Harvey Fierstein: A prophetic voice in the gay community

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Ernest James Hall, II

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ABSTRACT

HARVEY FIERSTEIN:
A Prophetic Voice in the Gay Community

by

Ernest James Hall, II

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Harvey Forbes Fierstein has become an important influence in the gay community. His first major play, Torch Song Trilogy, was a major milestone for gay theatre. By becoming the first gay play to be commercially successful, it launched Fierstein into the spotlight. Since his first major Broadway play, he has continued to be active as playwright, actor, and gay rights activist.

This paper places two of Fierstein's major plays within the context of gay liberation history and gay theatre history. By analyzing the importance and theme of both Torch Song Trilogy and Safe Sex, it is argued that Fierstein is clearly an influential voice in the gay community.

An outline of major events in the gay liberation movement and gay theatre history is included to assist in placing the plays within the appropriate context.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

“Never be bullied into silence. Never allow yourself to be made a victim. Accept no one’s definition of your life, but define yourself.”¹ These words, which concluded Harvey Fierstein’s commencement address to the Bennington class of 1992, embody a philosophy that Fierstein has embraced in both his career and in his life. Known for his distinctive gravelly voice and most often associated with Arnold, a role he wrote and portrayed on both stage and screen, Fierstein has established himself as a working actor in Hollywood and an avid activist in the gay community. In discussing his contributions, it is logical to begin with his playwriting career, since Torch Song Trilogy was the vehicle that propelled Fierstein into the public eye. In establishing Fierstein’s contributions, two plays will be discussed: Torch Song Trilogy, as it is considered his most successful work, and Safe Sex, which is his contribution to AIDS discussion. Both plays will help one understand his unique and important contribution to both theatre and the gay civil rights movement.

Before addressing the work of Mr. Fierstein, it is necessary to have an understanding of the major events in the gay liberation movement. Still a relatively young movement, many writers like Randy Schilts have begun to chronicle the events that shaped its formative years. As the movement matures there are more books being published exploring
the culture, but gay publisher Sasha Alyson has managed to provide a thorough and concise summary of this movement's events. Though impossible in the scope of this paper to address the whole of gay history, below is a brief accounting of highlights beginning with the Stonewall riots and continuing through the years in which Fierstein’s works were created. Following this essential outline of the gay liberation movement, a brief overview of gay theatrical history will be presented. By using these two historical perspectives, a rough but essential backdrop for interpretation will be formed as the importance and effectiveness of Mr. Fierstein’s two major plays will be assessed.

A Brief Overview of Gay History
Beginning with Stonewall

The Stonewall riots began June 28, 1969 and are considered by most to mark the start of the modern gay rights movement. Though the seeds of this event can be found in the preceding years, the spontaneity and violence of these riots quickly became a legend. The events of the evening unfolded after uniformed police arrived at the Stonewall Inn, a gay bar, around three o’clock in the morning. After ordering the patrons to leave, they began arresting the employees along with several drag queens. Though the raid and arrest were routine operations for the police, the evening took a surprise turn when the patrons of the bar resisted. A riot erupted and the crowd began chanting “Pigs!” Rioters in the crowd started throwing items such as pennies, beer bottles, and even a parking meter at the police. The police sought refuge in the building they had invaded earlier. Once authorities had barricaded themselves inside the bar, the rioters began attacking the Stonewall Inn. As the

\[1\] Fierstein, Harvey. *A 12-Step Program Guaranteed to Change your Life.*
rioters were fueled by their anger, the attack reached its climax that evening when someone in the crowd attempted to set the bar on fire. Fortunately, just before the trapped police began firing on the mob, reinforcements finally arrived and the crowd of 200 - 400 rioters dispersed. The following day, the management of the Stonewall Inn reopened the bar. Having been charged with selling liquor without a license, bartenders provided patrons with free drinks. As the evening progressed a crowd gathered at the bar and the riots that had erupted the night before raged for several more nights.²

The Stonewall riots were not a planned demonstration, but a spontaneous response to years of discrimination. When searching for a mitigating circumstance, no one cause can be found. There is a legend circulated among gays that the Queens were in mourning over the death of Judy Garland and had gathered at the bar. According to this legend, the riots were a response to the loss of an icon. Though the riots did occur the night following her funeral, this is an oversimplification. In his account of the Stonewall Riots, Randy Schilts links the riots to the death of Judy Garland. Schilts does not say, as popular gay legend would have it, that the death of the gay icon was a direct cause of the riots. Instead, Schilts notes that the social movement of the sixties had a direct impact on the event. “Once the social change movements of the 1960s hit, it seemed only a matter of time before gays would leap into the kind of militant movement ... a handful of early gay activists envisioned.”³ Schilts points out that in a decade where women and blacks were militantly fighting for their rights, it was only natural that gays would fight back as well. As Schilts

observes, gays related to Judy Garland because she was "put-upon and therefore self-destructive, a victim with a nebulous vision of Oz over the rainbow." Her life was one that gays related to, and when she died, so did the gay community's willingness to sit back and accept the rules that had been forced on them by society. The gay community would no longer accept the fact their lifestyle had been outlawed; they were now ready to claim their rights. Stonewall began as a spontaneous demonstration and ended up a mythic event which continues to empower the gay community. The following year the Stonewall Riots were commemorated in the nation's first gay pride events. Gay activists in four cities marked the anniversary of the event: in New York, activists staged a march which, according to various sources, had between 2,000 and 20,000 participants; Chicago and San Francisco were hosts to rallies, each attended by hundreds of participants; And while New Yorker's marched on the east coast, Los Angeles had the first ever "pride parade" down Hollywood Avenue. These anniversary events established the Stonewall Riots as the genesis of the modern gay rights movement and began to define a whole new generation of gays. No longer content with the underground gay culture that existed prior to Stonewall, this new generation would be increasingly involved in protests and politics.

**Gays are Not Crazy Anymore**

The visibility that Stonewall provided for gay people became more apparent as gay rights victories began to unfold. The church has a long history of denouncing homosexuality as sinful and abhorrent to God's law. However, gays were making inroads

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5 Schilts. 41-43.
into this most sacred institution as well. On June 25, 1972, the first major religious
denomination ordained a gay man for the ministry. After fielding questions from delegates
at the United Church of Christ's San Francisco Ecclesiastical Council, William Johnson was
ordained for the ministry. Though most churches still have official policies that define
homosexuality as a sin, Johnson's ordination signaled the beginning of a willingness for
dialogue within the church.

After the first religious victory, science would add some strength to the movement.
On April 9, 1974 the American Psychiatric Association voted by a 58% margin to remove
homosexuality from its official diagnosis manual of mental disorders. After extensive work
by the Association of Gay Psychologists, the American Psychological Association followed
the lead of the Psychiatrists and changed its' policy on homosexuality the following year.
This policy change urged "all mental health professionals to take the lead in removing the
stigma of mental illness that has long been associated with homosexual orientations." 9

As the image of homosexuals began to change, so did the media's portrayal of them.
In 1975, the cover of Time magazine carried the picture of Sgt. Leonard Matlovich, a gay
man discharged from the air force after publicly declaring his homosexuality. The depiction
of a conservative military gay man was an important step in helping to dispel the gay
stereotype that all homosexuals were effeminate men who could be spotted by the way they
dressed, talked, and walked. Five years later, a federal court ordered the military to reinstate
Matlovich. However, instead of accepting military reinstatement, he opted for the

6 Alyson. 33-34.
7 Alyson. 35.
8 Alyson. 37.
9 Alyson. 38.
settlement offered by the military of $160,000. The judgement and settlement were the first major blow against the anti-gay policy of the Pentagon. 10

Orange Juice and Twinkies are Evil

Anita Bryant, singer (and then spokesperson for the Florida citrus industry), proved to be a major setback for the gay rights movement in 1977. Bryant, a devout Christian, launched a campaign to repeal a gay rights ordinance that had passed in Dade County, Florida. Six weeks after the Dade County Commission had passed an ordinance banning anti-gay discrimination in jobs, housing, and public accommodations, opponents had formed a committee named “Save Our Children” and managed to place a referendum on the ballot. Largely due to Mrs. Bryant’s involvement in the “Save Our Children” committee, the issue became of nationwide importance. Despite the massive effort by gay rights advocates (which included an orange juice boycott), the ordinance was repealed by a two-to-one margin. 11 Though the movement was caught by surprise and disheartened by the loss, it was a valuable lesson for the activists and had managed to galvanize the fledgling community.

Though the Bryant campaign was an “upset”, the end of 1977 would hold another event even more abhorrent. On November 8, 1977, Harvey Milk was elected to the San Francisco Board of Supervisors, becoming the first openly gay man to hold public office in a major U.S. city. Harvey Milk served on San Francisco’s Board of Supervisors with Dan White, a conservative ex-cop. The relationship between Milk and White was adversarial, and when White finally resigned from the board due to personal and financial problems,

10 Alyson. 38.
Harvey Milk was jubilant. Dan White resigned approximately one year after the election of Milk. However, ten days after he had resigned, Dan White had changed his mind. Mayor Moscone had been ready to reappoint White to his position until Milk pointed out that White had blocked several of the mayor's proposals. Milk went on to remind Mayor Moscone that Dan White was the only city politician who had stepped forward as an active anti-gay spokesperson. Moscone, who faced re-election the following year and did not want to hurt his chances with the gay constituency, rescinded his promise to re-appoint Dan White. As the mayor's anticipated appointment neared, word reached Dan White that he would not be the chosen candidate. The day that Moscone was to make the appointment, Dan White went to the mayor's office. After a brief, heated exchange, White shot the mayor four times and killed him. He left the mayor's office and proceeded to the supervisors' offices, where he would find Harvey Milk. White asked to speak to Milk, who agreed. Dan White took Harvey Milk across the hall to his old office, closed the door, and shot Milk four times. The day was November 27, 1978. Harvey Milk died at approximately 10:55 a.m.

Right after the shootings, Dan White left the building, called his wife, and met her at St. Mary's Cathedral. It was there that White confessed to the shootings. The following year, Dan White was found guilty of a reduced charge. White's lawyers argued that a diet of too much junk food had impaired his judgement. Instead of being convicted of first-degree murder, the infamous "Twinkie Defense" resulted in a lesser conviction of voluntary
manslaughter. Gay people, who had faced violence and discrimination for years, were outraged and a protest march on city hall turned into rioting.  

The effects of Milk's martyrdom would continue to be felt. Almost a year after his death, in October of 1979, over one hundred thousand people marched on the nation's capital. In the hands of thousands, the name and picture of Harvey Milk was carried. Though most probably knew nothing more about the man than the stories they had heard, Milk had become a legend. In fact, as Schilts notes, Milk had become a martyr. "Milk was a gay leader who talked about hope, struggled for his political successes against all odds, and won. Since he was strong and found victory, he had to be killed because most gays knew, society does not want homosexuals to be strong and succeed. ... Since the killer was heterosexual and the victim was homosexual, it only made sense to gays that the killer found succor in the criminal justice system; heterosexuals had long been free to violate homosexuals with impunity." The murder of Harvey Milk provided the gay community with two new images in their struggle.

Dan White, who served only five years in prison and committed suicide on October 21, 1985, will forever symbolize those who irrationally seek to destroy those they do not understand. Harvey Milk, the first post-Stonewall martyr, will eternally symbolize every man or woman who is victimized simply because they love differently.

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16 Schilts. 271.
17 Alyson. 41.
18 Schilts. 348.
19 Alyson. 41.
The Changing Face of the Movement

As the activists marched forward, no one could predict the impact that AIDS was going to have on the gay community. In June 1981, The Centers for Disease Control announced that five previously healthy gay men in Los Angeles have been diagnosed with pneumocystis carinii pneumonia (PCP), a rare disease previously unknown in people with healthy immune systems. Though no one could imagine the impact of this announcement, it was the first official warning that the AIDS epidemic was on the horizon. As more people began to die from what was at first labeled a gay disease, (Originally, AIDS was known as GRID - Gay-Related Immunity Disorder) the face of the gay civil rights movement changed.

In an irrational response to AIDS, conservative state legislators in Austin, Texas moved to recriminalize homosexual acts between consenting adults in 1983. Citing their fear that the diseases of homosexuals threatened the public health, Texas eventually reinstated sodomy laws in 1985. That these new laws only punished only homosexuals underscores the link that the gay rights movement formed with AIDS activism. The actions of the Texas Legislature are representative of the attitudes of the nation. Discrimination against people with AIDS became more apparent and activists began to protest their mistreatment and the apparent apathy of the government, health agencies, and pharmaceutical firms.

Since the disease had become synonymous with homosexuality and as more people died of the “gay plague” -- with little or no response from mainstream society -- many gay

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20 Alyson. 43.
liberation activists became AIDS activists. The battle for civil rights had become a battle for life. Gay liberationists no longer had the leisure to pursue such causes as employment and housing discrimination. Society had begun to blame homosexuals for the plague, and gays found that no one seemed to care about AIDS as long as only gays were dying. The gay civil rights agenda evolved into the AIDS activist’s fight for life.

In response to the crisis and apparent lack of progress and concern by government and big business, ACT-UP formed in 1987. The AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power is a highly visible organization that has been at the forefront of AIDS activism. By using highly visible, media centered protests ACT-UP has been instrumental in raising consciousness regarding the plight of AIDS. Though gay pride events and marches would still occur, they would now focus more and more on AIDS causes. It would be several years before the movement that began with Stonewall would return to its original civil rights agenda. For now, the struggle for gay rights had merged with AIDS activism.

As activists made progress in getting the nation to understand that AIDS was not a gay disease but a health issue affecting people from all walks of life, the gay liberation movement, which had become synonymous with the AIDS movement, moved along with it. It is tragic that it took the a devastating disease and the ongoing death of thousands to begin convincing people that gays are not a deviant population, but people who faced the same life and death struggles as everyone else. As the heterosexual community began to realize that AIDS could effect them as well, many of them found acceptance and comfort in the gay community. AIDS provided a cause that both gay and straight communities would come together to battle, and in the process come to understand each other more. (Interestingly a
year after ACT-UP was formed and seven years after the disease was announced World Aids Day was first observed on December 1, 1988 under the auspices of the World Health Organization.\(^\text{23}\)

These events summarize the major historical occurrences in gay liberation during the time that Harvey Fierstein's career in theater began. The events and circumstances of the early gay liberation movement are paralleled in the history of gay theatre.

