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Queer in(g) performance : articulations of deviant bodies in contemporary performance

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QUEER IN(G) PERFORMANCE:
ARTICULATIONS OF DEVIAN T BODIES IN
CONTEMPORARY PERFORMANCE

Robin Mark Griffiths

A dissertation submitted to the University of Bristol in accordance with
the requirements of the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in the
Faculty of Arts.

Department of Drama: Theatre, Film, Television

8th March 2002

77,823 words
The aim of this thesis is to engage with current debates surrounding contemporary performance, queer theory and the body, which proffer a number of complex and contentious questions. How does queer theory work in practice, and does performance provide the ideal context for such deliberation? How do the subjective essentialisms of performance conflict with ideas of queer performativity and the deconstruction of sexual identity? Drawing upon corporeal and ontological theories of the body in conflict with queer strategic critiques, an attempt is made to articulate a problematically "essential" form of queer subjectivity in performance.

By exploring the potential "origins" of a preceding queer practice in the works of Antonin Artaud, Bertolt Brecht and Jean Genet, the work proposes that their approach to theatre and performance articulated and deployed a particularly "deviant" form of expression and aesthetic. They established an approach to theatre and performance, which has continued to inspire and influence anti-essentialist and political forms of queer performance in the new millennium.

From the early struggles of lesbian and gay theatre in the politically volatile context of the seventies and early eighties, the thesis foregrounds a liberating yet problematic attempt at enabling a "transformation" in British and North American theatre in response to queer critical paradigms in the nineties. Critical paradigms that are consistently promoted as the unique "product" of a postmodern deconstructive culture, and yet derive much from the works of the early avant-garde, the experiments of the sixties and the subversive texts of post-war British theatre.

The nineties have witnessed a proliferation of gay/queer-oriented performance "break through" into the populist mainstream, and the "heteronormative" culture in general. The concluding section focuses upon ideas of a queer corporeality that seeks to re-map the significatory potential of the live body in performance, in conflict with discursive inscriptions that attempt to fix and regulate categories of gender and sexuality. Yet, what role does the spectator/audience play in relation to this "activated" queer form of performance? How is the gaze/reception problematised, or does it subvert the very efficacy of queer theory itself?
Author’s Declaration:

I declare that the work in this dissertation was carried out in accordance with the Regulations of the University of Bristol. The work is original except where indicated by special reference in the text and no part of the dissertation has been submitted for any other degree.

Any views expressed in the dissertation are those of the author and in no way represent those of the University of Bristol.

The dissertation has not been presented to any other University for examination either in the United Kingdom or overseas.

SIGNED: [Signature]  DATE: 8/3/02
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INTRODUCTION

And Theory? How are we to proceed without Theory? What System of Thought has these Reformers to present to this mad swirling planetary disorganization, to the Inevident Welter of fact, event, phenomenon, calamity? Do they have, as we did, a beautiful Theory, as bold, as Grand, as comprehensive a construct ...? ¹

The central problematic aim of this body of work is to: (a) attempt to engage with the complex critical frameworks surrounding queer formations of gender and sexuality, and to (b) assess the importance of their conflicting and multiple manifestations or embodyments in contemporary Theatre and Performance. Discursive strategies have emerged that problematically attempt to articulate a concept of "the body in performance" that is seemingly "unbound" by the epistemological inscriptions and cultural assumptions of an oppressive notion of "Society" in the new millennium.

The subject of identity has been a central concern for much recent occidental cultural and critical debate, particularly with regard to the orthodox contexts within which both individuals and communities are able to construct, negotiate and defend such notions of self-identity and self-knowledge. The questioning of orthodox accounts of identity that assume the "self" as an autonomous and stable being, independent of external influence, has dominated these philosophical and genealogical inquiries: from Descartes' ontological philosophies and Hume's liberal individualism in the seventeenth and eighteenth-centuries, to the fundamental challenges of Durkheim's theories of the individual as a product of economic organisation in the nineteenth, and Mead's groundbreaking constructionist theories in the twentieth-century. In addition to this, the shifting paradigms of psychoanalysis, structuralism, post-structuralism and the revolutionary contributions of Freud, Lacan, Althusser and Foucault (broadly

speaking of course) have posed innumerable questions on the nature of identity, which subsequently led to the consolidation of such debates under the rubric of “identity politics”. The general consensus that identity is not merely self-constructed but dependent upon some “other” imposition/subordination, therefore, opens up a theoretical space for marginalised and oppressed communities to challenge and re-negotiate these identities that have been (seemingly) imposed upon them in the process of subordination. Undoubtedly, this is a difficult (or even impossible) task indeed, and yet, it is the relentless and enigmatic objective of the contemporary phenomenon of the queer theorist and practitioner to engage with such a challenge. Their aim is to attempt to explore forms of “deviant” sexual identity and gender performatives that are seemingly “free” of the demarcations and confines of common compulsory (hetero)sexual configuration. A “gendered” and “sexualised” identity is proposed that problematises “normative” categorisations and is hence able to envisage a state of opaque flux, re-appropriation and re-definition.

However, this is an objective that is made even more difficult in that these discursive strategies can only really be addressed, evaluated or called into being through a traditionally limiting “heteronormative” (a term that will be discussed at greater length later) process of definition and inscription, which in truth would seem to defeat the object of attempting to contain such a slippery concept. Queer discourses (though not necessarily in relation to a queer theory - a difference that I will discuss later) are currently offering some of the most innovative and interesting frameworks through which to explore the development and revision of definitions of gender, sexuality and identity; particularly (for this study) within the context of “postmodern” performance practice and political theatre (albeit problematically). Despite these innovative debates, any real analysis of the radical potential of the “queer artist”, and the significant contribution that their work has made to such critical paradigms and experiments in contemporary performance has yet to fully materialise. The debt that
queer theory owes to a preceding history of transgressive performance is immeasurable, particularly within the context of a broader analysis of the role they have played in simultaneously constructing and de-constructing the “heteronormative” paradigm that underpins contemporary culture and society. It is a transgressive form of performance that both precedes and anticipates the types of performative strategies that did not begin to be formulated until the invocation and re-deployment of the term “queer” in the nineties.

The linguistic complexities that emerge by the deployment of such volatile terminology are effectively “rehearsed” and put into practice through performance, which as an art form is an ideal medium to radically question and “play out” social strategies and structures of power that also formulate the way in which performance has been both socially defined and theatrically read. But more specifically, these queer events effectively foreground the problematic and often under-valued relationship between the (indeterminable) spectator and the (ephemeral) performance text. Queer theory and performance as a means of re-configuration have evolved from decades (or even centuries) of dissatisfaction with the way in which notions of gender, sexuality and identity are socially constructed and re-productively perpetuated in performance through a binary system of hetero/homo and masculine/feminine. Systems that persistently reinforce traditional power structures (legitimising the former over the latter) that subordinate the homosexual/deviant in the face of an apparently dominant heterosexist culture and society. Sexuality has consistently been mankind’s most volatile and oppressive social taboo, and is hence an effective site at which to begin to subvert and “play” with the legitimacy of fixed sexual/power roles, and thereby empower and articulate the “abject” ontology of the queer. As Carl Miller argues:

Drama is an ideal medium in which to represent anxieties about sexual licence, although it risks encouraging that which it condemns through such representation. (Miller, 1996: 8)
By exploring the traces of an already pre-existent "queerness" in drama that significantly pre-dates the emergence of a "theory" (from the avant-garde experiments of the early twentieth-century to the postmodern performatives of the new millennium), an attempt will be made to explore how the expression and representation of "deviance" in performance has transformed and mutated in reaction to the diverse and conflicting discourses that have sought to determine, fix and control it. "Homosexuality" in performance, though still a volatile theme to explore, can be seen to no longer hold the same potential for social subversion that it formerly held in the years following the Stonewall riots in the late sixties. Gay liberation has achieved much in the assimilation and (tentative) acceptance of a previously abject and oppressed identity formation, but its cultural appropriation and commodification as a legitimate yet subordinate minority group merely succeeds in perpetuating common dichotomies of power that circumvent its subversive potency for social critique. It is, therefore, the queer in performance that can now be seen to hold a more fertile transgressive potency due to its deconstructive approach to regulatory paradigms, narratives and readings of the body. And yet, in parallel to this, queer theory itself has evolved in relation to and drawn examples from theatre and performance to illustrate and consolidate the critical paradigms it attempts to construct. Queer theory and performance are thus inter-dependent upon each other to both activate and expand the boundaries of their invocation.

Drawing from early experiments of "deviant" performance in the avant-garde works of such radicals as Antonin Artaud, Bertolt Brecht and Jean Genet (see Chapter One), a framework will be established within which to re-evaluate the more contemporary innovations of "deviant" artists in the postmodern nineties, whose debt to these early "dissident" practitioners is clearly evident. The transformative work of such companies as Gay Sweatshop (Chapter Two) and the problematic nature of the queer body (Chapter Three), illustrate the conflicts and transgressions that inevitably emerge
when *theory* moves into *practice*, and begins to articulate an approach to performance that is still in a process of evolution in the "post" queer new millennium (Chapters Four and Five).

**I. Queer in(g) Perspective.**

Once the term 'queer' was, at best, slang for homosexual, at worst, a term of homophobic abuse. In recent years 'queer' has come to be used differently, sometimes as an umbrella term for a coalition of culturally marginal sexual self-identifications and at other times to describe a nascent theoretical model which has developed out of more traditional lesbian and gay studies. What is clear, even from this brief and partial account of its contemporary deployment, is that queer is very much a category in the process of formation. It is not simply that queer has yet to solidify and take on a more consistent profile, but rather that its definitional indeterminacy, its elasticity, is one of its constituent characteristics. (Jagose, 1996: 1)

The overall political efficacy of the "queer phenomenon", in a simplistic sense, lies in its resistance to any form of rigid definition since, as David Halperin argues, "the more it verges on becoming a normative academic discipline, the less queer "queer theory" can plausibly claim to be" (Halperin, 1995: 113). And Annamarie Jagose, in her exhaustive study of the concept, also expresses the futility of attempting an overview of queer theory since it "risks domesticating it" and "fixing it in ways that queer theory resists fixing itself" (Jagose, 1996: 2). The only real way then to engage with such a slippery concept is to attempt to explore its "mobility" in relation to the system of sexual categorisation and "heteronormative" ideology against which it divergently reacts. Within this context, "queer" exhibits as Lee Edelman proposes "a zone of possibilities" (Edelman, 1994: 114) that are subversively "inflected" by a radical "potentiality" that it cannot yet articulate.

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The primary target, however, of queer discursive strategies is the socio-cultural imposition of "heteronormativity", a term that specifies a general tendency in contemporary occidental sex/gender discourse to perceive and legitimise heterosexual identity as the "norm"; which hence configures all other forms as "illegitimate", "deviant" and "abnormal". Heteronormativity as an operation of power seemingly establishes and promotes a set of "norms" of behaviour and ontology that are only definable in relation to those practices and behaviours of its abnormal others (ie. non-heterosexual). Since queer does not seek to align itself with any sexual/identity category, it is not only exclusively concerned with deconstructing the heteronormative matrix but also (more problematically) all regulatory systems that have evolved in relation to it (including "lesbian" and "gay"):

This 'queering' of lesbian and gay studies has been the subject of violent debate. Some claim that it radically erodes the last traces of an oppressive gender coherence, whereas others criticise its pan-sexuality as reactionary, even unfeminist. (Jagose, 1996: 2-3)

As a critical paradigm, queer theory has been predominantly associated with lesbian and gay identity, but as Jagose continues, it is far more encompassing of other non-normative identities that do not necessarily fit with contemporary definitions of lesbian and gay:

but its analytic framework also includes such topics as cross-dressing, hermaphroditism, gender ambiguity and gender-corrective surgery. Whether as transvestite performance or academic deconstruction, queer locates and exploits the incoherencies in those three terms which stabilise heterosexuality. Demonstrating the impossibility of any "natural" sexuality, it calls into question even such apparently unproblematic terms as 'man' and 'woman'. (Jagose, 1996: 3)

_Queue Theory_ can be seen as one of the most important and controversial developments in sexual/social theory to have emerged in the final decade of the twentieth century. This is precisely due to its monumental attempt to embark upon the
seemingly impossible: to enable a process of queering that is specifically aimed at the hegemonic assumptions of a heteronormative “order of things” that took for granted the “naturalness” and “validity” of its own gender and sexual privilege as the basis for all “normative” social and cultural “coherence”. However, it is a coherence that can alternatively be seen as provisional, since it is articulated through a variety of often very contradictory ways: either “unmarked” as the basic idiom of the personal and the social, or “marked” as a natural state and perpetuated as an ideal “moral trajectory” for the social subject:

It consists less of norms that could be summarized as a body of doctrine than of a sense of rightness produced in contradictory manifestations - often unconscious, immanent to practice or to institutions.  
(de Lauretis, 1991: iii)

With regard to the terminology deployed within this thesis, generally speaking, the rather clinical term homosexual refers to a basic sexual predisposition towards a same-sex object of desire. Whereas, the terms lesbian and gay are more specifically referents to the constructed twentieth-century subject positions of the same configuration of desire, though quite distinctively politicised and re-inscribed as social identities. Queer, however, is the most diverse and problematic term to deploy, encompassing as it does homosexual, lesbian, gay and all other terms used for articulating “deviant” or non-heterosexual desires. Yet “queer” also refers to a protocol of “reading” that is framed by processes of textual coding, subversion and an “active” spectatorship that questions or disavows normative, compulsory, white, male, heterocentric assumptions and “preferred readings”.

Since the early 1970s, and the emergence of “Gay Liberation” in Western culture and society, there has been a significant development in the study and articulation of gay, lesbian and bisexual subjectivities. While queer theory embraces this body of research and discourse, it resists being characterised in any “simple terms” in relation
to such methodologies or disciplinary unities. Queer theory refers to a more diverse body of work that has emerged in a variety of cross-disciplinary contexts, such as sociology and philosophy (Butler 1990, 92), literary criticism (Sedgwick 1990, 92), cultural studies (Doty, 1993; Morton, 1993a), postcolonialism (Bhabha, 1992) and psychoanalysis (de Lauretis, 1991, 94b; Rose, 1986), all of which sought to foreground gender and sexuality as key categories through which other social, political and cultural epistemologies are mediated. Sexuality is thus a “meaningful” activity that is continually negotiated and disseminated, rather than a fixed or natural given (see Simon Levay, 1996).

What is crucial to this queer reclamation of history is the exposition of previously concealed or denied instances of lesbian, gay and non-heteronormative activity. And, synonymous with the postmodern movement from which it has evolved, queer theory is concerned with the collapse of “grand narratives” (see Lyotard’s The Postmodern Condition) and the transformation of ideas of what constitutes “knowledge”, though re-directed quite specifically at gender and sexuality as the after-affects of such heteronormative grand narratives. Equally as slippery a concept to define, postmodernism is generally perceived in terms of a “crisis” in our ability to provide an adequate or “objective” account of “reality”. Jean-Francois Lyotard proposes that (drawing from Kant’s notion of the “sublime” in the Critique of Judgement) the postmodern can be characterised as a “mode of expression” that attempts to project new ways of articulating or interpreting “experience”; ways that transcend the limitations of traditional conventions of modernity that embodied a desire for unity by alternatively celebrating fragmentation. Focus, therefore, shifts from a concern for an essential sense of “being” to an analysis of “appearance”, that foregrounds the contingency of knowledge (appropriated by queer to include perceptions of gender, identity and sexuality). By foregrounding difference and fragmentation as a critical framework for exploring a queer epistemology or mode of organisation, queer
theorists thus “map a change” (Jagose, 1996: 77) that is also characteristic of post-structuralism, as Donald Morton writes:

Rather than as a local effect, the return of the queer has to be understood as the result, in the domain of sexuality, of the (post) modern encounter with - and rejection of - Enlightenment views concerning the role of the conceptual, rational, systematic, structural, normative, progressive, liberatory, revolutionary, and so forth, in social change. (1995: 370)

As a critical paradigm, queer is not only the product of a specifically “lesbian and gay theory”, but rather informed by “historically specific knowledges which constitute late twentieth-century western thought” (Jagose, 1996: 77). Post-structuralism as a discourse envisages a “subject-in-process” whose shifting position within language is indefinable within traditional theories of knowledge or “truth” (such as structuralist, Marxist and feminist theories that are anchored or premised by “enlightenment” epistemologies). Influenced by Roland Barthes’ re-writing of “metalinguistic” mythology, Jacques Lacan’s psychoanalytical revisions of “subjectivity” and Michel Foucault’s scepticism of the “genealogies of knowledge” and sexuality, these ideas marked a radical break with the concepts and values of humanist discourse and the illusion of “autonomy”. Post-structuralism, therefore, envisaged a potentially liberated space of “plural” and “decentred” subject positions, where identity can no longer be defined in relation to “essentialist” ideas of gender, class, or racial affiliation. It can thus be perceived as a particularly post-Marxist movement that acknowledges the “diversity” of contemporary social perspectives, rather than the more “metanarrative” supposition that privileges one perspective (ie. classical Marxism) to articulate the unquestionable “truth of history” (with socio-economic/class hierarchies as the central issue). The subject is hence seen as “dispersed” over a range of multiple positions and discourses, which challenge any position that claims to “speak” on behalf of an oppressed subjectivity, since this singular articulation is merely the “product” of the subject’s place within a range of pre-existing discourses. Post-structuralism, in contrast, advocates a “free-play” of
signification and the possibility that subjects are enabled to adopt a number of “performative” roles (a key element of queer theory). By achieving this break with oppressive norms (naturalised or realist), gender and identity could be seen to be “liberated” from their fixed association with a hetero-patriarchal law and an unquestioned “classical realism”. Post-structuralist shifts can also be located within both feminist and postcolonial discourses that problematise notions of femininity and race as unified, coherent and stable categories from within a similarly queer discursive matrix. All of these debates have had a significant impact upon lesbian and gay studies, and provide the theoretical context from which queer theory is derived, as Jagose argues:

the post-structuralist theorisation of identity as provisional and contingent, coupled with a growing awareness of the limitations of identity categories in terms of political representation, enabled queer to emerge as a new form of personal identification and political organisation. ‘Identity’ is probably one of the most naturalised cultural categories each of us inhabits: one always thinks of one’s self as existing outside all representational frames, and as somehow marking a point of undeniable realness. (1996: 77-78)

Queer theory, therefore, articulates a challenge to the very regime of sexuality itself and the knowledges that construct the self as essentially gendered, or presume heterosexuality and homosexuality as natural binarisms that denote the inherent truth of sexual identity. Queer theorists (in true Foucauldian fashion3) regard heterosexuality and homosexuality as not simply identities or social statuses, but as categories of power, discourse and knowledge that shape moral boundaries and political hierarchies, framing our perceptions of the body, desire, sexuality and identity:

Queer theorists argue that identities are always multiple or at best composites with literally an infinite number of ways in which “identity-components” (eg. sexual orientation, race, class, nationality, gender, age, able-ness) can intersect or

combine. Any specific identity construction, moreover, is arbitrary, unstable, and exclusionary. Identity constructions necessarily entail the silencing or exclusion of some experiences or forms of life. (Warner, 1993: viii)

The works of French philosopher Michel Foucault have played a crucial role in this pre-queer process of denaturalising the dominant discourses of sexual identity. By proposing sexual identity as an effect of power rather than a natural or essentialist given, his work had a major impact upon lesbian, gay and later queer scholarship. As Diana Fuss argues, Foucault’s writings clearly anticipate:

current disputes amongst gay theorists and activists over the meaning and applicability of such categories as 'gay', 'lesbian', and 'homosexual' in a post-structuralist climate which renders all such assertions of identity problematic. (Fuss, 1989: 97)

This debate over the discursive production of sexuality was part of a much wider project for Foucault which contended that “modern subjectivity” is merely an effect of “networks of power”. And yet, he also argued that this network of power is not necessarily repressive in nature:

By perceiving power as productive and enabling (rather than fundamentally repressive) Foucault thus exposed the interdependence of power and resistance, which subsequently provided an opportunity for multiple discursive strategies of dissidence:

we must not imagine a world of discourse divided between accepted discourse and excluded discourse, or between the dominant discourse and the dominated one; but as a multiplicity of discursive elements

---

To demonstrate how discourses can be used “strategically” for oppositional aims, Foucault specifically foregrounds how the category of “Homosexuality” was formulated in relation to such a power/resistance dynamic:

There is no question that the appearance in nineteenth-century psychiatry, jurisprudence, and literature of a whole series of discourses on the species and subspecies of homosexuality, inversion, pederasty, and ‘psychic hermaphroditism’ made possible a strong advance of social controls into this area of ‘perversity’; but it also made possible the formation of a ‘reverse’ discourse; homosexuality began to speak: in its own behalf, to demand that its legitimacy or ‘naturality’ be acknowledged, often in the same vocabulary, using the same categories by which it was medically disqualified. (ibid: 101)

Concepts of “the body” and “sexuality” have persistently been sites of moral and political struggle within the past century, and moral concern over such issues as promiscuity, abortion, masturbation, prostitution, obscenity and sex education led to the urgent rise of sexology, psychoanalysis and psychiatry to “make sense” of such deviant transgressions. Homosexuality, therefore, came into being as an object of knowledge through the dissemination of such discourses on morality and subjectivity (eg. over one thousand publications on homosexuality appeared in Europe between 1898 and 1908⁵). However, despite attempts to view the modern human condition as socially constructed, the conclusions drawn by such sexo-linguistic discourses offered no real account of the construction of modern bodies and sexualities. Rather, they merely relied upon popular psychoanalytical frameworks that merely medicalized such conditions as symptomatic of abnormalities of the brain or physical deficiency, thereby unquestioning the validity of a hetero-patriarchal symbolic order that ascribes such “unnatural” behaviour as anomalous and “lacking”. This “silence” and apparent disavowal of classical sociology towards sexuality can, as Steven Seidman states,

⁵ For a more detailed analysis of these publications, see Jeffrey Weeks (1985), Sexuality and Its Discontents, London: Routledge.
begin to be seen as:

related to their privileged gender and sexual social
position ... just as the bourgeoisie asserts the naturalness
of class inequality and their rule, individuals whose social
identity is that of male and heterosexual do not question
the naturalness of a male-dominated, normatively hetero-
sexual social order ... Moreover, their own science of society
contributed to the making of this regime whose center is the
hetero/homo binary and the heterosexualization of society.

(Seidman, 1996: 4)

Adopting a constructionist position, Foucault argues that homosexuality is primarily a
modern identity formation, and that whilst there was evidence of same-sex "acts"
there was not, however, a corresponding identity category. He asserted the much
more provocative premise that in 1870 the category of "the homosexual" as a distinct
identity, emerged as a "product" of the medical discourses that formulated it:

We must not forget that the psychological, psychiatric, medical
category of homosexuality was constituted from the moment it was
characterized - Westphal's famous article of 1870 on 'contrary
sexual sensations' can stand as its date of birth - less by a type of
sexual relations than by a certain quality of sexual sensibility, a
certain way of inverting the masculine and feminine in oneself.

(Foucault, 1981: 43)

From 1870 then, same-sex acts began to be perceived quite unquestionably as
"evidence" of a particular "type" of "species", and around whom particular discourses
began to evolve: "The sodomite had been a temporary aberration; the homosexual was
now a species" (ibid). What is interesting, however, is Foucault's total disregard for
gender within such a paradigm, or even an awareness of the inherently masculinist
bias in his writings (the lesbian identity is commonly disavowed). Despite this bias,
many of his works have ironically played a vital role in the formulation of recent
feminist and lesbian critiques, and formed the critical base from which Judith Butler's
ground-breaking Gender Trouble (1990) evolved. Alternatively, "Heterosexuality" as
a category has received little theoretical attention until its recent queer deconstruction
(such as Jonathan Katz's *The Invention of Heterosexuality*, which owes much to Foucault's debates on the "origins" of homosexuality).

From the early part of the twentieth century to the mid-seventies, homoerotic desire has consistently been defined and articulated through scientific/medical discursive frameworks as indicative of a distinct ontological and sexual identity - "the homosexual". The early homosexual was framed as a unique type of (malformed) person, but the redefinition of homosexual desires into a shifting homosexual/lesbian/gay/queer paradigm has evolved in relation to a significant change in the meanings and perceptions of homosexuality in society. The first part of the century was dominated by a specifically psychiatric framework that defined the homosexual as insane, perverse and abnormal. Yet, the challenge posed to this model by Kinsey (1948), viewed sexuality as more of a "continuum". Human sexuality was thus proposed as essentially ambiguous with respect to sexual orientation, and that most individuals had the potential to experience both hetero and homo-sexual desire (as Freud himself concluded in his *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality* in 1905). New social "models" of homosexuality had also started to emerge which emphasised (and promoted) the homosexual as an "oppressed minority" in relation to a dominant "heterosexual majority", and projected a hierarchical power dichotomy that has dominated sexual discourse ever since: the hetero/homo binary.

Following the historic Stonewall riots of 1969, the seventies saw the arrival of the gay liberation movement, which sought to create "sophisticated social understandings of homosexuality" (Seidman 1996: 7). Images of homosexual desire and identity were thus re-iterated as "normal and natural", and social discourse placed emphasis upon oppression, prejudice, and the creation and promotion of a distinctively "ethnic" gay sub-culture. Generally, cultural assumptions viewed the homosexual as a strangely "exotic" persona, in contrast to the "normative" and hence more legitimate
heterosexual. The label-constructing ideas of "deviance" theorists such as Howard Becker or Erving Goffman (1963) were influential in re-shaping knowledges of sexuality (homosexuality in particular), and a whole new area of academic research was established as "self-identified" gay and lesbian researchers contributed to the emergence of "Gay and Lesbian Studies". However, these academics did not attempt to fully question the social consequences of the hetero/homosexual binary as a central legitimising category of modern sexuality, but moreover tended to perpetuate it in order to consolidate homosexuality as a natural subordinate alternative to the norm.

The establishment of newly empowered and affirmative gay politics inevitably led to the formation of "community", and a concerted need emerged for heightened cultural visibility: but more importantly led to the evolution of "social constructionism". Derivative of label theory, phenomenology, and heavily influenced by Marxism and feminism, social constructionist perspectives were firmly en grained within critical discourses of "identity". Social constructionism (also influenced by post-structuralism) challenged the very nature of sex and society, suggesting that homosexuality was far from a uniformly fixed phenomenon, but that its meaning and role varied in relation to the paradigmatic shifts and epistemological developments of history. The notion of the homosexual as a "trans-historical" seemingly universal identity, rarely questioned by the lesbian-feminists or gay liberationists, appeared to be quite a unique idea of modern occidental society. As Michel Foucault remarked:

As defined by ancient civil or canonical codes, sodomy was a category of forbidden acts; their perpetrator was nothing more than the juridical subject of them. The nineteenth-century homosexual became a personage, a past, and a case history, a life form ... Nothing that went into total composition was unaffected by his sexuality.

It was everywhere present in him: at the root of all his actions ... because it was a secret that always gave itself away. (Foucault 1981: 43)
Foucault’s anti-identitarian writings found much support from social constructionists who attempted to re-define the changing meanings and formations of the “modern” homosexual. However, even though these perspectives sought to challenge essentialist perspectives on homosexuality, they eventually contributed, as Seidman re-iterates, “to a politics of the making of a homosexual minority” (Seidman, 1996: 9). Constructionist debates on essentialism have since become institutionalised by the lesbian and gay studies movements of the eighties and nineties, since they legitimated a model of lesbian and gay subculture as an ethnic-like (more legitimate) minority subject formation. These essentialist debates which focused upon changing social patterns, became the core concern for most subsequent lesbian and gay theories (re. Seidman, 1996). However, the affirmative identities and emancipatory communities that had been founded upon and enforced by much of these liberationist politics in the seventies and early eighties were soon to face a devastating crisis in the aftermath of AIDS.

In the mid-eighties, an anti-gay movement re-emerged that vehemently and relentlessly revised and re-appropriated the traditionally regressive moral, medical and religious models that condemned and equated homosexuality with disease and death. And yet, this resurgence of prejudice and bigotry also achieved the opposite in that it initiated a defiant and defensive response, that re-deployed the post-Stonewall strategies of social confrontation and revisionism. Internal conflicts that had developed over the decades of “community-building” within gay culture were finally foregrounded and debated, evoking a shift in direction of gay theory and politics that placed problematic divisions and exclusions at the forefront of all discussion surrounding the construction of mainstream gay culture. The assertion of a fixed and uniform lesbian and gay identity that functioned as a utopian template for political organisation and the foundation of “community”, was vehemently criticised for reflecting and perpetuating a homogenously white, male, middle-class gay ontology.
wherein the categories of “lesbian” and “gay” function as restrictively disciplined, but more importantly, exclusionary models. These conflicts resulted in a more constructionist approach to gay politics that re-focused a “politics of difference”. Influenced by postmodernism, post-structuralism and Lacanian psychoanalysis, the “Queer Theorist” emerged to offer a new perspective on lesbian and gay theory and politics:

Queer marks both a continuity and a break with previous gay liberationist and lesbian feminist models. Lesbian feminist models of organisation were correctives to the masculine bias of a gay liberation which itself had grown out of dissatisfactions with earlier homophile organisations. Similarly, queer effects a rupture which, far from being absolute, is meaningful only in the context of its historical development. (Jagose, 1996: 75)

Since its “arrival” in the early nineties\(^6\) (which is debateable given its derivative nature), queer theory has acquired multiple meanings and definitions, from an umbrella term to consolidate and address all gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender experience, to a theoretical approach that is underpinned by anarchic performative transgression and revisionist dissent. However, what is central to queer theory is the relentless desire to challenge dominant concepts of both negative and positive homosexual discourse; a discourse that has presumed an essential homosexual “subject”, stable, unified and identifiable.

By approaching identity constructs as multiple, unstable and regulatory, the queer theorist thus seeks to present (albeit contentiously) new and productive possibilities and perspectives that encourage the exposition of “difference/s”, thereby attempting to articulate the multiple, fragmented voices, agendas and interests that shape queer life and politics:

Queer theory is suggesting that the study of homosexuality should not be a study of a minority - the making of the lesbian/gay/bisexual subject - but a study of those knowledges and social practices that organize “society” as a whole by sexualising - heterosexualizing or homosexualizing - bodies, desires, acts, identities, social relations, knowledges, culture and social institutions. Queer theory aspires to transform homosexual theory into a general social theory or one standpoint from which to analyse social dynamics.

(Seidman 1996: 13)

Post-structuralist queer theory hence ideally envisages a culture of sexual difference and fluidity, rather than the narrowly defined gay and lesbian liberationism. It analyses the social production of all sexual categories and meanings, traces their inter-relational dependency and, therefore, reveals the formation and operation of heteronormativity (as a contentiously fixed concept within the queer paradigm) which is placed at the forefront of queer study and critique. Queer perspectives propose to reveal the unstable and performative aspects of identity, and its deployment as a regulatory tool of control (as argued by Butler, 1990). By decentring the nature of identity (and the heterocentric matrix through which it is filtered), gender and sexuality become merely linguistic and psycho-social strategies that are theatrically and dramatically produced through behaviour and gesture; projected and re-enacted through innumerable repetitive actions that exist within a field of shifting, fluid meanings. From a queer perspective, even the “act” of “coming out” (and thus entering the “gay symbolic order”) is no longer regarded as a positive or emancipatory endeavour, but rather a process of construction or the performative re-iteration of a phantasmatic sexual identity and ideology. By “coming out” one is merely “entering in” to a heteronormative system of signification and an oppressive regime of power and control (as articulated through the queer paradigm).

As an academic movement, queer theory was first cited (though not exclusively) as a developing critical philosophy through a number of prolific conferences in north America in the early nineties:
Queer theory became a rallying cry for new ways of thinking and theorizing. For many the term “lesbian and gay studies” did not seem inclusive enough; it did not encapsulate the ambivalence toward sexual categorization which many lesbian/gay scholars felt, and the difficulties they faced in fitting sexuality into the “ethnicity model” which provided the template for such fields as African-American and women’s studies, and indeed for identity politics in general.7

The increasingly visible presence of confrontational post-AIDS queer political organisations during the past decade, in the form of Queer Nation and ACT UP, has provided queer theory with a fairly public stage for these anti-essentialist debates. And yet, it was the deployment of the term queer itself that provoked much of the controversy and confusion associated with this “new” critical paradigm.

The shift from “gay/lesbian” to “queer” was originally perceived as an inclusionary attempt at unity, since it ideally sought to remove exclusive sexual labels and separatist boundaries, to include previously contentious “bisexual” and “transgender” identities in a form of utopian political cohesion. The queer of such movements as Queer Nation reclaimed the term as a form of emancipation, self-empowerment and the enforcement of “in-your-face” methodologies - “We’re here, we’re queer, get used to it!!!” The term was ideally understood by advocates of queer theory to have been “erased” of its use as a traditionally homophobic insult, and its connotation appropriated (though highly problematically) to re-signify renewed lesbian and gay identities and polemics. Yet, as Eve Sedgwick discusses, there was much dissent over this uncertain and rather overly-simplistic “erasure” of the pejorative significations of the term:

there are some lesbians and gays who could never count as queer, and other people who vibrate to the chord of queer without having much same-sex eroticism, or without routing their same-sex eroticism through the identity labels lesbian or gay.

