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THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN LGBTQ+ REPRESENTATION ON THE
POLITICAL AND THEATRICAL STAGES

by

Brett V. Ries

A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment
Of the Requirements for the
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The members of the Honors Thesis Committee appointed
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ABSTRACT

The Relationship Between LGBTQ+ Representation on the Political and Theatrical Stages

Brett V. Ries

Director: Joe Stollenwerk, Ph.D.

This thesis examines the relationship between LGBTQ+ representation on the political and theatrical stages. During some decades, LGBTQ+ theatre was dictated by the politics of the time period. During other times, theatre educated and filled the silence when the government and society turned the other way. By examining LGBTQ+ plays, musicals, and political events over the past century, there are clear themes that emerge. In both the theatrical and political arenas, LGBTQ+ representation has been limited by a concept called “repressive tolerance.” Every step of progress has been met with another restriction, ranging from stereotypical caricatures to legal discrimination. In order to move forward, we must acknowledge this repressive tolerance and fight against its systemic limitations. LGBTQ+ individuals will never be seen as equal members of society as long as we continue to exist within this repressive narrative. It all begins by learning our history so we do not repeat it. Representation matters. Our stories matter.

KEYWORDS: LGBTQ+, Theatre, Politics, Representation, History, Queer.

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DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to my fellow LGBTQ+ community members who are still struggling to exist in this world and are fighting for full equality. This thesis is also dedicated to the brave members of the LGBTQ+ community who fought before us to bring us where we are as a community today. In a world that tried to silence you, you spoke out. It is now our duty to share your stories and keep moving forward.

CHAPTER ONE

Introduction

The goal of this project was to examine through an LGBTQ+ lens two topics that I am passionate about: theatre and politics. In 2016, *The Prom*, a musical that tackles LGBTQ+ discrimination in high schools, debuted and eventually premiered on Broadway in 2018. In 2019, the Supreme Court heard three cases (*Altitude Express Inc. v. Zarda*; *Bostock v. Clayton County*; and *R.G. & G.R. Harris Funeral Homes v. EEOC*) regarding discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation and gender identity under Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964. To me, it did not seem like it was merely a coincidence that both the political and theatrical stages were dealing with similar issues. Thus, I became curious to research and discover the history of the relationship between LGBTQ+ representation on the theatrical and political stages. I am not the first person to document the history of LGBTQ+ representation on the theatrical stage, and I am not the first person to document the history of LGBTQ+ politics. However, I hope to bring a unique perspective by focusing on the relationship between the two histories and evolutions. In order to do so, I will first go over the history of theatrical and political representation in each decade dating back to the 1920s. Then, I will pull broad themes from both histories and compare them. In the big picture, it is my belief that LGBTQ+ representation on both stages has been dominated by a concept called repressive tolerance, which I will explain in subsequent sections. At the conclusion of this thesis, I will recommend how we can fight this repressive tolerance in both arenas. Open the curtain, and let us begin.

CHAPTER TWO

Definitions

“Gay Play”: During my research, I targeted a total of 62 plays and musicals that were believed to be “gay plays.” Playwright William Hoffman defined a “gay play” as “one in which the principal character or characters are homosexual or one in which the major theme or focus of the play is homosexuality” (Schlager, 1998, p. 435). This is the definition under which I will be operating. For the purposes of my research, I am primarily interested in assessing plays in which homosexuals are represented physically on the stage and are a major theme of the production. See Appendix for full list of shows.

“Queer”: Queer is a term that once was derogatory and used as a homophobic slur. Recently, the term has been reclaimed by the LGBTQ+ community and is used as a gender-neutral term in the LGBTQ+ community. I will do my best to distinguish when this term is being used derogatorily or positively.

“Sexual Invert”: This was a common term used to describe homosexuals, particularly in the early half of the twentieth century.

“Homophile”: Some sources use the term homophile, which encompasses LGBTQ+ individuals and straight individuals who support LGBTQ+ rights.

“Gay v. Lesbian v. LGBTQ+”: Throughout this paper, I am going to be deliberate about the terminology I use. If I use the term gay, I am referring to individuals who identify as male and are attracted to other males. If I use the term lesbian, I am referring to individuals who identify as female and are attracted to other females. If I use the

term LGBTQ+, I am referring to the general LGBTQ+ community. In other words, I am not using these words interchangeably.

“Repressive Tolerance”: This is a term I came across in a book by Sarah Schulman titled *Stagestruck: Theater, AIDS, and the Marketing of Gay America*. I define repressive tolerance as the act of those in the dominant culture allowing representation for those in the minority, yet still confining those minorities to repressive definitions, stigmas, or stereotypes.

“LGBTQ+ Community”: The term “LGBTQ+ community” certainly has political and organizational implications. It implies a sense of community and organization that did not really exist on a national scale until around the 1970s and 1980s after the Stonewall Uprising. When I use this term, I simply mean individuals who were/are LGBTQ+, regardless if they recognize(d) it or were/are “out.”

CHAPTER THREE

Methodology

This paper will examine the relationship between LGBTQ+ representation on the theatrical and political stages in the United States. In order to do so, I read and analyzed 62 plays and musicals that contained LGBTQ+ representation (see Appendix for full list). These plays and musicals were selected based on a definition of “gay plays” provided by playwright William Hoffman: “[A play] in which the principal character or characters are homosexual or one in which the major theme or focus of the play is homosexuality” (Schlager, 1998, p. 435). I expanded this definition to also include bisexual and transgender individuals. To research LGBTQ+ political and social history, I primarily

used LGBTQ+ almanacs and timelines, which were created as a direct response to the lack of written history of the LGBTQ+ movement. It is important to note that when I am speaking about “political representation,” I am including social events and political events, as I believe the two are inextricably linked. For example, while the Stonewall Uprising was primarily a social event, the event had significant consequences that led to political consequences as well, including the formation of Lambda Legal and the Civil Rights Commission ending its discrimination (to be discussed later).

Looking from these sources, I identified patterns and themes both on the micro-level and macro-level. When I refer to the micro-level, I am referring to the patterns and themes of representation within a particular decade. When I refer to the macro-level, I am referring to the patterns and themes of representation over multiple decades. This paper will first analyze the overarching themes within each decade. Then, I will use these micro-level themes to determine how the themes of LGBTQ+ theatrical representation and political representation have evolved or remained constant on the macro-level. The focus of this paper is not to argue whether political movements caused theatrical movements or vice versa. The two realms have certainly influenced each other (as will be noted), but I think it would be very difficult to prove a causal relationship between the two. Instead, I am focusing on the relationship between their evolutions. How do the evolutions of LGBTQ+ representation on the theatrical and political stages compare and differ on both the micro-level and macro-level? That is the main question I operated under to conduct my research.

CHAPTER FOUR

The 1920s

Theatre

Prior to the 1920s, homosexuality was rarely portrayed or spoken about in mainstream theatre. In 1922, *The God of Vengeance* by Sholom Asch became the first play with a lesbian character to be produced in the United States (Schlager, 1998). However, the context for how lesbianism was portrayed was more of “an act of resistance to the patriarchal prostitution of women” than it was about legitimizing homosexuality (Schlager, 1998, p. 446). Then, *The Drag* by Mae West was produced in 1927. Not only did the play use dramatic drag queen characters, but it included many negative references to homosexuality. The judge in the play refers to homosexuals as “things” (p. 107). Even the doctor in the play, who is portrayed as the “defender” of homosexuality to the judge, refers to homosexuals as “sexual inverts” and “abnormal creatures” throughout the show. It is also revealed that the character Rolly has married his wife, the doctor’s daughter, as a cover up for his true sexuality. Rolly is eventually murdered by another gay man named David, but the judge has the murder reported as a suicide to prevent his name being dragged down. Thus, while the audience was introduced to homosexuality as a concept, homosexuality was by no means viewed in a positive light in the show. This is not surprising, considering Mae West at one point said that “the plays were written to help young men realize and reject their perversion” (Nereson, 2012, p. 515). Mae West was in favor of decriminalizing homosexuality, but she still believed it was a psychological disorder (Bak, 2006). This is clearly evident in *The Drag*.

