

GAY MEN ONLY, PLEASE! THE “PERFORMANCE” OF GAY IDENTITY IN TERRENCE MCNALLY’S *LOVE! VALOUR! COMPASSION!*

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The Stonewall Riots of June 29, 1969¹ marked the (r)evolution of gay-themed plays in American drama. Before Stonewall, male homosexuality on stage was disguised or at its best depicted with a negative or even a pejorative discourse and did not dare to openly speak about itself. If any, plays about homosexual men or featuring homosexual characters whether reflected their self-hatred and internalised homophobia or were the target of heterosexual characters’ abuse, scorn, or mockery. Mart Crowley’s *The Boys in the Band* (1968) is considered to be the turning point of the representation of homosexuality in American gay drama. The play’s greatest innovation was to show people that homosexuals are people too. “Gay plays” have flourished in the years since Crowley’s success. From his undeniable hit on, male homosexual identity on centre stage has often been represented conscientiously as self-confident and proud instead of being explored in the pathological areas of the margins it usually was left to dwell. Even though the play was certainly not the first popular drama to have gay characters, it was the first mainstream play to show gay men in their own environment, interacting with one another. However, Crowley’s play can be depicted as a bitter segment of gay history in that it vividly portrayed the way in which a group of gay men suffered from self-deprecation within a depressing environment. Instead of gay pride, *The Boys in the Band* displays nine unhappy men who spend a birthday-party evening among bickering, alcohol, jealousy and regret.

Twenty-six years after Crowley’s play achieved a groundbreaking success (it ran for over one thousand performances), another southern playwright, Terrence McNally, staged a similar play at Broadway. *Love! Valour! Compassion!* premiered at the Manhattan Theatre Club in New York and opened on November 1, 1994. The

¹ In the early morning of June 28, 1969, police officers raided the Stonewall Inn, a gay bar in Greenwich Village, New York. The police arrested employees and began ejecting the customers (mainly drag queens and butch lesbians) onto the street. The crowd that had gathered outside the bar –mainly from the gay neighbouring clubs– erupted and began throwing stones and bottles onto the patrol, which had to take refuge inside the bar. After hours of street fighting, the police could finally control the rioting crowd. That night, thousands of gay demonstrators flocked the streets around the Stonewall Inn. Once again there were serious clashes between demonstrators and the police until the early hours of June 29. A month later, the Gay Liberation Front was formed.

production subsequently transferred to Broadway where it opened at the Walter Kerr Theatre on January 20 next year, and ran for 248 performances. Among the five categories it was nominated for at the 49th Annual Tony Awards, it won two: best actor (John Glover) and best play. Thus, *Love! Valour! Compassion!* stands out along with the only three American gay plays –Harvey Fierstein’s *Torch Song Trilogy* (1983), David H. Hwang’s *M. Butterfly* (1988) and Tony Kushner’s *Angels in America: Millennium Approaches* (1993)– which gathered so many awards and nominations from a mainstream theatrical organization since Stonewall. As Don Shewey points out: “[since *Torch Song Trilogy*] it seemed like out gay theatre had hit the mainstream and was there to stay” (134). McNally’s *Love! Valour! Compassion!* creates an almost hermetic environment where there is no place for anybody else. Eight gay men, WASP urban professionals, spend three summer weekends –the acts of the play– at a charming Victorian lakeside country house in upstate New York. They swim, play tennis, make meals, listen to serenade piano songs, sunbathe nude, lament about AIDS and, finally, dance together to Tchaikovsky’s *Swan Lake* in drag as a rehearsal for a charity performance.

Both *The Boys in the Band* and *Love! Valour! Compassion!* share obvious similarities –they show exclusively a group of gay New York men on stage within a celebration framework (a birthday party and three summer national holidays) in the tradition of domestic realism; they display particular gay types (the longtime loving couple, the flamboyant effeminate and the exotic handsome straight-acting homosexual); and they both were widely acclaimed at Broadway before being adapted to the screen in 1970 and 1997 respectively. But there are as many similarities as differences. Whereas *The Boys in the Band* accentuates a self-hating homosexual group, *Love! Valour! Compassion!* emphasizes the sense of family and community in a self-assertive mood; whereas the first regrets the group’s mediocrity, the second shows a bourgeois gay way of life. But the major difference between them is that whereas Crowley’s play particularizes a view of gay identity, McNally’s idealizes it. Particular discourses cast the homosexual as a segregated, distinct identity, while generalized ones make society integrate gay men into it. If *The Boys in the Band* is a play about homosexual men whose homosexuality is the only item which drives the plot forward, *Love! Valour! Compassion!*’s main intention, in McNally’s words, is “to tell everyone else who we are when they aren’t around” (xii), that is, the play takes the gay background and way of life totally for granted and uses it as a legitimate basis for a particular section of human experience which happens to be gay.