**Repression of Gay Portrayals in Theater Before Stonewall**

There are several books which discuss gay theatre and its history in depth such as Nicholas de Jongh's *Not in Front of the Audience: Homosexuality on Stage*\(^\text{24}\) and Carl Miller's *Stages of Desire*.\(^\text{25}\) These books provide interesting and important details for the discussion of gay theatre history; however, William Hoffman and Don Shewey have both written authoritative and concise summaries of gay theatrical history and for the purpose of this paper provide the essential details.

According to William Hoffman, silence was the predominant form of repression in the 1930s, though Lillian Hellman's *The Children's Hour* (1934) is a prominent exception where a child falsely accuses two women of lesbianism.\(^\text{26}\) As the theater moved forward, the policy of silence surrounding homosexual portrayal was broken — despite a New York

\(^{22}\) Alyson. 309.

\(^{23}\) Alyson. 53.


State law, this existed until 1967, prohibiting the portrayal of homosexuality on the stage. William Hoffman credits Tennessee Williams with paving the way for future playwrights’ efforts to portray homosexuality in the theatre. To take just one example from his work, In A Streetcar Named Desire Blanche delivers a monologue about her dead husband that goes beyond the stereotype of gay men as sick and pathetic. Though he uses extreme characters and situations, Blanche’s description of the Grey Boy’s suicide accurately conveys the message that homophobia ultimately destroys. Hoffman goes on to state that “Williams was as outspoken as anyone could be in the forties and fifties and portrayed or mentioned homosexuals in many plays.” Because of the groundbreaking work of Tennessee Williams, it became easier for playwrights in the 1950s to mention homosexuality. Though most images of homosexuality in the fifties were negative, considering the superstitions of the period, the fact that homosexuality was portrayed at all could be interpreted as a positive sign. However, the progress towards positive gay portrayals is slow. Plays such as Robert Anderson’s Tea and Sympathy (in which a false accusation of homosexuality is made against a young man) represent the plays in which the issue of homosexuality is avoided in depth through the device of the false accusation. Of course, silence and the device of false accusation are not the only methods that were used to avoid directly dealing with the taboo of same-sex love. Other methods of avoidance that were prominent through the 1960s (and to a somewhat lesser degree are still present today) are stereotyping and exploitation.

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28 Hoffman. xxi.
29 Hoffman. xxii.
30 Hoffman. xxii.
31 Hoffman. ix.
Setting the Stage for Gay Theater

In the sixties two new forces entered onto the theatre scene which furthered the theatre's liberation when it came to gay plays. The first was an English playwright named John Osborne. While Osborne's first work did not deal with homosexuality, his anger at the social system changed British theatre empowering "other playwrights of the period to write about all aspects of British life, including homosexuality." At first, American theatre lagged behind British theatre when it came to including gay characters in the plays being written; however, American productions of British plays dealing with gays inspired a more honest approach for American playwrights.

At the same time, off-off-Broadway had begun. This second force came onto the theater scene in the late fifties in New York's lofts and coffeehouses. The most notable of the early off-off-Broadway houses was Joe Cino's Cafe Cino. The Cafe Cino began as a "bohemian hangout" and the practice that began with occasionally poetry and scene readings shortly blossomed into a full-fledged theatre. The Cino explored such works by established gay writers as Oscar Wilde's *The Happy Prince* and Noel Coward's *Fumed Oak*. More importantly, however, this new theater offered new and untried playwrights a chance to explore their voices -- writers such as Robert Patrick and Lanford Wilson, who saw gayness as an essential part of the new theatre. The Cino provided these playwrights with a forum for work that would not be accepted by the mainstream stage. Following the Cafe

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32 Hoffman. xxiii.
33 Hoffman. xxiii.
34 Hoffman. xxiii.
Cino, many other off-off-Broadway theaters began to spring up and when Ellen Stewart founded La Mama Experimental Theatre Club, the movement was in full swing.

The natural extension of the off-off-Broadway movement came in 1974 when playwright-director Doric Wilson founded The Other Side of Silence (TOSOS). TOSOS was birthed from the conviction that “there should be a place where authors and artists who want to deal with their gayness can have their work done, and done well, and done away from the marketplace where sensationalism is the rule of the day.” Though TOSOS only ran for a little over three years, producer John Glines left TOSOS in 1976 to open The Glines, which continued operations for six years. At the same time gay theatre, companies were springing up across the nation. Theaters such as Out and About in Minneapolis and the Theatre Rhinoceros are only two of the forty that would be members of the newly formed Gay Theatre Alliance by 1983. The proliferation of gay theater companies and the formation of the Gay Theater Alliance signaled that the American theater audience was ready to witness gay themes on the stage. It was finally viable to present gay plays to a commercial audience and gay theater began to move from found and makeshift spaces to the “legitimate stage.”

As the theatre community became more willing to present gay themes and ideas on the stage, as evidenced by gay companies appearing across the nation, Harvey Fierstein’s playwriting career was beginning. It would be impossible to separate the rise of Torch Song Trilogy from its humble beginnings at La Mama E.T.C. and the evolving willingness of the theatre community to support gay theatre. It is in this climate that Harvey Fierstein’s plays,

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35 Hoffman. xiv.
36 Shewey. xv.
which will later comprise Torch Song Trilogy, found a willing audience at the La Mama E.T.C. Harvey Fierstein’s success as both actor and playwright can be attributed as much to his talent as to his being fortunate enough to find himself involved in the world of theatre at a time that was ready for his message.

Towards a Definition of Gay Theatre

When William Hoffman published Gay Plays: The First Collection he defined “gay theater” as “a production that implicitly or explicitly acknowledges that there are homosexuals on both sides of the footlights.” He goes on later to say that gay theatre is “difficult to define but unmistakable to gays and knowledgeable straights. Absolutely any play can be performed gay.”37 Hoffman does make a distinction between gay plays and gay theater. Hoffman states that gay plays are determined by subject and character.38 Presumably, if a play has gay characters and deals with a gay subject it is a gay play. There is, however, an inherent problem with these definitions. Just as one cannot identify a man or woman as gay because they “look that way,” there must also be more to qualify a theatrical performance or play as “gay theater” than subtle codes or a superimposed “gay style” on a “straight” play. Similarly, a gay play must have more than a gay character and deal with gay issues to qualify as a gay play.

In the introduction to Out Front, Don Shewey takes the definition of gay theatre into a more contemporary understanding than Hoffman does. Shewey notes that “for all intents and purposes, gay theatre began as a result of The Boys in the Band, much the same way the

37 Hoffman. ix.
38 Hoffman. ix.
gay liberation movement began with the Stonewall rebellion in 1969.  "With the advent of the gay movement ... gay people began demanding honest portrayals of ourselves onstage; we wanted positive images, role models, alternatives to heterosexual stereotypes."

Before synthesizing a more complete definition of gay theater from Hoffman's definitions and Shewey's observations of what gays want from theater, it must be understood that the gay experience is one which is unique to the gay culture. Ethan Mordden, a prominent gay author, states:

"Gay's think there's room for everyone; most straights are willing to make room for gays on the condition that gays pretend they don't exist. ... Yet despite straights' lack of comprehension and outright intolerance, gays inevitably comprehend straights, because, whatever our sexuality, we all grow up in the straight culture as participators. You can be homosexual from birth, but you can't be gay unless you voluntarily enter the gay world, a culture all it's own. Gays understand straights, but straights don't understand gays any more than whites understand blacks or Christians understand Jews, however good their intentions. Gay is a unique minority; strictly elective. If, called to the colors, you resist, no one may ever know who you really are."  

Mordden's insight into the exclusivity of gay culture must be factored into any definition of gay theater and gay plays. This exclusivity is not designed to exclude heterosexuals from a

39 Shewey. xii.
40 Shewey. xi.
gay theatrical experience, but it does point out that whatever understanding and enlightenment may result will not be the same for those whose lives are outside the gay culture. Furthermore, it underscores the importance of gay artists being central to the production of either gay theater or a gay play.

Taking these three viewpoints into account, a gay play can be defined as a play that has significant gay characters that accurately portray at least one aspect of the gay community. Furthermore, the subject of a gay play will revolve around an issue that is inextricable to the gay experience. The character portrayals and subject need not necessarily portray positive aspects of the gay community, as evidenced by Mart Crowley's The Boys in the Band, but they must be honest. Morden's observations help to clarify Hoffman's nebulous definition of gay theater by providing an essential link to Shewey's observations of the theatrical needs of the gay community. Gay theater is a production of a play that presents the gay perspective of life through the production. Whether the company is performing a gay play or a straight play; Gay theater occurs when the inside perspective of the gay culture is found onstage.

The Playwright

Biographical information on Harvey Fierstein is scarce. "Blurbs" that are contained in published works focus on other works published and roles played. When Mr. Fierstein was contacted for an interview, he declined citing his busy appearance schedule and workload. One would expect such a response to come from his agent, but Mr. Fierstein made the call himself and left a polite but hurried response on voicemail while enroute to an

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appearance at a gay pride event. Searches through the Internet invariably return with promotions for his latest album *This is Not Going to Be Pretty* or a transcript of a commencement address given in 1992. Because of the scarcity of information, piecing together even a sketchy biography is a difficult task.

Harvey Forbes Fierstein was born in Brooklyn on June 6, 1954. His father, Irving, was a handkerchief maker and his mother, Jacqueline, a housewife. He began working as a drag queen in East Village clubs at 16 and turned to playwriting at 19. A product of the Brooklyn public schools, Fierstein graduated in 1973 from Pratt Institute with a B.F.A. in art. In 1971, Fierstein made the move from the clubs to the stage when he played an asthmatic lesbian in Andy Warhol's *Pork*. Fierstein began his playwriting career with plays such as *Freaky Pussy*, *Flatbush and Tosca*, and *Cannibals* — all remain unpublished. These early works were set in the drag world of New York. In addition to Fierstein’s work on the stage and as a playwright he has appeared in several films including *Garbo Talks*, *The Harvest*, *Mrs. Doubtfire*, *Independence Day*, *Bullets over Broadway*, *Sesame Street’s Elmo Saves Christmas*, and most recently as the voice of Yao, a soldier, in Disney’s animated feature *Mulan*.

Though Fierstein is accepted by the gay community as a spokesperson, there are gays who take exception to his portrayals of roles that they perceive as reinforcing a stereotype. One notable example is the role of Aunt Jack in *Mrs. Doubtfire*. Fierstein

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42 Fierstein, Harvey, *This is Not Going to be Pretty*. Plump Records, 1995.
43 Fierstein, A 12-Step Program Guaranteed to Change your Life.
responds to such criticism by reminding people that he represents only himself. "I make that as clear as I can as often as I can," he says. "Nobody elected me to this position. You'd like to make everybody proud and happy. But it can't be done." In addition to balancing his career with the pressures of being a public figure, Harvey Fierstein manages to remain involved in charitable causes. He believes in giving back to the community and gives of his time and money to causes such as AIDS awareness and research and organizations that help children.

As an identifiable spokesperson for the gay community, Fierstein is often asked about the political issues that face the community. When Michael Snell of Outlines asked Fierstein for his opinion regarding upcoming gay issues in America, Fierstein responded with an optimism that is characteristic.

We've got some big battles coming up. But I think we're constantly moving forward. Sure, we have our defeats and we have our distractions. God knows, you can still raise a lot of money by being anti-gay if you want to run a church. But, I think we have always been moving forward and I feel were doing ok. We are staying on track. Considering the strain that has been on the gay community the last 15 years, because of AIDS, and we've had to handle the entire country and do all the work for the entire country, you

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know, that took a lot of our energy away from the other stuff we needed to be doing. But, even considering that, we're doing alright. 49

Fierstein places a large importance on coming out as a political act. "Coming out is the most powerful thing any of us can do for ourselves and our community. Each of us has the power to change dozens of minds about who we are." 50 While coming out is the most important act that an individual can do, when it comes to the lesson that the gay community most needs to learn, Fierstein points to a lack of understanding of grassroots politics. Rather than learning how to network and lobby, Fierstein thinks that the most important lesson that the gay community needs to learn is that almost everything that is said and done is a political act. Fierstein realizes that celebrating a same-sex couple's commitment with a union ceremony is a political act and so is listening to a radio personality. Choosing to purchase one product over another constitutes a support of that company's policies. 51

Though he is often quoted and moves in circles that are considered power-brokers in the gay community, it is inspiring that he places so much faith in the acts of individuals to make a change in society.

When asked about his personal life Harvey reveals that his membership in Al-Anon has influenced his philosophy about secrets and privacy. "I'm a 12-step member of Al-Anon. And I know that part of the pain I feel when I go to an AA meeting, or whatever, is because of dirty little secrets. ... So if I seem an open book, it's because I don't believe in

49 Snell.
50 Snell.
51 Snell.
keeping those secrets. I may keep certain things private, but not secret."\textsuperscript{52} This philosophy is central to the character of Arnold in \textit{Torch Song Trilogy} and permeates the play.

Fierstein’s great love is a man who is hopelessly in the closet. The relationship has been on and off for 17 years and during that time he has had four other lovers. "I don’t think you stop loving somebody just because you love somebody else," he says. "I’ve always been in monogamous relationships, when they were sexual relationships. Yet I don’t necessarily believe in monogamy. I have always been free and my lovers have always been free to fool around."\textsuperscript{53} Perhaps Fierstein’s 17 year on and off relationship is the inspiration for Arnold’s and Ed’s relationship in \textit{Torch Song Trilogy}.

Though Mr. Fierstein is not the only gay playwright to obtain notoriety, he is notable for many reasons. As an actor, playwright, and activist he has inspired and challenged the gay community to redefine itself and examine its goals. At the same time, Fierstein has educated the heterosexual community by challenging the stereotypes of gays as either promiscuous sex addicts, pedophiles, or mentally ill. For both cultures, Fierstein presents an new image to consider: gay men seeking a family for themselves in committed relationships. In challenging these stereotypes, Fierstein not only presents to the audience the current condition of the gay community but also illustrates the gains made in the gay rights movement.

