

“BENEATH THE SURFACE”: AN INTERVIEW WITH PLAYWRIGHT DANIEL CURZON

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The early winter sun is peeping timidly through the window of the Java Café, a nice cozy place on the corner of Ocean Avenue and Faxon in San Francisco. Daniel Curzon —or Dan, as he asked me to call him— comes in the café calmly and looks around trying to locate me. I am waiting for him, sitting right below a large print of one of the most famous of Frida Kahlo’s self-portraits, maybe a good omen for an artistic and literary morning with a playwright and novelist.

Dan is a warm, good-humored, big man who shakes my hand firmly and looks kindly right in your eye despite his natural shyness. He has been living in San Francisco since 1976, though he was born in Litchfield, IL, in 1938. His Catholic background and early education, and his initial academic studies at the University of Detroit provided him with an enormous amount of material for his plays and novels. Then in 1960, he transferred to Kent State University in Ohio, where he realized he was unequivocally homosexual. This fact obviously marked the rest of his life and both his literary and academic careers since, for being openly gay, he was banned, censored, threatened, fired, insulted, pursued, and even suffered financial deprivation.

Once in California, he became a real front-row witness to the Gay Liberation Movement in San Francisco, and can now speak freely as a living legend about those difficult years when Harvey Milk started to win the city’s support in the 1970s and the first rainbow flags began to color the streets. Ever since his first novel, *Something You Do in The Dark*, (1971) —“considered by many to be the first gay-liberation novel” as John Gettys put it (Nelson 91), or “a real novel, not a political tract” (Curzon 9), as Christopher Isherwood defined it — Daniel Curzon has never concealed his gay view in almost everything he has written and published.

His playwriting career has been prolific and varied, covering everything from full-length to one-act plays and from musicals to short sketches. Of this output some twenty-four plays can be classified explicitly as “gay plays.” His first produced play was the collection *Sex Show: An Evening of Satirical Skits*, which he wrote and directed in 1977, and which ran for six months in San Francisco and

was nominated for the Best Writing award by the Bay Area Theater Critics Circle. Since then, Curzon's dramatic work has been basically dominated by satire, the burlesque, and the politically incorrect, including gay identity and gay issues. His plays, according to Tom W. Kelly, comprise "harsh plot elements that reflect the harsh, unequivocal demands he makes on all of society, including the gay community itself" (103), and such is the case of *A History of Really, Really Bad Ideas*, *Beneath the Surface*, *So Middle Class*, *Your Town*, and many others.

His plays have also allowed him to work as a gay activist. When AIDS tragically and brutally burst into American gay lives, Curzon was one of those playwrights on the West Coast who pioneered the staging and representation of the suffering and devastation the disease was inflicting on gay people. In 1981, when Theater Rhinoceros started to create "important new work on important queer themes, a lot of shows on subjects that hadn't been addressed yet in mainstream theater" (Hurwit web), Curzon did his bit to help with "Rev. What's His Name?" in *The AIDS Show* in 1984, a satirical one-act comedy which won him a special award from the Bay Area Theater Critics Circle.

The interview that follows is an attempt to shed light on Curzon's dramatic work and a celebration of and homage to those gay American playwrights, so often overlooked, who strongly contributed to the struggle against a hegemonic system based on monolithic views on sexual identity. Gay drama is still alive and its roots are to be found in the work of playwrights who, like Daniel Curzon, played their part in the fight for rights and visibility.

Q. Who is Daniel Curzon?

A: Daniel Curzon is a construct I created out of Danny Brown from working-class Detroit, changing him from Catholic, repressed, depressed, guilty to gay, openly gay, militantly gay, atheistic, and productive in what I hope is literature.

Q. How would you define your literary career so far?

A: I have written many plays, novels, short stories. I like to call myself a Gay Pioneer, because I wrote about open gay topics long before they were "fashionable." In fact, they were dangerous. You could lose your family, your job, your friends, even your life not that long ago. It's still true in most of Africa today, as well as Eastern Europe. So it is hardly all smooth sailing for the topic nowadays. And yet not everything I write is "gay."