(Sedgwick, 1993b: 13)

Within the (seemingly detached) context of academia, new queer theorists also exhibited a rather tense, uncertain attitude to this new political use of the term. Teresa de Lauretis, for example, one of the founding voices in queer academic discourse, publicly distanced herself from the appropriation of the word by *Queer Nation*:

> The term queer was suggested to me by a conference in which I had participated and whose proceedings will be published in the forthcoming volume, ed. by Douglas Crimp and the Bad Object Choices, *How Do I Look? Queer Film and Video*. My queer, however, had no relation to the Queer Nation group, of whose existence I was ignorant at the time... there is in fact very little in common between Queer Nation and this queer theory. (de Lauretis, 1991: iii)

Intellectuals such as de Lauretis, Judith Butler and Eve Sedgwick, claim to have created a theory that is “quintessentially queer”, and yet it is also a theory that is constructed from a rather lesbian-feminist context (thus redressing the masculine bias of gay theory) which problematises the location of a queer male standpoint from within such a model (a problem that I shall discuss more fully in Chapters 3 and 4). Queer theory, however, as an academic discipline, has provoked an explosion of research and publication on such previously ignored subjects as Drag (re. Butler, 1990 and Garber, 1995) to S&M (re. Grosz, 1995 and Hart, 1998), but it consistently attempts to detach itself from any actual connection with the *real* lives of those individuals who identify with such trans-gender/sexual/drag queen/sado-masochistic positions. Queer theory discursively refuses the ontological existence of such subjectivities, by formulating a division between the performance of identity and its essential actuality. Gender identity is thus performatively enacted whilst a sexual identity is categorised as a form of fluid monosexuality.

Queer theorists are not satisfied with merely analysing lesbian and gay communities as exclusive sites of sexual difference, but rather seek to interrogate the very nature of gender and sexual binarisms (and the performative nature of such notions) in order to
deconstruct or revise traditional epistemologies and cultural “texts” that had previously been assembled through heterosexual codes and discursive strategies. This is a process that would inevitably re-apply common perceptions on the “nature” of deviancy to the institution of “Heterosexuality” itself. The influence of Foucault has been credited by many from within queer culture as the catalyst for the emergence of queer theory from a gay academic subculture and into the populist academic mainstream. In collaboration with the rise of Postmodernism and Post-structuralism, queer theorists can be seen as radically leading the way in cultural and theoretical innovation, particularly in the arts and humanities (long the domain of the oppressed).

Similarly, postmodern theory as a critical philosophy is commonly regarded as “playful” and “self-ironizing” in nature, in much the same way as queer culture has adopted camp, drag and other performative strategies to celebrate alienation and anarchy. Postmodernists foreground the illusory nature of systems of rationality and “truth” in much the same fashion as the queer, and the multiple uses of the term displays a diversity of meanings and definitions akin to that of queer theory. In his attempt at elucidating the postmodern, Jean-Francois Lyotard embarks upon an analysis of Kant’s notion of the “sublime” (re. Critique of Judgement) to describe the feeling aroused to the intellect when presented with the indefinable (deviant), something that defies conceptualisation. Like queer, postmodernism can therefore be characterised as a mode of expression that proposes new ways of expressing “sublime feeling”. In other words, it is an aesthetic discourse that seeks to overcome the limitations of traditional heteronormative realist conventions and hence articulate new strategies for interpreting “experience” and “society”.

Queer theorists have often acknowledged the extent to which the texts of mass culture shape and define our understanding of sexuality, though some have also regarded this as a weakness in that such analyses rarely move beyond “the text” and notions of
There is a dangerous tendency for the new queer theorists to ignore “real” queer life as it is materially experienced across the world, while they play with the free-floating signifiers of the texts. What can the re-reading of a nineteenth-century novel really tell us about the pains of gay Chicanos or West Indian lesbians now, for example? Indeed, such postmodern readings may well tell us more about the lives of middle-class radical intellectuals than about anything else! (Stein & Plummer, 1993: 137-138)

Although queer theory is commonly utilised to attempt a de-ghettoizing of queer concerns, it is at times problematically over-burdened with theoretical jargon which thus limits access to those outside a knowledge of such discursive frameworks, thereby alienating those it seeks to liberate. It is also regarded by some critics as merely a trend: “just the latest progeny spawned by the Foucauldian Revolution and adopted by over-eager literary critics and proponents of cultural studies”, or as merely a version of capitalist ideology that compares such sexual “choices” to shopping for the latest brand name product (re. Morton, 1993, 1995).

This negative attitude towards queer theory’s subversive potential is also manifest in the cross-generational differences and conflicts within the lesbian/gay/queer community. Younger queers (the ideal demographic for such “capitalist” queer idealism) tend to be more open to explore such a revisionist theory, since it articulates the dissatisfaction felt with established and restrictive lesbian and gay codes and demarcations (but also marks their privileged position in the post-stigmatised climate of the tolerant nineties). Whereas older gays and lesbians, on the other hand, vehemently object to the appropriation of such a pejorative term. ‘Queer’ not only denotes their past struggles against oppression and prejudice, but also actively seeks to undermine and repudiate their achievements over the past 25 years, and deconstruct

the very community that they have so tirelessly constructed in the face of such oppression. In subject matter, queer studies tend to place emphasis (perhaps reductively) upon artistic, cultural and literary texts, in order to expose their deployment as the re-iterative mechanisms of society as it seeks to represent and reproduce itself. Queer theory does, however, acknowledge the problem or even impossibility of moving outside common conceptions of sexuality, since each of these terms comes into being in relation to each other. The aim of queer theory then is to "negotiate its limits" (re. Fuss, 1991), and explore the implications and sublime pleasures of transgression.

The inevitable political dilemma posed by queer perspectives is, of course, the undermining effect it has upon the legitimacy of gay politics. The act of "conceding to difference" can be regarded as a destructive endeavour, since the political strength of a social movement is dependent upon unitary identity and solidarity. By acknowledging multiplicity and ephemerality, stability and political effectiveness are thus jeopardised. The deconstructive queer position may disturb heteronormative ideas about sexuality, but it lacks the necessary effectiveness of a cohesive institutional basis from which to initiate and strategise a concrete political intervention. As Joshua Gamson warns:

Yet queer theory and politics tend to run past a critique of the particular, concrete forces that make sexual identity, in stabilised and binary form, a basis for discipline, regulation, pleasure, and political empowerment. In the hurry to deconstruct identity, they tend to "slide into viewing identity itself as the fulcrum of domination and its subversion as the center of an anti-identity politic" (Seidman 1993: 132); the politic becomes overwhelmingly cultural, textual, and subjectless. Deconstructive strategies remain quite deaf and blind to the very concrete and violent institutional forms to which the most logical answer is resistance in and through a particular collective identity.9

In effect, there is a fundamental paradox at play in queer theory because, within such a volatile and oppressive political climate, clearly defined identity categories are problematically both necessary and counter-productive; and attempts to either fix or de-stabilise them are equally important from a number of variable perspectives. Whereas queer theorists have argued that such a radical re-inscription of nomenclature could “transform cultural assumptions and knowledge” (Jagose, 1996: 104), their opponents have similarly illustrated that “merely to change the semantic value of queer is to misrecognise a symptom for the disease”, and that even if the redeployment and resignification of the term were to prove effective “other words or neologisms would take on the cultural work it once did” (ibid). So, even though these attempts at re-clamation of queer as a positive term can be seen as progressive in intent (similarly problematic theoretical attempts have been made by black scholars to reclaim the word “nigger”), they are also contentious since they are, as Jagose remarks, “neither absolute nor uncontestable” (ibid):

> Even though queer has been appropriated by a new generation, which recognises itself in that term without equivocation, homophobia is not going to be rendered speechless or lack an intelligible vocabulary with which to make itself understood. (Jagose, 1996: 104-105)

The liberation of queer identity is also problematic in that it can be seen to presume that the “regimes” of “heteronormativity” and “heterosexuality” are rigidly fixed in comparison. However, the ease by which such categories are transgressed or open to a “queering” strategy, and the tenuousness of performative iterations of power, thus demonstrate the instability and fluidity that is already inherent within such a conceptualisation. Queer could, therefore, be seen as a highly tenuous and contentious framework in itself, since it is only able to project its liberatory and fluid potential if it simultaneously inscribes the “heteronormative” as rigid and oppressive. It is hence just as inter-dependent upon the imposed iterative strategies that it seeks to
deconstruct, and could be seen to be merely setting itself up as another binary formation that only has meaning in relation to its more rigid counter-part. However, as long as queer signifies a resistance to the regimes of heteronormativity, “its immunity to domestication guarantees its capacity to maintain a critical relation to standards of normativity” (Warner, 1993: xxvi).

II. Queer in(g) Performance

From an artistic point of view, as far as performance theory and practice is concerned, a queer perspective is an intriguing (though highly complex) path to take for theatrical exploration and experimentation. Intriguing, since the apparent “freedom” of interpretation and possibility it proposes, in theory, envisages a variety of innovative approaches to form and content, semiological/discursive structures, and commonly accepted notions of gender/sexual signification within contemporary postmodern forms of performance. It would, therefore, be an ideal (or even necessary) process by which to attempt to put into practice such a complex and volatile critical framework:

It is those performers who explode the seamless body of humanist discourse and slip out of such naturalized categories who pose the greatest threat.
(Hart, 1994: 27)

Theatre and performance have long explored ideas of identity, knowledge and the potency of radical configurations of the body that significantly precede queer theoretical paradigms. Paradigms that have consistently drawn from the iconic works of pre-queer artists and philosophers that, by implication, undermines a perception of queer as a distinctively contemporary socio-cultural discourse. Theatre and performance as confrontative cultural mediators have been regularly appropriated by developing political movements to visualize, articulate and support their struggles.\(^\text{10}\)

from confrontational street theatre and agitprop performance, to the more experimental and established practices of the avant-garde. As a mobile medium, it is through the touring circuits and fringe theatres that radical ideas and artistic experiments have been enabled and disseminated, where theatrical risk is expected and encouraged (albeit amidst a background of political struggle and uncertain funding).

It is here that the emerging lesbian and gay perspectives of the seventies and eighties, were given a public forum for controversial sexual debate, which with the synonymous rise of a socialist trend in theatre led to the establishment of openly gay theatre groups, and the realisation of the political force of such public debate. Political theatre groups (such as Monstrous Regiment or Red Ladder) successfully attempted to reflect and transform the theoretical and political epistemologies of the time, thereby perceiving of themselves as initiators of social and ideological change. The live and confrontational nature of theatrical performance was the perfect medium for uniting the artist and the spectator in a public event that fused art with politics; it thus (seemingly) provided a forum for previously oppressed artists to develop greater artistic freedom and political control over their work. Works emerged that sought to challenge and re-evaluate the conventional demarcations between individual self-expression and political self-interest. From the very beginnings of gay liberation in the late sixties, theatrical self-expression and performativity were crucial elements for projecting a visible movement by adopting street theatre protests and spectacular demonstrations of "deviance". Alternative identities were hence being empowered and enacted, performed and celebrated in their many performative roles and guises.

The post-War radicality of such political and socially dissenting plays (from inside and outside the "mainstream") by such diverse writers as John Osborne, Caryl Churchill and Joe Orton (though not exclusively) and the works of the "queer" avant-
garde, contributed to a general “wave” of theatrical explorations of gender, sexuality and society (explored in more detail in Chapter Two). The foundation of Gay Sweatshop Theatre Company in the UK in 1975, activated a subsequent series of “gay theatre seasons” that introduced a new consciousness and visibility within gay culture and performance, as self-identified “gay artists” tentatively stepped forward, centre-stage. An emancipated notion of “Gay pride” had asserted itself not merely as a form of transient ghettoist trend, but as a serious desire for the “gay community” to represent and explore itself upon the stage without having to apologise for its existence, or adopt the traditional mode of self-deprecation and camp disavowal.

Early gay theatre became a “collective”, wherein its members were able to democratically control all aspects of their work, from form and content to tour planning, design and dissemination. Collective devising was, as Michelene Wandor discusses in her introduction to Strike While the Iron is Hot (one of the very first to document the work of such political theatre), the most effective method by which to “represent an intense movement towards a peak of consciousness at a particular historical moment” (Wandor, 1980: 10). Subject matter was presented to audiences that either supported and connected with their own experiences, or challenged their assumptions. Performances were commonly followed by discussions, thus demystifying the space/boundary between performer and audience, but more importantly “making the political conscious-raising which followed a performance something which was also shared, thus helping to politicise the theatre-going process itself” (ibid).

Approaches to form played an extremely important role in early gay theatre, since there was an urgent need to locate a common point of identification with its audience:

Gay theater has many valuable stories to share with the world; stories about self discovery, about being fundamentally different from what everyone around one appears to be, about growing up to be radically different from one's parents.
about forming relationships in which the rules have to be made up as one goes along. The best gay plays transcend these elements, as does all art that transforms the particular into the universal, but even those that don't still have an important social value that must not be underestimated.  

Theatre (irrespective of the dominance of television and cinema) has continually provided the means by which a community (in whatever form) can “get together and talk about itself” (Shewey, 1988: xi). No matter how simplistic the form or content, an organised gay theatre/text consistently functions to affirm the existence of a subordinate minority: “acting as corrective to neglect or abuse by the culture-at-large” (ibid). However, there are evident differences between the representative images of gay men and lesbians in post-liberation independent theatre than those within earlier mainstream theatre. Since nineteenth and twentieth-century psychiatric research into homosexuality was based upon a negative, or a purportedly “neutral” academic perspective, it is hardly surprising to discover that a pre-liberation theatre that focused upon homosexuality as subject matter, focused upon the redundant procreative negativity and psycho-sociological tragedy of such a predicament to the heterocentric (yet equally “perverse”) norm. When homosexuality did dare to reveal itself (albeit rarely in explicit terms) upon the stage, it was usually in relation to overly melodramatic forms of contrived social drama and scandal (eg. Lillian Hellman’s The Children’s Hour), or illicit perversion and pathological violence (eg. Frank Marcus’s The Killing of Sister George). “The Homosexual” was perpetually portrayed as tortured and pathetic and thus disavowed any real social threat to the seemingly detached infrastructures of heteronormativity.

12 For a comprehensive account of the history of lesbians and gay men in twentieth-century theatre, see Alan Sinfield (1999), Out on Stage: Lesbian and Gay Theatre in the Twentieth Century, New Haven: Yale University Press.
However, in the post-Stonewall climate of the seventies, a form of distinctly "queer" theatre emerged from the "avant-garde" and the "underground" that was relentlessly "devoted to total outrageousness" (Shewey, ibid). Camp performative excess and the spectacle of perversity became the specialities of such emerging figures as Ronald Tavel, John Vaccaro and Charles Ludlam, who's Ridiculous Theatre Company established a new tradition in camp/drag theatre. This theatrical tradition subsequently went on to influence and establish later collaborative links with such contemporary queer artists as Neil Bartlett, drag theatre troupe Bloolips and radical US lesbian performance group Split Britches (explored more fully in Chapter Two).

Experimental works by Peter Brook, Lindsay Kemp and Robert Wilson (though not "queer" directly), and such notorious productions as Peter Weiss’s perverse *Marat* in 1964, also began to articulate Artaudian and Brechtian approaches to "identity", "performance" and the deconstruction of the gendered body in performance (albeit to differing degrees and objectives). By rejecting the rules of a "mainstream" theatre (the extent to which is highly debateable), gay artists were given the valuable opportunity to un-self-consciously develop and explore their own life narratives, and the diversity and inconsistency of the gay under-culture:

> [t]he history of the homosexual in drama is the history of the shifts in the dominant society's perception of repression, otherness, the politics of the unconscious, ideology, and power. These are the very issues central to gay drama. (Shewey, ibid)

Yet, whilst queer theorists have consistently cited examples from theatre and performance to support and expand their analyses (ie. Marjorie Garber’s study of transvestitism or Judith Butler’s discussion of drag performance), queer theory has also made a similar impact upon the work of performance theorists such as Sue-Ellen

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Case, Jill Dolan and Lynda Hart. Case, in particular, advocates the efficacy of “queer performativity” as articulated by Eve Sedgwick and Judith Butler, wherein the fusion of the terms “queer” and “performativity” effectively “focus several critical anxieties that the departure from the troubled territories of “lesbian” and “performance” seeks to allay” (Case, 1996: 13). Discussing the differences between the Butler and Sedgwick definitions of queer performativity in relation to performance, Case argues:

“Queer” occurs within “performativity”, which Butler in the earlier article defines as evacuating “performance” by denying “a prior and volitional subject”; in fact, as she would have it, “performativity” “constitutes as an effect the very subject it appears to express” [Butler, 1991: 24]. Unlike Sedgwick’s, Butler’s sense of performativity sets out to contradict traditional agitprop or Brechtian theatrical strategies that encourage actors and spectators alike to imagine themselves as an agent of change. Butler gives over that agency to a “reiterated acting that is power in its persistence and instability... a nexus of power and discourse that repeats or mimes the discursive gestures of power” [17].

(Case 1996: 15)

There is a paradox at play in queer performance, therefore, that proposes an active queer performer who adopts a Brechtian approach to performance (that seeks to foreground the constructedness and iterative structures that are being exposed in the character represented in the text), in conflict with a queer articulation of “identity” that seeks to illegitimise the authorial intervention of an essential performer.

In *Gender Trouble*, Butler quite effectively elaborates upon Foucault’s thesis of the “operations of power and resistance”, in order to illustrate how “marginalised identities” are “complicit with those identificatory regimes they seek to counter” (Jagose, 1996: 83). Rather than naturalising same-sex desire in the same way as lesbian and gay theoretical frameworks, Butler alternatively contests the “truth” of gender itself as the performative effect of re-iterative “acts”:

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The cultural matrix through which gender identity has become intelligible requires that certain kinds of "identities" cannot "exist" - that is, those in which gender does not follow from sex and those in which the practices of desire do not "follow" from either sex or gender...

Gender is the repeated stylization of the body, a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame that congeal over time to produce the appearance of substance, of a natural sort of being.  
(Butler, 1990: 33)

Similar to Foucault's focus upon the importance of discursive strategies and their revisionist potential, Butler perceives gender as "an ongoing discursive practice ... open to intervention and resignification" (ibid), and as Jagose surmises:

Heterosexuality, which passes itself off as natural and therefore in no need of explanation, is reframed by Butler as a discursive production, an effect of the sex/gender system which purports merely to describe it.  
(Jagose, 1996: 84)

Although Butler is concerned with all "performatives" that repeat "laws of difference", she does tend to focus upon drag as a practice in particular, since it "reinflects heterosexual norms within a gay context" (ibid):

As much as drag creates a unified picture of "woman" ... it also reveals the distinctness of those aspects of gendered experience which are falsely naturalized as a unity through the regulatory fiction of heterosexual coherence.  *In imitating gender, drag implicitly reveals the imitative structure of gender itself - as well as its contingency.* Indeed, part of the pleasure, the giddiness of the performance is in the recognition of a radical contingency in the relation between sex and gender in the face of cultural configurations of causal unities that are regularly assumed to be natural and necessary.  
(Butler, 1990: 137-138)

However, in her next book, *Bodies That Matter*, Butler questions this tendency by queer theorists to consider performativity only in terms of theatricality and drag, which is reductive in that it implies a "conscious" theatrical agency. Whereas she perceives performativity far more problematically as "neither free play nor theatrical self-presentation; nor can it simply be equated with performance" (Butler, 1993: 95):
Performativity cannot be understood outside of a process of iterability, a regularized and constrained repetition of norms. And this repetition is not performed by a subject; this repetition is what enables a subject and constitutes the temporal condition for the subject. This iterability implies that 'performance' is not a singular 'act' or event, but a ritualized production, a ritual reiterated under and through constraint, under and through the force of prohibition and taboo, with the threat of ostracism and even death controlling and compelling the shape of the production, but not, I will insist, determining it fully in advance. (ibid)

And yet, as Case contends, this tension between queer performativity and performance is thus productive, as illustrated by "Butler's decision to accept (mis)readings of her own writing" (Case, 1996: 16), since its resulting efficacy lies in the fact that "Queer, then, moves identity to readership, and 'performativity' imbues writing with performance" (ibid: 17).

The impact of queer theory on the nature of sexual discourse is evident in the work of a number of current artists who, until recently (or in some cases consistently), have regarded themselves and their work as distinctly gay or lesbian (or even straight). Neil Bartlett, for example, has quite repeatedly defined his work as quintessentially gay, and has been one of the most dominant protagonists in eighties gay activist performance, despite his recent discomfort with notions of "subcultural" performance practices (explored more fully in Chapter Four).

Bartlett (the gay auteur) has quite visibly adopted a more queer artistic approach to his recent work, a factor that is common to many other previously gay/lesbian artists (eg. Lloyd Newson, Nigel Charnock, Lois Weaver, Peggy Shaw, Gay Sweatshop etc). However, even though such post-constructionist approaches are common to contemporary queer work, the artists still tend to place their own subjective autobiographies and individually (homo) sexualised bodies at the core of the reading

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process, thus evoking conflict in the sites of contact and departure between queer linguistics and corporeal delineation.

This way of working could be regarded as the point of origin of a new postqueer perspective in performance (traces of which are also residually evident in recent queer cinema and theory). Within such work, the queer perspective and aesthetic is explored more as a form of acknowledged utopian impossibility. And so, intrinsic sexual preferences or objects of desire (mainly same-sex) are not challenged or dislocated in the body of the work, but merely form the basis for experimentation, re-inscription and playful address within the context of liberated artistic expression. Texts are thus created that challenge the normalcy of heterosexuality as a power/defining model (in relation to an oppressed homosexuality), by de-stabilising all categories:

Why are these queer artists carrying the place of the inexpressible, the place of pain, in performances that have elicited an uncommon concern and unself-conscious new naiveté about representation? What is this purchase on/of the Real in queer performances about?... queer performance is literally saturated by a desire to understand and pose the body as raw material, the body unmediated by the form and consumption of spectacle. 17

This form of potentially post-queer performance is quite "readable" in the works of such performance artists as Karen Finley or Ron Athey. Finley herself is a "self-identified heterosexual", and yet the motivation of her work is undoubtedly queer - a fact exemplified by the furore of protest surrounding her work in the US. 18

Finley’s work has been placed at the core of nineties obscenity debates where, along

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18 In the summer of 1990, the US National Endowment of the Arts (despite much dissent) revoked their grant funding of Finley’s “indecent” and “immoral” work, who along with Tim Miller, John Fleck and Holly Hughes became notorious as the NEA Four.
with three other self-identified lesbian/gay/queer artists (Holly Hughes, Tim Miller and John Fleck), it has been subjected to a moral backlash and attempts at censorship. Even though the main cause for concern with the three “queer” artists was unsurprisingly their explicit homoeroticism, it was Finley’s presence as the only “straight” artist that caused most of the uproar since the homoerotic content of her work and frames of reference were so dynamically queer. The uncompromising impact of her work directly challenged her public status as a heterosexual woman, since all performative signifiers in the text should “naturally” denote a lesbian identity.

Finley’s work, therefore, empowered the queer agenda to the extreme, since she was, in effect, working from within the heteronormative matrix. The subordinate role of the gay-identified queer artist in relation to the homo/hetero binary fails to truly destabilise the heteronormative structures, yet when a straight-identified artist proposes such queer possibility its legitimacy as a definitive, fixed sexual category is directly placed in jeopardy, as Lynda Hart reiterates: “For the ‘object’ under attack by the homophobe is the presumed stability of his/her own identity” (Hart, 95: 64). Finley’s re-appropriation of the (female) body, in particular the anus (commonly associated with male homosexuality), not only attempts to transcend the boundaries of gender but also problematises the hetero/homo binary:

Her performances enlist the possibilities for multiple, shifting identifications that psychoanalytic discourse permits without abandoning a materialist critique. In the gaps between her rhetoric and performance, she negotiates the psychic/social split that troubles the feminist project of enlisting psychoanalytic concepts in a materialist critique. (ibid)

Finley’s work thus debates the boundaries of conventional discourse, appropriating and revealing queer techniques that articulate the constructedness of gender and sexual paradigms. But more importantly, she proposes the fact that “heterosexuality
is the site where resistance is most necessary” (ibid). By asserting that homophobia is a reaction to, or fear of, revealing the fallacy of hetero/homo and masculine/feminine binaries (rather than merely a matter of sexual difference), the “essential” nature of heterosexuality itself is put into question.

Problematically however, like most postmodern forms of performance, queer performance is ephemeral and merely visible “in the moment”. As an artistic event, it is experiential and transient within the space of the performance, unlike the more documentative and constructed political texts of gay agit-prop drama (post-Stonewall and AIDS). It is hence through the practice of performance and its relation to performativity, that the question of “queer” as a theory can be addressed and explored, since it is the ideal public context for experimentation and exploration. Performance, in its direct and confrontative form, is the appropriate means by which to explore that which in reality may be impossible to implement (though the political implications of its corporealisation within the space and in the presence of a collective audience is provocative enough). Queer/ness and performance work together due to their “ontological affinities”, ie. their obsession with the polysemic nature of being and the potency of re-imagining alternative realities and configurations.

The plurality of “texts” that will be explored within this study, are selected with the intent to call into question the variable aspects of performativity and performance that function as interpretive paradigms and political interventions. The actual definition of queer (albeit a contradiction in terms) is in a constant state of continual flux and re-signification. Any “definition”, therefore, lies within its versatility and mobility, and its relentless interrogation of representational disciplines and practices (which many critics perceive as the necessity for returning such questions back to “queer theory” itself). The problematic debates between sexuality and performance may not be new to contemporary theatrical discourses and practices, but there is undoubtedly a distinct
humanistic desire or drive for "answers" that reveal some form of reducible "truth", as exemplified by the rapid expansion of critical publications devoted to queer work:

Central to performance scholarship is a queer impulse that intends to discuss an object whose ontology, in its inability to count as a proper proof, is profoundly queer. The notion of (a) queer act... is immediately linked to a belief in the performative as an intellectual and discursive worldmaking project. I want to propose queerness as a possibility, a sense of self-knowing, a mode of sociality and relationality ... Queer acts, like queer performances and various performances of queerness, stand as evidence of queer lives, powers and possibilities.¹⁹

Queer Performance, therefore, seeks to evoke alternative modes of textuality and narrativity that almost subliminally remain after the act of performance itself: the residue or "evidence" of what has transpired, a "structure of feeling" (re. Raymond Williams). Queerness can be understood to engender a sense of ontological "experience" that is almost material without actually being in any real way "solid"; opaque as opposed to transparent. Its methodology lies, as Jose Esteban Munoz argues, in a "strategy of decipherment rather than interpretation, and the open play of meanings, significations and transgressions" that a text produces in performance (Munoz, 1996: 5):

It is in the spirit of doing queerness, and perhaps, making queer worlds, that these queer acts of thinking, scholarship, writing, and performance are offered.

(ibid)

Chapter One

THE QUEER AVANT-GARDE:

I. A Theatre of Tyranny.

The central aim of this thesis, as outlined in the introduction, is to seek to explore the volatile points of connection, conflict and inevitable departure between queer discursive strategies/frameworks and their performative invocation in contemporary performance. However, the subject of this initial chapter may seem at first rather disconnected or regressive in relation to such a seemingly contemporary cultural movement. If queer theatre and performance are commonly regarded as the “products” of an essentially nineties/new millennial discourse of postmodern revisionism, then of what relevance are practitioners of the early modernist period of the last century? Particularly if they were developing theatrical and theoretical concepts within a totally “different” social and artistic context.

It is my aim in this chapter to demonstrate exactly how the “origins” of a quite distinctive, yet pre-theoretical form of “queer” theatre had already started to emerge within the theatrical philosophies and practices of the early avant-garde. Or more specifically, in the works of the art form’s most visionary practitioners, Antonin Artaud, Bertolt Brecht and Jean Genet. Intrinsic and elusive traces of a “queer philosophy” (albeit unknowingly) can be located as a foundational context and motivating factor in much of their early work, and could be seen as the central inspiration for much of the artistic practices of early avant-garde theatre. In fact, they enabled an approach to theatre and performance that preceded, anticipated and made a remarkable contribution to the later “legitimate” forms of queer theatre that emerged.

Although queer theory and queer performativity can be seen as relatively “new” pre-millennial concepts of nineties critical and performance discourse (ie. as formulated
by de Lauretis, Butler et al), they are quite evidently indebted (as with all theory of the postmodern age) to the initial philosophical experiments of the modernist/structuralist movements of the early twentieth-century. With regard to the theatrical theories and practices of Artaud, for example, there are many academic studies that focus upon and perpetuate his role as a “revolutionary force” or “unique psychological case history”, which particularly emphasise the ways in which his work as a theatre practitioner and his “tragic” and “tortured” personal history are “inextricably interwoven”. Yet, what all these studies consistently disavow is the undeniable role that his fluctuating and problematic attitude towards sexuality and subjectivity has played in the contextualisation and formulation of this subversive and revolutionary approach to the role and affect of theatre and performance. Artaud’s work has been recognised as a groundbreaking and influential force in shaping the “thinking and feeling of our time” (as mediated by Esslin), and his writings on theatre, though opaque and problematic in practice, are generally acknowledged as vitally important inspirations for the past, present and future work of contemporary performance practitioners (such as Grotowski, Brook and Schechner, or Athey and Franko B):

[Artaud’s work] act as catalysts and stimulators for others by opening up new areas of speculation and directing the attention to new modes of seeing ... Artaud was the pioneer of a new approach, the inventor of a new [queer performance?] vocabulary. (Esslin, 1976: 10)

But Artaud’s achievements as an artist are not so widely perceived as being derived from what he has achieved as a theatre practitioner, but more intriguingly from what he is as a theatre practitioner. His theatrical power seemingly lies in cultural

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21 Focus is consistently placed upon Artaud’s addiction to drugs and progressive insanity as the sole motivation for the unorthodox and outlandish nature of his work. His status as social outcast or inherent sexual idiosyncrasies tend to be overlooked as a possible inspiration for wishing to rebel against the tyranny of hetero-patriarchal discourse and theatre.
perceptions and readings of his own enigmatic image of suffering as a symbol and metaphor for the archetypical outsider, the tortured “deviant” artist:

When one thinks of Artaud one is immediately aware of his image, or rather of one or the other of the two images which have come to stand for him and his life experience: the beautiful, spiritual, ascetic face with its deep burning eyes ... or the furrowed, ravaged face of the wasted toothless old man that stares out of the self-portraits which Artaud himself drew in the last years of his life after he had emerged from a decade of confinement as a lunatic.

Both these images remain engraved on the memory. They are unforgettable. (Esslin, 1976: 10-11)

As a philosopher and theoretician of the theatre, Artaud continually emphasised the primary importance of the opaque corporeality of “the body” in relation to the phantasmatic nature of language and the abstract oppressive realm of phallogocentric thought: a key objective of queer performativity itself is the point of contact or conflict between flesh and fantasy, gender and performance, essentialism and constructionism.

This cultural image of Artaud, however, could also be seen as the deliberate performative construct of Artaud himself, since this consciously motivated suffering for the sake of art and the search to express a metaphysical and fluid form of pre-linguistic identity, can, in effect, be seen as an early attempt at invoking a truly queer approach to subjectivity. Artaud sought to expose and disavow the “illusions” of a hetero-patriarchal linguistic and inscriptive economy, and thereby seek to initiate a similar self-reflexive and deconstructive response from his audience to that of later queer theatre. Such a consciously constructed and projected mythology, either by Artaud himself or his subsequent biographers and mediators, succeeded in “making flesh” a body of ideas and concepts, compressed, or to use Esslin’s term, incarnated.

