ibid., 85)

Having cast such a critical eye on the Canadian mosaic as an immigration society, the comedy – as comedy – eventually makes the parents embrace their son’s sexuality to the point where they even brag about it: "GINO (proudly): No one's gayer than my son! MARIA (gloating): And he's got a new boyfriend!" (ibid., 104). But the comedic overtones cannot conceal the deeply troubled characters.

**Queer Indigenous Perspectives**

If Québécois theatre has a particular take on identity politics and a Canadian concept of Otherness, so do Indigenous Canadian plays. What indigenous theatre can add to the polyphony of LGBTQ writing is a non-European take on gender and spirituality. An early exponent of queer indigenous writing is Tomson Highway, whose Trickster figures are challengingly ambiguous and defy categorisations like gender and sexuality. The two-spirit characters of modern queer indigenous theatre are foils for the discussion of themes and topics at the intersection of numerous identity discourses. "The word two-spirit," as Jean O’Hara has pointed out, "was coined during the Native lesbian and gay movements of the 1990s to establish a space for coalitions and activism that integrated Native identities" (O’Hara 2013, xx). This reclaiming of pre-colonial discourses lends itself to questioning gender and sexual binaries and to opening up these discourses from the traditional European context. The trickster figure in Muriel Miguel’s *Hot’n’Soft* (cf. O’Hara 2013, 1-31) actively uses gender to confuse (ironically, in the end, herself) and to question gender stereotypes. The drag character Miss Chief Eagle Testickle, created by Kent Monkman, employs a European political drag foil to question the conception of Otherness on many different levels. As Richard William Hill puts it:

[Monkman] is certainly not the first Indigenous performer or artist to address the history of colonial ideology as visualized in the arts, but I think that he is the first to explicitly recognize, respond to, and manipulate the operations of desire at work in those representations. I suspect that his ability to make this move is partly the result of a generational shift and partly licensed by his own queer subjectivity, including the traditions of camp and the performative identity play associated with drag. (Hill 2013, 38)
It is the interplay between the European queer tradition and the much more diverse Indigenous gender discourse that gives these performances their particular efficacy. But the power of this performance does not only lie in its gender concept but in its engagement with "ethnicities and racialized identities in a process of satirical symbolic version that I once referred to as ‘drag racing’" (ibid., 40), as Hill underlines.

Queering the Stage

In one of the three monologues that make up I, Animal, Daniel MacIvor has his character ruminate about identificatory terminology. At first, he nostalgically claims to have "preferred things back when we were over the rainbow and under the radar" (MacIvor 2015, 6). He then proceeds to establish a new "Gay" stereotype which he uses as a counterfoil to how he sees himself. Using stereotypical images of groomed and fashionable gay men familiar from the modern media, he defines their main quality as impeccability (cf. 10) and concludes: "I am not Gay. And I wouldn't want to be" (ibid.).

His demand in a gay men's group, "I'm Queer" is first denied as "semantics" (ibid.) but accepted once he hints at the WASP-ish nature of this Gay identity. He concludes his monologue with a discussion of Gay vs. Queer:

Gay guys don't fight back. I mean they do with words or ideas or lawyers, but not with fists. They realize how pointless it is. Especially after all the dental work. […] I prefer "Queer." It sounds like something anyone could be. Queer is deeper than personality. Don't tell me what I am. Don't tell me what I am until you've at least given me a chance to figure it out myself. (MacIvor 2015, 14)

