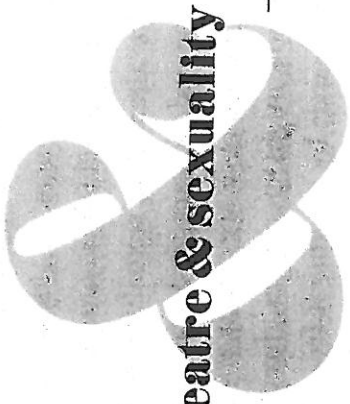




theatre & sexuality

Theatre & Sexuality argues that sexual identity provides a crucial perspective from which to consider how performance is created and received, as well as how sexuality is performed by actors and by people in their everyday lives. Considering sexuality as a component of theatre practice and reception allows critics and artists to analyse how performance refracts desire on both sides of the footlights. Although sexuality is as important as other aspects of identity – such as gender, race, ethnicity, class, age, ability, and other aspects of self-identification – it is not easy to ‘read’ onstage. How can we see, by looking at an actor, his or her sexuality or that of the character he or she plays? Must we rely on narrative cues in which a character tells us he or she is gay or lesbian or straight? Or can spectators see sexuality in an actor’s gesture, his posture, or how she wears her character’s costume? Alternative sexuality’s relative invisibility productively complicates how

spectators see theatre and challenges the artistic practices of actors, directors, designers, and producers. We often take for granted that what we see is heterosexuality. If we assume instead that not all sexual preferences or identities are 'normative' – that is, heterosexual, which is considered the norm – where do we look for alternative sexualities such as gay, lesbian, bisexual, transsexual or transgender, or queer, unless they are part of a play's content or are clearly assigned to a character? Conversely, how might spectators, directors, or designers 'queer' a performance by viewing it from such a non-normative perspective? Does it matter whether they claim to be gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgendered, or queer themselves? How does sexuality bubble underneath as well as within a play or a performance, providing a motivating current of desire regardless of actors', directors', designers', characters', or spectators' sexual identifications?

Theatre & Sexuality traces the history and explains the critical validity of posing these questions to performance, placing playwrighting and production within the context of lesbian/gay/bisexual/transgender/queer (LGBTQ) social and theatre history. Critical attention to sexuality as a subfield of theatre and performance studies began as both a recovery project – calling attention to work by LGBTQ people that history had overlooked – and an interpretive practice in the mid-1980s and continues to flourish today. This book also honours the history of LGBTQ people in theatre who have identified as sexual minorities, whether openly or through the covert practices of the 'closet', focusing on the period since the 1950s, when sexuality became

more publicly salient as an aspect of how people know themselves as subjects of their lives and of dominant or sub-cultural ideology.

Theatre and sexuality have always been productive spheres of overlapping influence, especially in contemporary Western performance. Sexual desire has long been a motivating narrative factor in plays and performances, the force that establishes or destroys relationships, that stirs jealousy and encourages infidelity, or that binds characters or tears them apart, regardless of their sexual orientations. Theatre is also a place of fantasy and longing, of fleeting exchange between spectators and performers. With its liminal status as both real and not, as ephemeral and transformational, theatre has long been a site where misfits and the marginalized have congregated. Sexual minorities have found among theatre people a generous acceptance sometimes not available in dominant culture's more constrained, conforming ways of life.

Theatre created from a consciously LGBTQ perspective ascribes politics to how it is produced, as well as to its content and form. For instance, many early LGBTQ theatres were collectives, borrowing the anti-capitalist and anti-authoritarian working structures of feminist theatre to displace the director's dominating power over the play's production. Ensembles such as the Women's Experimental Theatre, the WOW Café, Split Britches, the Five Lesbian Brothers, and the Ridiculous Theatrical Company (all in New York City), as well as Pomo Afro Homos (San Francisco), Bloodlips (London), and Gay Sweatshop (London), boasted collective

queer authorship and cooperatively devised performance. Thinking about theatre and sexuality, then, requires considering the embodiment of the actor and the spectator through a framework of non-normative sexuality. Each element of production comes into play: the text's narrative content, as well as its form and structure; the performance and its production style, along with those who craft it; and the audience and its relation to community, LGBTQ or otherwise.

