

The College of Wooster

The Electric Current: Presenting the Changing Waves of Gender and Sexuality in
Performance

By

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Abstract

This independent study poses the following critical question: How can I as an actor negotiate the signifiers of gender and sexuality in performance and recognize the fluidity between both ends of the gender spectrum? To answer my question I studied representations of gender and sexuality in twentieth-century American drama to identify American theatre's problematic history with gender and sexuality. I utilized methodologies from Judith Butler, semiotics, Sue-Ellen Case, and Diane Torr to analyze how gender and sexuality are constructed and perpetuated in a Western culture. I then applied these methodologies to a textual analysis of scenes from the plays *Take Me Out*, *Angels in America, Part I: Millennium Approaches*, and *Cloud 9*. These scenes were then presented in a devised performance titled *The Electric Current* to question how we construct and represent identities based on gender and sexuality and to demonstrate how those identities are oppressed and unacknowledged by patriarchal ideology.

An Overview of the Project

On April 26th, 2010, *Newsweek* published online Ramin Setoodeh's article "Straight Jacket," which argued that gay actors cannot play straight, heterosexual roles in performance. What sparked him to write this essay was Sean Hayes' performance in the Broadway musical *Promises, Promises*. Hayes plays the sexy leading man, Chuck, who is trying to pick up his sexy co-worker played by Kristen Chenoweth. Setoodeh commented that, "it's weird seeing Hayes play straight. He comes off as wooden and insincere, as if he's trying to hide something, which of course he is" ("Straight Jacket").

According to Setoodeh, Hayes was not very good at hiding his sexuality on stage, nor could he play the role of a straight character, labeling his performance as "the big pink elephant in the room." Setoodeh further noted that Hayes' performance at one point as the leading man resulted in "unintentional camp" when he tries to take home a drunk woman from the bar. He questions whether, "it is funny because of all the 60's-era one-liners, or because the woman is so drunk (and clueless) that she agrees to go home with a guy we all know is gay" ("Straight Jacket").

In response to "Straight Jacket," Chenoweth wrote online at *newsweek.com*, criticizing the author for writing a hurtful and homophobic portrayal of Hayes. While her comments appeared on *Newsweek's* website, they were republished on *Broadway.com* to further distribute it to a wider audience. Chenoweth came to Hayes' defense stating,

“I’ve observed nothing ‘wooden’ or ‘weird’ in his performance, nor have I noticed the seemingly unwieldy presence of a ‘pink elephant’ in the Broadway Theater”

(Broadway.com).

Furthermore, she noted that thousands of audience members did not seem to care about Hayes’ sexuality on stage.

....thousands of people have traveled from all over the world to enjoy Hayes’ performance and don’t seem to have one single issue with his sexuality! They have no problem buying him as a love-torn heterosexual man. Audiences aren’t giving a darn about who a person is sleeping with or his personal life. Give me a break! We’re actors first, whether we’re playing prostitutes, baseball players, or the Lion King. Audiences come to theater to go on a journey. It’s a character and it’s called acting....

(Broadway.com)

Chenoweth also added that as a supporter of LGBT causes and equal rights she understands how meaningful it can be for more young people who struggle with their sexuality to see proud and out actors living successful lives (Broadway.com).

Due to waves of criticism he received for his article, Setoodeh wrote an editorial in *Newsweek* titled “Out in Focus” to followup on the controversy he started by attempting to explain what his original article’s intention was. What prompted him to write “Straight Jacket” was reading a review of Hayes’ performance in *The New York*

Times for Promises, Promises. He noticed that the review described Hayes' performance as emotionally "colorless," with a relationship with his co-star that appeared more like a younger brother instead of a lover. To Setoodeh, this was code, or "a way to say that Hayes' sexual orientation is getting in the way of his acting without saying the word *gay*" ("Out of Focus"). According to Setoodeh, he wrote "Straight Jacket" to examine why he thought it is often hard for society to accept openly gay actors to play straight roles.

It is interesting to note that Hayes did not officially come out of the closet until March 2010 in the April issue of *The Advocate* in an interview. According to the author, Ari Karpel, when Hayes portrayed the role of Jack, a very effeminate, and flamboyant gay character on the TV-series "Will & Grace," critics and people alike questioned whether Hayes was gay or not. Karpel explained that when the TV-series premiered in 1998, out gay characters were rarely portrayed on television. Though Hayes enjoyed some success in films after "Will & Grace," "the kind of leading man roles that he hoped he would get to play—the straight guys his commercial career suggested he could carry—never materialized" (Karpel).