Any real attempt to “make sense of” or understand Artaud and his work must inevitably focus upon his autobiography or “deviant” life narrative as a point of evaluation, contextualisation and departure (thus re-asserting “the Author” as the
frame through which to not only read the textuality of his works and theories on theatre, but as the very text himself). His writings envisaged theatre as a medium within which anything is possible, but they are also visions that do not set out to construct a specific “blueprint” for a radical approach to theatre, but merely the possibility of its utopian existence:

In no way does it constitute a system. It has no architecture or form, only size, height, and density.\(^{22}\)

Artaud’s aim was to subvert the rules and regulations of theatre, to erase the boundary between performance and life, and to use his art as a means by which to transform the cognitive perceptions of the audience, thereby (optimistically) shattering their illusions. His eccentric volatility, camp inconsistency, sexual excesses and neuroses, invoked endlessly complex concepts and problems in that they embodied and exemplified the tenuous, ephemeral nature of accepted regimes of logic, power and sexual hegemony (which later pre-queer theorists such as Foucault and Derrida went on to controversially critique in the seventies and eighties\(^{23}\)). Artaud, the oppressed outsider, can be seen to have envisaged “queer” issues long before they assumed their present theoretical manifestation:

To our own time he has ... become the embodiment of a lonely individual persecuted and victimised for his individuality and life-style by the upholders of convention and propriety. (Esslin, 1976: 14)

With particular emphasis placed upon “the body”, Artaud regarded it as a vessel for all the world’s “impurities”, inscriptions and sexual perversions, and it was the internal inconsistencies of his own “wicked” flesh and perversity, in relation to the oppressive moralities of Society, that were the central motivating factors in his work. His degenerating mental state, increasing neuroses and sexual phantasms led him to

\(^{22}\) \textit{Oeuvres Completes}, Vol. 1, p.240.

question the fundamental modes of language, expression and cognition that shape and represent "the subject" and identity within social and psycho-sexual discourse. He began to contemplate exactly to what extent a form of unmediated subjective "thought" or "being", free of the baggage and limitation of human inscription and conduct, could exist in a pre-linguistic and fluid form. By re-configuring the "truths" (as Artaud perceived them) that lie behind the mask/s, what potential subjectivities could emerge? Whereas, queer theory could be perceived as the manipulation of surfaces (masks) rather than depths (truths), its exposition of the constructedness of such social guises also inevitably envisages a fluid corporeality beneath, or the "queer" depth or "truth" that Artaud so obsessively sought to articulate. Artaud's persistence in exploring the "chasm" that exists between metaphysics, corporeality and linguistics can be seen to have evolved out of an anticipated queer mistrust of all foundational concepts that seek to institutionalise a normative and heterocentric hegemonic matrix. The strengthening illucidity of his mental status (a product of the very institutions that sought to normalise him) and a resulting difficulty to translate thought into a coherent/logical external form or utterance, led him to conclude that language and cultural discourse were thus inadequate means by which to convey fluid corporeal sensations, ie. how he really felt. Verbal utterance and "normative" social interaction became insignificant in relation to the unnameable and fragmentary nature of deviant feeling:

During the 1930s, the period when he was evolving his theory of theatre, Artaud became more and more aware of such limitations of language. (Esslin, 1976: 67)

As a theatre artist, Artaud became increasingly frustrated by the dominant practitioners of naturalist theatre, who continually perpetuated and advocated realist and conventional forms of language that merely repeated traditional illusory modes and social concerns. A theatre that was merely re-producing and re-iterating "ready-made formulations" that set the tone for all theatre of the period: "that is to say, fixed;
and fixed in forms that no longer respond to the need of the time";\(^{24}\) thereby delimiting and renouncing the potential of language and corporeality that could possibly break with conventional forms of signification. By liberating the deviant realms of the subconscious, allowing it enunciation free of intervention from the will and the rules of rationality, Artaud hoped to liberate and embody a range of internal possibilities for human vision and expression. Theatre/performance as a medium could be the perfect tool for this approach, since it is not solely reliant upon verbal language or normative interaction as a means of communication to an audience, but for initiating a direct confrontation between the gaze and the corporeal spectacle of the body. The “grand theatrical (realist) narratives” of the past were to him only “good for the past”, and the new contemporary avant-garde theatre that was evolving in the early twentieth-century should subversively employ performative means that were “immediate and direct”, radical and deconstructive. His work, therefore, was an attempt to identify the causes that had subjected him to such suffering (and that of humanity), and to also encourage his audience to perceive the possibility of an alternate [queer] reality in which such oppressive barriers have been overcome, and anarchic fluidity the “norm”.

The body, as a signifying text and instrument with its live performative potential for subversion, inscribed tensions and inconsistencies, was the volatile locus or focal mediator for an Artaudian form of *queer consciousness*: a consciousness of the constructed and performative nature of a (hetero) normative ontology. The human subject’s over-reliance upon language and bodily social enactment as a communicator and means of reception, for Artaud, results in a limiting loss of contact with the liberated and fluid “truths” of corporeal life itself. Language and society, therefore, merely construct and inscribe phantasmatic illusions that perpetuate oppressions (pre-

Derrida) and substitute an abstract “formula” or “blueprint” for the complex but liberated corporeality of an unbounded existence, its queer fluidity and mobility:

the theatre is the only place in the world and the last
genral means left to us to reach the organism directly,
and, in the period of neurosis and low sensuality into
which we are about to plunge, to attack that low
sensuality by physical means which it will not resist.
(ibid)

Artaud’s avant-garde techniques and theatre practices were an attempt to re­communicate the (essential) fullness of human experience and emotion by re­configuring discursive and performative modes and their inherent implications. A process that would enable a point of contact between performer and audience that transcends common structural and spatial boundaries, and hence explores more problematic forms of theatrical catharsis, i.e. a “theatre of [queer] cruelty”. The surreal languages of Artaud’s theatre (as outlined in The Theatre And Its Double) would thus attempt to break down the barriers between human beings/subjects, enabling them to communally experience each other and revel in their “most shattering emotions”, which would subsequently set in motion a “total transformation of Society”. Such an idealistic vision or pre-queer propheticism envisaged a theatrical communion in which the audience would become overwhelmingly engulfed in the oppressive suffering of the artist, thereby invoking a queer form of catharsis. The spectator’s “essential” queer potentiality could be cathartically evoked during an engagement with the spectacle of transgressive performance, which would (in theory) allow the audience to connect with their suppressed sub-conscious deviance. Artaud’s metaphor for this effect, was quite prophetically the black plague of the Middle Ages, half a century before the “gay plague” that inspired the artistic suffering of post-AIDS queer theatre and performance in the nineties (such as Athey, Bartlett et al). Here, Artaud draws parallels between the disease’s infiltration and destruction of the human body and the

social disintegration of a plague-ridden culture with the relationship of the actor to the
text; body and society/actor and performance have thus become one. The “delirium”
invoked by such a condition should ideally impel its “victims” to be liberated from all
social conventions and performative modes of conduct, and a condition of “gratuitous
absurdity” would be achieved. As Albert Bermel states in his inspired analysis of
Artaud’s Theatre of Cruelty:

It evokes the plague as a time of delirium, a delirium which,
like theatre, is “communicative”; as a time of “immense
liquidation”, when the sickness and its aftermath wantonly
destroy; and as a time of “extremity” which, again like
theatre, calls forth exaggerated gestures that will release
unsuspected passions, including repressed and forbidden
sexual desires. (Bermel, 1977: 18)

To Artaud, the theatre and the plague reveals “a depth of latent cruelty [in men and
nature] by means of which all the perverse possibilities of the mind, whether of an
individual or a people, are localized” (ibid). As a controversial metaphor for the
subversive potential of a queer destabilisation of social norms, the plague not only
disintegrates “our present social state” but acts as an extreme form of purification:

Like a boil it brings whatever would have remained noxious,
hidden, and festering to the surface ... Theatre can do likewise.
It stimulates the dark, und indulged passions, the abnormal feelings,
of mankind (the actor is a murderer) and, by expelling them at one
remove in performance, cleanses the performer and spectator alike
in its collective experience. (ibid: 19)

An Artaudian theatre of cruelty, then, must successfully transfigure its audience so
that they may ideally emerge reborn from the experience and released from the
oppressions of “heteronormative” society. His aim was “not to define thoughts but to
cause thinking” (Artaud, 1958: 69).

The inadequacy of language or normative culture to truly articulate his corporeality
and internal conflicts of identity led Artaud to attempt to locate and develop a scopic
and performative methodology, that sought to overwhelm and assault the senses,
destroying the inherited indifference of society by consuming the audience in an unrelentlessly visceral enactment of suffering (a common feature of contemporary performance art). Artaud’s artistic obsessions were hence directed against the systems of thought, epistemology and culture that had produced such regimes of oppression, and had succeeded in subordinating and dehumanising any non-compliant outsider or social deviant. Language as a corrective and restrictive instrument of logocentric reason and morality, and social reliance upon discourses of logic to locate solutions to problems had for Artaud merely resulted in draining “the springs of true feeling”. By repudiating all self-regulation (re. Foucault) that maintains and repeats socially inscribed forms of behaviour (re. Butler), deportment (performativity) and utterance (logos), in favour of a directly confrontative, [cruel] fluid physicality and transient identification in performance, Artaud anticipated a theatrical form that has influenced much of queer performance since (from the experimental New York underground to the more culturally “legitimised” practices of mainstream contemporary live art). From the very beginning of his involvement in theatre, Artaud was a staunch believer in its “revolutionary potential and redemptive force”, its inherent power to change society and free us from performative repetition:

what we are trying to create is a certain psychological emotion in which the most secret recesses of the heart will be brought into the open [out of the closet?].26

As with many other theatre practitioners of the modernist era (such as Pirandello or Beckett for example), Artaud’s work “combines a radical semiotics and a radical phenomenology” (Fortier, 1997: 42) within which there is a “rupture between things and words, between things and the ideas and signs that are their representation” (Artaud: 7). What is necessary to his theatre, then, is a radically revised “creation of reality” that goes beyond all social limitation in order to put an end to representation.

As leading post-structuralist Jacques Derrida has noted in his major study of the works of Artaud,  *The Theatre of Cruelty and The Closure of Representation,* his theatre exists at the margins, liminal areas and limits of occidental thought (the ideal locus also for queer performance). For Derrida, Artaud's texts are “more a system of critiques *shaking the entirety* of Occidental history than a treatise on theatrical practice” (235). Derrida's writings made a significant contribution to the evolution of queer theory (as discussed in the introduction), in particular his formulation of "deconstruction", within which the accepted assumptions of truth, presence, identity and essence in cultural texts are radically unravelled. Derrida's acknowledgement of Artaud's importance to such deconstructive practices significantly legitimises the value of his contribution to queer strategies of theatre and performance, which have evolved from within an Artaudian context (from Ludlam and the Theatre of the Ridiculous to avant-garde and postmodern performance). However, Derrida concludes that the reality of an Artaudian theatre is impossible: “There is no theater in the world today which fulfills Artaud's desire. And there would be no exception to be made for the attempts made by Artaud himself” (Derrida: 24).

Yet, whilst Artaud himself echoed Derrida's sentiments by acknowledging that he was unable to achieve in practice what his theatre of cruelty envisaged, Mark Fortier on the other hand finds Derrida's conclusion rather limited in that he fails to properly "address Artaud's project" (45), which is to exist "at the incandescent edges of the future" (Artaud: 51). Even though Artaud often yields to the "impossibility" delineated by Derrida: “Theater is the one thing in the world most impossible to save”, he is also more importantly able to locate pre-existing examples of the kind of theatre he is proposing, from Strindberg's *The Dream Play* to Balinese theatre and the films of the Marx brothers:

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It may be that the proliferation of examples is a compulsive response to Artaud’s inability to make the theatre of cruelty a reality, but it might also be that, if we set our sights, as Artaud often does, below the absolute, it becomes possible to find intimations of the kind of theatre he is searching for. (Fortier: 45)

The anarchy that Artaud sought in theatre, he believed, would find its greatest power in the enactment of taboos and the projection of transgressive forms of eroticism and sexuality. “Perverse” performance and alternate systems of forbidden meaning would ideally provoke the internally suppressed phantasmatic realms of human desire, divorced from heteronormative reproductive functionalism and, therefore, able to initiate more fluid re-interpretations of sexual and corporeal possibility; hence achieving a cathartic form of (pre-queer) cruelty. Despite the criticisms levelled at his deployment of the term “cruelty”, that perceived it more as the antithesis to the vision his theatre proposed, Artaud viewed such an event as a necessary ontological process for the spectator to endure in order to be released from the inherited phantasms of society (being cruel to be kind). This vocabulary of cruelty was communicated by means of visceral physical sensation and theatrical “suffering”, in order to impel the spectator to re-evaluate their role and place in society, culture and history. For Artaud, the theatre was a sacred medium for self-renewal and the forging of new alternative and interdependent communities, within which difference is resolved in utopian (but also problematically essentialist) communion.

Though little of Artaud’s theatrical play texts have survived, traces of his transgressive approach to theatre and sexuality can still be located in the artefacts that remain, specifically such works as The Fountain of Blood (1925) and The Cenci (1935):

He writes about copulation more shockingly than does any author before him. In his descriptions the sexual act is almost always warped or perverted, made repellent and feverishly anti-pornographic. In Artaud’s fictional worlds we find anything but parity between spiritual and sexual love. His lovers are antagonists who surrender to a maleficent force. The medieval-to-Victorian idea of sex was that it violated woman; in Artaud it damages the man. (Bermel: 33)
His fictional characters brutally perform sadistic and perverse acts upon each other: Cenci rapes his daughter, the Young Man in *The Fountain of Blood* has an incestuous relationship with his sister, and Heliogabalus fornicates with his mother and sodomises both men and women. "Abnormality" and "deviance" had a great fascination for Artaud, not only in his writing but also in his own performances as an actor, since as Bermel discusses:

Not only did he write about exorbitant characters, but offered himself for exorbitant roles he heard about in forthcoming films and plays. His stated reason for doing this is worth noting. He felt that the anguish he had undergone qualified him for such parts. That is, he believed that brutality and other activities that exceed social norms proceed from anguish ... The types of roles he went after are inherently dramatic. The character bears a terrific conflict within himself ... In his anguish Artaud was probably prey to more than the average share of forbidden thoughts and sensations. By immersing himself in forbidden material he may have hoped to practice on a personal scale something like the therapeutic exorcism he wished to carry out on a social scale. (Bermel: 34-35)

As a short, complete play of only five pages in length, and one of the few play texts to survive, *The Fountain of Blood*\(^{29}\) attempted to put such problematic theories into practice, with a text that sought to explore the surreal borders of sexuality and transgression in conflict with the oppressiveness of a seemingly "civilized" society. The play begins with the characters of the Young Man and the Young Girl declaring "their love for each other and for the beauty and stability of the world" (Bermel: 63).

However, the revelation that such a beautiful love is in fact a "perverse" and incestuous relationship between two siblings (thus "marked" and "polluted" by the semiotic inscription of the term "incest") invokes an immediately problematic dynamic between the relationship of an identifying audience and the spectacle of taboo. The conventionally fetishised zones of the body in the play are performatively exaggerated, the Nurse with her over-sized breasts and the Knight with his immense

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swollen phallus, in order to both mark and problematise “heteronormative” sexual investment. Oppressive Freudian sexual paradigms are humorously enacted with surreal extremity, as the castrating vagina is infested with its symbolic dentata:

An army of scorpions comes out from under The Nurse’s dress and swarms over his sex, which swells up and bursts, becoming glassy and shining like the sun.

The “characters” of the play represent an opaque and shifting identity, more a play of surfaces, signification and performance than an identifiably essential character with a specific narrative function. As illustrated by Artaud’s specific stage directions, characters such as the Priest, for example, slip from adopting an expected “confessional tone” to a sudden performative absurdity as he (for no apparent reason) “starts talking with a Swiss accent” (225); similarly, the Young Man suddenly becomes a “petrified marionette... as if suspended in mid-air and with the voice of a ventriloquist’s dummy” (225-226). The fixity of corporeal gender identity is also simultaneously put into question as the Nurse suddenly “no longer has any breasts. Her front is completely flat” (226) and in a climactic and visceral act of repudiation of hetero-patriarchal values, the objectified character of the Whore proactively takes action against such dominant oppression:

At a given moment an enormous hand seizes The Whore’s hair, which bursts into ever-widening flames.

A THUNDEROUS VOICE: Bitch, look at your body!

The Whore’s body appears completely nude and hideous under her dress, which suddenly becomes transparent.

THE WHORE: Leave me, God.

She bites God’s wrist. An immense jet of blood shoots across the stage ... (225)

“Heteronormative” values of reproduction and maternity are thus rejected, and sexuality and cruelty entwined.
In *The Fountain of Blood*, Artaud, therefore, revels in the confrontative and unsettling presentation of transgressive and deviant sexuality, amidst a foregrounded inter-text of cerebral abstraction and symbol. His descriptions of sexuality and copulation are almost consistently perverse, but unlike conventional ideas of heteronormative sex as a violation of the female, it is the patriarchal male (the idealised Knight) who is victim to such violation. Freudian discourses of the “Other” and the stigmatism of the feminine are taken to their cruelest extremes (scorpions replacing vaginal teeth), foregrounded and deconstructed in order to unsettle any stable sexual formation/reception by the audience/spectator. The conventional fetishisation of a phallic female body within the heterocentric desire matrix is problematised by the visualisation and agency of abjection, and the phallus is quite literally disintegrated. Ideological boundaries between the “sacred” and the “profane” within such a configuration are consequently indeterminant and opaque, and the polymorphous perversity of the taboo eroticised. These fluidly deviant manifestations of sexuality play a vital role in Artaud’s approach to de-stabilising the perceptions and desires of the spectator, and serve an affective function in his “Theatre of Cruelty”, the radical *jouissance* of perversity and cultural anarchy:

_Night suddenly falls. Earthquake. Thunder shakes the air, and lightning zigzags in all directions. In the intermittent flashes of lightning one sees people running around in panic, embracing each other, falling down, getting up again, and running around like madmen._

(225)

Although it is generally perceived that Artaud wished to destroy language, or at least make it subordinate to his alternate theatrical semiotics, this notion is refuted in *The Fountain of Blood* and his later play *The Cenci*. In these texts, the actual quantity of spoken dialogue out-numbers any other implied elements of the mise-en-scene, and the spoken dialogue plays a crucial role in the deconstruction of identity, inscribed as it is by Artaud’s specific directions with an “unusual significance”. Unusual in that it must be delivered in an explosive and “unnatural” way, distinctive yet interconnected
with the abstract diegesis upon the stage; thereby destabilising the perceptive processes of the audience and stimulating the suppressed desires of the subconscious. Overall, *The Fountain of Blood* is an ironic parody of the eden-like creation of the world and its subsequent desecration by humanity (particularly women). It envisages a perverse nightmare that is an intriguing example of a complex Artaudian textuality that makes “a unique contribution to the history of the drama” (Bermel: 64).

Similarly, in *The Cenci*, his final full length play, Artaud once again attacks the antiquated ideas of heteronormative society, religion, order and the utopian stability of the hetero-patriarchal family. The play was his only real attempt to put into practice his Theatre of Cruelty, and for Artaud himself to embody and enact his philosophies of theatre and performance:

In his Count Cenci Artaud contrived a portrait of unredeemed evil, a man with no glimmering of conscience, who blames God or fate for having made him what he is.... He is proud of [his crimes], he means to indulge in more of them, they will be more “exquisitely refined” than ever. To excel in crime is his “destiny”.

(Bermel: 73)

Despite the narrative ‘action’ of *The Cenci*’s plot of familial lust, betrayal and murder, it by no means achieves this in a linear way. Identity and character are again constructed out of a series of opaque performances of shifting identifications and textuality, which Albert Bermel illustrates:

The sounds of the words even become detached at times from the action, like autonomous presences, as when seven or eight people call out Cenci’s name, and “then the voices grow louder and pass by like a flight of birds very close at hand”. (Such words, we can assume, would be intoned into microphones or megaphones by offstage speakers.) When Beatrice is being tortured, it is the wheels and beams of her jail, not she herself, that scream, grind, and moan. And at Cenci’s banquet, among the guests played by living actors there are dummies, looking like inhuman reproaches. Artaud says in an introduction that the dialogue will “act as a reagent” to the other elements, the rhythmic gestures and movement, the play of the lighting, the colors of the sets and costumes, and the bursts of music.

(ibid)

The subtexts of the play, in a similar vein to *The Fountain of Blood*, focus upon heteronormative ideology as inherently corrupt and “evil” in opposition to a more
fluid feminine/ised adversary:

LUCRETIA: My God!
CENCI: Devil take your God.
LUCRETIA: But with such words no society can survive.
CENCI: The family which I have created and which I command
is my sole society.
LUCRETIA: This is tyranny.
CENCI: Tyranny is my last weapon to frustrate the war you are
plotting against me.
LUCRETIA: There is no war, Cenci, except the war raging in
your head.
CENCI: There is a war you are waging against me and which
I am more than capable of returning in kind...

(Act II, Scene 1).

These diegetic and verbal “artifices” thus detach the play from “psychological
literalism” and, for Cenci, the “incestuous act is a form of self-love, and a further step
in his ambition to destroy what the Pope’s man calls “the social facade”. Cenci
delights in progressing from an “antisocial” gesture to an “unnatural” one, as part of
his quest for himself” (Bermel: 76). In the “character” of Cenci, Artaud relishes in his
radical determination to “defy moral and social convention”, and the play as a whole
has a pre-queer agenda to attack and deconstruct the “antique notions” of society,
religion, justice, order and the legitimacy of the hetero-patriarchal family.

However, despite its inspired descriptions of the symbolic and expressionist
innovations evoked by set design and costume, Artaud’s anarchic and alienating
approach to performance (that consisted of exaggerated patterns of movement and
gesture coupled with conflicting patterns of speech and sound) were poorly received
by audiences and critics alike. Rather than achieving the total transformation that he
so obsessively yearned for in theatre, audiences at the time were merely baffled by
such a new approach, and it wasn’t until after his death and his writings on theatre
were widely disseminated that other artists began to see the potential for such an
experimental and queerly potent approach to theatre and performance. A “total”
Artaudian theatre is an impossibility to accomplish for many practitioners (re. Esslin
and Derrida). since it only truly exists within the fragmented mind of Artaud himself.
His desire for catharsis and transformation also tends to negate the political potential that such a theatre envisages, since it has no real tangible value outside the experience of the performance itself (unlike a Brechtian proactive approach for example). However, it is only when elements of Artaudian theatre are combined with other experimental practices (as demonstrated by such contemporary companies as The Living Theatre or the Wooster Group) that a truly effective radicalised performance can begin to materialise. His vision was, therefore, limited by the context of the period in which he was working, and the volatile response it evoked from both the realist and avant-garde factions of early twentieth-century theatre. This was a problematic barrier that has been less prevalent in the working contexts of those artists who later followed him.

Artaud's fascination with sexual anomaly is also quite evident within his 1934 biography of Roman emperor Heliogabalus, *Heliogabalus or Anarchy Crowned*, in which the title character embodies and performs both a masculine and feminine corporeality and climactically succeeds in subverting the (heterocentric) "order" of the Roman Empire. In the text, binary oppositions are firstly established and then subsequently overthrown in the quest for a utopically queer "unity", with as the title itself implies: "the opposition of order and anarchy". Heliogabalus is both male and female, heterosexual and homosexual, but fluidly transcends both the bounded masculine and feminine elements of gender by uniting them in fluctuating androgyneity. His motivation is the need to transgress all limits, to push all boundaries to their extreme consequence, and thus Artaud succeeded in envisaging a truly queer form of identity that embodies the quintessential and contradictory Artaudian protagonist. In *Heliogabalus* (and *The Theatre And Its Double*) Artaud invokes images that reverberate with excess:

30 Artaud, *Oeuvres Completes V.*
The Theatre like the plague is a crisis which is resolved by death or cure. And the plague is a superior disease because it is a total crisis after which nothing remains except death or an extreme purification. (Artaud, 1974 [1938]: 13)

As with *The Fountain of Blood* and *The Cenci*, Artaud’s presentation of extreme eroticism and the decentring nature of deviant bodies engaged in sexual transgression are the means by which he problematises traditional indifference and expectation in the theatre, breaking new ground for artistic expression and representation.

Anticipating and influencing contemporary concerns and theories of performance, Artaud’s call for a “theatre of cruelty” subverts the authority of the text over the human *subject*. Performance, therefore, is the re-staging of the body in perpetual crisis, irreducible to a singular reading but attempting to re-define the borders between *art* and *life*, and the phantasmatic universal truths of existence. His work posed an interesting philosophical challenge to the ideologies and epistemologies of occidental discourse and the nature of identity. In conflict with traditional theatre’s repetition of the demarcations and passive identificatory bonds between spectator and narrative, Artaud’s more metaphysical (*queer*) theatre “calls into question, organically, man, his ideas about reality, and his poetic place in reality” (Derrida, 1967: 110). Artaud’s theories hence re-configured the efficacy of theatre, and point to a much broader and problematic question of the subject’s perpetual performance/performativity in discourse (pre-Judith Butler). He may not have finally articulated a coherent “language of [a definitively queer] theatre” in terms of actual semiotic codes or functions, but moreover initiated the beginnings for establishing a more fluid and “open” semiotics of performance.

The deconstructive potential of Artaud’s work, as recognised by Jacques Derrida, was vital in contributing to a general trend of problematising and dismantling the doctrines of Western thought. In his analysis of Artaud, *Writing and Difference* (1978), Derrida found much in common with Artaud’s project and his own deconstructive strategies:
the passivity of the role of the audience mirrors the passivity of the subject within society. For Derrida, Artaud is a genius in the history of Western thought who has managed to reveal the very contradictions by which such a system of thought undermines itself. Whereas, the application of the term “queer” to Artaud is inevitably problematic, his overall project of deconstructing the oppressions of heteronormative discourse, culture and identity, parallels the very aim of queer performance itself.

II. A Theatre of Politics

The nature of realism as a conservative force that reproduces and reinforces dominant cultural relations has been suspect at other moments in theatre history. Both Bertolt Brecht and Antonin Artaud intended to uncover the political and aesthetic myths of realism by, on one hand, distancing spectators from the theatre’s lulling narrative and, on the other hand, by total physical immersion in a theatre experience of sensual gestures free of narrative authority.

(Dolan, 1991: 84)

Approaching theatre and performance from a less problematically “essentialist” perspective to Artaud, the work of Bertolt Brecht has also made an invaluable contribution to the development of politicised forms of theatre and the re-focusing of debates within queer performance. Although derivative of a Marxist analysis that focused upon “demystifying” the dominant ideology inherent within conventional realist theatre, his aim (in a similar vein to Artaud) was to re-configure a new relationship between theatre and audience. Anticipating future trends in queer theatre (though of course not exclusively) the purpose of Brechtian theatre was to enable the spectator to be conscious of the ideological and social oppressions and epistemologies of the cultural matrix that envelops them. By challenging a naturalist and “bourgeois”
theatre that focuses upon the (hetero-patriarchal) figure of the hero, his work more radically sought to "develop an awareness of the individual’s social and political context, making connections between individual experience and consciousness and economic and social formation" (Wandor, 2001: 33).

Rather than conventionally perpetuating the empathetic, passive and identificatory bond between audience and performance/performer, Brecht alternatively posed the concept of "alienation". Counter to Artaud’s concept of "cruelty" which ideally sought to invoke a spiritual and corporeal "transformation" from the performance, Brecht proffered a more intellectual and (albeit contentious) politically aware response:

> Alienation implies a distancing from the event perceived, so as to stress understanding and the raising of political consciousness. Whether this of itself precludes empathy, or emotional engagement, is, of course, a contentious issue, since it is undoubtedly true that Brecht’s own work is as passionate (and conveys and evokes passion) as much as it provokes thought, even while it fractures the fourth wall convention, where audience and performers collude in the illusion that we are eavesdropping on something ‘real’. (Wandor: 33-34)

Whereas Artaud’s confrontational and disturbingly visceral approach to theatre can be seen in much queer theatre and performance art (from the Theatre of the Ridiculous to Ron Athey), Brechtian approaches that sought a collusion between audience and performer to objectively analyse the underlying textual polemics of the play-text can be quite readily foregrounded in later agit-prop works by such companies as Gay Sweatshop (discussed more fully in Chapter Two). As influential pre-queer semiotician Roland Barthes has interpreted, 31 Brecht’s work is primarily concerned with meaning and understanding; his theatre is philosophical, scientific, intellectual

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and pedagogical. What Brechtian theatre transgressively seeks to expose then are the constructed hierarchies of power and ideology that “hide from the many their ability to change things” (Fortier, 1997: 24).

The groundbreaking thesis of Brecht’s theory of theatre is the ‘Verfremdungseffekt’ (alienation-effect), a technique of de-familiarisation that sought to enable the spectator to re-view the performance text from a more enlightened perspective: “a representation that alienates is one which allows us to recognize its subject, but at the same time makes it seem unfamiliar”. 32 So rather than impersonating or “becoming” the character upon the stage, the Brechtian actor more importantly alienates or “quotes” the character instead of identifying with it. Brecht proposed that if the performer located him/herself “outside” of the character, the audience would also (ideally) remain objective and, therefore, able to analyse and evaluate the play’s underlying ideological meanings. Feminist theatre theorists, such as Elin Diamond and Micheline Wandor, have acknowledged the value of Brechtian theory to feminist theatre,33 but his additional value to queer performance has only more recently started to be addressed by such theorists as Sue-Ellen Case, Alan Sinfield and Alisa Solomon. 34 Since Brecht’s alienating techniques are designed to foreground the play’s ideological inflections and re-iterations (thereby alienating the female actor from her character), Diamond argues that such a process will also expose the constructedness of stage representations of women in theatre. This process of exposing the deployment of gender (and sexual) ideology in hetero-patriarchal theatrical practice hence enables feminist and queer performance practitioners to re-configure the relationship between audience and performance text. The queer value of Brecht’s theoretical project lies in his demystification of representation: “showing

how and when the object of pleasure is made, releasing the spectator from imaginary and illusory identifications". 35

Feminist and queer critical paradigms (drawn from the works of Judith Butler) that seek to ironically expose the performative inscriptions and limitations of gender and sexual identity have consistently been influenced by revised notions of Brechtian alienation:

When gender is ‘alienated’ or foregrounded, the spectator is enabled to see a sign system as a sign system - the appearance, words, gestures, ideas, attitudes etc., that comprise the gender lexicon become so many illusionistic trappings to be put on or shed at will. Understanding gender as ideology - as a system of beliefs and behaviour mapped across the bodies of females and males, which reinforces a social status quo - is to appreciate the continued timeliness of Verfremdungseffekt, the purpose of which is to denaturalize and defamiliarize what ideology makes seem normal, acceptable, inescapable. (Diamond, 1988: 79)

The audience in Brechtian theatre, then, is (in theory) quite radically encouraged to “look beyond representation” to the inherent alternative and multiple readings and values encoded within a performance text, which foreground differences and instabilities rather than complying to stable representations of identity:

When [an actor] appears on stage, besides what he actually is doing he will at all essential points discover, specify, imply what he is not doing; that is he will act in such a way that the alternative emerges as clearly as possible, that his acting allows the other possibilities to be inferred and only represents one of the possible variants ... Whatever he doesn’t do must be contained and conserved in what he does. (Brecht, 1964: 137)

Since each performative action of the actor must reveal “the trace of the action it represses” (Diamond: 80), a space for an enacted form of “queering” potentially opens up as “the audience is invited to look beyond representation - beyond what is [heteronormatively] authoritatively put in view - to the possibilities of as of yet unarticulated actions or judgements” (ibid).

The Brechtian ‘Gestus’, in which such performative tableaux makes visible the social values encoded within the text to the spectator, is hence an inevitable methodological practice for the agit-prop, avant-garde and queer theatres that evolved later. This key moment of deconstructive visibility complicates the reading processes of the audience, and potentially allows a platform for alternative and deviant viewpoints. A gestic queer project would consequently seek to alienate or foreground those “moments” in the text within which tenuous heteronormative attitudes towards gender and sexuality could be “marked”, thereby highlighting configurations that:

conceal or disrupt a coercive or patriarchal ideology. It would refuse to appropriate and naturalize male or female dramatists, but rather focus on historical material constraints in the production of images. It would attempt to engage dialectically with, rather than master, the play-text. And in generating meanings, it would recover (specifically gestic) moments in which the historical actor, the character, the spectator, and the author enter representation, however provisionally. (Diamond, 1988: 83)

The queer potential of Brechtian theory and theatre has recently been discussed by Alan Sinfield, who argues that Brecht’s work “has obvious connections with Foucault’s principle that sexualities are constructed rather than essential” (1999: 332). And both Jonathan Dollimore and Alisa Solomon contend how Brecht actively sought to re-configure ideas of the “natural” as performative and contingent.36

Whilst Artaud’s privileging of the essential corporeality of the body over the oppressiveness of language can be seen as problematic in relation to queer theoretical paradigms (that disavow ‘depths’ in favour of ‘surfaces’), Brecht’s theoretical starting point of “distanciation” holds much more efficacy for, as Jill Dolan argues, “dismantling the representational apparatus... Only by foregrounding this operation can theatre and performance be used for social change” (Dolan, 1991: 97). As a more politicised and postmodern focus upon surface, inter-textual discourse and protocols

of reading, Brechtian theatre has made an immeasurable contribution to the later practices of both lesbian and gay agit-prop theatre and the experiments of the queer avant-garde (Gay Sweatshop, Bloolips and Neil Bartlett’s Gloria have all expanded upon such an approach). And yet, the real “synthesis” of the oppositional pre-queer practices of Artaud and Brecht truly began to be articulated in the radical works of Jean Genet.

**III. A Theatre of Perversion**

The potentially “queer” work of Antonin Artaud and Bertolt Brecht has undoubtedly had a profound influence on one of the twentieth-century’s other archetypal “queer” artists, Jean Genet. Artaud’s “theatre of cruelty” and Brecht’s alienated “epic theatre” echo quite loudly within Genet’s theories of “theatre about theatre” and “theatre of the double”, within which the spectator/audience is placed upon the stage itself, thereby transgressing traditional theatrical boundaries and the illusion of character is destroyed. His work quite queerly:

> calls into question discourses of authority ... Genet wrote from the margins of dominant, heterosexual culture about events and in a language that could ruffle the complacency of the most sophisticated reader. Genet’s work also eludes the classifications and definitions we use to make sense of literary history. (Oswald, 1989: 9).

The aim of Genet’s work on theatre was to challenge the specificity and fixative nature of genre and conventional methods of representation, in a postmodern and queer form of cross-textual hybridity and reflexivity. Synonymous with Artaud and Brecht, Genet regarded theatrical representation as irreducible to a singular “system” of relations between form and meaning in performance, but more as a complex process of intricate negotiation between the codes that shape discourse, and the “uncodifiable movement of the subject in the folds of representation” (ibid). Clearly anticipating Jacques Derrida’s deconstructive critiques of metaphysical linguistics and
the ideologically determined construction of the subject (in response to Lacan), Genet (following Artaud’s lead) systematically challenged the unity of the subject and identity within discourse in order to trace its movement and liminality within textual performance. By problematising the subject, Genet thus exposed “the [queer] double” at the origin of speech and the phantasm at the “origin of meaning”.