Q. Lots of books and handbooks have been published so far dealing with gay drama and gay theater. What's your opinion about the existence of an "American Gay Drama"? Does such a kind of drama exist as different from the rest?

A: I know something about British gay drama but not much about this in other countries. I think American gay drama has led the movement. And not everything

started with the Stonewall Riot in New York City. Some of us were feeling the same rumbling of rage on our own.

Q. In 1983, in *The Dramatist Guild Quarterly* you wrote “Gay Plays Still Make Straight Audiences Uncomfortable” in the “Letters to the Editor” section. It’s been more than thirty years now since that statement. Do you think gay plays still make straight audiences uncomfortable after all these years?

A: I think most straight men, however liberal, quake inside when they see two men kissing, never mind anything else more intimate. (They seem to like to see two women being intimate!) It depends on *where* the audience is. Audiences of gay men like, even demand, gay intimacy. But even in San Francisco, with its large immigrant (and often homophobic) population, there is hardly a stampede to gay plays or movies. I saw a Cirque de Soleil show in Las Vegas a few years ago. There was one “gay” male skit. The audience was very uncomfortable. Somebody even tried to trip one of the performers as he exited the stage. I think the antipathy is deeply rooted and will take a long time to disappear, if it ever does. Yet as of December, 2014, there is an absolute *obsession* with homosexuality among straight men: they can't keep themselves from flirting with it, running to and from it like maniacs. It just goes to show how ruthless the taboo against homosexuality has been, the fact that so much is made of *not* being it even as they can't shut up about it.

Q. In 1978, Richard Hall in one of his essays, “Gay Theater, Notes from a Diary” published alongside three of his plays in 1983 by Grey Fox Press, said that “A gay audience ‘invents’ a gay play” Do you agree?

A: Richard Hall was a lovely man, and I helped get those plays published by Donald Allen of Grey Fox Press, but I have no idea what he means by this statement. I suppose it could mean if enough gay men are reacting to a play by finding it camp or deliciously overripe, especially a movie, it becomes somehow a gay play. But I would define a gay play differently. I worked with Theater Rhinoceros in San Francisco, so I saw a lot of gay theater and to me “gay theater” means the characters are recognizably gay. Dealing with human issues, but the characters are no longer disguised as in having to change the sex of a character, nor are certain “heterosexual obsessions,” such as adultery, a big issue in gay male drama.

Q. Do you think gay drama is written or should be written to scandalize audiences — whether gay or straight— or just to make people —whether gay or straight— aware of particular aspects of gay life, or, simply put, should be written for gay activism?

A: Back in the 1970s it was revolutionary to show gay characters as major characters, with gay-specific problems, or *gays* with non-specifically gay problems, (or *gays* with non-specific urethritis!) It was scandalous to show two

men in bed or being intimate in a positive way. Gays had feelings! Their lives mattered?! I still think it is revolutionary to show gay men as full human beings: not just best buddies or funny sidekicks or foils to the straight characters. Depending on the audience, say, in a high school, you still would “scandalize” most audiences with overt male-male intimacy. I think it is still very easy to annoy or enrage people by two men holding hands in public. Currently it seems like every straight man is flirting with gayness, usually as a put-down, either overt or indirect. “Gay activism,” to me, has always meant being multi-dimensional and honest — as honest as you can be and still be theatrical. I think the word “stereotypical” is always a pejorative word. “Typical” is a better word to use for actual behavior, even if it is disliked behavior.

Q. Do you think that a generation of gay American playwrights ever existed? I mean, there were important and innovative gay dramatists in the 1980s such as Doric Wilson, Robert Patrick, Robert Chesley, Harvey Fierstein, or Richard Hall. Can we talk of a “Gay Dramatists Generation” in the 80s?