Politics

There was a slight beginning to the LGBTQ+ movement in the mid-part of the 1920s. On December 10, 1924, in Chicago, Illinois, Henry Gerber founded the Society for Human Rights, which has been recorded as the first pro-LGBTQ+ rights political organization (*LGBTQ Rights Milestones*, 2019; GSAFE, n.d.). The overall attitude toward homosexuality, however, was very much still negative, as indicated by policies passed during this time period. Plays by Mae West and others led to the passage of a 1926 New York State law that made performances of any play depicting “sex perversion” a misdemeanor, a law that would remain in New York’s code until 1967 (*The Gay Almanac*, 1996). As a result, performances of shows like *The Drag* were prevented from having a Broadway run, and the individuals who produced “obscene” shows were placed in jail, including Mae West (Hamilton, 1992). This law directly impacted how LGBTQ+ individuals were portrayed on stage in New York and would also fuel further anti-LGBTQ+ sentiment in the next decade.

CHAPTER FIVE

The 1930s

Theatre

The Wales “Padlock” Law enacted in New York in 1927 certainly stifled the progress of LGBTQ+ representation on stage. Although plays were prohibited from depicting “sex perversion” on stage, there seemed to be an exception for *The Children’s Hour* written by Lillian Hellman in 1934. Characters Martha Dobie and Karen Wright are two teachers in the town of Lancet. Their lives are turned upside down when one of

their students accuses them of kissing each other. In response to the accusation, the town ostracizes them. When Martha professes her sincere love for Karen, Karen responds by calling Martha tired and sick. In the end, Martha commits suicide because of her inner turmoil. Thus, by having the female teachers ostracized by the community and one of them ultimately taking their own life, *The Children's Hour* continues the idea that homosexuality is not desirable. It was most likely allowed to be produced because of its "punishment" of lesbianism (Sinfield, 1999).

Politics

Taking notes from the Wales "Padlock" Law, Hollywood adopted the "Hayes Code" in 1934, which banned sex perversion or any reference to it on the screen (GSAFE, n.d.). Banned from viewing homosexuality on the stage and screen, Americans would remain largely unexposed to the concept of homosexuality. Homosexuality was still viewed as a sinful perversion or disease, and there was no significant political momentum gained in the 1930s. Perhaps a sign that change was coming, Sigmund Freud urged for compassion and tolerance for homosexuality in 1935 (GSAFE, n.d.). Then, a huge historical and political event occurred in the early 1940s that would shake up existing social norms.

CHAPTER SIX

The 1940s

Theatre

The 1930s can at least claim one mainstream production that contained sexual orientation as an essential plot element. The 1940s cannot do the same. Direct

homosexual representation was almost non-existent in the 1940s. *No Exit* by Jean-Paul Sartre (1944) contained minor flirting between the characters Estelle and Inez, but both end up resisting the urge to flirt as if it was an evil temptation. Some have speculated that *Auto-Da-Fé* by Tennessee Williams (1945) has homosexual undertones, but the only information the audience is given is that Eloi has received a photo with two naked figures on it and becomes so distressed about it that he burns down the house with himself inside. Members of the LGBTQ+ community would have to wait until the 1950s to once again see their community directly represented on stage.

Politics

While there seemed to be no significant change in LGBTQ+ representation on stage in theatre in the 1940s, a social revolution was beginning in the political realm. This revolution was catalyzed by an event that many would not associate with the LGBTQ+ movement: World War II. When the United States joined World War II in 1941, it transformed gay and lesbian life in the United States (GSAFE, n.d.). Men would now be in very close proximity to each other for an extended time, allowing “bonds” to grow between them. Urbanization as a result of the war would cause women to also be in closer proximity to each other. Although men and women alike were not identifying themselves as gay and lesbian, “by uprooting millions of young women and men and often placing them in nonfamilial sex-segregated environments, World War II fostered the process of lesbigay identity formation and the development of lesbigay communities” (Schlager, 1998, p. 1). After the war, the government denied homosexuals that served in WWII certain rights that were normally given to ex-service personnel, which also motivated gay people to begin organizing (Sinfield, 1999). Another ground-breaking

event in the 1940s was when Alfred Kinsey published his research on sexuality in 1948 (GSAFE, n.d.). He concluded that Americans lay on a “spectrum” of sexuality, ranging from exclusively homosexual to exclusively heterosexual (Morris, n.d.). This research laid the foundation for a changing societal perception toward homosexuality.

CHAPTER SEVEN

The 1950s

Theatre

The theatrical world was still behind the times of the political arena in terms of LGBTQ+ representation. The LGBTQ+ community received some direct representation with the publishing of *And Tell Sad Stories About the Death of Queens* by Tennessee Williams in 1957. However, there was very little positive representation in Williams’ play. The play contains “queen” stereotypes, homophobic slurs, adultery, abuse, and transphobia. The character Karl exclaims: “I don’t go with queers” (p. 193) and “There’s no woman as low as a faggot” (p. 209). This is not surprising coming from playwright Tennessee Williams, even though he, himself, was a member of the LGBTQ+ community. Tennessee Williams was vocal about his distaste for the “fairy” or “queen” culture within the LGBTQ+ community, saying, “I told them, those who would listen, that that type of behavior simply made them distasteful, sexually, to anyone interested in sex...and that it was ‘dated,’ as well” (Bak, 2006, p. 25). Williams was also transphobic: “I don’t understand transvestites or transsexuals...I think the great preponderance of them damages the gay liberation movement by travesty” (Bak, 2006, p. 27). Given this context, the negative portrayal of certain subsections of the LGBTQ+ community in his

1954 play becomes less surprising, but entirely disheartening. During a time when the LGBTQ+ community needed to be empowered, Williams' writing disrespected many members of the community. This representation of the community was common in the 1950s: "Discreet plays about [queerness] were acceptable, so long as they showed it either not to be occurring after all, or to be confined to despicable characters" (Sinfield, 1999, p. 217).

Politics

Building off of the momentum created by WWII and Alfred Kinsey in the 1940s, Harry Hay founded the famous Mattachine Society in 1950, which was the first sustained national gay rights organization in the United States (*LGBTQ Rights Milestones*, 2019). In 1952, Christine Jorgensen became the first American to undergo sex reassignment surgery when she traveled to Denmark for the operation and then returned to the United States (Schlager, 1998). On September 21, 1955, the Daughters of Bilitis became the first lesbian rights organization in the United States (*LGBTQ Rights Milestones*, 2019). In the scientific community, psychologist Evelyn Hooker sparked further discussion when she published her experiment in 1956 that concluded that homosexuals and heterosexuals do not differ significantly (*Milestones*, n.d.). However, this progress did not go unchallenged. In 1952, fighting against a movement to change the medical perception of homosexuality, the American Psychiatric Association listed homosexuality as a "sociopathic personality disturbance" (*Milestones*, n.d.). In addition, growing nationalism after WWII and the desire for "manly" protection during a looming battle with communism created what historians call the "pink scare" or "lavender scare" (Sinfield, 1999). In 1953, President Eisenhower issued an executive order that banned

homosexuals from working for the federal government or any of its private contractors (*Milestones*, n.d.). Homosexuals were believed to be a security risk based on the belief that communist enemies could blackmail homosexuals for government information using their sexual orientation because of the fear of societal and legal retaliation (*LGBTQ Rights Milestones*, 2019). Even civil rights organizations would abandon the LGBTQ+ movement. In 1957, the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) issued a statement saying it is “valid to consider homosexuality when making risk assessments” and urged lesbians to “become” heterosexual (GSAFE, n.d.). Thus, by the end of the 1950s, there was a government and society actively and directly fighting against the LGBTQ+ community, but there was also an LGBTQ+ community that was growing and ready to fight back.