For Genet, theatre was the highest form of ritual, and though his work has been described as political in intent, his overall view was to see it as an aesthetic “rite” that was (queerly) designed to release the spectator’s underlying impulses and perversity. In “A Note on Theatre”, Genet describes his theatre as “a clandestine theatre, to which one would go in secret, at night, and masked, a theatre in the catacombs, may still be possible”, and is, therefore, an ideal medium for him to re-focus his deviant energies and put into practice his radical vision. Similar to Artaud’s “Theatre of Cruelty”, Genet envisaged theatre as a form of avant-garde “psychodrama” that would stimulate and invoke the repressions and suppressed archetypes of the unconscious, thus inciting social dissidence. As Artaud discusses in his essay on the Theatre of Alfred Jarry:

The spectator who comes to our theatre knows that he is to undergo a real operation in which not only his mind but his senses and his flesh are at stake. Henceforth he will go to the theatre the way he goes to the surgeon or the dentist. In the same state of mind - knowing, of course, that he will not die but that it is a serious thing, and that he will not come out of it unscathed. If we were not convinced that we could reach him as deeply as possible, we would consider ourselves inadequate to our most absolute duty. He must be totally convinced that we are capable of making him scream.  

Genet's theatre seeks to purge the spectator of the repressed "evil" of their prejudices towards minorities and sexual deviants, and as with Artaud, attempts to invoke a queer form of "catharsis" that re-configures their sense of identity. However, the most significant difference between Genet and Artaud's approaches to theatre lie quite distinctively in their view on the role of the audience. Whilst Artaud advocated the abolition of conventional spatial divisions between audience and performance (in order to achieve a direct communion between spectator and performer), Genet's theatre tended to be more conventional in its use of a proscenium arch that spatially restored the boundaries and demarcations between performance space and audience. However, his approach can also be regarded as quite distinctively Brechtian in that it anticipated the efficacy of directly subverting such conventions from within the structures of a "bourgeois" theatre context, with an objectified performance technique and a direct address to the hetero-patriarchal audience whose presence was crucial to activate an effective mode of transgression. This division between a subversive avant-garde experimental practice, as typified by Artaud, in contrast to the more direct Brechtian subversion from within the "mainstream" that was adopted by Genet, also quite ironically anticipate contemporary debates surrounding the location of queer performative strategies in theatre and performance today (as explored in later chapters). Genet used theatre as a means by which to confront the heterocentric bourgeoisie of his society with their contingent identity and privilege, which is merely a re-iteration of performative role-play and ideological masquerade.

In parallel with dominant readings of Artaud and Brecht (particularly by Martin Esslin), it is a focus upon Genet (the auteur) himself that is of central importance to
frame and locate the “queer” philosophy within his work: Genet the homosexual, the outlaw, the dissident, the queer. The important project of queer theory that is debated within the narrative of this thesis (especially as influenced by Judith Butler) is that of “citing” heterocentric “norms” in ways that expose the inconsistencies and weaknesses inherent within them, thereby revealing discursive sites of prejudice and a foregrounded re-evaluation of ideology and institutional regimes. Genet was able to contribute quite effectively to the “critical rigour” of such an objective, since as theorist Leo Bersani argues, he was able to “provid[e] a perversely alien perspective. He is basically uninterested in any redeployment or resignification of dominant terms that would address the dominant culture” (1995: 152), and thus re-inscribe and uphold a heteronormative cultural matrix. In his controversial book, *Hmos*, Bersani sees Genet as the perfect “Gay Outlaw” to personify his objective of problematising some of the widely accepted ideas of contemporary queer theory and gender performativity, in order to return to some form of gay specificity. Bersani rejects queer ideas around gender performativity as a subversive strategy since it (and queer theory in general) merely succeeds in “de-gaying gayness”, an act of desexualised self-erasure that disavows the radical potential of homosexual identities. It is indeed his overall objective to “re-sex” contemporary sexual theory, and to demonstrate this focuses quite problematically upon Genet and his work to support such an aim. In his analysis of *Funeral Rites*, Bersani cites Genet’s passionate and explicit valorisation of the anus and anal penetration as a key example of the radical potency of a sexualised, and more importantly visible, “homo-ness”:

> Anal intercourse, even more than rimming, is extravagantly developed for its more radical moral and political implications in *Funeral Rites.* (Bersani: 163)
In order to imbue the anus with subversive potential, in opposition to its denigration within phallogocentricism, it must therefore be eroticised. And yet, Bersani appears to (intentionally?) misunderstand the central aims of queer theory as a utopically diverse project, but rather seeks to interpret it as a de-sexed assimilationist endeavour. Although his problematic disdain for “effeminacy” has much in common with Genet’s own seemingly internalised homophobia, Bersani is rather selective in his approach to Genet’s work, in particular his use also of gender performativity as a distinctively pre-queer subversive strategy. Judith Butler also acknowledges the transgressive potential of anal penetration between men, since it succeeds in transcending and dissolving accepted moral and corporeal borders. However, even though visible sex acts between two male bodies can be seen as an effective stimulant for symbolic re-signification, Bersani fails to consider the much more radical potential of poly-sexual “corporeal bordercrossings” that embody a diversity of bodily penetrations, gender transgressions and queer implications. The stereotypically re-iterative fusing of sodomy with homosexuality as a subversive practice may privilege homosexuality, but disavows the possibility of any corresponding poly-sexual acts achieving the same effect. The act of valorising gay male sexuality merely re-inscribes power imbalance, exclusivity and the disavowal of difference from within such an identity matrix.

Genet’s attempt at usurping culture’s dominant terminology (in particular its ethical and sexual categories) was designed to not only re-work or subvert such terms, but to (also more importantly) explore and exploit their “potential for erasing cultural relationality itself” (Bersani: 153). In Funeral Rites, for example, a perverse celebration of queer “anality” (the anus as merely one eroticised zone of the polysemic queer body) is articulated, and rather than simply rejecting or disavowing a common homophobic emphasis upon the non-procreative (heteronormative) sterility of gay

39 See Gender Trouble, p.132.
sexuality, Genet embraces and rejuvenates "the anatomical emblem of that sterility". His work thus seeks to renegotiate the cultural "values" of negative social declamations that label him as a "homosexual dissident", thereby fetishising the implications of the embodiment of such a social formation and achieving *jouissance* in queer performative transgression:

> Through these tableaux he defiantly - and nondialogically - addresses society's interpellations of him. (Oswald, 1989: 9)

Genet's abstract philosophies envisaged a cathartic process within which he could idealistically transcend his loathing of social, discursive structures, which fellow philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre described as, a form of verbal seduction in that his writings appealed to the reader on an emotive and moral level, whilst intellectually deceiving and de-stabilising the reader through such discursive devices as "whirligigs" (circular ideological forms of reasoning\(^{40}\)). In her study of Genet's life and works, Jeanette L. Savona sees his sexual identity as a "problem" for the reader. His "blatant" homosexuality (consistently aligned with immorality, crime and betrayal in his work) is for her a problem in that it enforces common prejudices and assumptions of homosexuality as an aberrant form of evil. However, Sartre's analysis of such an alignment acknowledges the transgressive potential of an intellectually self-conscious form of anti-heteronormative deviance.\(^{41}\) Contrary to his literary works, however, Genet's five plays\(^{42}\) reflect a quite distinctive awareness of socio-political conflicts and a passionate artistic commitment to the oppressed social groups of the "underground". Influenced by Artaudian theories of a "theatre of cruelty", Genet's theatre sought to subvert both intellectualism and realism in a form of pre-queer

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performative jouissance. A jouissance that is not derived from the subversion of linear logic in verbal utterance or narrative structure (enabling a playful polysemy in the underlying signs of theatre: body, space and temporality) but, more specifically, through the languages of performance itself that (whilst alluding to meaning and revelation) concurrently remain opaque and seemingly meaningless. As with Artaud, such performance seemingly resists interpretation due to its multi-dimensionality; it conveys sensations and signs that deny any form of legitimised or "univocal significance". Yet, there is also quite evidently a violent core beneath such opacity, that seeks to utopically overthrow hegemonically structured theatrical forms and arouse the spectator from their passive indifference. In fact, Genet's theatre fits well with Artaud's vision in *The Theatre and Its Double*, within which such a new [pre-queer] form of drama and performance would ideally re-open the theatre to "myth and metaphysics". Genet's play-texts also share the same suspicion of rational logic and Cartesian psychology as Artaud, in that they aim to project a series of spectacular metaphors that challenge and disorientate the spectator. However, his texts are also quite eclectic in structure and, unlike Artaudian surrealism, they appear to also present structured narratives that conventionally move towards dramatic (and ideological) closure. The characters in his plays are quite commonly consumed with hatred and the impulse to destroy, and his narratives present us with quite specific conflicts that have very precise social referents. His work is an integration of deviant realism and poetic experimentation that inter-textually combine to create a theatrical structure that is unique to Genet as "total theatre".

In parallel to Artaud, Genet's theatre attempted to de-stabilise the inner psyche of the spectator: "Evil must explode on the stage, show us naked, leave us distraught if possible and without any other resort than within ourselves".43 Through the sexual

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manipulations and masquerades of *The Maids*, the homoerotic violence and mind-games of *Deathwatch*, the sadomasochism of *The Balcony*, the racial hatred of *The Blacks* and the savage revolution of *The Screens*, Genet impels his audience towards liberation from the suppressions of society. Similarly “exhibitionistic” and erotic as the plays of Pirandello, Genet’s theatrical “anachronisms” have been compared to Brecht’s ‘Verfremdungseffekt’, in that he also disrupts spectatorial sensibilities through cross-gender/racial performance. Yet, whilst Brecht’s alienated theatre sought to stimulate his audience into objective analytical thought, debate and social action, Genet on the other hand, playfully aimed to shock and “harass” the bourgeoisie.

As J.L. Savona argues, Genet’s plays “focus primarily on the liminal phase of the rite of passage” (Savona: 144):

> Liminality is the means of stripping the individual of all ties to society through a period of intense isolation, degradation, and self-abasement. Barbara Myerhoff notes, “When an initiate is stripped of all that he/she knows and understands - the sources of knowledge of self and society - he/she is likely to develop a freer deeper understanding of the system from which he/she has been removed. Then the moral order is seen from a different perspective and the result may be alienation, social change, and/or individual self-awareness”... The actual separation from society and subsequent degradation forces the initiate to assess man’s relationship to institutionalized behaviour, roles, and norms.  

Genet, therefore, used theatre as a means by which to expose the hypocrisy of modern (hetero-patriarchal) society, who “can survive only through role-playing”. As Sartre has noted in *Saint Genet*, his dramatic protagonists consistently “play characters who play characters who play roles. The sham is repeated ad infinitum”.

To demonstrate this, in *Deathwatch*, Genet’s first (openly gay) play, he explores the violent struggles of the individual for recognition within a sub-cultural value system.

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that a heteronormatively moral society has already rejected. From within the alternative hierarchical community of a (Foucauldian) prison, the "natural order" is reconstituted to valorise the strong deviant over the weak, the butch over the femme:

Green Eyes: I didn't want what happened to me to happen. It was all given to me. A gift from God or the Devil, but something I didn't want ... I tried everything to shake it off. I struggled, I boxed, I danced, I even sang, and, odd as it may seem, I refused it at first. It was only when I saw that everything was irremediable that I quieted down. I've only just accepted it. It had to be total. (161)

A powerful element of *Deathwatch*, is its explicit criticism of the purely verbal and deceitful values of accepted ideas of morality, and the intensity of human experience when it is forbidden and enacted by the outcast, the condemned and the deviant.

In his plays, Genet presents the act of murder as a lucid and necessary action in order to transcend the tyranny of social oppression. The physical and ideological topology within the diegesis of *Deathwatch*, quite effectively illustrates Michel Foucault's thesis in *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, which echoes the same idea of surveillance implied by the French interpretation of the play's title, *Haute Surveillance*. Foucault's groundbreaking study of the ideological foundations of judicial and punitive institutions, analysis of the "order of knowledge" and the balances of power that underlie social structures, found their perfect symbol in the panoptic prison model. And Genet's *Deathwatch*, presents a prison structure whose architecture and social mechanisms quite effectively anticipate Foucault's panopticon; it is an immensely regulated machine controlled by an invisible yet highly pervasive hierarchy. This is a symbol then of the oppressive regimes and social institutions that

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46 The main principle of Foucault's "panoptic model", is that the prisoner is constantly aware that they are under surveillance, without knowing exactly when or how due to the spatial structure of the building. Such a condition would therefore increase their feeling of isolation and their ability to combine themselves into a coherent or effective social or political group.
seek to imprint a specific system of rules of behaviour, interaction and deportment from which the queer dissident so desperately seeks to escape:

LEFRANC: I did all I could. I did what I could to isolate you from the world and to separate the cell, and even the prison, from the world. And I think I’ve succeeded. I wanted the whole world to know that we’re here and that we’re peaceful here. Among ourselves. I don’t want a single breath of air to come from outside.
GREEN EYES: The prison is mine, and I’m running the show here. (146)

Genet’s unique pre-queer theatricality is evident in his ability to “exploit the stage sign in its duality as a perceptible presence and an imaginary absence” (Savona: 39). But, contrary to naturalistic practices that seek to erase the difference between theatre and reality, Genet’s play also asserts the inimitable power of theatre and performance to construct their own unique universe, system of signification and fluid form of identity:

LEFRANC: ...I put myself completely in your place. I got into your skin.
GREEN EYES: But in order to get into my skin, you’ve got to be my size. And to be my size, you’ve got to do as I do. (145)

Rather than adopting a Brechtian critique of the prison system, Genet’s play is far more interested in queerly exploring its homoeroticism. As Alan Sinfield writes, in Deathwatch “there are masculine men: some of them are top dogs and others identify with the top dogs and compete for that status. But this masculinity is insecure, always needing to prove itself” (1999: 125):

GREEN EYES: You’re the one who’s trying to act like a man. You’re trying to strut. A man doesn’t have to strut. He knows he’s a man and that’s all that matters. (143)

The “true queers”, as Sinfield argues, are “the feminine-identified boys who make themselves available to the phallic types they worship, have the advantage of
complete existence" (ibid). “Effeminacy”, for Genet, is a powerful “means for subversion”, and yet is also more problematically a stereotypical and “necessary condition for the manliness of others”:

What is so distinctive and disconcerting about his [Genet’s] writing, from a post-Stonewall point of view, is his total lack of interest in repudiating, explaining or justifying effeminacy. This is partly because he delights in the opportunity for resistance that it offers; partly because he is sunk in a mid-century construction of homosexuality that he cannot begin to imagine ‘liberated’ notions, wherein gay men might be ‘proud’ and not inferior (= effeminate). (ibid)

The primary and dominant concern for Genet then is the nature of “Being”, and its inevitable counterpart “Nothingness” (re. Sartre), and his work deals quite specifically with the “problem of man’s identity” and existential anxiety. Since Existentialism as a school of thought focuses upon the idea that the individual attains “wholeness” only once they are able to accept themselves as such, Genet’s plays in contrast deal analytically with those individuals who are unable to accept their existence as “real”, subsequently denying the ontological paradigm from which their being may gain “significance” (eg. in relation to “the Other”).

Genet imagined the “human condition” as a status of ontological instability, wherein there exists no centrally fixed or verifiable concept of experience. His texts dealt quite explicitly with the individual’s introspective relationship with their own ontology, and their “vain quest for identity”47 (as explored in his next play The Maids). By desiring to overcome a fear of “nothingness” the individual is forced into accepting their functional role within society, which thereby demonstrates the interdependence of a regulated social hierarchy. Genet’s work thus sought to fuse binary opposites and expose the artificiality of notions of “truth”, in order to construct a “queer” form of reality of his own:

Without thinking myself magnificently born, the uncertainty of my origin allowed me to interpret it. I added to it the peculiarity of my misfortunes. Abandoned by my family, I felt it was natural to aggravate this condition by a preference for boys, and this preference by theft, and theft by crime or a complacent attitude in regard to crime. Hence, I resolutely rejected a world which had rejected me.48

A meta-transgressive (queer) sexuality is, therefore, the site of greatest subversive potential for sublimation and social dissent. What interested Genet most was not necessarily how society distributes power dichotomies (re. Foucault), but more specifically how it assigns and constructs identities (re. Butler). It is the perpetual re-enactment or rejection of these identities that for Genet (and a lot of queer theorists) determines the most effective strategy for transgression. This notion is strongly implicit in one of Genet’s later theatrical works, *The Maids*. In his preface to the published play-text, Genet rejects a reading of the text as merely a social rebellion, but sees the play more as a rebellion of relational “essences”.49 In the narrative, Genet’s *Maids* are existentially fixed to endlessly repeat and perpetuate performative modes of oppression and domination, as Bersani argues, “structures of oppression outlive agents of oppression” (174). It was his aim with the play to “do away with characters - which stand up, usually, only by virtue of psychological convention - to the advantage of signs as remote as possible from what they are meant first to signify”.50 However, in *A Note on Theatre*, Genet also expresses his frustration with the failure of subsequent interpretations of his play (particularly early productions in New York, Paris and London) that tended to revert to more traditional methods of acting, which endorsed the identification of actor with character rather than the performer becoming “a sign charged with signs” (a common problem for Artaud). Genet envisaged *The Maids* to be an anti-realistic, anti-psychological experience that would present his characters as “metaphors”, uniting his spectators in poetry and transgression (a vision

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48 As cited by Markus, p.186.
49 As cited by Bersani, p.173.
that was only truly attempted later in the sixties by such experimental companies as The Living Theatre and the Wooster Group). Although a concise summary of the narrative and characters of the play is possible on a superficial level, it is a text that more intricately evolves from a complex pattern of interwoven and fluid identities that connect, conflict and depart from one another. Its narrative is based upon an idea that “normal” human interaction is impossible, except from within the [fluidly queer] realms of fantasy and surreality, and the characters performatively substitute the “mask” of one for the other. As Bersani remarks:

what interests Genet is not how society distributes predicaments, but rather how it assigns identities. It is the taking on - or attempted refusal - of those identities that determines effective rebellion. In a sense, Genet is an out-and-out social constructionist. There is no margin of being to which Claire and Solange can retreat, no secret inner place their social nature couldn’t reach or violate, and which might reconcile them to being maids. In The Maids, social roles are inner essences, and the question becomes: how do you get rid of an essence. (172-173)

Based upon an actual murder of a ‘Madame’ by her two maids in 1933, Genet’s play “focuses anxieties about class and sexual intrusions through women” (Sinfield: 176). But, rather than concentrating upon the play as just a symbol of socialist revolt, the real subversive potential of the play for Genet lies in its implicit sexual perversity. As Sinfield remarks, “sexuality is everywhere in the text” (ibid):

The role-play dialogue weaves obsessively around Madame’s clothes and body - her gowns, her furs, her jewels, her bosom, her throat, ‘her satiny skin, and her little ears, and little wrists’ (38). As Solange gets ‘right into the transformation’ her sensations are orgasmic: ‘I’m quivering, I’m shuddering with pleasure. Claire, I’m going to whinny with joy’ (34). Eroticism is the glue between the maids and between them and their mistress. (ibid)

Genet negotiates the question of “personal identity” in terms of an “economy of difference” in the play, exploring the underlying performative relations between “proper names”, characters “named”, and the “one who names” in narrative (re.
Derrida). In his queer universe, Genet's characters are not identified as "feminine" or "masculine" according to biology or sexual orientation, but to the specific role they perform for others: "les tantes" (queens) and "les males" (males). Gender difference is not based upon physical difference in this context, but between subjects and others in an economy of power, desire and performance.

SOLANGE [coldly] Madame will wear the red dress.

CLAIRE [simply] Quite. [severely] Hand me the dress. Oh! I'm so alone and friendless. I can see in your eyes that you loathe me. You don't care what happens to me.

SOLANGE: I'll follow you everywhere. I love you.

CLAIRE: No doubt one loves a mistress. You love and respect me. And you're hoping for a legacy, a codicil in your favour -

SOLANGE: I'll do all in my power.

CLAIRE [ironically]: I know. You'd go through fire for me. [SOLANGE helps CLAIRE put on her dress] Fasten it. Don't pull so hard. Don't try to bind me.

From within a heteronormative paradigm it is the relationality of difference that demarcates the sexual binary of male and female from which all other formations are derived, ie. subject/object, master/slave, active/passive. This establishes an ontological discourse within which the male acts as the unmarked "transcender" of difference, whilst the female is reduced to the negated figure of "lack" that can only be recuperated from within such a matrix. However, "the [queer] subject" in Genet is unable to be conceived of as a "fixed" identity, but more as "a trace for the movement of difference destroying/producing relations of intersubjectivity in discourse" (Oswald, 1989: 131). Binary categories of masculine/feminine, master/slave, active/passive, in the Genetian matrix are not seemingly natural or biological givens, but more a subversively performative strategy of role-play and fetishistic fantasy:

SOLANGE: Down on your knees! [CLAIRE hesitates and kneels.] Ah! Ah! You were so beautiful, the way you wrung your precious arms! Your tears, your petals oozed down your lovely face. Ah! Ah! Down! [CLAIRE does not move.] Down! [SOLANGE strikes her.] Get down! [CLAIRE lies down.] Ah! You amuse me, my dear! Crawl! Crawl, I say, like a worm!

By defining "performance" as the conscious act of being something for someone else
(a function of the subject’s oscillatory construction in discourse), Genet manages to challenge the boundaries between subjects and hence engage and stimulate the spectator’s desire for active transgression and re-negotiation:

Genet refuses the dialectical closure of didactic theatre, replacing dialectics with an ironic staging of difference, Derrida’s term for the slippery movement between signifier and signified in textual writing. In Genet performance constantly erodes mimesis as soon as it promises to present a transcendental signified in the immediate presence of representation. (ibid)

De-realisation is an integral part of this process in Genet’s theatre (as in Artaud and Brecht). A state of cognitive anarchy is deliberately provoked within the audience/spectator dynamic by the discursive and performative strategies of the text: in The Maids, for example, by cross-gendered representation (ie. male actors performing female identities or even an all-female production of Deathwatch). Genet’s “trans-gendered” maids perfectly encapture “the falsehood of the stage”, and his contempt towards the masquerades of occidental theatre led him to deploy a performativity in the play within which characters are metaphorical citation, thus displacing conventional patterns of characterisation and identification. The male gender of the performers is irrelevant to the internal structure of the narrative/diegesis, but rather becomes (queerly) “erotically charged” in performance due to the tension evoked between the masculine body and its feminine (re-) dressing (“a sign charged with signs”). This would ideally be a source of anxiety for the spectator, since “femininity” consequently becomes both a “concept” and a form of “theatricality”.

As Sartre has illustrated,51 the identity of the two maids is the result of artifice and the layering of multiple “appearances” that do not really lead the spectator to any concept of a central “truth”. He interprets Claire and Solange as two men masquerading as

51 See Saint Genet, p.622.
women who are themselves secretly boys, and although the play may claim to express “true feelings” or a socio-ethical search for “being”, it functions in a vacuum due to Genet’s authority, “whose consciousness controls its roles, asserts himself in his work as pure nothingness and the very cause of that nothingness” (Savona:58). And yet, as Savona responds, this existential dialectic fails to understand the essential and “complex feelings of love and hatred which seem to underlie the text” (81). The impact of the play is derived quite effectively from its eroticism and fantasy, which reveals the perpetual cycle of interplay between desire and repulsion, love and hate.

The maids’ sado-masochistic fantasies serve as a device by which to explore “deviant” sexuality and the interchangeable nature of sexual roles and practices. Their gender, sexual and social identities continually fluctuate from masculine to feminine, master to slave. Genet proposes a form of underlying “bisexuality” as the inherent nature of all human relations, in conflict with repressive social institutions of power that control the acts and thoughts of the oppressed (or a potentially queer corporeality). However, the drive to murder the source of their oppressive subordination (Madame) would be a futile endeavour, since as Leo Bersani argues:

The maids’ dilemma is that there is nothing they might do to Madame that would not confirm their identity as maids. Even to kill her - though it is not an intrinsic part of the social scenario within which they are inscribed - would transgress their maid-subjectivity in a way determined by that scenario. Transgressiveness is part of their identity.52

A possible response to this “dilemma” is, as Alan Sinfield proposes, to adopt a more Brechtian approach: “It is the structure that must be changed. The insight that might be derived from this (though it is not quite Bersani’s point), as from Bertolt Brecht’s

*Good Person of Szechwan*, is that individual violence is indeed pointless; the way forward must lie in political analysis and collective action” (177), which is an approach that has activated most “deviant” political performance since.

Genet’s *The Balcony*, also continues this project of indulging in the spectacle of sadomasochistic fantasies of sexuality and power. Set in a brothel, or as Martin Esslin describes it “a palace of illusions - a hall of mirrors”, his protagonists once more playfully enact their most subversive fantasies in conflict with an oppressive external reality of social dissent. As Esslin continues:

> It is quite clear that the play represents a world of fantasy about a world of fantasy; Genet’s dream about the essential nature of power and sex, which to him, have the same roots; his wish-fantasy about the true nature judges, policemen, officers, and bishops. The outcast child, repudiated by society and not recognizing any of its codes, unable to understand the motives of men who have acted as the instruments of the state. The outcast comes to the conclusion that these men are expressing their sadistic drive for domination, and that they are using the awful symbolism with which they are surrounded, the ritual and ceremonial of courtroom, army, and church, to buttress and secure their domination. (214)

With *The Balcony*, Genet seeks to expose the inherent (and hypocritical) perversity that underlies such iterative apparatus of power, and the play’s revolutionaries attempt to abolish such systems of oppression that are merely based upon illusion and fetishised masquerade. There are no characters as such in the play, “merely the images of basic urges and impulses” (Esslin: 217), or any tangible form of narrative. The brothel provides a creative context for “perverse” explorations of sexuality, identity and politics, all of which performatively interact to produce an “erotic charge”. The text is essentially “a series of rituals, followed by their equally ritual

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debunking - the customers of the brothel performing their rites, the ritual presentation 
of the new hierarchy of power, the ritual castration of the frustrated revolutionary”

(ibid):

IRMA: (Alone, switching off lights) What a lot of lights... Every one gilded, 
every one capable of combining with others somehow, somehow... And 
all these performances, just for me to be left alone, mistress and assistant 
mistress of this house and of myself... (She turns off another light, and 
then changes her mind.)... Any minute now we’ll have to start all over 
again... put all the lights on... get dressed... (A cock crows...)...get dressed 
...oh, all these disguises! Cast all the parts again... play mine... (Stops in 
the centre of the stage, facing the audience.)... prepare yours... judges, 
generals, bishops, chamberlains, revolutionaries who let the revolution 
congeal... I’m going to prepare my costumes and my studios for tomorrow 
... You must go home, now - and you can be quite sure that nothing will 
be any more real than it is here... You must go...You go out on the right, 
down the alleyway... It’s morning... (Puts out the last light.) 
(A burst of machine-gun fire.)

Similar to his reading of Artaud, Jacques Derrida also finds much in Genet’s work to 
support and expand his deconstructive strategies of knowledge and power. In his 
book Glas, Derrida subversively re-prints and re-integrates Genet’s radical literary 
texts alongside the more authoritarian and oppositional philosophies of G.W.F. Hegel, 
in a dialectical “double-session”. Within such a cross-textual dialogue Derrida 
initiates a linguistic battle, since the placing of Genet’s dissident poetry alongside a 
Hegelian rhetoric that foregrounds the bourgeoisie patriarchal family as the ideal 
embodiment of “Absolute Knowledge”, Derrida succeeds in enabling a dialogue of 
contradiction and conflict between the two distinct discursive strategies. Juxtaposing 
the two columns of text, Derrida engages his readers in an “air battle” between 
Hegel’s pure authoritarian “truth” and Genet’s perverse “freeplay”. Genet’s text both 
comments upon and exposes the phantasmatic nature of such claims to universal truth

Press.
and hegemonic deceits. The very same effect was also attempted in the conflict between his subversive theatrical texts in opposition to the bourgeois audience that he sought to address. In both instances, an abstract (potentially queer) dialogue was invoked within the receptive psyche of the reader in the case of *Glas*, and the audience in the case of Genet’s theatre, especially since Derrida and Genet were both interested in what lies “between” the conflict of interdependent opposites.

Genet’s diegetic worlds, therefore, are informed by structures of politics and aesthetics that when reflected in “fluid” sexual imagery, ideally produce shifting and anarchic effects. Even though he sought to expose the all-pervasive system of deception that masks social conditioning, his polemics also represented the impossibility of fusing social deconstructionism and radical nihilism with a positive need for social change and justice. Genet’s theatrical world tends to be much more problematically concerned with the psychic processes of anarchy and their relation to society, than with the actuality of creating new revolutionary institutions (a critique commonly levelled at queer theory). This attempt to merge a socialist need for change with a strive for anarchic nihilism is intensified by Genet’s playfulness with regard to gender and sexual metaphor in the narratives and characters of his plays:

> Because of its sexual connotations, the quest for political balance is perceived as a difficult search for peace between the two conflicting halves of a bisexual self. (Savona: 154)

Genet’s theatre can be regarded, then, as more of an experiment with representation and self-reflexivity. Representation thereby expresses a transcendental “truth” of an alternative reality based in fantasy (that operates emotively upon the spectator in collective political and sexual fantasy) and self-reflexivity intellectually upholds a
critical awareness of the components of theatre (ie. actor, space, mise-en-scene) that rupture the illusion, and force the audience into a critical evaluation of what they witness. Theatrical illusion is hence interjected with “lucid” devices and de-realising techniques. As Artaud previously articulated, “true expression hides what it makes manifest ... an image, an allegory, a figure that masks what it would reveal have more significance for the spirit than the lucidities of speech”. Both Genet and Artaud, therefore, convey a notion of fluid “truth” that is seemingly untranslatable into structured or analytical language (until the advent of queer theory?), yet they succeed in allowing us an insight into “reality” that is both recognisable and revelatory (and concurrently opaque and illusory) of what lies behind “everyday appearances”:

Although Genet’s theatre differs in many aspects of method and approach from that of the other dramatists discussed [...] it bears many of the essential hallmarks that they have in common - the abandonment of the concepts of character and motivation; the concentration on states of mind and basic human situations, rather than on the development of a narrative plot from exposition to solution; the devaluation of language as a means of communication and understanding; the rejection of didactic purpose; and the confrontation of the spectator with the harsh facts of a cruel world and his [sic] own isolation. As such The Balcony and The Blacks can with certainty, The Maids with a good deal of probability, be regarded as examples of the Theatre of the Absurd. (Esslin, 1961: 227-228)

There are many similarities between the sensory and psychological anarchy that Artaud envisions at the core of his theatre and the processes of Brechtian de-realisation that are actualised in the gender-performative texts of Genet’s theatre. All three approaches to theatre and performance discover their textuality through a process that subverts conventional modes of reception and representation in a quite anticipatory form of queer jouissance. Contemporary philosophers and theorists such as Derrida, Foucault and Lacan, have consistently acknowledged the influence of

these artists upon the development of their work. They have been cited as key representatives of a discursive paradigm of radically polymorphous performativity in conflict with hegemonic repression and phallogocentric rationality. It is at this site of sexual excess and the disavowal of hetero-patriarchal power struggles that the beginnings of a specifically queer theatre and practice can really begin to emerge. Their pursuit of transgression and liberated jouissance, their experimental aesthetics, political struggles and sexual contradictions, all set in motion an approach to theatre and performance that has contributed to a distinctively queer philosophy that lies at the heart of twentieth-century practice, irrespective of more recent critical frameworks.

While the pre-millennial nineties witnessed a blossoming in the art of *queer performance*, the debt owed to early experiments by such artists and philosophers is immeasurable and undeniable. The theory and practice of queer performance (and performance in general) has expanded beyond the material realms of theatre and drama, to the “problem” of the subject’s inscription in ideological and political discourses, that encompasses theoretical frameworks from psychology, critical theory and philosophy. Richard Schechner quite effectively encapsulates the importance of performance studies for humanistic study:

> The expanding view of what performance is demands that people both in their art and in their thinking deal with politics, economics, and ritual. Performance - how people deconstruct/reconstruct their various experiential worlds - interrogates and affects social, political, economic, and ritual activities. Exactly how this process works is what we need to know more about. 57

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As queer theorists have passionately proclaimed, to be queer is not who you are, it’s what you do, it’s the subject’s relationship to marginality that is the real site of radical empowerment. *Queer as a theory* may not have existed within the philosophical spheres of Artaud, Brecht and Genet, but *queer* as an emerging subjectivity, a desire, and a motivating philosophy is certainly traceable as an “unmarked” motivating factor in their developing theories and practices of theatre and performance.
Chapter Two:
QUEER IN(G) THEATRE

1. Early ‘Queer’ Stages in the Twentieth Century.

If drama is the most public of all art forms, it is also the one that may teach us most about our public and private roles as a gay community, and how to re-imagine personal and political spaces in rehearsing and recreating new challenges and possibilities. By acting out these alternatives, we can devise tactics and strategies to help us make them real. (Osment, 1989: xxii)

Ideas of “Performativity” and the experiential, potentially confrontative agency of live theatrical performance have played a vital role in relation to the articulation and subsequent consolidation of lesbian, gay and queer identities. As a more direct communicative medium and a “simulator of reality”, theatre has made a substantial contribution to the projection, promotion, and more importantly construction of a visible gay community. As a mobile and fairly volatile cultural platform, political theatre in the sixties and seventies acted as an important educative instrument, through touring productions and campaigns. Any real form of organised or pro-active form of gay culture and media had yet to surface prior to the legalisation of “homosexual acts” in Britain in 1967, and the “liberalisation” of British theatre in 1968. Alternative and political theatres (as opposed to the more commercially “apolitical” mainstream) during this period, therefore, performed a valuable function as disseminators of dissident information. More importantly, they also acted as a means for reaching out into “the community” and forging links with previously isolated individuals and “deviant” underground subcultures, thereby consolidating and supporting the unequivocal fact of their (seemingly) “essential” though disavowed existence within society.