However, the key for the success of *Love! Valour! Compassion!* not only lies in the aforementioned factors but also in how gay identity is constructed, or better re-constructed as a generalised subject. What McNally conveys and reproduces through eight gay subjectivities is a representation of, once the subversive and repressed, now the normative and official (cfr. Savran 66). From the point of

view of Queer Theory, identity is always socially and discursively produced. According to Judith Butler, all gender identities represent a kind of drag performance insofar as all are produced through acts of impersonation; hence it is only by means of repetition through which any identity could be constructed: “[g]ender is a kind of imitation for which there is no original; in fact, it is a kind of imitation that produces the very notion of the original as an effect and consequence of the imitation itself” (Salih 127). By using the conventions of the gay way of life and strategies of self-assertiveness and appropriation, *Love! Valour! Compassion!* positions gay identity as normative in itself, one which vindicates itself as natural and thus repeating the longstanding binary category (heterosexual/ homosexual) here inversely displayed as homosexual /heterosexual. Queer Theory pays attention to this fact, that is, it takes sexual identity as a simulation of an absent reality only constructed by means of repetition because its meanings do not possess any central, authentic and original truth. Therefore, this identity requires a constant “performance” in which these meanings could take shape. This is the reason why “performance” is put in inverted commas in the title of this paper. It associates the idea of the social and discursive construction of gay identity as “acted” by individuals with its performance on stage, which in turn leads to the idea of repetition.

If we could classify “gay drama” as a subgenre, there would certainly be some common characteristics underneath the majority of the plays labelled as “gay”. Since 1970 and the success of *The Boys in the Band* the majority of gay plays generally share three main features, namely the exhibition of the (gay) male body, the discourse of AIDS and the use of camp imagery. Some of these, such as the exhibition of nudity, started emerging sporadically as a result of Stonewall in the 1970s, although there were some signs in previous decades in the plays of William Inge or Tennessee Williams. AIDS discourse practically erupted on stage right after the first cases of the disease detected in 1982 and will remain since then, particularly in the so called “AIDS plays”. The use of camp –and drag, its most obvious expression– seems to go across these plays in the shape of different expressions, especially style, scenery, costumes and speech. According to John M. Clum, one of the most recognized critics on American drama, in his *Still Acting Gay*: “McNally seems to be consciously placing his characters within the framework of canonical gay drama” (268). The playwright had previously staged some plays in which gay identity took up the stage such as *The Lisbon Traviata* (1989) or *Lips Together, Teeth Apart* (1991). But it is with *Love! Valour! Compassion!* that McNally will clearly respond to the aforementioned features of gay (canonical) drama in that it creates a “normative” construction of gay identity.

Good and nice looks and an attractive and desirable body gradually became a commonplace within “gay culture” since the early 1960s. The phenomenon is not new –using a nice body to advertise a particular product is something usual from

the marketing point of view². But given the access of homosexual discourse to mainstream culture, the exhibition of the male body represents a central element and focus of desire. Drama was not alien to this reality and, in fact, when “gay drama” turned increasingly from Off-off-Broadway theatres to the Broadway ones, male nudity became a convention as the female body did for the cinema. In the 1970s the naked male body is exhibited on stage for pleasure, to produce self-delight and provocation, and as David Savran states, the theatre grants multiple identifications and desires, and such an ability enables it to become the most utopian cultural production (cfr. Solomon & Minwalla 164); that is, members of the audience feel questioned about the very nature of the theatre in order to adopt multiple positions and to desire multiple models to identify with so that they can enjoy the pleasure produced by the instability of categories, as Butler puts it (cfr. Salih 121). Such an instability is reinforced by the fact that the spectator is never able to separate character from actor so that he/she always identifies with one and desires both –an absence clearly designated (character) and a physical presence (actor), or, in Clum’s words:

[nudity] creates self-consciousness as audience members focus momentarily on their own responses. That moment briefly changes the dynamics of theater, as audience fragments into different interpretive communities and the dramatic illusion is lost in favor of a real physical presence. (*Still* 20).

Moreover, as Margaret Walters maintains, “in modern western cultures the exposed body is emotionally charged and potentially subversive” (11). The relationship between body and male homosexuality could be established by introducing the

² As regards male bodies, this convention lies in a cultural change undergone by the United States during the Second World War and postwar years. Display of power, vigour, strength and aggressive masculinity favoured a national image which returned to the old myth of West conquerors: rough, hefty and brave men who managed to build a country by means of work, sweat and effort. Michael Bronsky specifies it: “The presentation of the male body in U.S. culture began to change after World War II. Men returning from the war felt more at ease with their physical selves. Photos in *Life* and *Look* featured soldiers and sailors (almost exclusively white) casually shirtless or displaying muscled bodies while working on a base or at the front. Before the war, it was accepted practice for men to cover their torsos at the beach, a fashion that changed when the armed forces, in an attempt to conserve material, issued only bathing trunks to the troops” (*Pleasure* 89). Two more items should also be added: firstly, the masculine image created by Hollywood and cinema industry during the 40s and 50s. Actors such as Victor Mature, Kirk Douglas, Burt Lancaster or John Payne featured in the films with their naked torsos at the end of the 40s and late 50s: “Not only had the war made public male eroticism more acceptable, but Hollywood now perceived that female audiences were actively interested in looking at men’s bodies” (*Pleasure* 89). Precisely the film *From Here to Eternity* (1953) recreated various soldiers’ lives during the Japanese attack in Pearl Harbour, and contains that famous torrid scene showing young, handsome, muscular Burt Lancaster seducing Deborah Kerr on the beach. A second element was the growing influence of advertisements on female magazines: they create a desired and eroticised male image with a view to marketing particular products, such as perfumes or underwear.