CHAPTER EIGHT

The 1960s

Theatre

In the theatrical world during the 1960s, there seemed to be a shift from whether homosexuality can be mentioned to what can be said about it. What became evident was the fact that “most of the lesbian and gay presence was created for the amusement of straights and had little to do with Gay Liberation” (Sinfield, 1999, p. 277). The 1960s was the decade for gay stereotypes: “In theatre comedy, the effeminate gay man became a standard ingredient” (Sinfield, 1999, p. 273). In *The Madness of Lady Bright* by Lanford Wilson (1964), Leslie Bright is depicted as a “screaming preening queen” who ultimately loses their mind because they do not want to be who they are. In *The Haunted*

Host by Robert Patrick (1964), Jay is portrayed and written as a dramatic, sexual queen who is trying to torment and seduce Frank, a heterosexual who is trying to understand and support Jay. “Don’t be ridiculous, in my imagination I have nothing on you” is just one of Jay’s statements indicating his lustful sexual desire for Frank (n.p.). *The Killing of Sister George*, written by Frank Marcus in 1965, abandons comedic stereotypes, but instead makes June abusive to her partner Alice, including making Alice drink June’s bath water. *The Boys in the Band*, written by Mart Crowley (1968), was “the first commercially successful play set in a homosexual household, but because of its stereotypes and negative messages, it was not something homosexuals felt good watching” (Schlager, 1998, p. 440). In Crowley’s play, there are talks of “screaming queens,” “tired fairies,” sex, drugs, homophobic slurs, and adultery. To highlight just how “positively” homosexuals were portrayed, the character Michael claims, “You show me a happy homosexual, and I’ll show you a gay corpse” (p. 128). Although the kind of representation in the 1960s was disheartening, it was representation nonetheless, which had been nearly non-existent before the 1960s. Despite their shortcomings, these pieces of theatre were still highly influential in terms of increasing representation.

One of the reasons for this growth in representation was a little café that opened in 1958: Caffè Cino (Schlager, 1998). Owned by Joe Cino, the café became a “crucial Off-Broadway venue for gay work between 1964 and 1967” (Sinfield, 1999, p. 297). It was a place for gay playwrights and actors to come together and produce gay pieces of theatre, and it helped foster a gay community within the theatre world. Unfortunately, Caffè Cino closed in 1968, but it would leave a lasting impact within the theatrical and gay communities (Schlager, 1998).

Politics

The 1960s are known as the decade for civil rights movements, and the LGBTQ+ movement was certainly a part of that legacy, though the LGBTQ+ movement is less spoken about in history lessons. In my educational upbringing in South Dakota, it was entirely erased. On January 1, 1962, Illinois became the first state to decriminalize homosexuality (*Milestones*, n.d.). Inspired by similar events under the black civil rights movement, a group of homosexuals staged a “sip-in” at the Julius Bar—a bar with a policy of refusing service to homosexuals—in Greenwich Village on April 21, 1966 (*Milestones*, n.d.). The movement had spread to young people as well: in 1967, the Student Homophile League at Columbia University became the first lesbian and gay campus group to gain official recognition (GSAFE, n.d.). The LGBTQ+ community was dealt a serious blow, however, when the Supreme Court issued its ruling in *Boutilier v. Immigration Service* (1967). The majority of the Supreme Court held that “the term ‘psychopathic personality’ ... was a term of art intended to exclude homosexuals from entry into the United States” (*Boutilier v. Immigration Service*, 1967). Thus, the Court effectively legalized discriminating against homosexuals at the border. An increasingly discriminatory government and an increasingly vocal LGBTQ+ community were inevitably going to collide head on, and at the end of the 1960s, they did exactly that.

On June 28, 1969, at the Stonewall Inn in Greenwich Village, New York City, brave members of the LGBTQ+ community—primarily transgender women of color—stood up against the NYPD when the police attempted to “raid” the bar. Key leaders included Marsha P. Johnson and Sylvia Rivera, whose activism would not end after this revolutionary confrontation. The uprising would last several days, with neither the police

nor the LGBTQ+ community stepping down. The Stonewall Uprising was not the first of its kind, however. Similar uprisings had occurred at Cooper Do-nuts in Los Angeles in 1959, Compton's Cafeteria in San Francisco in 1966, and Black Cat Tavern in Los Angeles in 1967 (Recognizing the 50th, 2019). Perhaps because of its length and intensity, though, the Stonewall Uprising is known as the catalyst for the modern LGBTQ+ movement. After Stonewall, there was no going back to the status quo. It was a time for change, and the impacts of Stonewall would extend for decades.

CHAPTER NINE

The 1970s

Theatre

The Stonewall Uprising indubitably had an impact on theatre in the following decade. "After Stonewall, Off-Broadway-style venues and companies specializing in lesbian and gay material grew up in US cities" (Sinfield, 1999, p. 300). Such organizations included the Gay Men's Theater Collective that began in 1977 and the Gay Theatre Alliance that was founded in 1978 and had 28 associated companies by 1981 (Schlager, 1998; Sinfield, 1999). For lesbians in the community, many lesbian companies were founded in the 1970s as well, including the Lavender Cellar in Minneapolis and the Red Dyke Theatre in Atlanta (Sinfield, 1999). The LGBTQ+ movement had finally arrived and established itself in the theatrical world.

There were also some momentous first steps on stage for the LGBTQ+ community. For the first time, homosexuality was being mentioned and represented in American musicals. In *Applause* (1970), Eve kisses Margo during an award acceptance,

and Duane mentions having a date in the Village, referring to Greenwich Village in New York City. In *The Rocky Horror Show* (1973), bisexuality is introduced. In both of these musicals, however, homosexuality was not the main premise for the plot line. *A Chorus Line* (1975) would become the first Broadway musical to “deal matter-of-factly with homosexuality” (Hamlisch et al., 1977, p. xii). The character Paul has a lengthy monologue where he processes his journey through life as a homosexual, including how it affected his relationship with his parents and how he struggled coming to terms with his sexual orientation:

Once my cousin said to me, “You’ll never be an actor,” and I knew she was telling me this because I was such a sissy. I mean, I was terribly effeminate. I always knew I was gay, but that didn’t bother me. What bothered me was that I didn’t know how to be a boy. One day I looked at myself in the mirror and said, “You’re fourteen years old and you’re a faggot. What are you going to do with your life?” (p. 100)

Another revolutionary moment occurred with Martin Sherman’s play *Bent* that was published in 1979. *Bent* reclaims the part of LGBTQ+ history that is overlooked and sometimes ignored: homosexual persecution during the Holocaust. The play holds nothing back in depicting the obscene conditions that homosexuals were subjected to during that time period, including when Max shares that he was forced to have a sex with a dead thirteen-year-old girl to prove that he was not gay. Max is indeed gay, but he wanted to avoid the label because of the known poor treatment of homosexuals in concentration camps. Max also has to deny recognition of his lover Rudy in order to survive. To prove it, Max is forced to hit Rudy, and Rudy dies later that night.

