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The Role of Queerness in Theatre

It's no secret that theatre is considered a, well, "gay" art form- there are endless jokes in TV, movies, books, and, yes, plays about the stereotype of the effeminate gay musical theatre kid or the butch lesbian theatre technician. And there is inarguably some truth to that stereotype. Without a doubt, some of the greatest contributors to theatre were queer- Oscar Wilde, Lorraine Hansberry, Stephen Sondheim, and the list goes on. Continuing the tradition (or, perhaps, causing it in the first place), theatre seems to be a "magnet" of sorts for many young queer people- myself included. I was curious about how theatre influences the way we connect to our queerness, and how our queerness influences the way we connect to theatre. So, I conducted over a dozen interviews with young theatre artists of myriad genders and sexualities. What I found is nothing less than I expected- there is no single answer, much as there is no single way to be gay or trans or bi or nonbinary. No matter how unique, though, there were common threads binding each and every one of us.

Coming Out

Melissa: "Throughout high school I remember gravitating towards lesbian characters (the few that there are) and creating lesbian subtext for the characters that weren't. *Fun Home* is the musical that made me realize I was gay. I distinctly remember listening to the soundtrack for the twentieth time and something clicked very quickly and suddenly for me that I felt that I had been hiding for a long time."

Oodie: "Being surrounded by queer folks in university gave me the strength to let myself be who I am."

Iida: "Prior to joining my theatre group I had never met anyone openly queer. The specific cluster of theatres my group belongs to is very publicly characterized by openness and "queerness" in many meanings of the word, and that atmosphere definitely helped me find the courage to come out and validated my identity."

Brigitta: "Before [my theatre program], I knew that I was some version of gay, but after, I was confident that I was asexual and that there was nothing wrong with that."

Katherine: "it wasn't until I was in a performance of *Rent* and I played Joanne [that] I could easily just say that I was bisexual to the cast members."

Samuel: "Theatre helped me find a supportive group of people and a safe environment to explore my sexuality"

Brianne: "I had everything figured out before joining theatre, but I kept it all to myself. But as soon as rehearsals for my first musical started, I was practically thrown into a group of strangers who quickly became my closest friends, many of them being LGBT+ themselves. They've helped me so much with coming out to my friends and sisters."

Theatre has been an integral part of my life ever since I can remember- I have memories from when I was as young as 6 of playing in the scene shop of the school my dad worked at, and I mentally file periods of my life based on what cast recording I was obsessed with or show I was working on at the time. So, it makes sense that theatre was the single most influential part of my coming out process. When I was 15, I came across the musical *Fun Home*- based on Alison Bechdel's "graphic memoir," it was the first musical featuring a lesbian protagonist on Broadway. I eagerly devoured the few (illegally-recorded) songs I could find online, and after about the 30th listen, I had a dawning realization and finally allowed myself to say the words that had been in the back of my mind for the last 3 years: "I'm gay." When conducting over a dozen interviews with other queer youth involved in theatre, I found that I was hardly alone in my experience. For whatever reason, theatre seems to have a magnetic effect on queer youth. So naturally, it follows that many of us figured out who we were through theatre, whether by way of a specific show or role (Katherine, Melissa, and me) or just by merit of having so many queer peers to act as role models.

However, there seems to be a massive, problematic disconnect between these students and many of their teachers.

The Disconnect

Sam: I felt like I had to constantly push the fact that I was a man. That I played male roles. That I wasn't going to play a female just because it was convenient. That I wasn't going to wear a dress. That I know, it's just a character, but it's also about my personal comfort level and how people in the audience perceive me. That it wasn't about dressing "like a girl," it was about the audience not SEEING me as a man in a dress, but as a girl. A female actress.

Oodie: Only one of my professors in University actually used my proper pronouns.

Ryley: In my senior year of high school, I'd been with relatively the same class and had the same teacher for two years. Everyone knew I was trans* and that I was a guy.... My teacher said, in front of the entire class "so we have 9 guys here, except Ryley, honey, you'll probably play one of the unisex characters." then she laughed, because she thought she was making a joke and that I would let it slide. I said back to her, in front of the entire class, "I won't be playing a girl part." She looked at me, shocked, and almost speechless... and she said "You will if you get cast as one." I simply responded, with my head held high "No, I won't."