A: I know that Robert Patrick insists that “gay theater” began at the Caffè Cino in New York City in the 1960s. I was not part of that. My impression is that a lot of it was “read” as gay even though the specific subject matter was not *overtly* gay. He also believes that his *The Haunted Host* was the very first explicitly “gay” play. Some people point to Lanford Wilson’s *The Madness of Lady Bright*. But I have never seen that. I think there was a group of gay male playwrights in both New York City and San Francisco in the 1970s who were trying to write overtly, openly gay theater that would allow gays to write about their world without disguises. I did *Sex Show* in early 1977 in San Francisco. There had been one or two “gay” plays before that. Theater Rhinoceros soon followed me. Some of the New York City plays got more attention *merely* because they were in New York City. *Crimes Against Nature* ran at the same time as my *Sex Show*. It went to New York City and was dissed as “too San Francisco” —meaning touchy-feely, feminized, emotional.

Q. Do you feel you belong to any group or generation of gay American playwrights?

A: I think we were a loosely bound group of gay men who wanted to change the world's prejudices against us. I helped found Earnest Players in 1978, as a rival to Theater Rhinoceros. Later co-founder Dan Turner and I were voted off the Board and others stole our theater company from us. Yay, theater!

Q. Let’s talk about current gay American drama. Do you know about new gay American playwrights? Do you meet them or have any contact with them? What’s your opinion about new gay plays being produced and published in America or at least in California?

A: I can't say I have kept up very well on the newest gay plays. I have the feeling that much of gay theater has been embraced by American TV, with a gay character or two in just about every show. Theater Rhinoceros in San Francisco has lost its permanent theater home, and so its output is sporadic. It is also possible now to have what would have been restricted to a gay theater group performed by a non-gay theater. That was not possible when I started out.

Q. Within the full scope of canonical American Drama, it is almost impossible to find openly gay playwrights or plays, unless we regard Tennessee Williams as such. Can we assert that the ones in charge of designing an American Drama canon were homophobic? Or is it the quality of gay drama what has to be blamed for not finding room in canonical American Drama?

A: Many of the canonical American Drama playwrights were gay; they just could not write explicitly about gay subject matter. It had to be oblique or altered. I believe Edward Albee himself advised gay writers *not* to be explicit. "Homophobic" is too mild a word for the hatred and abuse and dismissive, vicious cruelty that was the fate of anyone daring enough to write about *that*. Such plays were also almost never produced, if they were ever written. If there were hints of *that*, the knives came out. That attitude is what some of us wanted to change.

Q. What are your expectations facing the current panorama of gay American drama? Are you somehow hopeful about a near future of gay American drama?

A: It's possible Gay American Drama as such will be like the period of Elizabethan Drama: a period of some thirty years of intense concentration.

Q. Some of gay American major dramatists such as Larry Kramer, or William Hoffmann, or Mart Crowley, or Terrence McNally and many others started to show gay lives on stage as an answer to homophobia and as a defense of gay rights. In your opinion, what is gay American drama's contribution to gay life today?

A: I loved *The Boys in The Band* in 1968 because it was a cry for gays to have less self-hatred. I remember seeing *Butley* in London about 1972 and being thrilled to see a gay character taken seriously. I think gay drama, in both stage and movie incarnations, has definitely changed perceptions of gay people, usually for the better. Before they were allowed to appear, people supplied their own ignorant fantasies about who we were and what we did.

Q. Why are critics so reluctant to consider gay drama as "serious drama"? Has gay drama been so involved with its own issues about gay life or so associated with *camp* that it cannot be classified but under the label of minor drama or non-serious drama?

A: I suspect that critics and others frequently make broad generalizations when they have not actually read or seen gay plays in any *quantity*. They also look only

to New York City for material. I do think there is a general critical devaluation of comedy of any kind (even about Chaucer) because weighty, heavy, dramatic texts seem, well, weightier. (My Shakespeare professor in college said even Shakespeare showed his dismissal of his comedies by their titles: *Much Ado About Nothing*, *As You Like It*, *Twelfth Night*, or *What You Will*, etc.) The problem with doing “serious” gay plays is that there is currently a *strong* rejection of gays as tragic figures (contrary to that is the success of *The Normal Heart* and *Brokeback Mountain*.) With my own gay plays I try for biting, satirical, even some noir comedy, because I think this way — and likewise I don't want to be dismissed as “lightweight.” My fiction at times is heavier.