In contrast, it is interesting to point out that heterosexual actor Eric McCormack, who played Will on the same TV-series, did not receive the same attention as Hayes did for playing a gay character. The character Will was not as flamboyant as Jack, but McCormack's portrayal of a gay male did not garner him questions about his sexuality or

whether he was in or out of the closet. According to Karpel, after the debut of "Will & Grace," the public wanted to know how Hayes felt playing a gay character and if he was gay himself. But Hayes became afraid of revealing his sexuality because it could have jeopardized his chances of playing heterosexual roles later in his career. So he never answered questions about his sexual orientation, only giving the press stock answers like, "When I play a gay character I want to be as believable as possible. And when I'm playing a straight character I also want to be as believable as possible. So the less that people know about my personal life, the more believable I can be as a character" (Karpel).

The controversy that was generated out of Setoodeh's article on Hayes's sexuality prompted me to ask this question: why does prior knowledge of an actor's sexuality and personal life matter in accurately portraying a heterosexual performance? Furthermore, Setoodeh reinforces our society's strict cultural constructions of gender: images of heterosexual male and female dictated by the ideology of a patriarchal society.

To explain what these strict cultural constructions of gender are, I must define the following related terms: sex, sexuality, gender, and heteronormative. Sex is usually understood as the main biological categories: male and female. While there are a range of sexualities, sexuality can be represented as a single choice as in straight or gay. Gender is often assumed to be a culturally defined binary of heterosexual male and

heterosexual female. These culturally defined binaries are heteronormative, which is heterosexuality repeatedly reinforced by normative values in a patriarchal society. What becomes problematic here is that while sex, sexuality, and gender can be distinguished from one another, they in turn create cultural constructions that do not represent a range of identities.

For example, the public is generally exposed to images of straight men and women in print advertisements and other forms of media. There are few representations of lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgender (LGBT) persons in this same media. Therefore, our range of identities are limited to tightly controlled depictions of heterosexual men and women. We commonly see men performing traditionally assigned masculine roles in business or politics, with women carrying out roles that are deemed feminine such as domestic service and motherhood. As these people are performing the assigned roles in their gender construction, they give off signals that reinforce binary gender constructions, where we assume they are attracted to the opposite sex. But in reality, there are a number of people who identify as LGBT because they are attracted to the same sex, but they appear to be a straight male or female. What happens then if these signals for a heterosexual man or woman do not align with his or her sexuality?

As an actor, I decided to further investigate these questions, especially in American theatre from the twentieth-century. Since gender and sexuality can be illustrated in performance, I utilize Keir Elam's *The Semiotics of Theatre and Drama* to

help define and analyze the use of signifiers in theatre. Elam describes the basic definition of semiotics as the study of the production of meaning in a society (Elam 1). He further states that this process of communication and signification within semiotics is “the means whereby meanings are both generated and exchanged” (Elam 1). Elam applies this idea of semiotics in performance to theatre and drama. He notes that theatre is a transaction between the audience and the performer and is the “production and communication of meaning in the performance and the systems underlying it” (Elam 2). Within drama though, Elam identifies this as a type of fiction for representation on the stage, which is constructed according to particular “dramatic” code (Elam 2). While semiotics is applied differently in different aspects of theatre, Elam’s observations and insights into semiotics in theatre will give a full picture of how semiotics operates in all kinds of performances.

Imagine a family of four standing in a line on the stage holding hands. Standing in the middle is the father dressed in a business suit with a briefcase and newspaper under his arm. His wife is by his right side, hooking her left arm into his arm. She is wearing an apron and his holding a bowl in her right arm. On the father’s left side is his younger son, dressed in sports clothes with a baseball bat and cap. The daughter, dressed in a pink dress, is holding a Barbie doll as she stands next to her mother. The positions, alignment, clothing and props of these characters on the stage communicate that they are a representation of a traditional family unit in a patriarchal environment.