concept of subversion into a discussion of the male body. The nude body emphasizes the equivalence between gay and heterosexual men; but the freedom of unfolding male genitalia, forcing their contemplation and taking delight in them, and the assumption that this vision is pleasurable is what makes gay identity be reinforced and *performative*.

In McNally's play, the image of nude bodies also underlines an appropriation of this cultural convention by gay culture; the interchange of glances, caresses, hugs, kisses and sexual intercourse between two men (whether on stage or off) proliferates in such a way that it entails an underlined nakedness and an overemphasised identity. In fact, as Savran points out, *Love! Valour! Compassion!* exploits "proudly and voyeuristically, the buff bodies and physical endowments of [the actors playing roles of] upwardly mobile gay men" (63) selectively. McNally seems to be using only the best of gay culture since the bodies presented are attractive, young and white, precisely the core appeal of canonical and official gay culture. By using a *spectrum of visibility* –in Drukman's terms (122), or the *male gaze* using Laura Mulvey's words (cfr. 6-18)–, the dramatist constantly appeals to our sense of sight in his play. From different scenes –in which three or four characters get undressed for various reasons– to the final scene of the play where the eight men have a bath in the lake ("[e]veryone is taking off his clothes to go swimming now. One by one we see the men at the rear of the stage undress and go into the lake. As they go into the water and swim out, the sound of their voices will fade away" (142), McNally does not only celebrate gay male friendship, but also the male nude body. The gay way of life is visually exposed frankly and naturally as the characters exhibit their bodies in an uninhibited fashion.

But there is a particular character who could be taken as the epitome of nakedness in the play. Ramón, the hunky Latin dancer and John's new boyfriend, stands as the play's focus of desire –he spends most of the play naked. At the beginning of act one he starts calling the others' attention on his body, especially his genitalia, by deliberately dropping the towel around his waist after a bath in the lake:

RAMÓN: Don't believe him. It's freezing! (*He drops his towel*) ¡Ay! ¡Coño!
¡Madre de Dios! [...] My nuts. Where are they? I have no nuts. They're gone.

GREGORY: They're not gone. Um. They're just. Um. Hiding. (*JOHN and BUZZ have returned.*)

RAMÓN: I had enormous nuts. I was famous for my nuts. Where are my fabulous nuts? [...] Hi, Buzz. I had balls. He doesn't believe me. Tell him about my balls, John.

JOHN: Ramón had legendary balls up until twenty minutes ago. (26-7).

In the same way, at the beginning of act two, McNally's stage direction makes the characters and us focus again on Ramón's nude body:

The MEN are singing 'In the Good Old Summertime'. As they move apart, they reveal RAMÓN sprawled naked on an old-fashioned wooden float at a distance offshore. One by one, they stop singing, turn around, and take a long look back at RAMÓN splayed on the raft. Even BOBBY. (65)

His Latin features, muscles and handsome face lend him an exotic air which becomes erotically charged and appealing for the rest of the Anglo-Saxon group. The author, on purpose, introduces Ramón to us through his body and makes him the perfect personification of the so called *gay culture's* official convention: the compulsive display of the body.

There is still another character upon whom the gay gaze is placed. Bobby – Gregory's lover – is blind but young and handsome. He is characterized with angel-like looks (20, 24). Bobby is Ramón's object of desire. His innocence gets stained by means of accidents which have to do with fluids: milk and semen, in act one (where he drops a bottle of milk while seduced by Ramón in the kitchen and cuts his foot with shards of glass, 10-12), and blood and saliva in act two:

RAMÓN: My prayers weren't being answered. I thought I would explode.

BOBBY: Ow! (*He's gotten a splinter from the raft*) [...] (*RAMÓN takes BOBBY's finger, puts it in his mouth, sucks out the splinter, and spits it out*) (*BOBBY kisses RAMÓN this time passionately, and then disappears back into the lake*) [...] (72-3).

McNally meticulously establishes the rules for what seems to be politically correct in an official gay world and at the same time celebrates the object of desire of this identity, that is, the male body. In this sense, the author also makes use of this convention by introducing items of gay culture such as magazines or periodicals. It is not difficult to find advertisements in any magazine (whether gay or straight) whose appeal lies in the erotic presentation of the body. In *Love! Valour! Compassion!*, Ramón uses an advertisement to call the others' attention on his body:

RAMÓN: (*holding a magazine*) Okay, here he is, I found him. Gather around, gentlemen.

