It's just a stage I'm going through: The rhetorical effects of musical theater

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IT'S JUST A STAGE I'M GOING THROUGH: THE RHETORICAL EFFECTS OF MUSICAL THEATER

by

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Bachelor of Arts
University of Nevada, Las Vegas
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A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the

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ABSTRACT

It’s Just a Stage I’m Going Through: The Rhetorical Effects of Musical Theater

by

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Human communication is often thought of in rather limited terms, such as rhetoric or media effects or interpersonal exchanges. While many sub-groups lurk beneath these broad categorical trench coats, forms of artistic expression such as music, theater and humor find themselves in other intellectual clothing; yet, it is undeniable that most – if not all – human endeavors can be viewed through a communicative lens. Other disciplines are obviously worthy in their own right and contain enough distinct characteristics to keep scholars from exploring additional contexts, but why limit the study of music to the music department? Or the study of Literature to the English department?

This project drags the elements of musical theater across campus from the Fine Arts Building to the Department of Journalism and Media Studies by framing them as a means of communication, rooted in the rhetorical and supplemented by historical, emotional, and psychological underpinnings. It is steeped in popular culture and contains an original musical comedy within its bindings, complete with a CD recording of its 16 songs.
However unique, its academic aperture is intended to illustrate how theory merges with practice; how the technical melds into the creative. It is the art and the artifact, the microscope and the amoeba, relying on itself as the primary data and emphasizing a communicative theme on a qualitative level in what is intended as a scholarly hodgepodge of the rigorous and the riotous.
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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I’m not very good at saying, “Thank you.”

Some would claim that is simply the result of growing up an only child, which to me sounds like a nice way of implying I’m a spoiled brat. I would be more inclined to argue it’s difficult to remember all the right people because of my advanced senility, but, as I’m fond of saying, what would I know? When you get this old you have a wide area to cover, and I’m not referring to my posterior end, although that certainly qualifies. This whole academic thing has been a complete hoot, and this thesis is obviously the final artifact I’ll produce for those people who have been so tremendously influential: my teachers.

But those who wear the title of “professor” are not the only teachers we have. In fact, I believe we can learn something from just about anyone, which is not to suggest I intend to thank six billion people. The list may be long, obscure, and inconsequentially boring to most, yet I owe a debt of gratitude and appreciation to many. So indulge me, and let’s have at it. I thank:

My parents, for shoving an accordion in my lap when I protested incessantly; John Copiskey for showing me how to play it; my elementary and secondary level music instructors – particularly my Junior High Band Director, Eldon Galyen – for teaching me that drums can indeed be played musically; every English teacher I’ve ever had; my mother, for reading to me when I couldn’t; all the musicians that took me under their professional wings when I was too young to be in nightclubs, such as Tony Tracy, Rick
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Elton, you don’t have a clue who I am, but without your music I would never have sat down at a piano, other than maybe to tie my shoes. You’ve been my musical inspiration
since I was a child, and I’ve modeled everything I write and play after you. I learned the trick to following chord sequences by listening to yours, I grasped the notion of playing pop piano by ear from watching you, and I figured out how to invent “hook-ish” melodies by your example. You are the sole motivating factor in my development as a pop musician, period. Your talent has taught me everything. And you never gave one lecture or one test or one workshop or one seminar. All you had to do was be the prolific genius that you are.

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I’m sure I’ve forgotten a few folks, but that’s what happens when you’ve got so many to thank. This doesn’t mean I don’t know or don’t care; it just means I’ve been around awhile and have a substantial history. I began my freshman year at age 38 and completed this thesis at age 45. The years between have provided more personal satisfaction and self-actualization than I’ve ever known, and I thank everyone at UNLV for this incredible opportunity and for giving me an invaluable experience that will last a lifetime.
CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Upon presenting the admittedly subversive idea of a gay musical theatrical comedy as a prospective project for a master’s thesis in communication studies, it became readily apparent that in order to meet the demands of the academy I would have to offer substantially more than merely a script, stage direction, characters and songs. With a “hands on” background in the media of print and broadcast journalism but an academic footing in the esoteric waters of classical and contemporary rhetoric, the structural options seemed obvious: I could couch the play within the context of traditional qualitative research by presenting a look at the persuasive characteristics and corresponding effects found in dialogue, humor, music and dramatic action. I could explore examples of various productions in the same genre and juxtapose theory against theater. I could marry Kenneth Burke and Aristotle to Harvey Fierstein and John Waters in a homo-hypothetical commingling of the canon and the camp, giving birth to the inbred love child that is *Heavens To Betsy, Heels To Jesus*.

I could, in other words, show by creative example that musical comedy is indeed a viable form of human communication, capable of moving the affectations and intellect as surely as any other medium.

It is easy for a budding rhetorician to forget that Aristotle also wrote *The Poetics*, a “theory of drama” that is “as useful now as it was then” (Hatcher 21). We are attuned to
the proofs of credibility, emotional appeals and logic, but rarely do we consider action, character, thought, diction, song and spectacle. These six elements are pure Aristotle in that they illustrate dramatic structure as surely as ethos, pathos and logos detail persuasive oratory. They are the conjunctive coat rack upon which hang the hats of comedy and tragedy, of laughter and tears. While seemingly simple, they nonetheless provide a foundation from which to analyze, if not build, a play. Coupled with rhetorical underpinnings, this theoretical hybrid is the platform upon which this project rests, punctuated by samples of those who have gone before as I attempt to “break a leg” while “standing upon the shoulders of giants” (Dutton).

The format adheres to convention in that the following review of literature looks at various mechanisms involving symbolic meaning and persuasive devices, then links them to and evaluates the creative and communicative muscle behind humor, music, and theater through the eyes of both academics and professionals in an effort to provide the foundation for a methods chapter that chronicles “how” I write music and dialogue. The results chapter is the play itself. A discussion then ties the preceding chapters into a finished product that frames satire, comedy, and music as a rhetorical vehicle and a credible means of communication that will fulfill the dictates of the academy while acting as vessel for my exploratory voyage as a librettist and composer. This includes unedited and unmolested feedback and commentary from experts in the entertainment business regarding the project as an alternative to an actual staging.

The characters are representations of people I know or people that embody ideas and behaviors that have been on the national stage such as a pedophile priest, a sixty-two-year-old, unemployed transsexual prostitute, a chubby, middle-aged, abrasive effeminate
“queen,” a young, inexperienced gay lad from the Midwest, and a heroic figure who, in a most ironic fashion, mimics the stereotype of the non-stereotypical gay man. Some of the scenes, situations and language also fit gay stereotypes such as anonymous promiscuity in a gay bathhouse, flamboyant, limp-wristed conduct and jargon such as “Oh, Mary” and “You go, girl!”

The focal point of the play is the music; or, more precisely, the songs. This is not to place the production in the realm of a “revue,” as it contains characters that find themselves in dramatic circumstances and whose actions (and inactions) result in a story. However, it is my goal to amuse and entertain, and I feel that goal is better served by my abilities as a songwriter than as a scriptwriter. The songs are satirical pop tunes—some with gay themes—that poke fun at accepted norms and established institutions. Many of them are stylistically rooted in the tradition of musical theater while others are pop songs that verge on rock and roll. They fit in the lyrical camp of musical satirist Tom Lehrer or political humorist Mark Russell, yet they are not “rip-offs” of existing melodies with rewritten words. They are wholly original and are intended to be performed by the appropriate characters accompanied by a five-to-seven piece band that could include guitar, bass guitar, drums, piano, keyboards, percussion, and wind or string instruments that would vary depending upon the arrangement.

I am not a musical theorist and therefore unable to place the melodies, harmonic structures, rhythms and lyrics on score paper, which is not unusual for those who “write” popular music. Benward and Kolosick note:

The most basic elements of music are intervals, simple melodies, simple triads, scales, and simple rhythms. Most students entering a career in
music know these ingredients from sight, but few know them from sound. 

Until the basics are mastered, the complex idioms of composition cannot 
be undertaken (preface x).

This underscores certain personal prejudices concerning formal musical training in that young musicians are usually taught to read notation from the page only, which neglects the ear and forces an audible medium into a formulaic printed pocket. It is artistically restrictive in that it compels them to follow a recipe that has been concocted by someone else, sort of a musical version of painting by the numbers that amounts to little more than decoding dots and lines. Musical creativity cannot be obliged to paper, and must instead spring from an ear that can invent melody and an imagination that is allowed to wander. Legendary pop musician and Oscar Award-winning composer Elton John comments:

It’s all down to a chord sequence. I could be fiddling on the piano and looking at the lyrics and I’ll play two chords together and think, “Oh that sounds really good.” You stumble on things by accident and certainly chords are very important and melody is very important. I could write a melody to more or less anything (John).

Similar to John, I know the ingredients from sound but not sight, which means I can “hear” musical ideas in my mind and make them perceptible via the voice and piano. I have consequently recorded the songs on the included CD in the order in which they appear in the script, which provides a “raw” representation of the lyrics and music in that they are delivered in a piano/vocal, singer/songwriter context that would need to be developed should the play be produced. Nonetheless, this format allows readers to hear the songs and “follow along” as they digest the dialogue.
This is not to suggest that at some point I do not wish to see the play through to fruition; after all, to what else would one see a gay play through? I simply do not possess the wherewithal to produce a full-fledged musical, nor am I a set-designer or a dramaturge or an actor or a director or a conductor. I am merely a songwriter and pop journalist with an idea.

Caveats and Disclaimers

Since we seem to be living in a hypersensitive age wherein people claim to take offense over comments that were once inconsequential and coffee cups carry labels warning that indeed their contents may be hot, it might be prudent to offer my version of that which could be considered cautionary advice: Do not read, view, ingest, savor, consume, digest, consider, reflect upon, think about, mull over, buy, examine, borrow, attend to, scrutinize, inspect, observe, smoke, sniff, snort or swallow this product if you have an affinity for litigation, particularly that brought on by the ACLU. Do not assume that every word is literal or that every connotation is unembellished. This is fiction, albeit imbued with a trace of realism and a kernel of truth. It takes no prisoners and leaves no sacred cow unmilked, especially in regard to gay culture.

Richard Dyer argues:

There is plenty of evidence to suggest that stereotypes are not just put out in books and films, but are widely agreed upon and believed to be right. Particularly damaging is the fact that many gay people believe them, leading on the one hand to the self-oppression so characteristic of gay people’s lives, and on the other to behaviour in conformity with the stereotypes which of course only serves to confirm their truth. Equally,
there can be no doubt that most stereotypes of gays in films are demeaning and offensive (353).

I would recommend Dyer avoid my play, as the very nature of parody is to present a particular idea, person, or activity as fodder for disparagement, primarily through exaggeration. Robert Harris comments that, “The satirist, therefore, will display his critical attitude and implicit morality through irony, often by creating a narrator who appears to be as much a hypocrite as the target of his work, but who exposes himself and the target by his lack of true perception or inability to hide his hypocrisy” (4).

I would not be so presumptuous as to assume a moral posture as the driving force behind the play, yet there is no doubt that I support Harris’ notion of mimicry through mockery: each character is his or her own narrator, singing their songs from a first-person perspective in a manner that calls attention to their shortcomings and ridiculousness. For instance, the “Moral Majority March” is performed by a pious conservative evangelical minister who sings about burning books and killing gays while soliciting homosexuals for donations. “Teeny Bopper Weenie” is sung by a Catholic priest who puts his pedophilic tendencies on hold for fear of legal trouble while offering moral advice to others. “Sauna Takin’ Queers” is a campy send-up of closeted gay men who seek random anonymous sex in gay bathhouses while sporting wives and girlfriends to the outside world.

Given that the content of my play is largely satirical, it would seem ineffectual to pursue other types of humor that may not be present; yet, the material is diverse enough to be more than strictly providing a means for the revered to be, as Simon Dentith describes, “held up to public gaze and subjected to ridicule” (1). It is silly. It is absurd. It may even be sentimental. It is most certainly musical, in that it contains sixteen songs
whose whimsical melodic, harmonic and rhythmic structures often incongruently betray their serious subject matter. But its inveterate impulse is unquestionably its “corrective purpose, expressed through a critical mode which ridicules or otherwise attacks those conditions needing reformation in the opinion of the satirist” (Harris 1).

Political correctness itself is at times a target, as are people like Dyer who wish to dictate the creative expression of others. As a gay man who has been in the forefront of gay culture in Las Vegas as a business owner, columnist, radio talk show host, and socialite for over twenty years, it is very simply true that gay stereotypes are a reality and that Dyer’s accusation that “many gay people believe them” functions as a condescending method of discrediting people like me by claiming my observations are not steeped in accuracy but are instead the result of blind obeisance to a “bigoted” ideology. Gay activists call this “internalized homophobia.” I would suggest that they, too, avoid my play, as the image they find in its mirror might reflect the authenticity they so vehemently deny. I am an equal opportunity offender in that I expose the disingenuousness and duplicity of those on the political Left as well as the Right, perhaps because the Left claims to care for and speak for gay people, which I find deceitfully self-serving and quixotically altruistic. Additionally, gay criticism of the Right is redundant and pedestrian, whereas gay criticism of the Left borders on heresy. And what is satire if it is not somewhat heretical?

Peter Dale, president of More4, the British television channel that broadcast a fictitious documentary about the assassination of President George W. Bush, states that, “We know some people are going to be offended. But you always risk offending people when you open people’s eyes to the way the world is” (Sullivan 7A). Heavens To Betsy,
Heels To Jesus is not intended to be overtly political nearly so much as it is intended to be entertaining, yet there is no doubt the entertainment comes as result of viewing the world through my admittedly biased lens. Christianity, Judaism, Islam, conservatism, liberalism, physical handicaps, romance, homosexuality, ethnicities, emotional anomalies and pedophilia are but some of my peripheral targets, but the bulls eye is anyone or anything that I feel takes itself too seriously. It is the rubric of pretension that I seek to expose and subvert. The specifics are merely window dressing.

In this sense, the “preexisting set of filters” (Traudt 92) Dyer calls stereotypes ought to be of little concern. I write with tongue firmly planted in cheek, I view social roles and behaviors with a healthy skepticism, and I question authority on every corner of the ideological street. Comic George Carlin claims that the material of most “comedians who comment on political, social, and cultural issues…reflects an underlying belief that somehow things were better once and that with just a little effort we could set them right again,” and that this “wished for outcome…necessarily limits the tone and substance of what they say” (preface xi). While I may not be as nihilistic as Carlin (“I frankly don’t give a fuck how it all turns out in this country – or anywhere else, for that matter” [xi]), I shamelessly share his contempt for phoniness and facades, whether it is a man in a frock or a man in a dress.

The expository element of satire, then, is obviously rhetorical in that it asks its audience to view its contents within the context of the “two traditional strands in the history of rhetoric: the argumentative, persuasive theme and the literary, aesthetic theme” (Fisher 291). Comedies in general would seem to wrap these strands into one cumulative rope that contains so much overlap they become indistinguishable from one another,
capable of touching an audience on both a conscious and subliminal level wherein ethos, pathos and logos merge. And if "music is undoubtedly the one [art] that has the greatest capacity to move us" to the point where "the emotion it arouses can reach overwhelming proportions" (Rouget 316), there is little doubt that musical theater functions not merely as entertainment, but as a potent communicative tool worthy of investigation and inquiry.

It is with this in mind that I launch my foray into a study of this creative art as the observer and the observed, fully conscious of the distinction and aware of the potential pitfalls involved with simultaneously appearing on both ends of the metaphoric microscope. For the higher-minded this is social science, philosophy, criticism, psychology, history and theory. For the everyman it is just plain fun.

At the risk of sacrificing scholarly protocol for the sake of foreshadowing the tone and tenor of that which follows, I must cite the colloquial admonishment to not – under any circumstances – try this at home.
CHAPTER 2

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

The opening chapter of this study is divided into four subsections that deal with information related to the communicative properties of musical theatrical comedy: persuasive techniques and the application of meaning; the nature of comedy and how humor works; the history, development and creative impulse behind gay theater; and the psychological, physical and emotional effects of music.

Sources for these segments include scholars rooted in rhetorical theory such as Kenneth Burke and Aristotle, professional comedy writers such as George Carlin and John Waters, gay icons in the performing arts such as Tony Kushner and Harvey Fierstein, and philosophers and musicians, from rhetorician Suzanne Langer to composer Danny Elfman.

It is from the opinions of these experts – those who do and those who study – that this backdrop is formed, with the intent to provide an analytical framework that embodies the essential elements of gay musical theater and the corresponding meaning and effects applied to and gleaned from its patrons.

Setting the Object Before the Eyes: Rhetorical Implications

...because some words are nearer in their ordinary acceptations, more assimilated, and have more peculiar force of setting the object before the eyes than others (Aristotle 1995 213).
The "object" of musical theater may ideally be left to speak for itself lest the interpretation, criticism and opinion of a mediator obscure the subjective nature of most art, which raises a pertinent question: Why is that which is in one way open to construal and bias (i.e., "taste") simultaneously measured against an absolute set of standards? The primary compositional elements of music, dialogue and plot – while capable of moving the affectations differently – are yet undeniably appraised as "good" or "bad" depending, primarily, on the level of craftsmanship involved with their design. It would seem foolish, if not ridiculous, to claim that a three-chord country song demands the calculated and creative powers of a symphony or that "Dick and Jane" children's stories are on the same literary footing as Shakespeare or that the interior of the Notre Dame Cathedral is architecturally akin to an adobe hut.

On some level, it can be also be inferred that certain theatrical ventures are superior to others, which calls attention to the vast scope of their collaborative nature in that they "...require(s) materials, tools, and talent drawn collectively from many or all other art forms..." (Rosenberg and Harburg 5). This is based on an analysis of the finished product as opposed to merely the music, lyrics and script, which, nonetheless, can also be quantified in terms of quality although alone they are not considered complete. Rosenberg and Harburg assert that, "For to create a musical, the artistry of story and song must first merge into a musical play, which exists in manuscript or on cassette until brought from page to stage by actors in a theater before a live audience" (6).

As a pertinent digression, the evolution of a nascent idea from a fixed, "copyright-protected 'expression'" (Biederman 282) into a performance illustrates the startling – if not often overlooked – difference between composition and execution. The ability to
invent melodies has little to do with the technical wherewithal to carry them out on an instrument or with the voice just as virtuosity is no indication of the capacity to compose. In a related study, Dale L. Bartlett found that “A pianist...will experience the need for a high degree of physical dexterity. Dexterity, however, does not assure remembering; that is, one may possess exceptional physical skills but lack the artistic expression necessary for achieving a high-quality performance” (Hodges 178).

Bartlett is discussing technique versus the subsequent application of esoteric nuance such as dynamics and timing in a slightly different paradigm, yet the distinction is obvious. Contemporary pop musician and former Beatle Paul McCartney “wrote” the Liverpool Oratorio in that he conceived the musical ideas, yet confesses “At some point the marks on the page failed to match up to what I was hearing, so eventually I made the music and someone else wrote it down” (Calkin 2). American songwriter Billy Joel composed a set of classical piano pieces called Fantasies and Delusions which, “...admitting his own limitations, he drafted classical pianist Richard Joo to perform” (“Billy” par. 3).

To extrapolate the analogy to musical theater, the libretto stands as one form of creation and the performance thereof to quite another in keeping with the Aristotelian model of “setting the object before the eyes.” This study focuses primarily on the conceptual components inherent to creation and composition, which obviously must exist prior to production. A singer requires a song. A dancer requires a step. A play requires a script. It is the skeletal framework upon which performance drapes, yet can support its own weight as a viable entity in much the same way as a novel maintains its identity though brought to film. Producer Robert Evans agrees:
It starts with what’s on the page. To me the biggest star of any page is on the page – in other words, the writer. I don’t care how many actors or stars are in the picture, or who’s directing it or who’s producing it or what company’s releasing it – if it isn’t on the page, it’s not going to work. That’s your biggest star – the writer (Gordon 125).

What does this say of an artistic world in which Hollywood writers are expendable and it seems to matter not that creator Matt Groening “has only written or co-written a handful of episodes [of The Simpsons] once the program became a series” (Alberti xxi) or that Family Guy creator Seth McFarland no longer authors his own scripts, yet Shakespeare and Mozart are commemorated for their contributions although their work has been interpreted and performed by many long after their death? What role does authenticity play in regard to the placement of “the object?”

William L. Benoit and Mary Jeanette Smythe maintain that, “Aristotle constructed his advice on message production...he was not developing advice on message reception or comprehension with auditors in mind…” (97). This complements Groening’s forthcoming commentary about “having fun” and supports Hatcher’s claim that “It is not the quality of the idea that matters most, but rather the quality of the ideas as depicted by the actions of the play” (41), which leads to a generalization that indeed the writer is of central import and that presentation of the idea must take place in written form prior to its development as spectacle.

Ronald Hayman states that, “Reading a script can be all the more enjoyable if we remember it was not intended for reading” (1). In other words, the consumer is digesting a work in progress that is often considered a finished work in itself, which can result in a
wide range of opinions regarding its suitability for production. At this point its impact is
driven by the imagination in much the same way as the radio mystery shows of old
conjured pictures in the mind through suggestion, dialogue and sound effects, which will
produce broadly varied interpretations. Playwrights may be specific in terms of their
vision regarding set design, character movement, lighting and mood, but their description
of this vision will change once the play is produced. As Neil Postman said, “That the
image and the word have different functions, work at different levels of abstraction, and
require different modes of response will not come as a new idea to anyone” (74).

Thus the question is posed: What, precisely, is the “object” of which Aristotle speaks?
A musical contains songs, each of which could be considered entities unto themselves.
The script and the collection of lyrics – the libretto – can be spoken of as a distinct unit,
as can the score, which is the physical placement of the melodic, harmonic and rhythmic
elements of the songs on paper in the form of musical notation. The direction is often
discussed as its own creature, as is the acting, set design, lighting and overall production.
Since the results of this study consist of dialogue, stage direction, lyrics and a recorded
“score,” those elements will serve as the intended object with the erstwhile knowledge
that they become an object of a different sort upon assembly. As Joseph P. Swain
observes, “...Kern, Gershwin, Rodgers, and others wrote many, many songs which long
outlasted the shows that first presented them” (21). The same could be said of stories
such as George Bernard Shaw’s Pygmalion, which became the “musical by Lerner and
Lowe, My Fair Lady” (Nilsen 256) or Dickens’ A Christmas Carol, which became
Scrooge!
 Appropriately, these artifacts are the very vehicles that forward the rhetorical implications of musical theatrical comedy. The visual components of the set, costuming and lighting merge with the acoustics of voice and music to further supplement the cognitive aspects of dialogue, plot and message in a sometimes-overwhelming sensory bombardment. Good theater is all of these things. It is persuasive in the simplest sense merely by its capacity to command attention as a form of cathartic escapism and, in perhaps a more esoteric sense, by the notion that, “The competitive and public ingredient in persuasion makes it particularly urgent that the rhetoric work at the level of opinion” (Burke 54). This would account for various conflicting views as to the quality of the material, as audiences often assume that if they like a play it is therefore “good.”

This calls on Aristotle’s claims of identification as a means of influence. It may seem rather sophomoric to reiterate that people are more responsive to persuasive messages when those messages are tailored to them, yet there can be no doubt that a person who finds common ground with the content of a play or movie is more inclined to leave the theater in a positive frame of mind. Equally fascinating, though, is the notion that a bad experience also has a persuasive (albeit negative) effect. In this sense, everything is rhetorical in that the meaning attached has a particular motivational result, “…within the cognizance of all men and not confined to any special science” (Aristotle Rhetoric 3). The multimedia represented by spectacle, music and dialogue indeed finds itself compatible, if not understood, by the mutual artistic soil in which rhetoric and theater reside.

Aristotle also claims, “We have, then, a natural instinct for representation and for tune and rhythm,” (Poetics 15) which illustrates a universal tendency for people to extract
connotative value from musical and lyrical elements. Perhaps the greatest confusion, however, lies in the propensity for us to arrive at artistic conclusions on a denotative level; i.e., our desire to attach too much literal clarity to that which is intellectually slippery. It is difficult – if not impossible – to deny that the theatrical has persuasive power, however it is equally difficult to discern precisely what individuals gather from the experience. If Burke is correct in “that there is a basic terminology of perception grounded on sensation, memory, and ‘imagination’ (in the general, psychological, nonpoetic meaning of the word),” (184) it would follow that certain absolutes can be identified, labeled, and understood. But the emotional realities could be akin to placing time in a bucket; we know it exists, yet we cannot hold it in our hands and make it tangible.

Furthermore, “imagination” carries a poetic vibe that lends itself to the ethereal. That which is present on stage or screen is concrete in the sense that, for example, a chair is a chair and an old woman an old woman. All audience members see the same physical representations put forth by the set design personnel and hear the same words as conceived by the playwright, but at some point the internal perceptual backdrop kicks in and these specific items become a subjective abstraction. Burke explains:

…nonverbal acts and material instruments themselves have a symbolic ingredient…In such a case, administrative acts themselves are not merely “scientific” or “operational,” but are designed also with an eye for their appeal…For nonverbal conditions or objects can be considered as signs by reason of persuasive ingredients inherent in the “meaning” they have for the audience to which they are “addressed” (161).
Taken together, the cornucopia of stimuli involved with characters, chorus, lighting, props, settings, costumes, and a full pit orchestra cannot only move an audience; they must move an audience. It seems beyond the boundaries of human reason to assume that they do not, as the emblematic representation inherent to human communication and comprehension forces a response. As Suzanne Langer observes, “The material furnished by the senses is constantly wrought into symbols, which are our elementary ideas” (42).

Much of this has to do with the nature of art and its communicative relationship with (and within) human beings. Subjective or literal, visual or audible, the form that artistic expression takes will prompt a replica of recognition in the mind of the observer, which is one of the fundamentals of enthymemic persuasion. These influences can be most easily understood in that they reside within the context of prior knowledge, “…a kind of induction, deduced from few premises, often from fewer than the regular syllogism; for if any one of these is well known, there is no need to mention it, for the hearer can add it himself” (Aristotle Rhetoric 25). It is more convincing for people to believe they have arrived at a suitable conclusion autonomously than to think they have been coerced, which is evident, for instance, in political discourse. Calling upon mythical schemata such as “patriotism” or “justice” pulls a trigger that plays the metaphoric movie in the theater of the mind, allowing the audience to “decide for themselves.”

Terence McLaughlin explains:

…one of the ways in which we recognize the signals as sight and hearing is that, in addition to coinciding in the data-processing stage of the brain, they still reach the auditory and visual cortices so that we know they are sight and hearing respectively. What becomes now of the identity which
occurred in the other part of the brain? The answer is – an association.

The pattern from the ear still remains ‘hearing,’ but the fact that it can be identified with a similar pattern from the eye is not lost on the master pattern-analyser; every time we hear that pattern from the ear we shall be reminded, automatically, of the sight which produces a similar pattern (61).

Thus a most efficient means of persuasion is borne out of the mechanism that connects sensory stimuli to an existing text in the mind, whether conjured by the nuance of connotative language or the blatant display of theatrical performance.

The rhetorical dimensions of this persuasion, however, are discovered in a wholly different paradigm than that of traditional discursive analysis. Whereas classical rhetoric looks at the symbols of language as its primary medium, visual and aural stimuli…

…is not limited, as the complexity of discourse is limited, by what the mind can retain from the beginning of an apperceptive act to the end of it…An idea that contains too many minute yet closely related parts, too many relations within relations, cannot be ‘projected’ into discursive form; it is too subtle for speech (Langer 93).

The initial impact of artistic work is sensory, only to later be apprehended on a cognitive level. Perhaps a good example of this would be dreaming: upon waking, the imagery and “narrative” from the dream often hold a brief, fleeting moment in the consciousness, after which they are replaced by a linguistic account. The manifestations of the stage function on the same level; we absorb them through direct recognition, then “make sense” of them after the fact.
Consider the narrative paradigm as outlined by Walter Fisher or Burke’s theory of dramatism as a means of rhetorical analysis: both contend that human communication can be influenced and understood by the linear, left-to-right motion of the “story.” Often referred to as “climax construction,” a tale or poem or novel or play mimics what might be the single most universal pattern: the human sexual response. We inherently understand the layout of introduction, development, culmination and conclusion because those very elements are part of our psychosexual make-up. The esoteric application to artistic ventures makes them interesting, if not compelling, due to this instinctual recognition. Imagine a movie with no plot or a song with no melody, a mere collection of instances or sounds that bear no relationship to one another. We would likely discount such art as inferior, if not ridiculous, primarily because the organizational model itself contains innate meaning. Without it we are left with little more than random materials with which we cannot identify.

Much of this has to do with the nebulous domain of “feelings” and their relationship to knowledge. While often regarded as less reliable than rational thought, they cannot be discounted as a legitimate form of epistemological understanding. Langer notes that, “Everybody knows that language is a very poor medium for expressing our emotional nature,” (100) which indicates that we grasp certain information outside the articulation of words and phrases. Images and sounds may occupy a different form than traditional rhetorical discourse, yet they cannot be discounted as any less “real.” As Ernst Cassirer claims, “…in the mental development of the individual mind the transition from one form to the other – from a merely practical attitude to a symbolic attitude – is evident” (33). In other words, though anchored in linguistic construct, human comprehension can as easily
operate on a sensory level. In fact, converting these imprecise symbols to language can often limit and distort their message and meaning.

Art in general has long been considered a form of expression that would ideally lift human consciousness toward an elevated sense of goodness and a better understanding of itself. Creative people might engage in producing persuasive artifacts, yet the notions of symbolism and epiphemic revelation are based not so much on that which is perceived to be present, but as a means of pondering the larger concept of Aristotle’s “object.” Good art, in other words, does not answer questions. It asks them. Or rather, it leads its audience to ask them, in a uniquely rhetorical manner in that the questions are rhetorical as well. The entire idea is a mish-mash of suggestion, implication, subjectivity, purpose, and conclusion, beholden to a different set of theoretical criteria than that of traditional, logical thought and discursive analysis.

As Cassirer said, “In the hierarchy of human knowledge and of human life art was only a preparatory stage, a subordinate and subservient means pointing to some higher end,” (137) which proposes that art is a vehicle rather than a destination. Yet, depending upon semantic framing, the “higher end” of which Cassirer speaks could be those qualities inherent to the art itself, for are not beauty, truth, justice and love – some of the deeper messages we look for in artistic expression – fitting conceptual examples of perhaps the highest order? Langer notes that, “If the origin of art had to wait on somebody’s conception of this inner meaning, and on his intention to express it, then our poor addle-brained race would probably never have produced the first artistic creation” (251). Therefore, though seemingly at odds, Cassirer and Langer unintentionally support one another in their efforts to describe the elusive object of which Aristotle wrote. The
articulation is the art as surely as the medium is the message. And the definitional labels often obscure, rather than elucidate, this critical point.

The Nature of Comedy

In a somewhat controversial interpretation of Aristotelian description, Richard Janko suggests that:

A Comedy is a representation of an absurd, complete action, one that lacks magnitude, with embellished language, the several kinds of embellishment being found separately in the several parts of the play: directly represented by persons acting, and not by means of narration: through pleasure and laughter achieving the purgation of the like emotions (93).

The word “magnitude” forces several questions concerning definition: Does he mean that comedies are rarely big-budget extravaganzas? Or that they are of minimal import in terms of social and political content? Or that they have a lesser effect on an individual’s emotional or intellectual state than more “serious” work? There seems to be a universal appeal in that which we call “comedic,” yet an equally universal tendency to dismiss humor as less important, if not downright low-class. Yet the subtle, layered nature of nuance and innuendo found in comedic writing often requires sharper communicative and interpretative skills, which hints at an art form that deserves greater credence and credibility in the rubric of intellectual discussion.