The imagery allows spectators to decipher what each person in this image represents. The father is in the middle because he is considered the head of the household due to his business suit and briefcase. His business suit and briefcase signify the reinforcement of his male gender construction to ensure the economical survival of his family. Since he is holding the newspaper, it suggests that he is the one who possesses access to knowledge of the outside world. Because he is connected with the outside world through business, this is clearly a patriarchal model that signals that men are better equipped to handle outside business, culture, and politics. His wife appears to be obedient towards her husband because she is clutching onto his side, obeying his patriarchal reign and order. Plus, since she is wearing an apron and is holding a bowl, she is performing her assigned duties of her gender: domestic service. The apron signifies the wife as feminine because the apron is similar in form to a dress, which is a common patriarchal sign of woman. Furthermore, the apron symbolizes that she performs the role of motherhood. Her bowl in turn also reinforces her role as a mother and as a caregiver for her husband.

The children symbolize how their gender construction is placed upon them through patriarchal order. With her Barbie doll and pink dress, the daughter is learning how to use her femininity to fit into her female gender construction. The Barbie doll as a sign represents the ultimate example and origin of beauty and perfection of a female gender construction. Also, the daughter's pink dress signifies a reinforcement of

femininity to code her gender as a female. On the other side, the son is becoming familiar with his masculinity through sports to form a male identity. By wearing sports clothes and a baseball cap, his gender is coded as male. The baseball bat signifies a reinforcement of masculinity and his male gender construction. Though the baseball bat in this instance signifies the boy's connection between masculinity and sports, it could also be signified as an extension of the power of masculinity if the father was holding the bat.

These identities are locked into tight societal gender constructions, limiting the opportunity to consider alternative identities based on gender and sexuality. To demonstrate the existence of these identities, the signals that broadcast and reinforce these stereotypes need to be disrupted. If we place a sign inside a person, such as a hidden signifier, we can reveal the true internal identity of a character that does not align with heterosexual constructs in terms of sexuality. For example, the father figure in the family portrait has signals that indicate that he is a heterosexual straight man. But how do we create a signifier for him to illustrate his homosexuality while all of his other signifiers are broadcasting his apparent heterosexuality?

The signifier for this example cannot be placed on the outside of the character since the rest of his semiotics are communicating that he has a straight identity. If we place this signifier for his homosexuality internally within the character, it becomes an element of his identity he is hiding from the outside world. The hidden signifier for this

man's homosexuality is negative, which can be considered internalized discrimination because the character avoids certain behaviors that are stereotypical of a particular identity. If the hidden signifier indicates that negative stereotype, that negative identity, it is a component that can disrupt the meaning of outward signifiers. There is then a conflict between the outward identity indicators and the hidden signifier. For the father figure in this case, if he felt inside that he was gay, he would suppress his impulses and the signs that would signify him as a gay male. He therefore could act super masculine or distance himself from other people who identify as LGBT in order to maintain the illusion that he is a straight male. Therefore the performance of his identity is not fully seen because of his attempts to hide his hidden signifier or inner true self. The hidden signifier will be considered the hidden semiotics of sexuality for a character during a critical analysis of plays.

With an understanding of semiotics applied to images of gender and sexuality on stage, I explore this application by incorporating signs and codes into my performance as an actor. How can I as an actor negotiate the signifiers of gender and sexuality in performance and recognize the fluidity between both ends of the gender spectrum? To answer my critical question, I will be looking at the plays *Take Me Out* by Richard Greenberg, *Angels in America, Part I: Millennium Approaches* by Tony Kushner, and Caryl Churchill's *Cloud 9*. All three of these plays question society's constructs of gender and sexuality through unique perspectives. In narrowing my scope of twentieth-century

drama, I chose these plays because the problems of gender and sexuality presented in these texts identify and sometimes combat these issues.

Take Me Out poses the question of what would happen if a major league baseball player came out in the prime of his career. In this play, Darren, a bi-racial baseball player, makes a pivotal decision to come out as a gay man. This results in the exposure of the internal and hidden danger of homophobia in sports. The character appears as a heterosexual male, but he disrupts the signifiers of that strict gender construct when he comes out as a gay man. Greenberg illustrates the world of baseball as a system that relies on a fraternal code that appears to be broken when Darren announces that he is attracted men. It causes the other team members to tense up because they feel as if their space has been violated by something outside their patriarchal ideology. McCrae supports this idea in his review of the play, noting that Darren seems to have robbed the idea of a fraternity from the team, which causes a loss of camaraderie. Homophobia creeps into the space at that moment, which becomes evident when no one looks each other in the eye, with hugs and friendly slaps on the ass no longer happening (McCrae). With the baseball locker room influenced by patriarchy, the baseball players are reinforcing heteronormativity, which categorizes the space as a straight male only zone.