58 Explored more fully in Chapter 3.
Without denying the equally important contribution of film, television and other media forms to such discursive cultural construction, the ontological liveness of theatre has been the one medium to effectively bring into "being" the visibly marked body of "the homosexual" out of the closet and into the public arena, seemingly "on its own terms". Post-1968 theatre had the advantage in that it was (seemingly) free of the regulation and censorship that governed much of television and cinema during this period. Problematically, however, the means by which these so called terms were articulated were also inevitably inflected by the dominant forms and strategies of British political theatre that were available to them at that specific moment in time. Inflections that thus influenced the "accepted" methods, structures and didactic forms by which such cultural texts were produced:

> The creation of community and performative identities through ritual and theatricality is part of our tradition, where no such tradition has been available. Theatrical manoeuvres serve a social function in creating identity as well as reflecting it. (Lucas, 1994: 188)

The inescapable and confrontative ontology of live performance (the enforced/consensual environmental bond between the subject and object of the gaze), succeeds quite effectively in bringing the previously private or disavowed into an avowedly public domain. The homosexual as an acknowledged "product" of psychoanalytical/psychosexual discourse (as Foucault anticipated) initiated a reverse-discourse that immediately staked its claim to "legitimacy" and subsequently demanded its universalist right to articulation, identity and acceptance. British theatre (and theatre in general) has long been regarded by gay historians to be one of the few locations where closeted gays (particularly male) have been able to enact private identities in public spaces, whether as performer, director or playwright.

seemingly unacknowledged by the disavowing repudiating eye of a
"heteronormative" society. And yet, these transgressively coded identities were also
quite visibly engrained within more mainstream cultural texts and iconography, from
the effeminate chorus boys and outrageous dames of music hall and pantomime to
the camp aesthetics and ironies of farce and melodrama (as explored in Neil Bartlett's
1993 play *NIGHT AFTER NIGHT*). A blatantly transgressive sensibility has always
existed within such complex performative counter-discourses, whose subtextual trace
or residue is quite accessible to queer protocols of reading and interpretation despite
cultural attempts at heterocentric encoding and masking.

As queer theorist Alexander Doty discusses in his recent queer re-reading of classical
cinema, *Flaming Classics: Queering the Film Canon* (2000), it is a common cultural
misconception to assume that “the mainstream” is an inherently and monolithically
heterosexist paradigm. Rather than reading queerness into mainstream texts or
“mak[e] things [perfectly] queer” to cite Doty’s earlier work (1993), he views the
mainstream as a far more slippery and fluid concept that has persistently had
heterosexist readings imposed upon it. Doty views all spectators (irrespective of
sexuality) as having intense “cultural and erotic investments in so-called mainstream
and classic popular culture texts”, and that such texts “can be more queer-suggestive
than ‘openly’ gay, lesbian or bisexual texts” (1). The concept of queer is hence
regarded as primarily a descriptor of “those aspects of spectatorship, cultural
readership, production and textual coding that seem to establish spaces not described
by, or contained within, straight, lesbian, bisexual, transsexual, or transgendered
understandings and categorizations of gender and sexuality” (6-7). But rather, his
work attempts to explore the “complex circumstances in texts, spectators, and
production that resist easy categorization, but that definitely escape or defy the
heteronormative” (7), and as such, queer readings in both cinema or theatre are just as
legitimate (or “real”) as the preferred readings sanctioned by dominant culture.
The representation of homosexuality in British theatre prior to the revoking of the censorial powers of the Lord Chamberlain’s Office in 1967 was, as John M. Clum argues, “the result of cautiously showing what could not be shown, and saying what could not be said” (Clum, 1994: 71). The “closet dramas” of this period saw sexual deviance as a tempting lure of the forbidden, wherein homosexuality was fluidly invoked and yet simultaneously disavowed actual articulation. Even in the United States during this period, depictions of homosexuality were outlawed for fear that they would lead to “the corruption of youth or others”\(^\text{60}\). Or more importantly, that such productions would attract homosexuals to the audience “thus creating a visible presence and, therefore, a threat to the enforcement of invisibility” (ibid). On the British and American stage, homosexual characters and relationships were commonly inferred through stereotype and an encoded structure of signs through which homosexuality could be deciphered. As Clum proposes, a performative homosexuality was embodied through a “catalogue” or “combination of selections”:

- Effeminacy (mincing, limp wrists, lisping, flamboyant dress)
- Sensitivity (moodiness, a devotion to his mother, a tendency to show emotion in an unmanly way)
- Artistic talent or sensibility
- Misogyny
- Pederasty (as we shall see, this became the stereotypical formula for homosexual relationships, with its connotations of arrested development and pernicious influence)
- Foppishness
- Isolation (the homosexual’s fate, if he or she remained alive at the final curtain)

(Clum: 77)

The aim of such “enunciation” was, of course, to attempt to universalise a system by which the invisible danger of homosexuality could be exposed. Heterosexist culture

\(^{60}\) Cited by Clum, p.74 from the Wales Padlock Act of the New York Penal Code that outlawed plays “depicting or dealing with the subject of sex degeneracy, or sex perversion”. 
could thereby seem to be given privileged and empowered access to the identification
and marginalisation of its deviant other, but ironically the establishment of such a
system also provided a means by which the homosexual could “pass” in
heteronormative society by refusing to enact such a performative system:

The homosexual character is often trapped in a ritual of purgation -
of identifying and eliminating. Visual stereotypes allow the
playwright and performers to enact this ritual without ever naming
what is considered unspeakable. (Clum: 78)

An early example of this “ambiguity” that is commonly cited by gay theatre
historians⁶¹ is Mordaunt Shairp’s *The Green Bay Tree* (1933), a play that despite its
implicit homosexual “characterisations” and relationships, never really makes any
actual allusion to homosexuality itself. Recounting the story of an elderly middle-
class homosexual’s “tutelage” of a younger man, it stereotypically panders to societal
fears of “pederastic and pernicious deviants” corrupting an impressionable working-
class youth through coded innuendo and judgmental polemics. The play was also
quite important in that it established and defined “the formula for the British stage
homosexual” (Clum: 79), as a middle-class effeminate bohemian with a penchant for
“cross-class pederasty”. The play’s central character, Dulcimer, is “the codified
presentation of unstated homosexuality” (80), and the “openly heterosexual”
playwright Shairp is, as Clum discovers, “meticulous about stage directions,
presenting judgments on his characters that the actors are clearly meant to
communicate to the audience” (ibid). Dulcimer exists in a typically excessive
aesthetic environment, described as “artificial” in that it “reflects his personality, his
sensitiveness, and his delicate appreciation of beauty” (Shairp, 1933: 55). Dulcimer’s

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⁶¹ Re. Clum, Sinfield et al.
homosexuality is, therefore, connected to both effeminacy and weakness, in that he is not only referred to by the more feminine name “Dulcie”, but his “penchant for performance is intended to reflect the aesthete’s love of artifice and hatred of the natural” (Clum: 81). In true pre-queer rebellion, Dulcimer rejects the heteronormative in favour of playful performance and “elaborate masquerade”. As a “wicked” and narcissistic homosexual, he has abused his class position by decadently “purchasing” an eleven-year-old Welsh choirboy from an impoverished working class family, and drawn him into the evil web of his perverse lifestyle. Dulcimer’s “unnatural” influence has subsequently resulted in the boy repudiating his “natural” masculine name (David) for the femininely coded “Julian”. He has performatively moulded Julian into his own queer image, thereby embodying the stereotypical social fears of the almost supernaturally evil powers of homosexuality. The predatory ‘Homosexual’ was perceived during this period as a common problematic “element” within the corrupt upper class élite, rather than the more heteronormative underclass. He was therefore able to tempt such impoverished “victims” through his empty excesses and opulent lifestyle.

“Normality” in the play is represented by the arrival of Leonora into such an alien world, who, in contrast, is ironically referred to by the more masculine name “Leo”, and is the only hope of “saving” Julian from such “deviance”. The central dilemma then at the core of this “problem play” is the conflicting “menage à trois” that develops between the three, as both Leo and Dulcie compete over the fetishised youth of Julian, whom Dulcimer seemingly possesses “body and soul”. Ironically, the potential heteronormative recuperation of Julian is represented by a masculinised
Leonora in opposition to a feminised Dulcimer, since from a heteronormative context it could be perceived as the lesser of two evils. Julian’s effeminacy should be countered by an attraction to a masculine female, which would be far more acceptable and “normative” than the shameful lack of being attracted to a feminised male. Discursively, Dulcimer is consistently referred to as the embodiment of evil, literally through the vitriolic descriptions of Leonora and Julian’s evangelical father: “[he is] rotten to the core” (76), “wicked” and “He’s evil. You don’t realise how evil he is” (95), and additionally in Shairp’s character profile: “He has a habit of looking at you from under his eyes, and though a complete dilettante, he has an alert, vibrating personality. A man who could fascinate, repel and alarm” (55). And just like all evil villains in drama, he is finally vanquished at the hands of a vengeful heteronormative morality when Julian’s father shoots him. Julian’s “authentic” biological father thus restores the hetero-patriarchal moral order by removing the deviant impostor. Yet, in a rather surprisingly queer dénouement, Julian finally rejects a heteronormative future with Leonora in favour of replacing Dulcimer as “queen” of his decadent environment. As Clum remarks, “normal” society may well be appeased by the fact that Julian is left contained within his hermetically sealed “gilded cage” at the close of the play. However, a “gay audience could see the denouement not as a sinister picture of corruption but as the survival of the homosexual” (82). The pederast may have been killed, but the dangerous effects of a homosexual influence live on in the perverted body of Julian: “a man could never settle down until he’d got women out of his life” (97).

Rather than conform, then, to the dictates of heteronormative narrative closure, with
Julian’s disavowal of Dulcimer’s evil influence and subsequent “happily ever after” union in heterosexual bliss with Leonora, Shairp’s “closure” has a defiantly queer resolution. Once tainted by the decadent homosexual lifestyle (that has “spread itself like a green bay tree”), Julian is hence condemned to a life of narcissistic solitude, and the lonely despair of such a vicious cyclic condition is made plainly and comfortingly clear to the audiences of the time. Even though an enunciated homosexuality in the play remained “unsaid”, the visibly marked “persona” and “sensibility” that re-iterated cultural understandings and stereotypes of the homosexual were glaringly abundant. Markings that were also quite pro-actively embodied by the “camp” performative strategies of the actors themselves in the original London production (as noted by both Clum and Sinfield), which in contrast were aggressively erased from the later New York version:

*The Green Bay Tree* is the point at which the queer gent breaks his cover as an eccentric bachelor, as many reviewers recognised ...

... But they were generally appeased by the play’s urgent hostility towards Dulcimer - the *New English Weekly* complained of his ‘exaggeratedly mincing deportment and his ugly caressing of chairs’. (Sinfield, 1999: 119)

Whereas British theatre was more accustomed to such subversive camp playfulness through the earlier works of queer icons Oscar Wilde and Noel Coward, the US production (following an aggressive response to Mae West’s earlier “queer” production *The Pleasure Man*, 1928) quite vehemently edited out all “hints of homosexuality” in order to avoid the theatre being “padlocked” by nervous censors:

The few overt references to Julian’s “fate”, like Leonora’s line: “I hope I shant meet you one day in Piccadilly with a painted face, just because you must have linen sheets” (p92), were cut from the Broadway production. The audience was left to infer from long glances and meaningful silences ... The onus of reading homosexuality was on the audience, not the producer, whose show could be padlocked. Yet the assumed audience ability to read homosexuality into gestures and innuendoes, to decode the cryptic production, shows that Harris knew his
audience had some awareness of homosexuality and some understanding of its stereotypes. (Clum, 1992: 83)

With *The Green Bay Tree*, homosexuality was conveyed through “the eyes of the beholder” (Clum: 84) and, therefore, open to audience interpretation. Despite the fact that the play is problematic due to its influential stereotyping of the pederastic homosexual (“wealthy, effete - and British”) and its repetition of the “tragic problem” of homosexuality, the play’s dual textuality and refusal of conventional narrative resolution also allows it a “queer” potency that is commonly underestimated. Whereas the homophobic elements of the audience could find pleasure and satisfaction in Dulcimer’s death and the corrupted Julian’s solitary self-confinement, more sympathetic (or identifying) audience members could also find equal pleasure and satisfaction in Julian’s resolve to continue with his “deviant lifestyle”, thereby epitomising homosexual “resilience” and “perseverance” despite social oppression and violence. However, as a piece of “queer theatre”, *The Green Bay Tree* is also problematic in that it attempts more specifically to essentialise an identity, and by doing so inevitably places limits upon its efficacy. Rather than celebrating the deviant sub-texts, sexual tensions and fluid identities of such playwrights as Genet (see Chapter One), Shairp presents the impotent, superficial effeminacy of the stereotypical “homosexual”.

Despite the legal, moral and internalised oppressions of closeted playwrights and performers during this early period, whose “unspoken compact with producers and audiences entailed keeping his [sic] homosexuality offstage or presenting homosexuality in a coded manner so that heterosexuals in the audience needn’t notice
it” (Clum: xv), Dan Rebellato, in his groundbreaking challenge to the “prevailing mythology” of the history of twentieth-century British political theatre, proposes that:

... after Foucault we should be very suspicious of claiming that homosexuality was ‘repressed’ beforehand, or that its theatre can be written off as one big closet. In fact, homosexuality in the forties and fifties, far from being nowhere, seemed to many to be everywhere. (Rebellato, 1999: 156)

Rebellato’s thesis is, that rather than accepting the historical importance of the year 1956 as the epochal turning point of the political “new wave” in British theatre (with the impact of John Osborne’s Look Back in Anger), in fact “the contours of homosexuality [became] more and more sharply visible” (ibid) in the sixties, and the “problem of homosexuality” as an identifiable homosexual presence in theatre and society was already quite prevalent, as The Green Bay Tree testifies. The perception of theatre culture as naturally “bohemian” and its “obvious” association with the “homosexual lifestyle”, has been consistently acknowledged by theatre historians (re. Clum et al). As Yoti Lane argues, in The Psychology of the Actor, the theatre offers “power and authority which he [sic] would fear to fight for in real life ... he is in an environment where a love of fantasy, and a delight in dressing up, is approved”. It is, of course, highly contentious to propose an “essential link” between theatre and homosexuality, but as Rebellato re-iterates, theatre did “seem to be a beacon for gay men” since it “offered a density of signs and structures through which to experience and explore an identity” (Rebellato: 161). Also, quite interestingly, it provided the context for the development of a deconstructive theatrical vocabulary that formed the

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63 Lane (1959), p.50, as cited in Rebellato, p.160-161.
basis of a unique and subversively coded gay language: “Polari”\textsuperscript{64}. Association with the theatre, then, was seen as an “attribute” by which homosexuals could readily be identified, and the emergent terms “gay” and “theatrical” were, as William Gaskill recounts, “almost synonymous” (1988: 10). The idea of theatre being dominated by a form of “gay mafia” has been a recurrent theme in twentieth-century cultural and dramatic criticism, particularly the fear that a queer influence in theatre is conspiring to “foist upon the public a false set of values” (Rebellato: 162). In ironic anticipation of later queer strategies, there was a genuine belief that “beneath an apparently normal play lurks an actually queer one” (ibid), which even led to a near ban on homosexual membership of Equity in the late fifties:

This structure of giving and withholding, revealing and concealing, of suggesting that beneath a normal surface, there may be something else, opens up a space between text and subtext and continually troubles the relation between what is said and what is unsaid. (166)

However, in contemporary theoretical terms this strategy finds much in common with nineties queer readings and recuperations of classical texts, but the historic Wolfenden committee in their research into the “homosexual condition” as a stable category in opposition to a fixed “heterosexuality”\textsuperscript{65}, acknowledged that there is also undoubtedly a third identity, the “pervert”. Rather than conforming to the fixed regulatory identity of “the homosexual”, the pervert on the other hand was regarded by the committee to be the more troubling persona of “a heterosexual who engages in homosexual

\textsuperscript{64} Polari (also ‘Palare’) was a vaguely defined and ever-changing gay slang language, more common to London during the sixties and popularised by the “Julian and Sandy” sketches on the BBC radio programme “Round the Horne”. A combination of Italian, English rhyming slang, circus slang, yiddish and gypsy slang, the West End dialect was generally regarded as “queerer” due to its use of theatre-speak. Re. “Gayspeak, the Linguistic Fringe: Bona Polari, Camp Queerspeak and Beyond” by L.J. Cox & R.J. Fay (pp103-127) in Whittle, S. (ed) (1994), The Margins of the City: Gay Men’s Urban Lives, Ashgate Publishing or additionally Farnham and Marshall (1989), p.52 and Lucas (1994), Chapter 5.

practices" (1954, 7). This contradictory identity thus foregrounded the visible fallacy of the "binary model" of sexuality that they were attempting to institute, since it was open to anomaly and queer deconstruction from the outset. This perversion of representation and the unity of signified identities, in addition to the idea that "perverts" could just as easily "pass" as "normal", therefore, "multiplied the hermeneutic panic" (Rebellato: 167) surrounding homosexuality in the fifties, and clearly envisages the potential for a more directly queer form of destabilising theatre. The chameleon-like identity of the pervert and the "danger" of subversively encoded theatre texts and interpretive anxieties can be regarded as having much more in common with a radical queer theatre, than the more fixed attempt at visibility and identification in such mainstream works as The Green Bay Tree and later gay theatre: a theatre that is based more upon affirming an essential identity that is safely distanced from the normative.

The homosexual panic that gripped British culture and society in the fifties thus led to a concerted attempt at conceiving a method by which the homosexual could be identified and objectified. An eclectic and rather ludicrous set of ontological and behavioural attributes were subsequently isolated (such as "small stature, excess fat, wide hips, smooth skin, a feminine distribution of pubic hair, narrow shoulders, a boyish face, luxuriant hair" and a "predisposition for the colour green") by which to fix and locate the homosexual in society. They were attributes that endeavoured to disavow any real notion of identity as performative, thereby circumventing the

inevitable danger that heterosexuality itself was also merely “a set of behavioural codes which can be deployed by homosexuals” (ibid). However, this desire for fixative attributes was also just as urgent to the emerging gay community of the period, and the more queerly coded performatives of “Camp” and playful linguistics of Polari were just as important methods by which gays could identify one another, either visibly or subversively; a combination of codes and attributes that played just as dominant a role in the ‘marking’ of a visible gay culture and identity in the liberatory seventies. This “open secret” (Sinfield, 1990: 115) of homosexuality as a more transcendental or polymorphous representational strategy in theatre prior to the seventies, therefore, envisages a far more radical approach to the development of an early queer theatre that will be explored in later chapters:

The cultural impact of Osborne’s *Look Back in Anger* in 1956, with its “full-scale tirade ... against the ruling establishment and its social and sexual conformities” (de Jongh, 1992: 52) subsequently led to a new realism in theatre, particularly in relation to sexuality, but more specifically it paved the way for a far more visible representation of homosexuality. However, this re-presentation by theatre in the late fifties/early sixties tended to once again align itself with the problematic physiological definitions of the Wolfenden Report, and the diagnostics of psychoanalysis. Plays such as Terence Rattigan’s *Separate Tables* (1954), Lillian Hellman’s *The Children’s*
*Hour* (1956) and Peter Shaffer’s *Five Finger Exercise* (1958) consistently presented characters whose homosexual tendencies were the product of either domineering mothers, weak fathers or an excess of feminine/effeminate irrationality. Homosexuality was, therefore, presented as a socio-pathology or a psychosexual immaturity, and moreover a tragic condition that should be pitied and policed. By encouraging homosexuals to “come out” and organise themselves into clear identities and communities (thereby educating audiences into identifying the signs of homosexuality), its overall threat as an invisible and pervasive presence could be erased, monitored and controlled. Despite the lifting of the Lord Chamberlain’s ban on “overt” homosexuality in theatre in 1958, strict limits and codes of conduct were still placed upon these representations and any form of physical contact or celebratory ideological inflection was prohibited. Homosexuality in theatre was merely a *subject* to be analysed objectively, “rather than a force within the whole structure of performance” (Rebellato: 212).

The revolutionary events that led to such a transformation in British theatre in the mid-fifties may well have marked a major step forward for the representation of homosexuality, but as Rebellato concludes:

...it should also be recognised that representation created a limited economy in which homosexuality was drained of much of its subversiveness, of its queerness, in fact, of its theatricality. Homosexuality, rather than simply being a theme, subject or topic which could be introduced onto the stage, is more pertinently seen in terms of a powerful range of structural effects which resonate through the whole ‘revolution’ in British theatre. (223)
II. Liberated Spaces.

Performance and theatricality, then, as distinctly excessive and open art forms enabled (seemingly) repressed homosexuals the opportunity to "escape" the fixity of an oppressive "hetero-reality", and hence re-create new worlds of unbounded potential and creativity. They were able to distance themselves from the limitations of their own culturally contentious identity by constructing characters with diverse narrative possibilities. The utopian nature of such a potent place of fantastical re-configuration could demonstrate its "essential" attraction to oppressed minorities (of any kind), and as Ian Lucas notes:

Theatricality and performance have been associated with the modern homosexual since the term was coined, and popular misconceptions of theatre see it as a business closely associated with, if not dominated by, homosexuals ...

... Theatre and theatricality have often been tools used to mask, encode and/or publicize (homo)sexuality, and it is in this respect that the connection between "gay theatre", theatricality and gay - or, more recently, "queer" - identity needs to be analysed more closely. (Lucas, 1994: xii)

No minority group can really afford to ignore the important opportunity that such a politicised form of theatre holds as an effective disseminator of "alternative" perspectives or as a subversive deconstructive and signifying tool. Theatre and performance (in their many incarnations) have long been appropriated by emerging political movements to articulate and support their struggles⁶⁷ (from public street theatre and agitprop performance to the more experimental processes of the avant-garde). The necessary mobility of political theatre as a form and its direct association with accessible touring circuits and fringe theatres (as opposed to a more controlling commercialised mainstream), have provided a vital forum for artistic experimentation to successfully articulate an alternative polemics and the re-interpretation of

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⁶⁷ For a detailed account of the historical and cultural development of "political performance" and "radical theatre" see Kershaw (1992) and (1999).
sexual/social relations.

From the very beginnings of gay and lesbian liberation in the sixties, organised theatrical self-expression and visibility were critical elements of the movement, from empowered street protest to radical performative spectacle. Formerly taboo and subversive sexual identities were being defiantly visualised and enacted, performed and celebrated in all their polymorphous diversity: “taking plays to new audiences and representing the experiences of the oppressed and exploited” (Wandor, 1981: 7). And as Michelene Wandor continues in the introduction to her study of the origins of British political theatre:

Sexual politics has introduced an additional, radical critique of the oppressive aspects of another kind of division of labour: that based on gender and the representation of sexuality. (ibid)

Synonymous with most “cultural industries” of the twentieth century, the theatre “industry” was also regarded by such emerging voices as Wandor, as an operational mechanism of a hetero-patriarchal hierarchy of value, that placed strict ideological control over all artistic expression and product. Influenced by the new wave of aggressive feminism in the sixties, a radical analysis of these repressive power structures and cultural institutions provoked a more suspicious genealogical critique of the representational concepts of gender and sexuality in particular:

Feminist and gay activism has so far had its greatest cultural impact in theatre work - overwhelmingly unpublished, only occasionally documented and reviewed, but of fundamental importance to theatre as a whole. (ibid)

An alternative theatre movement had begun to be consolidated that sought to challenge the “repressive aspects of the sexual and the social division of labour” (ibid), that was seen to be as much a problem in commercial theatre as in society in general. This new environment of political and cultural liberation subsequently gave
rise to some important changes within the British theatre “industry”, which reached a notable epoch with the final abolition of the censorious powers of the Lord Chamberlain in 1968. This long overdue achievement made it possible for previously taboo subjects such as homosexuality to finally stake their claim to theatrical and thematic legitimacy, but more importantly to the expression of a newly affirmative gay visibility with a uniquely positive dramaturgical presence (as opposed to its previously stigmatised manifestations). Although explicit references to homosexuality of a positive nature had been rigorously censored prior to 1968, theatre had always found ways around such oppression through linguistic innuendo and subtextual coding (as discussed earlier). However, following the partial decriminalisation of homosexuality in 1967 and the historical impact of the Stonewall riots in the US in 1969, the Gay Liberation Front came into being in Britain in the autumn of 1970. The main concern of this new G.L.F was essentially to encourage visible, defiant demonstrations of homosexual identity, thereby disavowing the “shadowy ghetto-like culture of their pre-1967 lifestyle” (Wandor: 7). Homosexual theatrical culture had up until this point been devoid of any real form of “direct” political expression, since the only effective means for subversion within such a social and moral climate lay mainly in the subtexts they were able to encode, or the genders they were contextually “allowed” to deconstruct.

Since the Second World War there has, as Baz Kershaw documents, “been an explosion of performance beyond theatre” that has “experimented in unprecedented ways to push back the boundaries of creative freedom” (1999: 59). Regarded occidentally as “underground”, “fringe” or “alternative” theatre (and as “people’s theatre” in the rest of the world), the fifties and sixties saw a concerted attempt to re-invent the socio-political role of performance:

By the end of the twentieth century a plethora of innovative practices could be grouped around these broad headings, including community theatre, grass roots theatre, feminist theatre, women’s
theatre, lesbian theatre, gay theatre, queer theatre, black theatre, ethnic theatre, guerrilla theatre, theatre in education, theatre in prisons, disability theatre, reminiscence theatre, environmental theatre, celebratory theatre, performance art, physical theatre, visual theatre and so on. (ibid)

What was common to these types of performance, however, was their drive to establish an oppositional approach to theatre that went beyond the cultural mainstream.

During the years leading up to the Stonewall riots in the United States and Gay Liberation in the United Kingdom, it was primarily within the avant-garde, underground and Off-Broadway theatres that early forms of "queer" performance can be seen to evolve. Influenced by similar experiments within avant-garde and underground cinema by such "queer" film-makers as Kenneth Anger, Andy Warhol and the Kuchar brothers, sexual dissidence and "camp" performance were freely explored in such a liberated environment. Underground theatre venues such as John Vaccaro and Ronald Tavel's 'Playhouse of the Ridiculous' in New York, for example, specialized in:

extravagantly transvestite performance - pop, multi-media, loosely plotted, improvisatory, obscenely punning, frenetic, psychodelic, Artaudian, often alluding to old movies. This work may be regarded either as looking back to the drag shows of the 1940s and the notion of the gay man as a feminine soul in a masculine body, or as anticipating 'queer' performance theory of the 1990s. (Sinfield, 1999: 299).

And the drag performance of Charles Ludlam's Ridiculous Theatre Company (1967) exposed, as Stefan Brecht recounts:

"the problem of psycho-sexual identity: to what extent male and female conduct, masculinity and femininity, are social role-identities, cultural artifacts, what they are, might be, should be - how valid these roles are, how natural. Beyond both his enactment of the contemporary role-conceptions and his mockery of them, he poses the ideal of a freely and playfully

polymorphous sexuality. Or, more generally, the ideal of a free and playful assumption not only of this but of all forms of personal identity and social role." 69

Rather than become pro-actively involved with the mine-field of gay polemics in the sixties or the earlier inferential approach of gay practitioners in the mainstream, avant-garde artists such as Ludlam deliberately drew upon a rich history of liberated experimentation in the underground, and set out to celebrate a "perverse culture" in which "all social(ized) role-identities are not rational (functional) but ridiculous" (Brecht: 55). Pre-empting queer theoretical debates on identity, performance and gender by over twenty-five years, artists such as Tavel and Ludlam (influenced by Artaud and Brecht) established a practice that much of contemporary performance theory was later inspired.

The sexually liberated 1970s introduced a newly consolidated political and cultural consciousness of the experience of "being gay", and the emerging alternative and political theatres were committed to such dissident attempts at taking theatre out to the "people". This innovative climate provided the perfect opportunity for the establishment of a specifically "gay theatre", but it was also a gay theatre that was evidently (and restrictively) informed by a popular and tested stylistic approach to politicised performance (influenced by Brecht's "epic theatre"). On a problematic level it projected a form of gay visibility that was on the whole highly filtered, policed and moulded to conform to the accepted vision of gay activism, which also marginalised those more controversial elements of gay culture. A more sanitised, "de-sexed" and acceptable (yet equally repressive) "performance" was foregrounded, but one that was still subject to the requirements and standards of heterocentric, feminist and patriarchal approval, all of whom were still perturbed by such open forms of deviance. As Wandor has noted, political theatre was rather cautious in the types of radical themes it was "open" to explore:

69 Brecht (1986) [1978], p.54.
Spontaneous and informal feminist and gay street theatre events continued in various parts of the country, but these early years saw a greater expansion of feminist than gay theatre work ... Gay theatre did not take off so confidently in these early years. 70

The queer potential that the new gay movement had originally envisaged was, therefore, slowly contained by the move towards social acceptance, which also led to social conformity. The radical performativity and sexual jouissance71 that had flourished so openly within the gay underground and in parts of the avant-garde movement, which were previously “unchecked” or restricted by heteronormative codes of taste and decency, were gradually suppressed in the mainstream by the need for empathy and social scrutiny. The subversive and sexually explicit experimentations of the avant-garde, which can be traced back to the queer practices of Artaud, Genet and their contemporaries, were developing in more liberated excess (as discussed in Chapter Three) than the more tentative and “hetero-friendly” approaches of early “Gay Theatre”. Contrary to the earlier achievements of homosexual artists who had encoded mainstream iconography with perversity, this new “open” gay theatre was seen by many as a very “closed” medium indeed (particularly by those who did not fit easily with the types of identities and ideologies being promoted, ie. bisexual, transgender, hermaphrodite etc.).

However, following the success of the work of the Women’s Theatre Festival in 1973, a similar season of specifically gay-themed work was commissioned in the summer of 1974. The resulting “Almost Free” season consisted of a programme of one-act plays that focused quite explicitly upon male homosexual relationships that highlighted the oppressive ideologies, misconceptions and prejudices of a “heteronormative” Britain.

The name *Gay Sweatshop* emerged as an appropriate title for such work, and was subsequently utilised as both a creative catalyst and as a pre-*queer* umbrella term to unite the (mainly male) artists involved, providing a forum for staging the evolving debates of such a highly revisionist period. The consolidation of a theatre that explored "homosexuality" on a positive and analytical level was (though problematic from a "queer" perspective) vital at this stage in the gay movement's development, since prior mainstream incarnations had merely been derogatory or self-repressive.

But the central problem that occurred at this early stage in the evolution of British gay theatre was mainly caused by the concurrent need for gay activism in such an approach to cultural production. So, rather than formulate a more diverse and experimental base from which gay performance could develop and evolve in a more queer direction, a more internally-policed and politically accountable methodology was adopted.

Having successfully established themselves as a company (albeit problematically), Gay Sweatshop emerged with the presentation of their first work, entitled *Mister X* (1975). Originally devised for the 1975 Campaign for Homosexual Equality (C.H.E) Conference in Sheffield as an official "gay play", the work revolved around the singular experience of one man, a *gay-everyman* (the ideal of gay activism - a universal subject identity). The "agit-prop" political narrative of *Mister X* traces the protagonist's life from his early days masquerading as a misogynistic "heterosexual" (the stereotypical woman-hating homosexual), through to a series of illicit encounters with closeted gays (with critical emphasis upon the illicit and repugnant nature of such liaisons), to the actor's triumphantly cathartic "coming out" with a direct emotive address to the audience:

> My name is Mr ... My name is Alan Pope and I live at 10 Marius Mansions, Marius Road, London SW17 and I'm gay.

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72 Written by Drew Griffiths and Roger Baker (unpublished).
That means I like men ... sexually, and I don't think I'll ever deny that again. And I don't think I'll wonder how I became gay ever again or wonder if I'm ill or who's to blame or "somebody up there hates me". I'm gay and I'm not pretending anymore. 73

With Andrew Hodges and David Hutter’s booklet *With Downcast Gays* (Pomegranate Press) as a textual starting point, combined with the collective autobiographical experiences of the performers’ northern working-class backgrounds, Gay Sweatshop’s *Mister X* was a perfect example of the prototypical socialist style of seventies British political theatre. Seen by some as “a piece of agit-prop for the Gay movement” (Osment, 1989: xx) that merely “preaches to the converted”, there was at this early stage a genuine feeling that the play had become so personalised that “they were not sure whether it would reach anyone else” (ibid). And despite the typically Brechtian devices deployed by the piece to critically distance the audience and highlight its polemics (such as direct audience address, self-reflexivity and ‘signboarding’), the play had, as Drew Griffiths recounts, “developed into a very revealing statement of the four of us involved. We were telling the truth and exposing our lives to public scrutiny” (“Touching Our lives”, *Gay News*, 1977). Contrary to the more objective and performative methodologies of some other agit-prop theatre of the period, for *Mister X* “identifying the actors with the characters was a vital element in the play” (ibid), thereby encouraging the same identifying relationship with the audience. Instead of observing a play with gay characters, the audiences of *Mister X* witnessed “a play put on by a gay company where connections are being made between the audience, the actors and the material ... [the audience] knew they were being addressed directly ... The play said the right thing at the right time” (Osment: xxi).