When summarizing Fierstein’s career to date, D.S. Lawson notes that “as a visible spokesman for gay people, queer theater, and AIDS causes, Fierstein has achieved a

\textsuperscript{52} Grant. 74.
\textsuperscript{53} Grant. 75.
celebrity that transcends the work of New York avant-garde theater." Fierstein became a household name because of the success of *Torch Song Trilogy*; however, his candid nature and willingness to speak out on issues that concern him expanded his notoriety past the experimental playhouses where he began. Fierstein now wields influence across the nation.

Perhaps the best summary of Fierstein’s life and personality comes from a story from his childhood:

> One day when I was a kid, I was sneaking out of the house with a comic book, something I knew I wasn’t supposed to take to school. And I had gone down to the basement and snuck it under my clothes. You know kids - and mothers know everything. Well, my mother just said, 'If you’re doing something that you know is wrong then you shouldn’t be doing it. And if you are doing it and it’s not the wrong thing to do, then there’s no need to hide.' She gave me that lesson that I was able to use as a yardstick for the rest of my life. That’s the way I feel about sexuality. That’s the way I feel about everything. My parents gave me that.

Harvey Fierstein is a man who defines himself day to day with little regard for what others will think of him. His personal experiences and philosophies are definitely an integral part of his plays and their unique themes. Fierstein’s integrity and belief in the destructive power of secrets is reflected in Arnold’s insistence on being open about his sexuality and Arthur’s insistence on being counted as Collin’s surviving spouse. His commitment to relationships as central to the human experience is reflected as the

54 Summers. 274.
55 Grant. 72.
characters in his plays struggle to find a meaningful connection despite apparently insurmountable odds. Though all of theatre is based primarily in the dramatic conflict of relationships, Fierstein uses the contemporary social pressures that surround his characters as the crux of his drama. For instance, the difficulty of finding and maintaining a relationship in an intolerant society is a central to Torch Song Trilogy. And in Safe Sex, Fierstein struggles with the pain associated with loving in the age of AIDS.

Despite pressures to toe the politically correct line and represent “normal” gay people, He maintains an integrity that is admirable and rare in the face of pressure to conform. He continues to live as he always has without apologizing for who he is. Though portraying Arnold as a drag queen might offend the post-stonewall sensibilities of the gay community, Fierstein’s commitment to the honest portrayal of a man who entertains in women’s clothing is proof that his commitment to truth is effective and moving.

In the following chapters an analysis of Fierstein’s major works, Torch Song Trilogy and Safe Sex, will be presented followed by a discussion of his contribution to gay theatre. The hit musical La Cage aux Folles, for which Fierstein wrote the book, is not included in this analysis. Since the musical is not only a creative collaboration but also an adaptation of the French play by Jean Poiret, it deserves a treatment separate from those works that have been created solely from Fierstein’s own dramatic voice. The plays chosen for this discussion represent the works most associated with his playwriting career and which have received the most notice by critics.
CHAPTER 2

AN ANALYSIS OF TORCH SONG TRILOGY

_Torch Song Trilogy_ is not only Fierstein’s first play to be produced for the Broadway stage, it is also remains his most well known. Fierstein won numerous awards for this work including the Tony Award for Best Actor and Best Play (1983), the Drama Desk Award in the same categories, and the Theatre World Award. \(^5^6\) These awards are more than mere acknowledgement of Fierstein’s skill. Such accolades mark a change in the theatre culture when it comes to homosexuality on the stage. The success of _Torch Song_ on Broadway signaled the willingness of both gay and straight theatergoers to contemplate the gay experience as something more than a curiosity.

In an interview in 1996, Harvey Fierstein comments that, “More straight people saw it than gay people. And they loved Arnold. It was the first gay play to actually make money. Which then changed how gay projects were conceived. It crossed over that very important line. It was a gay piece with openly gay actors playing the roles.” \(^5^7\) Despite the immense acceptance of _Torch Song Trilogy_ by a heterosexual audience, it is still gay theatre and the play’s success with mainstream audiences is a tribute to the idea that coming out is the most powerful act that any gay person can do.

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Torch Song Trilogy: A Character Analysis

Arnold Beckoff is a 24 year-old drag queen in search of a husband. As Arnold laments the passing of his youth and expounds on his philosophy of relationships, we learn about Arnold's past attempts at finding love. Perhaps the most revealing moment in the first scene is when Arnold says “The person who thinks they're mature enough to handle an affair that's hopeless from the beginning is the very same person who keeps the publishers of Gothic Romances up to their tragic endings in mink.”

We then learn about a relationship with a man named Charley, who is described by Arnold as Mr. Right. Although he never reveals what ended that relationship or any of the others alluded to, the impression is that an intangible element that is yet to be discovered by Arnold was missing. The key to unlocking Arnold's deepest desire, his objective, is when he says:

Ya know... in my life I have slept with more men than are names and/or numbered in the Bible (Old and New Testaments put together). But in all those bed not once has someone said, 'Arnold, I love you...' that I could believe. So, I ask myself, 'Do you really care?' And the only honest answer I can give myself is, 'Yes, I care.' I care be - (Catches himself) I care a great deal. But not enough.

Though Arnold thinks he is looking for the “International Stud” it becomes obvious at the end of the play that what he is actually seeking to build is a family.

In the next scene, Arnold is about to get another chance at love as the play’s antagonist is introduced. Ed is described as “thirty-four, very handsome; masculine with a

58 Fierstein. Torch Song Trilogy. 23-25.
59 Fierstein. Torch Song Trilogy. 26

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boyish charm." While Arnold is seeking Mr. Right, Ed is seeking nothing more than Mr. Right-Now. Ed is well practiced at the art of the cruise, knowing what lines to say and recovering with deftness when they do not produce the desired result. (e.g. "I'm a Sagittarius"). The first clue in Ed's monologue that this "one-nighter" may turn into more is when he offers to teach Arnold to ski. If Ed were only interested in a sexual encounter, he could dispense with the common courtesies of conversation. As he rapidly explores a potential emotional connection with Arnold, he is shocked at Arnold's choice of career, but having found a suitable date for the evening Ed moves forward and the two leave together. It isn't fair to say that Ed is only looking for a one-night stand as it is obvious he wants more than backroom sex can offer. But, as his ill-fated first relationship with Arnold will prove, he isn't quite ready to embrace a relationship with a man outside the safety of the backroom's anonymity either.

When Ed's relationship with Arnold becomes too involved emotionally, Ed leaves Arnold for Laurel — Ed's complication and companion in the second act. Laurel offers Ed a relationship filled with the "normalcy" Ed believes he wants. It is not until Widows that Ed discovers and reveals that he is looking for more than the "normal life" of a heterosexual by declaring that he wants "more than a marriage which is at best purposeless, unfulfilling, but perfectly acceptable." Ed and Laurel did not separate because they didn't love each other.

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64 Fierstein. *Torch Song Trilogy*. 177.
In fact, Ed points out that he and Laurel have a “friendship, not a marriage.” This admission is the turning point for Ed. By making this confession, Ed opens the door to accepting that more than he wants a relationship that is “normal” and acceptable, he is looking for a relationship that will provide him with security and love.

Laurel is thirty-five, single, and recovering from a series of badly ended relationships with men. Laurel is an “off-stage” character during act one, but her presence is felt strongly. She begins dating Ed while Ed is still having a relationship with Arnold. In scene three Ed chooses to stop seeing Arnold in favor of Laurel. When Laurel is onstage in Fugue she is a survivor. Desperately trying to understand why each relationship she has been through has ended and wanting to see herself as liberated and secure, she engineers the fateful weekend when Arnold and Alan visit the farmhouse Ed and Laurel call home. While Ed is seeking a relationship in which he can see himself as normal, Laurel must create in her world a relationship which is “civilized” and will fulfill her “domestic fantasies”. Unfortunately for Laurel, he need to create an ideal relationship deludes her into ignoring the realities of her situation. While Laurel plays the “dutiful wife” doing the dishes with Arnold, Ed and Alan have sex in the barn. Though she will later claim that this traumatic event made her relationship stronger, Ed and Laurel eventually separate. The purpose behind her orchestration of the farmhouse weekend is to force Ed to choose her over Arnold. The lesson that is learned is that no matter how desperately one wants a relationship to work, no amount of pretending and role playing can make it happen.

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Accompanying Arnold to the farmhouse is Alan. A young, beautiful eighteen year-old who fell in love with Arnold during a bar-fight. Having come to New York to make it as a business owner, Alan ended up a street hustler at the age of fourteen. Several years later, and with some luck, he had made connections and ended up a model – which is when he “found” Arnold. As Alan tells the story, he paints a fairy-tale, love at first sight, happily ever-after scenario. It’s not until the fugue is in its most frenzied do we learn that things are not all roses at the Beckoff home. Despite Arnold’s continuing visits to the backroom, Alan’s brief affair with Ed, and Alan dealing with Arnold’s insecurity, Alan wants his relationship with Arnold to be Hollywood perfect – Alan wants a relationship where he is safe and secure. Alan’s objective, however, comes into clearer focus when one remembers that it was his idea to participate in the weekend. Add to that the following questions that Alan asks Arnold: “Did you really love Ed?” “You ever think of going back with him?” “When I said I loved you before, you didn’t answer me. […] Well?” It is clear that Alan is seeking more than a warm place to sleep and a comforting ear. Alan’s objective is similar to Laurel’s: He wants to force Arnold to choose him over Ed. At the end of Fugue he has seems to have succeeded, and since he dies before Widows and Children begins, it will never be known if Alan and Arnold have managed to find a life-long partnership. Instead, Alan becomes Arnold’s ideal - A fantasy lover who is perfect because he is no longer alive to make the mistakes that could damage their relationship.

David, Arnold’s foster son, is the culmination of Alan’s dream for a Hollywood marriage. Though Alan dies in a gay-bashing incident after the farm visit, Arnold goes ahead with the adoption proceedings as a way to cope with his grief. David is placed with

68 Fierstein. Torch Song Trilogy. 72.
Arnold, despite the fact that it will be a single parent relationship, for several reasons – not the least of which is because he too is gay.

David has been abused as a child and was taken from his parents and placed in foster care. David ends up in Arnold's care as a last-resort effort of the system. After having been returned by one foster home and running away from a second, it appears that the officials in charge of David's care think that placing him in a stable gay home may help straighten him out. The hope is that Arnold will provide a home life with which David will be comfortable and that Arnold will prove to be a positive role model to which David can relate.

It is clear that David is a troubled child and street-wise enough to leave whenever he wants. Arnold knows that he has already run-away from one home when he was not happy. So why does David stay? The clues that answer this question are scattered throughout the third-act, but the most telling is David's attempts to get Arnold and Ed back together. David has found a place where he can feel safe with a parent that understands him. If David can manage to play cupid, he will finally have what he wants most and what every child deserves: Loving parents who respect, guide, and inspire their children. David's super-objective is to get Arnold and Ed back together, thereby creating the family he wants.

Mrs. Beckoff (Ma) is the most colorful character in the play – next to her son, of course. She is returning from Florida for what is to be a routine family visit. Things are going to be complicated for her when Arnold is faced with finally telling her about his son. Ma loves her son, but is frustrated by the fact that she cannot understand his sexuality. Despite the fights where she tells Arnold that his sex life should stay in the bedroom, she
does care about his emotional well being. The fights between Ma and Arnold climax in an emotional rage as Arnold declares that while his mother lost her husband through somewhat normal circumstances, he lost his lover to a hate crime. During his tirade Ma flees the room and begins packing. However, even this rage filled encounter does not prevent Ma from making one last effort to connect with her son. As she prepares to leave after the final argument, she stops and comforts Arnold, offering support as he copes with Alan’s loss. She also asks about his feelings towards Ed. These are not the acts of an irrational woman who does not love her son because he is queer – though she had made some hateful statements during earlier arguments. These acts of compassion demonstrate that Mrs. Beckoff is a mother trying to understand and relate to a son that she feels she has lost.

There are two other “presences” that need to be mentioned: Lady Blues and Murray. The word presence is used instead of character because Fierstein uses these two persons more as dramatic devices than actual characters. Though it is possible in some plays for offstage characters such as Murray to effect action, throughout Torch Song he is used as a convenience to propel the action along. The first time that Fierstein uses Murray is in The International Stud. Arnold is home waiting for Ed to call and has asked Murray to call to see if his telephone is working. When Arnold answers the phone the half of the conversation that we hear is a comedic exposition to highlight that Arnold is putting more into his relationship than Ed. Murray returns in Widows and Children to underscore the urgency of Ma’s arrival. (Arnold gets a call from Murray and then cuts the conversation very short when he discovers Ma is on her way.) Murray makes only two more appearances.

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once as an interlude in scene two and again at the end of the play to announce to Arnold that he should listen to the radio.

Lady Blues is a unique dramatic device. Though she is only onstage providing musical interludes between the scenes in Stud, her presence is felt throughout the play as the characters all search for relationships in which they will finally find happiness and contentment. Fierstein calls for her to be placed next to a grand piano that is located upstage center and "high above the action." Her songs are to "conjure" the action, not comment on it. It would be difficult to contend that Lady Blues has direct effect on the action of the play despite the instruction that her songs are to "conjure the action." Instead, Fierstein uses the Lady Blues as a metaphor for Torch Song Trilogy. As a singer of torch songs, she embodies the issues with which the play wrestles: love and hope.

William Ball outlines the technique for selecting a metaphor for a play in his book A Sense of Direction. Ball suggests that a director select a photograph or painting as a metaphor for the play. The director can then use this metaphor as a focus for the production. Though a picture or photograph is suggested, Fierstein has provided the director with a metaphor that can be utilized to great effect. Since Lady Blues embodies the quest for self-fulfillment in a happy relationship, her presence should be reflected in the music throughout the play. By selecting music and colors that embody her persona, Torch Song will become richer.

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70 Fierstein. Torch Song Trilogy. 23.
71 Fierstein. Torch Song Trilogy. 20.
**Torch Song Trilogy: An Analysis of Plot**

A play's spine is the overall action that runs through the entire play and connects the individual moments into a cohesive unit. It is most easily discovered after the major plot points of the play are identified. The plot can be broken down using the terms preparation, attack, struggle, turn, and outcome (P.A.S.T.O.). The preparation for the play is the equilibrium established at the opening. Attack is the moment that the major dramatic conflict is introduced which leads to the struggle to reestablish an equilibrium. The turn, or climax, of the play is the moment when the struggle reaches a point where a new equilibrium can be established. And the outcome represents the results of the entire play. Once these major plot points are outlined, it will be possible to determine the overall spine of the play which, in turn, will provide essential insight into the dramatic theme of the play.