While *Take Me Out* focuses on the problems of including gay male sexuality in a sacred straight space, *Angels in America, Part I* illustrates more problems with gender and sexuality through all kinds of characters in a political arena and religious setting.

The play exposes how the AIDS epidemic in the 1980's attached itself to the identity of gay men, which is highlighted by Prior Walter. The identity of the apparently straight, white male is further complicated through Joe Pitt and Roy Cohn. Joe is a Mormon and Republican lawyer in the court of appeals who struggles with his sexuality. Roy, a New York powerbroker and lawyer, is a homophobic and closeted gay man who becomes infected with AIDS. The character is based on the real life politician and lawyer Roy Cohn, who was involved in the espionage trial and execution of Ethel and Julius Rosenberg during the 50's. Cohn died of AIDS in 1986. Ethel Rosenberg's ghost taunts and teases Roy throughout the play. Joe and Roy's image of the straight, white politician is compromised by their homosexuality. While their culturally constructed images on the outside supposedly signal that they are males who are heterosexual, on the inside, there appears to be a hidden signifier that changes their identity completely.

Since Joe and Roy operate in a heterosexual environment, the full spectrum of their identities are kept close to their chest because of the fear or resistance of revealing their true sexuality. Roy continually insists that he is not gay. When he learns from his doctor that he has AIDS, he tells him "*what* I am is defined entirely by *who* I am. Roy Cohn is not a homosexual. Roy Cohn is a heterosexual man, Henry, who fucks around with guys" (Kushner 52). So Roy argues that he is not gay because of his actions, but because he considers himself to be a straight male, which causes him to not acknowledge his hidden signifier. Similarly, Joe feels pressure not just from patriarchal

ideology to act as straight man, but also he feels the weight of his religion on his shoulders to remain a heterosexual in the eyes of God. For example, when he finally garners the courage to touch another gay man, Louis, he hesitates and then says, "I'm going to hell for doing this" (Kushner 122). He recognizes the presence of his hidden signifier through his impulse to touch Louis, but since he still feels the influence and control of his religious background, he has a difficult time fully accepting his identity as a gay man.

Cloud 9 concentrates on the reversal of gender roles by questioning the construction of gender and thoughts on masculinity and femininity. It also gives exposure to sexual oppression. The reversal of gender roles is most apparent in Act I, which is set in British colonial Africa, featuring the mother, Betty, portrayed by a man and her young son, Edward, played by a girl. The first act demonstrates the tight constructions of gender and oppressed nature of sexuality. In Act II, the setting changes to modern times in London, but for the characters it is merely twenty-five years later. The action that takes place in London illustrates that while patriarchal ideology still exists, the constructions of gender and sexuality are challenged. The events involving gender and sexuality that occurred in Act I appear strange, but not unusual when compared to Act II. This shift into the modern era allows the characters to explore different facets of sexuality and gender that were considered strange and oppressed in Act I. Betty and Edward's gender roles are switched back with Betty being played by a

woman, and Edward portrayed as a man. But with the appearance of a male playing a five-year old girl named Cathy, the character demonstrates how reversing gender roles complicates patriarchal constructions of gender. The reversal of gender roles and exposure of sexuality push for further consideration of what the codes and signs of sexuality and gender communicate.

Cloud 9 acknowledges the restrictions placed upon gender and sexuality from patriarchal ideology and attempts to solve the problem through a reversal of certain roles. With certain characters being played by an actor of the opposite gender, for example, it gives the audience an opportunity to witness how gender is not static while recognizing the oppressive nature of a heteronormative culture. It also challenges the audience by communicating how gender and sexuality can change based on how one performs their own gender, which considers gender as a set of behaviors and choices rather than an outward appearance. Gender can then be based on the performance of the signs that you display through a character, allowing for alternative identities to be accepted.

To fully understand the troubled nature of the images of gender and sexuality present in the theatre, I rely on texts that highlighted issues surrounding the construction of gender, sex, and sexuality. Judith Butler's *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* demonstrates that we live in a society that sticks to restrictive societal constructions of gender leaving no room for other identities. However, she

challenges her readers to rethink the idea of the categories of gender. She states that “there is no gender identity behind the expression of gender; that identity is performatively constituted by the very ‘expressions’ that are said to be its results” (Butler 25). She elaborates on her theory by explaining that gender presents stylizations that are coded through the body as a set of repeated actions within a tightly controlled and regulated frame that settles over time to construct an appearance that looks natural (Butler 33). Furthermore, to expose the occurring repeated gender stylizations within a heterosexual frame, the appearance of gender must be recognized as “possibilities that have been forcibly foreclosed by the various reifications of gender that have constituted its contingent ontologies [constructed cultural images]” (Butler 33). Basically she argues that the possibilities of gender fluidity are prevented by the strict constructions of gender binaries, which highlights the problems surrounding a restrictive cultural thinking of gender.