BUZZ: It was after lunch and Ramón was having a hard time convincing us of an adventure he claimed to have had on the island of Mykonos.

RAMÓN: That's him. I swear on my mother's life. [...]

PERRY: First you said he was a model for Calvin Klein's Obsession. Now he's the model for –

RAMÓN: I can't keep all those names straight, but I don't forget a face and body like that. [...] Fuck you. I don't care. But the next time you see his picture or you're tossing in your beds thinking about him, just remember: somebody had him and it wasn't you. I know how that must burn your asses. (*He goes. The others stay with the magazine*) [...]

PERRY: The thought of Ramón and his possible encounter with the Obsession Man hung over the house like a shroud. We all wanted him and never would – (91-2).

First of all, whether Ramón is lying or not, the scene catches a group of gay men who rest their eyes on a Calvin Klein perfume advertisement whose brand is precisely *Obsession*,³ not randomly chosen by McNally. Secondly, Ramón stands as the only “model” in the play who maintains he had relationships with the model in the ad, thus involving them in an obvious parallel. Third, although the group seems not to believe him, they keep on looking at the man in the magazine, which stresses the gay gaze’s delight; and fourth, by Perry’s final words we conclude that the presence of a male body in a consumption product from gay culture leads the characters to project this image on the Latin, thus eroticising his physique. Therefore, this clever association of images –Calvin Klein model / Ramón– that McNally establishes under the title *Obsession* makes the audience also read the male body through products consumed by gay culture.

These paradigms about the male gay body in *Love! Valour! Compassion!* not only function to create a self-conscious assertion and celebration of gay identity, but also to reverse the old hegemonic binary categorizations, as it was mentioned above. According to structuralist paradigms, western culture tends to read reality into binary pairs, from which the first term is always privileged upon the second. But categorization based on fixed paradigms is achieved within the same gay identity portrayed in the play. McNally builds new binary patterns based on race, age and even health status. Ramón is treated as an inferior by the men in the play, who only stare at him in a lustful way. He is just seen as a focus of desire, not as a good dancer, and so becomes the target for pejorative remarks such as “[John’s] Third World boyfriend” (35) or “I don’t think English is Ramón’s first language” (37). On the other hand, Arthur describes Ramón as *hot* (18), and swims in the lake to meet him on the raft. Perry, his lover, wonders: “Should I be trusting my lover skinny-dipping with a horny Puerto Rican modern dancer?” (84). Perry mistrusts Ramón not only because Arthur feels attracted to Ramón, but also because he follows the Anglo-Saxon stereotyped pattern on Latinos: the macho’s ability of seduction (cfr. Carrier 215). The young Latin is also the subject for the construction of a new binary category: young gay man/old gay man. Gregory, in his late forties, becomes obsessed by his declining looks, which prevent him from dancing. Ramón notices it and tells him: “You’re old and you’re scared and you don’t know what to do about it. [...] I’m young and I’m not scared and I’m coming after you” (118); Gregory will acknowledge this when he later realizes that Ramón is spying him when rehearsing: “Gregory was suddenly a forty-three-year old man whose body had began to quit in places he’d never dreamed of, looking at a twenty-two-year-old dancer who had his whole career ahead of him” (127-28); the same happens when he

³ The model who posed for this Calvin Klein’s perfume publicity campaign was Brian Rishwain. The advertisement actually showed a Latin man. (cfr. <<http://pobox.upenn.edu/~davidtoc/calvin.html>> 24 Sept. 2002).

makes comments on Arthur's body: "You know, you got a nice ass for someone your age" (85). Even Bobby will leave Gregory for someone younger:

BOBBY: I'm sorry.

GREGORY: What was his name?

BOBBY: Luke. [...]

GREGORY: It was my age.

BOBBY: No.

GREGORY: It was my age.

BOBBY: Yes [...] I'm sorry I couldn't stay with you. (138-39)

Thus, Bobby and Ramón are the only characters in the play exhibited as models for vigour, youth, beauty and sexual appeal, who become nearly an obsession for the others. As Clum points out: "McNally shows his erotic inclinations. Youth is sexy; age isn't. Youth is idealistic and optimistic; age is anxious and cynical" (*Still* 280). The playwright makes it clear that old bodies are not attractive anymore and fulfils one of the conventions within canonical gay culture, that is, body cult and the worship of youth.

If the exhibition of the gay male naked body on stage represented a threat and subversion during the 1970s, this male homosexual body will remain in the 1980s and 1990s but with a distinct element which underlies the majority of gay plays –the AIDS discourse. The homosexual body as a victim of the great pandemic of the 1980s is completely different from the healthy, nurtured and attractive homosexual body of the previous years; the gay body is now read as weak, sickly and corrupted. People with AIDS, or better said, the homosexual infected with HIV was seen as the obvious sign for the inevitable "giving in" to homosexual desire. But in the middle nineties, AIDS discourse had entered the mainstream with a different articulation: a gay man with AIDS is not any more a pervert put to death as a result of giving himself to lust (cfr. Clum, *Still* 36). Thus, an intense campaign started in order to repair a damaged image of gay identity caused by AIDS. Apart from fighting against Reagan, Bush and Clinton's health programs policies, one of the most effective strategies mostly used by gay associations was to regain a positive image of gayness by means of touching and moving American public opinion.