Q. On this matter, when interviewed by Bruce Billings for *In Touch*, you stated that “Gays in particular seem to demand that their writers give them fun, fun, fun. But then they’ll turn around and bite the hand that tickles them.” Is it that a gay audience rejects humor when this deals with itself? Or is it that a gay audience does not like to watch itself parodied on stage?

A: When I said that, the taboo about *no more tragic gays* was very much in the air. Nobody gay wanted to see *sad* gays. Then we had AIDS —not exactly *fun*!! I don't think gays like to see themselves made fun of by outsiders. They may relish poking fun at themselves sometimes, but not if it is coming from the Enemy. I also think most audiences in most places prefer comedy over seriousness, or they want their seriousness with a big helping of comedy. Say, *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf* (by the way, I think Albee's *Who Is Sylvia?* is really his gay play. But he waited so long to do it, it was dated and so he changed the Other Man to a goat, a female goat.)

Q. The majority of your plays opened at San Francisco Bay area theatrical circuits, whether mainstream or not. Many of your gay plays were performed by San Francisco companies, whether gay or not, in the 1980s. Do you think San Francisco has lost the original gay avant-garde environment that it had in those years?

A: I started my professional theater career in early 1977 in San Francisco with *Sex Show* at the Gay Community Center. I acted alone because I saw nobody else doing it. I don't think gay theater per se is avant-garde now —except in Russia, or Gambia or Saudi Arabia!

Q. What did San Francisco mean for a young playwright like you?

A: I moved to California in 1974 to teach at Cal State —Fresno. I went up to San Francisco often and moved there in 1976. I was thirty-eight, not that young. San Francisco at that time represented openness, probably sex, throwing off the horrible shackles of the past. I recall making a very definite life decision when it was time to leave Fresno after my two-year job was up: go to Los Angeles and try to write for TV and movies, about non-gay subjects *or* move to San Francisco and

be a full part of what I thought was becoming a major socio-political movement. I think I made the right decision, though it meant economic hardship at the time.

Q. What was the difference in the 1980s, if any, between the gay theatrical activity of the West coast and the one of the East coast? Was there ever a tension between gay Broadway and the San Francisco Bay area gay theatrical environment?

A: I think some people like Robert Chesley went back and forth from New York City to San Francisco. But probably most worked out of one place or the other. In 1991 there was a show called *Homosexual Acts* in New York City that had plays by me, Robert Patrick, and others, from both coasts. I don't think there were very many "Broadway" gay plays in the 1970s or 1980s, more likely off-Broadway. I have always felt a certain tension, or rivalry, because everyone in New York City thought that New York City material was inherently superior to anything from the West Coast. (It was not.) I felt this with my off-Broadway *My Unknown Son*, when in fact the workshop production in Marin County, California was much better than it was in the Equity New York City production (1987 vs. 1988). It was also done at Circle Rep Lab in 1987 before being moved to the Kaufman Theater off-Broadway in October, 1988. New York has certain proclivities and preoccupations that are different from those in San Francisco. See my earlier comment on *Crimes Against Nature* as received rapturously in San Francisco but dismissed in New York City. New York also seems obsessed with Puerto Ricans.

Q. You published some of your early short stories and gay plays in magazines or periodicals for gay men, as was the case with "Last Call," which appeared in *The Alternate* in 1981, and other short stories in *Gay Times*, or in *Gay Sunshine*. Is it fair for a gay writer to publish his works only within a gay environment? That is, was the mainstream publishing arena so reluctant to gay issues in the late 1970s and the 1980s that gay literature had to be entrusted mainly to gay editors?

A: There was no place else at that time to publish anything gay. It was rejected, usually with an insult. Those magazines arose, no doubt, as a way to provide a home since none existed elsewhere.

Q. *The AIDS Show* was one of the first approaches to the pandemic that gay dramatists produced in America; your contribution to *The AIDS Show* — "Rev. What's His Name?" — was also winner of the special award from the Bay Area Theater Critics Circle in 1984. What did AIDS mean for gay American drama? What, in your opinion, did gay drama mean for AIDS in America?