Specifically, Janko is discussing “comedy” as a dramatic form rather than humor in general, a distinction clarified in the Poetics by Aristotle himself: “Comedy aims at representing men as worse, Tragedy as better than in actual life” (Butcher 2). Perhaps this difference is crucial, but it places too much emphasis on a deep symbolic meaning and
ignores the use of humor as a sophisticated medium. For instance, since comedies house primarily verbal or physical wit, seemingly important components such as location bear little relevance. Does it matter that Cheers! is set in a tavern or that Seinfeld is staged in an apartment or that South Park is a cartoon? These are merely vehicles—channels, if you will—that provide a place for characters to deliver dialogue. In his book The Theory of Comedy, Elder Olson discusses the machinations of playwrights such as Shakespeare, Shaw, Wilde and others, but makes no mention whatsoever of setting. The locale is largely inconsequential; at the very least, it is secondary and supplemental to the script.

This is similar to inductive reasoning, in which the logical pattern “moves from particular facts to a general conclusion” (Lucas 445). For instance, a writer may have a good supply of jokes that, by themselves, are short narratives relayed in small group settings such as one-on-one or as part of a stand-up comedy routine. From these laugh lines alone it would be possible to create characters and scenarios that result in a complete movie or play or sitcom that gives the appearance of being conceived deductively. Consider the musical Mamma Mia, in which an entire production was written around unrelated songs by the Swedish pop band ABBA, or The Simpsons, which began as “a series of brief animated shorts before and after commercial breaks” (Alberti xi) on The Tracy Ullman Show, or thematic restaurants that stem not from culinary expertise but out of a marketing concept that emphasizes environment.

There seems to be an informal agreement among writers that regardless of how excruciating, an inspired line or well-written passage should be jettisoned if it does not advance the direction of the entire piece. This, however, presupposes that a passage-as-entity undermines the integrity of the whole; yet, many people are able to recall particular
jokes or phrases used as dialogue such as, “Show me the money” from Jerry Maguire (1996) or “You can take your thumb out of my ass any time now, Carmine” from Animal House (1978) or “To be or not to be, that is the question,” from Hamlet (Shakespeare 3.1.55). Perhaps these quotes became inadvertently popular due to trendy repetition, or possibly authorial intent placed them in the fore of the contemporary vernacular. Regardless, such speculation seems foolish and futile as writers are not “generally conscious or fully conscious of the techniques they are using. They create comedy based on a variety of factors…what they feel ‘works’ in a given situation” (Berger 46-47, 1997).

The key word is “works:” A rigid, formulaic piece that is intended to please others – written for the masses – is rarely, if ever, as good as something that is created for the writer’s own sense of satisfaction, echoing Burke’s observation that a speaker who identifies “himself with his audience will be more effective if it is genuine” (56). Matt Groening, creator of The Simpsons, notes:

My attitude at this point is, as long as the people who work on the show are having a good time, let’s keep doing it…We’ve always tried to entertain ourselves and figured that the outside world would be entertained if we were making ourselves laugh (Elber 11B).

In other words, inventive people should write for their own “jollies,” for lack of a more scholarly phrase, as often the notion of analyzing how comedy works borders on assassinating the intangible magic that we accept as funny. Mary Ann Rishel comments that, “Humor’s an extremely complex phenomenon that’s not yet fully understood…” (32), which suggests that 2,500 years of study has rendered a rather limited bounty.
Comedy is a nebulous area in that even a firm grasp of its characteristics does not guarantee that one is indeed funny. For example, if a person knows how to perform open heart surgery he or she could *do* open heart surgery. If a person knows how to repair an automatic transmission he or she could fix a broken vehicle. However, knowing that Freud’s “psychoanalytic theory of humor argues that humor is essentially masked aggression” (Berger 3, 1993) or that conceptual theory “argues that humor is best understood as dealing with communication, paradox, play and the resolution of logical problems” (Berger 4, 1993) is little guarantee that an individual can create humor, or even find it appealing. If Dentith is correct that the “anti-academic nature of parody” has created “disputes about definition” (9), it seems obvious that agonizing over technicalities is in fact self-defeating.

Surely, it is the *unexpected* that might stand as the major component in comedy, “The playful incongruity that doesn’t fit our logical expectations or our normal view of things” (Rishel 44). If we accept the element of surprise as the DNA from which humor is formed it is then possible to dissect the blueprint into categories that range from irony to satire to puns to exaggeration. Don L.F. Nilsen makes a fine distinction between irony and satire, claiming that, “Parody is to language what satire is to reality. Both parody and satire rely on irony; but the irony of parody is a mismatch between language and earlier language while the irony of satire is a mismatch between language and reality” (101). Another possibility is that parody is intentional and deliberate whereas irony is random and situational; i.e., parody must be conceived and executed but irony can be merely observed. These terms may be used interchangeably at times even though they apparently
differ, but perhaps a greater definitional misnomer occurs between irony and coincidence. Carlin clarifies:

Irony deals with opposites; it has nothing to do with coincidence.

If two baseball players from the same home town, on different teams, receive the same uniform number, it is not ironic. It is a coincidence.

Irony is a state of affairs that is the reverse of what was to be expected; a result opposite to and in mockery of the appropriate result. For instance: If a diabetic, on his way to buy insulin, is killed by a runaway truck, he is the victim of an accident. If the truck was delivering sugar, he is the victim of an oddly poetic coincidence. But if the truck was delivering insulin, ah! Then he is the victim of an irony (115, 116).

Consider this stellar example of irony from the film Female Trouble, an early offering by gay director John Waters in which an old woman laments her adult son’s heterosexuality: “But you could change. Queers are just better. I’d be so proud if you was a fag and had a nice beautician boyfriend. I’d never have to worry. I worry that you’ll work in an office, have children and celebrate wedding anniversaries. The world of heterosexuals is a sick and boring life” (Waters). The contradiction is obvious; Waters flips on its head the conventional paradigm of a mother encouraging her gay son to be straight, turning the entire notion into, as Carlin said, “a result opposite to and in mockery of the appropriate result.”

As an intriguing digression, would irony still be a “reverse of what was to be expected” if an audience knows it is viewing satirical material – if it anticipates the unanticipated? Would its reaction differ? In regard to Neil Simon’s classic comedy The
Odd Couple, William Lang “suggests that the audience needs to be in a moderate state of tension to enjoy the play. The audience needs to know about divorce...But on the other hand, they can't be going through a traumatic divorce, for they will then understand all of the issues entirely too well, and will be too much associated with the actors themselves to be a part of the laughing audience” (19). In other words, familiarity is essential but immersion is ineffective, if not painful.

This seems to be rooted in a maxim that has been attributed to several people, from Steve Allen to Lenny Bruce: “Comedy is tragedy plus time” (Gordon 42). The equation implies that humor cannot (or at least should not) occur too close to the incident from which it stems lest the public wounds are too fresh to adequately heal. In other words, what could be offensive at one point could be hilarious at another. The biggest problem, however, is that often once an issue has passed into the “safe” zone its impact is lessened as well as its comedic value; it may no longer be topical or interesting. Another problem is that some wounds appear to never heal and some subjects seem perpetually verboten, such as Holocaust jokes or the relatively recent controversy over cartoon depictions of the Islamic prophet Mohammed.

Referencing the creators of the cartoon South Park, Matt Stone and Trey Parker, AP writer Frazier Moore asks the rhetorical question, “What drives Matt and Trey to mine laughs and truth-telling from places that good sense, and certainly good taste, would declare off-limits?” (8E) Stone replies: “You can take an issue, no matter what side you’re on, and make fun of the far extremes...much of South Park is a group on this side and a group on that side, all screaming at each other. And the boys in the middle are going, ‘What are you doing all this for?’ Do the right thing!” Parker adds: “What we’re
always looking for is weird social issues and weird connections to make. We’re the guys who, if someone says you really shouldn’t do an episode making fun of Scientologists, we say, ‘Whatever’” (Moore 8E).

It is precisely this brand of irreverence that should drive satire: not only must it be permeated by a sense of moral derision, but a reflexive impulse to do the opposite of that which society demands. In fact, satire should hold conventional wisdom in contempt. It should look at human activities on all levels and expose trumped-up pomposity, fraudulent posturing and bogus behavior in the same candid manner as the fabled child who shatters adult delusions when he declares that the emperor is naked. Telling people like Stone and Parker they ought to avoid certain topics is precisely the type of restrictive thinking they bemoan the loudest, which is sure to incite their comedic wrath in much the same way that forbidden fruit harbors an exotic appeal. In other words, never tell a satirist not to satirize; as Hemingway said, “The most essential gift for a good writer is a built-in, shockproof shit detector. This is the writer’s radar and all great writers have had it” (Gordon 49).

One thing satire should not do is take sides. At first this may sound contradictory given its corrective nature; after all, satire does assume a philosophical position. But the point is that some forms of iconoclastic humor can become iconic, which strips them of their authenticity and turns them into that which they once reviled. Perhaps a vivid example of this type of irony is the free “underground” publications that bill themselves as “alternative” or “edgy,” such as the Las Vegas Weekly and City Life. These magazines undoubtedly offer a subversive perspective in comparison to traditional media, yet there is a good deal of conformity in their efforts to be non-conformist. Their views might
represent a counter-culture, but that culture comes with its own tenets and expectations that often reject any opinions or attitudes that run opposed, which sets up a paradox that satire should avoid. Bruce Davis expounds:

Actually, what seems to be the case is that people who are socialized in such a way as to be able more readily to see both sides of an issue, non-idealogues whose opinions are not cast in concrete and are able to put themselves in their opponents position, lawyers who could argue both sides of a case with equal conviction, are those most able to detect irony (48).

This means that in order to remain pure, satirists will ideally view everything from a jaded perspective, including themselves. Self-deprecating humor might fall under a slightly different theoretical umbrella, yet will find itself in the same comedic cesspool once the raincoat of regulation has been hung out to dry. To cite Carlin once again: “I worry about my judgment when anything I believe in or do regularly begins to be accepted by the American public” (88).

Interestingly, the law seems to support creative enterprises when they have come under fire for libel through the medium of parody. In *Hustler Magazine, Inc. v. Falwell*, the U.S. Supreme Court’s “decision, in the case of a crude parody portraying Falwell as an incestuous drunkard, means that public officials and public figures will be unable to sue successfully for even the most biting satire or criticism unless it contains a provably false fact and is published with actual malice” (Middleton 207). Chief Justice William Rhenquist wrote:

“Outrageousness” in the area of political and social discourse has an
inherent subjectiveness about it which would allow a jury to impose liability on the basis of the jurors' tastes or views, or perhaps on the basis of their dislike of a particular expression. An "outrageousness" standard thus runs afoul of our longstanding refusal to allow damages to be awarded because the speech in question may have an adverse emotional impact on the audience (Smolla 20).

See Appendix I to view the piece in its entirety. Notice the disclaimer at the bottom, which reads *AD PARODY – NOT TO BE TAKEN SERIOUSLY. Such a statement may not annihilate the essence of the satire, yet it seems akin to explaining the punch line to a joke in that there is an element of humor lost in citing the obvious. It takes the "wink-and-nudge" nature of comedic criticism out of the equation and removes the nuance. It also assumes the audience is stupid in much the same way as if a restaurant menu declared, "The above items contain food."

Nonetheless, it is clear that legal issues pertaining to potential libel and slander suits are tamed in favor of artistic freedom. While there is a distinct difference between the two, both fall under the rubric of defamation, which is defined by four particulars:

(a) a false and defamatory statement concerning another;

(b) an unprivileged publication to a third party;

(c) fault amounting at least to negligence on the part of the publishers; and

(d) either actionability of the statement irrespective of special harm or the existence of special harm caused by the publication. (Biederman 158)

These stipulations become moot assuming the "defamed" target is ideological, cultural or political, as they are obviously in regard to an individual. Fictitious characters that
embody negative stereotypes might enrage certain people, yet it could be argued that these representations are steeped in accuracy in that they magnify existing characteristics and motives. Such uproar comes not from outrageous lies, but the unavoidable recognition of truth. To quote Oscar Wilde, “The books that the world calls immoral are books that show the world its shame” (Gordon 8).

To further expound, the distinct legal difference between satire and parody – defamatory or otherwise – can be identified by specific content in that parody is “an unauthorized use of copyrighted material that can fall into the category of fair use” (Duboff 185). In other words, for a song, person, television program or any other artifact to be considered the object of parody, that item must be used as a source of its own mockery. This creates a situation in which the legal entanglements are over ownership; i.e., re-writing the lyrics to an existing melody or mimicking established characters or titles that have protected by copyright. For example, Rocky Brown, owner of the adult movie production company EON Films, states that his motion picture called The Dicks of Hazzard was under scrutiny for infringement when he was served a “cease and desist letter from Warner Bros.” (interview). His attorney advised him to continue with the project, as such an obvious take-off is constitutionally protected speech.

The ingredients that comprise parody, then, can be observed by simply ascertaining if the content “has the paradoxical effect of preserving the very text that it seeks to destroy…” (Dentith 36). A priest singing an original song that pokes fun at the well-known tribulations (and trials) of the Catholic Church is satire. The Pope singing the same lyrical content to the melody of Brahms’ “Lullaby” is parody, of both the man and the music. This definitional difference may be more relevant where legal technicalities
are concerned, as the comedic application is so similar as to make such a reference a mere upstroke in the repetitious banalities of mental masturbation. Nonetheless, the knowledge that mockery is largely covered by the First Amendment should be of central import to any writer or creator who is crafting a piece that, as Peter Petro put it, contains "wit or humor, criticism and attack" (5).

It is generally accepted that verbal humor such as innuendo, wordplay, satire and parody are of a more sophisticated nature than the physical chicanery found in slapstick and pantomime. This is not to suggest that the vaudeville performers of yesteryear were not hilarious or that non-verbal material cannot make significant statements. It would follow, however, that the cognitive wherewithal necessary to recognize the subtleties inherent to the clever use of language might exceed that of a more passive, visual stimulus. For example, if a character claims "I was dumbfounded," and another character replies with, "Well, you're half right," the audience must fill in the blank to arrive at the desired conclusion. Obviously such a connection must come as the result of decoding the implication, which requires more intellectual resources than chuckling over, say, the classic pie-in-the-face routine. It is also apparently more conducive to social statements and political controversy.

According to William and Rhoda Cohn, comedian Bob Newhart told The Saturday Evening Post: "Those who control the medium are obsessed with the notion that if they offend even one viewer, they have one less customer. What the TV biggies don't know is that people like entertainment with bite. They want satire" (137). Newhart's comment, however, was made in the 1960s when Middle America was still under the moral and societal influence of the supposedly "squeaky-clean" entertainment era of Leave it to
Beaver and Father Knows Best. Audiences may have also been slightly more intelligent and informed; consider the quality of the material by comedians of the day such as Bruce, Carlin, Allen, Jonathan Winters, Dick Cavett, Johnny Carson and Buddy Hackett. It is doubtful that the general public of the early twenty-first century would appreciate their humor, not so much due to outdated references, but because much of it is steeped in verbal dexterity and narrative. As Jerrold J. Katz reminds us, “...there is a strong relation between the form and content of language and the form and content of conceptualization,” which could echo certain academic sentiments that words create reality. Moreover, it could mean that sharp people are more likely to get the joke.

There are also physical and emotional benefits involved with an appreciation for comedic material. What relatively aware adult has not heard the colloquialism, “Laughter is the best medicine,” or is not familiar with the Reader’s Digest magazine feature of the same name? Nursing professor Margaret Louis reports that, “numerous studies have shown that laughter affects us not just psychologically but physiologically, by lowering blood pressure, increasing stamina and respiration, and aiding circulation...Essentially, almost all body systems are being impacted when you have a good, genuine belly laugh” (Przybys 1E). Another authority claims the effects of humor “are comparable or possibly even stronger than those of a similar duration bout of exercise” (Szabo 4).

While it remains a mystery as to why people would spend time and money confirming that laughter makes us feel good, the experts have supported what Grandma has known all along: An ability to sense humor (as opposed to the trite cliché “sense of humor”) is indeed Duck Soup for the body as well as the mind, to mix an appropriate metaphor. It is spinach to Popeye and oil to the Clampetts. It is a relief and a discovery and a panacea
and a solution, to both the individual and the collective, in a world that, unfortunately, seems to value its presence but ignores its contributions.

**Gay Theater**

Those prone to generalizing would assess that most theater is, in fact, gay, as “There has always been a connection between theater and Gay men” (Evans). While it is indeed difficult to conceive of a brutish, beer-swilling, football-consuming heterosexual auto mechanic singing and dancing his way across the proscenium in full make-up and costume, the issue of homosexuals involved in the theatrical arts is not what should be inferred from the title of this subsection; it simply indicates there are particular scripts that have served both stage and screen that deal with gay characters, culture and conflicts. Nonetheless, it cannot be denied that indeed gays seem drawn to performance as either observers or participants irrespective of content, and to ignore this correlation would be an oversight of the highest order. Perhaps Shakespeare – albeit incorrectly – is the first playwright that comes to the minds of many regarding this realm, and while his work is not specifically gay oriented, there is no doubt that some of his plays feature gender obfuscation and some of his sonnets carry homoerotic overtones.

Consider Sonnet 52:

So am I as rich whose blessed key
Can bring him to his sweet up-locked treasure,
The which he will not ev’ry hour survey
For blunting the fine point of seldom pleasure.
Therefore are feasts so seldom and so rare. (Rictor 5)
Gay historian Norton Rictor observes: “The equation of treasure with semen is nearly explicit elsewhere in the Sonnets, e.g. ‘...all the treasure of thy lusty days’ (Sonnet 2) and ‘Make sweet some vial, treasure thou some place/With beauty’s treasure’ (Sonnet 6). Note, incidentally, the possibly phallic metaphor of ‘blessed key’” (5).

It is also feasible that Shakespeare is justifying the prospect of occasional gay oral sex: the participants do not wish to “blunt the fine point of seldom pleasure” involved with these “rare” and “seldom” “feasts” by agonizing over the activity (“which he will not ev’ry hour survey”). Interpretation aside, “The homoeroticism entailed in Shakespearean cross-dressing has already been analyzed by several critics...indeed, interest in theatrical transvestism – whether that of a boy actor playing female roles or that of the cross-dressed heroine – offered literary critics an initial point of access to the textualization of homoerotic desire” (Traub 72). This is not to suggest that gay characters must operate in a sexual context, but merely that they are hardly novel and there must be certain traits that distinguish them from heterosexual characters.

In other words, why use them if their homosexuality is not visible?

John Franceschina notes that Shakespeare is scarcely the first, claiming that “tragedy is said to have emerged from Dionysian worship in Athens...Dionysus went to Prosymnos’s tomb, cut off a branch of a fig tree, shaped it into a phallus, and sat on it until he reached orgasm” (4). While it is open to speculation as to whether this serves as the etymological impetus behind the slang expression “popping a woody,” the classical world of ancient Greece finds itself at the intersection of bisexuality and theater, of lesbians and thespians. Arno Karlen maintains, “At Sparta love was held in such honor that even the most respectable women became infatuated with girls” (20). Men are said to
have passed on their masculinity through anal sex with teenaged boys in a "religious-educational context in which the older man...elopes with a younger *eromenos*...where he initiates him into adult behavior" (Franceschina 1). Contemporary Los Angeles houses venues such as the Greek Theater, and, of course, Aristotle’s study in *The Poetics* pays homage to his country’s contributions to dramatic role play in a testament to the commingling of these antique cultural practices.

Evidence points to this relationship evolving out of primarily two factors: gay people often feel forced to conceal their orientation due to societal demands, which, in itself, is a form of pretending to be someone other than whom they are. Alisa Solomon corroborates this assumption when she states that, “…gay men and lesbians may have long found some pleasure and solace in theater as a place where the acting they employed in everyday life to hide their sexuality enjoyed more productive expression” (13). She further expounds that the mock representations of reality inherent to the stage allow gays to flip the cathartic bird to mainstream society: “Theatrical irony enables theater to attract sexual outlaws through its sodomitical tendencies to disrupt category and make hash of convention” (14). Director Randy Barbato illustrates this hostility toward the norm:

What is so gay about John Waters’ movies? What is so gay about drag queens eating shit? It’s just that outrage. It’s the fabulous outrage. You knew these films were made by someone who was an outsider, who had a slightly twisted view of the world around him. And that spoke to me. I was like, “My God, I’m not the only one.” (interview)
However, another distinct possibility is that acting requires a certain sensitivity and introspection regarding the human condition, a sort of “softness” that permits an actor to “get into character.”

This is purely speculative, but consider the non-show business professions in which gay men are often employed: Nursing, waitering, teaching, counseling, hotel services and other areas in which empathy, warmth and kindliness are an integral part. There is a fair amount of incongruity with a stereotypically “man’s man” being drawn to floral configuration or exhibiting the tenderness required to care for the sick and aging or painstakingly fashioning a statue of a naked male. If Jon Afalla is correct in his assertion that “Reinvention and gay culture go hand in hand... Gays adore super models and fashion designers” (7), the paradigm becomes clearer: traditionally feminine traits and an emphasis on the presentation of self often manifest themselves in gay men, which underscores the notion of their alleged gentleness (and genteelness) arriving at an affinity for the performing arts in general and the theater in particular.

In this sense, the very essence of theater is gay, perhaps reared in the tradition of a “put-on” of sorts between those who would pretend to be another and an audience willing to suspend its disbelief. The subject matter does not have to be comedic or “cheeky” to achieve this end, although that which is known as “camp” often finds itself at the peripheral core, to use an irresistibly delicious oxymoron. As Solomon reminds us, “Theater, by its nature, reveals and revels in... the notion of identities as contingent and malleable and the suggestion that categories can be playfully transgressed – queered” (13). Gay is not “normal,” nor is the idea – at least publicly – of taking on a different persona. A friend once snidely remarked, “every Halloween another drag queen is born.”
indicating an anecdotal bond between gay men and role-play while supporting Don Shewey’s contention that “Queerness and theater seem inextricably linked, twined around each other like flesh and spirit” (126).

Tracing this attachment from its earliest sources, however, seems like an exercise in cerebral futility given this study is less a chronology of historical signposts than it is a look at how gay musical comedy works. Carl Miller agrees: “All history is an act of intercourse with the past, but this concentration on theater and homosexuality is perhaps a foolhardily exotic position for it” (14), supporting the assertion while making a subtle (if not inadvertent) play on words. Knowing that the arts are dominated by gay men provides little in terms of recognizing gay theater in much the same way that knowing golf is dominated by white men would offer much in terms of understanding how the game is played. It requires dissecting content and analyzing creative techniques. It involves investigation into the impulse behind humor and the effects of dialogue and music. It demands studying specifics rather than generalities while keeping in mind the field is indeed a playground for overgrown children and, in this particular case, “a guy who doesn’t know what he’s doing and won’t admit it” (Carlin 7).

Interestingly, however, the Hollywood Production Code of 1930 forbade homosexuality in movies. Outfest organizer Stephen Gutwillig notes that, “Many of us grew up during a period when there was a de facto mainstream media blackout on our lives. Stories about us were not allowed to be told” (interview). Obviously the culture of the day influenced this silence, yet it seems that even though gay overtones rang clearly throughout the theater during its entire history, society has always heard them as something of a curious novelty, if at all. Gay people were considered a source of
entertainment at best, and a cancer on humanity at worst. Critic B. Ruby Rich comments that as recently as “the post-war period it’s hard to talk about gay and lesbian cinema. It’s even hard to find a gay and lesbian audience” (interview). At the time there may have been what appeared to be fewer gay people, perhaps due to a lack of solidarity and openness. It could also have been due to a strikingly oppressive attitude. Waters remarks: “You have to remember how much fun it was to see those [early gay] movies ‘cuz the police would raid it and arrest the audience. I mean, imagine going to the movies today and being taken away in a paddy wagon” (interview).

These examples bring to mind the notion of causality versus correlation regarding art and society: Does art influence culture, is it merely reflective of culture, or does this “either-or” paradigm ignore the possibility that each persuade the other? It is highly likely that the gay uprising during the sexual revolution of the 1960s was in part spurred by theater, film and music, which, in turn, encouraged more gays to become visible, thus creating an audience that Rich had noted was all but non-existent. With that audience came more product, which lead to yet a wider audience. The inertia snowballed and spawned an industry that – while still a niche market – has become fairly substantial. Kim Frizza, Sales Executive with Wolfe Video, claims, “I would estimate approximately 130-160 G & L titles were released in 2005” (e-mail), supporting the notion that society has become considerably more accepting of gay culture.

Yet doubts remain as to the level of significance, primarily due to varying opinions as to the purpose and consumption of creative efforts. Is there a difference between entertainment and art? It seems as though one defining characteristic is that entertainment is immediate and temporary, whereas art transcends generations and speaks
to humanity on wider scale. This is not to suggest that entertainment must be meaningless drivel, as it certainly can be an intelligent, philosophical depiction of the time; yet its concerns address current situations and its execution is too ordinary to stand apart from more classical representations. According to Joseph Golden:

...a fearful imbalance continues to exist between the nature of life and the function of art...[art should] cause the infinitely random impressions of man and nature to coalesce into a meaningful, necessary, and superior revelation of life’s purpose...We are great consumers of product and product information. But art as a natural and native experience, rivaling the intimate and immediate satisfactions of, say, the dreams we all share of success in health, wealth, and love, or of profound religious experience, is alien to most Americans...we have not found an enduring means of accommodating the satisfactions peculiar to art – in any of its manifestations (24, 25).

The operative word is “enduring,” although Golden is discussing the primacy of art – its role and importance in daily life – as opposed to the lasting qualities of superb craftsmanship. Nonetheless, it follows that a transient people would not recognize permanent revelations, thus favoring that which bellows to the human senses over that which whispers to the human sensibilities.

Gay theater, then, may be more a product/reflection of the times than vehicle that speaks to the whole of humanity. This is not necessarily because of its appeal to a “minority” audience as much as it might be due to its content and quality, as it would be possible to write gay-oriented material that functions on a larger level. Shewey discusses
his meeting with gay director/producer Charles Ludlam from New York’s Ridiculous Theatre Company:

This experience unleashed a whole other confusion of thoughts for me.
I could see that Ludlam was an ambitious, brilliant theater maker with the highest aspirations to art, toiling not on Broadway or in some well-funded institutional theater, but in his own jerry-rigged yet fully functional laboratory. Here was a theater ostentatiously made by gay people, using elements of gay culture…but not directly addressing gay themes…Ludlam expressed decidedly mixed feelings about being labeled gay theater, not because he wanted people to think he was straight, but because as an artist he felt most of what was called gay theater simply wasn’t good enough (131, 132).

This hints at what has circulated as gossip in gay circles: that exclusively gay projects are often lame, and that gifted gay artists find themselves in a quandary as to the genre of their creative outlets. Many find themselves in more mainstream situations, producing non-gay material that is superior to art crafted solely within a gay context. Consider the success of classicists such as Tennessee Williams, Michelangelo and Tchaikovsky, or pop artists like Andy Warhol, Freddie Mercury and Gianni Versace: they are all gay men whose work is not particularly gay.

Gay journalist Tom Moilanen writes, “You would think that gay guys – whom above all should know better – wouldn’t tolerate what I call the ‘McDonaldization’ of music. I am constantly reminded that homos are supposed to be more culturally aware than their straight brethren, but I have yet to stroll into the Gipsy [nightclub] on a Saturday night
and hear Beethoven – or even Skynard” (46), which alludes to an element that may take itself too seriously. “Underground” theaters in West Hollywood, Greenwich Village and San Francisco offer productions that may never leave those exclusive enclaves, possibly due to subject matter, but also likely due to a lack of quality that is resurrected when more talented gay individuals step out of the niche and into the norm. Shewey points out, “Harvey Fierstein, Charles Busch, Tony Kushner, and David Greenspun – among many others – absorbed aspects of Ludlam’s Ridiculous Theater and brought them to a wider audience than those who were fortunate enough to see Ludlam’s own work” (132).

The initial reaction would be that much of this is based on money. Smaller operations cannot afford to bring their material to the masses, whereas Broadway icons like Fierstein – though openly gay – have the wherewithal to tap into straight sensibilities. Golden laments:

The economics of the legitimate theater...is now almost legendary in dimensions and popular understanding. What reasonably educated, moderately intelligent man has not heard about the meager thirty-five antiquated playhouses left on Broadway (down from seventy in 1928), the astronomical production costs (up 300-400 per cent in twenty-five years), the prohibitive ticket prices...the exorbitant salary demands of stars fighting to stay famous in a shrinking, fiercely competitive market? ...It is here that we also rediscover the bases for the “complete hit” syndrome displayed by professional producers who must live with the haunting statistic: four out of five plays will fail (10, 11).
Given this harsh economic reality, it is no wonder that gay theater finds itself on the periphery in terms of production values and exposure. But the financial aspect is driven by the even larger impulse of identity, particularly when it comes to content.

Gay actors, writers and directors must make a decision as to where to focus their creative energies, which forces them to deal with their own conceptions of self and how those notions manifest themselves in the script, on the stage, and as part of the national psyche. A gay playwright is not limited to gay plays any more than a sane playwright is forbidden from writing about psychotic murderers in a testament to the idea that the substance of the art need not be steeped in the substance of the artist. Yet, the divide between homosexual identity and heteronormativity is deeply entangled with marketable appeal. A play cannot exist if it has no financial support, which would seem to come largely from the majority. As David Saravan said, “...the very disposition of the field guarantees that Broadway and regional theaters are constantly in the process of trying both to undermine and reinforce hegemonic social values...experimental theaters are under less pressure only because their budgets are so small and their less affluent audiences less invested in maintaining the status quo” (154).

If the very nature of theater is somewhat subversive, this dichotomy reflects the long-standing rift between creative purity and commercial success, suggesting that financial solvency is an indication of artistic compromise. Who has not heard variations on the theme, “They were a great band until they sold out?” The recurring thread among purists seems to be the dismissal of anything that is popular as uninspired and the anointment of lesser knowns as ingenious. Consider snippets from this rather cynical review of the Las Vegas production of Andrew Lloyd Webber’s *Phantom of the Opera*:

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The growing phenomenon of ravaging Broadway for the amusement of Vegas drunks sunk to a very new low this past weekend... The new and “improved” Vegasized Phantom of the Opera (sic) eliminates such pesky inconveniences as character development, transitions and an entire hour of the original Broadway show... I’m happy that Andrew Lloyd Webber will be raking in another few gazillion dollars, even if it is at the expense of his integrity and the dignity and quality of the Broadway stage. Ironically, Hal Prince, who directed this new atrocity, wrote in a 1974 memoir: “Do we not run the risk of mechanizing the theatre until it becomes so slick it loses its ‘liveness?’” Indeed, Mr. Prince. But that was back when you thought like an artist rather than a whore (“The $100 Million Broadway For Dummies”).

Perhaps this is only half an analogy, as obviously the full-length Broadway version of Phantom was wildly successful. Nonetheless, this is a classic example of the “either-or” paradigm of profiteering at the expense of honest craftsmanship, which unintentionally supports the likelihood that the reverse is also possible. Quality material can make money for its producers, and sometimes “back room” theater companies should exit the building completely. As Russell Lynes, former managing editor for Harper’s, said, “Every journalist has a novel in him, which is an excellent place for it” (Gordon 66).