Like most plays addressing gay issues, AIDS is all present in McNally's *Love! Valour! Compassion!* but in a sort of silenced presence, as Drukman concludes: "The disease informs all of the scenes: in the house on fire, in the hate-drenching saliva, and in McNally's encodings of the dangers of vision/desire" (126). In fact, Buzz is the one who will fine anyone who mentions the acronym during the holidays precisely because he suffers the effects of HIV: "That's five dollars. Anyone who mentions AIDS this summer, it'll cost them."* Apart from this, AIDS is only addressed in private conversations regarding the charity performance they are rehearsing. AIDS is assigned its place from the beginning of the play in a sort of

silenced presence, and even only shared by the characters who undergo its effects. But their conversations articulate a positive discourse of the disease instead of a self-loathing or self-lamenting one. Buzz and James, the characters with AIDS and the only ones characterized as effeminate, become lovers in act three. Their love relationship seems to be perfect, unlike those depicted in most AIDS plays:

JAMES: After my bath, Buzz (and I never remotely thought in my wildest imaginings that I would be making love to someone called Buzz and saying things like: “I love you, Buzz”, or “How do you take tea, Buzz?”), this same, wonderful Buzz wrapped me in the biggest, toastiest bath sheet imaginable and tucked me safely into that lovely big chair by the window in the corner of our room (124).

Through the terms used by James, McNally proposes an exemplary relationship. The insistence on love and affection, the use of superlatives –which denote the intensity of the romance–, and “wonderful” Buzz’s attentive care change the audience’s attention from a tremendous disease to a loving couple. Thus, we have to take pity on them taking into consideration their warm and kindly personalities and their incredible romance. James and Buzz’s love makes us displace our view from the horror of HIV effects towards a loving couple, thus provoking the audience to be moved and touched and to accept them as just tender human beings. We do not witness a rotten body but a body reconstructed by means of empathy, affection and love.

Body lesions provoked by AIDS related diseases and particularly Kaposi sarcoma became the clearest signs of the effects of the pandemic which arouse certain levels of disgust at first sight.⁴ In *Love! Valour! Compassion!* a conversation between Buzz and James takes place which, apart from dealing with Kaposi sarcoma lesions to illustrate the effects of the disease, also exudes tender sensibility which moves to pity:

(BUZZ finally looks at James)

BUZZ: How sick are you?

JAMES: I think I’m pretty good nick, but my reports read like something of Nostradamus. (*He looks at BUZZ*) I should have died six months ago.

BUZZ: Try eighteen. Do you have any lesions?

JAMES: Only one, and I’ve had it for nearly a year.

BUZZ: Where is it?

JAMES: In a very inconvenient spot.

⁴ Kaposi’s sarcoma is a type of cancer. The cancer cells cause an overgrowth of small blood vessels, which in turn form small tumours (spots or blotches) called lesions. Frequently, Kaposi sarcoma lesions appear first on the tip of the nose or the soles of the feet. These lesions appear reddish-purple in light-skinned people and bluish or brownish-black in dark-skinned people. Although some people without HIV infection can get Kaposi sarcoma, HIV-related Kaposi sarcoma is much more common and aggressive (Cfr. <<http://www.gmhc.org>>).

BUZZ: They're all inconvenient. May I see it?

JAMES: It's –All right. (*He pulls up his shirt and lets BUZZ see the lesion*) I have a lesbian friend in London who's the only other person who's ever asked me to see it. I was quite astonished when she did. Touched actually. Mortified, too, of course. But mainly touched. Somebody loves me, even if it's not the someone I've dreamed of. [...] Are you through? (*BUZZ kisses the lesion.*) Gwyneth didn't go that far. It doesn't disgust you?

BUZZ: It's going to be me. [...]

JAMES: You learn to make friends with them. Hello, little lesion. Not people you like specially, but people you've made your peace with.

BUZZ: You're very nice, you know.

JAMES: Frankly, I don't see how I can afford not to be.

BUZZ: No, I mean it.

JAMES: So are you. (75-76)

Through Buzz's questions, the audience is forced to focus its sight on the lesions and to indulgently contemplate the marks of the disease on James's body. But James's attitude is what softens the looks of the lesions and makes the spectator feel compassion instead of disgust. On the one hand, James uses humour to lessen both the terminal phase of his disease and the anti-aesthetic look of the lesions themselves; on the other hand we attend to the patient's comforting reaction when he learns about somebody's solidarity. But Buzz goes beyond and kisses James's lesions as a sign of empathy. His action, far from arousing his disgust, shows his affection. As Clum puts it: "AIDS drama may not be erotic, but unabashedly romantic, even at its most violent" ("Where" 62). The scene conditions us to consider it as an intentioned underlining of a love which transcends gender barriers, and as a reflection on any kind of relationship between two human beings. Although we also have Buzz and James referring to their deaths (137), McNally's point is to show that gay people suffer as everybody else does and that we all will die anyway. The author is not leaving AIDS horror out, but underlining that AIDS is one of the many ways of dying. McNally's gay characters with AIDS show how much the world has to learn from them and how to live happily with a lethal virus. He himself feels proud of how he succeeded in moving the audience: "[w]hat I'm really proud of is that everyone has tolerated and accepted an enormous amount of affection and tenderness between men" (Zinman "Muses" 14). The reception of the play, in this sense, points to how homosexuality had accommodated and normalized itself within mainstream American drama.