Despite these significant steps forward for the LGBTQ+ community, these steps did not come without a furtherance of historical stereotypes. The stage directions in *Applause* make it very clear that some of the males are dressed in flamboyant attire

(Comden & Green, 1970). In *The Rocky Horror Show*, Frank is depicted as a sort of murderous madman and as a sexual deviant. In *A Chorus Line*, the gay characters are portrayed as being heavily effeminate. The character Bobby states, “This one time I was doing Frankenstein as a *musical* and I spray-painted this kid silver—all over” (p. 35). In Lanford Wilson’s *Fifth of July* (1978), there is a plethora of homophobic slurs, including “Superfag” (p. 31). Even *Bent*, as revolutionary as it was, plays into the sexual deviant stereotypes of homosexuals as well as “punishes” homosexuality by having Max commit suicide at the end.

Politics

The proof that the Stonewall Uprising was a catalyst for the modern LGBTQ+ movement can be found in the progress that occurred during the 1970s. On June 28, 1970, a year after the Stonewall Uprising, the first gay pride parade was held, a tradition that continues to this day (*LGBTQ Rights Milestones*, 2019). The 50th Anniversary of Pride will be this year in 2020. In 1973, Lambda Legal became the first legal organization established to fight for gay and lesbian rights (*LGBTQ Rights Milestones*, 2019). On December 15, 1973, the American Psychiatric Association finally voted to remove homosexuality from its list of mental illnesses—it did not, however, remove transgenderism from its list (*LGBTQ Rights Milestones*, 2019). In 1974, Kathy Kozachenko became the first homosexual American elected to public office (*LGBTQ Rights Milestones*, 2019). In 1975, the U.S. Civil Service Commission announced it would no longer exclude homosexuals from government employment, a little over twenty years after Eisenhower’s executive order (GSAFE, n.d.). Finally, the first National March on Washington for Lesbian and Gay Rights was held in 1979 (*LGBTQ Rights*

Milestones, 2019; GSAFE, n.d.). The LGBTQ+ community was more vocal, organized, and empowered than ever. This, of course, inevitably led to societal backlash. In 1977, Anita Bryant founded her “Save Our Children” movement and started opposing advances for LGBTQ+ rights (Schlager, 1998). In 1978, Harvey Milk, a famous LGBTQ+ politician in San Francisco, was assassinated (GSAFE, n.d.). One of the biggest blows to the LGBTQ+ movement, however, would come at the beginning of the 1980s, and it would jeopardize all of the progress the community had made up to that point.

CHAPTER TEN

The 1980s

Theatre

There were two powerful LGBTQ+ plays at the beginning of the 1980s. *Last Summer at Bluefish Cove* by Jane Chambers (1980) was the first major successful LGBTQ+ play in the 1980s. Not only that, it was “the first play written for and about lesbians that enjoyed a successful Off-Broadway run” (Schlager, 1998, p. 448). The play explores many stereotypes about lesbians during that time period, including when Eva’s preconceived notions that lesbians cannot be married and have children are challenged. Bisexuality is also discussed and explored in the show, and the relationship between Lil and Eva provides an on-stage example of coming to terms with one’s sexuality. *Last Summer at Bluefish Cove*, however, still also reinforces some stereotypes about the LGBTQ+ community and how they are represented on stage. For example, it is suggested that Donna is cheating on her partner Sue (adultery), and the main character becomes a tragic victim at the end of the show (Lil dies from cancer). Lil also mentions

to Eva in regards to Eva coming out to her mother: “Don’t tell her then. It’s ten to one she’ll disown you as a pervert” (p. 75). Still, the play was progressive in its context.

Torch Song Trilogy by Harvey Fierstein (1982) won the 1983 Tony Award for Best Play (Schlager, 1998). It explores Arnold’s struggle with losing his husband Alan, adopting a son named David, and dealing with a homophobic mother. As has been noted, *Torch Song Trilogy* was different because it showed the “constant negotiation with society at large” and really talks in-depth about those struggles (Schlager, 1998, p. 441). Arnold frustratingly exclaims: “You want to know what’s crazy? That after all these years I’m still sitting here justifying my life. That’s what’s crazy” (p. 151).

The LGBTQ+ community continued to be represented in the world of musicals as well. *La Cage Aux Folles* (1983) tells the story of Albin, a drag queen who tries to navigate his relationship with his son Jean-Michel, who wants to marry a woman whose father is homophobic. Jean-Michel has hidden from his lover that his parents are gay, terrified that it would ruin their relationship. Albin even dresses up and pretends to be Jean-Michel’s mother. At the same time, the character Dindon, a politician, is trying to close down the place where Albin performs drag. In the end, Albin professes “I am what I am” and refuses to conform to anyone’s needs. *La Cage Aux Folles* struck a chord with audiences, and it even won the Tony Award for Best Musical in 1984 (Schlager, 1998). The show still contained negative reinforcements of LGBTQ+ representation, such as homosexuals being called “perverts” and using drag as a way of blackmailing and “punishing” the politician Dindon.

Outside of *Last Summer at Bluefish Cove*, *Torch Song Trilogy*, and *La Cage Aux Folles*, LGBTQ+ representation would be primarily dominated by the significant political

and health crisis of the 1980s: HIV and AIDS. This decade is probably when theatre was the most influential in impacting the LGBTQ+ community politically and socially. While prior to the 1980s it seemed that theatre was lagging behind social progress, it certainly at least caught up to the social progress in the 1980s if not surpassed it. “Both produced in 1985, William H. Hoffman’s *As Is* and Larry Kramer’s *The Normal Heart* paved the way for the use of the theater as a forum for AIDS education and a cathartic outlet for the anxiety, anger, and grief caused by the proliferation of the virus” (Schlager, 1998, p. 444). Because of the devastating effect AIDS had on the LGBTQ+ community and the silence of the government, most LGBTQ+ plays about AIDS in the 1980s were tailored toward individual therapy (Sinfield, 1999). *As Is* by William Hoffman (1985) focuses on the viewpoint of someone who has AIDS and the people that comfort them. The character Rich shares his struggles: “My lover leaves me; my family won’t let me near them; I lose my business; I can’t pay my rent” (p. 16). In *Safe Sex* by Harvey Fierstein (1987), Arthur details his process of taking care of his lover Collin, who eventually dies of AIDS. *The Normal Heart* by Larry Kramer (1985) is the most political AIDS play of the 1980s. Larry Kramer himself co-founded the Gay Men’s Health Crisis, which educated and warned gay men that having sex with one another could be lethal (Kramer et al., 1985). His play specifically addresses the lack of government response to the AIDS crisis, and it explores in-depth the inner turmoil of the LGBTQ+ community during this time: is being gay about having sex? Many homosexuals continued to have sex during this epidemic, and some members of the LGBTQ+ community viewed this as a death wish while others simply viewed it as them living their identity. Overall, the

plays and musicals of the 1980s added more depth to the LGBTQ+ identity, and they filled a silence created by the government.