Gay theater, then, fits into no particular pocket when it comes to excellence and money. Reflect upon the musical Hairspray, which was adapted from the film by John Waters. The story features no visibly gay characters or themes, yet the matriarchal role of Edna Turnblad was made famous on the screen by the late drag queen Divine, and
subsequently on the stage by Harvey Fierstein and Bruce Vilanch. Anthony Pecora, company manager through Farrington Productions, confirms that, “Fierstein’s performance, in fact, gave the show enough star power to earn it eight Tony Awards” (interview). If something as kitsch, camp and pointedly unique as a chunky man in women’s clothing and outlandish make-up can generate enough interest to garner such accolades, the possibility of more in the genre is certainly not unrealistic.

The question thus remains: what, precisely, makes a “gay play?” Or perhaps more directly, what elements can bring gay characters and gay content out of the experimental workshops and into the literal and figurative spotlight? Could it be the same dramatic (or comedic) components that propel any other theatrical venture to the fore? Tony Kushner’s Angels in America — by all accounts a “gay play” that tackles the AIDS epidemic during the Reagan Administration — caused such a controversy that at Catholic University of America, “one gay alumnus was so angered he returned his master’s diploma to the university” (Fisher 90). Yet the two-part epic found itself in performance worldwide and spawned a movie for HBO and an opera for the Glyndebourne Festival, presumably due to its exploration of universal human conundrums more so than its gay themes. James Fisher succinctly summarizes:

Angels explores questions of tolerance and the inevitability of monumental change... This darkly touching, ominously political, and humanly redemptive drama suggests that betrayal and sin can and must be forgiven; Kushner persuasively insists that faith in a brighter future is essential, despite the harrowing specters of fear and doubt undermining the survival of hope. Kushner offers a beatific vision of a new America for the twenty-

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first century as the millennium arrives (92).

What person at any time has not desired a “brighter future” and a reprieve from “harrowing specters of fear and doubt?” It seems – as with any form of art that stands the often-hackneyed “test of time” – successful theater, gay or otherwise, boasts universal themes that transcend generations. In other words, it is not the man of the world, but the human inside that is intriguing. As Alan Sinfield put it, “…it is not necessary for an audience to imagine that queerness is the unique key to the text…” (103).

It is also possible that confrontational posturing might alienate many theatergoers, which is somewhat evident by the genre of gay plays, films and television programs that have become highly visible: most are comedies. Price Video, the leading gay rental and sales store in Las Vegas, NV, reports that of their 161 gay-themed theatrical films, 122 are of a serious, dramatic nature (Dilldine), yet most of those are familiar only to the gay subculture. The Rocky Horror Picture Show, Priscilla Queen of the Desert, Hairspray, Partners, Avenue Q, Pecker, In and Out, La Cage Aux Folles, Will and Grace, Absolutely Fabulous, Adam and Steve, The Birdcage, Transamerica and Victor/Victoria are prime examples of gay-oriented material that has torn through the pink chiffon curtain and emerged as legitimate pop culture, giving credence to the notion that straight audiences do not wish to be reminded of the grim side of gay life, such as AIDS and other political issues: “American theatergoers tend to believe that plays should offer their audience pats on the back, not slaps in the face. Part of the Broadway success of Tony Kushner’s Angels in America can be explained by the fact that ultimately the play does not call for change but forgiveness” (Clum 425).
Gay activists often bemoan the comedic representations of gay men and women as insensitive to gay problems, trivializing gay people and generally using them as a novelty rather than a legitimate character. Straight audiences may, however, find humor a more palatable means of absorbing a culture with which they are largely unfamiliar, as funny material is often more inviting and friendly than heavy-handed drama. This does not necessarily mean that heterosexual consumers are laughing in derision, only that they are laughing. And if the script is well-written and the goods are of high quality, why should anyone care? People chuckle over boy-meets-girl situations, so why should they not find the same absurdity in gay entanglements? Consider the self-deprecating humor from Robert Preston as he sneezes and sniffs his way through a conversation with Julie Andrews in *Victor/Victoria*: “There’s nothing more inconvenient than an old queen with a head cold” (1982). This insignificant aside bears no relevance to the plot whatsoever, yet its contextual placement is hilarious.

If humor is the engineer that drives the train of gay theater it is perhaps coincidental as well as practical, in that the very word “gay” used to connote feelings of happiness and frivolity. We know, of course, that not all gay men are giddily cheerful individuals, yet it could be argued that a lighter handed approach might foster a diplomacy of sorts with straight audiences while reminding their gay counterparts that their world need not consist solely of serious political battles and cultural struggles. As with any artistic endeavor, gay theater asks its patrons to look within and contemplate its position in the grander scheme. It may belong to a different sphere, but once inside, its concave walls appear pretty much the same and its larger context more similar than different.
The Communicative Aspects of Music

It would be difficult to find a society at any time or place in human history that has not embraced musical expression of some sort. From the primitive, atonal Gregorian chant to the grandeur and complexity of a Beethoven sonata to the rockabilly sounds of Elvis Presley, the seemingly nebulous emotional impact of different pitches arranged in various rhythmic orders has functioned as – among other things – a profound mood-altering stimulant. Whether a supplement to the formality of a church service or an inducement to purchase goods and services or an invocation of pride and patriotism or simply for listening pleasure, it is the rare individual that is not in some manner influenced by music. This universality suggests that Donald A. Hodges may be correct when he declares that, “Just as we are born to be linguistic, with the specific language to be learned determined by the culture, so we are born with the means to be responsive to the music of our culture” (42), which implies that human musicality finds itself rooted in biology and genetics to be later played out by human manipulation.

The most primal musical element – rhythm – can be found in the regularity of a heartbeat, the circadian sequences of sleep and digestion, or even the innate reliability of tidal activity, lunar cycles and the earth’s rotation. Hodges notes that “breathing rates…brain waves and hormonal outputs…are examples of more than 100 complex oscillations monitored by the brain” (43), furthering the proposition that patterns anchored by a steady meter are more a product of nature than human organization. It is precisely this inherent manifestation that provides the foundation for a deliberate repetitive order that has become known among music theorists as a “time signature,” of which 2/4, 3/4, 4/4, and 6/8 are most common, particularly in popular music. To illustrate
briefly and thus avoid a superfluous dissection, the first three can be most easily found in
song form(s) such as a march, waltz, and ballad, respectively (6/8 time is an esoteric
variation of 3/4 time, differing more in nuance and feel than in actual count).

It is upon these simple rhythmic structures that melody is laced, “the most
perceptually salient aspect of musical sound” (Lipscomb 161). It is melody that is most
easily recognizable: the consecutive movement from one single pitch to another along a
continuum called a “scale” that people can sing, hum, or whistle. It is a tune. It is a
journey. In typical climax-construction form, it has an introduction and conclusion that
bookend a tonal path that paints a psychological picture in the mind via “mechanical
vibrations that enter the ear canal…” (Lipscomb 161). Musicologists claim that human
perception and active participation must take place in order to make melodic sense of
these sounds, which is a viable hypothesis and an area of study that far transcends the
demands of this exercise. Yet, a certain backdrop of musical basics must be present in
order to provide an adequate summary of their communicative properties.

The linear voyage created by the fusion of melody and rhythm will be implicitly rest
upon a harmonic underbelly, which is defined by Scott Lipscomb and Donald A. Hodges
as “…two or more notes that are played simultaneously…a combination of tones
that…anchor the poles of a perceptual continuum” (106). Commonly called “chords,”
these structural support beams change as the melody travels along its rhythmic route. In
popular music form they are generally simple major, minor and seventh chords that
establish the key in which a song is written and provide a comfortable “home base”
otherwise known as a “tonic.” Pop songs usually begin and end with the tonic chord and
return to it frequently, which releases tension and “sounds pleasant and stable”
(Lipscomb and Hodges 106). The resolution experienced by harmonic consonance could be equated to a literary epilogue or a sexual dénouement: the pressure has been relieved and the listener can feel at rest. It is the contextual contrast between melody and harmony that creates the heat which causes the pot to simmer, boil, erupt and cool. As Charles J. Smith put it while discussing Chopin’s Prelude in C-sharp Minor:

Not until virtually the last harmonic event of the Prelude are all of its narrative threads pulled together. Not until the very last measures is the central figure of D allowed its long-postponed appearance, which transforms and reshapes everything that has led up to it. Not until the last possible moment do we find out what’s really been going on. And then, like that...it’s over (252).

Pop songs do not approach the compositional complexity of Chopin, yet the analogy of the narrative is befitting. A strong musical idea is similar to a novel in that the tonal pattern tells a musical story, the climax to which can only be as good as the tension created prior. Sex without foreplay yields a weaker orgasm. Mountains with no incline contain no pinnacle. Music with no melodic and harmonic disparity is excruciatingly boring, whether intricately constructed or plainly arranged.

The nutshell version of these three fundamentals offers an academic foundation from which to consider how music communicates on both psychological and physiological levels. The standard communication model points to a cultural rubric in which, “Variation of perception due to a person’s past experience is a natural consequence of social acculturation” (Lipscomb 135), which implies that different people will experience the same melodic patterns differently. This may be true in a rhetorical sense; i.e., the
meaning applied to forms, tonality, instrumentation, and arrangement. However, the validity of cultural relativism in every case should be suspect, primarily because it presupposes aesthetics as the only barometer. Beauty may be in the ear of the beholder, but anyone who seriously believes the level of musical craftsmanship between the works of Mozart and Tupac Shakur is simply one of interpretation and background is either ignorant or lying.

What, precisely, is communicated through music? The process might be, as Lipscomb claims, “one of coding and decoding messages between and among the various participants” (137), thus emphasizing the feedback loop that permeates the model. Yet, the neutrality imposed by this view fails to delve into the emotional exchange between composer and audience. It neglects the idea that “The art of tonal design… has a marked effect on pulse, respiration, and external blood pressure” (Mursell 26, 27) and that “…there are properties in the nature of musical tones themselves which ground their expressive power” (Madell 23). Perhaps this is a rather limited view in that it claims pitches do not need to be arranged in any particular order to stimulate a response, which places the most primal aspects of music once again on a psychobiological level rather than in a socio-cultural context. Consider the soothing hum of an air conditioner as opposed to the annoying squeal of fingernails on a chalkboard: it would seem foolish to claim that a reaction to these stimuli is learned through societal conditions and grooming any more than it would be to believe that hunger or sleepiness is induced by the same.

Given this more or less knee-jerk response to sound alone, it logically follows that placing tones and pitches in a particular pattern would heighten the intensity of arousal. Background music in movies is a classic example: horror and suspense films often
employ music that is written in minor key, which – by the simplest definition – occurs when the third, sixth and seventh pitches of the scale are lowered (flatted) by one half step continually throughout the piece. As Hugh M. Miller remarks, “Notice that the C minor scale has three flats...you can construct all the scales, major and minor, by...beginning with any tone and applying the pattern of half and whole steps” (228). This creates an eerie, uncomfortable state that begs for resolution to a major key, which complements the tension on the screen. Both plead for a return to normalcy, functioning as catalysts for one another in a complementary gesture of pressure and relief. Hanns Eisler supports this assertion when he mentions that, “Music must follow visual incidents and illustrate them either by directly imitating them or by using clichés that are associated with the mood and content of the picture” (12).

It should be noted, however, it is not only the composition that can create or supplement mood; instrumentation is crucial to establishing atmosphere in a nod to the aforementioned commentary concerning the effects of tonality. Consider the quirky strains of Prokofiev’s Peter and the Wolf, wherein the quick, darting melody line is carried by the woodwinds (clarinet, flute, piccolo, etc.), higher pitched instruments that are commonly associated with frivolity. Dramas would utilize a more situational approach depending on the scene, such as heavily orchestrated pieces that are dominated by the string section (violins, cellos, etc.). Plays or films that wish to arouse feelings of pride and patriotism might use a John Phillip Sousa march that is dependent upon the confident, aggressive sounds of brass instruments (trumpet, trombone, tuba). Science fiction motifs could easily be represented by synthesized, computerized, and other electronic sounds. Even the absence of music – the pregnant pause or awkward silence –
can have a startling effect. To paraphrase pianist Arthur Schnabel, "It is not so much the notes, but the spaces between the notes...that is where the art resides" (Source unavailable).

In terms of musical theater these decisions are that of the conductor, or musical director. Lehman Engel observes:

...it is the obligation of the musical director to set and maintain the actual tempo of performance. In a musical show he is the inner driving force. Of course he cannot create the force if it is not inherent in the script, direction and performance, but he can add the vital ingredient of lightness and proper tempo and he is the only person who can see that once achieved, it is retained. All of the other directors are dependent on him from the point when they themselves must necessarily become silent contributors (92, 93).

Certainly there is a distinct difference between a musical backdrop for motion pictures and the role of a pit orchestra in musical theater in that the latter accompanies characters as they sing, whereas the former functions as "...cement, which holds together elements that otherwise would oppose each other unrelated" (Eisler 59). Yet there is no question that the conductor makes the ultimate decisions in terms of the particulars such as cuts, revisions, instrumentation, pace and mood.

Herein lies another distinction between the music of film and theater: musicals are written with the specific intent to be produced and performed by many organizations ranging from the original professional company to offshoot touring groups to high school theater departments, whereas movies are essentially a one-time thing. Therefore the music of musical theater begins with the composer and undergoes a new interpretation
with each production, whereas the music of motion pictures is often static, written and/or performed and arranged by the same people. Musicals also contain complete songs that “can add an enormous amount of appeal to a show. A score with a parade of memorable melodies and well-written lyrics can almost beguile the members of an audience into believing that they are unaware of the caliber of the book” (Engel 20), as opposed to the fragmented, supportive nature of movie music.

Film composer Danny Elfman comments:

Film composition is a unique art with unique requirements. It is not the same as writing a symphony – something I’ve never professed to be able to do. Film music is written for no other reason than to accentuate the images on the screen, to underline the emotions of the characters, and hopefully, when we’re lucky, to help breathe life into a two-dimensional medium. A film score is not ‘pure music,’ and should be judged on its dramatic, and/or visually enhancing merits (Composer Tributes).

A perusal of any music store will help validate: how many movie soundtracks are packaged and sold in comparison to original cast recordings from Broadway musicals? It is obvious that the music of theater is more conducive to being consumed as a complete unit, due to the totality of the musical ideas represented in song form. As Swain put it, “They are more than simple decorations or diversions…the music of a good musical play informs the drama that contains it, and the composer is a dramatist in his own right, more important sometimes than the person who writes the words” (1).

This suggests that while music puts forth a subliminal, physiological communicative effect in one arena, it has perhaps even more succinct rhetorical powers taken at face
value. It may seem intellectually gratifying to sift through cryptic analyses, yet the simple notion that music gives people pleasure often gets lost in the desire to cite intricate explanations and elaborate elucidations. It is not necessary to understand how or why music works for the most untrained ear to find enjoyment in the linear motion of a catchy melody or dance rhythm or sweeping, grandiose key change. It is also not necessarily true that genre begets a corresponding emotion. As lyricist Bernie Taupin wrote, “It feels so good to hurt so bad” (Taupin), which makes the poetic implication that style and feeling are not of the same idiomatic persuasion.

Therein lies the crux of the controversy over intent and interpretation. The Romantic theory holds that “…at least sometimes the emotions a piece of music arouses in qualified listeners will be those very emotions that it expresses” (Robinson 249), which hints at a fairly literal cause and effect relationship; i.e., people are inspired by hymns, wooed by ballads and depressed by dirges. Yet Taupin may be ever so correct in that those particular feelings are enjoyable, which reduces the argument to a semantic level. Peter Kivy makes an attempt at the distinction:

…we must separate entirely the claim that music can arouse emotion in us from the claim that music is sometimes sad or angry or fearful: in other words, we must keep apart the claim that music is expressive (of anger, fear, and the like) and the claim that music is arousing in the same sense of moving…a piece of sad music might move us (in part) because it is expressive of sadness, but it does not move us by making us sad (153).

Kivy could be inadvertently echoing the Romantic theory because there is a slight error in his use of language and definition that makes his conclusion only seem antithetical; sad
music indeed provokes a melancholy state, but Kivy fails to recognize that the melancholy state is **pleasurable**. There is also a bit of irony in that a music scholar uses 83 words to inadequately summarize that which a pop lyricist succinctly does in eight.

Given the undeniable feedback loop between music and emotion, it is easy to see how visual elements can be augmented by organized tonal relationships. Rock guitarist and recording engineer Caleb Quaye confesses that, “The industry knows full well that the images and sounds they produce really do have an impact on peoples’ attitudes and behavior” (ix), which corroborates notions of deliberate manipulation that surpasses mere enhancement and suggestion. Consider Josette Perone’s observation that “If a couple is at a candlelit dinner table and not talking as they eat, it is the music that will help form an opinion of the mood. If it were a romantic serenade, it would probably lead you to believe the couple is in love…but if dark and somber music was heard instead, the opposite may be believed” (26).

In this sense, music has such a powerful effect on human perception that it can essentially control what people think. While these connections are perhaps partially rooted in associational relationships (i.e., we consent that music written in a minor key is “spooky”), their correlation to unlearned physiological and psychological responses is easily as certain. Bonnie C. Wade asks, “Does a lullaby really put a child to sleep, or is it something else such as loving attention that lulls the child into secure rest? With most ethnomusicologists, I think the latter: people make music meaningful, whether that meaning is individual or communally agreed upon” (10). Yet, research by Mursell indicates, “the central nervous system is sensitive to extremely fine differences in vibrational frequency in acoustical stimuli” (87). These conflicting views may grow out
of contrasting disciplines more so than “reality,” in that ethnographic studies come from a qualitative perspective, which holds that an individual is “an agent of collective understanding,” (Salwen and Stacks 46) and psychological research is steeped in the quantitative, in which “Explanation intends to be categorically and transcendentally true” (Salwen and Stacks 47).

It would follow that the definitional arguments over the influence of music – as with other forms of stimuli – varies depending upon who is doing the describing. Interestingly enough, however, is the either-or paradigm put forth by assuming that conflicting clarifications cannot coexist. Does sociological research not overlap with psychology? Cannot the clinical commingle with the cultural? There appears to be a definitive split in the academic world between the qualitative and the quantitative – between the “bean counters” and the humanists – that forces comprehension into either camp, yet it seems fairly obvious that music operates on both levels. Explanational differences amount to little more than perspective at best and posturing at worst, both of which, as Dr. Thomas Fuller suggests, can result in “a deluge of words and a drop of sense” (Gordon 115).

Perhaps a more complementary summation comes from McLaughlin:

Wherever we turn, the origins of music remain mysterious because of the dichotomy between the human experience which constitutes the content of the art, and the inhuman, mathematical means of expression. The lack of any overt external association marks off music from other arts…Music contains no simple associative information and the amount of imitative material…which can be used is negligible. Yet most people would still contend that it expresses something which is deep and
valuable and which can be communicated from the composer to the
listener in such a way that it conveys some aspect of the composer’s
subjective thought (15).

Perhaps a key phrase in McLaughlin’s passage is “no simple associative information,”
with an even greater emphasis on the word “simple.” He does not argue that music
possesses nothing from which people can draw meaning, only that the information is not
plainly wrapped, which once again raises questions as to how, precisely, music acts. It
also implies the need for the same existing schemata found in the enthymeme; i.e., we
relate certain tonal patterns with emotive symbols.

This may, however, be where associative musical meaning ends in that – as opposed
to a painting or a sculpture or a spoken word – music cannot represent a tangible reality.
Whereas the classic “cheesy” print of dogs playing poker or the classical statue of
Michelangelo’s David embodies a reference to material items, music is, in and of itself,
the only item. It is monorepresentational in a transient manner in that once the music is
over, any corresponding emotions are over also, as are any physical responses. When the
band is done playing, the dancing ends. When the haunting melody reaches its zenith and
subsequently its final note, the gooseflesh disappears. In this sense, musical form is the
end-all, be-all of the art. Any effects cannot be sustained until it is heard again.

Langer expounds:

Music…is preeminently non-representative even in its classical
productions, its highest attainments. It exhibits pure form not as an
embellishment, but as its very essence; we can take it in its flower –
for instance, German music from Bach to Beethoven – and have
practically nothing but tonal structures before us; no scene, no object, no fact. That is a great aid to our chosen preoccupation with form. There is no obvious, literal content in our way. If the meaning of art belongs to the sensuous percept itself apart from what it ostensibly represents, then such purely artistic meaning should be most accessible through musical works (209).

If Langer is correct, music is essentially organized sound whose artistry is in the placement of those sounds in a particular pattern, the crafting of which is its only illustration. Any appreciation derived from music comes solely from the music, and, by extrapolation, the composer, as it is the composer’s imagination that is on display.

Gavriel Salomon supports Langer’s dissection by claiming, “Any object, movement, gesture, mark, or event can potentially serve in a symbolic capacity, provided it is taken to represent, denote, or express something beyond itself” (29), which furthers the notion that music functions on an autonomous level. It may sadden, anger, please, degrade, tickle, cajole, or inspire, among any number of other descriptive modifiers. The crux, if there were one, would be that its charms are almost paranormal and enchanting, having mesmerized human beings since the Psalms suggested we “make a joyful noise unto the Lord” (Ps. 100). Musical expression transcends all cultures, times and peoples, yet philosophical dispositions toward its nature seem to have evolved little, as has understanding of its delicate temperament.

This is not to recommend that we halt our study of this fascinating, uniquely human enterprise, only that its wiles could be forever reduced should we one day penetrate that which might be better left alone.
CHAPTER 3

CREATIVE METHODS

As opposed to the methodology chapters of more traditional research projects in which scholars detail the type of experiments or surveys or analyses used to ascertain the results of their study, this area functions on sort of an anecdotal level that describes how I arrived at a “conclusion” regarding gay musical comedy. My initial claim, of course, is that theater is a form of rhetorical communication that operates on a persuasive level, which could be shown by devising various techniques that measure audience reactions to music, humor and gay culture, among other related stimuli. While certainly a viable option, such an exercise seems conformist, unoriginal and pedestrian in that it would place this venture in the same vein as most other theses. This is not to suggest that my purpose is to be different; only that writing a musical is more representative of my personality and temperament than a conventional approach. It also seems more fitting to construct an example of that which I am examining, as it allows me the freedom to flex my creative muscles while remaining in compliance with the requirements set forth by those who would grant me a degree.

Therefore, the following text will chronicle the manner in which I write music, lyrics, dialogue, and humor, with the stipulation that such a first-person account makes it difficult to offer an objective version of my own subjective undertaking.
And make no mistake: this is subjective to the point where I may lapse into a colloquial, casual voice at times, simply because I am attempting to put forth that which I do in a style that is authentic and easy to understand. If I am forced to use the neutral, sanitized language that is expected in scholarly writing I will lose the essence and accuracy of that which I am trying to describe. Additionally, this is a communication-based project; it would be irony of the highest order if it were worded in such a way that obscures simple, direct communication. To quote a professor who shall remain nameless, the trick to writing academic discourse is to “take out anything that would make anyone want to read it” (source available but undisclosed), which acts as a confession that much of what is produced in the academy is dreadfully boring, if not awkwardly pretentious. As Aristotle said, “Your language will be appropriate if it...corresponds to its subject. ‘Correspondence to subject’ means that we must neither speak casually about weighty matters, nor solemnly about trivial ones; nor must we add ornamental epithets to commonplace nouns, or the effect will be comic...” (The Rhetoric and Poetics of Aristotle 178).

Philosophical Musings

As I mentioned earlier, the focal point of my musical is the songs, so it is with the songs that I shall begin. As I also mentioned earlier, it is of critical import to state that – while I do have a musical background that includes pedagogic instruction – my knowledge of the piano and of musical composition is completely self-taught. I cannot read sheet music, nor can I write sheet music, which means that when I use the word “write” (or its derivatives) in this context I am referring to inventing melodies, rhythms and chord changes in my head and storing them in memory. I do not put anything on
paper other than the lyrics, and I discard them once I’ve played the song enough times to
“know” it. I am not aware of how many songs I have written, but it must be in the
neighborhood of 100. I do not have all the titles down and therefore often forget that
some of these songs exist, but luckily I have enough friends who are familiar with my
material that one of them will often remind me of a song that I had forgotten about. I am
also fortunate enough to have a good memory in that once reminded I can do the song
without further prompting.

Making up melodies has always come naturally to me. This is not to claim that I was
some sort of prodigious wunderkind, plunking out tunes like Mozart shortly after I
popped out of the womb. Yet I found myself able to improvise on, of all ungodly things,
the accordion, the instrument on which my parents forced me to take lessons at age ten.
Reading the sheet music provided by my instructor was difficult for me, as it seemed odd
that people would try to communicate something as indefinable as a musical idea through
something as unyielding as a printed medium. It made no sense to me then, nor does it
now. I view musical notation as similar to painting by the numbers or following the
recipe on a box of cake mix in that anyone with a modicum of intelligence can decode
dots and lines and press the corresponding buttons on an instrument.

That is not making music. It is a coloring book of sorts that forces its adherents to stay
within the lines, producing a picture that is not their own. Musical ideas begin in the mind
and are carried out through an instrument or the voice, which means, essentially, that the
creation of musical patterns is independent of their execution. Consider two exceptional
contemporary composers, Burt Bacharach and Marvin Hamlisch: neither sings very well,
but both have written intricate, beautiful classic songs that have been performed and
recorded by many excellent singers. Conversely, reflect upon the scores of gifted instrumentalists and vocalists – from classical violinist Itzhak Perlman to country guitarist Roy Clark to the legendary Elvis Presley – who cannot invent melodies but carry out the compositions of others with impeccable skill and technicianship.

Joseph M. Moxley claims that, “No one will ever be able to prescribe the precise steps method. Inspiration, talent, originality – these are elusive qualities, qualities that teachers cannot dispense” (xxi), which is obviously in regard to creative impulses as opposed to the wherewithal to manipulate certain tools; writers, for instance, must have a command of the alphabet and other rudiments such as punctuation and sentence structure before they can be concerned with more artistic aspects such as metaphor and nuance. Songwriters need to understand how chords are formed and their relative relationships to one another before they can compose a complete song. (However, it would be theoretically possible to make up melodies independent of this knowledge, yet it would be difficult to communicate them without at least minimal competence on an instrument.)

I have not ingested any information about songwriting other than an occasional interview with certain pop tunesmiths, which are often so general in nature that they do not discuss the “nuts and bolts” of the game. Therefore I learned through trial-and-error, simply at first by listening to records and mimicking what I heard, then experimenting with creating my own music. To better explain how this process works I must digress momentarily to provide a bit of history regarding my musical background, as it is essential my methodology. I may have matured in terms of technical wherewithal on the piano and in my ability to construct more complex songs, but everything I know now can be directly traced to my childhood.
Pressing the Buttons and Pushing the Envelope: The Early Days

I had two years of private training on the accordion, from age ten through eleven. This was by and large very rudimentary in nature, but it established two critical foundations: exposure to basic music theory and an understanding of how the keyboard is laid out. (The right-hand keys on an accordion are identical to piano keys in terms of chromatic order, albeit considerably fewer octaves. The left-hand buttons are similar to what might be found on a concertina, or “squeeze box,” and bear no resemblance to a piano whatsoever. The “fingering,” or the prescribed technique of navigating the scale, is also radically different, primarily due to the position of the keyboard in relation to the body: An accordionist looks at the keys in an up-and-down order, whereas a pianist sees them sequentially left-to-right.) Thus to this day my right hand piano fingering is designed for the accordion and my left hand fingering completely “made-up.” It is a musical equivalent of the typing method casually known as “hunt-and-peck” that would cause most piano instructors indefatigable anguish upon observation.

At age twelve I began taking drum lessons in public school and, quite simply, fell in love with percussion instruments. I subsequently dropped my accordion instruction to focus solely on drums. Again I was taught simple rhythmic music theory as my teachers introduced me to the instruments in the percussion section, and I learned how to read the sheet music that would be necessary to participate as a member of the concert band and string orchestra. Once I became proficient enough to play a “trap set” (aka as a drum set or drum kit) and joined jazz band, however, the concept of improvisation – playing by ear – became indispensable. For the very first time my instructors told me to ignore the sheet music and to listen to recordings of professional drummers in other jazz bands.
performing the same charts. They encouraged me to mimic what I heard and to develop my own style. I soon wanted to play piano, and cobbled together what little keyboard knowledge I had from the accordion with the “ad-lib” nature of jazz drumming.

In short, it is the combination of these two vastly diverse pedagogical backgrounds that led to my capacity to play piano without instruction or formulaic notation. It is also because I was not “over-instructed,” which is to say my theoretical ignorance forced me to essentially teach myself. This is similar to a self-help version of the popular Suzuki Method of violin training in which it is assumed that since children “can speak and understand such difficult things as language, they must surely have the abilities for performing high arts if these are also developed at a tender age” (Honda 1). It is predicated on the proposition that we learn to talk before we learn to read and write, and therefore can absorb musical ideas without, or at the very least prior to, the application of music theory.

Dr. Even Ruud, Norwegian professor of musicology writes:

Improvisation contains an element of prepared aimlessness…the jazz musician has acquired an arsenal of musical formulas, scales and motives, or rules which determine how such materials may be performed or recreated…(93)…The child is free to express himself after a supposed inborn creative ability tied to his ego…Thus, the musical material is linked to the pre-liminal, to a kind of “real human nature” which is present in spite of “extremely limited possibilities and very little speech.” In other words, this is not only a more original expression, it is thus an expression freed from cultural competence which is released (Kenny 110, 111).
This led to listening and experimentation on the piano in precisely the same manner that I had used with drums, but with two added dimensions: melody and harmony. I realized that with most popular music the voice carries the melody line, which is layered on top of chords that change in harmonic support. At first I tried to copy the chords that I heard on my Elton John records, and once I discovered a repetitive pattern in his music I began to see that I, too, could invent patterns. Some were “ugly.” Some were not. Others were so nondescript as to be the musical equivalent of an eighth grade English paper. However, the one element they all shared was that I was in complete control. I had no authority figure to which I had to report, nor any books or other references to which I was beholden. It was just the piano and I, and the piano knew more than I did.

Roger Sessions observes:

(The composer’s) activities…belong in the sphere of action and not of thought. He is…a doer, not a thinker. He is therefore sharply differentiated in his approach to his art from the critic, historian, or music theorist…The composer’s point of departure, however, is entirely different from – perhaps is even opposed to – that of the scientific scholar or thinker. It is based not on careful analysis, weighing, and comparison of facts, but at best on an insight, born of intense and active experience, into the nature of the materials and the creative processes of his art (Centeno 102, 103).

It could be argued that I learned to devise musical ideas on the piano before I learned to play the piano, in that setting down chord changes and making up melodies requires very little in terms of keyboard technique. Legend has it that Mozart concocted entire symphonies in his head before ever approaching the piano (or harpsichord), and that he
considered the physical organization of these musical patterns on paper to be merely “scribbling and bibbling,” to paraphrase his biographical movie, *Amadeus*.

**How It Happens**

I do not know that there is fixed method for writing songs, but mine follow a definitive pattern based on the AABA form, or a derivative thereof. The two letters represent contrasting yet complementary musical ideas – a verse and a chorus – that are strung together in a certain order and repeated using different lyrics, particularly the verse. Scholar John Covach notes that, “A wide range of variation in rock music can be understood in terms of these basic schemes, and while these schemes do not account for all rock, they offer a solid foundation for the formal analysis of much rock music” (Stein 66). I did not consider the option of writing my own lyrics at the time, and instead enlisted the services of a would-be poet friend who supplied me with some fairly mediocre verse upon which to hang my melodic hat. I would place his words in front of me on top of the piano, read them, and somewhere during the initial reading, one of the lines – or stanzas – would take on a musical form in my mind. (This could be equated to the biology of conception, in that science can ascertain *what* occurs when a sperm and egg fuse, but not precisely *how* they become life.)