Sue Ellen-Case further investigates the problem of gender and sexuality when semiotics are applied. She notes that cultural feminists began to deconstruct cultural codes that were dominant in society, leading to the discovery of utilizing signs and codes as a way to break down the association between the patriarchal order and sign systems (Case 114). Her attempt to separate semiotics and patriarchal ideology goes beyond questioning Butler’s theory of gender trouble by directly questioning and challenging how the signs and codes of gender build strict cultural constructions of

gender. Furthermore, Case explains that cultural coding is a component of ideology, which is related to the values and beliefs that create connotations within a society (Case 116). Furthermore, Case asserts that the prevalence of cultural coding is within theatrical language or communication on stage, which causes the perspectives of artists such as the director, actor, or author to be directly influenced by ideologies constituted in a patriarchal society (Case 117). Case's discussion of how semiotics is inserted within theatre provides an understanding of how compositions of characters are limited not by the artists in a production but through the surrounding cultural beliefs of a society.

As Butler and Case question and provide further insight into the problem of gender and sexuality within society, performance artist Diane Torr observes and experiments with the cultural construction of the straight male to uncover why this identity causes these issues. This is possible because her "Man for a Day" workshop teach women to create a male character to interactive with the world as a man (Torr 2). Her exploration of this common gender identity demonstrates that the male identity is built upon performance and social contexts (Torr 2). Furthermore, it provides a platform to call into question these images and perceptions of gender identity and break the division between these two strict cultural gender constructions (Torr 2-3).

An analysis of the methodologies of Butler, Case, and Torr was applied to a selection of scenes from *Take Me Out*, *Angels in America, Part I*, and *Cloud 9* to answer my critical question. Before the theories were applied to the texts for analysis, there was an

examination of the representations of gender and sexuality in American theatre through historical perspectives. To comprehend American theatre's relationship with homosexuality, I analyzed David Savran's *A Queer Sort of Materialism*, especially the chapter titled "The Queerest Art." Savran comments that the theatre has traditionally been a sanctuary for closeted gays and lesbians, but American theatre did not truly "come out" until the nineties (57). This was due in part to the increased visibility of out lesbian and gay artists and queer-themed driven plays and films. Savran demonstrates that the theatre could be the queerest art form of all because the "writing and performance always functions to disarticulate and disrupt identity—whether the identity in question is that of the playwright, the performer or the spectator" (70). He reinforces this notion by stating that in theatre the act of identification is not always permanent and consistent because it is improvisatory, unpredictable, and unstable (71).

Savran also notes that during the 80's and 90's, a new type of theatre that universalized and deconstructed the queer subject emerged with a representation of a utopian project designed for spectators to create intersections between desires and identifications to promote "a queer colonization of the public sphere" (76). Essentially, as this new type of theatre appeared, it questioned and deconstructed the perceptions of sexuality by putting the issue right in front of the audience. He goes on to theorize that this progression of new theatre was historically linked to social movements of the period, including "the power of identity politics among those who consider themselves

to be on the left, to the rise of queer nationalism in the streets and queer theory in the academy, and to the escalating struggle for lesbian and gay rights” (76). In preparation for my performance, I want to develop a type of theatre as described by Savran that challenges and provokes an audience’s societal perspective of how gender and sexuality is constructed and restricted in a Western culture. With a selection of scenes from *Take Me Out*, *Angels in America, Part I*, and *Cloud 9* that call into question problems surrounding gender and sexuality, I will be able to produce a production that creates an opportunity for spectators to think about how we construct our identities in everyday life.