The more AIDS epidemic spread, the more new research increased. From the moment when HIV was isolated by the middle 80s until AZT was available, scientists managed to establish how the disease spread and the means to avoid it, and even to prevent some HIV infected individuals from developing AIDS symptoms. Thus a new binary opposition was created, as Roman states:

Once armed with HIV-negative test results, many gay men defined themselves in opposition to, and at the expense of, gay men testing positive. One of the first means by which HIV-negative gay men defined themselves as HIV-negative gay men was through the formation of HIV-positive gay men as other. (226)

This opposition created a new *closet*. Radical activism tended to marginalize men with HIV negative test results, which led them to hide it. Outing as a HIV negative meant an attitude opposed to radical gay activism policies against AIDS. The new binary played a major role in several plays whose aim was making the audience aware of the problem and move it to discussion and action.⁵ But McNally uses this binary categorization to emotionally move the audience to pity. Indeed James and Buzz are confronted with Perry and Arthur in a bucolic scene where both couples are paddling in the lake. The image becomes a metaphor of how HIV negative and HIV positive gay men have contact with each other. As David Román points out: “Although they are ‘paddling’ through the same waters, they are not in the same boat” (250):

PERRY: Fourteen years. I haven’t been perfect. Just lucky.

ARTHUR: I’ve been perfect.

PERRY: Sure you have!

ARTHUR: Do you ever feel guilty?

PERRY: No, grateful. Why, do you?

ARTHUR: It used to be nearly all the time. No, first I was just scared. Then the guilt. Massive at first. Why not me? That lingers, more than the fear. We’ve never really talked about this. [...] Every time I look at Buzz, even when he’s driving me crazy, or now James, I have to think, I have to say to myself, “Sooner or later, that man, that human being, is not going to be standing there washing the dishes or tying his shoelace.” (120-21)

By focusing on Arthur and Perry’s conversation, McNally distinguishes both identities by having the characters undergo the same experience though shared in a different way. The scene not only puts forward a new categorization and the silence around HIV negativity but also the survivors’ resulting guilt that accompanies this silence (cfr. Roman 251). The scene finishes with a dialogue which makes clearer this lack of communication between both identities:

ARTHUR: Hello! They see us.

BUZZ: We’ll see you at dinner.

PERRY (to BUZZ and JAMES) You want to race?

ARTHUR: Perry!

BUZZ: What?

⁵ The clearest examples of this new reality and its consequences were *Jeffrey* (1993), by Paul Rudnick, *Naked Breath* (1994), by Tim Miller, and *A Language of Their Own* (1995), by Chay Yew.

ARTHUR: Jesus.

PERRY: I'm sorry. I wasn't thinking.

BUZZ (to PERRY): What did you say?

PERRY: Nothing! It's all right!

ARTHUR: Let's go in. [...]

BUZZ: Grace. I thought he said something about grace. (122-23)

Perry's intention is a canoe contest, but being told off by Arthur, he realizes he has forgotten Buzz and James's health status, that would have prevented them from accepting the challenge. Buzz's misunderstanding, on the other hand, remarks this lack of communication and understanding between both couples, thus reinforcing the metaphor: same waters, different boats.

Finally, as a consequence of the silenced AIDS discourse in the play, there appears another binary opposition, that based on economic status. In the nineties most people with AIDS do not have enough income and cannot exercise the consumerism promoted by AIDS pharmaceutical marketing. Thus, Perry and Buzz are designed as the terms of this binary:

BUZZ: It's not enough sometimes, Perry. You're not sick. You two are going to end up on Golden Pond in matching white wicker rockers. "The loons are coming, Arthur. They're shitting on our annuities."

PERRY: That's not fair. We can't help that.

BUZZ: I can't afford to be fair. Fair's a luxury. Fair is for healthy people with healthy lovers in nice apartments with lots of health insurance, which, of course, they don't need, but God forbid someone like me or James should have it. (131-32)

Through the terms and similes which Buzz uses in his first intervention, anger turns into parody on both Arthur and Perry. The key sentence to establish AIDS here as a discourse creating binary categories is precisely "You're not sick". Immediately after, Buzz compares Perry and Arthur to the loving eighty-year-old couple from Ernest Thompson's play *On Golden Pond* (1979). Through parody and sarcasm, Buzz seems to suggest his annoyance as regards Perry and Arthur's health and economical status, judging by the expressions he uses: "matching white wicker rockers," "they're shitting on our annuities." His second speech becomes reinforced by terms directly associated with a high economical status ("afford," "luxury," "nice apartments," "lots of health insurance") which neither him nor James have and which marks the difference between them and Perry and Arthur. Therefore, the playwright is again making the audience focus on differences and categories. McNally seems to like playing differences by marking the first item in every opposition he makes. Even the characters' pairing and the double-cast of James / John stand as an emblem of the rigidity of this binary categorization in the play.