A: I think it was the whole *AIDS Show* that won an award from the Bay Area Theater Critics Circle, not just my piece. The show was also published in *West Coast Plays*, edited by Robert Hurwitt. AIDS meant, alas, an unavoidable

confrontation with Tragic Gays, a theme that most gay people wanted to deny or run away from. The show was a wonderful combination of sketches that were both hilarious and/or heartbreaking. It took the AIDS epidemic on headlong. My skit was dropped from the Second Version of the show, the version that was made into a movie. It was dropped to make room for “lesbian material.” There has been a long-standing tension, even dislike, between gay males and lesbians about what should be in or out of gay theater, including the name “gay” for a long period in the 1980s. “Gay” for women only returned after Ellen Degeneres identified herself as “gay” instead of “lesbian.”

Q. In your opinion, to which extent did the gay culture monopolize AIDS as a source of artistic production in the 1980s?

A: There were a number of plays and such about AIDS in the 1980s. To be honest, I avoided writing about it for the theater. I did include it in my novel *The World Can Break Your Heart* (1984). I found it so painful I avoided most things dealing with AIDS. People around me were dying in great numbers, and it was hard to maintain any aesthetic distance. To name some: Richard Hall, Robert Chesley, Dan Turner, Martin Zero (in the cast of my *Cinderella II*), and on and on.

Q. What do you think AIDS means today for gay artists and especially for gay American drama?

A: I think time has made it a “safe” topic for theater, movies. Now a straight man can win an Oscar for playing somebody with AIDS. I don’t know for sure, but I believe there are very few *plays* about that subject now, given that it is a disease that can be “maintained” better than it was at first.

Q. Between 1975 and 1976 you edited and published *Gay Literature, A New Journal*, in Fresno; what did it mean in your career as a gay writer and playwright?

A: It provided a place to publish “literary” gay work, as a counter to porn magazines. I don’t think I had room for many plays, just short stories, poems, essays. Most people, I find, do not like to *read* plays of any kind. (There were some who grumbled that I used my English Department mailing address for *Gay Literature*. I still have a bunch of them in my garage!)

Q. When facing the amount of your literary work, one can easily notice that you wrote and published more narrative than drama; does it mean that both the publishers and the media were more interested in your novels and stories than in your plays?

A: Novels and short stories may take up more space than plays do. I have never calculated how much of one kind vs. the other I have written. Usually it is harder to get plays published unless they have won a prize or been prominently produced, especially in New York City. I have written some forty full-length plays at this point plus maybe the same number of one-acts. I decided to POD (Publish on

Demand) my *Collected Plays* so that I would not have to rely on anybody else getting them in order, with the most polished version.

Q. Regarding your style, most critics agree that it is clearly ironic, satirical and even parodic; taking this to your gay dramatic production, what aspect do you satirize and parody most in your plays?

A: I *rarely* do “parodies,” except for *Pixies in Peril* (of *The Hobbit*). I don’t believe parodies usually have any deeper purpose than to spoof the original. They have no life on their own. I think mine do. Overall I would call what I do either satirical or realistic. I have a few “soft” or “sweet” things here and there. Generally, though, I think my literary output, in both plays and novels, is mocking or “punishing” things I don’t like — such as Catholicism or Muslim fanaticism. (*The Blasphemer*, never produced). I tell off or get back at things that have made my life unpleasant: being arrested by the Vice Squad in Detroit, being told things are Sacred Cows or politically *incorrect*. Says who? One has to gauge the *Zeitgeist* to know just how far one can go to ridicule whatever it is. At other times I feel sorry for people, for the human condition, since people have limited lives. Sometimes I want to comfort them. Sometimes I want to slap them! Lately, I have been writing things where I think you are not allowed to violate the confines, the expectations of readers and audience members. By this I don’t mean just the “scandalous” or “outrageous,” but things that are not “acceptably scandalous” or “acceptably outrageous” but *really over the top*. I feel a writer can be more daring in a novel or short story than in the theater. The theater demands *applause*, thus agreement. It is difficult to get people to applaud for the *truly outrageous* as opposed to the *fake outrageous*. For example, *fake outrageous* would be showing full frontal nudity; *truly outrageous* would be five drug addicts in a toilet shooting up to see who can die first. Another example: a play about a woman seeking to have an abortion, thwarted and stopped by various characters —but then she succeeds and the play ends with her having an abortion and throwing the fetus at the audience. I think the theater generally requires a liberal attitude, however false it may really be.