Politics

As a result of LGBTQ+ activism in the 1970s, on July 8, 1980, Democrats became the first major political party to endorse a homosexual rights platform (*Milestones*, n.d.). In 1982, Wisconsin became the first U.S. state to outlaw discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation (*LGBTQ Rights Milestones*, 2019; GSAFE, n.d.). This progress became significantly threatened, however, when in 1981 the first case of Gay Related Immune Deficiency Disorder (“GRID”) was reported, the disorder that later became known as AIDS (GSAFE, n.d.). This health crisis jeopardized everything the LGBTQ+ community had built. “HIV and AIDS reopened the whole question of legitimacy of gayness: it still required justification, it still hurt” (Sinfield, 1999). What many people viewed as an issue stemming from a lack of sex education was viewed by others as a punishment delivered by God. It sparked another cultural and moral debate about homosexuality. The morality debate was reopened enough for the Supreme Court to rule in *Bowers v. Hardwick* (1986) that it was permissible for states to criminalize sodomy. Chief Justice Burger emphasized that “in constitutional terms there is no such thing as a fundamental right to commit homosexual sodomy” (*Bowers v. Hardwick*, 1986). Meanwhile, President Ronald Reagan had remained entirely silent on the AIDS crisis until the end of his presidency (*Milestones*, n.d.). Mainstream media viewed AIDS as a “gay plague” that infected “innocent victims,” such as hemophiliacs, children, and the wives of infected men (Schlager, 1998, p. 17). During a time when the LGBTQ+ community desperately needed help, both government and media turned their

heads the other way. “The abandonment of people with AIDS by heterosexual society is the most historically significant factor in the initial escalation of the crisis in the United States” (Schulman, 1998, p. 49). LGBTQ+ individuals were going to have to take matters into their own hands, and that is exactly what they did.

On March 10, 1987, the AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power (“ACT UP”) was founded (*Milestones*, n.d.). The ACT UP organization was critical in getting the federal government to respond to AIDS (Schlager, 1998). The group protested the government to enact policies that protected AIDS patients from high prescription drug costs and also protested pharmaceutical companies that were exploiting the epidemic for profit (*Milestones*, n.d.). The persistent protests would force the government to finally acknowledge and respond to the crisis, beginning with the Center for Disease Control sending out a brochure about AIDS to every household in the United States in 1988, an astounding seven years after the first reported case (*Milestones*, n.d.). During the time that the Reagan Administration remained silent, more than 15,000 people in the United States died as a result of AIDS, and tens of thousands more were infected (Schlager, 1998). As ACT UP’s slogan stated, silence truly was equaling death.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

The 1990s

Theatre

The 1990s were a decade of significant growth in LGBTQ+ plays and musicals, rightfully earning the title “The Gay 90s” (Schlager, 1998). There was not a lack of LGBTQ+ plays regarding the AIDS crisis: *The Baltimore Waltz* by Paula Vogel (1990),

Angels in America by Tony Kushner (1991), *Jeffrey* by Paul Rudnick (1992), *Love! Valour! Compassion!* by Terrence McNally (1994), and *The Dying Gaul* by Craig Lucas (1998). The musicals *Falsettos* (1992) and *Rent* (1994) would tackle the issue in the musical world for the first time. Now that the world was finally paying attention to the AIDS crisis, most of the plays and musicals in the 1990s shifted their focus from people dying of AIDS to those living with AIDS (Schlager, 1998). Lesbian representation also increased in the 1990s with *Rent* (1994), *The Hungry Woman* by Cherrie Moraga (1995), *Why We Have a Body* by Claire Chafee, and *Stop Kiss* by Diana Son (1998). In general, the “theme” for LGBTQ+ plays and musicals in the 1990s certainly seemed to be “death and violence.”

The three most influential LGBTQ+ pieces of theatre in the 1990s were probably *Angels in America* by Tony Kushner and the musicals *Falsettos* and *Rent*. Much like Larry Kramer’s *The Normal Heart*, *Angels in America* explores both political and social struggles within the LGBTQ+ community. It encompasses the married character Joe coming to terms with his sexuality, the character Louis navigating his own relationship with Prior, who is diagnosed with AIDS, and the character Roy, who fervently denies that he is gay, despite his AIDS diagnosis and the fact he sleeps with men. While the play certainly still contains negative stereotypes, *Angels in America* was different in the sense that it has an ending in which one of the main characters (Prior) does not die of AIDS. Instead, the play ends with Prior delivering an empowering monologue: “We won’t die secret deaths anymore. The world only spins forward. We will be citizens. The time has come...And I bless you: *More life.*”

Falsettos, which premiered on Broadway in 1992, was the first mainstream, commercially-successful American musical to tackle AIDS-related issues and depict a homosexual couple raising a child. *Falsettos* also contains representation for lesbians with the characters Dr. Charlotte and Cordelia. The musical is technically two one-act musicals combined: *March of the Falsettos* and *Falsettoland*, which were written in 1981 and 1990 respectively by William Finn but were only performed Off-Broadway. *Falsettos* does include gay stereotypes, such as typical “queen”-esque language like “fairy,” and negative portrayals, such as Marvin hitting his ex-wife Trina and verbally abusing his partner Whizzer. Whizzer also becomes the tragic victim by dying from AIDS. However, the familial representation and commercial success of the musical was significant for the LGBTQ+ community.

Rent (1994) was indubitably popular during its time and remains popular among mainstream society. It further exposed the struggles of people with AIDS, straight and LGBTQ+ people alike. The rock music resonated with audiences, and the show was enjoyed so much that it would later be produced into a movie. However, there are significant issues with the musical. “*Rent*, in addition to its positioning of heterosexuals front and center of the crisis, and its callous privileging of straight people with AIDS over gay people with AIDS, specifically denies the actual AIDS experience, both individually and socially” (Schulman, 1998, p. 54). It is Mark and Roger—both straight—that are at the center of the show. In addition, it is a straight character (Mimi) that survives the show with AIDS, while it is an LGBTQ+ character (Angel) who dies from the disease. The relationship between Maureen and Joanne is also tainted when Mark has sex with Maureen. While *Rent* increased LGBTQ+ representation, it seems to have painted the

AIDS crisis with a heterosexual brush, despite it being LGBTQ+ individuals who mainly fought for awareness and action.

Politics

There were some political victories in the 1990s. In 1990, President George H.W. Bush finally signed a federally-funded program for people living with AIDS (*Milestones*, n.d.). In that same year, policies that had restricted immigration of lesbians and gays were rescinded, although those with HIV and AIDS were still not permitted to enter the country (GSAFE, n.d.). In 1996, Kelli Peterson founded the first Gay-Straight Alliance at East High School in Salt Lake City, Utah, and the Supreme Court ruled in *Romer v. Evans* that the citizens of Colorado could not pass an amendment to their state constitution that prohibited passing anti-LGBTQ discrimination laws (GSAFE, n.d.). In 1998, Tammy Baldwin became the first openly-gay elected U.S. congressperson, and in 1999, the American Counseling Association Governing Council opposed “reparative therapy” as a cure for homosexuals (GSAFE, n.d.).

However, the 1990s were still a difficult decade politically and socially for the LGBTQ+ community, perhaps still a symptom of the effects of the AIDS crisis. In 1993, President Bill Clinton allowed the “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell” policy to pass, which prohibited LGBTQ+ individuals from being “out” in the military (*LGBTQ Rights Milestones*, 2019). On September 21, 1996, President Clinton would also sign the Defense of Marriage Act, which stated that the federal government would only legally recognize heterosexual marriages (*LGBTQ Rights Milestones*, 2019). With this increased hostility toward the LGBTQ+ community, it is no surprise that homophobic violence occurred. The most notorious example of this violence in the 1990s was when Matthew

Shepard was beaten and tied to a fence near Laramie, Wyoming, on October 6, 1998, a story which gained national attention and sparked conversation about hatred toward LGBTQ+ individuals (GSAFE, n.d.). It would take over a decade to reverse the political and social damage done in the 1990s.