The use of stereotypes becomes in *Love! Valour! Compassion!* a skilful way of strengthening a gay identity too. Camp –whether in stage aesthetics, or the characters, the setting or the action– is a convention of gay drama not only used by McNally but also by a pretty large group of gay American playwrights mainly in the 60s and 70s. Charles Ludlam, who best epitomized camp in his plays, said that “[c]amp is all about something in the action or the dialogue or the dress –even in the sets– [...]” (Samuels 227).

There is a whole group of gay plays which explicitly use camp aesthetics since it is precisely in the theatre where camp finds its clearest and coziest expression.⁶ Camp has the ability to perceive things in a unique way and to turn values upside down (cfr. Samuels 226). By means of camp, gender roles can be easily ridiculed, stylised and “theatricalized,” and what is usually thought to be average or normal is re-made, as Esther Newton has pointed out: “Importance tends to shift from what a thing *is* to how *it looks*, from *what* is done to *how* is done. [...] emphasis on style goes further than this in that camp is also exaggerated, consciously ‘stagey’, specifically theatrical” (47-8). Thus, it could be asserted that theatricality and parody are both the most outstanding components of camp discourse, as well as drag –the *performative* acting of sexual identity– which contains in itself the concept of gender as parody; according to Judith Butler, drag is a stylised and hyperbolised repetition of acts (cfr. *Gender* 179). Therefore, camp will also make reference to strategies for the parody of gender.

But camp underwent a process of reeducation ever since Susan Sontag standardized it and raised it to the level of Pop Art in her famous essay “Notes on Camp” (1964). From being a way for gay men to re-imagine the hostile world around them (cfr. Bronski, *Culture* 42) it became an item of consumption, thus losing its subversive strength and political challenge, being finally absorbed by the mainstream. Therefore, camp was committed only to its aesthetic and humorous side. This is what McNally does in *Love! Valour! Compassion!*.

The discourse of camp appears from the very beginning since we are introduced into a stylish setting: an old-fashioned, excessively decorated Victorian country house, which evokes the camp taste for past decades:

The wallpaper in the dining room is original too. So is a lot of the cabinet work.[...]
This sofa is my pride and joy. It came with the house. It’s genuine horsehair. [...]

⁶ Camp was used as the main tool by a group of playwrights lately called Ridiculous Theatre by the critics. By means of pastiche, parody, intertextuality, cross-dressing and camp itself, this group played a significant role in contemporary American culture and drama. Relevant dramatists such as Jack Smith (*Destruction of Atlantis*, 1965), Ronald Tavel (*The Life of Lady Godiva*, 1966; *Gorilla Queen*, 1967), Charles Ludlam (*Conquest of the Universe*, 1967; *Camille*, 1973), Kenneth Bernard (*The Sixty-Minute Queer Show*, 1970; *The Magic Show of Dr. Ma-Gico*, 1973), Tom Murrin (*Cock-Strong*, 1969) and Jackie Curtis (*Heaven Grand in Amber Orbit*, 1970) among others represent an age in which camp was used on the American stage to defy institutionalised language and values.

It's an antique. [...] Wainscoting there. This finial here. The main stairs have a very gentle rise." (9-10).

Thus, the house becomes the perfect idyllic frame where the plot takes place and the appropriate scenery for the rehearsal of their performance for a charity show: the *pas de cygnes* from Tchaikovsky's *Swan Lake* in drag.

As regards the characters, McNally places Buzz as the fatty, easygoing, and funny show queen with whom the rest find relief and enjoyment: "[...] I can contain the world of the Broadway musical. Get my hands around it, so to speak. Be the master of one little universe" (26). The character is designed through camp in his excess, manners and expressions. He makes costumes for Gregory's company, but it is his expressions about fashion and dressing that make his profession camp: "I've got everyone in Lycra. Lots and lots of Lycra. I'm entering my Lycra period" (29); or "[...] I'd have you in tulle, lots and lots of tulle. A vision of hairy legs in a tutu and toe shoes." (48) His passion for Broadway musicals shows as well his lack of moderation: he lavishly displays his knowledge about them (16, 25), imitates great actresses (49), dreams of them (16), and even translates into musical the most daily event (131). Buzz's excessive camp attitude even includes any historical famous name or celebrity as gay: Ethel Merman (37); John F. Kennedy, Darryl Hannah and Will Smith (73); Mark Spitz and the Olympics (101); the president of the United States (106) and even Shakespeare with all his plays: "Shakespeare was gay. [...] Every character Shakespeare wrote was gay. Except for Titus Andronicus. Titus was straight. Go figure" (114-15).