Alan Sinfield’s *Out on Stage: Lesbian and Gay Theatre in the Twentieth Century* reminds readers that Western theatre has been a complex and struggling space for gay and lesbian identities. He states that some people assert that lesbian and gay identities were invisible and unspeakable in most of the twentieth-century. Sinfield notes though that, “representations in theatre helped to establish, consolidate and challenge notions of lesbians and gay men which were held by them and in society at large” (4). Sinfield examines a number of subjects ranging from societal scandals with homosexuality, to the relation between gender and gay men. To give a background of homosexuality in society, he theorizes that queerness was viewed as a transgression in society since it was provoked and evoked by scandals during the times of Oscar Wilde through the 1920’s (36). Sinfield mentions that sex-gender scandals consisted of, “illegitimacy, marital

discord, adultery, bigamy, homosexuality. They too were ultimately about money—conventional transmission of property through the legitimate male line not only regulated the distribution of wealth; it appeared to justify it” (39). He also notes that scandals within society “marked a structural faultline at which the system was struggling to maintain equilibrium” (47). This could mean that the eruption of scandals surrounding homosexuality were helping reveal the queer identity. Sinfield also points out that people now think that if a person does not possess a heterosexual enthusiasm, the person must be queer (114). He asserts that this stigma is attached “to fussy bachelors, mannish spinsters, sissy-boys and tomboys—violators of gender hierarchy” (114). Sinfield further examines these profiles in a variety of British and American plays in the twentieth century.

Robert Vorlicky’s *Act Like a Man: Challenging American Masculinities in American Drama*, provides an in-depth analysis of all-male cast dramas while also critiquing issues of masculinity, gender, and sexuality in the theatre. He first approaches the subject by stating that an all-male cast offers a unique perspective on culture, especially with its relationship to realism and changing gender codes (1). However, due to the absence of women from these realistic contexts, and the push for patriarchal ideology, “most variations of American male-cast drama resist the diversity of American male experience and its challenge to traditional masculinities; rather they aggressively limit themselves to perpetuating a rigid, antihistorical account of male identity” (1).

However, Vorlicky explores how during the past decade male-cast plays on the cutting-edge of challenging traditional models sometimes shared two commonalities. First, there was an influence and response to the Civil Rights movement, the AIDS crisis, and the impact of contemporary feminism in America. Second, these dramas consisted of persons who were gay, or of color, or both (3). These minority male-cast dramas, according to Vorlicky, do not challenge the patriarchal norm because these “characters have been presented as objects within the dominant culture who become subjects only after they claim their status as gendered subjects—that is, as men, culturally defined” (3). By identifying how minority male-cast dramas are culturally defined, it will be possible to observe how these types of casts exist as non-challenging objects in patriarchal environments. Vorlicky also mentions that gender codings subsume representations of sex, race, and class in American realism due to the overdetermination of a dualist gender codings (22). What Vorlicky challenges here is how patriarchal ideology oppresses other elements of identities based on class, race, and sex in American realism through a strict gender binary. Furthermore, Vorlicky considers the realist male-drama canon to be a semiotic system that is so rigidly coded it restricts the spectrum of representations that are available for drama (23). He notes though that when the mechanics within the system are revealed “the playwright has the option—through a radical reworking of the codes of male dialogue—to articulate and stage new types of male subjectivity, new masculinities” (23). While Vorlicky acknowledges the

presence of a tight and restrictive gender construction in all-male dramas through semiotics, he theorizes that a deconstruction of the patriarchal ideology in the text can deliver different considerations of masculinity and gender.

To fully layout and examine my thoughts on performance of gender and sexuality on stage, my process has been solidified into three main chapters. Chapter One will provide an overview of the problem with gender and sexuality in twentieth-century American drama. I will be consulting Savran's *A Queer Sort of Materialism*, Sinfield's *Out on Stage*, and Vorlicky's *Act Like a Man* to examine how historically sexuality and gender in American drama has been formed, represented, and repressed. My survey will start with Henrik Ibsen's *A Doll's House*, the play which traditionally marks the start of realism in theatre. Realism is defined "as the dramatic mode that makes the strongest claim for forging links between a play's theatrical system and its cultural context. The characters in realist drama purport to voice our thoughts" (Vorlicky 1). *A Doll's House* is centered around Nora and her tense relationship with her husband Torvald, who treats her like a doll. Nora leaves her husband so she can live independently and escape the oppression he has placed on her as a woman. Ibsen's *A Doll's House* is not an American play, and is not feminist literature because the playwright was mainly exposing a societal problem (capitalism). However, I begin with this play because when the production was introduced in America, it provided a realist dramatic structure that plays continue to utilize today. In addition, I

will also examine other instances of gender and sexuality trouble as pointed out in plays such as Lillian Hellman's *The Little Foxes*, Tennessee Williams' *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*, *The Boys in the Band* by Mart Crowley, Caryl Churchill's *Cloud 9*, *M. Butterfly* by David Henry Hwang, and *Angels in America* by Tony Kushner. These twentieth-century American plays cover a myriad of important issues related to gender and sexuality.