What MacIvor's monologue does is to pick up not the academic Queer discourse but the appropriation of the term 'Queer' in community discourses. His character turns against the modern gay stereotype which, apart from probably being camp, can be unpolitical and homonormative in the sense of the word prominently employed by Lisa Duggan (cf. Duggan 2002; 2003). Queer therefore re-radicalises a gay image which seeks to present itself within a normative discourse and therefore as acceptable. This impetus ties in with, for instance, resistance to 'marriage for all,' 'equal marriage' etc. from within LGBTQ communities, a resistance which separates itself from gay and lesbian identity politics and seeks to underline non-normativity. The academic and the communities' discourses diverge here from a certain point onwards as the former (cf. Edelman's argument above) denies Queer the ability to denote an identity at all, therefore rendering impossible the usage "I AM Queer." MacIvor's monologue is important as it holds up a mirror to the self-satisfied state of gay and lesbian politics but, at the same time, also questions the viability of a Queer identity. The terminology 'equal marriage' – much like the matter itself – has been highly contentious throughout the political developments around the equalisation of marriage. A play that illustrates the discussion around equal marriage in a poignant (as well as occasionally very funny) way is Michael Healey's Courageous. Healey introduces questions of civil liberties, discrimination, faith and religious freedom as well as immigration and human rights into a plot which is dense with short monologues. With her 2017 play Unholy, Diane Flacks taps the intersectionality between feminism, women's rights, gender performance and sexuality in the context of religious belief and thereby addresses a
matter at the heart of contemporary discussions in a very different (but just as effective) way from Healey’s play. ‘Equal marriage’ has been hailed by the media as the first significant social change of the 21st century, but it has also been criticised from within LGBTQ movements as a homonormativisation of queer lives. The foremost scholar to have addressed this normativisation process is of course Lisa Duggan who has been at the forefront of showing that this normativisation process re-introduces heterosexist tropes into queer contexts and thereby subverts them. Dennis Altman’s 2013 book *The End of the Homosexual?* picks up this development in a much more political context, and veteran theorist Martin Dubermann asks the provocative question *Has the Gay Movement Failed?* in his latest book (2018) of the same title. These are only a few publications which show that ‘equal marriage’ may contravene queering processes by normativising, a mechanism which is shown vividly in the plays discussed above.

**Outlook**

There are many other playwrights and plays, performers and performances in the LGBTQ context on Canadian stages at the moment, which is proof positive of LGBTQ themes being a firmly established theme in Canadian theatre as well as in Canadian society. With plays like *Outside* by Paul Dunn (2017), which has as its background the “It gets better” campaign, and other plays like it, LGBTQ themes have also entered the realm of Theatre for Young Audiences (TYA) and therefore the educational context. In the play,

Daniel (G. Kyle Shields), a gay teen facing bullying and depression, is forced to move to another school, where he tells his story in the security and comfort of a Gay Straight Alliance (GSA) meeting. Meanwhile, Krystina (Mina James) and Jeremy (Youness Robert-Tahiri), friends at his former school, try to set up their own GSA. […] Dunn – who you might remember as one of the three creator/performers of the excellent The Gay Heritage Project, which Buddies in Bad Times is bringing back next year for a national tour – moves the action cinematically back and forth between the two schools as Daniel recounts his history before and at high school, while the other two try to formulate a mandate for their new club, in the process revealing their own feelings and attitudes. […] Dunn also gives time to the other characters as they struggle to come up with reasons for needing a GSA and asking questions that I’m sure the viewers also have, such as how to talk about being gay to a peer or how to handle a friend’s coming out to them. (Kaplan 2015, n.p.)

With a still full schedule, Buddies’ traditional format Tallulah’s (community nights with performances and the theatre functioning as a bar) as well as an important residency programme, the theatre is still at the forefront of queer theatre and performance. One of the programmes developed here is *Black Boys*, which after a 2016 production in Vancouver reached the Buddies stage in 2018:

A raw, intimate, and timely exploration of queer male Blackness. *Black Boys* is created from the lives of three people seeking a deeper understanding of themselves, of each other, and of how they encounter the world. As they explore their unique identities on stage, they subvert the ways in which gender, sexuality, and race are performed. Theatrical and

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4 Michael Lewis MacLennan shall be acknowledged here, whose plays are a rich amalgam of historical re-imaginings, intertextual references and adaptations as well as theological and philosophical discussions.
intimate, *Black Boys* weaves together the ensemble's own personal stories in search of an integrated self and a radical imagination. (Buddies in Bad Times Theatre 2018)

It is with projects like this that Canadian theatre has its eye on the most current discussions of LGBTQ theatre and indeed not only queers the stage but provides (a) queer (a) stage.

**Works Cited**