However, whilst the play can be seen as merely addressing the debates of the time, it is also simultaneously envisioning a rather homogenised idea of who exactly “they”

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supposedly were, the “connections” being made, and the “truths” being “exposed”.
The problematic nature of the work was evidenced by the frequently volatile reaction it received from the diverse audiences of the cities it was purporting to address, whose politics “were informed by anarchism, socialism and radical feminism” (xx). They were, therefore, wary of the kinds of “truth” and “experience” being foregrounded as universal. They saw the company’s “professional status as a contradiction - it was felt that Sweatshop members were setting themselves up as experts in gay theatre which was resented by some ... They believed that gay theatre should be created by people within the context of their own communities” (xxvii). The progressive nature of this early form of gay theatre, however, was evident in the opportunity for debate it provided after each performance:

... most importantly there were discussions after the plays which were led by Alan Pope and which often continued into the afternoon. These discussions were free-ranging and afforded people the opportunity to talk about things which they had perhaps never been able to express before. Sometimes the discussions became therapeutic with people ending up in tears or there were bitter arguments about sexual politics and about what was right-on. Always new ground was being broken and new ideas were being shared. In any radical organization which is exploring hitherto uncharted areas, where the rules have to be made up as you go along, there is bound to be conflict and Gay Sweatshop was (and is) no exception.

(xvii)

Despite the rather personal interpretation of gay identity and experience being projected in the work, the differing perspectives of this new “queer” community began to be properly addressed with the critical responses it evoked from its audiences. The work was breaking new ground in that it was simultaneously challenging audiences to re-assess their assumption and attitudes towards gender and sexuality, irrespective of their own “personal” identity: thus illustrating “the power of theatre as a force of change and enlightenment” (xxiv) during such a critical cultural shift.

The production was unique in that it provided the locus for disparate sections of the gay community and those (both gay and straight) who chose to distance themselves
from the very notion of a divided “community”, to come together and debate the
issues of the play. Viewed problematically by some as “ambassadors for the Gay
movement” (xxiii), Gay Sweatshop played a vital role in formulating a “network of
information” that not only defied the condemnatory media backlash to the work, but
also provided the impetus for further local gay theatre companies to emerge:

We weren’t able to be just actors in a play and to walk away from
it. We had a responsibility to our audience which actors don’t
normally have. You had to be ready to deal with any situation,
ready for any questions. The angry debates at the Sheffield conference,
the activities of the lesbian and gay community in Bradford, the battles
and the euphoria of the Mister X tour were all part of an amazing world
of change and hope ... (xxiii-iv)

Unlike the more acerbic, reflexive and highly critical stance of the earlier London
production of Mart Crowley’s Broadway hit The Boys in the Band in 1969, the work
of Gay Sweatshop (despite its inevitable flaws) was the first real attempt to explore
such issues in a positive and supportive environment. Yet, it was still an environment
that existed on the fringes of British theatre, and the only culturally permissive context
within which lesbian and gay issues could be confronted. In his extensive study of the
history of lesbian and gay theatre in the twentieth-century, Out on Stage (1999), Alan
Sinfield sees Mister X as “an incredibly powerful moment for people who have never,
hitherto, been allowed to recognise themselves on a public stage, or indeed in any
public context” (303-304). Yet there is an inherent problem in defining exactly who
these audience members are that are able to “recognise themselves” in Alan
Pope/Mister X, and this tendency to homogenise the “gay experience” is one of the
main reasons for the mixed and at times apathetic response that the Company’s work
has received over the decades.

The effectiveness of Mister X as an early piece of “queer” theatre lies not so much in
its attempt to universalise a gay identity, but more in its deconstruction of oppressive
cultural, social and legal institutions. Mister X’s “confusion” over his sexual identity
in the play is heightened at an early stage in his development due to misleading heterocentric educational discourses on sexuality, “normality” and the oppressive moral doctrines of the Church: “What do you do when you find you’re the person you’ve been taught to despise?”\textsuperscript{74} Having been seduced into exploring the seedy gay underground of the pre-liberatory “scene” by a park “flasher”, \textit{Mister X} finds that it too is infected by a heterocentric idealism “whose inhabitants wait dolefully in hope of an idealized ‘husband’ to lead them to happiness” (Lucas: 18). In order to obtain such an ideal, \textit{Mister X} himself embarks upon such a “marriage”, but one that is portrayed as being inevitably doomed since it is merely an inferior “imitation” of a more “authentic” and “natural” relationship. The cause of \textit{Mister X}’s problem, therefore, seems to lie in the dual nature of his identity, in that he disavows the liberation of being “out” in favour of a performative process of “passing” as straight. His apparent salvation in the play is inevitably to “come out” and assume the type of gay identity utopically promoted by gay activism, but just how his problems could be miraculously solved by merely labelling himself is never fully addressed. Yet, as Ian Lucas explains:

\begin{quote}
The central character is taught and encouraged to hide himself within a heterosexual and moralistic framework, but discovers this to be untrue; from his own experience, social order is constructed solely on misrepresentation and falsification. It’s only when fear is challenged that the possibilities for liberation and freedom are seen. (20)
\end{quote}

In the final segment of the play entitled “Catharsis”, \textit{Mister X} meets a Gay activist called David who encourages him to reject the delusion of such a dual status. His final narrative “challenge” is to endure a very public and vitriolic ridicule by the play’s politically incorrect Drag Queen host (a throwback to the pre-liberation self-loathing epitomised by such plays as \textit{Boys in the Band}):

\textsuperscript{74} As cited in Lucas, p.18.
This I have to hear. Ladies and Gentlemen - a homosexual who hasn’t got any problems. So she thinks! I can’t wait for this. It’s all yours, ducky. Do your worst.  

This climactic confrontation between a past “negative” form of gay identity and the more “progressive” identity that Gay liberation envisions, subsequently results in the actor (Alan Pope) discarding the role of Mister X and “asserting his homosexuality not as a mask adopted for the stage, but as a positive and important part of his life off stage - ‘No more split lives and dual personalities’ (19). Lucas sees this unmasking as a “re-birth” or an existentialist opportunity for Mister X to be “authentic as he can be to his own individual identity”:

The search for identity, particularly a sexual identity, and how that identity is constituted and defined, is at the heart of Mr X’s journey - until he announces that he is no longer playing a character but is in reality a gay actor, he has no name and therefore, no identity.  

(20)

The inherent essentialism of this reading of Mister X is, however, later problematic when Lucas observes that the power of this moment lies in the character/actor’s “act of choice” and the radical potential that “rehearsing identities, performing identified and/or changing identities” (ibid) have. It is this conflict of definition between essentialism and performativity that is at the heart of the gay vs. queer debate. Mister X, therefore, embodies the very tension of definition that has gone on to plague the gay movement from the assimilationist seventies to the queer nineties:

The fashionable use of the modern-day ‘queer’ is not something I wholeheartedly welcome, but I acknowledge it as part of a process of continuing redefinition, and it is useful for my purposes where ‘queer’ is taken to be associated largely with transgressive same-sex behaviour rather than homogenizing homosexuality as a single identity. Here, then, queer is a process of changing identities, looked at from a (post) modern perspective, which help to inform and shape our own present performative sexual identities. If the love that dare not speak its name has become the love that won’t keep its big mouth shut, then it’s also speaking different languages.  

(22-23)

75 As cited in Lucas, pp.18-19.
However, despite the success of the production, the mainly male artists were commonly confronted by the women in the audience for failing to have any female members in the company or exploring the “new” lesbian identity that was also seeking validation (a fault that was remedied during their second season of gay plays at the ICA in 1976).

The process of “coming out” (ie. the literal realization or re-evaluation of sexual identity) has been the central theme of many gay plays over the past twenty years, but the true importance of Gay Sweatshop’s *Mister X* lies in the fact that it signified the first visible “outing” of the lesbian and gay movement in British theatre. The motivation of the play was to explore the ontological and psychological effects of internalised homophobia and the social tensions involved in adopting (or should that be submitting to?) an “open” gay identity. Yet, *Mister X* also documents the experiences of the members of Gay Sweatshop themselves in realising an openly gay form of theatre for the first time within the public sphere. As Roger Baker stated in October 1984:

> Mr.X is very much a product of its time. Reading it again, almost ten years after it was written, it seems to recreate a world significantly different from that in which gay people live today. In many, many ways the lives of gay people are more comfortable today. But Mr.X reminds me of what seems to have been lost: passion, discovery, that determination to take control of our own lives, and ... maybe most important of all ... a sense of the future.76

The play represented an amalgamation of the company’s personal (*subjective*) and professional (*polemical*) objectives, “reaching out to people who were themselves Mr.X’s”77, but as was a major problem with most gay polemics of the period, also presumed a singular and exclusive notion of gay identity and life experience that was quite repeatedly white, male, and middle-class. Despite such contentiousness,

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however, the play was invaluable on a political level, since it was concerned with both the possibility and necessity for sociological change. Its adoption of an alienating Brechtian style “made it a direct and challenging rallying call for the new gay consciousness, both terrifying and thrilling audiences with its unapologetic openness” (Lucas: 19).

**III. Debates and Departures.**

The newly established occidental lesbian and gay politics of the post-Stonewall era, was viewed by many as a chaotic climate of external masquerades (*performances*) of homogenised utopian unity, that really concealed underlying internal conflicts in agenda and ideology; conflicts that aggressively sought to articulate or impose a necessary gender/sexual separatism. The lesbian movement vociferously condemned the gay men for their apparent misogyny and patriarchal privilege, whilst the gay men responded by condemning the lesbians for (seemingly) being free of actual legal persecution and thus being unable to fully conceive of true oppression. As culturally perceived “essential” homosexual subject formations, lesbians and gay men were united in terms of their sexuality and its relation to heterocentric dichotomies of power (as deviant *Other*), yet divided in terms of their heteronormative gender status in relation to the same dichotomy (the lesbians as subordinate female *Other*). These gender and power differences also started to become quite problematic when discussed in relation to their differing approaches to political theatre and performance:

In particular the conflict between gay men and lesbians proved problematic; women were a minority in the Gay Liberation Front, and they felt that general patterns of male dominance in society were being reproduced within a supposedly radical movement. Even though lesbians and gay men shared a sense of hostility from the dominant heterosexual society, lesbians felt they also had to deal with prejudice against them as women, both from “straight” society and from many gay men. (Wandor, 1981: 18)

During the agenda-forming period of the liberationist seventies, gay male politics in
Britain were consistently concerned with assimilationist and essentialist agendas, ie. the need for social acceptance and institutional change. And yet, lesbian politics seemed at the time to be irrevocably (and repressively, given feminism’s unease with lesbian sexuality) intertwined with the radical separatism of early feminism, and so gay men (in the form of the G.L.F) set themselves the problematic task of defining and promoting (but more importantly constructing) a visible and essential “gay community”. By promoting an idea of “sameness”, and publicly distancing themselves from those “problem” members of the gay subculture that enacted heterosexist stereotypes (ie. drag queens, butch dykes etc), the core of gay identity politics was specifically concerned with the “normalization” of the “homosexual subject” and the promotion of a strictly policed gay iconography. Gay men were projected as being (essentially) just as “straight” (ie. normal and conservative) as heterosexuals and, therefore, undeserving of such oppression. Less threatening signifying identities and strategies were thus adopted, culturally projected and debated within some of the emerging gay-male theatre of the time (this is in comparison to the more deviant sub-texts of such playwrights as Joe Orton).

Works by founding Gay Sweatshop members such as Drew Griffiths, Noel Greig and Philip Osment, for example, sought to locate and trace the existence of a universal “gay subject” in the development of British history. Greig’s *The Dear Love Of Comrades* (1979)\(^78\), explored the life and loves of gay socialist Edward Carpenter, one of the earliest champions of gay rights, as reclaimed, re-viewed and mediated through the eyes of another gay “icon”, novelist E.M. Forster. And an earlier collaborative work with Drew Griffiths, *As Time Goes By* (1977), also explored the effects of homophobic oppression from Victorian England, through Nazi Germany to pre-Stonewall Greenwich Village. Within such emotive texts, the apparently

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“essentialist” and “trans-historical” homosexual subject is heroically placed at the heart of political and cultural conflict and change:

HUKIN: Very well, Edward. Sit and write your books; about a world where there’s no such thing as a couple; where marriage doesn’t exist; where there’s no jealousy and no guilt; where it isn’t a crime to love your own sex ... One day it might all come true, but there’s people living here now who’ll thank you much more for doing the one thing that you’re not supposed to do. Which is to be homosexual. Not think and write and talk about it, but be it. In whatever way you can ... You won’t be thanked for it and you won’t be remembered for it. But, you might be loved for it ... You were so much cleverer than us ... We’ve got to live with what we’ve learnt from you ... The world didn’t seem very safe any more.  

Despite the efficacy of these queer historical reclamations and revisions (that affirm and acknowledge the presence and importance of past “deviant” figures that legitimise the struggles and accomplishments of the present) the recurrent subjects of such productions also tended to perpetuate a rather exclusive, de-sexualised and thus unthreatening homogenous subjectivity that omitted the ethnic, gender and social diversity of the community it sought to address and represent. A certain synecdochal image that represented the gay man in Britain was constituted in the late seventies, that went on to influence the early work of many other gay artists who emerged later in the eighties (namely the white, middle-class intellectuals who made up such companies as DV8, Blookips, or Gloria, for example), and which was regarded as a key contributor to the consolidation of a gay cultural patriarchy:

In any radical organization which is exploring hitherto uncharted areas, where the rules have to be made up as you go along, there is bound to be conflict and Gay Sweatshop was (and is) no exception. (Osment, 1989: 45)

Although the ‘cultural phenomenon’ of the gay artist was accorded a certain amount of acceptance in theatre (and society) during this period, it was permissable only as long as it conformed to a rather sanitised and unthreatening stereotype, and did not

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79 From Noel Greig’s *The Dear Love of Comrades* in Osment, p.45.
“rock the boat” of heteronormativity too much. However, attitudes towards lesbianism were far more complex (and threatening). Despite being an ideal fantasy within hetero-male erotica, “the lesbian” as a social identity posed a more direct threat to patriarchal harmony, in that she was able to embody an “active” form of sexuality that is quite independent of a male corporeal or phallic presence; yet it is also able to radically appropriate the phantasmatic codes by which the “masculine” as a site of power and sexuality is perceived and performatively enacted (particularly through butch/femme role-play).

Following much criticism, however, and the overwhelming success of its first all female production *Any Woman Can*, written by Jill Posener (1975), Gay Sweatshop decided to divide into separate male and female sections, but maintained the same working ‘umbrella’ title of *Gay Sweatshop*. As Michelene Wandor, one of the original female members of the company, recalls:

> This was for two reasons; [the] lesbians felt that many features of their oppression were shared more with other women than with gay men. One of the consequences of this was to be seen in a conflict between theatrical styles, in that the men drew on an already familiar camp and drag tradition, which they both celebrated and tried to stand on its head, whereas the women leaned more towards the newer agitprop documentary-based styles, as a means of showing hitherto suppressed experience as it really is. The problem of male dominance in the organisation of the group and the clash of styles was acknowledged on both sides, and the plays done in 1977 reflected this divergence of emphasis. (Wandor, 1981: 18)

This division evolved in part due to what was seen as the rather essentialist rhetoric of the gay male works, that were able to readily access and reclaim a “rich history” of queer textual signifiers in theatre culture, from which to build and consolidate a more privileged and “authentic” voice. Lesbianism on the other hand, had historically been ignored by hegemonic, legal and sexual discourses (as an after-effect of Victorian disavowal), an attitude that had also been echoed in theatre, where they had been denied any real form of narrative access to such a male-dominated art form. The
lesbian members of the company were, therefore, left with the creative task of breaking "new ground" through collective experimentation and the construction of a uniquely lesbian approach to theatrical representation and performance practice:

GINNY enters and speaks to the audience. The other members of the cast are sitting amongst the audience.

GINNY: You are looking at a screaming lesbian. A raving dyke. A pervert, deviant. Queer, fairy, fruitcake, freak, Daughter, sister, niece, mother, cousin, Mother-in-law, Clippie, actress, bishop's wife, MP, Machinist, typist, teacher, char, I'm everywhere. In your armies, in your schools, peering at you out of passing trains, sitting down next to you on the crowded bus in seat D22, yes sir, right next to you. I'm here to stay to infiltrate to convert 80

This was an approach that relied upon much closer contact with the lesbian constituency/community to whom the works were aimed. The women's first official production, Care and Control (1977), was as Philip Osment observed, "an example of a piece of documentary theatre which was collectively devised, which arose directly from people's lives. Countless women contributed to it" (Osment, 1989: xxxii). This collective dynamic to performance could be seen as an early attempt at a more proactively queer form of practice, since they invoked and constructed a performative text out of a diversity of bodies and experiences.

Whereas the men were able to embark upon a "queer" reclamation and revision of gay historical texts and figures (such as Noel Greig's The Dear Love of Comrades, 1979), the experimental textuality formulated by the women drew upon the earlier didactic and agit-prop practices of the company. The structure of the men's work sought to

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“reflect” the greater historical presence and significance of a gay social subculture, by projecting a legitimised gay iconography that was revised and updated with contemporary gay perceptions and cultural values. These re-interpretations were, of course, quite extensively inflected with the ideological perspectives of seventies gay activism. By comparison, the poly-biographical and documentative style of the women tended to be rather more self-reflexive and open to the multiplicity of the “lesbian experience”. Influenced by counter-cultural feminist theatre, that sought to “re-present women as subjects in their own right” (Aston, 1999: 6) rather than “belonging” to men, the women’s work desired to put lesbian issues, experiences and stories centre-stage; and not as fetishised representations of a hetero-masculinist imagination. This approach was explored in a variety of ways, though principally involved the rejection of ‘realism’, since in order to develop a counter-cultural practice they needed to “understand the formal properties and ideological content/s of dominant cultural forms” (ibid). As Sue-Ellen Case explains, the rejection of the theatrical “malestream” realist tradition that objectifies women is crucial, since “the psychological construction of character, using techniques adapted from Stanislavski, placed the female actor within the range of systems that have oppressed her very representation on stage” (Case, 1988: 122). Lesbian-feminism, therefore, added an additionally complex dimension to these negotiations, invoking new perspectives on gender identity, heterosexism, the gaze, representation, and the “exchange of women in a patriarchal economy” (Fortier, 1997: 76). Ideally, lesbian identity relations could be seen to “escape patriarchal oppression, representation and the male gaze” (ibid), but as Teresa de Lauretis argues, the key dilemma faced by lesbian work lay in its aim to assert lesbian sexual difference from within a masculine ‘homosexual’ hegemonic context, “whose predominating characteristic is its indifference to (as both an inability to see and a disregard for) whatever lies outside heterosexist norms”\(^{81}\).

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\(^{81}\) As cited in Fortier(1997), p.76.
lesbian writers and artists have sought variously to escape gender,
to deny it, to transcend it, or perform it in excess, and to inscribe the
erotic in cryptic, allegorical, realistic, camp, or other modes of
representation, pursuing diverse strategies.\textsuperscript{82}

Heterosexism, therefore, can be seen to assimilate lesbian representation, and the only
effective way to circumvent this problem is to transgress the conventions of
representation and the predominant notion of ‘the male gaze’. The explicit
presentation of lesbian sexuality is, as Jill Dolan reiterates, a “truly radical” way of
subverting hetero-normative stability:

Because gay male or lesbian sexuality is completely out of place
- unimaged, unimagined, invisible - in traditional aesthetic contexts,
the most transgressive act at this historical moment would be
representing it to excess, in dominant and marginalized reception
communities.

Dolan is critical though of early lesbian work, that focused upon “realist
representations of normalized lesbian ‘lifestyles’ and relationships (normatively
monogamous and assimilationist)”\textsuperscript{83}, and it was these very conflicts of lesbian identity
and sexual relations that the women of Gay Sweatshop set out to debate (such as
Posener’s \textit{Any Woman Can}).

Lesbian feminist practitioners in the seventies, who were alienated by such
heterosexist and ‘hommosexual’ structures of representation, attempted to explore
theatrical forms and performance styles that set out to invoke alternative experiences,
themes and subjectivities. They achieved this by not necessarily locating a new form,
but by “queerly” re-working more established forms and styles from within a
specifically lesbian context. Playwrights such as Caryl Churchill, discussed “the
‘maleness’ of the traditional structure of plays, with conflict and building in a certain
way to climax”\textsuperscript{84}. Though rarely (if ever) regarded as an early queer playwright,
Churchill’s work has consistently focused upon the transgression of boundaries

\textsuperscript{82} de Lauretis (1990), “Sexual Indifference and Lesbian Representation” reprinted in Case (ed) (1991),
\textsuperscript{83} As cited in Fortier, p.77.
between gender, race and sexuality. Rather than seeing queer as a predominantly nineties phenomenon, Alan Sinfie1d argues that “a lot more queerness was produced in theatre than has been properly registered” (1999: 330), and in Churchill’s 1979 play Cloud Nine (in a similar vein to Genet’s The Maids) she “cross-dresses her characters in order to suggest the constructedness and malleability of their gendering” (ibid). Following earlier “queer theatre” auteurs such as Ludlam and Tavel, Churchill also deploys camp and drag “to disturb the sex/gender system” (ibid) in true queer deconstruction.

As a text that developed out of a series of workshops on sexual politics (similar to Gay Sweatshop), Cloud Nine was a direct attack on the oppressive hegemonic structures of heterosexism, racism, colonialism and classism, and as Wandor explains:

> Integrated into the fabric of the play are stage directions that Clive’s wife Betty is played by a man, to indicate that she is made in her husband’s image; also, a black servant, Joshua, is played by a white man. The casting in these cases (and in the second half where 5-year-old Cathy is played by a man) externalises, and literally embodies, the values espoused by the relevant characters, so that their biology, age and race change to suit what is in their heads, and thus by reversing the norms, draw attention to those stereotyped concepts. Son Edward is played by a woman, highlighting Clive’s futile attempts to bring him up as a ‘man’, and daughter Victoria is a dummy, since that is what girls are expected to be.

(Wandor, 2001: 182)

Focusing upon the familial hierarchy of a colonial patriarch (Clive), who imposes his (hetero-patriarchal) ideologies upon those around him, Cloud Nine clearly anticipates part of Judith Butler’s ground-breaking queer thesis in Gender Trouble (1989) when Betty announces “I am a man’s creation as you see,/ And what men want is what I want to be”. In the play, Churchill’s characters each have an oppressive social identity imposed upon them which:

> limits the possibility of remaking themselves in a more liberated and self-chosen way. As the actor’s gendered or racial reality is distorted

in his or her stage role, each character has been saddled with a role which imposes a false sense of self. (Fortier, 1997: 78)

Yet whilst the characters in Act One struggle with the ideological constraints of the Victorian era, the liberated utopia of the seventies that is the setting for Act Two (and the re-assignment of roles that takes place), does not necessarily entail an escape from oppression. Re-located to seventies London, and with the roles now ‘gender-appropriate’, it could be argued that Churchill was attempting to promote the necessity for a more essentialist and ‘natural’ gender identity: “Betty is now played by a woman, as she gradually becomes real to herself” (Churchill, 1985: 246). Even though one of the play’s gay characters (Edward) is now played by a man, he still (perhaps stereotypically) “clings to the feminine identity he sees as his own” (Fortier: 78), but rather than remaining within the limits of his liberated gay identity, Edward later begins a relationship with a woman (Victoria) and controversially proclaims “I think I’m a lesbian” (319). Contrary to finding their essential selves, Churchill’s characters are alternatively enabled to fluidly explore, as Betty announces, “if there isn’t a right way to do things you have to invent one” (ibid):

The stagecraft of the piece plays very clear games with our perceptions of the signs of gender - the male or female body, the deep-voiced man playing a little girl, the woman playing a gay man, black versus white - and each appearance, as it lulls us into a suspension of disbelief as we engage in the relationships and actions, asks us implicitly to question what these ‘roles’ are. (Wandor, 2001: 183)

The first half of the play embodies a “socialist-feminist dynamic” (ibid) in that notions of desire and role are in conflict with a dominant (hetero) patriarchal ideology. However, the libertarian environment of the second act presents no “overarching political system in which to fit them” (Wandor: 184), no dominant or dominating ideology to work against (though Wandor overlooks Victoria’s Marxist/cultural-materialist views) or to make sense of how this “change has come about” (ibid),
which Wandor believes “weakens the impact of the play as a whole”:

...the tightly meshed linkage between class, race, gender and sexuality in the first half is reinforced by the placing of the family - there to represent class and racial domination - and within the family to establish and enforce traditional gender roles. The excitement, tension and drama lie in the way these parameters are constantly either actually breached, or on the brink of being breached. (ibid)

Interestingly, Wandor compares the context of the first act to the censorious theatre practices of the fifties and sixties, and sees political value within such a climate of repression since it “led to odd and fantastic expressions of taboo” (ibid).

Transgression is, therefore, only seen as radically possible (and effective) if there are ideological and oppressive boundaries against which to impact (rather than erase). The cross-gender and cross-racial casting in the first act thus accentuates the contradictions of regulatory frameworks within which “cause and effect are constantly clear” (ibid). Act Two, in comparison, portrays a “queer” utopia where there are “no political structure[s], no dominant social values within which the characters live” (ibid), but which, more problematically “isolates characters from their contexts” (Wandor: 185) and fragments the unity of the cohesive sense of ‘community’ that was established. As Wandor remarks, the [queer] freedom that the characters achieve in Act Two succeeds in encouraging the audience:

...to ‘think’ about its own times and mores - in terms of the text (whatever its complex impacts on an audience) this division remains, and the final message is that gender, class and race are explicable in terms of the past, but not in terms of the present. (ibid)

*Cloud Nine* is, therefore, unique in that Churchill was articulating the very dilemmas posed by a queer theory that didn’t emerge within cultural discourse until over a decade later.

Despite their numerous ideological and political differences, the gay, lesbian-feminist and early queer theatre that evolved in the seventies undoubtedly achieved the aim of presenting affirmative and multi-dimensional images of gay/lesbian (and queer)
subjectivity. Influenced by works from both inside and outside the “mainstream” (and inside/outside the lesbian/gay identity by such artists as Churchill, Delaney, Orton or Osborne, all of whom debated ideas of sexuality and social transgression), works began to emerge that idealistically encouraged the erasure of “the closet”, the exposure of oppressive regimes of heterosexism and an end to the concealment of alternative sexualities. Artists from the British fringe and the American underground were starting to emerge (such as Ludlam and Tavel) who can rightfully be credited with leading the way in exploring a progressive and experimental approach to the development of lesbian, gay and later queer textuality. Drawing upon a diverse history of avant-garde and agit-prop experimentation with such forms as cabaret, and explorations of the “performative directness” of performance, these emerging artists succeeded in bringing a renewed and innovative style to theatre. They were endowed (though not unproblematically) with a greater freedom towards the representation of both “Homo” and “Hetero” sexuality, and the deconstructive efficacy of re-appropriating a number of generic styles and themes (from the Theatre of the Absurd to the Royal Court). This self-reflexive “queerness”, and the plurality of methodologies deployed, allowed them a certain corporeal and verbal freedom to produce works that were both immediate and complex, irreducible to a single “statement” in true queer jouissance (a conjunction explored in Chapter One). An effectively postmodern inter-textual style was beginning to evolve that began to deconstruct the lesbian, gay and feminist issues of the time, exploring as it did “sex-radical” role-play and the subversive re-interpretation of canonical texts. These works exposed the darker deviant traces of division, fetishism and gender violence (an approach that is quite endemic of a lot of queer performance, from Split Britches to Neil Bartlett or Tim Miller). This postmodern experimental theatrical “style” proved to be an effective methodology for exploring “non-normative” subject matter, since postmodern performance’s subversion of the constructedness of theatrical conventions appropriately paralleled the tenuous nature of the heterocentric hegemony it sought to
A definitively lesbian form of textuality has also been effectively deployed (by such companies as Split Britches, and the early experimentation of the WOW Cafe) to define and influence many of the issues and terms of academic discourse surrounding lesbian and gay theatre. Debates involving butch-femme role-play, mimesis and the spectacle of desire have played a prominent role in the establishment and evolution of “queer” critical frameworks on performativity in the nineties. In addition to gay male drag performance, re-newed forms of agit-prop/political theatre and attempts to articulate the devastating impact of AIDS in the eighties (from inside and outside the mainstream), this lesbian performance enabled a more self-reflexive critique of sexual identities/economies in response to the reunification of lesbian, gay and queer politics in the late eighties/early nineties. It was a critique that inevitably met much opposition from the “assimilationist” factions within gay and feminist culture (influenced by the ideologies of the “homophile” movement and the Gay Liberation Front), since it directly questioned their achievements in promoting a fixed and validated identity. Queer critiques not only attempt to undermine the power of heterocentricism as a given framework for epistemological “truth”, but consequently seek to expose the indeterminant nature of the ‘lesbian’ and ‘gay’ categories themselves as a given ontology.

The aggressively deconstructive nature of queer theoretical paradigms can be located in many theatre subcultures prior to the discursive consolidation of political identity categories in the sixties, from the radical nature of drag (male and female) to the playful power-performances of S&M sex shows in underground leather clubs. Stefan

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87 Influenced by the success of such agit-prop plays as Larry Kramer’s The Normal Heart in 1985.
Brecht, in his aptly entitled document of the underground theatres of New York in the sixties and seventies, *Queer Theatre*\(^89\), details an approach to sexual performativity that encapsulates much of the current discourses surrounding queer theory and practice:

> The ambiguity of sexual identity is the basic variant of the theme of role-playing... the plays repeatedly point up the make-believe, free, role-playing character of sexual identity. By their grotesque display of male and female genitalia and secondary sexual characteristics, the productions starkly emphasize biological sexual identity [and] paint a picture of a world in which an androgynous psycho-sexuality gives biologically male or female creatures a challenging choice between playing male or female roles ...
> ... they are ridiculous not only by the actual way in which they are played but especially (more basically) in being imposed role-identities, strait-jackets put on us in the bosom of the family and by the power of the state and so transmitted from generation to generation...
> (Brecht: 55)

Written in the mid-seventies, Brecht describes an approach to performance that is at the heart of most contemporary academic debates concerning queer identity. Interestingly, there tends to be little reference made to the importance of this “male dominated” queer performance by recent female queer academics (from Judith Butler to Teresa de Lauretis), who appear more influenced by a (long overdue) lesbian-feminist bias in their theorising. Though undoubtedly the leading voices in contemporary queer theory, the majority of female academics within the field hail from a specifically lesbian-feminist quarter of the post-structuralist/post-Lacanian paradigm, and are thus less accepting of gay male theorisation of “sex” that fails to disavows the oppressiveness of masculine phallogocentricism. The queer theatre of seventies New York that Brecht documents was quite dominated by male artists (such as Charles Ludlam and Ronald Tavel), and so their work could be seen to be structured from a more privileged gay white male perspective, with very little space accorded to the lesbian voice. Even though the subject matter of their work explores the performativity of gender and sexual role-play in true queer style, this often enough

\(^89\) Brecht (1986) [1978], London: Methuen.
occurs within the valorised and fetishistic spectacle of the exposed male body and male drag, in relation to an occasional tendency for misogynistic humiliation of the female or feminine: “The women, a nest of whory vipers, are more particularly the vessels of impurity” (Brecht: 53).

*Queer performativity* as a “new phenomenon” of nineties performance theory (as documented by such theorists as Lynda Hart, Sue-Ellen Case and Peggy Phelan) does tend to be consistently located within lesbian-feminist performance (such as Split Britches, Claire Dowie, Holly Hughes or Annie Sprinkle). Gay male theatre and performance (still recovering from the onslaught of renewed anti-AIDS homophobia and oppressive legislative censorship from Section 28 and the NEA), on the other hand, has yet to achieve the same level of queer critical attention. The historically undervalued nature of lesbian activism in gay culture is probably the reason why queer theory has been so embraced as a method of cultural critique by lesbian feminism, since it not only subverts the conventional hierarchies of the heterocentric matrix, but also attacks the oppressive imposition of a seemingly less inclusive and narcissistic gay male culture.