I would hum that melody enough times to let it “sink in,” then sing the lyrics my friend had written verbatim to the tune I had just made up. From there I would build lengthier musical ideas around that particular melodic phrase and construct a verse, then a chorus, perhaps a bridge; and within maybe twenty to thirty minutes I would have a complete song. This collaborative effort yielded approximately twenty songs and continued until I reached my sophomore year in high school, at which time I began to
slightly alter my friend’s lyrics to fit different musical ideas. I came to the realization that I could pen my own and experimented with the notion, but had very little luck composing an entire set of lyrics and then placing them into a musical context in the manner I had done with my creative partner.

For me, it was simultaneous. My inspiration for subject matter would stem from a single phrase that I or someone else would utter in causal conversation. The content suggested by these words and the phonetic and rhythmic sounds they made as they “fell trippingly off the tongue” would illuminate the metaphoric light bulb: “Now that would be a great title for a song!” Almost immediately the phrase would take on a melodic structure in my mind without any conscious effort whatsoever, followed by an instinctual notion of lyrical content - not the precise words themselves, but the perspective from which I would approach the subject. For example, I was explaining to a friend why I had such trouble controlling my weight and blamed this challenge on heredity by claiming, “I’ve got fat relatives.” The instant I spoke those words I knew they were going to be a title of a song, and I knew that it would be concerning the propensity my family has for undesired obesity. I “heard” those four words in a melodic pattern in my mind and it became apparent I would build the rest of the song around it.

Boden comments:

Randomness is widely seen as incompatible with creativity. If Mozart had written his dice-music by randomly choosing every note (instead of carefully constructing sets of alternative bars), the composition of minuets would have been…improbable…A scientific understanding of creativity is widely regarded as impossible: creative surprise, it is often said, can never be anticipated by
deterministic science. But unpredictability has positive associations with science, as well as negative ones. For modern science is not wholly determinist: quantum indeterminism lies at its foundations” (234).

Stumbling upon the title “I’ve Got Fat Relatives” was completely random, and the associated melody line to which it is sung could be construed as unpredictable, as it “came out of nowhere” immediately after I became cognizant of the words. Turning that phrase into a four-minute song, however, was deterministic in that I possessed the tangible raw materials to build something of substance. The muses provided me with lyrical clay. I shaped it into a melodic, harmonic, and rhythmic pot.

I have often felt that pop lyrics are largely irrelevant; that they are merely a means of providing syllabic content for the voice to use as a vehicle for melody. Since I was already something of a wise guy and enjoyed writing humorous prose, I considered it only befitting that my song lyrics take on a similar bent and carry slightly more substance than, say, “She loves you, yeah, yeah, yeah.” Political satirist Mark Russell – known for his red, white and blue baby grand piano and musical spoofs – presented a model, as well as Tom Lehrer, the Harvard mathematician who composed and performed brilliantly clever tunes in the 1950s and 1960s. I wanted to write what I at first called “joke songs” – catchy, melodic ditties whose lyrics made fun of just about anything. Since my collaborative efforts dealt with more straightforward topics, I set out to specifically write subject matter that came from a comedic angle. I also recognized that my singing voice was (and is) mediocre at best, compatible with the delivery of humorous lyrics but inadequate for more “legitimate” content.
I should mention that at that time I was playing drums in a professional country-western band and had become painfully familiar with the genre. I knew that the "boom-chick-a-boom" or "boom-chick, boom-chick" beats (known in theoretical circles as 4/4 and 2/4 time, respectfully) inherent to most country songs were conducive to lyrics that told a story, and that the style would be ideal for my purposes. The rhythmic feel of classic country songs such as "Your Cheatin' Heart" or "I Walk the Line" perfectly supported four to eight stanzas of poetry that contained alternating rhyming lines. Therefore, most of my early work has a country flavor that could easily be adapted to (or adopted by) an ensemble composed of traditional country instruments like the fiddle, steel guitar, banjo, and dobro.

While I initially sought laughter as a response to my material, it soon inadvertently took on more serious undertones in terms of social and political commentary. While still in my teens I penned the "Moral Majority March," which is sung from the perspective of its founder, the Reverend Jerry Falwell. Consider these lyrics, which are repeated as the chorus:

```
Drop the bomb and start the war
This is what we've waited for
Hear our battle cry for motherhood and apple pie
Burn the books and kill the gays
And lock the atheists away
Won't you please come build with me
A perfect society
```

In addition to irritating my Republican father to the point where he asked, "Why don't you write straight stuff?" the March may have been my first song that seeks more than mere chuckles. It makes relevant social statements. It takes a persuasive position. It
“...uses uncompromisingly clear language to describe unpleasant facts and people” (Highet 123).

One other persistent element is perspective. Most of my songs are written about other people but are sung in first person, as if these individuals were singing them about themselves. I find this to be the most effective vehicle for satire, as the notion of someone stating, “I do this,” or “I think that” – particularly when the “this” or “that” is an accurate exaggeration – is a key component of mockery and mimicry. When this point of view is presented within the framework of a light-hearted “ditty,” the contrast becomes even more evident. It also lends itself to satirical representations in that it echoes Harris’ previous commentary about “creating a narrator who appears to be as much a hypocrite as the target of his work…” (4).

Lyrics, Music and Laughs: Putting It All Together

Therein lies the connection between lyrics and text in regard to musical theater: the words to the songs will ideally operate as dialogue in that they move the story forward, which obviously requires the same type of self-disclosure and perspective. Dialogue itself, however, seems to be yet a creature of another sort. Hatcher claims that, “Any playwright will tell you it’s difficult to teach the talent of dialogue writing; you either have an ‘ear’ for dialogue or you don’t” (133). I admittedly do not possess the “feel” for dialogue that I do songs or prose, perhaps because I have considerably less experience with its creation (or worse yet, because I have a lousy ear). But the problem is less about being to come up with lines and banter as it is using dialogue as a means of promoting action, which is of paramount importance in carrying a script. It is not enough to offer merely an exchange of clever repartee. The conflict between characters that is known as

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“plot” is moved by the notion that “they must compel the audience’s attention” (Hatcher 22).

_Heavens to Betsy, Heels to Jesus_ is slightly different than most musicals in that the characters and situations are written around existing songs in much the same manner as _Mamma Mia_. Therefore I must undertake the daunting task of creating circumstances that accommodate the lyrics, which is, very simply, not easy. The whole idea of writing this musical in the first place came from the long-held opinion that many of my songs would go well in such a format. I did not write them with this in mind, however; they were written as separate entities over the course of my life, some as early as 1980 and others as recently as 2006. I have always thought that they would work quite well in the context of a play, primarily because they are of the same comedic genre, are sung in first person, and generally have something to do with homosexuality. There is enough of a relationship between them to work as cohesive glue.

This is but one reason why my dialogue is not on the level that I feel it ought. I find myself setting up the song rather than letting it act as script, which forgoes the emphasis that should be placed on character development and plot. Advice from a professional playwright contributed further to my insecurities about coming up with a draft that is more than merely staging for the songs until I stumbled upon this piece of wisdom from screenwriter Stephan Elliott, who wrote the mildly successful _Priscilla, Queen of the Desert_:

> Just about every day people tell me of the great manuscript they are about to write, but it’s just not quite ready yet; the government grant hasn’t come through; the timing just isn’t right at the moment. The lesson I have learned
is simple. If you have a script floating around in your head – just write the thing. You might be in for a pleasant surprise (vii, viii).

So write I did. I have a little experience composing dialogue from my high school days when a friend and I used to do our own homegrown sketch comedy, so it is from that which I drew my knowledge. I had also done some acting in school, which obviously requires reading a script or two. Very simply, I sort of created my own style in much the same way that I began writing songs: I just looked at how others do it and pressed forward, trying to imagine scenarios that would be most conducive to the linear presentation of these songs as supplements to a play; or rather, the play as contextual support for the songs.

The humorous elements involved were not as difficult for me, as I write a lot of comedic prose, much of it satirical in nature. This, of course, requires a rather cynical view of human behavior, which I admittedly possess. It also requires – perhaps not theoretically but certainly in practice – a propensity to be funny in “real life.” Much of my daily dealings are loaded with innuendo and sarcasm, perhaps because I grew up around humor and had parents who appreciated laughter. At this point in life I cannot resist the urge to offer a good one-liner or a facetious comment, often with little regard for the public setting. Needless to say, this has put me in positions where strangers might think I am a bit obnoxious, although I am not so socially unaware as to be disruptive and nasty. Yet, given the choice between a good zinger and polite deference I will go with the zinger every time. As Steve Allen put it, “The raw material of humor is tragedy...It is therefore absurd to assume that there can be such a thing as subject matter totally off-limits to the humorist or comedian” (Gordon 42).
Since I wrote *Heavens to Betsy, Heels to Jesus* in a higgledy-piggledy, piecemeal fashion, it is only fitting that the dialogue would follow suit. Much of the humor between characters is more representative of things I would say in a given situation rather than indicative of the personality of the character. This is relatively easy, as it is almost like writing prose that substitutes the author’s voice with that of a fictional persona. As an example, consider the protagonists in three novels by science fiction writer Robert Heinlein: there is little difference between Jubal Harshaw from *Stranger in a Strange Land*, Lazarus Long from *Time Enough For Love*, or Johann Sebastian Bach Smith from *I Will Fear No Evil*. These leading characters speak in the same tone, possess an unusually high level of intelligence and philosophical sophistication, and seem to view human (or extraterrestrial) behavior from the same perspective. They are, essentially, Heinlein himself.

In this sense – though modeled after real people – the characters in my play speak in my voice, at least in terms of their humorous temperaments and use of innuendo. Typical of this is the exchange between Pastor Jehovah, the evangelical minister who shows up at the door of protagonist Ricky Johnson:

RICKY: Pastor Jehovah? Are you sure you’re not a Jehovah’s Witness?

PASTOR JEHOVAH: Yes, I’m sure. This is a real religion.

The implication is obviously an insult to the Jehovah’s Witnesses in that it claims – through insinuation – that theirs is a bogus belief system. More importantly, it is representative of how I behave in “real life” when it comes to smart-ass comments. Rarely do I hurl blatant insults and direct invective, as they merely state an opinion, which can be done by anybody. I prefer to couch editorial commentary in a form that
requires people to fill in the blank and arrive at the desired conclusion on their own.

Classical rhetoricians might claim otherwise, but I feel this suggestive nuance is similar
to the enthymeme in that it acts in a persuasive manner without hammering home the
notion.

Much of this echoes the style of writers and cartoonists such as the probably now-
deceased Dave Berg and Don Martin from *Mad Magazine*, which I consumed
voraciously as a child. The type of humor created by these men was not only bitingly
satirical; it was presented in a manner that relied upon allusion and innuendo. Rarely did I
watch or read comedy that was literal, such as slapstick and pantomime. I enjoyed
wordplay, suggestion, and overtone. John D. MacDonald claims:

> First, more than anything else, I believe that writers must be readers. The
> only students who belong in advanced undergraduate or graduate creative
courses are those who have been compulsive and omnivorous readers all
> their lives, and who have thereby acquired some sense of the excruciating
> complexity of the history and the existence of humanity (83).

In other words, writers draw upon existing representations and, ideally, impose their own
ideas and styles in the process. They must be culturally attuned in order to make
analogous references. They should be aware of that stamp of authenticity in others and
themselves known as “voice.” And they need to know how to manipulate language in
order for this to be accomplished. As Goethe reminds us, “The most original
authors...are not so because they advance what is new, but because they put what they
have to say as if it had never been said before” (Gordon 74). This is not to suggest that
musical satire is a novel idea, only that my play should ideally represent my unique take on certain segments of society, presented in a manner that bears my stylistic fingerprints.

Since staging this work is beyond the scope of my knowledge and wherewithal, I am offering written criticism and feedback from four industry professionals in lieu of a live performance. As noted in my introduction, I would assuredly want to be included as a consultant of sorts should someone at some time decide to produce the play. I have a distinct vision for the characters and their delivery of the songs, as well as certain subtleties that are difficult to accurately describe in the stage direction. Indeed, much of what happens en route to a final production occurs during rehearsals; impromptu ideas, additions, deletions, and the like. I feel I need to be involved, particularly with a first launch. Usually musicals are collaborative effort between a composer and scriptwriter that are interpreted and presented by others, but this has “me” slathered all over it. I cannot stand back and not have creative input. If this thing were to stink, I take full responsibility. If it were a success, I want the glory. In fact, although it is unusual for playwrights to appear in their own productions, I would like to play the character of Father Puhl.

Meet the Critics

The final chapter will heavily reference the articles in the Appendix; the musings of Ronald Kenney, Robert Burgan, James Grifall, and Marc Breindel regarding the quality of the play as read, its suitability for production, possible venues and marketing ideas, and an overall take on its viability as something other than a pedagogic exercise. While they come from varying backgrounds ranging from higher education to hands-on experience to pop culture media to the executive level, each of these men is highly
qualified to render an expert opinion as is documented by the forthcoming biographical information. These diverse credentials – coupled with generational differences – may result in equally diverse perspectives, which seems like an ideal means of identifying strengths, weaknesses, or any number of randomly applicable footnotes.

To provide a brief backdrop: Ronald Kenney is a retired Director of Theater and teacher from Webster Groves High School in St. Louis, Missouri. Sporting a B.A from UN-Kearney, an M.A. from UN-Lincoln and some post-graduate work at Ohio State University, Mr. Kenney has directed three musicals, six dramas, and is the recipient of a “Teacher of the Year Award” and an “Outstanding Theater Teacher” award. Some of his students and family members have gone into the business as actors, singers and dancers, most notably a nephew who appeared alongside Hugh Panaro on Broadway in his title role of the failed Elton John musical Lestat.

Marc Breindel is employed as a film critic for the website Gay.com/PlanetOut and has done production work for National Public Radio in Las Vegas and San Francisco. The former editor of the Berkeley Voice newspaper, Mr. Breindel holds a B.A. in Rhetoric from UC-Berkeley and an M.A in Radio/Television/Film Studies from the University of Texas at Austin. Additionally, he provided movie reviews and pop culture commentary for Q Radio, the now-defunct gay talk show which I used to host.

Robert Burgan wears the title of Professor Emeritus, retired from the Department of Theater at the University of Nevada, Las Vegas. Holding a B.A. in English from Nevada Southern University (UNLV) and an M.F.A in theater from Ohio University, Mr. Burgan’s academic credentials span thirty years, from Teaching Assistant to Department Graduate Coordinator to various committee chairs to Associate Professor to studies
abroad. He has directed 31 plays, produced five, written a one-act play, published five articles on myriad related topics, and provided extensive community service consultation to local and regional theater troupes.

James Grifall has been an entertainment professional for over 25 years with a history that began as a young actor in New York in the 1970s. Mr. Grifall’s career soon led him into the entertainment and special events industry, with a primary emphasis on corporate conventions. He has worked in entertainment management in Reno, Lake Tahoe and Las Vegas and as a result has come in contact with many famous show business legends. Currently the Director of Entertainment at a major Las Vegas resort, Mr. Grifall deals with all levels of talent and designs lavish events for high-end convention clients. He has also been known to take frequent and far-flung vacations to exotic locales, some of which have been detailed via his own pen as travel features in Envy Man Magazine, an upscale coffee table publication to which I contribute.

I am not offering any sort of primer to these people lest such prior knowledge taint their assessment. I asked them to merely read the script, listen to the songs, and write their own critique in a free style narrative that most accurately reflects their personalities, opinions and temperaments. I should note that they are my friends, which could result in a biased review lest they do not wish to hurt my feelings. I have stressed the importance of neutrality and objectivity wherein they look at the work only, with no regard to its creator; however, most critical coverage of creative ventures inevitably links the artist to the art, so I subsequently expect to see some correlation drawn between the play and my personal characteristics. This may not lead to an overly flattering review nearly so much as anticipated commentary, yet it is important to acknowledge my personal relationship
to these men. I should also note that they do no know one another and will not have any interpersonal correspondence concerning this effort.

The chapter itself is a conclusion of sorts that ties together the research, the play, and the commentary by looking at how these components contribute to the corpus of knowledge in the field of human communication. I will once again attempt to step outside of myself and focus on the available information as a third party rather than a defensive hack or a glorified artist, as my motivation is not to bask in the luxury of acclaim or suffer in the dungeon of rejection. I will also, however, offer a closing segment that contains personal commentary as a response to the critiques and to underscore one of my secondary claims: that message production and authorial intent generally have a specific goal and come from an unambiguous perspective. These last few pages are slightly less formal and may at times even mimic the sarcastic nuance and comedic feel of the play in an effort to illustrate a slightly off-kilter view of message and meaning while having a little fun.

One final word: Aristotle refers to “The Discovery,” which he defines as “a change from ignorance to knowledge” (Poetics 11.30). This model of a transfer of information implies a stable, immutable message that runs counter to the arbitrary application of meaning often accepted in communication research. Conversely, Traudt defines “mass communication” as “the process by which individual audience members engage and give meaning to media contents” (6), which places all the rhetorical eggs in the basket of the receiver. While intent versus interpretation is indeed a controversial issue in academia, I must state clearly that everything I produce is of a specific substance and has a particular purpose. I understand that different people might perceive my lyrics or melodies or
dialogue or observations differently from each other as well as differently than I desire, but I insist that this does not alter their meaning. If I urge the public to donate blood, after all, I am not asking them to stop smoking.

Sessions’ commentary that, “The artist’s effort, using the raw and undisciplined materials with which is inner nature provides him, to endow them with a meaning which they do not of themselves possess – to transcend them by giving them artistic form” (Centeno 133, 134) suggests that passions, concepts, proposals, or any impulse that the artist feels or wishes to represent will be placed in a specific framework of the artist’s choosing. It is deliberate. While I cannot speak for others, my work is premeditated, calculated and conscious. It takes on a tangible form and points in a precise direction. If consumers glean something from my material other than what I intend, it is either due to my expressive incompetence or their desire to impose meaning that is simply not there.

Or, very possibly, they just did not get the joke.
CHAPTER 4

HEAVENS TO BETSY, HEELS TO JESUS
Book, Music and Lyrics by Tom Moilanen

THE CHARACTERS: RICKY JOHNSON, a 21-year-old gay man
JOE SMITH, a 21-year-old straight man
HARLEY QUEEN, a flamboyantly gay 45 y/o divorced father of six
PAULA MASON, a 62-year-old transsexual prostitute
FATHER PUHL, a reformed pedophilic catholic priest
DR. JAMESON, a shyster psychologist with an obviously bad toupee
PETE THE PUBERTY PLUMBER, a practicing pedophile
PASTOR JEHOVAH, a money-grubbing conservative evangelical

CHORUS

THE SONGS: The Cut That Doesn’t Heal/Pete the Puberty Plumber
I’ve Got Fat Relatives
Moral Majority March
Teeny Bopper Weenie
King For a Day, Queen For a Lifetime
Hershey Highway Is a One-Way Street
Where There’s Snow There’s Dough
Timmy Raun, the Human Bong
Sauna Takin’ Queers
Alcoholic Homosexual Pedophile
Everyone’s Fucked Up In the Head But Me
Ned, the Gay Indian Mormon From Utah (That I Met on the Internet)
If You’re Gonna Stick It In, You Better Stick It Out
Homosexual Step-Incest Affair
I’ll Never Have To Jack the Dog Again

Notes From the Playwright: the character of RICKY should be exceedingly cute and appear far younger than his twenty-one years. HARLEY must be well over-weight and sport unusually developed male breasts. FATHER PUHL ought to play piano, and PAULA should wear excessively heavy make-up, a long, reddish/auburn wig, 1950s-style women’s clothing, and be portrayed by a male actor. The songs are to be done by a small pop/rock combo consisting of drums, keyboards, guitar, and bass, with optional
instrumentation such as miscellaneous percussion instruments and piano. There is no score, as I insist the musicians should be competent enough to play this stuff by ear. All music is required to be performed live, and any recorded accompaniment will result in the director’s imminent demise. Should this stipulation be ignored following my death I will arrive from the great beyond and return with said director.

ACT ONE

Scene One

(Lights up on a busy street scene indicating the Las Vegas Strip. RICKY and JOE enter center stage toting luggage and taking in the view. They are vibrant, curious and excited. People stroll about. The mood is energetic and noisy, complemented by the rhythmic vamping of the chord changes behind “The Cut That Doesn’t Heal.” The crowd contains FATHER PUHL and PAULA MASON. They browse the area with the rest of the CHORUS.)

RICKY: (looking around, amazed) I can’t believe it! We’re here! We’re in Las Vegas!

JOE: Dude, this is too cool!

RICKY: It’s so open! So gay! Look at the lights, the pictures. My God, Chippendales!

JOE: Showgirls!

RICKY: Guys with hot abs!

JOE: Chicks with big boobs!

RICKY and JOE: (facing each other, high-fiving) Beer! Day and night, beer!

JOE: (grabs a flyer from the street) Erotic dancing girls 24/7 direct to YOU!

RICKY: (laughing) You mean you.

JOE: Yeah, yeah, direct to ME!

(JOE grabs another flyer.)

JOE: And here’s some for YOU: Hunky studs and escorts.
RICKY: Exotic male dancers!

JOE: Massages by (pauses for dramatic effect, teasing RICKY)...Troy!

(RICKY and JOE sit down on their suitcases.)

RICKY: Man...we’re not in Kansas anymore, Toto.

JOE: Or even Iowa!

RICKY: I didn’t hear you. Eye-Oh-What?

JOE: Eye-Oh-Where?

RICKY: (gloriously) Heavens to Betsy!

JOE: (teasing yet serious) How many times do I need to tell you to not say that? It is so dorky and so hick. Anything else is great — “Holy shit” is tried and true. Why don’t ya go with that? Or even “unfuckingbelievable.” That’s got balls. But not “Heavens to Betsy.” We might be from the sticks but Christ, don’t broadcast it.

RICKY: Yes, Mother Josephine. But...it’s so exciting! You know what this calls for, don’t you?

JOE: Do I ever!

RICKY and JOE: BEER!

RICKY: (pointing) Over there...two bucks a beer!

JOE: And you can drink it walking down the street!

RICKY: Let’s get one.

(JOE and RICKY cross to the beer booth. They buy their beer and return to center stage.)

RICKY: (sitting down on suitcase) We gotta find a place to stay.

JOE: (produces newspaper from his back pocket) I’m one step ahead of you. See this? (pointing at paper) Rent by the week, no deposit. Furnished!

RICKY: We’re there!

JOE: We are both gonna get so laid. Everybody knows Vegas chicks are easy.

RICKY: I bet they are.
JOE: Vegas guys must be easy too.

RICKY: You’d think.

JOE: You can finally do whatever you want, no worries, no hiding.

RICKY: Yeah, it’s awesome. There’s gotta be a lot of great guys here too. Ones that want a husband. The not-so-easy ones.

JOE: (chuckling) Oh yeah, that’s right…the “husband.”

RICKY: Laugh now. Go ahead, just laugh.

JOE: Hey, I’m behind you all the way.

RICKY: You know I’m not into that.

JOE: I’m joking, I’m joking.

RICKY: I thought you were Joe Smith.

JOE: Serious Ricky, some guy’s gonna want you to be Johnny Bottom. You’ll get the “Big A.”

RICKY: You ARE my mother, aren’t you.

(FATHER PUHL crosses in front of them in full priest regalia.)

JOE: (acknowledging FATHER PUHL) No, but he could be your father.

FATHER PUHL: (nodding as he passes) Gentlemen.

(FATHER PUHL melts back into the crowd.)

RICKY: Man, I haven’t been to church in forever. That might be a good place to meet decent guys.

JOE: Yeah. Unfortunately you’re too old for any of ‘em.

(PAULA approaches behind them. RICKY stands and turns. PAULA bumps into him. She is dressed like a frumpy old woman with heavily caked-on make-up. She walks like a man and holds her purse like a briefcase. She is obviously a man in a wig and a dress.)

PAULA: (in a very deep male voice) Hey numb nuts! Watch where you’re (catches herself in “male mode” and changes her voice to upper register)...going.

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RICKY: Excuse me, uh... Ma'am?

PAULA: *(attempting femininity)* You boys looking to party?

JOE: You know it!

PAULA: A hundred bucks each or both for one-fifty.

RICKY: A hundred bucks?

JOE: Both for one-fifty?

*(RICKY and JOE look at each other as the stark revelation hits them.)*

RICKY: You're a... a...

PAULA: Working girl. *(grabs her crotch through her dress)* With an extra added attraction for your total satisfaction. Going once, cumming twice... GONE!

*(PAULA stomps off into the crowd.)*

JOE: There's one for you.

RICKY: There's not enough beer in the world.

JOE: Dude, we're gonna have to find jobs if we're gonna afford this party scene.

RICKY: Yeah but not right away. I want to see the city first.

JOE: It'll be more fun with a few bucks in our pocket.

RICKY: I'm going to meet my dream boyfriend here, I just know it. He won't care about money. Love will see us through.

JOE: Reality check all the way around. First of all, where you gonna look?

RICKY: There's gotta be places. Look, those racks! *(points at free publications)* Right here!

*(RICKY grabs a magazine and starts paging through it.)*

JOE: *(reading)* "A Gay Guide to Vegas: Things to See and People to Do."

RICKY: There's a lot of normal stuff here, The Valley of Fire... the Grand Canyon.
JOE: They’re giving tours of your ass?

RICKY: You’re so wrong. It’s as tight as a Jewish Banker.

JOE: Old Matzo Balls himself over here.

RICKY: I’m serious. I’m not into that butt business.

JOE: Isn’t that, like, important?

RICKY: Not to me. Not every gay guy wants to be a wide receiver, ya know.

JOE: Yes they do.

RICKY: *(reading intently)* Hey, look here. Read this.

*(Cue Music. JOE and RICKY huddle around the magazine and begin “reading” while singing “The Cut That Doesn’t Heal.”)*

**The Cut That Doesn’t Heal/Pete the Puberty Plumber**

*Tracks One and Two – Key of G*

JOE: While sitting at home watching the news one day
About the dangers known to Man
Famine, war, poverty, floods and plagues
From Moscow to Iran

RICKY: An earthquake here and a tornado there
And nuclear armament deals
But the greatest threat they neglected to name
Was the cut that doesn’t heal

JOE: It’s situated just south of town
Where the two roads meet at the “Y”
It’s guarded by a little man in a boat
And it stands three stories high

RICKY: If you happen to be around the neighborhood
And you thought about copping a feel
Just beware the lava that erupts once a month
Out of the cut that doesn’t heal

JOE and RICKY: Its strange seductive power
Can usually devour
Any man that’s in the way
And the odor there
Hanging in the air
Smells like the fresh catch of the day

JOE: Now the safest time for you to see the cut
Is when the gates are fully closed

RICKY: When the summer sun has dried them up
And a douche law’s been imposed

JOE: But as you’re cruising by you’d better stay alert
Don’t be dozing off at the wheel

RICKY: ‘Cuz you certainly don’t want to drive anything
Into the cut that doesn’t heal

(Music keeps vamping. Same beat, same key. FATHER PUHL emerges from the crowd and joins RICKY and JOE center stage.)

FATHER PUHL: (over the music) You know, boys, there’s a lot of talented famous people who live here too.

RICKY and JOE: We know, yeah, Wayne Newton...Lance Burton...Rip Taylor.

FATHER PUHL: I said “talented.”

RICKY and JOE: Like who? Yeah, tell us!

(FATHER PUHL begins singing as the music segues into “Pete the Puberty Plumber.”)

FATHER PUHL: While looking back on your early childhood
   The days of mom and dad
   Of Sunday school picnics and hide and go seek
   The innocence you had

   But there’s a time in life when you’re packed with hormones
   The glands just go to town
   And soon you’ll be adorin’
   The region you’re explorin’
   When this guy comes around

(Chorus)
   He’s Pete, the puberty plumber
   And he’s working overtime
   With little boys around the world
   To get their pipes in line
   He puts in countless hours
He’s there for one and all  
He’s Pete the puberty plumber  
He’s the guy you need to call

(PAULA emerges from the crowd and joins FATHER PUHL.)

PAULA: Now often times an active youngster  
Is easily annoyed  
‘Cuz Cub Scout meetings and little league proceedings  
Aren’t enough to fill the void

FATHER PUHL: But now the time is ripe for a brand new hobby  
Before you reach your teens

PAULA: “Sensational!” you reckoned

FATHER PUHL: With each ecstatic second

TOGETHER: After Pete has made the scene

(FATHER PUHL and PAULA sing the chorus together.)

He’s Pete the puberty plumber  
And he’s working overtime  
With little boys around the world  
To get their pipes in line  
He puts in countless hours  
He’s there for one and all  
He’s Pete the puberty plumber  
He’s the guy you need to call

FATHER PUHL: When all the kids across the country  
Have seen what Pete can do

PAULA: Their folks will hit the ceiling  
‘Cuz he’s openly revealing  
A whole new avenue

FATHER PUHL: And for the daring souls who felt the calling (gestures at himself)  
To see what they could take

TOGETHER: From miles around are coming  
For heavy duty plumbing  
When Pete whips out his snake
(RICKY, JOE, FATHER PUHL and PAULA sing the chorus together. They are joined by the entire chorus of passersby in a big chorus line-type finale.)

ENSEMBLE: He’s Pete, the puberty plumber  
And he’s working overtime  
With little boys around the world  
To get their pipes in line  
He puts in countless hours  
And he’s there for one and all  
He’s Pete, the puberty plumber  
He’s the guy you need to  
The guy you have to  
The guy you just gotta call

(MUSIC immediately cues back to intro to “The Cut That Doesn’t Heal.” RICKY steps forward in front of everyone, drops to his knees ala Al Jolson and delivers the closing line alone.)

RICKY: ‘Cuz I certainly don’t want to drive anything  
Into the cut that doesn’t heal

(ENSEMBLE joins RICKY on the least note. The song ends in full harmony with full lights up and the cast and orchestra firing on all cylinders.)

End of Scene

Scene Two

(SETTING: RICKY and JOE’S sparsely furnished one-bedroom studio apartment. A small desk and two chairs complement a twin bed. A sleeping bag serves as another bed. There is an entrance to a side room, presumably the bathroom. Lights up on RICKY unpacking his suitcase, arranging the room.)

JOE: (yelling from the bathroom) Incoming!

RICKY: Not another one.

JOE: (singing the traditional Mexican hat dance and dancing as he emerges from the bathroom) La cucaracha, La cucaracha…boopy doopy doopy doo.

RICKY: They’re hideous. And they’re everywhere.

JOE: (flippantly) So are the cockroaches.
RICKY: I hate them. I can’t sleep knowing they’re in here.

JOE: (antagonizing RICKY) I heard there are (pauses for dramatic effect – in RICKY’S face) SCORPIONS!

(RICKY shrieks and falls back on the bed. JOE jumps on top of RICKY and straddles him, pinning him to the mattress.)

JOE: Nasty, mean scorpions with poisonous stingers. And tarantulas. Big, hairy tarantulas crawling all over you, chewing your flesh til it falls off, leaving your bones to be eaten by maggots!

RICKY: (struggling) Goddamnit!

JOE: (getting up off of RICKY. Sits on the bed) You can be such a girl sometimes. Gawd. Just when I start thinking you fruitcups might be a little bit normal you gotta go and get all pansy on me.

RICKY: You’re going to have to sleep on the floor til they get the exterminator out here. I don’t care if I lost the coin toss. I get the bed.

JOE: A deal’s a deal.


JOE: (standing up) Not a chance.

RICKY: You could be nice to me considering this is our first night.

JOE: We need groceries.

RICKY: Quit ignoring the problem.