As the play opens, there is a drag queen seated onstage completing her makeup. Things are under control and she takes time to explain the state of her life to the audience. Of course, Arnold is engaged in more than mere storytelling and exposition – as he moves through his ritual preparations he wrestles with his life as a single gay man. Characteristic of Arnold's search for the perfect lover, his opening reflects a dance of intimacy. As the drag queen puts on her armor, the man underneath peeks out and bears his soul. However, Arnold often lets more of himself out than he is comfortable with and, like a mother protecting her son, Virginia Hamm, Arnold's drag persona, jumps forward. With biting camp humor, the armor is pulled back on and Arnold is safely back in a world where he makes the rules.

The attack comes in the following scene when Arnold meets Ed in the bar. When Arnold agrees to go home with Ed the play's action takes off and the play's major dramatic
question (MDQ) is asked. Will Arnold, the protagonist, finally find happiness in a relationship?

As the play’s action progresses through the struggle, there are several obstacles that must be overcome before Arnold can find happiness again. The first comes when Arnold discovers that Ed is seeing Laurel. Arnold finds himself single again when he attempts to force Ed to choose either Laurel or himself. Though it would seem rational that Arnold and Ed’s relationship would be over after that, at the close of the first act Ed re-enters Arnold’s life. Ed has returned with the hope of reconciling with Arnold and salvaging a friendship. When the lights go out at the end of Stud, it is not clear if Ed has succeeded. What is clear is that Arnold is not ready to restart any sort of romantic relationship with Ed. For the moment, Arnold has found a new equilibrium. Of course, the struggle will continue in the second act, Fugue in a Nursery.

A year after the action in The International Stud the trilogy continues. As the scene opens Arnold has found a new lover and seems to have set up housekeeping with Alan. The attack on this blissful situation comes quickly – in the form of a telephone call from Laurel inviting Arnold to come up and visit. Arnold initially says no, a response that would preserve the status quo; however, Alan pushes to go and the search for the MDQ’s answer is renewed. Of course, things are even more complicated this time. Alan’s desire to go to the farmhouse stems from his desire to have Arnold confess his love. Laurel’s motive behind the weekend is to put closure on Arnold and Ed’s relationship. The common factor in both these motives is that Laurel and Alan feel threatened by the shared bond Arnold and Ed still share.
The initial encounters at the farmhouse center on each couple demonstrating to the other that their relationship is a happy one. The dinner where Arnold fawns over Alan while Laurel cuts Ed’s steak and the competition between the two bedrooms to prove which couple has the healthier sex life are both attempts to reinforce that it wasn’t necessary to have this weekend at all. When Arnold and Ed spend the afternoon talking on the bed, each is attempting to get the other to confess that there is still a spark between them. It is after this “showdown” that the facades begin to collapse. When Laurel tries to get Arnold to confess he is still in love with Ed, Arnold reverses the accusation and points out that it has been Ed who keeps initiating contact. Meanwhile, Ed takes Alan to the barn and seduces him. When the tryst becomes known both couples face the possibility of the end of their relationship. Through a series of shouting matches, arguments, and discussions, each character seeks to get their partner to confess their love and commitment. By the time the lights go down on Fugue, the characters have reconciled and it appears that they have found the contentment they were seeking.

Widows and Children First! begins five years after Fugue ends. The equilibrium as the action begins is quite different than one might expect. Instead of finding Arnold and Alan coping with “married life” together, Arnold is quite single. Alan was killed in a brutal fag-bashing and Arnold is now planning on adopting a young gay orphan. Ed and Laurel have separated and Ed has taken up residence on Arnold’s couch. Arnold’s is not a typical household, but nothing in his life is ever typical. Arnold has enlisted Ed and David, they are preparing for a visit from Arnold’s mother, and the tension in the room is thick. Arnold has not told his mother how Alan was killed or that he is planning to adopt David. David is
enjoying playing house and is busy trying to reunite Ed and Arnold. Ed is trying to resolve his separation with Laurel and he is courting Arnold.

The attack in Widows occurs when Ma enters. Ma’s bombastic personality overtakes the apartment and Arnold is immediately off balance and trying to establish a neutral ground for the inevitable talk about his plan to adopt David. From the moment she enters, Arnold is attempting to get Ma to accept his life. Everything from his choice of wallpaper to his decision to adopt David becomes an issue that Arnold needs Ma to approve of.

David raises the stakes as he too seeks the approval of Mrs. Beckoff, often providing results that increase the tension between Arnold and Ma. David returns home from school early and introduces himself to Mrs. Beckoff and forces Arnold into the conversation he wanted to avoid. As Arnold and his mother struggle to show each other the error of their viewpoints, the discussion escalates from David’s adoption to Arnold’s sexuality and relationship with Alan.

It would be easy to classify the “discussions” between Arnold and Ma as didactic sermonizing by the playwright. But the arguments are firmly grounded in character needs and are the direct result of Mrs. Beckoff’s attempts to reconcile with her son and Arnold’s desire to win his mother’s approval. When Arnold tries to explain how David came to live with him, he compares his relationship with Alan to his mother’s marriage. Though this is an attempt to place his relationship in terms that might make sense to his mother, it results in all out war. Ma is going to force Arnold to see that he is wrong. Arnold is going to shame his mother into admitting that his life is acceptable.
After the last major battle, Arnold gets drunk in an attempt to forget the course of the day. Ed chooses this moment to complicate Arnold’s life further and uses Arnold’s moment of emotionally vulnerability to seek another chance at their relationship. Ed struggles to convince Arnold that he is sincere and committed to trying again. Arnold, having learned from bitter past experience, is going to make Ed see why it can’t possibly work. David interrupts the moment just as Arnold is about to make a decision.

The turn of the play comes as Ma is getting ready to leave. She is going to make one last effort to reconcile with her son. Ma says several things to Arnold in an attempt to demonstrate that she loves her son even if she doesn’t understand his homosexuality. After confessing that she knew Arnold was gay and tried to ignore it – hoping it would go away – Ma confesses, “I knew and I turned my back. But I wasn’t the only one. They are other things you should have told me. You opened a mouth to me about your friend Alan … How was I supposed to know?” When Ma reveals that she has felt shut out of Arnold’s life, Arnold is forced to reevaluate the relationship’s breakdown and accept some of the responsibility. The outcome of the play comes when Ma later demonstrates that she does care about and accept Arnold when she asks if he is in love with Ed. It is not easy for her, but she is trying. Though she has difficulty showing it, she is proud of her son and loves him. Arnold is now able to look at his life and relationships for what they are, without filtering it through his desire to be accepted.

Having broken the play down into its major dramatic components, the play’s spine is revealed. A careful examination of each of the objectives of the characters and the resolution of the major dramatic question reveals that the overriding action throughout
Torch Song Trilogy is the quest for relationship. Each character is seeking to connect with someone else in the play: Arnold, Ed, Alan, and Laurel are all seeking partners to share their lives with, Ma and Arnold are trying to reconcile, and David is looking for a family. When the play ends Arnold has found his family with David and his reconciliation with Ma. There is a possibility that Ed may be given a second chance and complete the familial picture for Arnold and David, thereby achieving his own happiness. Alan’s death serves as a reminder that no matter how perfect a relationship is, love does not come without a price - sorrow. Moreover, Laurel and Ed’s separation is proof that even with the best of intentions, not all relationships will work out.

The Synergy of the Trilogy: Understanding How the Plays Work Together

Each act of Torch Song was originally presented in New York at the renowned La Mama E.T.C. as a one-act. (International Stud: Feb 2, 1978; Fugue in a Nursery: Feb 1, 1979; Widows and Children First!: Oct 25, 1979) \textsuperscript{74} When the individual acts were fused into a trilogy for Broadway, it became a cohesive three-act play. Though each piece was complete in itself, when they are presented together, a synergy develops. As the story unfolds, each piece becomes richer and the overall play is stronger.\textsuperscript{75}

Consider each play as an evening of theater by itself. In the International Stud, Arnold has struggled to create a relationship with Ed and in the end it fails. Ed leaves Arnold for a woman and the probable interpretation is that two men cannot have a happy
relationship. Similarly, if Fugue in a Nursery is left to stand alone the theme of the play seems to be that marriage is where true happiness is found. Following a roller-coaster series of arguments, both couples decide to solidify their relationship: Ed and Laurel through a legal ceremony; Arnold and Alan through the acquisition of joint property, a Saint Bernard. Without the first two plays, Widows and Children First! becomes a family sitcom. Arnold and his mother spend the majority of the play exchanging arguments and one-liners. There is an adopted child to serve as comic relief and an old boyfriend to make sure that, in the end, boy meets boy. By the time the curtain falls on this play it would be easy to assume an attitude that the message of the play is that everything works out in the end if one is true to one’s values. It would seem that the critics might be able to shed some light on the effectiveness of the entire trilogy; unfortunately, there is much more time spent on discussing which act is the better act than how they work together.

Zachary Leader contends that the first play in the trilogy is the most successful despite the fact that it is also the least ambitious. On the opposite end of the argument, Gerald Clarke asserts that Widows and Children is the best play of the three despite its several flaws. Clarke notes that Mr. Fierstein attempts to tackle everything from Alan’s murder by “fag bashers,” Ed’s pending divorce from Laurel, and Arnold’s process of adopting David. When you add all this to the visit from Mrs. Beckoff, there is enough material for another play and when it is all dealt with in this short one-act, it appears “hurriedly tacked together.” It often seems that the same arguments are being used on both sides to support the assertion that one act is better than the other is. What is not being

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76 Leader. 1176.
77 Clarke. 244.
discussed is what the progression from the staccato **Stud** through the discordant **Fugue** to
the melodious **Widows** does to strengthen the experience.

One of the common tactics that facilitators use when bringing a group of people
together for the first time to bring down personal barriers is that of “unbalancing.” They
place the people in strange and unknown circumstances such as co-operative obstacle
courses to force the people to work together. When one looks at the order of the acts of
**Torch Song Trilogy** there is a similarity to be found. Fierstein begins the piece with an
untraditional play structure. In fact, the first piece is rather disjointed itself, as if to say
“jump in and hang on - its going to be a rough night.” The second act “Fugue in a Nursery”
captures the confusion of the characters in a style that permits the audience to share their
emotional roller-coaster ride. Throughout these two pieces, characters and audience alike
are kept off balance, not knowing quite what to expect but lured along by the promise that
soon all will be explained. Having spent the first two-thirds of the piece being presented
with unbalancing ideas and emotions, the play finds itself in a rather normal setting for the
final act. In a traditional, well known structure, the plays’ message is spoken most
powerfully. By taking the audience on this journey from “shock” to “safe”, Fierstein affords
an opportunity for the audience to set aside the notions they carried into the theater with
them and sample a new set of ideas – possibly owning a few of them.

Having seen how the individual play’s work together to strengthen the overall
experience, the message of the entire play can be defined. However, The search for the
overall thought of the play is complicated when the variables of the gay and straight culture
are mixed in. Clive Barnes, a critic, notes that “For gays, **Torch Song Trilogy** could, with
its positiveness, be a sort of manifesto. For straights it could be a tourist trip into an
alternative country." Though Barnes underscores that the play is going to mean different things to the two different audiences, he does nothing to suggest a middle ground where both camps meet. In his article titled "Dignity in Drag," Jay Scott eloquently states the universal truth of the play when he forges a commonality for both communities, Torch Song Trilogy is about accepting yourself and learning not to be victimized." This universality is a truth of which everyone is aware and with which everyone struggles, including each character created by Fierstein.

The best embodiment of this truth is the play's protagonist, Arnold. Throughout the play, Arnold is aggressive in his pursuit of acceptance. His insistence in Stud that his relationship with Ed follow the rules heterosexual normalcy is an attempt to prove he has succeeded in his personal life. His relationship with Alan embodies a gay ideal. Alan is a devoted, beautiful young man whose love reinforces Arnold's need to perceive his success in relationships. While Arnold's struggle throughout the play seems to be aimed at convincing others, he is actually attempting to convince himself. At the end of the play, Ma's acceptance of Arnold's life allows Arnold to see himself in a new light. Knowing that he is accepted by the one person he thought could never tolerate let alone embrace his life, Arnold can see himself as having achieved his goals and ambitions. He is now, for the first time, able to accept the relationships in his life for what they are and enjoy them.

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CHAPTER 3

SAFE SEX: AN AIDS PLAY

When AIDS plays are mentioned The Normal Heart by Larry Kramer and As Is by William Hoffman jumps to mind — by contrast few realize that Fierstein ever wrote Safe Sex. While Fierstein’s Torch Song Trilogy achieved critical raves and commercial success in addition to an array of awards, Safe Sex enjoys none of those distinctions. In researching Safe Sex, it is amazing to discover how little has been written on it. Reviews are scarce and scholars seem to mention it only in passing. One gets the feeling that, as a play, Safe Sex is the child that moved away and was never seen again.

Safe Sex was first performed January 8, 1987 at La Mama E.T.C. – eighteen years after the Stonewall riots and nine years after The International Stud premiered on the same stage. Though Safe Sex premiered on the same stage as Fierstein’s early trilogy, the world of the playwright has been changed by the AIDS epidemic. The impact of this health crisis is addressed by Fierstein in his introduction to the play as he explains the imperative that inspired him to write the trilogy entitled Safe Sex.

In his introduction, Fierstein says “More than any other work with which I have involved myself, these plays are this moment. They could not have existed two years ago,
...and probably would not be written two years hence."\textsuperscript{80} The introduction is filled with a sense of existential urgency that concludes with the following prayer: "My only wish is that from where you now read this, in your present moment, this world of mine no longer exists."\textsuperscript{81} It is apparent from this introduction that \textit{Safe Sex} is Fierstein's attempt to grapple with and understand the impact of AIDS on his life.