The appellative “queer” within lesbian feminism has, therefore, signalled the desire to re-map and re-define concepts of “the body” that transcend ideologically inflected boundaries of gender, race, age or sexuality. In the past decade since the term was reclaimed, linguistically revised and politically empowered (albeit with conflicting and shifting definition), the body of theory that has emerged has selectively appropriated fragments of poststructuralist, psychoanalytic and French feminist thought, developing them to a much more radical sexo-political level: placing direct emphasis upon (hetero/homo) masculine regimes of power, epistemology and

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90 This imbalance has, however, started to be redressed with the publication of works by Román (1998) and Sinfield (1999).
ontology. However, whilst claiming to address categories of sex, sexuality and gender
as strategic performative articulations of heterocentric hegemony, a recurring
hegemonic discourse from within queer theory itself can also be located: one that can
be read as distinctively ‘lesbo-centric’ in ideology. Since early queer theory evolved
from a number of influential conferences and publications within a lesbian-feminist
context,91 it has, therefore, been constructed and influenced by such a discursively
biased paradigm. In refusing heterosexuality, the lesbian discursive matrix can no
longer be defined in terms of its oppositional binary status, but is seemingly beyond
the categories of “sex”. The linguistic concept of “sex” enforces the binary political
and cultural operation of a compulsory and naturalised heterosexuality, and so a
lesbian refusal of such phantasmatic categories exposes the constitution and
hegemonic presumptions of an unmarked heterocentric matrix. With lesbian-feminist
revisions of psychoanalysis and discourse theory forming the basis of queer, the
dominant linguistic paradigm of the “masculine” is hence the “essential” site of
contention and disavowal. Yet where does this place the queer male within such a
matrix? Is it therefore possible to effectively identify as both ideologically queer and
oppressively male within such a repudiating discourse? Ideally, queer theory moves
the debate forward from conventional equations that align queer men with the phallus,
since they too are repressed by such a framework. However, gay male culture still
tends to uphold and perpetuate phallic associations with the gay male body (in fact
one could argue that it is a necessary affirmation of a virile gay sexuality - re. Leo
Bersani) that are problematic from a lesbian-feminist inflected queer paradigm.

From a (lesbian) queer standpoint, the proliferation of heterocentricism is constructed
from within a masculine linguistic paradigm, and it is only through a transient or
oppositional discursive paradigm that subversive forms of identity can be articulated,

or regulatory categories potentially destabilised. Queer male theorists, in comparison, have found themselves almost confined to the identity category “gay” to access any form of radical critique or subversive economy, since “queer” seems beyond their reach from within such a “lesbocentric” paradigm (that problematically relegates the oppressive male to a biologically determined subordinate relation to any real form of transgression). Leo Bersani’s criticisms of queer theory, for example (as discussed in Chapter One), favour a re-sexualised and specifically ‘gay’ method of analysis, which shows much potential for subverting the heterocentric order, since it renounces the ‘melancholic lack’ attributed to homosexuality by Post-Freudian psychosexual discourse, and invokes jouissance in the forbidden desire between men by the fetishisation of the phallus/anus relationship.

If gender and sexuality are the constructs of a rigidly masculine linguistic field, a process of queering is, therefore, only achievable when enunciated through a fluidly feminine discursive paradigm. Traditionally, psychoanalysis has commonly denoted the ‘maternal body’ as the locus of polymorphous sexuality, and it is only through the rejection of this body that “the subject” is formed or “hailed” into the symbolic order. It is during this process that a queer sexual fluidity is rejected in favour of the mediated acceptance/imposition of a fixed heterosexuality and the disavowal of homosexual or bisexual possibility. Lesbocentric discourse then has evolved in relation to post-Lacanian French feminist analyses of this maternal body⁹², which places it as the primary locus for subversive critiques of a paternal heterocentric order. Although ‘the lesbian’ is also an exclusionary and essentialist identity category, lesbian theory from within a queer paradigm effectively begins to unravel the fallacies of heterocentric discourse, since it disavows the specificity of a penis in favour of a ‘flexible phallus’ and a reversible hegemony. The concept of ‘power’ is thereby re-

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configured as mere illusion from within a lesbian matrix: performative, fetishistic and redundant. Queer performance, therefore, explores the nature of such regimes of power, in order to locate new ways of articulating the body. And, it is an articulation that is in constant flux, constrained by external discourse, but conflicted by internal instability: the performativity of “symptoms” in conflict with heterocentric “causes”.

IV. A “Queer” Sweatshop?

The “popularity” of gay-themed theatre since the seventies has been a site of regular contention amongst cultural critics and activists alike, since the uncritical value, placed upon gay theatre irrespective of its (at times fairly questionable) artistic quality, led to dissatisfaction within its audiences, and a substantial decline in “community” support. A move toward “gay drama” (with emphasis placed upon the melodrama of the “gay condition”) and a rather de-sexual positivity may have sought to pacify the prejudices of the mainstream, but also led to dissatisfaction within the very community it was seeking to “represent” (since a number of perspectives were consistently over-looked). Coupled with numerous cuts in funding as a result of debates on the value of such minority work, companies such as Gay Sweatshop responded with an urgent process of retrospection and re-evaluation of the types of theatre and debate they were constructing. Following the radical impetus of the “new queer movement”, the company entered the nineties with a refreshed artistic agenda and a revamped aim to address these “new” sexual discourses on identity. But more importantly, this was an urgent response to the diminishing support and lack-lustre reception from such a de-political and ‘pomo-sexual’ culture, thereby returning the company to its original aims and objectives. Under the artistic influence of one of the leading practitioners of lesbian (and now queer) performance in the US, Lois Weaver, and the joint artistic direction of James Neale-Kennerley, the company attempted a decidedly queer approach to theatre and performance.
In an interview with Sandra Freeman, for her book charting the evolution of lesbian theatre in the UK, Weaver discussed the uncertainties surrounding the early stages in this new artistic approach by Gay Sweatshop:

I don’t know if they knew exactly what they were looking for. When I interviewed I said what I’d be interested in doing because of my experience of where “queer” theatre is, in the United States (as opposed to “lesbian theatre” or “gay and lesbian theatre”, “queer theatre” is very politically based, it’s very urgent, it comes out of a necessity around issues of the AIDS crisis for one, and censorship for another, much more agit-prop, not in style but in content, experimentation with form and space) that I’d like to (and I saw that as harking back to the beginning of Sweatshop) 93

As a founding member of radical lesbian performance group Split Britches (with partner Peggy Shaw), Weaver (along with Neale-Kennerley) embarked upon a series of performance “events” and practical workshops that attempted to experiment with and challenge the theatrical practices and politics of earlier Sweatshop works. Adopting a more improvisatory cabaret style, and a fluid re-positioning of the audience in its relation to the spatial dynamic of the “text” (which they both “thought was a particularly queer work aesthetic”94), their overall objective was to encourage the performers to experiment with various performative styles and themes that they had never felt liberated to do so during the laborious and politically correct artistic climate of some of the company’s previous work (ie. the socio-political gay texts of assimilation and education). A two-week “Queer School” was subsequently established (albeit temporarily) that became a focal point for queer artists from all over the UK; and work was explored that eclectically combined a number of differing approaches to theatre and performance, from traditionally script-based work to more deconstructive and improvisatory approaches. And yet, the most important element to emerge from the School was the need for a self-reflexive analysis of the way in which

94 Freeman, p.43.
sexual identity categories have been ‘placarded’ and socially constructed (from within both hetero and homo discursive paradigms); the aim was, therefore, to attempt to address them as tenuous iterations of power.

Weaver’s earlier _oeuvre_ in the US during the seventies (in conjunction with Peggy Shaw) is regarded by many theorists⁹⁵ to have consistently fuelled or even subverted conventional academic discourses regarding the representation of lesbian “visibility” in performance. In particular, their work was directly concerned with notions of how the “lesbian address” and the “queer gaze” can be potentially constituted or evaluated, and the relationship between lesbian “performance” and ideas surrounding a fixed lesbian “community” and protocols of reception. These vociferous debates over the construction of identity politics in the nineties, problematised sexual categorisation by insisting upon a more complex and fluid process of multiple signification. Rather than merely embodying her acknowledged or essential lesbian subjectivity, Weaver’s performative approach demonstrated the construction of her desire through a history of shifting and inconsistent identifications. Therefore, identity itself loses its meaning as a fixed construct, and sexuality is subsequently performed as an open historical/cultural process, that is, as Lynda Hart writes, “both social and psychic” (Hart, 1994: 130).

The “queer perspective” that Weaver brought to Gay Sweatshop was fairly evident within the “construction” of the “written” text for _Lust and Comfort_ (1995),⁹⁶ which marked the company’s first integrative collaboration with Weaver’s Split Britches company. Two decades after the company’s first official production (_Mister X_), _Lust and Comfort_ was a text that produced an effective insight into this newly “inventive” way of working. Devised by Weaver, Peggy Shaw and James Neale-Kennerley (and

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documented by Sue-Ellen Case), the “play” was quite evidently a continuation of the developing queer strategies of performance that had began to emerge in Split Britches previous collaboration with another British foundational gay theatre company, Bloolips (ie. Belle Reprieve in 1990). Lust and Comfort is, in effect, a queer deconstruction that foregrounds the occidental influence of Cinema as a constructive, representational force, and a powerful mediator of structures of desire from within a heterocentric matrix. Three film texts, Joseph Losey's The Servant (1963), Rainer Werner Fassbinder's The Bitter Tears of Petra von Kant (1972) and Roberto Rossellini's L'Amore (1948), are utilised as primary “source material” from which to invoke a queer strategy of cross-textual discourse and deconstructive conflict in true postmodern re-appropriation and hybridity. As cultural texts that in their own unique way exhibit a potentially subversive relationship to heteronormativity and mainstream cinematic culture, the films are the perfect “found” materials for devising a performance text that plays with ideas of representation and classical narrativity. Lust and Comfort commences with the central “character” of the screenwriter/auteur, who begins to “write” and control the unfolding narrative text of the play, thus establishing and shaping the receptive framework from which the spectator engages with the material presented for critique, in a form of Brechtian objective analysis. Identities, lifestyles and sexual relations in the play are presented and articulated as counter to “the norm”, inflected with conflicting meanings and explored for their fetishistic excess and fragmented performative jouissance.

The first stage of the text quite specifically deals with methods of “crossing”, not only as exemplified in the narrative by the cultural crossing of the American character (and Shaw the performer herself) who crosses the Atlantic to escape the oppressive social and political barriers of McCarthyism in favour of a culturally perceived liberated Europe, but more specifically with the crossing of gender and queer sexual boundaries. This trans-national crossing, therefore, also informs our reading of the
characters/performers' psychosexual crossing. By moving from the rigidly structured context of the US (by McCarthyism in the play, and their lesbian ‘marriage’ in real life) to a seemingly liberated more fluid Europe, this geographical re-location symbolically signifies the divisions of gender and sexuality that the text seeks to re-map: to delineate and re-inscribe a transition in identity. The performative embodiment of queer ideas of “genderfuck” in the opening image of the “transgender arabesque” (in which the bodies of both performers appear to be “fused” in polymorphous androgyne through their entwined costuming), directly points to the discursive debates surrounding gender and queer theory. As June L. Reich has written:

[genderfuck is]...the effect of unstable signifying practices in a libidinal economy of multiple sexualities... This process is the destabilisation of gender as an analytical category, though it is not, necessarily, the signal of the end of gender... The play of masculine and feminine on the body... subverts the possibility of possessing a unified subject position... We are defined not by who we are but by what we do. This is effectively a politics of performance. It neither fixes nor denies specific sexual and gendered identifications but accomplishes something else ... Gender-fuck... 'deconstructs' the psychoanalytic concept of difference without subscribing to any heterosexist or anatomical truths about the relations of sex to gender... Instead, genderfuck structures meaning in a symbol-performance matrix that crosses through sex and gender and destabilises the boundaries of our recognition, of sex, gender, and sexual practice. 97

With the lyrical contradictions of the song, I've Grown Accustomed to Her Face, accentuating the spectacle (sung by the icon of gender subversion Marlene Dietrich), the lights come up to reveal Weaver at the centre of the performance space. Her body is “dressed” and performative gestures encoded as feminine as she embodies the archetypal movie star, the source of desire and object of the heterocentric gaze (a signifier enforced by the iconic and overly dramatic musical soundtrack, that echoes the cultural history of representative heterosexual romance). As Weaver turns, the encoded masculine leg of Shaw emerges from beneath her purple gown, their bodies merged in fluctuating symbiotic contradiction, which then separate in what the written

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text describes as “a struggle of identities” (Case, 1996: 33). Traditional perceptions of lesbian butch/femme role-play are thus re-presented in a process of complex transsexual/gender flux, that problematise the role of identity and “the lesbian” as situated within such a practice. This “moment of conception” of the characters of the text could be read as a symbolic enactment of the Freudian “primordial scene”, in which the deviant lesbian subject “comes into being” as the masculinised butch by repudiating her accepted “lack” and defiantly usurping the masculine symbolic order. In contrast, the femme replaces her expected ‘lack’ by a narcissistic feminisation/phallicisation of her body, and the performative “transgender arabesque” can, therefore, be seen as the vessel of polymorphous perversity within which a queer subjectivity is conceived:

Thus, gender falls in with sex and sexual practice in a new configuration. Constructing the body leads the parade of gender and sexual practices. This perspective is more “queer” or lesbian than feminist. (ibid)

Lust and Comfort, as a queer text, can be seen as both an exploration of gender/sexual performance in relation to heterocentric cultural iconography, and as a form of complex autobiographical performance that focuses upon Weaver and Shaw themselves (and the structure of their own lesbian relationship). An ontological subtext that is made quite clear in the author’s written introduction to the documented play text itself:

The characters are the performers, Peggy and Lois, who play themselves playing various roles... There are times when they cross clearly in and out of character and those crossings are noted in the script. Other times the crossings are more ambiguous and the performers play themselves and the characters simultaneously... ... There is a conscious use of theatrical set, props and costumes for the enactment of the relationship just as there is a conscious performing of character. (Case, 1996: 226)

From within such a paradigm the spectators are encouraged to read the ontology of the performers themselves in conflict with the constructed performativity of the queer
text. By “playing men”, Weaver and Shaw are not only performing a gender/sexual identity, but also employing and usurping masculinist linguistic fields and power-relations to inform and eroticise their own butch/femme lesbian relationship. These acts of performance thus reveal the anthropomorphic dominance of masculinity as merely phantasmatic, and open to re-appropriation and subversion: its inherent weaknesses, inconsistencies and contingencies exposed. Yet, there is also tension evident between Weaver’s performance of masculinity and that of Shaw’s, the femme lesbian and the butch dyke: parody vs. embodiment. The linguistic play of words in the text is quite strictly controlled and delineated by the dramatic situation, infused with dominant/subordinate power-play and a deconstructed heteropatriarchal inflection:

PEGGY: (breaking out of character) Jump!
LOIS: (out of character) I don’t like this game.
PEGGY: Yes you do, you love this game.
LOIS: No I don’t, I hate this game.
PEGGY: (returning to character) I’m American.
LOIS: (returning to character) Really, sir?

(228)

However, the male homoeroticism that is a common product of such hom(mo)-sexual relations (quite implicit in the spoken text of the film, and a common subtext of the camp iconography of classical British cinema from which the text is derived), and the power-play between the two “men” are given a more complex resonance in conjunction with the butch/femme “reality” of the performers and the fluidity of gender/sexual signification. Such lesbian performance seeks to re-configure the tenuous power of the phallus as mere fetishistic masquerade and subject to appropriation irrespective of gendered/sexed bodies. ‘Homoeroticism’, as a distinctive subtext in such male-dominated situations, is consequently re-enacted from within a specifically lesbian matrix, its fetishes re-appropriated and inflected with a more direct and fluid erotic potential. The phallogocentrism of male hom(m)o-social/sexual interaction is ironically detached from the specificities of sexed bodies, inhabited and explored from a more polymorphous perspective. Ideas of the phallus
are ideally reinscribed; its modes of power fetishised from within a lesbian-queer matrix, and its masculine connotations repudiated as a fixed given, but merely presented as erotic performance:

PEGGY: Do you like to work hard?
LOIS: Very much sir.
PEGGY: Can you cook?
LOIS: I'm something of an expert, sir, if I may say so.
PEGGY: Nothing too exotic I hope.
LOIS: Exotic is as exotic does, sir.
PEGGY: Precisely, would you like a drink?
LOIS: I don't touch alcohol, sir.
PEGGY: Not even beer? I thought all real men drank beer.
LOIS: Indeed they do, sir. Indeed they do.
The clock strikes.
LOIS: Shall I serve tea sir?
PEGGY: Barrat - you're a real gent.
LOIS: I'm a gentleman's gentleman, sir. (She exits)
PEGGY: He does everything for me, he even dresses me. I like it. Why should I worry about it if we're complicit in it? (229-230)

Contrary to earlier Gay Sweatshop productions that centred around the process of "coming out" within a context of prejudice, oppression and heterosexism, *Lust and Comfort* stages debates that deal quite directly with more recent revisions of such polemics. The play is a shifting text that draws upon a number of cultural and performative signifiers that specifically deal with the relationship of the corporeal body to the "straight-jacketed" regimes of discursive power: sex, gender, race and class. The "problem" of being lesbian, gay or queer is disavowed in favour of the jouissance of deviant desire, irrespective of sex, sexuality or gender. The interaction of two transgressive bodies within the open textual space of the performance is the transient site of a consensual and playfully polymorphous exploration of articulations of desire in its many forms and deviations. As Weaver recollects:

Peggy and I thought that there's a lot of business going on in the community about trans-gender, and we'd worked for the middle part of our work together as butch/femme, so we thought, let's take this a lot further, let's play men, and see what that's about. Let's play men, play that relationship that dominance power, submission, sex relationship of men... (Freeman, 1997: 44-45)

The nature of relationships (namely that between Weaver and Shaw) is played out in
the text through a number of complex and intricately constructed scenarios and fluctuating balances of power. The imbalances that are inscribed within class and sexual status are explored and inflected with a narrative structure of seduction, betrayal and a butch/femme dynamic that is as Sue-Ellen Case notes:

... replaced by the direct struggle for power and its reversals between women. Lesbians and women are no longer the alternative to power struggles, but embody them - even enjoy them as part of seduction. Reflecting the lesbian sex-radical practices around these issues, this play enacts the trends of the “queer” subculture in the 1990s, just as the earlier works dramatized lesbian feminist issues of the 1980s.

(Case, 1996 : 34)

And as Case later proposes, lesbian “sadomasochistic scenarios” have much potential for deconstructing the limiting idea of “equality” that was so prevalent in lesbian theatre of the seventies:

Explicitly imagining the power imbalances within sexual relations has, in many of the cultural icons, replaced the 1970s fantasies of equal sexual relations, now commonly referred to as “vanilla sex”. Utopian fantasies that both players would play equal roles in lesbian seduction and foreplay are now considered to be “naive”. Instead performing power imbalances in s/m scenarios better suits the political climate of the late 1980s and 1990s. Lois Weaver and Peggy Shaw, who earlier performed those community pieces at WOW, have turned to scripting bitter, physically abusive power struggles...

(Case, 1996: 178)

By embodying a transgender morphology of ‘opaque’ signification, the “male” is revealed within the “female”, and the empowered verb fuck (inscribed as it is with masculine aggressive activity in relation to a feminine passivity) is transgressively reclaimed to articulate lesbian sexual relations that are free of such gender determinism. As the archetypal “femme”, Weaver consistently adopts submissive roles within the text, from the “servant” to the “stripper” and the “femme dyke”, but it is an actively constructed performance of passivity that is both manipulated and subverted by Weaver herself, as servility and supportive subordination within the power-dynamic between the two becomes dependence on the part of the seemingly dominant Shaw (and masculine domination in general). The heteronormative regimes of power that are ironically enacted between Weaver and Shaw are hence exposed as
merely consensual and fetishistic, thereby undermining the seemingly oppressive universality of hetero-patriarchy and its reliance upon deviance to perpetuate and enforce its role as “master”, and revealing the phantasmatic nature of its unquestioned phallocentric power:

LOIS: I might not always be here, sir.
PEGGY: What do you mean by that? You're not going to leave me are you? I couldn't bear it if you left me. You told me you'd be here for ever. (p. 235)

A textual interplay is established and subsequently juxtaposed with the autobiography of their own relationship, as the demarcations and boundaries between performance and reality become blurred or subverted by the specificities of their performative dualism:

LOIS: (out of character) I won't leave you.

This dual reading thus draws the spectator to engage with the fore-grounded dynamics of a “real” lesbian relationship and ontology, in conflict or collusion with the inter-textual blurrings, tensions and frames of reference of the performance. As Barratt and Tony from Losey’s *The Servant*, the performers enact a class/gender relationship that directly invokes a “queering” of patriarchal order. A form of gender performance is explored that refers back to the work of such early practitioners of a *queer* performance as Jean Genet. As discussed in Chapter One, Genet’s *The Maids* also deployed a similar mode of gender performativity, though conversely it was the “nature” of *femininity* and its relation to regimes of power that was explored, in conjunction with the masculine re-appropriations and inscriptions of his male performers.

*Lust and Comfort*’s “men” inhabit a symbolic environment which “looks perfectly acceptable from the outside”, but masks an underlying “trouble with the foundations”. And in true queer playfulness, Weaver suggests: “We wouldn't want the house falling
down now, would we?” (237), ironically referring to both the deteriorating status of the character’s stately home and the tenuous state of hetero-patriarchy itself. A critique that is immediately juxtaposed with a blunt return to “reality”, and an intertextual reflexive commentary upon the connections between the idealised patriarchal “male” and the psychology of the “butch”:

PEGGY: I don’t cry anymore. I used to cry when I was a girl. Now I don’t cry. It feels great. I get mad a lot now. I get so mad that the only way to feel right is to be aggressive. I can’t help it. Then I apologize, and that feels good. I can’t help it. It feels right. I feel good. I don’t know what the problem with me is. This is the way I want to feel. It feels good. It feels right. It’s something to strive for. Crying is embarrassing. Aggression makes sense. And I like to fuck. I find I now prefer “super feminine” women, though I’m sexually interested in too many things now to consider marriage. I don’t kiss ’cause then you get emotionally involved. My favourite thing is not to kiss, leave all my clothes on and never, ever stay the night ...(She unzips her pants, pulls out a bunch of grapes, takes a classical masculine pose and begins to eat the grapes). 238

In this Brechtian self-address to the audience, Shaw draws direct parallels between the constructed nature of masculinity as a gender identity and its performative role within the lesbian matrix. As a butch, she repudiates the masculinist concept of femininity associated with emotion, in favour of the more masculine mode of aggression and active sexuality. The butch lesbian thus disavows the lack as inscribed by patriarchal psychoanalytic discourse, and consequently “imprints” a fetishised phallus upon her masculinised body, whilst simultaneously seeking phallic desire in her need for “super-feminine women”. Her aggressive demeanour and implicit “misogyny” in relation to the “object” of her desire re-configure a conventionally male rhetoric of empowerment, whilst disavowing the ontological relevance of the male himself. The “biological” male is corporeally erased from the configuration, which is ironically accentuated by Shaw’s embodiment of the sculptured “classical” poses of the idyllic Greek adonis, as her lesbian power is transgressively empowered by iconic referent.
The performers cite and enact sexual/gender roles in true (Judith) "Butler-esque" style, in that conventional gender discourses and corporeal significations are revised, deconstructed, and exposed for their opacity and performativity:

(\textit{She manipulates Peggy's body into a stereotypical masculine pose}) 237

\textbf{LOIS:} We make our own rules, don't we sir? 241

As Barratt, Weaver explores the subversive power inherent within (consensual) submission as a necessary pre-requisite for domination; but as she subsequently "transforms into a feminine body and voice" for the play's deconstructive gender striptease (the site of transformation for the narrative as it draws upon the textual material of Fassbinder's \textit{The Bitter Tears of Petra von Kant}), polymorphous feminine sexuality is once again empowered by its active interplay with a "fragmented" Weaver as the consensual/controlling object of Shaw's "masculine" gaze and shifting power dynamic:

(\textit{Lois, \ldots enters with six large framed photos of her body parts and places them in a semi-circle at the front of the stage ...})

...\textit{She falls immediately on the carpet in several cheesecake poses.} \ 247

Butch/femme and male/female are once again subverted in performative cross-textual reference, exposing the tenuous interchangeable nature of gender and sexual formation. This process exposes the "rules of the game" and the constructed nature of the system. They are rules that are "made to be broken" so that a queer fluidity can begin to be envisaged:

\textit{Music.} \textit{Lois enters as the maid, naked except for a tiny white pinafore, a long red wig and high heels. Peggy takes off her jacket and Lois hands her a silk smoking jacket and microphone. Peggy begins to sing a song that describes love from the subject's point of view in the style of "This Guy's in Love with You" ...}

\textbf{LOIS:} (interrupting the song) No, no, no, no, no!!
\textbf{PEGGY:} I'm sorry?
LOIS: You're supposed to be singing to me; to me. The love object. Instead you're singing about yourself. That's so typical of a butch.

PEGGY: Just like a femme to throw a fit ... never satisfied.

As Fassbinder’s Karin and Petra, Weaver and Shaw once again “transform” and are now “playing lesbian” (as opposed to their earlier homoerotic male manifestations), and consequently, more directly autobiographical material starts to seep into the narrative, as the complex dynamics of their own relationship is interweaved and juxtaposed with the celluloid lesbians:

PEGGY: (taking off the wig as Lois falls into her lap) Can't we take a break from all this? 255

As the text's unravel, the performance site itself is spatially deconstructed, minimalised and fragmented, as focus is placed upon the significance of specifically encoded props, guiding the gaze to the centrality of the body in the space as the main canvas of the performance:

(Peggy and Lois play themselves, bunkered in their basement of props and costumes, looking for the next roles to play.)

PEGGY: Where are the walls?
LOIS: (Entering, picking up the phone and placing it backstage) Gone. Tumbled down.
PEGGY: Just now? When I was on the phone. You turn your back for five minutes and everything's different. 260

As the play moves towards “conclusion”, the interaction between the two becomes far more repetitive and ritualistic, as autobiographical recollections and moments of meaning echo the problematic representation of lesbianism in the film that aligns it with betrayal and despair. Emotional significance is implied, but sentimentality is exaggerated (“in the style of”) and, therefore, evacuated of any real form of “tangible” meaning for the audience due to the detached nature of their performative “acts”. The past conflicts within their relationship are juxtaposed (and discursively enabled) with the melodrama of cinematic performance, thus emphasising the irrelevance of such
inter-relational dynamics. Within such a context it can be dismissed as the unavoidable by-product of a heterocentrically inflected (and thus problematically essentialist) lesbian “marriage”, that is seemingly doomed to repeat socially inscribed forms of oppression, value and expectation. As their final “tango” struggles to reach its seemingly aimless crescendo of impassioned physical violence, the women rebound and retreat “facing different directions” within a world of contradiction and deceit:

LOIS: I was still open in a city where everything was closed.

In *Lust and Comfort*, the butch/femme dichotomy that is so central (yet seemingly limited) to the lesbian identity becomes increasingly less fixed. The radical interruption of narrative marks the site where the performers expose the gender role-play of the heterocentric matrix as mere illusion. The intervention of classical narrative structure disturbs the phallogocentric impetus towards narrative climax and closure, and thereby refuses harmonious resolution or a return to heteropatriarchal hegemony. Identity and desire are aesthetically “filtered”, elusive and shifting, as their bodies are projected through meshed screens, behind which they engender and dress, performatively transform and voyeuristically gaze. The performed desire of the lesbian couple (both on and off-stage) foregrounds the discursive subject/object split that is so inherent within manifestations of heterocentric “coupling”. And so, by a strategic adoption of a fluid and consistent slippage between roles, texts and significations, the performers achieve a direct intervention in the conceptualisation of desire, that queerly subverts accepted spectatorial expectation, in favour of a shifting, “transmutational” subjectivity.

*Lust and Comfort*, as with most queer theatre, relies quite extensively upon the body in performance for its overall subversive effect, despite Sue-Ellen Case and her researchers thorough reconstruction of the text from the fragmented texts/notes/tapes
that remain of the production process. The written script can only really seek to
envisage a rather partial and inconceivable indication of what the ephemeral “total
performance” (in Artaudian terms) might have achieved. With this production, a
more deconstructive approach to autobiography and performativity has re-configured
the rather essentialist identity-polemics of some of Gay Sweatshop’s earlier work.
Queer politics, in this context, can be seen as a transformative politics of the flesh,
thereby putting the “sweat” back into the Sweatshop. The play perfectly articulates
the complex issues surrounding queer discourses and their embodiment in
performance. As a queer “text”, it directly engages with queer interventions in
identity politics and the use of the body as a raw material with which to explore and
critique issues of ontology, sex and genealogy. And by challenging the
oppressiveness of the heterocentric “mould” in opposition to a more fluid form of
performative gender and sexual signification, the company is quite progressively
exploring the radical potential of deconstructing the discursive taboos of deviant
desire. A process which attempts to locate a form of queerness that exists in a more
complex, less definable, linguistic and psycho-sexual domain. Heterocentric and
hom(m)osocial relationships are hence marked as an important starting point from
which identity categories may fragment.

The “erotic charge” of the culture of the phallus is objectified, scrutinised and
subsequently detached and re-applied to the female body, its power re-consigned.
Gender is deconstructed and subsequently re-integrated to a new more open
configuration that is quite definitively ‘queer’, whilst the “spectator” (as a problematic
given) is ideally invited to cathartically engage with such transgressive jouissance,
thereby acknowledging the illusory ontology of their own corporeality. The
performers’ bodies are “dressed” with cultural signifiers of gender that both mark and
erase, in that they project and signify “male” and “female”, and then proceed to
subvert the signification, directly engaging and problematising the specular gaze.
They embody that polymorphous maternal body of psychoanalytic theory, fluid and free of the doctrines of the symbolic order that seek to imprint markers of sex and gender and, therefore, encode specificities of sexuality in true post-oedipal harmony. By rejecting paternal inscription and constraint, this maternal materiality envisages a "subject" that is finally free to explore the excesses and inconsistencies of the corporeal realm.

The queer artistic influence of Weaver (and, of course, Shaw) can be attributed as the central motivation behind this new phase in Gay (or should that be Queer?) Sweatshop's theatrical vitality. As Weaver remarked at the time:

> Because so much gay theatre is coming into the mainstream at the moment, a company like ours can afford to be more experimental ... There was a time when we had to do "the coming out play" because we were the only ones doing anything in the area. Now we can make our own boundaries and not replicate what's on offer in mainstream theatre.  

However, in the latter years of the company (before it finally folded in the late nineties), this queer approach to performance was also developed in the work of such members as Claire Dowie (*Drag Act* in 1992), and in one of Weaver's final productions for the company, *The Hand* (1995). Although Gay Sweatshop's new methodology aimed to provide an eclectic range of texts that reflected the diversity of the "new" lesbian, gay and queer community, it is Weaver's distinctively authorial influence as artistic director of *The Hand*, that led it down a far more subversive and experimental path.

Basically a "work-in-progress", *The Hand* once again sought to combine a number of ideologically inflected cultural genres (like the oppositional genres of horror and ballet), to invoke conflict and transgress the boundaries and structures of signification,

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thereby releasing the queer potential within. As a transmutational synthesis of dance, film and theatre, *The Hand* sought to expose the radical horror of a deviant and unconstrainable perversity that underlies the seemingly harmonious confines of heteronormative suburbia. Drawing once again upon the radical potential of Genet and the perverse aesthetics of ‘New Queer Cinema’\(^9\), the play delves into the dark underbelly of “human nature”, celebrating such taboo subject matter as incest, voyeurism, narcissism and murder. The play presents a distinctively feminine fetishistic relationship to violent fantasy and sexual obsession, in a performance text that does much to articulate the complexities of Artaudian queer cruelty (discussed earlier): the violent catharsis and transgressive jouissance of the spectator:

\[
\text{SARAH AND LISA: } \begin{align*}
\text{You} & \text{ are malicious. I love you. You are vindictive.} \\
\text{I love you. You} & \text{ terrorise me. I love you. You are nasty.} \\
\text{I love you. You} & \text{ are cruel. I love you. You are like no other.} \\
\text{I love you. You} & \text{ are poisonous. I love you.} \\
\text{You are you love I malicious I vicious are you I you} & \\
\text{vindictive you love poisonous I cruel are love other no} & \\
\text{you I like nasty you I terrorise you.} & \end{align*}
\]

By usurping the conventional role of the male monster\(^{10}\), as opposed to the female victim, the work re-inscribes the deadly “femme-fatale” of film noir with a specifically queer significance. As a performance text, *The Hand* had a number of diverse starting points, but its central theme focused upon the conflicting relationship between queer desire and sexuality, and the boundary between pleasure and pain. Inspired by nineteenth-century Parisian “Grand Guignol”, this transgressive ‘ballet’ is located within a hyper-real simulation of suburbia (complete with a fold-up lawn), wherein the voyeurism, sexual repression and jealousy of its deviant female inhabitants lead to a denouement of abuse, rage and violent murder. The three

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\(^9\) Influenced by such films as Todd Haynes’ *Poison* (1991) and Tom Kalin’s *Swoon* (1992).

\(^{10}\) Quoted from the unpublished text by Stella Duffy, Cherry Smyth and Caroline Forbes, cited by Freeman (1997), p.47.