JOE: I don’t know if you’ve noticed, but the kitchen looks like Mother Hubbard’s cupboard.

RICKY: What kitchen? It’s a fridge and a sink.

JOE: Whatever it is, it’s dry as a bone. You ought to know all about that.

RICKY: Well maybe we should take my bone and your...your...whatever it is you got and go get some food. I saw a Wendy’s on the corner.

JOE: I said groceries. Like when you go to the store and get lots of food that you bring home and cook?
RICKY: Can’t we wait til tomorrow? I’m pooped. Let’s just get a burger.

JOE: I’m not eating that shit. It makes you fat.

RICKY: You’re not fat.

JOE: I want to keep it that way.

RICKY: Since when have you given a shit? One day in Vegas and all of a sudden you’re Mister Health?

JOE: I don’t want to end up like my cousin. Or my uncle.

RICKY: I don’t get it. Straight guys aren’t supposed to care if they got a big ol’ gut. I’m the one who should be whining.

JOE: Or my aunt.

(Cue music. JOE performs “I’ve Got Fat Relatives.”)

I’ve Got Fat Relatives
Track Three – Key of C

JOE: See her toss and turn about
At five foot three and somewhat stout
With visions of a pot roast in her eyes
She attacks the freezer door
Insisting that I eat some more
I’ve got fat relatives

The grocer can’t forget the time
She spent four days in the checkout line
Picking up some goodies for a snack
And when she’s done with that I’m sure
She’s eyeing up the furniture
I’ve got fat relatives

(Bridge)
As she hits the bathroom scale
The Oreos and ginger ale
She hides beneath the sink begin to shake
If she seems to misbehave
Just take away her microwave
And let her take the cake

She’s never really been the same
Since she spotted Jack LaLanne
Doing calisthenics on the tube
As she jogged around the block
The asphalt couldn’t take the shock
I’ve got fat relatives

RICKY: Geez. I didn’t know. Sorry.

JOE: *(sits on bed)* Not nearly as sorry as I am.

RICKY: Joe, tell me something.

JOE: Yes?

RICKY: *(standing)* You just sang a song. You don’t sing. I sang a song when we first got here, and I don’t really sing either, although I’m better than you. And those weird people we met – the priest and the hooker? They sang too. Please tell me this isn’t a musical.

JOE: *(standing, speaks to RICKY slowly, like he’s divulging an intimate secret)* Ricky... *(whispers)*... it’s a musical.

RICKY: Heavens to Betsy!

JOE: *(sticks his finger in RICKY’S face, cutting him off)* Ahhh!

RICKY: Shit. I mean, “Oh, shit!”

JOE: *(face to face with RICKY)* Why “Oh, shit?”

RICKY: Because you told me no more “Heavens to Betsy” about five hours ago!

JOE: No, no, no! What’s wrong with musicals?

RICKY: Everybody has a musical. Everyone in the whole world has a fucking musical. Musicals suck. Please. People just start singing when they should be talking? What a lame-ass excuse for writing shitty dialogue.

JOE: *(referencing the audience)* They’ll never notice.

*(RICKY and JOE pause. They turn their heads and look directly at the audience.)*

RICKY: *(to JOE)* Look at them. They’re filing their nails.

JOE: *(puts his hand above his eyes and squints at the crowd)* That one old queen in the second row is asleep.
RICKY: We could get away with anything.

JOE: We really could.

RICKY: Know what would be hilarious?

JOE: An unexpected visitor?

RICKY: That’s exactly what I was thinking. Who do you have in mind?

JOE: We’ve already got a priest. How about a regular minister? You guys really hate them, especially the super conservative Republican ministers.

RICKY: We do NOT!

JOE: Do so!

RICKY: Well, maybe a little. But they hate us!

JOE: Mutual hate. Makes the world go ‘round, don’t it?

(There is a knock at the door. RICKY looks through the peephole.)

RICKY: Heavens to...holy shit, look. I think it’s a Mormon.

JOE: (nudges RICKY out of the way) Let me see. (Peers through peep hole) Nah, that’s not a Mormon. Too old, no bicycle, and he looks only partially insane.

RICKY: Maybe it’s a Muslim.

JOE: I said partially.

(JOE opens the door. PASTOR JEHOVAH enters. He is wearing a dark blue suit and tie and carrying a Bible in one hand and a small American flag in the other.)

PASTOR JEHOVAH: Hello, gentlemen. I’m Pastor Jehovah from the “Church Of God Thinks Just Like Me.” May I have a moment of your time?

RICKY: Pastor Jehovah? Are you sure you’re not a Jehovah’s Witness?

PASTOR JEHOVAH: Yes I’m sure. This is a real religion.

RICKY: (gestures to the table) Sit down if you want.

JOE: We’d offer you something to drink but we just moved in and we don’t have any groceries. (looks sternly at RICKY)
PASTOR JEHOVAH: (sits, placing his Bible and flag on the table) The Lord will provide if you have enough faith.

JOE: The store will provide if you have enough money.

PASTOR JEHOVAH: Our nation is facing some trying times.

RICKY: So what do you want from us?

PASTOR JEHOVAH: First of all, I need you to agree with me. Then I need you to give me cash so I can do the Lord’s work.

JOE: Can’t the Lord give you cash? I would think he can make as much of it as he wants.

PASTOR JEHOVAH. You don’t understand. This country is going straight to Hell if we don’t change our evil ways.

(Cue music. RICKY and JOE sit on the bed. PASTOR JEHOVAH stands and performs “Moral Majority March.”)

Moral Majority March
Track Four – Key of G

PASTOR JEHOVAH: We’ve got to do something about all the people
Living in the U.S. of A.
Our methods can’t be timid
We’ve gotta put a limit
On what they can do and say
Abortionists are plotting
The moral structure’s rotting
The liberals are solely to blame
We’re gonna take the nation and turn it around
So everybody thinks the same

(Chorus)
Drop the bomb and start the war
This is what we’ve waited for
Hear our battle cry
For motherhood and apple pie
Burn the books and kill the gays
And lock the atheists away
Won’t you please come build with me
A perfect society

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(Bridge)
We’ll tell you what to do
And who to do it to
We’ll teach you what is right and wrong
We’ll show you how to be
And more importantly
We’ll tell you where to send your money

It’s been for us behooving
And things have been improving
Now that we’re in total control
Don’t you try to fight us
Or morally indict us
We’ve got the right to save your soul

Now anyone who’s thinkin’
Of emulatin’ Lincoln
And bringing freedom out of the woods
Our power’s sent divinely, get out of our way
Hitler never had it so good

(REPEAT Chorus dancing around the room waving Bible and flag.)

RICKY: Man, I never knew. Good thing you’re here to fix everything.

PASTOR JEHOVAH: Would you like to give me cash? Or a check?

JOE: (standing) How about we give you the opportunity to see how the door works from the inside?

(JOE escorts PASTOR JEHOVAH to the door and out of the apartment. RICKY stands and crosses to JOE.)

RICKY: (in JOE’S face) That was kind of rude.

JOE: Yeah, people should know better than to just barge in and start talking about God.

RICKY: No, I meant it was rude the way you gave him the boot.

JOE: Hello! (pantomimes sign language) Earth to Helen Keller! Didn’t you hear him? “Kill the gays?” I’d say that’s as rude as you can get.

RICKY: He didn’t really mean that. He’s a minister. Ministers never do stupid things.
(RICKY and JOE pause. They turn and face the audience, give it a knowing glance and roll their eyes.)

JOE: Dude, sometimes I don’t want to admit I know you. Now do you wanna get some food or not? I’m hungry.

RICKY: I’m tired.

JOE: Does that mean no?

RICKY: You go ahead. I’m just going to lie down.

JOE: I might just go explore the neighborhood.

RICKY: I was thinking that too, but tomorrow. I saw an ad for this video store for gay guys and I wanted to check it out.

JOE: You’re on your own there.

RICKY: You don’t want to go?

JOE: I don’t know. It depends how late I’m out tonight. I was thinking if you’re staying here I might try to get laid. Might take awhile.

RICKY: So I’ll take the bed, cool?

JOE: Yeah. Cool. I might not even come home if she lets me stay at her place. If there even is a “her.”

RICKY: (pauses, thinking) Umm…if I’m not here when you come back it’s ‘cuz I went to the video place. Ok?

JOE: Leave me a note.

RICKY: Yeah. You too.

JOE: For sure. Later.

(JOE exits. RICKY adjusts the linens and pillows and lies down on the bed. Lights out.)

End of Scene
Scene Three

SETTING: The ornate interior of a Catholic Church, complete with an altar and stained glass window. A black grand piano is front and center with candelabra on its lid. Lights up on Father Puhl, who stands alone stage left in his full priestly garb. Organ music plays a very slow, solemn hymn-like version of the chord changes in the introduction to “Teeny Bopper Weenie.” FATHER PUHL appears stern and stodgy. He slowly but deliberately approaches the piano, produces a lighter and lights the candelabra, then sits down at the piano with a stately flourish by flipping the back of his robe like it was a tuxedo. He cracks his knuckles and satirically assumes the pompous posture of a classical pianist about to perform. The organ music stops and FATHER PUHL launches into a rocking piano/vocal rendition of “Teeny Bopper Weenie.”

Teeny Bopper Weenie
Track Five – Key of F

FATHER PUHL: The moment that I took my perch
As pastor of a Catholic church
I knew I found my way, found what I needed
I didn’t have to tell the world
I didn’t like to play with girls
But Lord please lead me not into temptation

(Chorus)
I want some legal weenie
Some teenybopper weenie
I’ll catch it the second it turns eighteenie
I really don’t meanie to make a scenie
‘Cuz my friends are all in jail
For grabbin’ younger tail
I want some teenybopper weenie tonight

I always wore a crucifix
Was never big on politics
But yesterday I talked to my attorney
I told him I had made the choice
To stay away from altar boys
They couldn’t book me for that revelation

(Chorus)

Their rosaries would stand erect
In front of them I’d genuflect
I’d drink their wine and then they’d eat my wafer
But even though they were of age
A little boy’s hormonal rage

96
Dominated my imagination

(Chorus)

End of Scene

Scene Four

(SETTING: A gay-oriented video store. RICKY is perusing gay pornography in the adult section clad in jeans, a tee shirt, and a baseball cap. HARLEY QUEEN is wearing a very tight tee shirt that says “It ain’t gonna suck itself,” which accentuates his chunkiness. He is also adorned with rainbow gay pride jewelry – necklace, ring, and bracelet – and sports a dramatically frizzed out perm and metal-framed 1970s skydiver-type glasses. He carries a rainbow pride handbag and is unquestionably an over-the-top parody of himself, very femmy and obnoxious. He is an elementary schoolteacher who works weekends in a gay video store. HARLEY is pulling movie boxes out of his handbag and placing them back on the shelf. Music is playing through a small PA system. RICKY drops a movie box by HARLEY’S feet.)

RICKY: (bends over to retrieve box) Excuse me.

HARLEY: Got dropsy, honey?

RICKY: (smiling) Isn’t he one of the seven dwarfs? (places box back on shelf)

HARLEY: That’s Droopy. (gestures to the model on a box cover) Like this guy.

RICKY: (looks at box) Wow. I’d like to see him not droopy.

HARLEY: I’d like to see you not droopy.

RICKY: (blushing) Umm…well, thank you.

(RICKY moves a few steps away and begins looking in another section. Turns his cap around backwards to help him see better.)

HARLEY: So, uh, cum here often? I work here on weekends and I’ve never seen you before.

RICKY: It’s my first time.

HARLEY: My, my. A virgin.
RICKY: (nervously) Sir, I don’t want to be rude, but if you’re hitting on me I’m really not interested.

HARLEY: But I’m an interesting guy.

RICKY: (gestures toward box cover model again) I’m not like this dude. I don’t do, um, the quickie thing.

HARLEY: (sighs, removes handbag from his shoulder and places it on the floor) It’s my weight.

RICKY: No it’s not.

HARLEY: So I am fat.

RICKY: I didn’t say that. You did.

HARLEY: But that’s what you’re thinking. Your mouth is going “no, no, no” but your brain is thinking “fat, fat, fat.” (HARLEY shakes his head back and forth emphatically with each “no” and up and down emphatically with each “fat.”)

RICKY: If you say so.

HARLEY: I do say so. I say a lot of things.

RICKY: (removes his cap, running his fingers through his hair to get it off his forehead, then replaces cap) I just like guys my own age. It isn’t personal.

HARLEY: (in mock agreement) It never is. But I can handle it. I’m a big girl and I’ll get over it.

(Gloria Gainor’s “I Shall Survive” is playing on the radio. HARLEY begins singing along and bouncing to the beat. His tummy and breasts jiggle.)

HARLEY: Go on now go, walk out that door, don’t turn around now, you’re not welcome anymore…

(RICKY moves even further away. HARLEY sings louder.)

HARLEY: Oh no not I, I will survive…

(RICKY crosses to HARLEY and places his hand on HARLEY’S arm.)

RICKY: (interrupting) Shh…you’re…this is kind of embarrassing.

(Music fades.)
HARLEY: (almost too apologetically) Am I? I’m sorry. I get so excited. (Starts singing the Pointer Sisters tune “I’m So Excited.”) And I just can’t hide it. I’m about to lose control and I think I like it...

RICKY: (interrupting, gestures toward handbag) Umm...do you have any new releases in there?

HARLEY: (real faggy and flamboyant) New releases, schmew releases. That’s all fantasy stuff. (gesturing at box cover model) If you think he’s gonna do you or me or anyone that doesn’t have a perfect body like he does you might as well become a proctologist ‘cuz your head is so far up your ass you can see your kidneys.

RICKY: But porn stars must have boyfriends too.

HARLEY: Oh you sweet innocent child, you ain’t lived ‘til you’ve been with a real queen. And I am the King of the Queens, yes I am. Harley here, Harley Queen. It’s my real name too, so don’t get all phony baloney with me. Just bop the baloney with me, baby! Bop it good. Get your ass outta the broom closet, shake it up and gimme some booty honey ‘cuz (almost singing and grabbing his crotch) Daddy’s ho-ome!

RICKY: Daddy?

HARLEY: Of course I’m your Daddy, you little sugar boy. You say I’m too old for you but I know the game. I’ve got experience. Shit, I’ve got a pedigree. I’ll take so good care of you, I’ll teach you and together we’ll make (singing in a real femmy voice) beautiful music to-geth-er!

RICKY: Teach me?

HARLEY: Why of course, you cute sexy number. That’s what I do! I teach, teach, teach. All day long, every day.

RICKY: Teach what?

HARLEY: Third grade during the week. And cute young boys on the weekends. (starts singing the Jackson Five tune “ABC”) A B C – easy as one, two, three – I said do re mi, A B C, one two three, baby you and meecee!

RICKY: You’re not...you know, like this when you teach, are you?

HARLEY: Like what, you scrumptious little thing? Like the diva that I am?

RICKY: Diva?
HARLEY: Dee-VAH! I’ve got the hot spotlight, I’ve got the hot numbers and you’re just so hot you’re burning right up in your boxers. You go girl, you GO!

RICKY: Don’t they give you a hard time? I mean students, or even your boss?

HARLEY: It’s called “tenure,” baby cakes. I’m so on fire I can’t be fired! So what’s your name honey? Who is this gorgeous boy right before my very eyes?

(RICKY crosses to the entrance of the adult section. Peers out into the store. Ducks back in.)

RICKY: My name’s Ricky.

HARLEY: Ricky dicky! Mmm, mmm, mmm. I’ve never seen you anywhere…the clubs, the parades…(singing) the fes-tiv-als!!

RICKY: I’m new here.

HARLEY: Bless your little heart, brand spanking new. (pause) Spanking? Did someone say spanking?

RICKY: I hope not.

HARLEY: You don’t know what you’ve been missing! (valley girlish) Oh-muh-Gawd! Now tell me, little Ricky. Why did you poke your sweet head out that door? What are you afraid of?

RICKY: I don’t want everyone to know.

HARLEY: What’s to know? Who cares?

RICKY: I’m…I’m not really in the closet, I mean people do know. That’s why I left Iowa. Nobody there understands.

HARLEY: Ah, Iowa, the world’s biggest corn hole. Well pop me in a jiffy baby, ‘cuz my kernel is about to ex-PLODE!

RICKY: It’s hard growing up where everyone knows every move you make.

HARLEY: Don’t you be lecturing me. I know all about that. I came from Ohio.

RICKY: So you know.

HARLEY: Honey I do know, and what you gotta know is that you need to be who you are! Screw those old hillbillies and live for yourself!
RICKY: That’s what I want, to live my own life and fall in love. *(gushes)*

HARLEY: Love? Oh now you don’t be thinking such crazy thoughts. It’s not about love, it’s about sex, sex, sex. Party all the time, paaartay! Don’t waste it on nothing, just do it, do it, do it!

RICKY: That’s not really what I want though. *(starry-eyed)* It’s so wonderful to be in love.

HARLEY: *(sarcastically)* Well good luck, Daisy Duck.

RICKY: Oh come on now, gay guys can fall in love. We can. That’s what it should be all about, right? Getting married and being with one man forever?

HARLEY: You silly girl.

RICKY: *(standing)* I want to fit in. I want friends. I want a boyfriend. And I’d like to have you as a friend but if you keep on getting all sexual with me then I just can’t.

HARLEY: No horny lil’ boy like you is gonna settle down, and even if you tried there isn’t a man on the planet who’s gonna settle down with you. It’s not the gay way. We’re just like big ol’ bumblebees, buzzing around from flower to flower sticking our pollen everywhere we can. Mmmm yes, some fresh honey on the stinger!

RICKY: That’s what being gay is all about?

HARLEY: If you ain’t takin’ it up the pooper then what’s the difference between you and a straight boy?

RICKY: I could never do that.

HARLEY: *(screaming)* Whhaaat?

RICKY: The, uh, butt thing. I can’t do that.

HARLEY: Oh you sick, sick child.

RICKY: It’s...way too small. For...a guy’s *(points at movie box)*...that.

HARLEY: I can do squats over a fire hydrant baby. Hundreds of ‘em, over and over and over. You’ll learn. You’ll see. It’s WUN-der-ful!

RICKY: Oh my God, I could never!

HARLEY: You need some serious teachin.’ *(pointing at ball cap)* I hope that’s your thinking cap, ‘cuz you’re gonna need it. Sit your ass down and listen right up.

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RICKY: Huh?

HARLEY: Sit that tight little rump down, right on the floor and pay attention ‘cuz class is in (singing) sess-sion!

(RICKY sits on the floor, crossing his legs Indian style. Cue music. HARLEY sings “King For a Day, Queen For a Lifetime.”)

King For a Day, Queen For a Lifetime
Track Six – Key of F

HARLEY: I’ve been living in Las Vegas where the gambling is contagious
And I’ve pissed away a zillion, maybe more
I’m really not too proud of this
But gamblers anonymous
Has got my picture hanging on the door
But things have improved lots
Since I’ve given up the slots
And I’m picking up new hobbies by the score
I’ll be a king for a day, but a Queen for a lifetime
Who could ask for anything more?

Please don’t be disgusted, but I think I’m maladjusted
‘Cuz I figured out just recently I’m gay
I really should’ve had my doubts
Before my wife was spitting out
Six kids for which I’ll always have to pay
I could sit at home and sob
But I took a second job
Working at the local video tape store
I’ll be a king for a day, but a Queen for a lifetime
Who could ask for anything more?

Don’t ask what I was thinkin’, but I took to heavy drinkin’
‘Cuz when I’m smashed I just don’t have a care
I’ll sober up, I promise
As I’m yelling (pointing at box cover model) “Fuck me Thomas”
And I’m sitting with my legs spread in the air
In the morning I’m a grouch
When I wake up on the couch
That I’ve passed out on a hundred times before
I’ll be a king for a day, but a Queen for a lifetime
Who could ask for anything more?

(HARLEY picks up his handbag and begins twirling it around to the music.)
(Bridge)
In between the craziness
I'm teachin' little lads
But I won't get caught molesting them
I'll just molest their dads

I think I'm looking better in my freedom rings and sweater
That I picked up at the big and tall man's store
They thought I was Chris Farley
I said, "No, I'm only Harley"
They said, "Sorry, Charlie," pointing toward the door
But life will be just great
When I lose a little weight
And my bed is filled with gorgeous men galore
I'll be a king for a day, but a Queen for a lifetime
Who could ask for anything more?
(Repeat last two lines – slow chorus line camp. Big splashy ending.)

HARLEY: So...there! (places handbag on the floor)

RICKY: Wow. You're...that's...you do all that?

HARLEY: Honey, I've done them all. Up and down, in and out, sideways and in a (singing) loop-dee-loo. I've done everything. More than twice. So you get those silly ass notions of love and romance out of your pretty head 'cuz it ain't happening. Can't, won't, ain't.

RICKY: I should go.

HARLEY: Where we going? Your place or mine?

RICKY: Please stop that. It really bothers me. I should go home. I wanted to find some good movies to rent first, but I need to go. He's expecting me.

HARLEY: Who's "he?"

RICKY: My friend Joe. He moved here with me.

HARLEY: (interrupting) Whoa, Nellie Forbush! Now is this a "friend" friend, or a friend friend?

RICKY: He's straight.

HARLEY: (sarcastically) Yeah, straight to the nearest cock.
RICKY: He is. He likes girls. (pauses, turning his cap around so the brim is in front) I need to go now. It's been nice, um, hearing you sing and all.

HARLEY: (reaches in his handbag and produces a card) Here's my number, and don't you lose it. I expect your ding-a-ling. In more ways than one.

RICKY: Thank you.

HARLEY: (firm yet rhetorical) You're going to call me.

RICKY: Umm...okay.

HARLEY: You will, I know it. Until then, sweetums, until then.

(RICKY exits. HARLEY picks up his handbag and continues to stock the shelves. Blackout.)

End of Scene

Scene Five

(SETTING: A vacant bus stop. Ricky is on his way home from the video store. He enters stage left and walks slowly, lost in thought. He approaches the bus stop, looks around, and sits down. He appears contemplative and introspective. He sighs. Looks around. PAULA enters stage right and crosses to the bus stop. She nods to RICKY and sits.)

PAULA: (looking at RICKY. Speaks in upper register "female" voice) So we meet again.

RICKY: Yeah. How you doing?

PAULA: Oh, you know. Okay. You?

RICKY: I've been here twenty-four hours and I've never been more confused.

PAULA: It's a confused town. It'll eat you up and spit you out if you let it.

RICKY: I don't know where to start.

PAULA: Try the beginning.

RICKY: No not that. I mean I don't know how to get started doing anything. I need a job. I need friends. I need a boyfriend. I don't know my neighborhood. Heck, I don't even
know my neighbors. Whenever I say hi to someone they look like they’re going to bite my head off.

PAULA: Welcome to the real Las Vegas. The one they don’t show on TV. (pauses) What about your friend?

RICKY: He’s my…friend. Best friend, but still just a friend.

PAULA: He “family?”

RICKY: (pauses, thinking) Oh, you mean gay? No.

PAULA: Too bad. You two would be a cute couple.

RICKY: Oh my God, never!

(There is an awkward pause. RICKY looks around, surveying the area. Turns back to PAULA.)

RICKY: So you’re a…a…

PAULA: “Working girl?”

RICKY: Yeah. That.

PAULA: I am. It’s the only way I can make any money.

RICKY: (confused) You can’t get a regular job?

PAULA: Not like this. Who’s going to hire me?

RICKY: So…you’re really a man?

PAULA: Physically. Emotionally I’m a woman. A straight woman.

RICKY: I’ve read stuff about that but I never thought I’d meet a real…real…

PAULA: Transsexual. Some folks call it “transgendered,” but it’s the same thing. Why people fuck with words is beyond me. Mind control, I guess.

RICKY: What’s it like?

PAULA: (her voice drops into a lower register and she speaks as a man) A living hell that I wouldn’t wish on my worst enemy.

RICKY: Then why do you do it?
PAULA: Let me ask you this: can you help it that you’re gay? Did you ever make a conscious choice to be attracted to guys?

RICKY: No. It’s always been there.

PAULA: Same thing with me. I’ve always felt I should’ve been born a girl. I’m in the wrong body.

RICKY: I’m trying to imagine. Yeah, that would be real hard.

PAULA: I’ve lived as a “man” before. I can’t stand it. It’s like being left-handed and being forced to do everything right-handed. Worse.

RICKY: Can I ask you a question? This is kind of personal but…

PAULA: Go ahead.

RICKY: Do you like…you know…being on the bottom?

PAULA: Very much.

RICKY: I never have. (pause) Doesn’t it hurt?

PAULA: It’s heaven.

RICKY: (talking to himself) Oh man, I’m never going to find a boyfriend.

PAULA: Are you kidding? You’re adorable. Guys are going to be knocking down your door.

RICKY: Even if they did they wouldn’t like me.

(RICKY stands. Lights dim over PAULA and the rest of the stage. RICKY is enveloped in a light blue spotlight. Cue music. RICKY sings, “Hershey Highway is a One-Way Street.” This is a mockery of love songs in general and a parody of romantic ballads in musical theater. Every element involved should mimic this.)

Hershey Highway Is a One-Way Street
Track Seven – Key of E-flat

RICKY: I just moved in from Podunk town
I haven’t got a clue
Concerning all the things a little
Gay boy’s ‘sposed to do
I really want a man to love
To make me one with him
But I’m terrified he’ll want to go to
Regions no one’s ever been

(Chorus)
I listen to my buddies talk
They’re dishing out advice
They say I ought to give it up
Just try it once or twice
They’re telling me without it
My life just ain’t complete
But Hershey Highway is a one-way street

I can’t believe the talk I hear
Exaggerated lines
People like to make you think
They do it all the time
I can’t begin to comprehend it
Not the slightest bit
There ain’t no way on God’s green earth
It’s ever, ever gonna fit

(Chorus)
This is it – tonight I’m gonna
Head out to the bar
And meet the fella of my dreams
Together we’ll go far
I’ll want for him to love me
I’ll give in without a care
But he’s headed for big trouble
If he’s headed for my derriere

(Chorus)

PAULA: (dabbing her eyes, holding back sniffles) That brought me back to a beautiful
time in life.

RICKY: When you were a virgin?

PAULA: (sobbing) When I used to be able to eat chocolate without getting fat.

RICKY: (sitting and smiling) I can eat anything.
PAULA: *(pulls herself together)* You might have to.

RICKY: Huh?

PAULA: There aren’t any good jobs here unless you know the right people. It’s all minimum wage shit with no security and shitty benefits, and they can fire you anytime they want. And they call it a “right to work” state. See what I mean about fucking with language? They should call it a “right to get shit-canned” state.

RICKY: So what does that have to do with me having to eat something?

PAULA: *(sighs)* You really don’t get it do you?

RICKY: Guess not.

PAULA: It’s just a figure of speech. I don’t know how much money you have, but a lot of times younger gay guys sell their bodies to survive. Of course, a lot of them are on drugs too.

RICKY: I hate drugs.

PAULA: *(thoughtfully)* I’ve done so many in my sixty-two years on this fucked up planet.

RICKY: You’re *that* old? *(realizes his offense)* Sorry. I didn’t mean it that way.

PAULA: *(turns to RICKY, touching his hand)* You’re really sweet, you know that? I’d hate to see you go down the same road I have. Stay sober. Go to school. Get ahead in life. The boyfriend part can wait.

RICKY: *(pauses)* But that’s why I moved here. To find love.

PAULA: Jesus Christ. In this town?

RICKY: Why is it any different here than anywhere else?

PAULA: You can’t trust anyone here. Everyone’s an asshole, especially in the gay bars.

RICKY: But there’s gotta be somebody like me out there who feels the same way.

PAULA: Let me tell you right now: stay away from guys your own age. They’re full of shit and they’ll break your heart. Be like everyone else in Las Vegas and use other people to get what you want. A cutie like you could make a killing.
Where There’s Snow There’s Dough
Track Eight – Key of F

PAULA: Where there’s snow there’s obviously dough
You ascertain the whole affair
By the color of his hair
Several shades of gray means ability to pay
Tolerate what’s down below
By keeping up the status quo
If you got no place to go
Where there’s snow there’s dough

When the belly’s sticking out, the bank account is stout
You estimate a guy’s net worth
First by checking out his girth
A big ol’ tub of lard, and you’re on the credit card
It’s all a dog and pony show
Pretending that you love him so
You might feel like a dirty Ho
But where there’s snow there’s dough

(Bridge)
If the face has lots of cracks then the checkbook’s to the max
And you know you won’t be left out in the cold, so I’m told
Each ejaculation is another indication
You’re getting that much closer to the gold

A carton of Depends means it’s your Mercedes-Benz
You calculate his solvency
By how much he gets up to pee
If the underwear is wet, you’ll be driving a Corvette
I’m giving you a blow-by-blow
I guarantee the cash will flow
Just don’t ever tell him “no”
‘Cuz where there’s snow there’s dough

(BAND plays the Bridge as PAULA performs a campy soft shoe dance around the bus stop.)

If the heart is on the fritz, the pocket’s full of glitz
You’ll wanna be his next of kin
By the pallor of his skin
You’ll get the funds you crave if there’s one foot in the grave
Once they drop him down the hole
Crack a jug of fine Bordeaux
Staying at Bellagio
Where there's snow there's dough, re, mi
It's all about me
Where there's snow there's dough

RICKY: (standing) What about that priest? He's got gray hair.

PAULA: Father Puhl? That pervert? You gotta be shittin' me.

RICKY: I don't want him. He's old but he doesn't seem rich to me.

PAULA: (flustered) I didn't mean that every old man you see is loaded. I meant that young guys aren't.

RICKY: Well then shouldn't you have sung a different song?

PAULA: Hey, talk to the asshole that wrote this thing. I'm just doing my job.

RICKY: (as the realization hits him) Oh, that's right. We're in a musical. It's not supposed to make sense.

PAULA: And it's a contemporary musical, so you know it's gonna be lousy. Besides, the writer couldn't come up with decent dialogue if you paid him, which no one ever would.

RICKY: This isn't written by that Jonathan Larson guy, is it?

PAULA: No, at least some of these songs have a sing-able melody.

RICKY: So what is the deal with Father...Puhl, you said?

PAULA: We go to group together.

RICKY: You've been to orgies with him?

PAULA: Group therapy, dear.

RICKY: Hey, do you know some dude named Harley?

PAULA: (gestures behind her) You were just at the video store, weren't you?

RICKY: Yup.

PAULA: He's in our group too. Spends a lot of time at the clubs.
RICKY: What’s his story?

PAULA: He’s the most obnoxious person I’ve ever met. And very possibly the gayest.

RICKY: Is he rich?

PAULA: Of course not. He’s a teacher, for God’s sake.

RICKY: I don’t care about money. I want love.

PAULA: I hate to tell you this sweetie, but first of all, love doesn’t pay the bills. Sex does. Second of all, both require that you take it like a man. If you’re not f*cked, you’re f*cked.

RICKY: That sounds like the title of a song from this musical.

PAULA: There’s already way too many.

(A horn honks and a running motor is heard approaching.)

RICKY: (referencing the bus) Where do you think it’s headed?

PAULA: (referencing the play) Back to the writer for major revisions.

Lights Out
End of Scene

Scene Six

(Scene Six: RICKY and JOE’S apartment. RICKY enters. JOE is sitting at the table counting money.)

RICKY: So what time did you come stumbling in? I left at ten so it had to be after that. (sees the cash) Dang, where’d all that come from?

JOE: Dude...this is unreal. I met this chick last night...

RICKY: (stashing his backpack) Yeah?

JOE: Got sloshed on cheap beer...
RICKY: And?

JOE: Went back to her place...

RICKY: Yes?