Fierstein comments that \textit{Safe Sex} contains his world in a very immediate moment and says, "Herein you will find my world as it exists. These are my friends and fears. These are my wants and losses."\textsuperscript{82} This imperative points to the very personal investment of the playwright which can be seen as the characters in the play experience Fierstein’s life and emotions as it is affected by AIDS. In each of the plays, there is a character that seems to stand in for Fierstein, encapsulating an aspect of the AIDS crisis with which Fierstein is wrestling. In the first play, Manny stands in for the playwright and embodies the frustration and fear of intimacy in the face of AIDS; in the second, it is Ghee who seeks to discover a new way in which to connect with his partner; and in the third play, Arthur represents the playwright’s experiences of losing those around him to AIDS.

\textit{Safe Sex} is a collection of three one-act plays which are presented together to make an overall statement. The first play is \textit{Manny and Jake}; the second, sharing its title with the entire collection, is \textit{Safe Sex}; and the third and final play is titled \textit{On Tidy Endings}. Before an analysis of the overall play is possible, each act must be considered as a separate piece. This is necessary since each act is a separate story unrelated to the first. Following each

\textsuperscript{81} Fierstein. \textit{Safe Sex}. xii.
\textsuperscript{82} Fierstein. \textit{Safe Sex}. xii.
individual act's analysis, the overall play will be discussed. A character analysis of each play will be followed by an analysis of the plot. The P.A.S.T.O. structure outlined in the chapter on Torch Song Trilogy will be used in the plot analysis.

Manny and Jake: Character Analysis of the First Play

Manny is described as "an irresistibly beautiful young man." As the play opens, he is in Yoga's "lotus" position, meditating, praying, thinking — the intention isn't clear at first but the impression is that he is searching for something. When asked by Jake what he is doing he responds, "Praying for sex." This answer is not flippant but seems shallow on the surface. The answer to what he is actually seeking is revealed as he discusses his life long goal. "At fourteen years old I had a goal. ... I could see my destiny so clearly that I could almost reach out with my bare hands and pull myself along the vortex of time. ... My goal was to lie in the arms of every man. Every man." Manny continues to describe a period in his life where he had sex with any man who wanted him. He would stay with that man until the initial passion of the encounter waned and he would move on to the next. Each encounter contained more than an orgasm for Manny. "And I loved them all. And I missed them when they were gone. ... And I was tempted to let them stay. Tempted to be tempted to stay. ... So many with so much to offer ... So much love, need, comfort..." When this declaration is considered with Manny's repeated question to Jake - "Can you

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83 Fierstein. Safe Sex. 3.
84 Fierstein. Safe Sex. 4.
85 Fierstein. Safe Sex. 15-16.
86 Fierstein. Safe Sex. 18.
kiss?" - it becomes clear that Manny desires a way to physicalize his emotional connection with men.

What stands in his way? Certainly, Jake is willing to go to bed with him. Manny is beautiful, young, and irresistible and has demonstrated that he can easily find someone with which to have sex. The key to discovering the core of Manny’s conflict is contained in the “brechtian asides” throughout the first play. Each time Jake pushes Manny to move to a more intimate level of contact, Manny pushes back with a recitation describing various encounters between men. Though described in the third person, these are Manny’s experiences with sex in the era of AIDS. Each speech is a partial explanation as to why Manny has given up sex and an attempt to convince Jake that a sexual relationship between the two is impossible. This is the core of Manny’s character and the crux of his objective. Though he sometimes expresses a desire to give into passion, he always returns to his attempts to persuade Jake he is sincere when declining to have sex.

Manny desires to connect with another person in the age of AIDS but is unwilling to change any behavior to make it possible. When Jake suggests that they could practice safe sex, Manny dismisses this idea, categorizing safe sex as something less than a real encounter. However, the real issue for Manny is not the act of sex, be it safe or unsafe, but the ability to connect emotionally – something he can no longer allow himself to do. This is made evident by his repeated questions regarding Jake’s ability to kiss. On the surface, this seems a rather silly question, but the act of kissing transforms sex from a mere act of passion into an intimate moment shared between two people. Each time Manny asks

87 Fierstein. Safe Sex. 21.
if Jake can kiss, he is actually asking if Jake is someone with whom he can form an emotional connection. In fact, Jake’s answer to this question is not as important as the Manny’s answer to the companion question that is never asked, “Can I kiss you?” In other words, Manny is asking himself if Jake is someone he could love. The key to Manny’s spine is in the unasked question. Manny is struggling with the desire to love someone and the fear of getting hurt because of AIDS. His task throughout the play is to decide if he will risk loving Jake.

Jake is also irresistible, young, and gorgeous. From his first entrance, it is obvious that he is on the prowl. After several attempts to gain the interest of Manny evoke no response, Jake lunges at Manny and chokes him in a desperate attempt to elicit a sign of interest. While Manny embodies a reaction to AIDS that is centered around denial of sex, Jake is at the other side of the spectrum as he relentlessly pursues sex despite the risk of AIDS. Jake begins by attempting to get Manny to notice him. After the extreme attempt of choking Manny fails to elicit a response, Jake starts to leave. He is stopped by Manny’s invitation to “talk.” Seeing this as an open door, Jake resumes his efforts to pick-up Manny. However, the invitation to talk was not the promise of a sexual encounter that Jake perceived and each attempt made to get Manny to agree to go home is countered.

Jake first propositions Manny in a rather offhanded way but is rebuffed when Manny declares that he doesn’t want anything from Jake. Not to be easy dismissed, Jake promises that the encounter will be nothing more than sex. As Jake continues to pursue a sexual encounter with Manny, he becomes more frustrated by Manny’s cryptic questions.

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88 Fierstein. Safe Sex. 3.
and responses. Fed up, Jake finally gives up and gets ready to leave. He is stopped by Manny’s first recitation and the confession that Manny wants to be with Jake.

Encouraged by this admission, Jake changes tactics and again attempts to convince Manny to come home with him. Determined to get Manny home before he can change his mind, Jake tries rushing Manny out the door despite objections. He stops himself when the idea strikes him that Manny may have AIDS, but resumes pursuit of his goal after Manny assures him that he is not sick. Throughout the play Jake is persistent in his efforts to get into bed with Manny and he seems oblivious to Manny’s conviction that sex will lead to infection. Jake is not even deterred by the fact that Manny declares he is a carrier of the disease. He immediately resumes his attack by attempting to convince Manny that “There are ways around it. Things you can still do. ... Positive, health conscious acts of love and fulfillment.” Jake pursues his objective to have sex with Manny until the end.

Why would Jake, or anyone, seek a sexual encounter with no regard for their own physical health? The answer lies in Jake’s last ditch effort to get Manny to go home with him. Jake attempts to persuade Manny by saying, “People shouldn’t be alone.” Not only does this statement underscore the idea that sex is more than a physical release, but it also summarizes the impulse behind Jake’s objective. Jake is pursuing sex as a substitute for relationships. As long as he has someone in his bed, he is not alone. By the end of the play, Jake has been forced to re-evaluate his objective.

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87 Fierstein. Safe Sex. 21.
89 Fierstein. Safe Sex. 23.
After telling Manny that he is going to move on, he stops to ask "What are you going to do?" This question is representative of the conflict between the two characters. Manny answers by declaring that he can’t change, so he will wait for the world around him to change. Though Manny has been offered a chance to connect with Jake, he chooses not to change his behavior and continue his monastic life of separation. On the other hand, Jake has been forced to change his approach to the world. Because of his insistence in the beginning, it is reasonable to assume that after being rebuffed, he would normally move on to the next man. This time is different - Jake stops to wonder what Manny is going to do.

In the closing stage directions, Fierstein indicates that “Jake stares as the lights fade.” Jake isn’t successful in getting into bed with Manny, and since he has not yet left it is obvious that Jake has been forced to reevaluate his approach to sex.

**Manny and Jake: An Analysis of the Play’s Plot**

The preparation in *Manny and Jake* is brief. The equilibrium of the play is established non-verbally when the curtain rises. Manny is alone praying for sex. Jake enters and attempts to get Manny’s attention. Both men are single and both desire to connect to someone. When Manny confesses that he is “Praying for sex,” Jake declares, “Your prayers have been answered.” This moment represents the attack. It is at this point that Manny must confront the fact that his desire for a partner is in conflict with his fear of AIDS and the struggle for resolution begins. As explained in the character analysis, Manny

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93 Fierstein. *Safe Sex*. 4-5.
is seeking more than a physical relationship, but he has been hurt by past relationships and he is unwilling to risk again. The basic conflict of the play is established in the major dramatic question of "Will Manny and Jake have sex?" The basic MDQ is symbolic of the deeper quest of both characters to find a relationship. Throughout the dramatic struggle, Jake attempts to persuade Manny with reassurances and promises that it will be sex with no strings attached. Manny continually counters with attacks that whatever encounter they might have will have consequences beyond what Jake can realize. While Jake is seeking nothing more than a sexual interlude, Manny is convinced that any sexual encounter will end painfully. The struggle can be broken down into five major units of action separated by Manny’s recitations.

The first unit of action centers on Manny’s desire to know if Jake can kiss. Manny leads up to this important question by first attempting to dissuade Jake by stating that he does not want to take anything from Jake or to give anything to Jake. Though Manny’s early actions convey a hope that Jake will give up and leave, each time Jake attempts to go, Manny stops him. Their first encounter is a brief exchange that confuses and frustrates Jake. Jake is flirtatious while Manny is evasive. An exasperated Jake finally insists that Manny answer the question, "So, you wanna do it or what?" Manny responds with, "Can you kiss?" Despite Jake’s assurance that he can kiss, Manny dismisses him. Jake is not satisfied and wants to know from Manny why kissing is so important. What Jake fails to realize is that Manny is talking about more than the mere act of kissing; kissing is symbolic of the emotional connection that Manny is really seeking.

94 Fierstein. Safe Sex. 6.
Jake, however, is seeking nothing more than a temporary sexual interlude and is unwilling to contemplate a deeper relationship. The action progresses when Jake demands a second time to know if Manny wants to have sex. Tired of couched responses and evasions, he is seeking a decision. Jake is persistent despite Manny's efforts to disinterest him. Manny decides to see how committed Jake is with the following, "Do I inspire you to lust?" The moment moves towards its peak after Jake assures Manny that all he is offering is a good time. Throughout this and other exchanges, Manny cannot decide what he wants from Jake. He vacillates from rejecting to embracing Jake, which continues to increase the tension between the two. The first encounter climaxes when Manny confesses that he wants Jake. However, true to his form, in the next breath, Manny turns Jake away by saying "But I can't kiss." This is Manny's admission that the issue keeping them apart is not Jake's but his own unwillingness to be emotionally vulnerable. Jake starts to leave but stops when Manny begins his first recitation:

Two men meet in a bar and go home together. ... Two grown men, mutually attracted, mutually in need, both of them hoping that this will be more than just another night. ... Two grown men wait next to each other equally willing, equally wanting, equally willing to please. And they wait. Each waiting for the other to take. Each wanting only to give. And they wait. And they crumble. And they part. No one giving, no one getting, No one taking. ... Unhappy but safe.

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95 Fierstein. Safe Sex. 7.
96 Fierstein. Safe Sex. 9.
97 Fierstein. Safe Sex. 10.
Though this speech appears to be an interruption of action, when placed in context with the preceding moment is becomes an explanation. Each speech throughout the play is told in the third person; however, they are deeply personal to Manny and summarize his experiences with the concept of sex in the age of AIDS. By telling them in the third person, Manny is able to distance himself from the stories they tell. This first recitation is Manny’s attempt to convince Jake that he is sincere. Manny finds Jake attractive and would like to accept the invitation, but he cannot accept because he fears the inevitable results. Manny’s past is littered with encounters that have ended with many of his former lovers dead because of the innocuous disease. As gently as possible, Manny attempts to tell Jake that it is the threat of AIDS that is keeping him from going home with Jake.

The second unit of action begins when Manny says, “I wonder if you could understand how desperately I want to be with you.” It is not enough for Jake to leave at this point; Manny must make sure that Jake understands why he won’t have sex with him. Though intended as a compliment and apology for saying no, Jake takes this statement as a change of mind and tries to force Manny to leave with him immediately. Manny returns to the fact that he “can’t even kiss” and this time Jake thinks he understands why Manny is hesitant to go home with him. “Have you got it?” Jake asks. Manny assures him that he does not and Jake, again, invites Manny home. This triggers Manny’s second recitation: “Two grown men stand in a bar. ... Each wanting the other. ... Two grown men stare in a bar and then travel on in opposite directions. Never touching. Never holding. Never

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98 Fierstein. Safe Sex. 10.
having. And why? Why? They can't kiss. They want to. They used to. They can't
anymore."

In this speech, Manny illustrates for Jake that it is not lack of desire that is keeping
them apart. Jake continues to perceive the question of kissing as one of skill. Nevertheless,
Manny is trying to explain to Jake that it is emotional, not sexual, intimacy that the two men
are really seeking. And like the two men, Manny is unable to let himself be vulnerable
anymore.

The third unit of action is brief. Jake establishes that he is now fully aware of the
threat of AIDS, but in light of the fact that neither he nor Manny is infected, they should
forget about the disease and enjoy each other. Manny responds with the following
recitation:

Two grown men stand in a bar looking at each other.

Four grown men stand in a bar looking at each other.

Eight grown men stand in a bar looking at each other.

Twelve grown men stand in a bar looking at each other.

Do they have it? Do they think? Do they forget? Can they kiss?

Nine grown men stand in a bar looking at each other.

Five grown men stand in a bar looking at each other.

One grown man stands in a bar looking for someone to look at.

As the men gather in the bar, they are all looking at each other, seeking someone
with whom to connect. The desire to connect is underscored by the symbolism of the crowd

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99 Fierstein. Safe Sex. 12.
growing by twos. As they stand around, doubts enter their minds regarding the probable outcome of the evening and they start to leave, in larger groups than they arrived, until only one person is left. Each of the men who entered the bar left because they could not forget that each encounter with another now carried a threat of a deadly disease. The threat has made them all reluctant to make themselves vulnerable. This time Manny’s message is clear. He cannot just forget and go home with Jake because he won’t allow himself to.