CHAPTER TWELVE

The 2000s

Theatre

Most of the LGBTQ+ representation in theatre that occurred during the 2000s occurred in the beginning half. Violence and death was again a common theme for the representation throughout this decade, although none of it concerned the AIDS crisis anymore. This included youth suicide in the play *Dog Sees God* by Bert V. Royal (2004) and the musical *Bare: The Musical* (2000). *The Laramie Project* by Moises Kaufman (2000) discussed the beating and death of Matthew Shepard. In *A Man of No Importance* (2002), the main gay character Alfie is beat on the street by a group of men. All of these events follow the tragic victim repressive stereotype.

There were two main breakthroughs during this decade as well. First, there was a significant increase in representation of LGBTQ+ youth. *Dog Sees God* and *The Laramie Project* were two plays that focused on youth. In addition, the musicals *Bare: The Musical* (2000), *Zanna, Don't!* (2003), and *Spring Awakening* (2006) also all included LGBTQ+ youth, a demographic of the LGBTQ+ community that had seen little to no representation on stage prior to the 2000s. The importance of youth representation cannot be stressed enough, and it may be a symptom of the increase in youth activism in

the 1990s. Children in the United States could finally go to the theatre and see their identity on stage. The second main breakthrough was LGBTQ+ representation for the black community. There were black LGBTQ+ characters on stage prior to the 2000s, but two shows in the 2000s tied the characters' LGBTQ+ identities directly to their black identities as well. The musical *The Color Purple* (2004) follows Celie, who must deal with an abusive husband and her affections toward another black woman named Shug. *Take Me Out* by Richard Greenberg (2002) tells the story of a gay black baseball player named Darren, who must tackle both racism and homophobia. The character Shane exemplifies this combination of racism and homophobia:

“I don’t mind the colored people—the gooks an’ the spics an’ the coons an’ like that. But *every night* t’have’ta take a shower with a *faggot*? Do ya know what I’m sayin’? Do ya *get* me?” (p. 30)

As has been the common theme for every decade, although representation increased in the 2000s, it did not transcend typical shortcomings of LGBTQ+ representation on stage. In *Bare: The Musical* and *Dog Sees God*, one of the LGBTQ+ students commits suicide (tragic victim); in *Take Me Out*, Darren is depicted as being predatory toward a homophobic teammate (sexual deviance); and in the musical *Avenue Q* (2003), homosexuality is comedic relief for the show, including the song “If You Were Gay.” Thus, LGBTQ+ youth and other LGBTQ+ individuals could go to the theatre and see their identity represented on stage more commonly, but they would still be leaving the theatre unsure if they could have a happy ending.

Politics

With the passage of “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell” and the Defense of Marriage Act, things were looking grim in the political sphere for LGBTQ+ individuals. It created a

sense that being LGBTQ+ was still not socially acceptable. There were, however, some signs in the 2000s that things would be looking more positive in the near future. On June 26, 2003, the Supreme Court reversed *Bowers v. Hardwick* (1986) with its decision in *Lawrence v. Texas* (2003), officially declaring laws against sodomy unconstitutional. The majority wrote in regards to same-sex couples, “The State cannot demean their existence or control their destiny by making their private sexual conduct a crime,” and thus expanded the right to privacy under the Fourteenth Amendment to homosexual sex, a right that the *Bowers* majority denounced (*Lawrence v. Texas*, 2003). Then, in 2004, Massachusetts became the first state to legalize gay marriage (GSAFE, n.d.). It became clear that gaining the right to marriage was going to be a necessary goal for the LGBTQ+ community in order to receive full legal and social equality. Violence against the LGBTQ+ community continued in the 2000s, ultimately leading to President Obama signing into law in 2009 the Matthew Shepard Act, which expanded federal hate crime law to include sexual orientation (*Milestones*, n.d.). Thus, by the end of the 2000s, the LGBTQ+ community had gained the right to engage in consensual homosexual sex, and with a sympathetic president in office, it was now time to push for even more protections.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

The 2010s

Theatre

The 2010s contained significant empowering progress for LGBTQ+ representation on stage. *Indecent* by Paula Vogel (2015), much like Martin Sherman’s *Bent* in the 1970s, brought to life an important milestone and untold story of the

LGBTQ+ movement: the writing and production of Sholom Asch's *The God of Vengeance*. It tells the story of how the artists in the show were arrested for obscenity and how the troupe was eventually taken to concentration camps. The majority of the progress for LGBTQ+ representation on stage, however, would come in the world of musicals. LGBTQ+ youth continued to be represented, including *Fun Home* (2013) and *The Prom* (2016). *Fun Home* shares the story of a family struggling to come to terms with the sexualities of both the father and daughter and would go on to win several Tony awards (Morris, n.d.). In my opinion, *The Prom* is the first LGBTQ+ musical that LGBTQ+ youth could go see and leave hopeful about their sexuality. While there is bullying in the musical, no one dies or commits suicide, and in the end the LGBTQ+ youth characters Emma and Alyssa get to be public with their relationship.

I have played up the progress in the realm of theatre in the 2010s, but it, too, still enforced negative representations of the LGBTQ+ community. In *Fun Home*, the gay father targets young students: he is caught providing alcohol to a minor and has to go to classes, and it is hinted that he may have been charged with something else as well (sexual deviancy). It is also revealed that he commits suicide (tragic victim). *Kinky Boots* (2012) contains a highly sexualized queen who was disowned by her father (tragic victim) and contains derogatory language toward the transgender community. In *If/Then* (2013), lovers Anne and Kate file for divorce after Anne cheats on Kate (sexual deviancy). *The Prom* also contains the stereotypical gay comedic character named Barry. So, while progress was made in the 2010s, there is certainly more ground to gain.

Politics

Politics in the 2010s were just as empowering for the LGBTQ+ community as theatre under the leadership of President Obama. In 2010, “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell” was repealed (*LGBTQ Rights Milestones*, 2019). In 2012, President Obama became the first sitting U.S. president to publicly support same-sex marriage, and Tammy Baldwin became the first openly-gay elected LGBTQ+ U.S. Senator (*LGBTQ Rights Milestones*, 2019). On June 26, 2015, the Supreme Court granted full marriage equality to the LGBTQ+ community in *Obergefell v. Hodges*. Writing for the majority, Justice Kennedy stated, “They ask for equal dignity in the eyes of the law. The Constitution grants them that right” (*Obergefell v. Hodges*, 2015). In 2017, Danica Roem became the first openly transgender candidate elected to a state legislature (*LGBTQ Rights Milestones*, 2019). In fact, transgender rights have finally become an important part of the LGBTQ+ movement after decades of being placed in lower priority. This, of course, has led to backlash, particularly under the current Trump Administration. In 2018, the Trump Administration announced a new policy banning most transgender individuals from serving in the military (*LGBTQ Rights Milestones*, 2019). The Trump Administration also made oral arguments in front of the Supreme Court in 2019 that sexual orientation and gender identity discrimination are not included under gender discrimination under Title VII of the Civil Rights Act (Vogue, 2019). The backlash has also included violence. In 2016, a large mass shooting occurred at the Orlando Pulse LGBTQ+ Nightclub in Florida (Morris, n.d.). Transgender women of color are being murdered at an alarming rate (Holter, 2017). Needless to say, there is still much more progress to be achieved.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Broad Themes of Theatrical Representation