Hellman's *The Little Foxes* focuses on southern aristocrat Regina Gidden's struggle to become financially independent from her wheel-chair bound husband, Horace. She exerts power over her husband near the end when she lets him die of a heart attack. As a result, she becomes a stronger woman who inherits his wealth but loses respect from her daughter, Alexandra, and the rest of the family. Regina's actions signal the complication the female gender experiences when being controlled financially by the dominant male gender.

Cat on a Hot Tin Roof is set in the Mississippi delta and focuses on Big Daddy Pollitt, a wealthy cotton tycoon, and the rocky relationship with the rest of his family. When Maggie tries and fails to conceive a child with her alcoholic and resistant husband, Brick, Big Daddy interrogates him about his strange behavior. This leads to a heated confrontation with Big Daddy, pressing Brick to answer if he ever had a desire for his friend, Skipper. Brick reveals that Skipper made a drunken confession to him over the phone, leading him to hang up the phone, which resulted in Skipper committing suicide. Brick's fear, confusion, and denial of having a desire for Skipper

reveals the conflict of an apparent desire or love in direct opposition with the straight male identity. Though it is not perfectly clear if Brick had a homosexual love or desire for his friend, it does communicate how these kinds of feelings are repressed within a patriarchal society for males. Furthermore, Maggie's insistence and desire to love Brick and have a child with him reinforces the ideologies of a patriarchal society to define her actions and image as a worthy straight female.

With *A Doll's House*, *The Little Foxes*, and *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* demonstrating the issues of gender and sexuality repressed within patriarchal contexts, *The Boys in the Band* and *M. Butterfly* address these problems directly by objecting to the strict patriarchal ideologies placed upon gender and sexuality. Mart Crowley's *The Boys in the Band* is centered around a group of gay men who are friends in New York City during the 60's/70's. A birthday party turns into a night of soul searching when someone's straight friend accidentally arrives at the party. The relationships between the men highlight the different identities of the gay male in society, representing the possibilities of different identities within male sexuality that are not completely repressed by a patriarchal culture.

M. Butterfly is about the relationship between Rene Gallimard, a french civil servant in China, who falls in love with the Chinese opera singer, Song Liling. Song is a man disguised as a woman, providing an opportunity to observe how gender can be fluidly represented. Though Song's identity opens up the possibilities of a flexible

gender spectrum, his relationship with Rene signifies how sexuality is oppressed and masked by strict gender constructions.

Chapter Two outlines various scholar's opinions and observations of the problem with gender and sexuality in culture and the stage. To answer my critical question, I will primarily discuss theories and observations about gender and sexuality from Butler, Case and Torr. Butler's *Gender Trouble* demonstrates that there are strict gender binaries that are closely prescribed in society. However, I plan to use her idea of gender as performance for my production as a tool to explore how I can stretch the boundaries of representations of gender and provide the opportunity for reconsideration of multiple identities in the gender spectrum. Case argues that semiotics can be utilized to deconstruct and disrupt its influence from patriarchal ideology. I intend to utilize her theory of examining semiotics as a deconstructive tool by manipulating the signs and codes within a character to further reveal hidden gendered and sexual identities. Torr's exploration of the straight male identity through the "Man for a Day" workshops allows for an examination of how this dominant gender identity operates and is controlled by patriarchal ideology. Her findings and observation will serve me in constructing the whole image of some particularly masculine characters. By examining gender or sexual representations with semiotics through a non-heteronormative lens, my queer perspective could allow for more

opportunities and considerations for more identities outside of the set standards of gender and sexuality.

In Chapter Three, I will explain how these theories and strategies will be applied to my performance of three specific scenes chosen from the plays *Take Me Out*, *Cloud 9*, and *Angels in America*. Chapter Four will consist of my preparation for the performance of those scenes, as well as a review of the outcome of the production after applying the methodologies. Furthermore, this chapter will consist of reactions and other observations during my performance. Chapter Four will also reflect upon my findings, and analyses as an actor negotiating and challenging gender and sexuality on stage.