Jake begins the next section by bringing Manny’s deceased ex-boyfriends onto the stage. Tired of being led on and then rebuked, Jake is going to force Manny to confront his fear. On one level, it does work for Jake. Though Manny does not agree to go home with Jake, he does allow Jake to see a little of his soul. As Manny relives his past, Jake finally manages to be allowed into Manny’s personal space. Because it takes Manny’s emotional openness to allow Jake physically close, this moment lasts only until Manny shunts his emotions again. The coziness of their physical arrangement ends when Manny remembers that his past relationships all ended. Unwilling to succumb to the emotions these memories conjure, Manny retreats and Jake makes another attempt to push the intimacy further, and Manny responds with his most direct recitation so far.

"Two grown men stand in a bar. ... Two grown men forget. Want to forget. ... One gets what the other did not intend to give. Doesn’t even know he’s giving. Doesn’t even know he had it to give. Doesn’t even have it himself. ... One gives. One gets. One weakens and dies. (looking at the dummies) I didn’t know."\textsuperscript{101} Manny has upped the stakes and accepts responsibility for the deaths of his ex-lovers. Even if Manny is not a

\textsuperscript{100} Fierstein. \textit{Safe Sex}. 14.
carrier, he feels responsibility for their deaths. Despite his admission later that he is a carrier, the HIV status of Manny is never thoroughly resolved. It is possible to interpret the promiscuous lifestyle that Manny and his lovers practiced as the act that put them at risk. Manny's health status is not the issue, the end result is that he feels directly responsible for their deaths and is unwilling to take that risk again.

Jake is still not deterred. Offering safe sex as an answer to their problem, Jake continues his pursuit. Manny, however, does not share Jake's view. Using words like omissions and bastardizations, Manny makes it clear that he does not want to practice safe sex, and as a final cap to this argument, again he asks Jake if he can kiss. The return to the theme of emotional connection illuminates that what Manny is really afraid of is the emotional costs of having a relationship. Jake now understands that this question is actually a desire for an unconditional emotional connection and he stops. Neither Jake nor Manny is capable of fully opening himself emotionally, and Jake pulls away from Manny and is silent.

In a requiem designed to provide closure, Manny recites, “A moment of silence for what can’t be done. Another for what can’t be undone. A moment of silence for letting go of dreams. And one for stifled lives. For loss. For want. And a toast to those who can change. Who have changed. Who want to change and not forget.” Manny seizes the moment of Jake’s silence to make it clear that he is aware that there are options and people who have adjusted to the new rules. He is aware of all this, yet he is not able to forget the pain involved in relationships and his fear of AIDS. This speech is the turn in the play. At

this moment, Manny has decided that he is committed to his celibacy and will not go home with Jake. He is unwilling to change and does not want to expose himself or anyone else to either emotional or health risks.

Jake makes one more attempt after this speech. Arguing that he knows what he is doing and prepared to take the risks, he asks Manny to go home with him. Manny refuses. When Jake asserts that people shouldn’t be alone, Manny counters with, “I’m not people anymore. I’m not even a disease. I’m a carrier of a disease. … Not a patient. Not a survivor. A fact. A statistic. No will. No dream. No choice.”103 Manny has detached from life. He is not willing to participate. He returns to praying and Jake prepares to move on.

Before leaving, Jake asks one last question. “What are you going to do?” The subtext here is that Jake is rethinking his next move. In the past, when rebuked, he would have simply moved on to the next man. His encounter with Manny has demonstrated for him that he may need to rethink his approach. Jake is faced with the option of either continuing his current behavior or adapting to the world of AIDS. Manny has chosen to continue prayer. Only this time, Manny’s prayer is no longer for the mere act of sex. He will pray for the world around him to change and a return to a life where he can kiss without fear of hidden consequences.

The throughline of Manny and Jake is based in the approaches each character takes to dealing with AIDS. Each one is in denial about the effect that the disease has on their lives. Manny is convinced that he can wait it out. By entering a life of celibacy, he will no

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102 Fierstein. Safe Sex. 21.
longer feel the loss associated with love. This approach, paradoxically, has forced Manny into centering his life on the disease. He spends every moment contemplating AIDS. Jake is at the opposite end of the spectrum when the play begins. He pursues Manny with abandon and it takes a metaphorical two by four to get him to acknowledge AIDS. Even after he is aware of how AIDS is affecting his encounter with Manny, Jake persists in pretending that it doesn’t have to effect their relationship. The question that is being asked is to what degree should AIDS effect the relationships we are having. Manny and Jake does not offer an answer to this question. It raises the issue and leaves each person in the audience to discover the answer for themselves. As for the characters: When the play ends, Manny has chosen to allow AIDS to shut out the possibility of relationships. Jake is now faced with his choice.

**Safe Sex: A Character Analysis of the Second Play**

While the story of Manny and Jake deals with men attempting to find a relationship in the age of AIDS, the second play in this collection of one-acts centers around a couple that has reunited and are working out their relationship despite the difficulties of AIDS. Though the practice of safe sex is the overt conflict for Ghee and Mead, they are also faced with jealousy over interim lovers and the cause of their first breakup.

Ghee has reunited with Mead, a former lover, after a two-year hiatus in their relationship. Though their first relationship lasted over five years, they have been together for only a week. Ghee is obsessed with establishing safe sex as a lovemaking standard in

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their new relationship. He stops their lovemaking at the opening of the play to check his list of acceptable acts. He is now in the position of convincing his lover that it is a necessary precaution. Though Ghee seems to push throughout the play to convince his lover that his rules are necessary, there is an underlying action to this one. Ghee desires to keep Mead at a safe distance.

Ghee’s defense of safe sex quickly turns into an argument over the entirety of their relationship. After it is obvious that Mead is no longer “in the mood”, Ghee pronounces that the honeymoon is over. He quickly says that he accepts the full responsibility for the failure of their relationship, however he and Mead both know that Ghee does not blame himself. When Mead offers to show Ghee a list of his own, Ghee seizes the opportunity to shift the blame for the failure of their relationship from himself to Mead. Their first relationship ended because of an affair that Mead had. Sarcastically baiting Mead, Ghee forces Mead to confess that the only man he had sex with during their hiatus was the one he had an affair with while they were still together. Though this is Ghee’s attempt to shift the blame for the relationship troubles to Mead, Mead has a ready counter. Ghee is forced on the defensive when it is implied that the reason Mead felt it necessary to have an affair is that Ghee was no longer emotionally or sexually available.

Ghee attempts to defend himself citing AIDS as the reason he withdrew from the relationship, Mead accuses him of being afraid to be emotionally vulnerable since before their relationship began. Mead says, “our problems started years before AIDS. AIDS was your salvation. … You ran out and got your list of Do’s and Don’ts .. a concrete, board-
certified, actual, purposeful excuse to avoid intimacy.” Ghee is now backed against a corner and comes out fighting, although he has no real ammunition. In an attempt to avoid accepting responsibility for his distancing, Ghee attacks Mead’s personal hygiene, citing it’s lack as the primary reason he stopped desiring sex. Mead calls Ghee’s bluff and offers to shower before they resume their lovemaking.

As quickly as he agrees to it, Ghee changes his mind and insists on checking his list. He is not ready to commit to the relationship and retreats to his list, where he will find safety. Realizing what he has done, he changes tactics again and agrees to proceed without checking the list. The moment is lost, however, and now it is Ghee who must somehow compromise if the relationship is to develop further. Ghee does not want to lose Mead a second time, and decides to talk about how he felt about Mead when they first met. In a monologue that is supposed to explain his actions, Ghee confesses that the reason he pushed Mead away during their first relationship is because he was afraid. Unfortunately, the effectiveness of this monologue for the character is lost because of its didacticism. In what amounts to a lengthy sermon on how AIDS has destroyed people and relationships, the playwright effectively paints a picture of pre and post AIDS worlds. After the diatribe ends, Ghee confesses that he is scared and alone. It is this vulnerability which resumes the plays actions and begins the process towards resolution.

Having admitted his vulnerabilities, Ghee is forced to rely on Mead for strength. When he finally gives up his need for total control and submits to the partnership necessary for a successful relationship, he is able to achieve his ultimate goal. Though he espouses a

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104 Fierstein. Safe Sex. 41-42.
paramount need for safe sex, what Ghee is really seeking is a relationship in which he is safe – emotionally.

The objectives of Mead are not that different from Ghee. The conflict for the two arises because Mead has always been ready to embrace a partnership. It is his insistence on total openness, Mead inadvertently pushed Ghee away. As Ghee pushes to justify his position on safe sex, Mead is forced to confront why their relationship ended the first time. Though he often finds himself on the defensive, he is aware that the reason he left the first time is because Ghee would not allow him emotional intimacy. When Ghee espouses on the end of the honeymoon, Mead is left to contemplate why he came back. Mead offers to show Ghee a list of his own, a contrast to the list of do’s and don’ts that Ghee is a disciple of. His list of ex-lovers during their breakup is only one name long, and it by sharing this information Mead is attempting to prove to Ghee that he came back because he wanted to, not because he had not choice.

Ghee does not receive this revelation with the response for which Mead hopes. Rather than feeling comforted or wanted or even just relieved, he is jealous. Ghee begins to discuss his feelings when he found out that Mead had cheated on him. Rather than apologize, Mead takes this opportunity to reveal the reasons why he had an affair, placing Ghee in the defensive. While he has the upper hand, Mead presses to get Ghee to understand that it was his emotional unavailability that was the cause of their breakup. Mead states that, “We had Safe Distance, and that’s all you’ve ever wanted.”105 This statement clarifies what Mead is fighting for in this relationship. While the first relationship

105 Fierstein. Safe Sex. 43.
ended because Mead felt pushed away, this time he is going to force Ghee to become more than physically intimate with him. Mead wants Ghee to admit that he needs Mead emotionally.

When Ghee turns the tables and begins blaming Mead for his emotional distance, Mead argues that he tried to connect with Ghee but wasn’t given access. Still pursuing his goal of forging a partnership with Ghee, Mead agrees to compromise and agrees to shower so they can continue their lovemaking. This is his attempt to meet Ghee in the middle and move pass the surface issues in their relationship. Ghee, however, pulls away again, and Mead is fed-up. He resists Ghee’s attempts to reconnect, at first, and is only moved to respond when Ghee finally admits that he is vulnerable. Finally, Mead has an opening to mend past hurts and begin the relationship he wants. He takes control and meets Ghee in the middle of the teeter-totter. Mead has managed to achieve his super-objective and lay a foundation for a relationship based on mutual trust and love.

Safe Sex: A Plot Analysis of the Second Play

The preparation for the play occurs with the stage lights down. All that is heard are the sounds of waves crashing on the beach and lovemaking. It is established that the two characters are in a relationship. The attack occurs abruptly when Ghee yells, “It’s not safe. Stop!” The lights come on and Ghee and Mead are lying on a seesaw. There is now a separation between them and the struggle that follows is an attempt to bring them back together.
Ghee begins the attempts at reconciliation by attempting to prove that he was right. Whatever Mead had attempted during sex was not safe. Instead of countering Ghee's arguments, Mead responds with short words and phrases that convey the message, “I don’t want to talk about it.” Ghee continues his attempt at justification and eventually asks Mead if he is scared. This question takes the first part of the struggle to a visible separation of the characters. They end up with their backs to each other – each refusing to listen to the other.

Ghee breaks the silence in attempt to discover the status of their relationship. “The honeymoon is over. (pause) Would you say that was a safe assessment?” Mead doesn’t respond immediately. After Ghee mockingly accepts responsibility for everything that is wrong with their relationship, Mead asks if Ghee wants to see a list. The list he is talking about is his list of lovers after their breakup. This is Mead’s attempt to prove that Ghee’s obsession with safe sex is an over-reaction. The list contains one name, Larry, and Mead had already had sex with Ghee after Larry. This tactic doesn’t last long and it mutates into each character discussing why their relationship ended the first time.

Ghee asserts that they broke up because Mead’s cheating put him at risk. Mead counters with the argument that their problems existed before the threat of AIDS entered their relationship. According to Mead, Ghee used safe sex to put a comfortable emotional distance between them. Mead strikes a nerve and Ghee lashes back. Accusations fly that Ghee pulled back because Mead’s personal hygiene was less than adequate. Underlying these accusations is Ghee’s feelings that Mead was insensitive to his wants in the relationship. The argument cools to a simmer as the two reminisce about the past.

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106 Fierstein. Safe Sex. 34.
Mead makes the next overture at reconciliation and offers to shower before they continue. Mead’s earlier accusation that Ghee didn’t want safe sex as much as he wanted emotional distance is proved. Ghee immediately wants to see if showering is on the list of approved activities. Ghee realizes immediately what he has done and tries desperately to convince Mead it was a “knee-jerk” reaction. Finally, Ghee decides that it is time to explain his fears. In a long speech which borders on didactic, Ghee conveys his hopes, dreams, fears, and frustrations. Mead sees that Ghee is making an attempt to connect emotionally and decides that it is time to force the question. The action of the play climaxes as Mead stands up and asks Ghee to join him in the middle of the seesaw. Ghee must now decide if he is willing to commit emotionally to their relationship. The outcome of the action is that both Ghee and Mead meet in the middle. It is clear that they will resume their attempt to build a relationship together.

The spine of the second play, Safe Sex, is hidden behind Ghee’s attempts to remain at a safe distance to avoid getting hurt and Mead’s consistent push to force a commitment from Ghee. Ghee has used AIDS as a convenient excuse to protect himself emotionally and Mead has fought to move beyond safe distance to a full relationship. Though its title and subject matter make this an AIDS play, the real message is that though AIDS can prevent people from forming positive, fulfilling relationships if they choose to let it, relationships are now, and always have been, based on mutual respect and trust. Though AIDS has changed the way in which people have sex, when it comes to the part of relationships that really matter, AIDS holds no power. When the play comes to an end, both characters choose to forge a relationship together, and AIDS is no longer an issue for them.
On Tidy Endings: Character Analysis
of the Third Play

The third play in the collection, On Tidy Endings, is a departure from the first two plays in both style and content. While Manny and Jake is a minimalist play with a rather stylized quality and Safe Sex (the second play) is a symbolic encounter between two lovers, this final play is realistic in every sense of the word. The fact that this play is set in a realistic home with realistic props emphasizes the impact of this piece. Since this play deals with the aftermath of death caused by AIDS, it is entirely appropriate to make this shift in style as it strengthens the impact of the piece.