JOE: I was hammering her brains out and her boyfriend came home.

RICKY: Heavens to Bet...Holy shit! Where’s the black eye?

JOE: He was a white guy.

RICKY: Eye! I said, “Eye!” Black eye, as in peas.

JOE: That’s just it. He wasn’t pissed. He wanted to watch! I was like, “Fuck, this is surreal.” I thought I was dead and turns out I was like the star of the show. But dude... it gets weirder.

RICKY: *(sits at table)* How’s that?

JOE: First of all, the guy was a water head.

RICKY: You mean a...what are they called? Hydro-something? Hydrocephalic?

JOE: I don’t know. One of those people with water on the brain, you know? He had a gimp leg and this dent in his head. You could fit a golf ball into it perfect. So I’m thinking, “what does she see in this dude?” I mean c’mon! Well, turns out he’s a fucking drug dealer. A big time one. He’s got money up the ass.

RICKY: No way.

JOE: Total way.

*(RICKY pauses. Stands. Starts pacing.)*

RICKY: So...that money. What’s up?

JOE: I did him a favor.

RICKY: What kind of favor?

JOE: No big thing. I just made a drop for him. He paid for a cab for me, I met these dudes, sold them the shit, came back. Then...*then* fucked his girlfriend again! While he watched and jerked off.

RICKY: Have you slept?
JOE: No.

RICKY: (*sits on the bed*) This isn’t good. Joe...it isn’t good!

JOE: Don’t worry about it.

RICKY: Do they know where we live?

JOE: They know the complex, just not the apartment.

RICKY: Shit...

JOE: Dude, calm down. Everything’s cool. Look at this money.

RICKY: He paid you all that?

JOE: Not really. I have to do a pick up for him later. Then another drop. I keep two hundred. Sweet, eh?

RICKY: (*standing*) Joe!

JOE: Don’t worry so goddamned much. This money’s gonna help a lot. It’ll help you too, ya know.

RICKY: What kind of drugs?

JOE: Some rock...some meth. Lots of weed.

RICKY: (*crosses to table, stands close to JOE*) Rock and meth? Are you nuts?

JOE: I’m not doing any of it. Well, maybe some weed but that’s all. I’m just the delivery boy.

RICKY: You smoked pot?

JOE: Oh come on! It’s not like you haven’t ever. God, when did you start getting all choirboy?

RICKY: That was different. I knew everybody, and I knew it would be cool. We’re in a big city now. You don’t know these people.

JOE: (*pulls out a pinch hitter and prepares a hit*) There’s kind of this unwritten rule that you respect each other, ya know? So...do you wanna smoke some weed? It’s awesome shit. Two hits and you’re gone.
RICKY: No.

JOE: Your loss.

RICKY: I don’t care.

JOE: You should come with me. Over there. It’s crazy.

RICKY: *(sits at table)* Not a chance.

JOE: Like I said…*(takes a hit, speaking while holding his breath in typical pot smoker fashion)* your loss. *(exhales)*

RICKY: *(gestures to pinch hitter)* They give you that?

JOE: *(fiddling with paraphernalia)* Nope. Bought it at a smoke shop. Oh but dude…this is too funny…*(takes another hit. Exhales.)*

RICKY: No it’s not.

JOE: *(giggling and blabbering, obviously stoned)* Dude…shit, dude, I was sitting there looking at this guy – Timmy Raun – and I start thinking…now remember he’s a water head…*(laughs, giggles)*… and I was so fucking stoned…I started thinking “what if you used his head as a bong?” It would be so perfect…a live smoking device. Just think:

*(Cue music. JOE sings “Timmy Raun, the Human Bong.*

**Timmy Raun, the Human Bong**
Track Nine – Key of C

JOE: You’re sittin’ home alone one day
Last night you bought a bag
You haven’t any papers left
And pipes just make you gag
You know the smoke will get you high
You really should be stoned
I know a guy who lives in town
He’s usually at home

*(Chorus)*
He’s Timmy Raun, the human bong
It’s with him wherever he goes
Just put a stem in either ear
And carb him by the nose
He gurgles every step he takes
He finds it hard to walk
He’s Timmy Raun, the human bong
The envy of the block

(RICKY takes the pinch hitter from the table and does a hit. Starts swaying to the music.)

He’s kind of nice to have around
‘Cuz then you’re guaranteed
You know you’ve got the means to smoke
Should anyone have weed
He’s really fun to party with
That’s how he gets his kicks
His drink is brandy water
And he provides the mix

(Chorus – RICKY stands and sings along with JOE)

JOE: Now when you make the public scene
A group of any size
Should make sure they bring Tim along
To see how hard he tries
As the rest of you are down the street
He’s bringing up the rear
Wond’ring, “Why’s this little Dutch boy
Got his finger in my ear?”

(RICKY and JOE sing the Chorus together. End of song.)

RICKY: (laughing) Gimme that thing. (loads pinchie. Takes a hit)

JOE: So did you go to that video place?

RICKY: Oh man did I ever.

JOE: How was it?

RICKY: The place was fine. But I met this older fat dude. My God, his last name was “Queen.” (laughing hysterically)

JOE: You’re shittin’ me.

RICKY: (takes another hit) He was so faggy and so fat and so pathetic. Joe, he had boobs!

JOE: He wasn’t one of those he/she things was he?
RICKY: No. But that’s another thing! I saw her, or him...that hooker we met yesterday too. Paula. Waiting for the freaking bus! Fuckin’ A!

JOE: Really?

RICKY: The people here are wacked. *(laughing uncontrollably)* The Queen guy, Harley...he’s a mess. Just a mess. Nice guy but a mess. And Paula...Christ! Her make-up is so crusted on she looks like Mount Rushmore.

*(JOE and RICKY fall on the floor laughing. They sit Indian style and smoke more weed.)*

JOE: Dude, we’re really not in Kansas anymore.

RICKY: Oh man, I know. Look I didn’t mean to give you so much shit, but just be careful ok? Don’t do anything dumb. And gimme that pinchie!

JOE: So you coming with me? When I go do my...*(very sneakily and faux ominously)* dirty deed?

RICKY: When?

JOE: Late tonight.

RICKY: I was gonna call that Harley dude.

JOE: The one with tits? Well the hooker’s got tits too, but hers aren’t real. Fuck dude...a man’s got tits that are more real than a woman’s. *(laughs hysterically)*

RICKY: She’s not a real woman.

JOE: That’s what I mean. *(giggles)* This is unreal. These people! So...so...why are you calling tit man?

RICKY: He was actually kinda nice. I dunno, at least he’s gay and he knows people and places and maybe he can help me meet a boyfriend or whatever.

JOE: Freak-a-zoid…

RICKY: You’re delivering illegal pharmaceuticals for a gimped out, water-head sex pervert and my friend is a freak-a-zoid?

JOE: Point made.

RICKY: *(reaches for his wallet, hands JOE a card)* Here’s his cell number ok? Just in case?
(RICKY and JOE smoke. More laughter. Lights out as they giggle)

End Of Scene

Scene Seven

(SETTING: A gay bathhouse. Lockers and benches run along stage left. Shower stalls are positioned on stage right. Two or three doors indicate private rooms and access to other areas. PETE THE PLUMBER is changing clothes and otherwise fiddling with his locker. RICKY and HARLEY enter stage right. They are babbling incessantly.)

RICKY: I don’t know what the big fascination is. All gay guys ever talk about is women. Bette Midler, Madonna, Britney Spears. What’s up with that?

HARLEY: (frantically scanning lockers) Where the hell? Okay, here it is.

RICKY: I mean, I identify with guys. Probably because I am one.

HARLEY: They’re fabulous! (opens locker. Removing his shoes.) This is going to be fun, fun, fun!

RICKY: (looking around) Guys are better.

HARLEY: You dare criticize Bette Midler in a bath house? You’ll rot in Hell. Now what you do is you take your clothes off and put your towel on and…

RICKY: I thought we were supposed to be cultural. Madonna is a shitty musician.

HARLEY: …you just walk around until you see something that floats your boat. Go up to him, say something, drop the towel and get it on. This is what it’s all about, honey.

RICKY: (looking at PETE) I wonder if he’s cultural.

HARLEY: Quit stalling. You’re nervous as a fart in a frying pan. Just pretend it’s Gym class.

RICKY: (looking at HARLEY. Sits on the bench. Sighs.) Gym class was major trauma for me.

HARLEY: You’re nuts.
RICKY: My God, I... I just can’t do it with someone I don’t know.

HARLEY: (pulling his sweater over his head. It sticks on his glasses and he lets go, leaving his face covered and his arms free to gesture. He is essentially a talking sweater. Sits next to RICKY.) Look, I know you have good values and you want love and romance and all that good stuff. But seriously, that only happens in movies and books. If you want to know about gay life, then you need to have gay sex. Otherwise why bother?

RICKY: You’re missing the point. I want to be with a man. I just want it to mean something.

HARLEY: You want to know what it means? It means two, three, even four or more guys making each other feel good. That’s what it means. Nothing more, nothing less.

RICKY: But why? Why does it have to be that way?

HARLEY: (continuing to talk through his sweater. He looks ridiculous.) It’s always been that way.

RICKY: That’s not a good enough answer.

HARLEY: Are you sure you’re not 100? You’re talking like an old fart. I’m the one who should be preaching and you’re the one who should be whoring around.

(PETE approaches RICKY and HARLEY. He is wearing a towel only.)

PETE: Hey guys, I didn’t mean to eavesdrop but, well, it’s hard not to.

HARLEY: Well, if it isn’t... (finally pulls sweater over his head. He sits shirtless on the bench, his tummy hanging well over his waist. His glasses are crooked on his face)... old rusty tool himself.

PETE: (to RICKY, ignoring HARLEY) Pete. Pete the Plumber. Pleased to meet you.

RICKY: (extends hand) Hi Pete. I’ve heard a lot about you.

HARLEY: Yeah, if you’ve read Kindergarten Round-up Quarterly.

PETE: (to RICKY) I’m gonna chill in the steam room, if that’s possible. Care to join me?

RICKY: That might be ok. Do guys do stuff in there?

(HARLEY and PETE speak simultaneously.)

HARLEY: Oh, all the time!
PETE: Not really, no.

(HARLEY shoots PETE a dirty look. Realizes his glasses are crooked and adjusts them.)

HARLEY: Oh come on now, who you shittin’?

PETE: Like I said, I couldn’t help but overhear you guys. I agree with...Ricky, right?

RICKY: Yeah.

PETE: (to HARLEY) You don’t have to be a tramp. I’m not.

HARLEY: Bullshit. There are two kinds of people in this world. Whores and those who wish they were.

PETE: (to RICKY) Don’t listen to him.

HARLEY: (to RICKY) If you’ve ever wanted to shower with Pat Robertson now’s your chance.

RICKY: C’mon you guys, we’re supposed to be one big happy family, right? Unity in the community, right?

HARLEY: (removing his pants and speaking in a sarcastic tone) Let’s just forget sex and hold hands and sing Kumbaya.

RICKY: (to HARLEY) You make it sound like I’m judging you. I’m not. I don’t care what you do. It’s just not for me.

PETE: (adjusting his towel) You have every right to make that choice. And this guy (gestures toward HARLEY) has every right to be a slut, if he can find anyone to be a slut with. What he doesn’t have the right to do is tell you lies.

HARLEY: Be a slut with? I’ll have you know I’ve lost thirty pounds.

PETE: Turn around.

(HARLEY turns his back to PETE and RICKY.)

PETE: (looking at HARLEY’S ass) Found them!

HARLEY: (bending over, slipping his boxers below his butt cheeks) Obviously this isn’t the only asshole in the room.

PETE: (smiles at RICKY, shuddering) Is he always such a crack-up?
(HARLEY pulls his boxers off and places a towel around his waist. Turns to face RICKY and PETE.)

RICKY: Turn around again. (to PETE) You too.

HARLEY: (smiling) Like what you see?

RICKY: Umm...actually I’m going to change.

HARLEY: You’re in a men’s locker room, for God’s sake.

RICKY: I know. Now turn around and don’t peek.

HARLEY: (looking up at the ceiling, addresses God) I hope you’re happy.

(HARLEY and PETE turn their backs to RICKY, who quickly undresses and places a towel around his waist.)

RICKY: (placing his clothes in locker) Ok, you can turn around now.

HARLEY: Tell me something. You keep going on about how you don’t want to have sex with strangers, right?

RICKY: Right.

HARLEY: And who’s the only person here that’s not a stranger?

RICKY: You are.

HARLEY: So you won’t let me see the goods, but now you’re going to show them off to everybody else?

RICKY: No, I’m just gonna go to the sauna. I like saunas. I took saunas all the time in Iowa.

HARLEY: You’re going to get hit on.

RICKY: I’ll just talk to Pete. (to PETE) Is that cool?

PETE: Of course.

HARLEY: And what if someone does something you don’t like?

RICKY: I can handle it. Like I said, I’ve taken saunas before.
PETE: *(to HARLEY)* He’s a big boy. *(nudges RICKY and winks)* Aren’t you?

(RICKY smiles at PETE, runs his finger under the waist of his towel. PETE adjusts himself.)

HARLEY: *(visibly shaken)* I thought this was your first time at a gay bath.

(RICKY locks eyes with PETE, adjusting himself.)

RICKY: I always took saunas at the golf course. My folks are members at the Country Club and they’ve got a real nice sauna.

HARLEY: Pardon me sweetums, but this is a whole different ball game played with totally different balls. And clubs.

PETE: *(to HARLEY)* So where’s your first stop? The Jenny Craig Jacuzzi?

RICKY: I know a lot of those guys back in Davenport were gay.

HARLEY: *(to RICKY, ignoring PETE)* You’re not making sense. You told me you were afraid that people would find out about you. How would you know they’re gay?

RICKY: They’re all real bad closet cases, a lot of them. Old guys who never got married, and even younger guys who did. All they talk about is sports and athletes and stuff, but there’s something weird going on, like they get excited about getting naked together. They don’t do anything, they just sit there and talk and stare. But I knew what some of them were thinking. You can just tell.

*( Cue music. RICKY performs “Sauna Takin’ Queers.”)*

**Sauna Takin’ Queers**

Track Ten – Key of D

RICKY: *(Chorus)*

I have seen
Way too many of the sauna takin’ queers
Squeaky clean
See them sittin’ in the sauna with their beers
I can tell
That they really like to strip and fool around
They’re not straight
They’re just a bunch of sauna takin’ queers

I see them every weekend
They hang out at the club
And when they’re through with eighteen holes
They go inside for grub
But after that the fun begins
When they’re drinking in the pub
And they head off to the locker room
For a little rub-a-dub

(Chorus)

Most of them have girlfriends
A couple, even wives
Apparently it’s clear to me
They’re living dual lives
But Sunday afternoon their ass
Is right where it belongs
On the top bench of the steam room
Where they’re checkin’ out the schlongs

(Chorus)

Most of them love football
A couple of them are jocks
But there ain’t no game as fun as pouring
Water on the rocks
The lesson learned from all of this
Should come as no surprise
It’s plain to see that heat is not
The only thing to rise

(HARLEY and PETE join RICKY for the last chorus. They do a "step-kick" chorus line routine, twirling towels around in time to the music. Total camp.)

I have seen
Way too many of the sauna takin’ queers
Squeaky clean
See them sittin’ in the sauna with their beers
I can tell
That they really like to strip and fool around
They’re not straight
They’re just a bunch of sauna takin’
They can’t wait
To sizzle like a piece of bacon
Ain’t it great?
They’re just a bunch of sauna takin’ queers

HARLEY: So the innocent little boy isn’t so innocent after all.
RICKY: I never did anything. I was just there.

HARLEY: So you’ve got a clean body but a dirty mind, is that it?

RICKY: I just have eyes. *(to PETE)* And a couple other body parts. That’s all.

HARLEY: *(increasingly desperate)* So you gonna let me see your snake eye?

RICKY: The towel stays *(tugging at it firmly)* right here the whole time. *(winks at PETE)* Maybe.

HARLEY: *(bitter and sarcastic)* What a waste.

RICKY: *(smiling)* Thanks. It’s size 29.

*(HARLEY’S cell phone rings.)*

HARLEY: Yes? This is Harley Queen. *Who* Johnson? Oh, you mean Ricky. Yes, he’s right here.

RICKY: *(takes phone)* Hello?

*(RICKY listens and pauses. Sits slowly on the bench, his face in shock. Listens. Slowly sets phone down. HARLEY and PETE look at him.)*

RICKY: *(sniffles, crying)* Joe... is dead.

**Curtain**

End of Act One
ACT TWO

Scene One

(SETTING: DR. JAMESON’S office. Group therapy is in session. RICKY sits among them, his head in his hands, sniffling. HARLEY is sitting next to him, doting on him and comforting him. The mood is not somber. It is fast-paced, lively, and chaotic. The characters fire off one-liners and accusations back and forth.)

PETE: I swear…

FATHER PUHL: (sighing) Constantly.

PETE: Lay off, Puhl. I mean it this time. Never again. I’ll never do it again.

DR. JAMESON: Remember what we said about promises.

PETE: I’m serious.

PAULA: Seriously pathetic.

DR. JAMESON: Paula…

PAULA: Pervert!

FATHER PUHL: Now let’s not judge.

HARLEY: That’s right. Who are we to judge?

PAULA: (to FATHER PUHL, gesturing at PETE) He needs a fuckin’ judge. So do you.

DR. JAMESON: This is counter-productive. Remember what we said about that.

PAULA: What’s this “we” shit? That a muskrat on your head?

PETE: Hamster.

DR. JAMESON: (ignoring comments) We have a visitor. And from what I understand he’s got a pretty serious problem. This is Harley’s friend Ricky. Welcome Ricky to the group.
GROUP: Hi Ricky.

DR. JAMESON: Ricky is from Davenport.

PETE: Now he’s on the couch.

DR. JAMESON: Ricky, tell the group about yourself.

RICKY: (hesitates between sniffles) I’m from Iowa. Davenport. I uhh...moved here to be gay. I mean, I was always gay. I had to leave. It was a bad scene. (starts choking back tears) I just want a boyfriend. To be in love. (breaks down crying) Oh my God, Joe!

HARLEY: (his arm around RICKY) Baby...

FATHER PUHL: (to RICKY) Is Joe your lover?

DR. JAMESON: It’s his best friend. He was killed two days ago. It was on the news. Drug deal gone bad.

FATHER PUHL: (assumes full priestly persona) Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death...

(RICKY sobs)

PAULA: (whispers) Holy...shit. (to RICKY) Honey, I’m so sorry.

FATHER PUHL: (sensuously making a phallic masturbatory gesture) ...thy rod and thy staff...comfort me...

PETE: (to PAULA, referencing RICKY) I almost did him.

HARLEY: (to PETE) Not a good time for this, Pete.

PAULA: (to PETE) Isn’t he a little old for you?

PETE: (to PAULA) I’m tired of your shit, you old confused troll. Pick a fucking gender.

DR. JAMESON: That’s not very supportive.

PAULA: (standing, grabs her penis through her dress) Support THIS. (sits back down)

DR. JAMESON: Ricky, don’t feel like you have to say anything if you don’t want. It’s okay.

RICKY: We never should’ve come here. It’s all my fault. It was my idea.
HARLEY: No. You can’t blame yourself.

PETE: You people. Look at you. None of you know who you are. None!

PAULA: (muttering) Drunken child molester.

PETE: (standing) Goddamn right! At least I know who I am.

FATHER PUHL: Pete, please. We have a crisis here.

HARLEY: (to PETE) Jesus, where’s your brain?

PETE: (ignoring them) I know I swore off booze and boys, but you know what? I’m like Popeye.

PAULA: I’d say you’re more like Pop Warner.

PETE: I am what I am, and that’s all that I am. I don’t need you. I don’t need this. I’m perfectly fine just the way I am. Right, Doc? Accept yourself, right?

DR. JAMESON: Right. Only then can you change.

PETE: What if I don’t want to change? I take it back. I take back the whole thing about “never doing it again.” I’m fine. In fact, I’m excellent.

(Cue music. PETE performs “Alcoholic Homosexual Pedophile.”)

Alcoholic Homosexual Pedophile
Track Eleven – Key of B-flat

PETE: While browsing through the local paper just the other day
It came to my attention that I might not be okay
With all the chic support groups
People looking for the cure
I’d never had a therapist
Or a thought that wasn’t pure
So I set out to design a way to make myself fit in
And now I’ve got the perfect malady
I’m an alcoholic homosexual pedophile
And there ain’t nothing wrong with me

I thought it might be kind of nice to pick up on some guys
So first I hit the liquor store and then the junior highs
To get the ones you really want
You have to drop some clues
You get 'em all to trust you
Then seduce 'em with the booze
Now it seems like I'm an asshole and the cops are coming soon
To lock me up and throw away the key
But I'm an alcoholic homosexual pedophile
And there ain't nothing wrong with me

(Bridge)
A juvenile naked
Is just too hard to take, it
Turns me on so much I lose control
The thought of giving lessons
To horny adolescents
Starts a fire burning in my soul

If I could only turn my hobby into a career
Getting smashed while feeling up a thirteen-year-old rear
Of all the possibilities
I finally made a choice
And now I'm an advisor
At a home for wayward boys
I guess I found my calling and the kids all think I'm swell
They're running hot and cold, from A to Z
And I'm an alcoholic homosexual pedophile
And there ain't nothing wrong with me

FATHER PUHL: (to PETE) We need to talk.

PAULA: (to FATHER PUHL) Got a little something in common, do you?

FATHER PUHL: (nervous) Hardly.

PAULA: Shit. You're frick and frack. (to AUDIENCE, pinching FATHER PUHL'S sleeve) And this is a frickin' frock.

(GROUP pauses. Looks accusingly at PAULA.)

DR. JAMESON: Maybe Ricky wants to talk.

RICKY: I should go home. To Iowa.

HARLEY: Now's not the time to make rash decisions.

PAULA: (referencing PETE) His last date had diaper rash.
RICKY: I feel so...so...

DR. JAMESON: Go ahead.

RICKY: I loved him like a brother.

DR. JAMESON: Of course.

HARLEY: (to RICKY) You can stay with me.

RICKY: This is all too intense. I need time to think. To...(looks away)

FATHER PUHL: (to PETE) How young WERE they?

PETE: You’d have loved ‘em.

RICKY: (looking at PETE, sniffles) I thought we...at the bathhouse...we had something cool.

HARLEY: (to RICKY) You should’ve listened to me.

PETE: That was innocent flirtation.

RICKY: It was more than that for me. (pause) Fucking drugs!

FATHER PUHL: I won’t touch anyone over eighteen. (realizes error) Under! Under!

RICKY: Are you a real pedo priest?

PAULA: It’s Christopher fucking Columbus. (to RICKY) Discover anything else?

FATHER PUHL: (pauses, whispers) I am. Was. WAS! (sobs) Jesus Mary!

PAULA: I knew it!

DR. JAMESON: Father, do you have a confession to make? You are among friends. You cannot repress.

GROUP: (scattered musings) Confess! Don’t repress. Confess! Don’t repress.

FATHER PUHL: (whispers beneath sobs) I was one of them. I was. I have sinned. (weeps) There were so many boys. Hundreds. Oh Jesus Mary Louise! Thousands! (sobbing) In the parish, under the desk, behind the rectory, in the confessional, at their homes... (barely audible) on the...

GROUP: (gasps, sighs, wails) Horrible! Despicable!
FATHER PUHL: …altar.

PETE: Puhl!

HARLEY: Rotten Puhl!

RICKY: Filthy Puhl!

(GROUP looks at AUDIENCE. They each cup a hand behind one ear and tilt their heads toward PAULA. They freeze and brace themselves for the pun.)

PAULA: Playing pocket Puhl, were ya?

DR. JAMESON: I must contact the police.

FATHER PUHL: (rises, shrieking) NO!

PETE: (to FATHER PUHL) I hope you got phone numbers.

FATHER PUHL: (pacing hysterically) No numbers! No police!

DR. JAMESON: It’s my professional responsibility. Both of you.

RICKY: (incredulous) This is too much.

FATHER PUHL: (composing himself) Please. No police. I’ve changed. I have. I’m not like that anymore.

(GROUP pauses, looks accusingly at FATHER PUHL.)

PAULA: (to FATHER PUHL) Shit. You put the “semen” in “seminary.”

PETE: (to FATHER PUHL) Did you at least get pictures?

HARLEY: Don’t stereotype. We need to celebrate diversity and embrace tolerance.

PAULA: (to HARLEY) Who are you, Alec fucking Baldwin?

FATHER PUHL: A person can change. Really.

PAULA: Bullshit.

FATHER PUHL: I have! I haven’t touched a…a…wee willie winkie since Cardinal Law committed his cardinal sin. I got…(quietly)…scared.
DR. JAMESON: Fear can be an effective deterrent.

PAULA: Bullshit.

DR. JAMESON: If the threat of incarceration prevents future episodes it is very effective.

PAULA: Just because he ain’t blowing them doesn’t mean he doesn’t want to, so he isn’t cured. It’s bullshit.

PETE: (to FATHER PUHL) Thousands?

FATHER PUHL: I cannot handle prison. I’ll kill myself first.

DR. JAMESON: That is no solution.

RICKY: Can’t anyone help? God, all you do is fight.

DR. JAMESON: That’s why I’m here. To fix everybody.

PAULA: (sarcastically) We’re all still here so I’d say you’re doing a fantastic job.

HARLEY: Come to think of it, yeah. You’re supposed to help but all we do is write a check every month.

PETE: Quit ripping us off.

(Cue music. DR. JAMESON rises and performs “Everyone’s Fucked Up In the Head But Me.”)

Everyone’s Fucked Up In the Head But Me
Track Twelve – Key of F

DR. JAMESON: It seems to me the world these days
Is caught up in a mess
The way that people think and act
Is not what they profess
The druggies fry their minds to bits
The Christians think they’re blest
And this is why I know that I
Was born to be the best

(Chorus)
Everyone’s fucked up in the head but me
The poor dumb shits ain’t got the brains to see
I’ve had as much as I can stand of low mentality
And everyone’s fucked up in the head but me
All the women in the world
Are equal to the guys
The niggers count as people
And the commies have their ties
The Jews have all the money
And the politician lies
Now I can see why God made me
A blessing in disguise

(Chorus)

We give minorities food stamps
And they spend their cash on gin
And Falwell says we’ll go to hell
If we don’t think like him
The Queers keep getting queerer
And now euthanasia’s in
But look at me and you will see
A perfect specimen

(Chorus)

(DR. JAMESON sits.)

PAULA: A blessing in disguise?

FATHER PUHL: A perfect specimen?

PETE: Born to be the best?

RICKY: Doesn’t anyone care about me? Please?

HARLEY: (to RICKY) Let’s go, honey. Let’s go get your stuff and move you in to my place. You can have your own room, your own bed. I’ll behave. I promise.

DR. JAMESON: Now you know why I’m in charge.

PAULA: (to DR. JAMESON) Bigoted asshole

PETE: Yeah, I wonder what he’s swept under that rug. (refers to toupee)

FATHER PUHL: (to PETE) Hush! Don’t provoke the guy. He’ll turn us in.

PAULA: Just don’t pay him until you get results.
HARLEY: *(standing)* We’re leaving.

PETE: *(standing)* I’m out...

PAULA: *(to PETE)* ...of your mind.

FATHER PUHL: *(standing)* I need to prepare Mass.

PAULA: *(standing)* Am I the only normal one here?

RICKY: I guess I should...we should...go. *(stands)*

PAULA: *(to RICKY)* Call me.

PETE: *(to RICKY)* Me too.

HARLEY: Same time next week?

DR. JAMESON: *(standing)* Of course. *(to RICKY)* You are welcome any time. No charge.

RICKY: Thank you.

*(GROUP disbands and everyone begins to leave, exiting stage left and right. PAULA is the last to go. She stops and addresses the audience before the curtain falls.)*


End of Scene

Scene Two

*(SETTING: A well-furnished living room that features many gay artifacts, most of which are cheap trinkets with gay pride rainbows on them, equal rights campaign stickers and other kitschy memorabilia. RICKY sits on the couch in silence, depressed and almost zombie-like. HARLEY prances around the room offering way too much advice. He is significantly less flamboyant.)*

HARLEY: Look, honey, I know this is really difficult for you but you can’t go back to Iowa. You just can’t.

RICKY: But the funeral...his parents...
HARLEY: They’ll take care of it, I promise. But you came here with a dream and you have to go for it. Joe would want that.

RICKY: How can you pretend to know what Joe wants? You never even met him!

HARLEY: You two had a plan. You need to stick with it and not give up. That’s what I meant when I say he would want you to stay here.

RICKY: You know, both you and Paula asked me if we were boyfriends. I over reacted the way I said no. I loved him... I mean, not like that, but I loved him...

HARLEY: I understand baby. “Love” is a complicated word.

RICKY: Don’t I know it?

(RICKY stands and begins to wander around the room, looking at HARLEY’S collection of pictures and bric-a-brac in a slow, dazed manner, like he’s not really paying attention. He flips a lamp on and off, picks up magazines and pretends to leaf through them, pauses at HARLEY’S computer hutch and stares at the screen.)

RICKY: I thought you said love was bullshit.

HARLEY: (sitting) It is. It doesn’t exist. It’s just temporary insanity.

RICKY: (looking at HARLEY) But you just said it’s complicated. That doesn’t make any sense.

HARLEY: I said it’s a complicated word.

RICKY: Have you ever been in love?

HARLEY: Absolutely not.

RICKY: Not even with your wife?

HARLEY: We should never have married. I was gay but couldn’t deal with it so I married her to keep other people happy. This is why I think you need to stay and find yourself so you don’t go home and make the same mistakes I did.

RICKY: So you were never in love with a guy either? I mean, all the sex you’ve had and you’ve never met a special man?

HARLEY: (standing) I...um...have a confession to make. I’m a virgin.

RICKY: (incredulous) What??
HARLEY: I’m a gay virgin. I’ve never done anything with a guy.

RICKY: But the bathhouse…the porn shop...all this gay stuff!

HARLEY: (touching RICKY’S arm) It’s all an act. Look at me. Who’s gonna fuck me? I’m old and fat and ugly and faggy.

RICKY: But...you’re a really good guy. You’re funny and smart with a great personality.

HARLEY: (backs away, sighing) Yeah sure. It’s not my brain they want to suck at three o’clock in the morning.

RICKY: So it’s all a lie? Really?

HARLEY: (gestures at the computer) If it weren’t for that I’d have no sex life at all. That and porn.

RICKY: What do you mean?

HARLEY: (referencing his body) At my age it’s all I’ve got. Nothing works like it should anymore. Except my imagination and my right hand.

(Cue music. HARLEY sings “Ned the Gay Indian Mormon From Utah”)

Ned the Gay Indian Mormon From Utah
Track Thirteen – Key of C

HARLEY: When I get up in the morning
I always hesitate a bit
The prunes and bran are kickin’ in
But I’m still full of shit
I love it that I’m lucid
But the biggest thrill I get
Is Ned the gay Indian Mormon from Utah that I met on the Internet

It’s amazing I’m not homeless
All the money that I gave
Seven bucks a minute
To my Canadian muscle slave
But my dates have gotten cheaper
And I’ll soon be out of debt
With Ned the gay Indian Mormon from Utah that I met on the Internet

(Bridge)
I get my news from Yahoo
And I pick up other clues  
The market’s down and oil’s up  
It’s all those fucking Jews  
But facing Armageddon  
Won’t make me that upset  
With Ned the gay Indian Mormon from Utah that I met on the Internet

I’ve got my favorite chat room  
But I need a different bunch  
I know I have no business  
At the Lambda Business Lunch  
I’ve got myself a Navajo  
My social life is set  
With Ned the gay Indian Mormon from Utah that I met on the Internet

(Bridge)  
Thank God for my delusions  
‘Cuz I live without a care  
Imagine my elation  
When my legs are in the air  
But for now I’ve got my buddy  
And I haven’t one regret  
About Ned the gay Indian Mormon from Utah  
I talk to him everyday on the compu-tah  
There isn’t a Native American cu-tah  
Than Ned the gay Indian Mormon from Utah that I met on the Internet

RICKY: (Standing, incredulously) Oh my God, you do the Internet thing? I did that back when I was twelve! Shouldn’t you try to meet real people?