The description of historical, critical, and artistic practices throughout this book will culminate in a reading of *Belle Reprieve* (1991), a performance collaboration among Peggy Shaw and Lois Weaver (of the US lesbian feminist performance trio Split Britches, which they created with Deb Margolin) and Bette Bourne and Paul Shaw (of the UK troupe Bloodlips) that queers the canonical American drama *A Streetcar Named Desire* (Ethel Barrymore Theatre, New York, 1947). 'Deconstructing' Tennessee Williams' play (taking apart its form and content and revealing its operative ideology) was a historically apt choice for the Split Britches-Bloodlips collaboration, as Williams' work was written at a moment in LGBTQ theatre history when the playwright's own homosexuality had to be disguised, in his plays and in his life. David Savran, in *Communists, Cowboys, and Queers* (1992), addresses how gay male sexual desire coursed between Williams' characters in covert and often displaced ways. *Belle Reprieve* exploded Williams' play with Split Britches' and Bloodlips' interventionist theatricality. The production critiqued the original's realism with

witty commentary, Brechtian acting, and a 'poor theatre' style that let the seams of theatrical illusion show. Through pointed, often bawdy humour, the performers commented on the obvious constructedness of their gendered and sexuality-based roles. *Belle Reprieve* was originally produced at the Drill Hall in London and opened shortly after at La MaMa E.T.C., the experimental theatre club (hence E.T.C.) and venue in downtown New York. By explicating the performance strategies and resistant reading practices that *Belle Reprieve* makes evident, *Theatre & Sexuality* demonstrates theory in action through performance and illustrates the pleasure that can be found in such critical approaches. The book also traces the interplay between commercial or 'mainstream' theatre, represented by Williams, and the more avant-garde, experimental performance generated by groups such as Split Britches and Bloodlips. *Theatre & Sexuality* perhaps privileges the avant-garde, in part because earlier versions of the story of LGBTQ theatre in the USA, the UK, and elsewhere have focused almost exclusively on commercial theatre, where white men tend to be most visible and successful. By refocusing the story to look at the margins as well as the centre, I hope to tell a richer, more complex story about how sexuality has been represented and has influenced theatre from the twentieth century to the present.

Gay and lesbian lives and ideas in the twentieth century

Although it has provided refuge for people who deviate from heterosexual norms, theatre has also long been a site

for dominant culture to clamp down on sexual minorities and to censor representations that suggested relationships or characters that weren't staunchly heterosexual. In the USA, the Comstock Law of 1873 enforced public morality by censoring materials considered 'obscene' and preventing the distribution of contraceptive information. The law also allowed vice police to close theatres in New York, in particular, for the slightest indiscretions. Edouard Bourdet's 1926 play *The Captive* (Empire Theatre, New York), which scholars believe was the first play about lesbians to be performed in the USA, was considered indecent. Vice squads closed the production after only a five-month run. In 1927, Mae West, the popular actress/playwright known for her sexually suggestive style, performed her play *Sex* on Broadway. She and the rest of the cast were arrested, and the production was closed. She later attempted to bring to Broadway her play *The Drag*, which concerned a group of cross-dressers attending a costume ball. Although preview performances were staged in the tri-state area surrounding New York City, the New York Society for the Suppression of Vice threatened to ban the play if West tried to open it in the city itself.

At the same time, historians suggest it was an 'open secret' – a term explicated by queer theorist Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick in her 1990 book *Epistemology of the Closet* – that many theatre people were lesbians or gay men. The theatre attracted iconoclasts, for whom the constrictions of daily life proved intolerable while the fantastical spectacle and seductions of theatre provided personal freedom.