On Tidy Endings is centered on the character of Collin. Of course, Collin is dead and never appears on stage, but his presence is felt everywhere. When he was alive, Collin worked to ensure that the people he cared about grew to care about each other as well. As the play progresses, the extent of his success at this task is revealed.

Marion is Collin's ex-wife. Collin has left her half of his estate, and Marion goes to visit Arthur because there are legal documents that need signed. As evidenced by her actions when she enters the apartment, Marion is more than a recipient of half the estate – she is an integral part of Collin’s world. She begins her interactions with Arthur by trying to lay claim to Collin. Asking for small momentos, she is exerting her status as the mother of Collin’s son, his wife of sixteen years, and most importantly his widow. Marion does not see herself as an ex-wife. She loves Collin and when he declared that he wanted to end their marriage because he was gay, Marion refused to lose him and strived to become his best friend. Throughout Collin’s life, Marion has managed to stay involved in Collin’s world. First discussing the men Collin was dating with him, and when Arthur appeared in
Collin’s life, she manages to become an extended member of the household. Marion illustrates this point when she reminds Arthur that they used to team up against Collin—teasing him about intimate details of his behavior. Throughout the play, Marion strives to prove that she still has a place in the life and death of Collin.

Marion has come to the apartment to put closure on part of her life, a task that is always difficult and complicated by the fact that Arthur is involved. Marion is not at liberty to dispose of Collin’s possessions and memories as suits her, she must work within the framework established by Arthur. Before Arthur arrives home, June, Marion’s lawyer, comes to drop off the papers that need signing. During her brief visit, June raises the issues with which Marion will wrestle throughout the play: How does her sixteen year marriage compare with Arthur’s three year relationship? What part of Collin is she still entitled to? When June leaves, Marion is left alone with her thoughts and turns to practical acts such as gathering pens and small tokens she wants to have. When Arthur comes home, Marion awkwardly lays claim to the items she has piled up. Next, she presents Arthur with a list of people who should receive something of Collin’s to remember him by. Marion has never accepted that Collin is no longer her husband, and she continues to play his wife even after he is dead. Throughout the play, Marion negotiates with Arthur for more than claim to Collin’s possessions, she seeks to lay claim to his memories as well.

Arthur met Collin after he was diagnosed with AIDS. He lived with Collin and became lover and caretaker. When the play opens, Arthur is grieving the death of Collin and is faced with the loss of his home. Marion had made the decision to sell the apartment, and Arthur is forced to deal with the consequences. From the moment he enters his home
he must defend it. Marion has started marking territory, and Arthur fights back. Though Marion has prepared the list of people who she would like to see receive some of Collin’s property and has taken the liberty of responding to the condolence letters, Arthur asserts himself as the surviving partner of Collin and insists he will attend to these matters himself. Despite the fact that he was the one who was by Collin’s side throughout the illness, Arthur has been set aside in Collin’s death. This is illustrated by the fact that the newspapers edited his name out of the obituary and that at the funeral Collin’s family and coworkers consoled Marion instead of Arthur. While Marion’s place in Collin’s life has been acknowledged, Arthur is being ignored. He must defend the place he has earned in Collin’s memory.

Jimmy is Collin’s son. He appears briefly at the beginning, but leaves before Arthur can return home. He is the only character who does not have to face the dilemma of position in Collin’s life. No one is disputing the fact that Jimmy has lost his father. Jimmy’s conflict comes from trying to reconcile what status to accord Arthur in his father’s life. From the moment he enters, he works to avoid having to make this decision. Rushing out the door at the first opportunity, he makes a narrow escape. Nevertheless, Jimmy fails to go directly to his Aunt Helen’s and Arthur finds him in the lobby. Though this scene never occurs onstage, the fact that Arthur managed to get him to Helen’s indicates that Jimmy does respect Arthur, even if he doesn’t want to admit it. At the end of the play, Jimmy is forced to interact with Arthur. Confessing that his father loved Arthur, Jimmy reveals that his father also told him to make sure Arthur isn’t lonely or sad. Marion had forced this confession out of Jimmy after he refused to give Arthur a kiss. After Jimmy
reveals what his father says, he hugs Arthur and gives him a kiss on the cheek. This time the hug and kiss come without prompting, unlike the revelation. Jimmy’s objective throughout the play is to give Arthur a place in his life.

There are two more characters in this short play. June and Helen. June is Marion’s lawyer. She enters long enough to make sure Marion will be fine, outline what papers need to be signed, and suggest that Marion contest the will. June is there to protect Marion’s interest. She is concerned that the necessary loose ends get resolved as soon as possible. Helen is mentioned, but serves no other purpose than to provide a place for Jimmy to be while offstage.

**On Tidy Endings: Plot Analysis of the Third Play**

As Marion and Jimmy enter the empty apartment, it is obvious that a move is in progress. Though this apartment was never Marion’s home, it was a second home to her son Jimmy. Collin, Marion’s ex-husband and Jimmy’s father, has recently died from complications related to AIDS and the apartment has been sold. Marion is there to settle legalities with Arthur, her ex-husband’s lover of three years. Marion’s lawyer has stopped by to leave the necessary paperwork with Marion. During their conversation, it is discovered that Collin has left half of his estate to Arthur. As Marion wanders through the apartment, she sets the groundwork for the impending conflict. She sees what is remembered as a treasured momento from her marriage with Collin. She takes the teapot and sets it aside to take with her. The preparation of the play is complete.
The conflict emerges as Marion returns to the living room with another momento of Collin. Arthur returns and sees the items that Marion has collected. Marion and Arthur are fighting for claim to Collin. Each item that Marion claims strengthens her sense of connection to her late husband while each item that Arthur holds onto represents his place in Collin’s life. The struggle over possessions gives way to a fight for Collin’s friends and family. Marion has brought a batch of condolence cards from relatives that were addressed to Arthur, but mailed to her. Marion has taken the liberty of responding on his behalf as they were addressed to both. Refusing to relinquish his rightful place in Collin’s life, Arthur insists that he will respond to anything that has his name on it.

In an attempt to end the battle, Marion moves to return the teapot she has claimed to the kitchen. Arthur responds by declaring a truce and changing the subject to what he hopes will be neutral ground. He tells Marion that he ran into Jimmy playing in the lobby and managed to get him to his Aunt Helen’s apartment. The change of subject does not bring and end to the argument, but instead changes the subject of it.

Jimmy is Marion’s most tangible claim to Collin, as she is not willing to share with Arthur. Though Marion attempts to assure Arthur that Jimmy actually likes him, Arthur insists on fighting for his own relationship with Jimmy. Marion may be his mother and Collin his father, but Arthur is not content to interact through a surrogate. The fight over Jimmy moves back to the reason they came together in the first place. Marion wants Arthur to understand how difficult it was for her to give up her marriage. A temporary truce is called while both digest the preceding incidents.
Returning to Jimmy, Arthur again attempts to find a middle ground. Marion responds with assurance that she still considers Arthur part of the family. Arthur’s response is to describe the experience he went through when Collin finally died. In essence, he is going to prove that he has earned his place in Collin’s life and Marion doesn’t have the authority to decide if he is family or not. To drive the statement home Arthur says, “But at least understand, from my point of view, who you are: You are my husband’s ex-wife. If you like, the mother of my stepson. Don’t flatter yourself into thinking you’re any more than that. And whatever you are, you’re certainly not my friend.” Marion wants to leave, but Arthur isn’t done. Arthur is going to force Marion to see that she is not Collin’s widow. In a bombastic declaration, Arthur says:

I paid for my place in his life and I will not share it with you. We are not the two widows of Collin Redding. Your life was not here. Your husband didn’t just die. You’ve got a son and a life somewhere else. Your husband’s sitting, waiting for you at home, wondering, as I am, what the hell you’re doing here and why you can’t let go.

Marion now has a whole new perspective on what is happening. After a moment to regroup, she begins to explain why she was never able to let go of Collin. The struggle is coming to an end. As Marion describes the experiences she went through discovering Collin’s illness getting to know Arthur, she attempts to share the title of widow with Arthur. Marion does acknowledge that, in caring for Collin, Arthur managed to survive something she could never have done. Arthur needs to set a couple more things straight for Marion.

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107 Fierstein, Safe Sex. 93.
He stayed with Collin because he loved him. Arthur gave up his life and entered Collin’s fight with AIDS for no other reason than love. To make this point crystal clear, Arthur proceeds to describe Collin’s death. This is the turn of the play. Calmly and passionately, Arthur relives the moments when he held Collin as he died. His final plea to Marion is that she let go and respect his place as the widow of Collin Redding. Marion responds, simply, with “I understand.”

The outcome is a flurry of activity. Arthur produces flowers for Marion, and effort to demonstrate that he understands she has experienced a loss too. Marion promises to protect Arthur’s place in Collin’s family by doing things like having him to dinner and making sure that Collin’s mother and friends remember him. As they settle down to sign the papers, Jimmy calls. It is Marion’s first opportunity to demonstrate that she is committed to Arthur and she tells Jimmy to come up to the apartment. As they sign the papers, Marion inquires whether Arthur is sick or not. In an unexpected reversal, it is Marion who carries the HIV, not Arthur. The bond between Arthur and Marion is strengthened. Jimmy rings the doorbell, and Arthur opens the door. Despite Jimmy’s efforts to escape without contact with “Uncle Arthur,” Marion forces Jimmy to acknowledge Arthur’s role in his life. Despite the coercion used, Jimmy is sincere in his declaration and Arthur is touched. Jimmy exits. Marion and Arthur have one more brief supportive exchange before Marion exits and Arthur continues his preparations for moving.

The spine of this final play of the trilogy is revealed as Marion, Arthur, and Jimmy discover the relationship with each other now that Collin is no longer living to tie them

together. Arthur and Marion have competed throughout the play for the designation of
Collin’s widow. Jimmy has spent the majority of the play trying to avoid reconciling the
loss of his father. When all three discover that they are a family, albeit a strange and
untraditional one, Collin’s presence in their lives is felt. Despite the fact that he is dead,
Collin has managed to bring his family together again. Though AIDS has taken Collin’s
life, the unity of his family is his victory. AIDS may take lives, but can only destroy people
who allow it.

**Safe Sex as a Collection of One Acts**

Now that the individual plays have been discussed, the search for the overall
meaning of the play can begin. In the writing of *Safe Sex*, Fierstein has returned to the one-
act trilogy structure used in *Torch Song Trilogy*. While his first trilogy is a series of
sequels, *Safe Sex* is a montage. In each act, Fierstein lays before the audience a different
image of AIDS. In *Manny and Jake*, Fierstein use of brechtian asides underscores the
disconnectedness felt in the face of AIDS. The emptiness of the stage as Jake struggles to
connect with Manny emphasizes the potential loneliness. *Safe Sex*, the title piece, offers an
option to the monastic choice made by Manny in the first play. Ghee and Mead embody the
struggle to create a relationship despite AIDS constant threat to destroy. The image of the
teeter-totter accentuates the balancing required to maintain a relationship in the era of AIDS.
*On Tidy Endings* presents an image of triumph in the face of despair. Arthur, Marion, and
Jimmy have all experienced the loss of a loved one because of AIDS, but by coming
together at the end of the play, they ensure that Collin will remain alive in their relationship

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with each other. Collin’s body may be dead, but his spirit lives on. Before attempting to stitch these plays together to discover an overall through-line, remember that in these plays Fierstein has incarnated his experiences with AIDS. As mentioned at the beginning of this chapter, Fierstein uses the various characters to explore his struggle with the disease. Using each character that represents the playwright, Safe Sex can be viewed as a progression through the five common stages of grief: denial, bargaining, anger, grief, and acceptance.

The first play works through denial. Manny wants to pretend that AIDS does not affect their life and he attempts to deny AIDS by choosing to be celibate. By not having sex, he never has to encounter or deal with AIDS. The second play embodies bargaining. At the core of Ghee and Mead’s negotiations about their relationship is how they are going to factor in AIDS. For Ghee a list of “do’s and don’ts” will place AIDS in an appropriate place in their lives. Fierstein moves through the last three stages in On Tidy Endings. Anger is apparent throughout Arthur’s discussions with Marion. He is angry that Collin is gone and that his home is being taken. Grief comes when Arthur shares his experiences when Collin dies. Acceptance comes in the moments that Arthur, Marion, and Jimmy are all together at the end. AIDS may have taken someone that Arthur loves, but Arthur is part of a family and nothing can take that from him.

Safe Sex is a play with a powerful message. AIDS has changed the way in which people relate to each other. The disease has inextricably become part of our lives and can no longer be ignored. Throughout the play, various Fierstein analyzes various responses to the disease and explores their results. Through Manny, it is established that one can choose to cut himself off from life because of AIDS. By choosing to become a recluse, Manny has
effectively stopped any risk associated with relationship. Of course, he has also ceased to experience any joy that can come from life. Jake, by his denial, continues to experience joy but the cost of his choice is unknown. When all is said and done, he may end up paying with his life for his unwillingness to acknowledge AIDS. Ghee and Mead are a study in the difficulties of establishing and maintaining a relationship in the face of the disease. When the couple manages to work through their issues with AIDS and the accompanying emotional baggage, it seems clear that they just might manage to make their relationship work. The characters in On Tidy Endings do not have the luxury of ignoring AIDS as Jake does. Arthur had chosen to love despite the inevitable death of his lover that he would face. Marion had become infected with the virus before she even knew it was a threat. Both characters, having experienced the worst that AIDS can cause, go forward with their lives having discovered that joy can still exist. The experiences of Arthur and Marion in the final play drive home the message. As long as we maintain our humanity with each other, the experience of loving in the face of AIDS is worthwhile.
CHAPTER 4

HARVEY FIERSTEIN AS A PROPHETIC VOICE

When the word “prophet” is mentioned several concepts come to mind. For some, a prophet is future-teller - a Nostradamus like individual full of predictions for the future and warnings of inevitable destruction. There is another definition of prophet that is less well known. In his book, The Prophetic Imagination, Walter Brueggeman defines the word prophet within the context of a prophetic ministry. He asserts that “the task of the prophetic ministry is to nurture, nourish, and evoke a consciousness and perception alternative to the consciousness and perception of the dominant culture around us.”¹¹⁰ In this sense, a prophet is more than a mere seer: A prophet is also a person who issues a call to a new order based on social justice. This thesis is not an attempt to establish Harvey Fierstein’s accuracy as a foreseer of history. Rather it will discuss Fierstein’s success as a force that challenges the dominant culture and provides an alternative view of life.