HARLEY: (Stammers) I... want to but I... just have no confidence. And when I see someone I like – like you – I get the shaft, and not in a good way.

RICKY: But there’s more to life than sex. That’s what I’ve been trying to tell you.

HARLEY: (irritated) Not in the gay world. It’s so superficial and shallow. And that’s what I’ve been trying to tell you.

RICKY: Oh bull. You just wanted in my pants.

HARLEY: (his tone of voice softening) Maybe.

RICKY: And I wanted you for a friend.

HARLEY: I am your friend.
RICKY: Do you still want in my pants?

HARLEY: *(insincerely fumbling about)* If I say “yes” you’ll think I’m a dirty old man. If I say “no” you’ll think I’m lying.

RICKY: Maybe.

HARLEY: So there you have it. Two maybes. I’m glad we cleared *that* up.

RICKY: Know what? I never did anything with Pete at the bathhouse.

HARLEY: *(hope rising in his voice)* Really?

RICKY: Of course not. I mean, I was attracted to him and all, but he’s a stranger and you know how I feel about that.

HARLEY: *(quietly)* Deep down I... I... am the same way. I believe in love too.

RICKY: *(looking away)* It’s gotta be beautiful to be in love. *(Addresses HARLEY face to face.)* Don’t you think?

*(CUE music. RICKY performs “If You’re Gonna Stick It In, You Better Stick It Out.” This should be delivered as a relatively serious ballad with only the slightest hint of humor. The AUDIENCE should be expecting silliness. Surprise them.)*

*If You’re Gonna Stick It In, You Better Stick It Out
Track Fourteen – Key of G*

RICKY: I’ve done a lot of thinking
   Made a couple friends
   Everyone’s advice is geared
   To serve their selfish ends
   They say they want to help me
   And I want to make amends
   With all the garbage stuck inside
   That from my past descends

   I know I’ve made decisions
   I thought I thought them through
   Refusing to accommodate
   What others want me to
   I gotta know you’re serious
   If you really want to screw
   ‘Cuz I ain’t like a lot of guys
Not any guy will do

(Chorus)
You know I’ve closed the highway
Of that there is no doubt
Yet I’m not too sure of what
This whole thing is about
So show me you mean business
And I might just change my route
If you’re gonna stick it in
You better stick it out

Was telling everybody
I’d never let him in
Couldn’t find an opening
To let our love begin
Maybe if I take it
Somewhere other than the chin
My stupid pride will never hide
Just what a fool I’ve been

(Repeat Chorus twice)

(HARLEY and RICKY stand close, facing one another as the lights begin to dim. RICKY reaches out and runs his forefinger around HARLEY’S rainbow pride necklace in a thoughtful yet teasing manner. HARLEY extends his arms and they embrace as the lights fade to black.)

End of scene.

Scene Three

(SETTING: FATHER PUHL’S church. FATHER PUHL sits at the piano noodling around and PETE is leaning up against the piano scribbling on some scratch paper, using the lid of the piano as a desk. He looks up at FATHER PUHL and sets down his pen.)

PETE: This should do it.

FATHER PUHL: I can’t believe you’re going through with this. Ricky is a nice kid and he just lost his best friend.

PETE: I haven’t gotten laid since the lockdown at the middle school. Gimme a break.
FATHER PUHL: I’d rather not know.

PETE: Who are you trying to bullshit? You’re a bigger pedo than I could ever hope to be.

FATHER PUHL: I’m trying to cut down.

PETE: Look, if we do this right we’ll both get a piece of that fresh Iowa beef.

FATHER PUHL: I’m not comfortable with it. Besides, he’s too old.

PETE: Yeah, but he looks real young. Plus he’s a virgin. And he’s vulnerable.

FATHER PUHL: True. And you can’t go to prison for doing a 21-year-old. But it won’t be nearly as much fun.

PETE: All you gotta do is set these lyrics to music and I guarantee it’ll work. I’ll sing the song to him, play the woe-is-me victim card, he’ll feel sorry for me, and I’ll do him.

FATHER PUHL: Back up there, white boy. I’m supposed to get in on this too, you know.

PETE: Just write the damn thing and I’ll give you my sloppy seconds. Promise.

(PETE hands the scratch paper to FATHER PUHL, who looks it over briefly, puts his head down, and sighs.)

FATHER PUHL: These are terrible lyrics.

PETE: Do I look like Ira Gershwin? Just write the fucking thing.

FATHER PUHL: I don’t get it. How is this piece of ancient self-disclosure going to help us?

PETE: It’ll make him feel sorry for me. I’ll play on his weakened emotional state and pounce all over that little rump.

FATHER PUHL: I don’t see how re-counting a sexual experience with your stepbrother is going to have much effect.

PETE: Look, Puhl, I’m just a character in this ridiculous theatrical experiment. So are you. Write the song, already.

(FATHER PUHL places the lyrics on the piano in front of him and begins playing a country shuffle beat. He soon hums the melody from the verse. PETE crosses to the piano bench behind FATHER PUHL, looks over his shoulder, and begins singing along. They noodle around for a few measures, then PETE takes center stage in front of the piano and
FATHER PUHL accompanies him for the full rendition of “Homosexual Step-Incest Affair.”

Homosexual Step-Incest Affair
Track Fifteen – Key of A

PETE: I’ve been drunk ever since my mama had me
Smoking dope and taking LSD
A far cry from the life my parents wanted me to live
But up ‘til now, at least I’ve lived it free

(Chorus)
Now the people in the city’ve learned to hate me
My friends all keep their noses in the air
And I’ve all that I can do to keep from crying
I had a homosexual step-incest affair

Late at night, a cold one in December
Me and Danny stopped in for a brew
But once is not enough, we had a couple, three or more
And the morning showed us what that brew can do

(Chorus)

They say that when you’re pegged you’ve really had it
But the rumors in this town are all a lie
Everybody thinks that we were playing with our dinks
And the problem is, there ain’t no alibi

(Repeat Chorus Twice)

PETE: Not bad, Puhl. I like the country influence.

FATHER PUHL: (standing) It’s only four chords.

PETE: That’s three more than hip-hop or techno. And the tune’s kind of catchy.

FATHER PUHL: So is diarrhea, which reminds me: I’m thinking of creating a new style
of music that combines country and rap: I’ll call it “crap.”

PETE: Add some hyper-introspective dialogue and a few self-indulgent characters and
you’ve got Rent.

FATHER PUHL: Quit changing the subject. I need some young meat, and I need it bad.
Now get out there, find this kid and let’s do the oinky boinky.
PETE: He’s putty in my hands.

FATHER PUHL. There ARE a couple of roadblocks, namely Paula and Harley.

PETE: That’s nothing a hundred bucks and a hamburger won’t fix, oh ye of little faith.

FATHER PUHL: Are you saying they have no principles?

PETE: Puhl, they’re in this musical.

FATHER PUHL: So are we.

PETE: See what I mean?

Blackout
End of Scene

Scene Four

(SETTING: RICKY and JOE’S apartment. HARLEY and RICKY have returned to pack up RICKY and JOE’S belongings. They move about the room inspecting boxes and closets and whatnot.)

RICKY: His mom is gonna want a lot of this stuff. I guess I can ship it to her.

HARLEY: That’s awfully white of you.

RICKY: It’s only right.

HARLEY: Where the hell is Paula?

RICKY: What’s she gonna do? Take my stuff to your place on the bus?

HARLEY: She’s a big girl. We could use her muscle.

RICKY: Yeah, I guess she’s got one.

HARLEY: Not that muscle, you little goof.

(There is a knock. RICKY gives HARLEY a quick peck on the lips, then opens the door. PETE is standing at the entry in full country regalia; jeans, chaps, a cowboy hat, a vest,
a large belt buckle and an acoustic guitar slung across his back, ala Johnny Cash. He looks like an absurd parody of himself.)

HARLEY: (defensively) And just what do YOU want?

PETE: To see Ricky.

HARLEY: (gestures at RICKY across the room) There he is. Take a good look.

PETE: (barging in past HARLEY, nudging him out of the way and crossing to RICKY) Hey you.

RICKY: Hey.

PETE: I wrote a song for you.

RICKY: Not another one.

PETE: What? This is the first one.

RICKY: (gestures at audience) Don’t you think we’ve tortured them with enough songs?

HARLEY: (crosses to RICKY and PETE) This is ridiculous. Pete, get out of here.

PETE: (referencing RICKY) Not until I have my way with him.

RICKY: Umm... that’s not going to happen. (gestures to HARLEY) I’m all his.

(PETE grabs RICKY around the waist. RICKY struggles. HARLEY tries to stop the entanglement by screaming in a very femmy, howling voice.)

HARLEY: Help! Rape! Rape!

PETE: (evil and menacing to RICKY) You can’t rape the willing, can you, little boy?

RICKY: Get away! Get off me!

PETE: Oh, I’m gonna get off, alright.

(PAULA enters through the open door and crosses to center stage.)

PAULA: (in a very deep, threatening male tone) STEP AWAY FROM THE FAG AND PUT THE BOY DOWN!

PETE: Shit! You miserable meddling androgynous troll. (PETE lets go of RICKY, who races into HARLEY’S arms)
RICKY: Paula!

PAULA: You sick bastard. You’re number’s up, pal.

(FATHER PUHL enters, producing a small handgun.)

FATHER PUHL: (points gun at PAULA, waves it at HARLEY and RICKY, then back to PAULA. He clearly doesn’t know what he’s doing and cannot handle a firearm) Give it up. All of you! He’s mine. The kid is mine!

(RICKY whimpers and clings to HARLEY as PAULA tackles PETE and wrestles him to the ground.)

HARLEY: (groping for his cell phone) Dr. Jameson...gotta call Dr. Jameson.

FATHER PUHL: Too late.

HARLEY: (screaming) Whaat?

FATHER PUHL: He knew too much. I had to get rid of him.

RICKY: You killed Dr. Jameson??

FATHER PUHL: No, I bought him a new toupee. He’s been stuck in front of the mirror for the last thirty-six hours.

(PAULA and PETE continue to wrestle, their respective garb flying around the room; his hat, her purse, his vest, her wig, his boots, her high heels. The entire fight scene is a slapstick send-up. FATHER PUHL holds the gun on RICKY and HARLEY, who quiver in fear as they hold each other. PASTOR JEHOVAH enters through the open door, witnessing this fast-paced, absurd spectacle while still in possession of his Bible and miniature flag.)

PASTOR JEHOVAH: Our nation is facing some trying times. I need you to make a donation to...

FATHER PUHL: (turns gun on PASTOR JEHOVAH) You nut case.

PASTOR JEHOVAH: Eek! A Catholic!

FATHER PUHL: Fundamentalist prick!

PASTOR JEHOVAH: Hell-bound child molester!
(FATHER PUHL points the gun in the air and shoots a couple shells into the ceiling. PASTOR JEHOVAH runs out the door with FATHER PUHL in fast pursuit. HARLEY and RICKY follow, running and screaming and making all kinds of ruckus. PAULA and PETE disengage and clamor out the door as well. The entire crew spills out onto the Las Vegas Strip, which is full of the same hustle-bustle crowd as in the opening scene. The whole gang is now yelling and hollering at one another amidst the throng of tourists milling about. FATHER PUHL fires off a couple more rounds. People duck. RICKY and HARLEY hit the ground. PAULA has PETE by the nape of the neck, kicking him in the butt and kneeing him in the gonads.)

PASTOR JEHOVAH: (at the top of his lungs) I need money to do the Lord’s work!

FATHER PUHL: (desperately) I’m gonna fuck him. I don’t care what else happens, I’m gonna fuck Ricky!

PETE: (between taking punches to the gut from PAULA) He’s mine! I’m gonna fuck him. Ugh. Argh! Uh...gonna...fuck...Ricky...

(DR. JAMESON emerges from stage right sans his toupee. His head is completely bald and he looks awful with no hair. The entire ensemble freezes and looks at him in shock and horror.)

DR. JAMESON: (innocently amidst the confusion) Anyone know a good barber?

(The action stops. All interest in RICKY - the gun, the fight, the fracas – halts. DR. JAMESON stands center stage, rubbing his head. RICKY and HARLEY stand and move to front and center. PAULA and PETE dust themselves off. PASTOR JEHOVAH drops his arms to his side, still in possession of the flag and Bible. CUE MUSIC: the slow, 4/4 ballad chording of the intro to “I’ll Never Have to Jack the Dog Again” begins. This is a parody of love songs and is a duet between RICKY and HARLEY that develops into a full-blown grand finale.)

I’ll Never Have To Jack the Dog Again
Track 16 – Key of C

RICKY: Almost all my life I’ve lived alone in some respects The only love I’ve ever known’s been solitary sex But things have changed for good and I know that my life Won’t mean a thing If you’re not with me

HARLEY: Suddenly I feel fulfilled, I’m living out a dream Now I’ve got another hand to help me with my cream And even all the thrills I’m feeling from your kiss
Just can’t compare
To this

(Chorus)

RICKY: I know I’ll
Never, ever have to jack the dog again
Doo, doo, doo
No need to spill my seed
I’ve found a friend
For all the times I’ve spent
Just strokin’ in the can
I’ll never have to jack the dog again

HARLEY: I’m thanking you for saving me from finding other means
Not to mention all the money spent on magazines
And every quarter that I’ve pumped into the slot
Has finally paid off
It’s your slot I’ve got

TOGETHER: No more little blisters hide beneath my underwear
My fingers get a break from spending so much time down there
So as we lock the door and slowly dim the light
I’m happy you’re here
Tonight

(Repeat Chorus)

(The key change denotes a long, slow dramatic build-up into the final round of the chorus, in which the ENSEMBLE has locked arms and is doing a chorus line step-kick routine. The song ends with RICKY and HARLEY smiling at one another, obviously in love and ready to give it up to one another.)

FULL ENSEMBLE: (Reprise of Chorus) Final wrap-up with everyone singing an a capella version of “shave and a hair cut – two bits”)

Curtain
CHAPTER 5

DISCUSSION AND PROPOSALS

This epilogue may seem rather dicey at first glance given that traditional conclusions often link statistical, or, at the very least, some form of “objective” results to prior knowledge with the goal of arriving at new information. In this case, however, the “findings” are obviously a creative theatrical concoction borne of the same pen as the rest of the study, which makes such a conventional approach difficult, if not implausibly incongruent. Nonetheless, this chapter seeks to achieve a reasonable facsimile thereof by tying the literature to the musical to the aforementioned criticism from a scholarly perspective, focusing on consistent communicative patterns and recurring thematic claims – the “thesis,” as it were – inherent to a venture of this sort. It is grounded in theory and example, coming from an angle that emphasizes analytical academic conventions in the field of communication studies commingled with various (and varied) opinions.

Herein lies an internal communication conundrum: given that I wrote the dialogue, lyrics and music, I must fill the schizophrenic roles of astronomer and nebula, biologist and amoeba, observer and observed, which obviously would not be the case had the libretto and score been composed by someone else. This carries an inherent bias, as it is reasonable that any artist would wish to vehemently defend his or her work, particularly in the face of negative criticism. This is not to suggest the critiques are off-putting and pessimistic; only that the diverse feedback begs a response. It also starkly illustrates
interpretative discrepancies that could stem from differences in the age, education, vocation and personality of the four critics while emphasizing the ongoing debate between authorial intent versus audience perception.

The point of this exercise is to show that musical theatrical comedy is a valid form of human communication, worthy of study and supported by enough research to indicate its legitimacy. Since much of it is rhetorical in nature, rooted more so in nuance than numbers, it seems only befitting that the bulk of this chapter deal with persuasive elements and the nebulous domain known as “feeling” or “affectation.” It is crucial to repeat, however, that artistic undertakings can be viewed from at least two perspectives: subjective effect and objective criteria. In other words, a play could be labeled “good” or “bad” when measured against a certain set of standards, yet another piece of theater might not meet these definitive customs and still move an audience on an emotional level. Conversely, a different staged work could be technically “perfect,” yet possessing little human appeal; the “x” factor, as some would say. Unfortunately, this can create semantic confusion in that people tend to embrace the equation, “I like it = it is good.” This is important to remember when assessing any kind of art; for example, it is entirely possible to dislike the music of Stevie Wonder, yet it would be difficult, if not impossible, to deny his exceptionally clever compositional ideas and impeccable executional prowess.

Therefore, these closing remarks begin by recognizing elements in the play and criticism that complement the four components of the literature, followed by arguments that identify them as applicable communicative artifacts, and conclude with a personal
address for the purpose of contextual clarification in conjunction with recommendations for future research.

Strange Bedfellows: Subjective Views of Objective Materials

Once again the Aristotelian notion of “setting the object before the eyes” demands specific identification regarding that which could be considered the “object.” As a complete unit, *Heavens To Betsy, Heels To Jesus* finds itself described as a “rites of passage musical” (Burgan), a “teaching vehicle” (Kenney), and an “odyssey” (Grifall), illustrating the perceptual differences among consumers while advancing Burke’s conceptions of arbitrary meaning. The script and songs, though stalwart, immutable entities, trigger varying responses that come as a result of different backgrounds, training, and personal characteristics. Grifall’s theatrical milieu is steeped in classicism, eliciting his statement concerning one of its central tenets: that a story “should result in some change or enlightenment befalling the characters, especially the protagonist...in the case of Ricky, his revelation came with minimal conflict and without warning or logical progression, catching me off guard.”

He thus found sense in nonsense by evaluating the show from a different frame of reference; i.e., “By looking at the play as a fast-paced romp, not grounded in reality...I was able to justify...a lighthearted parody filled with fun, silly songs and sillier characters – full of flounce and flurry, signifying nothing.” This makes a startling revelation concerning context and criteria; it is possible to render conflicting opinions of the same object by changing that which it is measured against. A good example of this would be notions of what constitutes being “overweight.” If someone wished to show increasing rates of obesity, they would simply need to adjust the numbers; if a six-foot
man is considered obese at 200 pounds, merely drop the standard to 180 pounds and
presto; there now appears to be more overweight men. Similarly, Grifall had to alter his
“operational definition” in order to yield a more positive assessment, which he may have
done to avoid harsher criticism of a friend’s admittedly feeble script.

Kenney grants “the object” slightly more credibility in that he sees “a rather angry
play…leavened with enough humor and music to temper the rage,” reflecting Berger’s
remark that “the psychoanalytic theory of humor argues that humor is essentially masked
aggression” (1993). He may be inadvertently correct; however, a more likely scenario is
an angry author who has merely extrapolated his antagonism in a cathartic release
through fictional characters. A play cannot be “angry,” but an individual certainly can.
This is not to suggest that all artistic expression is a direct representation of a literal state
of mind, as cynicism and distrust could be simply illusory traits of the “dysfunctional
relationships…taboo topics and offensive characters” cited by Grifall. Regardless, these
diverse views emphasize Burke’s insistence that “the rhetoric work at the level of
opinion” (54) and highlight Langer’s claims of sensory stimuli converted into symbols;
that which seems juvenile to some carries artistic maturity to others. For instance, Grifall
“had trouble with characters breaking the fourth wall to speak directly to the audience,”
yet Breindel praises the same methodology when he says, “Another fun element is the
post-modern way the characters know they’re in a play.”

This implies shared meaning, which, in most cultures can be ascribed to language. It is
interesting, however, that although Katz notes a kinship “between the form and content of
language and the form and content of conceptualization,” generational differences within
a culture can apparently skew audience perception. Grifall contends that, “Suddenly, it
seemed, he (Ricky) and Harley were in love and I felt none of the groundwork had been laid for the formation of their relationship.” Kenney referred to the plot as “perhaps a bit banal,” but Breindel sees a “narrative flow…taking the audience on a well-paced, active journey toward someplace intriguing.” It is important to note that Breindel is considerably younger and therefore these conceptual discrepancies may not be rooted in the culture of words nearly so much as the culture of age. They may also be due to professional predispositions; Grifall, Burgan and Kenney are actors and directors grounded in live theater. Breindel is a largely a movie critic with an M.A. in radio, film and television studies.

Consider Burgan’s suggestion that the show be “done by a ‘gay-hip’ producer, director and cast,” Kenney’s assumption it was written for a “young homosexual male audience,” Grifall’s call for the viewers to “approach the piece with a keen ear and clever eye,” and Breindel’s conjecture that “this will appeal to many contemporary audiences.” Each of these comments concerns message reception more so than message production and points to a niche market in terms of both demographics and intelligence. The play is not for children (yet it seems like it is primarily adults who would take offense), nor would those of a traditionally conservative bent likely find it appealing. It is doubtful that too many heterosexuals could identify, although a more relaxed approach to homosexuality might generate interest among a straight audience. This echoes Cassier in respect to a shift from “a merely practical attitude to a symbolic attitude” (33) in that we often assume people accept or reject art based on subjective feelings triggered by emblematic signs that represent preconceived ideas.
To slightly distort an album title from the rock band Led Zeppelin, "The Play Remains the Same." In other words, Breindel, Burgan, Grifall and Kenney read precisely the same words and heard exactly the same songs, yet their commentary reflects different "absolutes" in the theater of their respective psyches. Surely, each of their perspectives contains kernels of accuracy as analogized by the maxim, "Truth is like a barn door. No one who throws at it can miss, but no one can hit all of it." Yet any analysis should look at authorial intent as perhaps the closest arbiter of defining art, as people do not put pen to paper or brush to canvas or fingers to keyboard without a specific result in mind. The forthcoming endnotes exemplify – and expound upon – precisely this controversial premise.

**Humor and Music: Funny Is As Funny Sounds**

Interestingly, the play bills itself as satirical, but Kenney labeled it a "farce," which implies a lack of restraint that supports Grifall's alliterative accusations about "flounce and flurry." Breindel refers to "Tom's sharp, sarcastic sense of humor," and Burgan "found the piece to be very strong – solid songs, much humor, and very producible." Surely it could be any or all; yet again this places the focus on intent versus interpretation while illustrating how creative efforts sometimes turn out differently than anticipated. Songs and narratives often write themselves, to use a tritely pretentious, if not pretentiously trite, phrase. But there is a good deal of accuracy in its declaration; artists of all sorts might begin a project with a specific result in mind, but somewhere during the process the creation takes on a life of its own and leads the creator by the hand. Playwrights often talk about being spoken to by the muses, which is a mythological way of describing that intangible known as "inspiration." In fact, the phenomenon is more
than merely motivation. It is almost as if the next line or sentence or melodic phrase already exists somewhere in the cosmos for the artist to simply harness and tame.

None of the critics discussed musical technicalities beyond “pop rock beats,” “fun and bouncy” (Grifall), and a “catchy, appealing melody” (Breindel). Burgan noted his appreciation for lyrical content but disregarded musical construction, which neglects the incredibly persuasive power in the commingling of words and music. Perhaps this oversight is because they are not musicians and do not fully understand chord structures and melodic climax construction, yet the music has distinctive communicative characteristics, particularly the placement of lyrical laugh lines at the end of phrases in which the melody either ascends or descends the scale. This is similar to the rise in vocal pitch when asking a question versus its complementary lowering when making a statement, and works remarkably well in verse form when seven lines function as a set-up for the eighth and final line, which is the “kicker.” If the melodic route noodles around for seven stanzas and then makes its final run up the scale during the punch line, the effect is two-fold and significant. Listen to the verses in “Everyone’s Fucked Up In The Head But Me” or “Sauna Takin’ Queers”: the last line in each verse is the laugh line, and its musical equivalent plops its way up the scale from the second to the fifth.

The bass line on the piano then follows a mirror image in the opposite direction, which is known in musical circles as a contrapuntal pattern. As an illustration, consider the electronic “da-bing” a computer makes when someone inserts a flash drive; the pitches are one fifth apart from each other, and the tonal jump is from lower to higher, indicating a positive connotation that “this is now hooked up and ready to go.” Upon removing the flash drive, the computer produces the same two pitches, this time from
higher to lower: "da-bong," suggesting the hardware has been removed and its usefulness is temporarily over. When the vocal line and piano bass line move in the same contrapuntal manner, particularly when the lyrics are set up so the funniest phrase is sung to the ascending melody, the listener is hit with the joke contained in the poetry supplemented by the rising tonal inflection.

This echoes Rishe's notions of "the playful incongruity that doesn't fit our logical expectations or our normal view of things" (44), in that both melody and lyrics spend the bulk of the verse teasing the listener in a form of aural and cerebral foreplay, culminating in the payoff of the unexpected. In short, it makes people laugh. They know something is coming, they are not sure what, the tension builds, then wham: they are smacked with the key phrase. Additionally, using the bass line "walk-up" in a 4/4 time, country shuffle beat carries sort of a wink-and-nudge feeling in its flippancy and nonchalance. It is difficult to take seriously, possibly because many old classic country songs used it frequently and did take it seriously. It is, therefore, a musical cliché and a ripe candidate for parody.

Conversely, other musical forms simply do not as easily lend themselves to humor. It is much easier to write an eight-stanza verse with four sets of syllabically rhythmic, rhyming couplets that set up a punch line than it is to fashion comedic lyrics around a rock beat or a ballad. Ten of the sixteen songs (technically eleven, as "Timmy Raun, the Human Bong" was not originally a slow tune) are designed in the "oompah" or "boom-chick" style; and while humor is generally subjective, there is no question that these songs are funnier. This may be a personal preference, but consider the material by master musical parodist Tom Lehrer; he is lyrically and compositionally adept with various
musical styles, but the bulk of his songs are also written in this traditional, polka-like 4/4
time, such as the bitingly satirical “National Brotherhood Week”:

Oh, the Protestants hate the Catholics
And the Catholics hate the Protestants
And the Hindus hate the Moslems
And everybody hates the Jews
But during National Brotherhood Week
National Brotherhood Week
It’s National Ev’ryone-smile-at-
One-another-hood week
Be nice to people who
Are inferior to you
It’s only for a week so have no fear
Be grateful that it doesn’t last all year

This song is written in the same tempo and with the same flavor as ‘Everyone’s Fucked
Up in the Head But Me,” “Alcoholic Homosexual Pedophile,” “Moral Majority March,”
“Where There’s Snow There’s Dough,” and five other tunes from Heavens/Heels. So is
much of Lehrer’s other material. The same holds true for the humorous essence of artists
such as Jim Stafford, Mark Russell, Hoyt Axton, Jon Lovitz, Adam Sandler, Tompall
Glaser, Shel Silverstein, Tom Paxton and Randy Newman.

Why? Because, quite simply, it is funnier.

Grifall seems to corroborate this claim with his commentary about “sharp lyrics” and
the music being “fun and bouncy,” but fails to expound upon the “bounciness” as a
primary vehicle to carry the sharpness, as well as the fun. Wade’s claim that “people
make music meaningful” (10) supports this assertion; there would be little congruency
between, say, the lyrics to the hymn “How Great Thou Art” set to a punk rock styling.
But is this incompatibility inherent or arbitrary? As odd as it may sound to attempt the
mixing of sacred song lyrics with heavy metal power chords, and as odd as it is to
provide two conflicting responses to the same question, the answer is “both.” Recall
Mursell’s observation about the central nervous system’s sensitivity to vibrational frequency, and then consider soothing words laid over a fast, loud, frenetic soundtrack. It is easy to spot an innate discrepancy coupled with shared meaning, dwelling together in the same basement of theoretical classification.

Of course, the songs are not the only means of humor. The critics use language such as “fast paced romp,” “darkly funny,” sarcasm,” “mocking,” “smart and witty” “wordplay” and “lampoon,” among other descriptive modifiers, yet Dentith has reminded us about the “anti-academic nature of parody” creating “disputes about definition.”

Heavens/Heels is unquestionably both parody and satire as noted by Nilsen, “the mismatch between language and earlier language” and “a mismatch between language and reality” (101). Father Puhl’s “ode to his own sexual kink” (Breindel) mocks the rampant pedophilia that for centuries has been practically a sacrament in the Catholic Church, Harley’s flamboyant, aggressive behavior ridicules the gay stereotype. Dr. Jameson exposes pompous charlatans in all professions and Pastor Jehovah is a fictitious dig at the Reverend Jerry Falwell. To a certain extent, in fact, Ricky’s naiveté is commentary regarding Midwest simplicity.

Some of these portrayals might seem brutal in their outrageousness, which, again, supports Kenney’s use of the word “angry.” But what is humor if it is not marinated in the contrary and sautéed in the subversive? There is an axiom that says something to the effect of; “There are two kinds of jokes; clean ones and funny ones,” which implies that a statement or punch line or comedic situation must run counter to the norm. If it does not, it merely languishes like a dead fish and is essentially pointless, reducing the content to that of the mundane and pedestrian. Not everyone will find this play to be funny, but that
might be more of an indication of his or her inability to “get” humor than it is a statement about the material, which, to quote Lehrer himself, is bordering on “fugacious ephemera which by now should have been of artifactual interest only to scholars (although in what field I can’t imagine) [foreword].

Queerly Odd or Oddly Queer?

At first glance the play would undoubtedly be labeled “gay,” particularly if defined by Barbato’s comment about John Waters’ movies: “…it’s the fabulous outrage…these films were made by someone who was an outsider, who had a slightly twisted view of the world around him” (interview). The show may not be quite as antithetical to convention as Waters’ *Pink Flamingos*, in which the late drag performer Divine takes a bite of human feces, yet there is no question many people would be shocked by this collection of “outrageous lyrics, dysfunctional relationships and over-the-top characters” (Grifall). Does this make it a gay play? Are gay characters, themes, and connections necessarily “gay?” Would the same be said of a play with heterosexual characters and situations: “Oh, that’s a straight play?” It is entirely possible the only reason the label “gay” is used is precisely because homosexuality is not the norm.

Therefore Kenney’s musings about “the argot of the homosexual community” serves to purport the show as a communicative vehicle that shines the queer flashlight of revelation upon the cockroaches of straight ignorance. This may sound vehemently heterophobic, but it is not intended as such. Gay culture is different, with its own jargon, its own set of rules, its own behavioral idiosyncrasies and its own hierarchy of acceptable activities. However, this should not in any way imply that gays ought be held to different standards; after all, we are human beings. At some point that commonality must trump all
others, which identifies the exclusive world of “gay communication” as nothing more than another oddball subculture. And if a gay musical theatrical comedy could succeed in a venue such as San Francisco’s Castro Theater but not on Broadway, let the reason be due to its universal crappiness rather than its elite excellence.

In other words, gay people might like the play simply because of its gay subject matter, irrespective of any other qualities. And that would be distressing.

Gay characters have become rather common – even popular – in contemporary entertainment, yet many of them are quite ordinary, which seems like a method of pushing an agenda that “gays are just like everyone else.” But examine Heavens/Heels closely and the message is not that of gay acceptance, or really, of anything remotely “gay.” The “makeshift community” of which Breindel speaks might utilize gay situations and frame its content in the gay vernacular, but that content is pointed at institutional traditions, routinely accepted idioms, and hypocritical behavior. In this sense the play is no gayer than the television programs All In the Family or The Mary Tyler Moore Show, though certainly not as well written or conceived. Those programs used a blue-collar, Brooklyn family and a Minneapolis newsroom as contextual backdrops, but the thrust of the dialogue and situations was to make myriad social statements that had little to do with the milieu in which they were set.