On the other hand, we have the perfect loving gay couple, Arthur and Perry –lawyer and accountant–, who have been together for 14 years. They are well-heeled enough to be comfortably off and stand as a model and main target of a gay relationship. In addition, Gregory and John, choreographer and musician respectively, represent the artistic side in the play, as taken for granted for a gay sensibility. These stereotypes work mainly as cultural standards which are received, apprehended and reproduced; this way, they repeat a kind of performance that still cannot manage to escape a binary categorization based on hegemonic paradigms.

So much insistence on and excess of gayness leads us to think of the use of appropriation as a cultural strategy and of McNally's insistence on the level of visibility and power that gay identity has achieved. This may be the reason why the play also acquires a strong level of excess by stressing homophobia and showing Buzz and the characters radically opposed to this fact: "I'm sick of straight people. There's too goddamn many of them" (58); "They hate us. They fucking hate us. They've always hated us. It never ends, the fucking hatred" (107). *Love! Valour! Compassion!* works as a play which magnifies the *gay way of life*, amplifies stereotypes and uses love within the "gay family" as a throwing weapon against homophobia and as an alternative to the *heteronormative* world, from which they withdraw in a house in upstate New York. It seems McNally wants us to know that

gay identity “needs” this kind of stereotyped and normalized expressions to be acknowledged as such, but in the end it only repeats a *performative* construction of identity.

For Butler, “in imitating gender, drag implicitly reveals the imitative structure of gender itself –as well as its contingency” (*Gender* 175). Drag is theatricalized in *Love! Valour! Compassion!*: six grown men –showing hairy chests and muscles– dance together to Tchaikovsky’s *Pas des Cygnes* in gauzy white tutus and ballet slippers. In fact, camp implies humour and one of its aims is to make the audience laugh. According to Esther Newton: “Camp humour is a system of laughing at one’s incongruous position instead of crying. [...] when camp cannot laugh, it dissolves into a maudlin bundle of self-pity” (49-50). This is exactly what happens at the general rehearsal of the *pas de cygnes* in the third act of the play. As Clum puts it, “the image is hilarious camp” (“Where” 110), but McNally uses drag here just for fun instead of destabilizing sexual identity or blurring sexual boundaries with it. Drag in the play seems to confirm and firmly to establish that only a gay sensibility is able to understand it right. It is a truly *performative* kind of drag, but it seems to show once again the best that gayness could offer.

The dance scene has also been interpreted as a condensed image of a family by a section of the critics: a community of gay men in which a variety of forms of gay male intimacy could be seen. Indeed, the dance takes teamwork and precision and the group must move as one. The author himself agreed with this remark; when talking about his own play, he considered *Love! Valour! Compassion!* as “an extended family with relatives you like more than others” (Rosen 21). At the end of act one, Buzz, facing the audience, exclaims: “All in all, there was a lot of love in Gregory and Bobby’s house that first night of the first holiday weekend of the summer” (62). Even so, this new family rises from the ashes of the nuclear traditional one and becomes convinced that it could be *the* positive model. The gay family, in offering more affection and protection, becomes the natural substitute for the biological one, which does not take its homosexual “children” in. As Kate Weston states, “it differs from networks to the extent that they quite consciously incorporated symbolic demonstrations of love, shared history, material or emotional assistance, and other signs of enduring solidarity” (109). The family at Gregory’s house positions itself as an understanding unit which cares for and accepts all of its single members and provides warmth and love: everyone is allowed a place at the play’s finale: Ramón is appointed by Gregory as his legitimate successor at the ballet company, James has been accepted as a new member in the family being Buzz’s lover, and John –his twin brother– abandons his bitter personality by saying “Can I give anyone a hand? I want you to like me” (140). An ideal family within an idyllic framework which puts itself forward as a right alternative for both gay and straight ways of life.

McNally's gay plays generally seem to avoid current subject matters which would become particularly uncomfortable for mainstream audiences, such as transexualism, leather and bear communities, gay and lesbian relationships, child adoption, gays in the military or mistreatment within gay couples, to mention some. As a result, gay identity is idealized by privileging and appealing to white, intellectual, upper-middle class subjects, which consequently would guarantee that this gay standardized identity will have a certain global purchase; thus, he pushes into the background those individualities which would not be of any profit or success when on stage. Thus, *Love! Valour! Compassion!* could be labelled as canonical gay drama, non-threatening for mainstream audiences, and as Savran points out: "it titillates well-heeled audiences, queer and straight alike, and reassures them of their hip, liberal values" (63). The inclusion of homosexual clichés (such as passion for musicals, admiration for the male body –particularly Latin ones–, obsession for self-decay and taste for the arts) or the exhibition of a politically correct gay way of life contribute to underline a stereotyped and idealized gay identity.

Despite the play's success, the "performance" of gay identity takes an essentialist and normative tone, a gay presentation which only reiterates a *performative* construction of gender identity by following the same paradigms which hegemonic power had formerly used to naturalize itself.

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