In Torch Song Trilogy, Fierstein presents the life of Arnold Beckoff without apology. The audience is empowered to experience the whole of Arnold’s world without comment on the rightness or wrongness of his sexuality. The preaching, if one wants to call it that, is saved for the last act. Ma and Arnold’s “discussions” are the closest Fierstein

comes to lecturing his viewers. However, Fierstein resists the temptation to “mouthpiece” through his characters. Both Ma and Arnold’s arguments come from their hearts. This is proven after the argument when Arnold compared his relationship with Alan to his parents’ marriage. Arnold confesses to David that he lost control; “I didn’t mean to say any of that. But it came pouring out; I felt like I was fighting for my life.” Ma and Arnold embody the dichotomy of the audience. Both gay and straight viewers are present in the house, and neither are victimized or glorified in this play.

To explore this universality further, a look at the ending staged on Broadway is necessary. Kim Powers describes the staged ending:

Mrs. Beckoff slips quietly out the door before Arnold realizes she is leaving. He discovers that she is gone as he hears on the radio that David has dedicated a song to him. He sits down, and gathers in his arms the tokens of his life, the representative objects for the people he loves and has loved: a wallet that the forgetful Ed is always leaving behind, a framed photograph of Alan, a schoolbook of David’s, and finally, a tin of cookies that his mother brought from Florida. These are the people who in some ways will always be with him, the people he has accepted and who have accepted him. They are the start of a new order.\textsuperscript{112}

Powers observes that Torch Song could have followed a more political route and chosen only images of male love at the closing. The inclusion of Ma’s cookies represents

\textsuperscript{111} Fierstein. Torch Song Trilogy. 156.
the larger, universal truth of acceptance. These movements are not included in the printed play, but as either actor or directorial choices, they serve the purpose of the play. Throughout the play, Arnold has sought to form a family relationship and this final moment symbolizes the fact that he succeeded.

Dennis Altman observes that one of the major roles of theatre is to help us to “imagine ourselves and to understand the experience of others.” He continues:

The fact that Torch Song moved from an experimental theatre in the West Village to a mainstream theatre on Broadway represents a progression from a theatrical dialogue within the gay community to theatre which presents gay themes and characters to a more diverse theatre audience comprised of both the straight and gay communities.

Torch Song Trilogy managed to build a bridge of understanding between gay and straight culture. The fact that Torch Song had made it to Broadway and was recognized with its numerous awards, legitimized the play as more than just gay theater. Its commercial success proved that gay characters no longer had to be stereotyped, depressed, unhappy, or dead to be portrayed to an American audience. Finally, there was a play that spoke to, and affirmed the lives of, the gay community. At the same time, this play managed to open a door of understanding for heterosexuals. By placing the emphasis in the play on Arnold’s relationships and not his sexuality, Fierstein had managed to strike an emotional chord that was universal more than political.

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113 Powers. 67.
114 Altman, Dennis. “Gay Theater - Not Much of it, and What There is, Not Very Gay.” Meanjin V43 N1. 171
115 Altman. 171.
Even critics that harshly criticize the play such as Gerald Clarke and Edwin Wilson cannot avoid recognizing the strength of the play. Clarke, who says, "Several things are wrong with this evening of one-acters: it is too long (more than four hours with intermissions); it is often inconsistent; and for embarrassingly long periods of time it becomes as mawkish as an afternoon soap opera," continues with, "But what is right about it is absolutely right. Playwright Harvey Fierstein has created characters so vivid and real that they linger in the mind, talking the night away, long after the lights have been turned out and everyone has left off-Broadway's Actors Playhouse." In his last statement, Clarke acknowledges that Fierstein's characters are truly universal and speak to the audience in a way that stimulates contemplation. Edwin Wilson, who contends that Torch Song Trilogy lacks dramatic action in much of the piece, asserts that the first play is the "most blatantly homosexual" and sacrifices drama for "the funny or the outré" and that Fugue is "often downright dull." However, Wilson feels that Torch Song's redemption is in the last act when "Mr. Fierstein transcends the homosexual emphasis of the evening and makes Arnold a person with whom everyone can empathize." Both of these critics echo the effectiveness of Torch Song Trilogy as a prophetic play by pointing out the universality of the characters. The fact that the entire audience can relate to the characters satisfies the first criteria of the prophetic definition: nourishment. Clarke goes further to note that the plays message encourages audiences to think about their experience during the play, which

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116 Clarke. 244.
117 Clarke. 244.
satisfies the second half of the definition: providing an alternative view to a dominant viewpoint.

In her essay “Fragments of a Trilogy,” Kim Powers notes that the first major gay play was Mart Crowley’s Boys in the Band, a play filled with self-loathing homosexuals who found solace only in a ghettoed life of bitter self-examination. Boys in the Band is notable because it was the first major play where the lives of homosexuals were presented “in full”. It also marked the end of plays where gays either had to be jailed or dead by the end of the play. Following came a series of plays where gays were allowed to be seen onstage, provided they were also something else. In her analysis of Torch Song’s importance, Powers observes that prior to Fierstein’s trilogy, plays such as Martin Sherman’s Bent and David Rabe’s Streamers portrayed characters where being gay was a backdrop with which to examine other issues; homosexuality presented to add another interesting layer. Powers recognizes that the major significance of Torch Song is that the playwright has managed to let a gay character have his life and examine it for the intrinsic value of looking at his life. While earlier plays with gay characters seemed to need an excuse to deal with gay characters, or avoided dealing with homosexuality in a direct manner, Fierstein has managed to remove the necessity to provide the audience with a “spoonful of sugar” to look at the gay experience. Gays and straights were both able to watch Arnold struggle with the day to day conflicts of his life. No apology was made for his sexuality and no accommodations were made because parts of Arnold’s life might be objectionable. In Widows and Children Arnold tells his mother “You want to be a part of

119 Powers. 65.
my life? I am not going to edit out the things you don't like!"121 This is the strength of this play. Fierstein has invited the audience to enter his world, but refuses to water it down or make apologies for who he is. It is this brutal honesty which makes Torch Song a play that is able to cross the cultural barriers and unite the audience for the evening.

The significance of Safe Sex is much more difficult to establish. What has been written about the play, and it is hard to find and almost non-existent, is mostly negative. In the only production review of the play found, Edith Oliver declares that Safe Sex is sure to be a disappointment to fans of Fierstein's Torch Song. Describing the first play as "out of sight, out of mind", the second as "insubstantial" but the "cleverest of the three", and the final play as an overly sentimental monologue delivered by Arthur with Marion on the receiving end, Oliver says nothing to recommend the play. In what is intended as the final slap, Oliver does mention that "the settings - that seesaw was good - were designed by John Falabella. Eric Conklin directed." 122 The few positive reviews about the play are usually based on the HBO short-film made of the last play On Tidy Endings. In her short book review of the entire play, Susan Dean comments that "in dealing with a topical subject, Fierstein movingly depicts the age-old difficulties and joys of loving. Highly recommended."123 The apparent lack of performance and critique seems to lead to a conclusion that Safe Sex is just another AIDS play with not much new to say. For a clue to the important piece that this play adds to the theatrical discussion of AIDS a look at Gregory Gross's essay provides insight.

120 Powers. 65.
121 Fierstein. Torch Song Trilogy. 162.
In “Coming Up For Air: Three AIDS Plays,” Gross compares *The Normal Heart, As Is*, and *Safe Sex*. “The plays, by William Hoffman, Larry Kramer, and Harvey Fierstein, respectively, remind audiences that history is political, art is political, and even sex is political. These are history plays that are performed in the midst of their own history.”  

Gross goes on to outline the urgency with which these playwrights wrote. Their personal experiences with “the plague” have compelled each one to write about their experiences. *As Is* is the story of two lovers re-united because of AIDS. Saul becomes Rich’s caretaker and lover, while Rich, who is dying of the disease, maintains a safe emotional distance.

Rich is described by Gross as something of a ghost and quotes the play itself to underscore its theme: “Everybody in the play is dead [and] the main characters are ghosts.”  

By contrast, *The Normal Heart* is a rage filled play that can be read as a political manifesto. Ned, afraid of relationships and afraid of AIDS wages war on the disease that taken the lives of so many people he knows. Gross concludes his summary of the first two plays with the following: “Like other gay domestic dramas, these two plays end with closeness pressed upon men in desperation, whose time for love and life is rapidly ending.”

It is here that the difference of *Safe Sex* becomes apparent.

While both Hoffman and Kramer have written plays in which relationships that are formed because of AIDS, Fierstein’s drama is centered around the theme that relationships will have to be formed in spite of AIDS. In *As Is*, Rich and Saul reunite because of (and in

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125 Gross.  63.

126 Gross.  64.
spite of) Rich's battle with the disease. Similarly, Kramer's The Normal Heart, Felix and Ned end up marrying as Felix dies of AIDS complications. Both of these plays underscore the tragedy of relationships affected by AIDS. Fierstein, however, presents a different view.

For Fierstein, AIDS does not have to ruin relationships or run them. As the play Safe Sex progresses, the audience gets to witness various approaches to relationships in the era of AIDS. Beginning with Manny and Jake, the idea that AIDS has the power to keep people from connecting emotionally is presented. Manny, afraid of the disease and unwilling to change, has closed himself off from Jake. In the second play, Safe Sex, Ghee and Mead are attempting to rebuild a relationship despite the threat that is felt. And in the final play, On Tidy Endings, the aftermath of a relationship that ended because of AIDS is explored. The overall effect of the play is that AIDS is a part of life and not a pretty one. However, in the sorrow, there can be joy. Fierstein never shies away from the horror of the disease and its inevitable political agenda, so vividly captured by Kramer, but he never forgets that before activism can change our society, we must understand how AIDS effects our humanity. Safe Sex encapsulates the idea that though the ultimate victory for AIDS will be a cure, it is possible to be triumphant over the disease by remembering joy and sorrow are both necessary in love. By choosing to play it safe, Manny sacrifices his humanity to AIDS; Ghee and Mead both struggle to remember what it feels like to be open to commitment; and Arthur and Marion are faced with overcoming the grief associated with loss and the challenge of finding life after death.
Taking the message of Torch Song Trilogy and Safe Sex together the case can be made that Harvey Forbes Fierstein is truly a prophet. Beginning with the premise that a prophetic message challenges a culturally dominant perception, let us examine each play. For straights, Torch Song Trilogy presents a new view of gay life. Though the “traditional” elements of anonymous sex and casual sexual experiences are included, they are dwarfed in importance by the message that honesty to self, whether one is gay or straight, is the source of true happiness. The idea that a gay man, who is a drag queen, seeks and obtains ideals that are traditionally heterosexual, is a revelation for many straight people. For gays, who were forming a revolution based on their sexual partners, the idea that there might be more to winning liberation than getting permission to have sex at will is an eye opener. For gays, Fierstein’s message is that liberation must begin with the self and the rest will follow. When examining Safe Sex there is a dominant value placed upon finding a cure for AIDS, after which all will be well with the world. Contrary to this view, Fierstein paints a picture where wellness can be found in the midst of the AIDS crisis. And if the theme is carried further, Safe Sex seems to whisper that unless we can triumph over this disease while it is with us, no cure will be able to reclaim the soul we will sacrifice in the battle. Both of these plays also fulfill the additional criteria that a prophetic play must nurture and nourish its audience. Torch Song accomplishes this task through his characters. As he notes himself in the introduction to the published play:

Like a gaudy East Indian purse, outrageous in color, embroidered in cliché design, the worth of these plays lies ultimately in the tiny mirrors woven into the fabric wherein we catch our reflections. ... You might just catch a line
... that reaches out and touches something going on inside of you. And for that instant you are relieved of isolation.\textsuperscript{127}

\textbf{Safe Sex} nourishes the audience through a similar manner. By providing a play where joy is found where none believed it could be, the audience is empowered to embrace life again.

Though it is usual to judge a play’s - and thereby the playwright’s - success on the tally of box office receipts, these works of Harvey Fierstein are both successful at the task of being prophetic. \textit{Torch Song Trilogy} challenges the misconception that gay men do not desire or are not able to maintain a lasting relationship. In fact, it is not Arnold who ends his relationship with Alan, but a tragic death that is caused by heterosexuals who murder Alan because he is gay. This act points out that, if gays seem incapable of “serious” relationships, the fault may lie as much with the straight culture as it does with gays themselves. Though gays may have placed an inordinate emphasis on sex over substance, it is easy to understand why someone would resist falling in love when the society they live in reinforces the idea that gays shouldn’t be happy – they are better off dead.

\textbf{Safe Sex} exerts its’ prophetic message by challenging the idea that AIDS is a death sentence. Death, in this sense, includes more than the ending of one’s physical existence. Fierstein demonstrates that AIDS can kill the human spirit as much as it can kill the body. When one looks at the ending of \textit{The Normal Heart}, this point is made quite effectively. Ned has spent so much time protesting and fighting, that he finally marries his love when it is too late. AIDS has not only taken Felix’s life, but also Ned’s. This seems to be the

\textsuperscript{127} Fierstein. \textit{Torch Song Trilogy}. 9.
dominant view of AIDS—one must devote one’s life to fighting it, and in the end, AIDS will win by taking life. *Safe Sex* takes the battle against AIDS one step further: It acknowledges the necessity of fighting and protesting and never giving up. However, the ending is quite different from the tragedy one expects. Rather than ending in despair, *Safe Sex* ends with renewal. Arthur and Marion have both found new strength to embrace life. Even though AIDS will continue to be a part of their world, it is important that there is happiness and joy as well.

Though *Torch Song* is critically acclaimed and *Safe Sex* is an apparent theatrical bomb, they are both a credit to the man who wrote them. Whether or not Harvey Fierstein will ever manage to produce another blockbuster like his first play remains to be seen. However, his continuing presence as an playwright, actor, activist, and spokesperson permit him the honor of being identified as a prophetic voice in not only the gay community, but the American community as well.
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