This section will attempt to describe the broad evolution of LGBTQ+ representation in theatre over the past century, including some reoccurring themes. LGBTQ+ representation mainly started as a “disease” or “illness.” It was something that people should not desire to be and the product of mental illness. This kind of representation dominated LGBTQ+ theatre from the 1920s to the 1950s. Over the past century, however, three dominant themes have prevailed in every decade: the tragic victim, the sexual deviant, and the comedic relief. The first theme is the tragic victim. Of the 62 plays and musicals I read, 23 of them (37%) used the term “fag” or “faggot.” 29 of them (47%) included either an LGBTQ+ character dying or being subjected to some form of violence. It is true that tragedy is often used for plot even in the heterosexual realm of theatre, but I would argue it is not nearly as often tied to heterosexual individuals’ sexual identity, whereas the “tragic” homosexual is often victimized because of their sexual orientation. The second theme is sexual deviancy. This can include, but is not limited to, sexual promiscuity and adultery. Typically, this theme manifests in the form of talking about “cruising” (searching around looking for individuals to have sex with), talking about how much they love sex, and cheating on their partners. 33 of the 62 plays and musicals (53%) included some form of sexual deviancy or sexualized the LGBTQ+ characters. The third and final dominant theme is the comedic relief. In musicals such as *The Book of Mormon* or *Avenue Q* or plays such as *The Haunted Host* or *The Drag* homosexuality is used for comedic relief or includes “campy” queens that are meant to entertain the audience. There is a reason why when

people say the term “typical gay character” a common idea emerges in people’s heads. This results in a lack of depth for LGBTQ+ characters. In fact, stereotypes have historically been an efficient way to make the homosexual “visible and recognizable” (Schlager, 1998, p. 436).

These themes of LGBTQ+ representation in theatre are what I believe fall under author Sarah Schulman’s term called “repressive tolerance” (Schulman, 1998, p. 71). While LGBTQ+ representation has grown on stage, that representation has been mainly limited to oppressive stereotypes and story lines. LGBTQ+ characters are allowed to exist on stage, but only in a way that reinforces the power structure that places heterosexuals at the top and LGBTQ+ individuals below them. In other words, “They create caricatures of us and confine us with the prison of their plays” (Schulman, 1998, p. 71). There seems to be a prevailing trend of creating plays and musicals that satisfy LGBTQ+ individuals’ needs while also representing LGBTQ+ individuals in a way that allows heterosexuals to “rationalize their privileges and justify their own false sense of objectivity” (Schulman, 1998, p. 102). Of the 62 plays and musicals I read, I would only feel comfortable saying three of them did not fall under one or more of these three repressive themes. Those shows are *Well* by Lisa Kron, *A New Brain* by William Finn and James Lapine, and *Spring Awakening* by Steven Sater and Duncan Sheik.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Broad Themes of Political Representation

LGBTQ+ politics followed a similar, although not identical, evolution as LGBTQ+ theatre. Homosexuals began as being viewed as individuals with a “disease” or

“perversion” that was not socially acceptable. However, after some shifts in medical perspectives on homosexuality, homosexuality then became more of a social and moral issue (Sinfield, 1999). The question was no longer whether or not homosexuality legitimately exists, but, rather, was it right to act upon? LGBTQ+ politics then shifted into a more activist/liberation movement in the 1950s, but even more so after Stonewall at the end of the 1960s. After significant progress, the AIDS epidemic once again caused society to view homosexuality as a “plague” that had no place in society. This contempt toward homosexuality then turned into structural and physical violence toward the community, including the repressive “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell” policy as well as the beating and murder of Matthew Shepard. While the activist/liberation movement is still strong today, so is the structural and physical violence against the community.

In this manner, the evolution of LGBTQ+ politics can also be characterized as an evolution of “repressive tolerance.” Society has certainly become more accepting of LGBTQ+ individuals, but it has never allowed full equality. Recognizing that homosexuality is legitimate was met with the argument that it was still immoral. The allowance of LGBTQ+ individuals to be “out” was met with the restriction that they could not legally have sex. Obtaining the right to have sex was met with the argument that it was not moral to let homosexuals be married, and obtaining the right to marry has been met with the argument that it is still permissible to legally discriminate against LGBTQ+ individuals. There has always been a new restriction with every step of freedom. The people in power (straight, cisgender individuals) have allowed LGBTQ+ individuals to exist just enough to not threaten the people in power’s hierarchy. Some

handcuffs and restraints have been taken off, but the LGBTQ+ community is still within the prison cell operated by the dominant members of society.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Performance Project

As an actor, I am trained to put myself in others' shoes and empathize with others in order to effectively tell their stories. I knew that bringing these theatrical pieces to life would only deepen my understanding of the material I researched. It is one thing to read about how my community has been depicted; it is another to have to internalize, process, and perform those depictions. Thus, I created a performance project based on the research detailed in this paper. It encompasses scenes, songs, and monologues from 16 of the 62 plays and musicals I read. The goal of the performance project was to highlight the evolution and lack of evolution of LGBTQ+ theatrical representation over the past century. I decided to use social and political events as transitions in an effort to give the viewer sufficient context for each scene. This section will explain my selections for the performance project.

The performance project begins with *The Drag* by Mae West and *The Children's Hour* by Lillian Hellman to indicate the reluctance to talk about and condone homosexuality. In both scenes, homosexuality is deemed a mere "illness." In the scene selected from *The Drag*, homosexuals are called a plethora of demeaning terms in just three pages, including degenerate, outcast, thing, and sexual invert. In *The Children's Hour*, Martha commits suicide after struggling with her sexuality and being ostracized by

the community. The tragic victim and sexual deviant repressive themes are evident in both scenes.

Because there were few examples of LGBTQ+ representation in theatre in the 1940s and 1950s that differed from the first two scenes I had selected, I then moved on to the 1960s with a scene from *The Haunted Host* by Robert Patrick. The scene illustrates the comedic relief repressive theme. In this scene, the gay character Jay is written to be overly dramatic and highly sexual. “You shouldn’t assume that every homosexual wants to sleep with every attractive boy he meets—just because a few million of us are like that” (Patrick, 1964, n.p.). The 1960s and 1970s were important decades for empowering the LGBTQ+ community, so I wanted to select a piece from that time period that reflected that empowerment while also still exemplifying the repressive themes. Thus, I selected a scene from Martin Sherman’s *Bent*. The play was empowering because it reclaimed an important part of LGBTQ+ history that is often overlooked: LGBTQ+ persecution during the Holocaust. The scene I chose also plays into the tragic victim and sexual deviant stereotypes. Max describes having a sex with a thirteen-year-old girl in order to make a deal with the Nazi Party (sexual deviancy). However, this choice is made in order to survive as an LGBTQ+ individual during this time period, making Max a tragic victim.

The 1980s was a roller coaster for the LGBTQ+ community: a time of empowerment and a time of tragedy. I wanted the pieces I chose to reflect that sentiment. I chose *Last Summer at Bluefish Cove* by Jane Chambers because it was the first show about lesbians that received a successful Off-Broadway run (Schlager, 1998, p. 448). Despite that empowerment, however, the scene shows how the characters were depicted

as tragic victims: Lil recounts how she and many of her friends have been disowned and demonized by their families. I then chose a monologue from Harvey Fierstein's *Torch Song Trilogy*. I picked this monologue because of Arnold's emotional vulnerability as he pleads to his mother to understand the kind of violence and hate the community is facing because of people like her. Even though Arnold finds the courage to stand up to his mother, the story he tells is still exemplary of the tragic victim repressive theme. The song "I Am What I Am" from *La Cage Aux Folles* by Harvey Fierstein and Jerry Herman was too monumental to not include in the performance project. The musical won the Tony Award for Best Musical in 1984, a momentous victory for the LGBTQ+ community. The song itself is empowering, and I thought it was the perfect depiction of the climax of empowerment for the LGBTQ+ community before the AIDS crisis. To illustrate the influx of plays and musicals depicting the AIDS crisis, I chose a monologue from *Safe Sex* by Harvey Fierstein. Although the monologue plays into the repressive theme of tragic victim by having the gay character's partner die of AIDS, I felt it did so in such an intimate way, and I wanted to emphasize the intimate pain and suffering that occurred while the government remained silent.