Q. Which do you regard as the most satirical among your “gay plays”? What particular aspect is the most satirized in your gay plays?

A: In a recent play, *The Importance of Being Cecily, or Cecil* (not yet produced) I make fun of the “progressive” liberal in the character of Miss Prizzin, who is a self-righteous prig *a la* San Francisco — though the setting is Victorian England. Usually it is right-wing characters who are pilloried in plays. I thought it more daring and more important to do it to the politically *correct*, who are the Puritans of our day. I have satirized conservative Christian preachers and just about anybody else who is pompous. In *When Bertha Was A Pretty Name* I satirize homophobes — the French mother, the one-legged fiancé. Tell me I can’t make fun

of certain people, and I think, “Hmm, oh yeah.” If I am not sweating a bit about the reception, I feel I am not doing my job.

Q. According to the many sketches, skits, and one-act plays you have written and published, one could assert that your themes and plots are taken from everyday life. Does everyday life stretch that much?

A: I think many of my plays are inspired by my reaction to being irritated — like a pearl, only more butch! One also must pick subject matter than can be *performed on a stage by human beings* if it is a play. A novel can be more expansive. I think I write “*What If*” plays (what if this were to happen?) and plays that are *this happened* plays, always shaped for drama of course.

Q. What would you recommend to active playwrights living in such an urban environment like San Francisco?

A: I used to tell my creative writing students to get inside a good theater company, become invaluable there, and then gradually insinuate their plays into the right hands. Also, if nobody will do your work, get three friends together, rent a theater, and put on a show. *But* the work needs to be good, re-written, vetted by others, not just slapped together and put up sloppily.

Q. Looking back in your professional life, what is the best experience you have ever had? Would you change anything? Among all your professional experiences in your career, do you regret anything?

A: My best professional experience ever was: October 1, 1970, when I had just moved to London and got a letter from my agent saying that she had sold *Something You Do in The Dark* to G. P. Putnam. It was a mainstream publisher publishing an angry protest novel about how homosexuals were viciously mistreated (with the implication being that the world needed to change what *it* was doing). The best theatrical experience was the staged reading of *My Unknown Son* in Marin County, California in 1987, where the play was picked up by a visiting director from New York City and taken to the Circle Rep lab in New York that October, followed by an Equity production off-Broadway in October, 1988. The worst experience also came from this off-Broadway production because the one actor carried over from the Circle Rep Lab production (playing the Unknown Son) was not able to give a consistent performance in the role and varied *enormously* from night to night. The night the eleven major critics came, he was off, destroying my chance for a long run. In novel-writing, my greatest regret came in 1968, when my New York literary agent had an offer from New American Library to do my first completed novel, called *A Crooked Eye*. The editor wanted me to change the ending to make it a happy one. It was to be a paperback original. I was naive and snobbish both: a paperback? For me? Paperback? But it was a story of a gay man's crush on a straight housemate. I did not think they would become a couple. I should have jumped at the chance. Instead I said no. I could have had a published novel three years before *Something You Do in The Dark*.

Q. What's your next project? Are you planning a new play?

A: I have written the un-collected *Mean Enough For Ya?* —A 44-page play in what I guess is a phase I'm going through— that is, writing plays that I feel violate what you can say on the stage in this time. Again, I mean with subject matter that is *truly outrageous* vs. *acceptably outrageous*. I think I will also steal from my novel *Saving Jane Austen* (2012) and take the episodes there where I have Ms. Austen (come back to our time, writing her new novel) based on my real-life episodes with a famous woman novelist, who shall remain un-named. This woman gave me some of the best and *worst* moments of my life.

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