Public disapproval, however, meant that many of these people couldn't claim the freedom to announce their sexuality openly. The American playwrights Edward Albee and Tennessee Williams, for example, achieved mid-twentieth-century Broadway success even while critics for prominent papers not so surreptitiously referred to the well-known if not directly expressed 'fact' of their gayness. British playwright Oscar Wilde's flamboyant performances of himself, evident in his cutting witticisms and flagrant sartorial style, made his own body a site for dominant cultural surveillance, which eventually doomed him to be tried – and convicted – for indecency in 1895. Historians describe theatre people from impresario Clyde Fitch in nineteenth-century America to Alfred Lunt and Lynn Fontanne, famous actors of the twentieth century, as leading cloaked lives of sexual non-conformity.

Although gay men and lesbians found community backstage, theatre often perpetuated conservative, normalizing values in front of the footlights, forcing queer artists to remain closeted. Even plays by writers known to be gay told stories that damned and demeaned characters whose sexuality seemed the slightest bit off-kilter. Williams, for instance, wrote horrific scenes such as the one in *Suddenly*, *Last Summer* (York Playhouse, New York, 1958) in which a gay man who's been seducing boys at a beach resort is surrounded by an angry mob of young men and dies from cannibalism, a gruesome enactment of the historical moment's hatred for homosexuals. Playwrights of some renown, including Lillian Hellman, enshrined the day's dominating

opinions when they wrote stories in which lesbians and gay men killed themselves or lived lives of desperate isolation because of their sexual desires. In Hellman's *The Children's Hour* (Maxine Elliott's Theatre, New York, 1934), for instance, two young teachers lose the school they founded when one of their students spreads rumours about their 'unhealthy' relationship. When one of the women admits she does have feelings for the other, her distraught confession prompts her to hang herself. For much of American and British history, mainstream theatre produced by noted playwrights had no place for healthy, self-actualized gay men or lesbians.

The fortunes of LGBTQ people in theatre have changed according to the politics of history. In the USA, the homophile movement – which essentially preached tolerance for gays and lesbians and was the country's first expression of gay rights – made tentative incursions into civil rights in the 1950s, when gay and lesbian subcultures began to form in large cities around the country (see George Chauncey, *Gay New York*, 1994; John D'Emilio and Estelle B. Freedman, *Intimate Matters*, 1988). In the 1960s, as liberation movements gained ground, these sexual subcultures became politicized through identification with the political struggles of other minorities, especially women and people of colour. Although US activist groups such as the Mattachine Society and the Daughters of Bilitis organized sexual minorities to advocate for their rights in the 1950s, many historians locate the advent of the visible gay and lesbian rights movement in the 1969 Stonewall uprising in New York City's Greenwich

Village. Before the Stonewall riots, gay men and lesbians congregating in bars around the lower western edge of the city – long known as a bohemian haven for artists, including theatre people, and others who led alternative lives – expected to be regularly rounded up by vice squads, who raided the bars and nightclubs they frequented. Men and women had to make sure they were wearing at least three articles of properly gendered clothing; if not, they were arrested on vice charges. When the Stonewall Inn was raided by police on 28 June 1969, gay men, some of the bar's lesbian clientele, and drag queens (men dressed overtly as women, wearing clothing and make-up that let them perform femininity) refused to go obediently into the police vans waiting to cart them away for processing. Instead, with long-buried rage at the injustice of their plight, they rioted, breaking windows, throwing chairs, and otherwise resisting arrest. When word of this uprising spread, the LGBTQ liberation movement was motivated to begin agitating openly and more aggressively for equal rights and fair treatment. In the UK, a parallel history saw the 1967 Sexual Offences Act passed, which partially decriminalized homosexuality. What became a national movement for gay liberation spawned a number of non-profit organizations in the USA that work to change legislation and increase acceptance for gays and lesbians.

Theatrical street activism in the 1980s and 1990s

In the last decades of the twentieth century, LGBTQ social activism in the USA and the UK took a more radical turn,