Appropriately, so it goes with Heavens/Heels. Many people, gays included, might consider it a “gay play.” Authorial intent, however, does not. Neither does a close read.

Arguments

It seems rather odd that the study and creation of a musical theatrical comedy would be considered an anomaly as a communication-based research project, yet there appears
to be little work in this area. Perhaps this is because music and theater are relegated to the
discipline of Fine Arts and the domain of humor belongs primary to Literature, yet, as is
often reiterated, human communication must come before any other area of human
activity. It is not possible to communicate any type of information without, well,
communicating (or communicating well), which would indicate that most, if not all,
scholarly undertakings could be framed as a form of communication. People see, hear,
feel, speak and think about everything from business administration to breast cancer to
*Huck Finn:* and it is in the seeing, hearing, feeling, speaking and thinking wherein
communication resides.

As the review of literature supports, music operates on emotional and physical levels,
often so intertwined that it is difficult to distinguish one from the other. Consider its use
as a mood-enhancing agent in shopping malls or hair salons or casinos or elevators or
bars or while “on hold” during a telephone call. It can soothe, it can placate, it can
induce, it can provoke and it can entertain. One of the largest dilemmas for musicians,
however, is to avoid looking at music too technically, as it can ruin the experience.
Ideally it should “wash over” an individual as art before it is dissected as science, but the
musical mind is often geared toward a content analysis of sorts. Both points of view are
valid and communicative, yet there is a delicate balance between comprehension and
enjoyment in that too much of one yields too little of the other.

Music also plays a major role in every society. Nations have patriotic anthems,
commemorative events such as weddings and funerals demand its use, advertising
agencies seek its mysteriously manipulative wiles, movies would be largely ineffectual
without it, and religious organizations rely upon it heavily. From the highbrow intricacies
of a Mozart piano concerto to the be-bop jazz of Miles Davis to the primitive thumping of a Native American “rain dance,” tonal and rhythmic patterns communicate emotions, thoughts, creative wherewithal, and technical virtuosity. It is, in fact, a means of speaking without using language that is, unfortunately, studied primarily as its own pedagogic exercise rather than a vehicle for communication.

When music is connected to a visual sensation, in this case a stage full of costumed characters spouting irreverent dialogue, its communicative effects become even more intense. Amusing songs are rare, and the marriage of comedic material to musical ideas seems almost a bit rebellious by its mere existence. Yet it is important to remember that a song is both lyrics and music and therefore can be observed as three separate creatures: the words, the tune, and the combination thereof. Each of these components sports communicative properties on various levels, and, as previously mentioned, can be viewed from both objective and subjective perspectives.

Humor also functions in much the same way. It can communicate a frivolous chuckle or a scathing social observation or a hearty belly laugh, primarily by emphasizing the unexpected. For example, most jokes are constructed in triplicate; the first two instances are designed to create a pattern that is disrupted by the third: 1) A guy and a monkey walk into a bar and “x” occurs. 2) A guy and a monkey walk into a bar and “x” occurs again. 3) A guy and a monkey walk into a bar and “y” occurs. It is, of course, the breaking of the pattern wherein the humor lies, which is why most jokes (and song lyrics) contain a set-up. It is the unusual that we find funny, the abnormal or the absurd.

Perhaps more importantly, though, comedic writing often communicates something about the temperament of its author. An adept use of language indicates a relatively
articulate person, whereas more visual humor could point to a less “intelligent” creator. This is not to insinuate that physical sight gags are performed by only the cerebrally inept, but certainly that they require less creative conceptual wherewithal. The communicative avenue between comedian and audience is also quite revealing; how many times has someone uttered the phrase, “You’re writing over their heads?” Therein rests an interesting predicament, in that if writers know the majority of their readers won’t understand the content, they should perhaps “dumb it down.” Or seek a more sophisticated audience.

Laughter, of course, has been shown to produce physical well-being, which is an odd combination of external communication triggering internal communication resulting in hormonal secretions that just plain “feel good.” The knee-jerk reaction of a laugh is so spontaneous as to allow little time for thought, which seems like a reasonable explanation as to why funny people are generally quite sharp; they do not require much time to process the disrupted pattern or the subtle innuendo or the sly suggestion. Many people have experienced the “I saw that coming” phenomenon in that they have anticipated the punch line simply due to their ability to spot a repeated idea and arrive at the conclusion before the conclusion arrives to them.

It remains a mystery as to why humor always seems to take an intellectual back seat to that which is considered “serious” commentary, primarily because it is more complex and deserves a decidedly elevated status. Making an argument for or against a proposition at face value is simply a one-dimensional set of statements, but stating a case for or against the same proposition through humor is layered. Its communicative road is paved with intricacies and nuance and requires keen perceptual skills from the audience and even
keener delivery skills on the part of the communicator. Additionally, the role of humor in society occupies a curiously schizophrenic position. Rare is the person who does not like to laugh, yet rare is the person who grants humor legitimacy as philosophical conjecture. This may be more of a miscommunication of sorts, internally and externally. It could also be an example of The Emperor’s New Clothes: people know that good humor is “smarter” than sober reflection, but nobody wishes to admit it for fear of being considered “lowbrow.”

Another item to consider is the physical structure of a theater, what with the uniformity of seats that forces members of an audience into rote boxes that render them little more than cattle. The focal point, of course, is the stage, and its mere placement as the center of attention functions as a communicative tool of power. One entertainer can command the interest of thousands of people, not only because of his or her unique talents, but also because of the layout of the venue. Similarly, cathedrals and classrooms are set up in pretty much the same way, creating an authoritative vessel for the few over the many. Add lighting, costumes, props and music and at first glance it would be difficult to discern between a play and a church service. Surely this is a potent means of communicating not only the content of the message, but an underlying presupposition that the masses are dispensable and interchangeable but the actor or priest or teacher is not.

Taken to its logical conclusion, the idea that musical comedies communicate is, to use a colloquial phrase, a no-brainer. The trick is to state specifically that which is being analyzed, as well as to decide (and declare) precisely which context frames Aristotle’s
elusive "object." Shared meaning, after all, ought to be present in message creation as well as message reception. Without it any form of cohesive collective is impossible.

Endnotes Off the Deep End

This is the grand finale, if not the curtain call, of this rather daunting enterprise. In keeping with the traditional theme, most musicians perform a prescribed "set list" in concert, yet their encores are often chosen at random depending upon the general mood and dynamic between themselves and the audience. In much the same spirit, I claim these last few pages as mine to expound upon authorial intent, clarify some misconceptions, and essentially lend a personal touch to an academic project that is probably more self-revealing than most. As a caveat and a simple statement of fact: I find it excruciatingly difficult to write in a formal tone, therefore the forthcoming words may be considerably more colorful than the preceding 46,000.

I would be remiss if I did not begin this literary post-coital cigarette without expressing my gratitude to these professionals for the time and energy they donated to this project. Bob, Marcus, Griffy and Ron – I cannot thank you enough. You did me an enormous favor for no recompense other than the satisfaction garnered by helping a friend. Might I suggest you shame me into buying you lunch, if not dinner and drinks? But do it soon. I have a selective memory when it comes to parting with money.

One item of business: Marc Breindel gave me undue praise for the rhyme scheme in "Teeny Bopper Weenie" by claiming it "suggests Latin Catholic liturgy." I did not intend for the line “I really don’t meanie to make a scenie” to parody the ritual; I was merely having fun with words. I cannot, in good conscience, take credit for that which was purely an accident. Yet this is an excellent example of intent versus interpretation, albeit
perhaps in reverse. Usually a writer places an idea on the table and it is ignored or misinterpreted. In this case I placed nothing on the table but was hailed as clever. If I were a politician I would already have taken several bows, if not several bribes.

“Timmy Raun, the Human Bong” seems to have struck a chord with Burgan and Breindel, other than the C Major in which it is written. The former found it “to be very funny.” The latter thinks that, “Making fun of water on the brain goes too far for my sensibilities, and likely for many other viewers.” I wrote the song in high school about a hydrocephalic classmate with whom I used to smoke pot and who is familiar with the song. Our little clique had several laughs as a result (of both the song and the pot), and no one even entertained the idea of being offended. As I stated earlier, the dialogue and characters were written around existing songs (except “Where There’s Snow There’s Dough” and “If You’re Gonna Stick it In, You Better Stick it Out”) and I wanted to incorporate “Timmy Raun” while providing a vehicle to get to Joe’s death. If Tim himself doesn’t care, why should anyone else?

Burgan is right about “Fat Relatives.” It doesn’t fit. I forced it in like a poorly lubricated dildo. He is also right about the word “sauna,” in that it is regional. But it is the correct, authentic pronunciation; the folks who invented the sauna are Finlanders, and they pronounce it “sow-na.” Big city yuppies that don’t know their history and are willing to spend $200 to sit naked in a room full of hot stones pronounce it “saw-na.” (Perhaps I just found another use for the dildo.) But all joking aside, the script should reflect this prior to the song in some sort of humorous fashion, if for no other reason than to make Ricky’s pronunciation easier to understand.
But again, the play was written to showcase the tunes; you could even say it is a forum for ‘em. Grifall found some “repetitive and unnecessary,” but he is approaching the show from a traditional perspective in which “Musical numbers should explode out of dialogue when simple talking is no longer enough to convey the emotions a character is feeling.” He is correct in a Rodgers and Hammerstein sort of way, but let’s not forget context. Incidentally, Grifall claims, “Music is always intrusive into drama and it is the playwright’s challenge to make it fit seamlessly into his plot and move that plot along,” which implies Kenney inaccurately identified “believable dialogue and song lyrics that not only help establish character but advance the plot.” Fascinating. I wrote the plot and characters to fit the lyrics and move the songs along.

Herein lays another communication conundrum that clearly illustrates a definitive split between different frames of reference among readers, as well as discrepancies between what I intended and what others gleaned. At what point is shared meaning shared? Kenney seems to think I wrote the show for young gay men as a “teaching vehicle,” as well as a “plea for more tolerance and understanding from the heterosexual community.” Grifall said, “The intentions of the playwright were to tell a conventional story...through unconventional means.” Once again, misappropriated credit finds itself at my feet: I wrote the play for my own jollies, which is the only legitimate reason to write anything. I would never plead for “tolerance,” whatever that means, and I hope to God Almighty no one takes this seriously enough to consider it educational. I wrote it so I could get a few narcissistic chuckles. Period.

I may have one ulterior motive, and if I do it is to slap around people I don’t like. I am extremely cynical, and I have a virulent distrust of human beings in general, particularly
those who seek power over others through whatever means. In a way, the play could be considered one gigantic middle finger placed squarely in the face of society, validating Kenney’s musings about angry content. The rough-hewn characters, inflammatory dialogue, cheeky lyrics, bad puns and sexual innuendos are not intended to be idiosyncratic character temperaments, but manifestations of my personality. Recall the nod to Robert Heinlein in that his characters largely resemble him? The same applies: I may not be Father Puhl, but some of his comments are things I would (and did) say. And Paula Mason’s bitter comments are mine.

Interestingly, though, is how the play changed during the course of its creation. For instance, I had no intention of the characters making smart-ass asides to the audience and to one another, but I found this form of self-deprecating humor to be an efficient, if not somewhat cheap, means of making this work. I have made repeated comments about my deficiencies as a dramatist, probably because I feel my dialogue is inadequate and my story-telling abilities weak. And what better way to do this than to let my own creation insult me? Not only does it act as disclaimer that states, essentially, “I don’t know what I’m doing,” but it does so in the same tone and with the same machinery that I use to poke fun at others.

This is supported by Kenney’s commentary about “a plot that is perhaps a bit banal” and Grifall’s contention of a “conventional story.” Assuredly, I could have written a “revue,” in which the songs are performed as individual units with little relationship to each other except for the gay subject matter and first-person mockery. But I chose the narrative form of a play, partly because I simply wanted to and partly because I felt the genre would be a great means of satirizing itself as well as its targets. It is in this betrayal
of form that satire can also thrive; in fact, it is a classic example of Rishel’s “playful incongruity” coupled with the element of unexpected surprise.

Additionally, I feel that an audience would respond to a linear story of sorts better than a piecemeal collection of performed songs. I’ve made garnered considerable laughter by doing these tunes at parties and other social functions, but the idea of stringing them together through characters and dialogue seemed an intriguing variation. This is rather odd in that I am hardly what would be called a “theater queen,” yet surely I’ve dipped my toes into the waters of dramatic performance; but it is neither something to which I feel an affinity nor something that compels my creative interests. It was merely another challenge, and an intimidating one, at that. I had no idea how it would turn out in much the same way that I don’t know how a song is going to sound when I sit down to write it. As I reported in Chapter three, the genesis for my songs is a title phrase, and from there the rest is hatched. The same applies to the play; I just kept writing, and new ideas popped into my head as one concept led to another.

The biggest problem I encountered was coming up with dialogue that forces action; i.e., what the characters “do” that advances a plot. I had no real “story” in mind, no intrigue or mystery or edge-of-the-seat plot to conjure. My goal was not to tell a tale but to give the songs life through characters, which to some might sound like a crazy reason for writing a musical. I would think that most folks who set out to create a play believe they have a unique twist or unusual set of circumstances to describe, but the classic “little boy lost” theme had come to mind as a viable vehicle years ago, simply by looking at the content of the song lyrics. This inductive approach led to fashioning a Candide story of sorts; I could use the broad “stranger in a strange land” concept and juice it up with
outrageous characters to accommodate the lyrics, simply because enough of them pointed in that direction. For example, “Everyone’s Fucked Up in the Head But Me” and “Alcoholic Homosexual Pedophile” seemed perfectly suited for a group therapy scene, and “Sauna Takin’ Queers” simply had to be performed in a gay bathhouse.

I do not consider this to be great, or even good, theater, at least in the traditional sense. However, given that this artistic vision changes from the page to the stage, it is impossible to accurately summarize the play as produced simply because of its presently raw form. I can see audiences laughing heartily over the songs, yet apprehensive about the story. One of the key components to good drama is, for instance, inventing a protagonist with whom people can identify and empathize. I don’t think Ricky has any qualities that make him a desirable leading man; all that matters, for my purposes, is that he is young and somewhat naïve. But it affects the overall product in that an audience should ideally care for its fictitious hero.

Perhaps my bias is showing, in that I assume since it is the songs I wish to feature it is the songs that others will find funny. They are the artifacts that make this hum, as it were, and without them the show would be dreck of the lowest order. Were I to put myself in the audience I would undoubtedly chuckle over the tunes much more so than the script. And who knows how the characters might develop? Actors interpret roles, wardrobe personnel devise costumes and set designers create a mood. Again, that which is invented here will evolve should I undertake a staging simply due to impromptu input, spur-of-the-moment changes, improvisational urges and any other sort of intermediary stimuli. For example, the director could make any number of changes on a whim.
Another bias, of course, is that which comes by means of acting as both the analyst and the analyzed. This is not to suggest that artists cannot accurately define their work, as I think they certainly can. I believe I have rendered a fair assessment of both the strengths and weaknesses this product offers without lapsing into a defensive mode, yet this final chapter exists primarily for the purpose of clarifying misconceptions in keeping with the notion that authorial intent points in a precise direction. I am certain that if I had conducted the same type of case study using another’s musical this entire project would carry a different flavor in that the chapters would not jump back and forth between first and third voice. And while it might be a more sterile assessment, it may also be less comprehensive in that I could not step into another playwright’s mind. I know what these songs mean, from whence they came, and what I wished to accomplish. I could not impose those ideas on another writer. In that sense, this subjective approach may actually render more precise “data,” for lack of a better term.

My purpose has been served in that I finally turned these ditties into a musical, but I doubt I will write another, simply because I’m not good at it. I will always write songs and always write pop journalism pieces, but those are the areas in which I glean the most satisfaction. Let dialogue and storytelling be proffered by those who do them best, and leave satirical musical representations to the handful of crazies, with whom I admittedly identify. Silliness is one thing, cynicism another, and cursed are those of us who dare mix these seemingly incongruent perspectives.

For example, one of the most subtly cynical songs is the finale, “I’ll Never Have To Jack the Dog Again.” I wrote it in my early twenties as a rebuttal to the syrupy love songs of the day with the notion that love doesn’t exist; that people think they’re happy when
they meet the elusive “person of their dreams,” but what they’re really happy about is that they will no longer have to masturbate. In this sense, the play is less of a “fantasy,” as Grifall calls it, but a slice of reality. He missed the point about the tune: Ricky and Harley could never “perform a true love duet in which they proclaim their love and realize that they are meant for each other,” because this thing called “love” is merely temporary insanity. The only love they feel is the self-centered relief of having a warm body in their bed, which is much closer to real life than people would like to admit. It also absurd that any hot, red-blooded twenty-one-year-old would ever have sex with a fat middle-aged man, unless there is money involved; yet the reality is that people usually settle for a less-than-ideal companion when they settle down. In other words, a cutie like Ricky would scoff at the prospect of a one-nighter with a schmuck like Harley. They might, however, cohabitate as a couple out of the practicality of financial and emotional support.

The musical elements of the song also function as a vivid example of satire in that the verses are sung in the form of a slow, schmaltzy ballad that leads the audience to believe it is hearing a love song. This complementary form, however, betrays that notion as the chorus kicks in: the snide, “oompah oompah” feel provides a musical contrast to the lyrical disparity and once again the audience knows it has been duped. The lyrics in the verse are allegorical, loaded with ambiguous meaning, and the musical form pushes the audience into an interpretative corner. In other words, the love duet that Grifall desires as a staple of musical theater is mocked primarily due to the meaning attached to musical genre. We expect tender music to house tender lyrics, and, for the most part, it does, but only in the verses, and then in a sneaky, vague manner.
In this sense, the play is sarcastic commentary that looks at the human situation "...through a critical mode which ridicules or otherwise attacks those conditions needing reformation in the opinion of the satirist" (Harris 1). It works on this very simple communicative level: fix it, or else. Breindel is correct in his assumption about Harley and Paula being heroes, and he is also correct in that I need to draw a clear distinction between the good guys and the bad guys. His example of Harley singing "I wont get caught molesting them/I'll just molest their dads" indeed makes it seem as though Harley would abuse children if he could, when I actually wrote the line as if it were sung by all teachers, with the notion that many have been busted for kiddie porn or other sex crimes against their students. In that context, it establishes that Harley *does* condemn pedophilia. But it does so inefficiently.

I once told a colleague this play is not political. She snorted something to the effect of, "Of course it's political. Everything's political." I suspect she is right. My primary goal is, of course, the cheap laugh, but my secondary purpose is to say, "Look, people. You're absurd. Stop it." If that is not communication of a painfully obvious sort, I do not know what is. The music communicates, the lyrics communicate, the characters communicate, the gags communicate, the dialogue communicates and the parody communicates. To kick this up another notch, perhaps future study could look at visual elements, which I largely and intentionally ignored, primarily because they are not my area of creative interest. Costumes, props, lighting, movement; all of these theatrical components operate on a rhetorical and physical level. Consider the blue spot light under which Ricky sings "Hershey Highway," or the full blown brightness of the opening street scene: the use of color and visual texture impacts perception, as does clothing, such as Paula's frumpy
outfit and poorly applied make-up. I would think the important thing is to realize that humor and, by extrapolation, all human communication is multi-residential. It lives both in the mind of the creator and the ear of the audience.

If *Heavens To Betsy, Heels To Jesus* can do one thing, I hope it is to make people laugh. If it generates some personal and societal reflection, great. However, to nip a phrase, you can lead a horse to water but you can't make him think. The only thing worse than a preacher is a preacher who masquerades as an artist, primarily because the fun takes a back seat to the message. And if you don't write for fun, you shouldn't be writing, which leads me to consider one more plausible proposition for more research in this area: write an entire dissertation in song form and deliver it live for the committee. In fact, you could call it *Thesis Christ Superstar*.

"Now that," to quote Marc Breindel, "is good, non-shitty dialogue."
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APPENDIX I

FALWELL AD PARODY

Jerry Falwell talks about his first time.

Figure 4.1 Reproduced with permission of L.F.P. Inc. and Larry Flynt.
Commentary
Ronald L. Kenney

Tom Moilanen has crafted a well-written musical piece for the theater. The basic structure is sound, consisting of two acts, interesting characters, a plot that is perhaps a bit banal, but, on the whole, the parts are cohesive.

HEAVENS/HEELS is a brilliant, little musical farce. A rather angry play, it is leavened with enough humor and music to temper the rage. Moilanen has an excellent grasp of language, of the argot of the homosexual community, and shows this in his believable dialogue and song lyrics that not only help establish character but advance the plot.

The author has written this, I believe, for a young homosexual male audience. In that sense, it is a teaching vehicle, proposing the possibilities of long-term relationships for the young men. Underlying this “lesson,” is a plea for more tolerance and understanding from the heterosexual community.
Rare is the musical theater artist who can create not only the libretto, the book, for a stage piece, but who can add the lyrics and the music. In that sense, HEAVENS/HEELS is far above the norm. I would very much like to see this play staged. It is worthy.
APPENDIX III

MARC BREINDEL CRITIQUE

“Heavens to Betsy, Heels to Jesus” by Tom Moilanen

Comments
Marc Breindel

“Heavens to Betsy, Heels to Jesus” is impressive on various levels. First, the music is great; Tom knows how to write a catchy, appealing melody and a clever lyric. Second, the characters are nicely developed; you get a good sense of who everyone is, especially the leads, which makes you care what happens in their fictional lives. Narrative flow is another of Tom’s strong points, taking the audience on a well-paced, active journey toward someplace intriguing.

Tom’s sharp, sarcastic sense of humor is well served by the darkly funny subjects he’s smartly chosen to lampoon. For example, he’s dead-on when Dr. Jameson tells Pete the Plumber in a group therapy session that he needs to accept himself, because “Only then can you change.” And I laughed out loud when I read the name of Pastor Jehovah’s church: “Church of God Thinks Just Like Me.” I especially enjoy Tom’s wordplay, as when a character suggests combining country music with rap to get “crap.”

Another fun element is the post-modern way the characters know they’re in a play. They laugh about the unreality of it all, and poke fun at the composer. “Musicals suck,” a character says at one point. “Please. People just start singing when they should be talking? What a lame-ass excuse for writing shitty dialogue.” Now, that’s good, non-shitty dialogue. It’s entertaining and it makes the play feel current.

Tom’s good humor makes those accursed songs fun. My favorite song is “Teeny Bopper Weenie,” Father Puhl’s ode to his own sexual kink. “Teeny Bopper Weenie” has a lively, infectious rhythm, and some fun wordplay like the alliterative chorus. It’s clever the way Tom suggest Latin Catholic liturgy with the line, “I really don’t meanie to make a scene” (it sounds like Latin when sung). Another comic song reminds me of the great 1950s-‘60s musical satirist Tom Lehrer: “Alcoholic Homosexual Pedophile.” I couldn’t help thinking of Lehrer’s “Poisoning Pigeons in the Park” and “The Masochism Tango.” It’s a pleasure to hear new comic songs in the arch, smart style.
Some of the more serious elements give “Heavens to Betsy” depth, which makes it compelling. Poor Ricky struggles so convincingly, you want to give him a (platonic) hug. When his friend Joe dies, you really feel for Ricky. The other characters also elicit sympathy; they feel real, and often sad. The unfortunate events of the play (Joe getting involved with drug dealers and then dying in a drug deal; several characters’ off-stage pedophilia; most characters’ sad sex lives) hook the audience in to see if maybe the characters’ lives will improve.

One key to the play’s success, I think, lies in the interaction between the characters; they give one another life, inviting us to join their social world. Even though their lives are troubled, they have a makeshift community that pulls the audience in. It feels like real Las Vegas community.

Another important element of “Heavens to Betsy” is, of course, a sense of “political incorrectness.” I expect this will appeal to many contemporary audiences. When you see characters who don’t apologize for their roughness (using racial epithets, declaring their ethical lapses), it can be refreshing when done in an upbeat, positive context like this one. For example, Joe sings a mocking song about his “fat...hillbilly” relatives, and you can tell it’s all in a friendly spirit. Later, when Ricky connects intimately with Harley, you see that overweight characters also get love here.

Some of the “political incorrectness” pushes the envelope. Making fun of water on the brain goes too far for my sensibilities, and likely for many other viewers. I would consider taking out that part, although I respect Tom’s instincts, whatever course he chooses.

Pedophilia is another touchy subject, obviously. It makes it hard to sympathize with characters when there’s a question of whether they’re abusing children. Tom might want to establish clearer lines between “acceptable” and “unacceptable” behavior. For example, Harley and Pete spar over Ricky, but it’s not always clear that Harley condemns pedophilia. Harley sings, “In between the craziness/I’m teachin’ little lads/But I won’t get caught molesting them/I’ll just molest their dads…” In the quick pace of a musical, audiences might interpret that as meaning that Harley does molest children and just “wpn’t get caught.” Sarcasm is at the heart of this play as it should be, but as a result it becomes unclear sometimes whether a character really means what he says, or is speaking facetiously. I’d make it clearer that the “heroes” are not abusing children, if only to maintain the audience’s sympathy and interest.

In that general spirit, it might improve the play to further differentiate between “good” characters and “bad” ones. (Or else Tom could make everyone a little darker, with no good guys, but I believe he means for Ricky, Harley and maybe Paula to be seen as essentially good.) Harley is so lecherous at first, it’s a little hard to accept him as the romantic partner for Ricky at the end. Might Harley be a little closer to Ricky’s age? If he were, say, 35, he’d still be 14 years older than Ricky, and it would feel less like “cradle-robbing” when they connect. It would also help the audience make the leap if there were
more foreshadowing that Ricky might be finding some charm in Harley earlier, maybe with Harley acting a bit less menacing.

Overall, I think “Heavens to Betsy, Heavens to Jesus” is terrific. I can’t wait to see it staged!
APPENDIX IV

ROBERT BURGAN CRITIQUE

Tom-
Re: Heavens to Betsy, Heels to Jesus

Overall I found the piece to be very strong – solid songs, much humor and very producible. Assuming it is done by a “gay-hip” producer, director and cast, it should work quite well as a “coming of age” or “rites of passage” musical.

Some specific responses:
1. It seems to call out for a song about Las Vegas since the town is so exciting and important to Joe and Ricky. There is, as you probably know, a tradition with many musicals of what I think of as “city-celebration” songs, e.g. “Everything’s Up to Date in Kansas City” (Oklahoma), “New York, New York (a Helluva Town)” (On The Town), “Bali Jai” (South Pacific), “Urinetown” (Urinetown), etc.

2. I just don’t understand: what is “The Cut That Doesn’t Heal”? I thought maybe I was too old to get it, so I played the song and showed the scene to a 34 year old man (my boyfriend) and he didn’t understand it either. We guessed cunt or asshole, but the lyrics don’t support either.

3. I don’t think “I’ve Got Fat Relatives” contributes anything in terms of plot or character to the piece. Of course you need a song for Joe. I just don’t think you’ve found it yet.

4. “Teeny Bopper Weenie” should be a big hit with the intended audience (which I assume to be gay men and Roman Catholic nuns)!

5. I found “Timmy Raun, the Human Bong” to be very funny.

6. Re: “Sauna Takin’ Queers”: As pronounced on your demo CD, the word is “sound-a.” I am used to it being pronounced “saw-na.” Is this a regional thing for Ricky?
7. The “Joe…is dead” curtain for Act I is very strong, although I missed him in Act II. You might consider an Act II flashback scene for Joe where he returns as a “ghost”/spectral figure ala Carousel, Les Miserables, Falsettos, etc.. Related to this, Ricky’s line (p 120) “I loved him like a brother” sounds like a song cue or song title.

8. Harley’s lyric “It’s all those fucking Jews” sounds like Dr. Jameson.

9. I love having a finale song about masturbation.

Again, congrats on such a solid piece of work.

Bob
Critique of “Heavens to Betsy” by T. Moilanen
Submitted by J. Grifall – February, 2007

The play, Heavens to Betsy, Heels to Jesus, is structured as a journey in which the lead character is searching for his heart’s desire; in this case, Ricky’s quest is for someone to whom he can give his love and who will love him back. Along the way he meets a bizarre mix of interesting and varied characters, none of whom are what they seem: a transsexual, a hypocritical preacher, a pedophile and a greedy conservative evangelical, even his best friend “Joe”, with whom Ricky moves to Las Vegas, turns out to be more of a risk-taker than Ricky had imagined as he watches Joe descend into depravity. Only the outlandish video-store employee/ex-heterosexual divorced father of six, “Harley”, is shown honestly for what he really is, faults and all. This, of course, is the person with whom Ricky falls in love and (presumably) lives with happily ever after.

Any odyssey should result in some change or enlightenment befalling the characters, especially the protagonist; he must either be rewarded or punished, but he must learn something in the dramatic process. In the case of Ricky, his revelation (finding love in the character of Harley) came with minimal conflict and without warning or logical progression, catching me off guard. Suddenly, it seemed, he and Harley were in love and I felt none of the groundwork had been laid for the formation of their relationship. By looking at the play as a fast-paced romp, not grounded in reality and certainly not conforming to traditional dramatic conventions, I was able to justify the rapid pace at which the story sped forward. I had to step back and re-evaluate the play for it to make sense as a lighthearted parody filled with fun, silly songs, and sillier characters – full of flounce and flurry, signifying nothing, thereby making the fast, uneven and some non-existent transitions acceptable to this reader.

The characters are cleverly written, using stereotype to their advantage. Each displays complete characters as described by the playwright and the unwavering make-up of these characters is again displayed through and through in their lyrics. I must admit that I often found this convention jarring and thought it tended to undermine any depth the play might have achieved, making it difficult for me to “buy-in” to the characters’ commitment to the play. With the frequent asides, I can imagine the difficulty a performer might find in performing a role and believing in his character.
The many songs were filled with sharp lyrics set to pop rock beats, lending an easy-listening characteristic to the carryout tunes. Though the music and lyrics were both fun and at times, even bouncy, I found some of it repetitive and unnecessary. Music is always intrusive into drama and it is the playwright’s challenge to make it fit seamlessly into his plot and move that plot along. Musical numbers should explode out of dialogue when simple talking is no longer enough to convey the emotions a character is feeling. Characters sing because they must, nothing else will do. To that end, I wish Ricky had sung about his dream of finding “Mr. Right”, and demonstrated his desire and angst through song. Rather, Ricky sang about what he didn’t want (“Hershey Highway”) and what he finally gets (“I’ll Never Have To…”), but never about his heart’s desire, nor did he and Harley perform a true love duet in which they proclaim their love and realize that they are meant for each other. Again, as a fantasy, I could accept this, but as far as dramatic form, musical numbers should bare souls and define emotional character, these did not.

I found the writing to be smart and witty, calling upon the audience to not only listen, but to approach the piece with a keen ear and clever eye if he is going to come away with a complete understanding of and appreciation for the piece. I believe that the purpose of the play and the intentions of the playwright were to tell a conventional story of a young man’s quest for love through unconventional means: outrageous lyrics, dysfunctional relationships and over-the-top characters. Is there value in this? I think so. Was the attempt worthwhile? Certainly. As spectators, we have become mired in cliché, bogged down by trivia, expectant of obvious outcomes and hindered by trite storytelling with commonplace morals. I felt the play took a fresh approach to an old story. I may not necessarily approve of the words, subject or personalities, but I appreciate and applaud the writing, taboo topics and offensive characters. After all, one doesn’t need to like a work of art to be affected by it, and Heavens to Betsy Heels to Jesus had a powerful and positive effect on this reader.
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