Angels in America by Tony Kushner is too popular to not be included in the performance project. I chose the specific scene between Joe and Harper, however, to illustrate that homosexuality had again been demonized after the AIDS crisis, despite all the progress that had been gained beforehand. To illustrate the violence that increased toward the LGBTQ+ community, I then proceeded to use monologues from *Stop Kiss* by Diana Son and *The Laramie Project* by Moises Kaufman. The LGBTQ+ characters were

the targets of violence purely because of their sexual orientation, which further exemplified the tragic victim repressive theme.

At the beginning of the 2000s, there was an increase in representation of LGBTQ+ youth, so I felt obligated to showcase that representation. I used a song from *Bare: The Musical* by Jon Hartmere, Jr. and Damon Intrabartolo and a monologue from *Dog Sees God* by Bert V. Royal to: (1) further illustrate the victimization of LGBTQ+ individuals and (2) illustrate how it was impacting youth specifically. There was also a return to using LGBTQ+ identities as the comedic relief of a show, which is why I then included the song “If You Were Gay” from *Avenue Q* by Jeff Whitty, Robert Lopez, and Jeff Marx.

There were many important milestones for LGBTQ+ theatre in the 2010s, and I chose *Fun Home* by Lisa Kron and Jeanine Tesori and *The Prom* by Saundra Mitchell, Matthew Sklar, Chad Beguelin, and Bob Martin to best illustrate that progress. LGBTQ+ youth continued to be represented in both of these musicals after a sudden drop-off in 2006. *Fun Home* was especially well-received and won many Tony awards (Morris, n.d.). I personally chose the song “Telephone Wire” because it’s one of the few times when LGBTQ+ youth have been depicted trying to talk about their sexuality with their parents, and I thought it was important to showcase this familial representation. Finally, I chose the song “Unruly Heart” from *The Prom* as the end to my performance project because of my opinion that *The Prom* is the first musical that LGBTQ+ youth could see and leave feeling empowered about their sexuality, despite the fact that it plays into the tragic victim repressive theme by having Emma be the victim of bullying and having to conceal her relationship with Alyssa. I especially felt that the following lyrics provided

an excellent contrast to the scenes from *The Drag* and *The Children's Hour* that started the project: “And nobody out there ever gets to define the life I’m meant to lead with this unruly heart of mine.”

By encompassing scenes that included empowerment, tragedy, and stereotypes, the performance project illustrates how LGBTQ+ representation has evolved over the past century, but also how some repressive elements continue to dominate LGBTQ+ representation in theatre. To view the performance project based on this research, please visit: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RN94PvP2j3g&t=91s>.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Moving Forward

This thesis examined the evolutionary relationship between LGBTQ+ representation on the political and theatrical stages. Despite progress made in both arenas, LGBTQ+ individuals are still subjected to the repressive tolerance administered by the straight cisgender individuals in power and by society at large. There are many steps still needed to unlock the confined cell in which we, as a community, are placed.

In theatre, we need to urge the creation of positive, empowering LGBTQ+ representation on stage where our sexuality is not the basis of the conflict and we are not continuously and dominantly portrayed in the same stereotypical manner. To be clear, I am not advocating for the erasure of stories that have been told. Many of them tackle real issues that the LGBTQ+ community has faced and continues to face. I am instead advocating for more proportional representation between negative and positive portrayals. This could include normalizing LGBTQ+ relationships for all ages and not

making their love the conflict, but rather making it a tool in resolving the conflict of the show. For example, one could keep the plot of *Dear Evan Hansen* but have Connor's parents be a gay couple, or one could keep the plot of *Next to Normal* but have Natalie's love interest be a woman. These are just two examples in which LGBTQ+ representation could have the depth of heterosexual representation without their sexuality being the basis of the conflict.

In the political arena, we must continue to fight for non-discrimination policies across the entire country and advocate for more LGBTQ+ representation in our government. It should not still be legal for someone to be fired, evicted, or denied services because of their sexual orientation or gender identity. The "Gay Panic Defense" should not still be an allowable legal defense for violent crime. It is also important to note our historical exclusion of the transgender movement in both the theatrical and political arenas. More positive, empowering transgender theatre pieces should be produced. More transgender individuals should be elected to public office. We cannot ignore that transgender women of color are being murdered at an alarming rate and that the majority of discriminatory legislation being introduced across the country right now is targeted toward the transgender community. We must lift ALL members of our community up, especially since transgender individuals were a leading force in the rise of the LGBTQ+ movement that has secured so many rights for our community. It is our duty to learn our history, learn from it, and use it to keep making progress.

Representation matters. Our stories matter.

APPENDIX

APPENDIX

List of “Gay Plays” in Chronological Order

PLAYS

- The Drag* by Mae West (1927)
The Children’s Hour by Lillian Hellman (1934)
No Exit by Jean-Paul Sartre (1944)
Auto-Da-Fé by Tennessee Williams (1945)
And Tell Sad Stories About the Death of Queens by Tennessee Williams (1957)
The Madness of Lady Bright by Lanford Wilson (1964)
The Haunted Host by Robert Patrick (1964)
The Killing of Sister George by Frank Marcus (1965)
Boys in the Band by Mart Crowley (1968)
Fifth of July by Lanford Wilson (1978)
Bent by Martin Sherman (1979)
Cloud 9 by Caryl Churchill (1979)
Last Summer at Bluefish Cove by Jane Chambers (1980)
Torch Song Trilogy by Harvey Fierstein (1982)
As Is by William Hoffman (1985)
The Normal Heart by Larry Kramer (1985)
Safe Sex by Harvey Fierstein (1987)
Pouf Positive by Robert Patrick (1989)
The Baltimore Waltz by Paula Vogel (1990)
Angels in America by Tony Kushner (1991)
Jeffrey by Paul Rudnick (1992)
Love! Valour! Compassion! by Terrence McNally (1994)
The Hungry Woman by Cherrie Moraga (1995)
Why We Have a Body by Claire Chafee (1996)
The Dying Gaul by Craig Lucas (1998)
Stop Kiss by Diana Son (1998)
Falling Man by Will Scheffer (1999)
The Laramie Project by Moises Kaufman (2000)
The Secretaries by Five Lesbian Brothers (2000)
Take Me Out by Richard Greenberg (2002)
I Am My Own Wife by Doug Wright (2003)
Dog Sees God by Bert V. Royal (2004)
Well by Lisa Kron (2006)
Indecent by Paula Vogel (2015)
Hir by Taylor Mac (2015)

MUSICALS

Cabaret (1966)
Applause (1970)
The Rocky Horror Show (1973)
A Chorus Line (1975)
La Cage Aux Folles (1983)
Kiss of the Spider Woman (1990)
Pageant (1991)
Falsettos (1992)
Rent (1994)
A New Brain (1998)
Hedwig and the Angry Inch (1998)
Road Show (1999)
Bare: The Musical (2000)
The Full Monty (2000)
The Producers (2001)
A Man of No Importance (2002)
Avenue Q (2003)
Zanna, Don't! (2003)
The Color Purple (2004)
Spring Awakening (2006)
The Book of Mormon (2011)
Kinky Boots (2012)
Fun Home (2013)
If/Then (2013)
It Shoulda Been You (2015)
The Prom (2016)
Everybody's Talking About Jamie (2017)

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