I have had directors repeatedly make homophobic and/or transphobic comments during the rehearsal process- and, in most cases, I felt I wasn't in a position where I could speak up due to the power imbalance. I have to wonder why, in a field so populated by queer people, so many directors and educators are ignorant when it comes to queer issues. I strongly suspect that it's due partially to the fact that, although many theatre artists are queer, theatre as an art form (particularly mainstream/commercial theatre) is still incredibly hetero- and cis-normative.

The "Representation Problem"

Ida: I can't remember ever seeing a play in a professional theatre with any LGBTQ+ characters.

Queerness as a theme is considered to belong to a niche audience and for-profit theatres seem to see it as a risk they can't take, especially in smaller cities. This is especially odd to me knowing that there's definitely a big chunk of LGBTQ+ people making theatre happen - why is content catered so heavily to straight audiences, when it seems theatre people are so open to queerness and oftentimes also identify under the queer umbrella.

Ivy: The show I am involved in right now, *As Bees in Honey Drown*, is focused on a man who is referred to as "gay," though he sleeps with the main female character. I haven't heard the word bisexual brought up during the production process.... People seem to think it's a dirty word or think people can only be gay or straight. The lack of representation hurts a little.

Jo: People are scared of what they don't know and would rather see a racist production of *South Pacific* than an honest portrayal like *Hedwig and the Angry Inch*.

Lauren: I feel representation in theatre is still very stereotyped. A lot of non-LGBTQ+ people still write roles for us that aren't how most of us are. Lesbians don't have to be butch. Bisexual people don't flirt with everyone they meet. Asexuals aren't precious gems that are just interested in dinosaurs. While it's getting better over time. It's still horrible, and there are steps that need to be taken to fix it.

Almost every single person I talked to while writing this essay said the same thing- seeing meaningful representation in theatre meant a lot to them, and even influenced the kinds of projects they wanted to take on. Unfortunately, this kind of representation is very, very rare- and almost everyone I spoke to agreed on that count, as well.

There are only 7 shows currently on Broadway that feature LGBT characters, and of those, a sad number are either very, very small roles, absurdly stereotypical and played purely for laughs, or both. In the last 10 years, there have been only 3 Broadway shows that feature transgender characters (*Priscilla Queen of the Desert*, *Bring It On*- notable for having Broadway's first trans teen character, and *Hedwig and the Angry Inch*) all of which were women and played by cisgender men. It took until 2015 for a musical featuring a lesbian protagonist (*Fun Home*) to open on Broadway. Admittedly, representation Off-Broadway is improving- there were 5 Off-Broadway shows featuring trans leads alone this season- but the progress is still slow. Additionally, while there have been many shows featuring gay characters or themes over the years, they mostly focus on the same kinds of characters- usually white, cisgender, gay men. This is not to say that those instances of representation are not important, but the fact remains that many of us are still unable to see reflections of our own selves and experiences upon the stage. And for every *Torch Song Trilogy* and *Fun Home*, there's a *Hairspray* or *Something Rotten*- shows that use their gay characters as one-liners meant to cater to straight audiences. So what's the solution? We are. I think the only solution is for queer theatre artists to stand up and make our voices heard.

Changing the Narrative

Ida: I want to make sure that the theatre I put out into the world stems from reality - and in reality, there are endless ways to be LGBTQ+. Generally, only a small slice of those ways get

represented. My dream is to one day write a play that helps someone figure out who they are. I think that would be the most important thing I could possibly do as a writer.

Jo: I have actively sought out other LGBTQ+ works such as "The Normal Heart" to continue spreading the message in this community.

Melissa: I tend to try to add a lesbian or a queer character into everything I do (performance or writing.)

Lauren: I would sprinkle Asexuals into more theatre scripts. Asexuals who are married, or Asexuals who are dating, Asexuals who have children, and Asexuals who never want children. I want Asexuals who are flirty, and Asexuals who aren't.

Oodie: The binary wouldn't exist within the walls of my theatre.

In conducting these interviews, I heard the voices of the next generation of queer theatre artists, and I realized that there is a void that needs to be filled. Theatre means so much to so many young LGBTQ+ people, and yet there are so few reflections of us on the stage. But if so many of us feel the same way, and so many of us have ambitious visions for what representation should be, maybe it's up to us to make that vision a reality.