\(^{101}\) A role consistently ascribed to the deviant male in mainstream horror cinema: see Harry Benshoff (1997).
separate, yet intersecting strands of the narrative were sourced from three very
different writers (Stella Duffy, Cherry Smyth and Caroline Forbes); and coupled with
the frenetic structures of intense physical interaction (the ballet) and fragmented
dialogue, the production attempted to re-define the role and signification of women in
the horror genre, and the transgressive threat of queer monstrosity. The narrative of
the piece thereby exposes the inherent (queer) horror masked within everyday social
situations, but rather than portraying women as the passive powerless victims of such
(conventionally masculine) horror (thereby fetishising the spectator’s investment in
watching the spectacle of their subordinate suffering at the hands of a dominant male
aggressor), the text reveals:

how by reclaiming violence and horror in a female context we are
taking control of that which frightens and terrifies us. 102

Similar to Weaver’s previous work with Split Britches and the WOW Cafe in New
York, The Hand’s narrative structure totally erases any trace of the “heteronormative”
exterior world “out there” as an oppositional relation to the queer diegetic paradigm of
the text. The operational codes of heterosexuality as an institution, therefore, are
subversively marked as illusory. This utopian vision of a world that is solely
constituted of lesbians is a context from which most of Weaver’s work originates (as
with Lust and Comfort). This premise quite radically re-configures the performative
address, invokes lesbian and queer spectatorial “communities”, and thus erases the
heterocentricism that underlies hegemonic forms of representation:

For spectators whose sole experience with dominant culture is
one of either being erased entirely or foregrounded as tragically
“Other” against a (hetero) sexuality inscribed as fiercely normative,
the experience of being addressed as if inhabiting a discursive space,
an elsewhere eked out in the gaps of hegemonic representations,
is both profound and exhilarating. 103

102 Weaver, The Pink Paper, op. cit.
Synonymous with *Lust and Comfort*, Weaver’s interpretation of *The Hand* relies quite substantially upon performance and performativity for its overall theatrical effect. As Sandra Freeman comments in her analysis of the evolution of lesbian theatre, the constructed narrative of the text is far from “straightforward” and the actual characters extremely “elusive”:

> ...the relationship between all of them is obscure. In one sense they are all each other, each other’s bodies. This is a play about bodies, as violent and beautiful as those in Monique Wittig’s “The Lesbian Body”... the politics of feminism is clearly the politics of the flesh. 

(Freeman, 1997: 45)

In contrast to this queer work by Gay Sweatshop, however, there are texts that whilst operating from within the umbrella term of “queer”, do not necessarily fulfil the “criteria” of a discourse that despite attacking oppressive linguistic paradigms, is in danger of becoming oppressive itself (since it also repudiates those identities who do not necessarily fit with its utopian fluidity). This conflict in criteria and applicability is in effect due to the inconsistency ascribed to the definition of the term “queer” (as demonstrated by Tim Miller’s problematic deployment of the term, discussed in Chapter Three). The re-articulation of the word in contemporary critical theory (albeit contentiously) has envisaged a rather convenient solution to the minefield of anti-identitarian discourse, and queer performance, therefore, embodies or “marks” the point of tension between gay socio-communitarianism and “lesbocentric” discourse.

The queer performativity of (seemingly) misogynistic forms of drag and a hyper-fetishised phallic masculine economy, conflict quite interestingly with the “genderfuck” re-appropriations of radical lesbian performance. The tension of such a ‘union’ initiates a performance discourse that debates identity from within a polymorphously queer paradigm, the result of which is the radical deconstruction of the very act of performance itself.
Chapter Three:

Queering the Body

1. Towards a “Queer” Corporeality

Theater remains the form most dependent upon, fascinated with, drawn, quartered by, and fixated upon the body, its vulnerabilities, pain, and disappearance. (Blau, 1992: 1)

The aim of this chapter is to attempt to engage with one of the most essential tools of modern occidental theatre and performance - the cartographic corporeality of the “performing body”. The body’s dominance in contemporary theatre and performance practice (and the varying degrees to which it is deployed) has made it the ideal site for perversion and re-configuration, since its seemingly fixed materiality is the perfect sub/ob-ject for an ecriture queer. The “natural” ontology of the living body in performance is regarded by many critics of constructionist and queer philosophies as undeniable evidence of the irrefutable “truth” of a biology in conflict with a metaphysical being: the true ontology of humankind. Theatre, as an art form, has long been the place within which the “human condition” is debated, embodied and marked, as it is repeatedly presented for social analysis and ideological recuperation. The scrutinising context of performance provides an ideal opportunity, therefore, for the humanist “subject” to be placed in dramatic “jeopardy” by dissident influences, and consequently “saved” by the recuperative strategies of “normativity” and the order of things (re. Foucault), thereby classically resolving the narrative (in whatever way it is manifested) and restoring hegemonic equilibrium. Deviance within such a context is pleasurably foregounded, but inevitably repudiated in favour of a more legitimate form of “heteronormativity” (the deviant is either exiled, killed, imprisoned or commits suicide).
As a canon that is regarded by feminist and post-colonial theorists to be inflected with the codes and ideologies of a white hetero-patriarchy\(^{104}\) (that is common to all communicative and artistic art forms), “mainstream” theatre has commonly been the ideal platform upon which to debate the tentative efficacies of transgression, and the vulnerabilities of the exposed corporeal body. An ideal platform in that theatre is conventionally perceived as a rather detached and elitist medium, with little actual connection or relevance to, or impact upon, the contemporary “real world” and is, therefore, a seemingly “safe space” to explore more problematic narratives due to its “distanced” performativity and (un)consciously acknowledged artifice. Theatre enables a constructed make-believe world of fantasy and spectacle within which artistic ego and aesthetic excess can be explored in a more heightened, indulgent and liberated context. It was only in the latter half of the twentieth century, post-Brecht and Artaud, that the subversive potential of theatre truly began to emerge as a crucial critical site for social dissent and the de-stabilisation of accepted ideologies and representations. The “safe space” of a traditionally delineated and realist theatre started to face a number of attempts at subversion, with a number of boundaries transgressed and challenged (particularly from the avant-garde, agit-prop and postmodern movements). New agendas were being creatively explored and debated that attempted to shift conventional understandings of performance from the previously “hermetically sealed” safety of the stage, with its enforced divisions between actor and performer/stage and audience, and re-configure its impact upon the “real” world itself. Debates emerged that sought to deconstruct the accepted epistemologies of an autonomous logocentric subject, and the biologically-determined heterocentric matrix through which society and culture are mediated.

In recent decades, there has been a substantial increase of interest in theoretical studies of "the Body" and strategies of interpretation, particularly from within corporeal philosophy. The impetus for this renewed intellectual focus is primarily the developing political movements that have sought to foreground the centrality of social and ideological inscriptions upon the body, that effectively discriminate against those who are "marked" by corporeal differences that are based upon sex, race, gender, disability or class. The emergence of postmodernism, queer theory and multicultural studies, have all centred upon revising and rejecting existing disciplinary studies and the early assumptions of "first wave" feminist philosophers and academics who had articulated the body as an 'essential' and exclusive site of subjective biography, memory and experience. The theorised body is, therefore, commonly located between the gap or at the boundary between such contemporary linguistic tensions as modernism/postmodernism, feminist theory/queer theory, and a desire to progress towards more experimental ways of "writing the body". A dialogue is invoked that cartographically explores the conflict between the body’s biological materiality and its social and historical formation, i.e. as a product of discursive inflection and significance that is projected, delineated and disciplined within the physicality and regulation of the body. As Jacqueline N. Zita argues, the body is, in effect, the materialisation of a socially mediated formation, experienced subjectively and communally as a normative and indisputably "real" effect:

The physicality of the body establishes some of the potentials and limits for what we can do with our bodies, but these limits are not always absolutely fixed. The social world enters the physical body as we develop skills and capacities, altering even the body's molecular structures, its anatomy, physiology, and metabolism. The body is thus a sturdy but fragile thing, an historical matter of political struggle. (Zita, 1998: 4)

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The body has thus far been consistently embodied through the occidental discursive practices of the *natural* sciences, in particular biology and medicine. It has generally been fixed within and mediated through essentialist presumptions regarding its ahistorical natural determinism and metaphysical corporeality. Therefore, a *rethinking* of the body would involve a major epistemological upheaval, in order to extend or even erase the conventional accepted frameworks that seek to *contain* it.

Cartesian philosophy (and its advocates) has long shared the view that the *human subject* is an ontological being made up of two dually opposed halves: mind and body, psychology and biology. Yet, as feminist philosophers (eg. Irigaray) have argued, these conventionally masculinist dichotomies consistently establish a hierarchy that privileges one polarized term (of masculine inflection) over its subordinated counterpart (of feminine inflection). The dominant term thus defines itself by the negation and expulsion of its *Other* (ie. male/female, hetero/homo), thereby establishing and rigidly enforcing its own boundaries in order to consolidate and define its identity and privileged balance of power. The dichotomy of mind/body, therefore, subordinates the (feminine) corporeal in favour of (masculine) reason, hence defining the body in terms of its fixed subordinate materiality. Understandings of the body have developed through more recent analyses under the rubric of “cultural studies”, which acknowledge the body as a textual site of meaning. Semiotic approaches from such theorists as Umberto Eco (1986) perceive the body as a “communication machine” that is not some form of natural entity, but is product of, and incorporated into, its culture. The body is, therefore, the location at which culture and cultural identity is expressed and articulated, encoded and performed. It is through the body that the “individual” can either conform to, or resist, the cultural expectations that have been imposed upon them. Influenced by Foucault’s analysis of discipline and punishment (1977a), the body is seen as “shaped” through the regulatory systems of surveillance (either actual or imagined) and discipline. It is the
“product” of social constraint, construction and the discourses through which it is both understood and analysed (ie. the languages of medical science, criminology and psychiatry).

In addition to this, the heterosexual body, in particular, is commonly regarded as the most natural and normative of all essentialised bodies, supported as it is by conventional bio-medical discourses that consistently suggest that sex and sexuality have biologically grounded explanations. These ways of writing the body, however, have recently been challenged by social constructionist and performative theories that have foregrounded the natural and normative as the rather tenuous functions of discursive practices, power relations and performative effects. Within such theories, the body is thus conveyed as “culturally produced” as “heteronormative” through such practices and disciplines, semiotically mapped by constructed categories of identity and meaning. Social constructionism perceives “culture” to be incorporated and hypodermically injected into the body through discipline, routine and daily practice (re. Horkheimer and Adorno), producing and reiterating semiotic or symbolic meaning through specific bodily parts, functions and surfaces. It has more recently been argued through performative theories of gender and sexuality, that such meanings are constructed through inscribed and reiterated performative practices (re. Judith Butler or Elizabeth Grosz). The heterosexual male body within such a “heteronormative” matrix would, of course, be perceived as the perfect embodiment of such discipline, meaning and identity that has produced and perfected the utopian corporeal ideal. And yet, like all “cultural” bodies, the heterosexual male body as a given, is extended institutionally beyond its actual physicality and into the realms of “commodity fetishism” and the inter-dependent relationship of power with meaning. It is a body that is encoded as “natural” and “normative” through such institutional practises that bestow privilege and power upon bodies of “like kind”, whilst rejecting its Other/s (namely feminine or queer). This social rejection is a response that is commonly
directed towards those “border” bodies that are specifically defined by their transgression of normative sex and gender (and racial) boundaries. Yet, it is these bodies that propose a distinctly *queer corporeality*, since they do not clearly align with the prerequisites of naturalised sex, gender and sexual orientation, i.e. biologically male, masculine and heterosexual. Such queer border bodies are hence perceived as “deviant” within such a dichotomous context, i.e. effeminate men, masculine women, trans-gender/sexuality, gay/bi sex acts and various other fluid combinations/mutations etc.

The emergence of postmodern/post-structural sexual theories and the development of multi-dimensional and diverse approaches to sex research, have posed the most radical challenge to heterocentric and hegemonic discourses of sex ontology. These new ways of thinking about sex and sexuality are not only a direct challenge to heteronormative and reductionist theories, but their invocation of new metaphors of fluidity and fragmentation contrast quite effectively with conventional ideals of solidity and corporeal unity. Postmodern queer theory, therefore, constitutes itself as a radical contemporary challenge to the apriori categories, genealogies and epistemologies of thought:

Contrary to naive rejections of social constructionist theory, postmodern queer theory does not claim that sexual desire did not exist until it was named but, rather, that how it is named, depicted, represented, culturally organized, and socially regulated is considered relevant to its historical and epistemic appearance. Such an approach scrutinizes specific categories of normative and deviant sex, the social uses made of sex, as well as our lived experiences of sexuality and our ways of knowing about our own sexualities. These practices in turn have a gripping and metabolic effect in shaping the real. (Zita: 5)

By contesting the categories of sexual identity, queer theorists attempted a “softening of the edges” of the hetero/homo divide, thereby exploring the utopian possibilities of a new sexual pluralism. As a result of this approach, the body is perceived as metaphorically coded as fluid or *liminal*, which hence seeks to “replace” the more
constrictive and stabilizing ontologies of heterocentric modernist thought with a seemingly limitless potentiality. Critics of such queer discourses of the body tend to reject this tendency for nihilistic and "vacuous transcendence", since its discursivity problematically appears to replace the flesh with the word, thus disavowing the indisputable reality and value of lived experience, within which the oppressive hegemony of the hetero/homo divide is perpetuated.

The tension between the linguistic and the corporeal in relation to the body has consistently been a core contentious area of debate in queer theory since its inception. However, these debates also tend to define queer in singularly discursive terms, and disavow the "queer" materiality that exists at the heart of such perspectives. The fluidity and excessive "jouissance" that is such an integral part of queer subjectivity can also be seen to exist at the centre of most philosophical discourses on the pre-discursive material body: the polymorphous matter that is moulded and embodied once in contact with social, cultural and political hegemony. It is an essential polymorph that in (dis)unity with its fellow subordinates, female, homosexual etc, could be seen to embody a "queer corporeality" that pre-exists the "tyranny" of the phallogocentric "word", and is open to radically utopian inter-relational possibilities. It is this queer corporeality and its embodiment/erasure within current performance practice that I will attempt to reveal within the body of this chapter.

As earlier chapters have attempted to demonstrate, post-liberation gay/lesbian theatre and performance problematically sought to articulate and consolidate a seemingly fixed and definitive homosexual body, in direct conflict with the inscriptive processes of heterocentricism and homophobia. Processes that are also invoked and reiterated within the more dominant epistemologies of theatre, which subsequently culminate in the construction of a "malestream" dramatic text. This definitive homosexual body (if
such an idea is possible) though effective in projecting a visible identity and consolidating a context or active forum for political expression and debate, is also reductive from a constructionist point of view in light of its adherence to essentialist binarisms that merely re-enforce conventional power relations and hierarchies (dominant legitimate hetero/subordinate perverse homo). The gay body is thus problematically situated within a semiotic network of meanings that have enforced exclusivity, assimilationism and cliché, which tend to be perpetuated through the creation of texts that draw significance from, and structure existing patterns through theatrical explication and the conventional ideologies of social drama. The mind/body dichotomy has consistently been a key subject of analysis in twentieth-century western theatre, from the metaphysical subjectivism of naturalism (re. Stanislavski), to the more revisionist and experimental ontological expressionisms of the avant-garde, anti-naturalist and postmodern performance “laboratories”, influenced by the works of Artaud, Brecht and Grotowski (though laboratory in itself is a problematic concept in that it appears to adhere to scientific ideas of naturalism and determinism in the “truth” of the human condition). However, despite these emerging theatre practices that seek to continually question the nature and purpose of theatre and performance, and the semiotic and linguistic meanings it constructs, the corporeal and sexual body still held much potential as a site for radical critique. It is the very nature of performance itself then as (re) presentation, that places these corporeal epistemologies in doubt, thereby revealing the potentially queer essence within.

Since the eighties, a number of academic studies on performance have emerged that began to incorporate a quite extensive and diverse range of critical frameworks, from phenomenology, Derridean deconstruction, to multiculturalism, semiotics and feminism. They were frameworks that consistently foregrounded conventional theatrical practices and epistemologies, in order to expose their unquestioned legitimacy and acceptance. Following Ferdinand de Saussure’s influential theories
that proposed the idea that an access to language does not provide an *apriori* access to the “Real” (but merely articulates a projected “version of reality”), academics from a number of disciplines began to question the axiomatic assumptions of non-reflexive approaches to the way in which social subjects “think, talk and write” (Zarrilli, 1995: 8). Forms of “narrativity” (including those about/within theatre and performance) were thus exposed as merely constructed, artificial inventions, and not actual representations of a clearly definitive truth or reality. By accepting the idea that all narratives are mere invention then, discourses regarding acting/performance are also conceivable as essentially the product of particular historical, social and cultural contexts and hegemonies, and subject to the same possibility for queer re-interpretation, revision and transgression.

And yet, dominant discourses on theatre and performance problematically tend to assert that they are imparting some form of existential “truth” (of the human condition), and fail to effectively foreground the processes that went into the production of such metaphysical epistemologies, or the specific context of their construction. To do so would, of course, expose the authoritative *voice* behind such discourse, and hence make it vulnerable to contention and active subversion. Therefore, the epistemological assumptions that lie behind the ideologies of theatre and performance tend to remain unmarked and problematically re-iterated. As Philip B. Zarilli argues, languages of performance, like many alternative linguistic methodologies, mask not only their “positionality and ideology but also their referential, signifying nature” (11). The so called “truth” of performance is thus deployed by the conventional use of such discursive metaphors as “believability” and “honesty” in relation to an enunciation of the inevitably “autobiographical” processes of acting. As Zarrilli contends, the use of such metaphors originate from a predominant perspective in naturalist/realist performance that a character, when enacted, must conform to a vision of social reality as an “ordinary” construct of the
"spectator’s point of view". The audience must be convinced that the character’s behaviour is a product of the given circumstances of "ordinary life". However, this evocation of "believability" also stakes a claim to truth that masks or disavows its ideological or linguistic construction, and the ideology of identity within which the performer is "collapsed" into the role.

Late nineteenth and early twentieth-century theatre theorists such as Konstantin Stanislavski and Vsevolod Meyerhold, developed "systems" of performance that engaged with languages of acting that were based upon the assumption of an unquestioned and objective science of the mind/body. A science that enforced the relevance of the subjectivity of the actor/performer, and concretised and promoted a mythology of the "personal" as the source of an essentialised "truth" in performance; a mythology that is still very much perpetuated in acting methods and schools of thought today (though from a much more critical perspective). Stanislavski viewed the body as part of the "apparatus" of the actor, a flexible instrument which, along with voice, speech, observation and imagination, is constantly under logical control and manipulation. The performer’s corporeality is, therefore, central to the (performative) training method, and its central objective is to control and make the body "responsive", thus reiterating conventional Cartesian ideas of (masculine logical) mind over (feminine material) body. The mind is perceived as the impenetrable vessel of the imagination, which is subsequently envisaged and re-lived through the act of a consciously embodied performance:

The System provides a certain means of control based on a stimulus-response model imposing order on disorder … a nature/culture dichotomy where culture (male/mind/texts) controls, shapes, and tames nature (female/emotions/the body). (Zarrilli, 1995: 11)

The performer’s mind (consistently gendered male within such discourse) thus becomes an "all-knowing entity", separate from the body (disembodied), in control of
all experience and the processes of embodiment; there is no place for any (feminine) polymorphous inconsistency or loss of corporeal control within such a paradigm. This mind-body duality (re. Plato) consequently establishes a metaphysical superiority that is subsequently capable of participating in and reiterating logocentric epistemologies, despite the apparent limitations of such a corporeal body. As Stanislavski himself described in true counter-Artaudian fashion:

An actor's performance which is cluttered up with a multiplicity of gestures will be like that messy sheet of paper. Therefore before he [sic] undertakes the physical interpretation... he must rid himself of all superfluous gestures... Unrestrained movements, natural though they may be to the actor himself, only blur the design of his part, make his performance unclear, monotonous and uncontrolled. 107

The philosophical works of M. Merleau-Ponty (in particular his Phenomenology of Perception, 1962) mark quite a distinctive shift in thinking around the role of the body in constituting experience. Merleau-Ponty's theories of the body pose a direct challenge to Cartesian metaphysics, since they focus upon the primacy of a less tangible form of lived experience in the constitution of meaning, and critique the static, objective nature of most representations of the body and experience. His notion of phenomenology reclaims the centrality of the body and embodied forms of experience, and rejects accepted discourses that perceive the body as a mere instrument under the control of an all-knowing (and ideally masculine/heteronormative) mind.

In contrast to the more “mainstream” canon of naturalist theatre practice (that is more resistant to non-realist practices), however, the evolution of avant-garde and post-sixties experimental approaches to performance had begun to articulate a far more

radical (re) discovery of the body. The influence of performance theories by Antonin Artaud, Bertolt Brecht (see Chapter One) and Jerzy Grotowski, for example, led the way in rejecting the limitations of character and subjectivity in favour of a more cerebral and communal union between performer/spectator “in the moment”. The work of performance theorist and practitioner Richard Schechner, in particular, vehemently rejected performative systems that regarded the body-as-instrument, in favour of developing a process by which the performer may attain a more “organic connection between body and mind”\textsuperscript{108}:

\begin{quotation}
All performance work begins and ends in the body. When I talk of spirit or mind or psyche, I mean dimensions of the body. A knee can think, a finger can laugh, a belly cry, a brain walk and a buttock listen.
\end{quotation}

(Schechner, 1973: 132)

Such a radical “resurrection” of the body has quite effectively contributed to a re-evaluation of the role that the body and corporeality play in performance theory and practice in the “queer” new millennium. Of course, this resurrection is in itself problematic in that these reifications of “body-experience” re-assert an essential notion of the “real” that assumes this new organic subject or “self” to be stable and fixed, and that a particular experience or transcendental self exists as an ideal and “authentic” construct or essence. And so a body/experience phenomenological approach to performance also results in re-inscribing a Cartesian dualism, in the form of a performer’s “natural” organic presence and subjectivity. Neither approach truly provides an adequate account of the body or the processes by which “presence” and more importantly notions of gender, race and sexuality, are read as discursive constructs, but merely perpetuates a heightened \textit{mythology} of the truthful and naturalised subject.

These explorations of bodily experience consistently envisage a “natural order” of

\textsuperscript{108} As cited by Zarrilli, p.15.
sexed and gendered organic subjects, rather than the fluid possibilities of a polymorphous invocation of corporeality. An effective way of initiating a more complex or constructive way of re-thinking the body in performance is through the playful adoption of transgressive strategies of bodily interaction and representation. From a queer perspective, it is in the moment and context of performance that the actor/performer/body is able to re-create or embody shifting traces of transient and ephemeral meaning, signification and opacity in relation to the play of signification that occurs between the signs generated by the performer and the interpretations of those signs negotiated by the spectator. It is within this creative (and indefinite) exchange that the potential for an attempt at *ecriture queer* emerges. Since meaning is invoked collaboratively by the intangible semiotic interaction of performers and spectators, the performer does not necessarily *have* to produce logical, ideologically motivated or heterosexist signs for a moment or performative to have “meaning” for an audience. The fluidity of meaning exposes for the performer the complexities of the relationship between performative actions and the generative structures of signification, but as Derrida has argued, these potential meanings can never be fixed since there is no transcendental signified that asserts authority and exists without signifiers or beyond signification. Linguistic *truths* and performative *meanings* hence enforce a positivist metaphysics which assumes a *fixed* stability of the subject/spectator, and hence disavows the significatory potential of subversive counter-discourses or opaque significations.

In Derrida’s deconstructive critique of the “metaphysics of presence” and the foundational essentialism of (phal)logocentrism, he exposes the fact that every “mental or phenomenal event” is merely the product of difference, and is thus defined by what it is not rather than by some form of axiomatic essence. Therefore, if it is impossible in his view to legitimately claim to possess a stable, autonomous identity, then the authority of the (hetero-patriarchal) *logos* itself is mere phantasm. Derridas’s
critiques are thus extremely useful in their application to performance theory, since the logocentric mythology that surrounds discourses on performance quite commonly, as discussed earlier, focus upon the unquestionable "truth" of the "revelatory" subject in performance. But as semioticians and deconstructionists have discovered in analysing performance, the performer is, in effect, quite intriguingly opaque in nature: an intertext of contradiction and significatory potential. An examination then of performance theory from the perspective of Derridean deconstruction and queer theory, reveals that the *apriori* "authoritative self" of the performer is not an autonomous actuality, but is merely produced by the performance it supposedly produces: "Everything begins with reproduction ... we are written only as we write" (Derrida, 1978: 211, 226).

As a deconstructive approach to theatre and performance, the works of Brecht, Artaud and Grotowski are commonly regarded within theatre epistemology to have laid the foundations for the present "condition" of contemporary drama and performance. In conflict with the empathetic subjectivism of Stanislavskian and naturalist approaches to "reality", Brechtian theories of performance in particular envisaged a dual role for the activist/performer, wherein the apparently *conscious* performer is able to detach themselves from the role and critically examine it from the "point of view" (in unity with the audience) of an obliviously hegemonised society. As Roland Barthes suggests, "the [Brechtian] actor must present the very knowledge of the play's meaning ... The actor must prove ... that he guides meaning towards its ideality" (Barthes, 1977: 74-75), but in order to achieve this "objective" duality, the performer must adopt the role of an authoritative social critic (a deconstructive tactic), but also more problematically succeeds in reifying the conventionally logocentric notion of the privileged "all-knowing subject". By implication, the Brechtian performer must possess an essential (masculinised) authority in order to "transparently" comment upon their character/dramatic situation/sociological perspective. This authority is,
therefore, only attainable from *apriori* “personal experience”, the same notion of autonomous personal experience that is so vital to Stanislavskian and subjectivist approaches to performance:

The dilemma of Brechtian performance is that for all of Brecht’s emphasis on rationality and the undermining of theatrical illusion, the actor must convincingly portray something that she [sic] is not, the persona Barthes calls the “master of meaning”.¹⁰⁹

There may be a vast ideological departure between the performance theories of Brecht and Stanislavski, but as is quite evident, the principle that underpins their theories of performance remains fairly similar: performance is only truthful if it invokes the presence of the performer’s self (empathetic in Stanislavski’s case, and critical in Brecht’s). Brechtian discourses may be more “conscious” of the nature of theatre and performance as “writing”, since they articulate a number of ideas that expose the “mechanics of theatrical signification”, but are unable to detach from the exposition of such mechanics within a concept of “presence”.

However, a far more radical approach in privileging “the self” in performance comes from the work of Jerzy Grotowski, who by seeking to reveal the “mask of lies” of culture and society, attempts to produce such a revelation in the “excesses of truth” (1968: 52-53). In an anticipatory pre-queer approach to performance, Grotowski urges the performer to approach the “role as if it were a surgeon’s scalpel, to dissect himself... The important thing is to use the role as a trampoline, an instrument with which to study what is hidden behind our everyday mask - the innermost core of our personality - in order to sacrifice it, expose it” (37). This act of self-exposure and sacrifice is thus also an attempt to impel the spectator to discover and confront the same revelations about themselves. However, Grotowski once again privileges the

self over the performance, and the archetypal “truths” of experience, but as Derrida writes, the self is “inscribed in language, is a function of language, becomes a speaking subject only by making its speech conform to the system of the rules of language as a system of differences” (1982: 15): the self is therefore inseparable from the language by which it expresses itself, and it is a function of and does not precede that language. Yet Grotowski (akin to Artaud) rejects any dependence upon common systems of verbal language in performance, insisting upon “an elementary of language signs and sound - comprehensible beyond the semantic value of the word” (24), thereby transgressively eliminating any corporeal resistance to oppressive psychic processes. He subsequently proposes the possibility of a uniquely corporeal physical language and self-presence, with a problematically originary physical presence; but as Derrida’s reading of Artaud points out, the body is unable to transcend the “play of difference” that constitutes language, since it too is constituted by difference or more specifically:

Organization is articulation, the interlocking of functions or of members ... the labour and play of their differentiation ... The division of the body into organs, the difference interior to the flesh, opens the lock through which the body becomes absent from itself, passing itself off as, and taking itself for, the mind. (Derrida, 1978: 186)

Therefore, the internal divisions of the body, its structures and organization, challenge the idea of its “organicity” and undifferentiated presence, thereby allowing instability and inconsistency to emerge between mind and body/self and other. The body is no more an autonomous foundation for communication than verbal language is. As Philip Auslander argues (1995), a purely physical expression of the corporeal body, then, is seemingly impossible since it is differentiated from within, and enigmatically not really “present to itself”; the mind is thus unable to essentially communicate the body without being defined by the “rules of language as a system of differences”. and the body cannot express the mind without being “defined by its own system of
Pure self-exposure is no more possible on a physical level than on a verbal level because of the mediation of difference. (ibid)

The performance theories of Stanislavski, Artaud, Brecht and Grotowski, though important to the development of theatre and performance not only as an art form but as an academic discipline, are hence subject to the limitations of the very linguistic and metaphysical assumptions upon which they are based. When referring to “presence”, it is important to acknowledge that it is merely a metaphorical invocation of “self”, that results from the very “play of difference” that is central to performance discourse. Derrida’s critiques are both analytical and descriptive, and their deconstructive applications are ironically unable to exist independently of their object of deconstruction. As Auslander points out, performance equivalents of Derrida’s notion of writing “under erasure” (ie. the adoption of language systems that are enmeshed with the metaphysics of presence, and subsequently crossing it out) might simultaneously cite the (heteronormative) vocabularies of conventional performance methods and styles, but may also simultaneously begin to undermine or subvert them, and thus initiate the beginnings of an *écriture queer*. Brechtian styles of performance quite visibly started to move in this direction, but even though his theories of performance allow for the creation of multiple, even contradictory meanings in performance, the polemical implication that the resolution of such conflict is possible and could inevitably lead to the resolution of such conflict within the social sphere, is both problematic and provocative (particularly from a queer perspective). An approach to performance, then, within which the performer is able to move fluidly from style to style, and role to role, may consciously dramatise the construction of the performer from the language of the theatre, but such practice also produces a polysemy of multiple meanings that envisage a “horizon” of meaning, and not the more open ungrounded play of signification that Derrida proposes.
The ability of the performer to deconstruct his/her own work from within, and the relationship of that work to the spectator, is one of the central concerns for contemporary queer performance. The idea of a “uniquely queer” approach to performance is undoubtedly (and subjectively) the most progressive and “truthful” of most current theories and practices of performance. Unique in that it is potentially able to fluidly transgress or illuminate the problematic tensions of logocentric dualisms and conflicts of linguistics over corporeality, and quite effectively inhabit (or invade) all foundational practices, since queer can be seen as both discursive and essentialist, and the confrontative practice of performance its most radical medium for embodiment. The central dilemma of queer theory, in practice, is that as with all deconstructive strategies it is just as enmeshed within common linguistic structures as any other theory and hence just as problematic. However, the inherent power of queer discourses of “the self” and ideas of “truth” (in logocentric and ideological terms) lie in their effectiveness at destabilising the heteronormative matrix by which all language and social foundation is seemingly constituted. Contemporary deconstructive strategies tend to selectively and consistently disavow the underlying limits of the heterocentric foundations upon which most theory is based, and the radical potential posed by such attempts at destabilisation; even feminist theorists have regularly avoided developing their anti-patriarchal discourses further to encompass the radically deconstructive but creative level posed by a queer critique. Queer theory’s recognition of its theoretical confines and the seeming ease (albeit contentiously) by which it is able to subvert or ironically play with traditional ideologies, enforces its impact as an important and progressive perspective in critical theory; yet, it is a perspective that is constantly in a state of flux, revision and transformation. In performance, a consciously queer approach to the construction of a performance text or the projection of a body/self is just as problematic as the earlier approaches of Stanislavski, Brecht and Grotowski, since the act of queering a performance also implies an authoritative role for the performer in conjunction with
the re-presentation of their body within the space, or the content of the verbal text; thereby attempting an embodiment of the metaphysical queer self.

II. The Conflicts of Queer 'Identity'.

The tension caused by an attempt at invoking a fluidly queer presence in performance is effectively illustrated by the controversy caused by American performance artist Tim Miller's 1992 presentation of *My Queer Body*. In this work, Miller, who is no stranger to controversy, adopts a specifically autobiographical approach to the construction and content of his "queer" text, yet not only as a source of narrative explication, but also by presenting his naked body as an equally important "queer" text to be read. This corporeal nomination by Miller thus seeks to shift the "body of the [queer?] community" which incorporates (and homogenises) "subjects", to the individual body of "the [queer?] subject" which incorporates the community. His aim, therefore, is to performatively merge his "search for identity" with that of the community. In his previous solo performance work Miller set out to document the responses and experiences of gay men in the time of AIDS, but also (rather ineffectively) attempted to problematise the possibility of direct mimesis or the inflection of his real life into the work by the ambiguous textual disclaimer "I remember so many things, some of them even happened."

Miller's approach to the construction of the work's textuality incorporates a variety of modes of theatricality, from stand-up comedy and cabaret to moments of extreme emotion and nostalgia. His aim is to encourage the spectator to witness, participate

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111 As part of the NEA Four discussed in the Introduction.

and thus identify with the consolidation of a united communal response to both the epidemic and his mediated biographical context. As David Román discusses in his analysis of such an “interventionist” performance, Miller’s work seeks to deny direct identification with the performer (of course a difficult claim to quantify) in favour of a more direct focus upon the audience as it is encouraged to participate in an interrogation of gay male sexuality and a radical critique of the body (specifically Miller’s). With My Queer Body, Miller’s composite body-text explores the “stories” that are cartographically “mapped” into the flesh, in conjunction with the threat of corporeal invasion posed by AIDS, in what originated as a “story to his penis”.

Adopting the form of an introspective monologue, he recounts the (subjective) memories that are marked upon a reading of his body, from birth through to sexual awakening, coming out, first love, loss and the inevitably existentialist contemplation of mortality. However, by actively naming the performance My Queer Body, Miller directly places his body-text within the contentious discursive frameworks that surround identity politics and their queer re-appropriation, which results in not only problematising his definition of the term but also his definition of the united community to which the performance is addressed. This directly “possessive” citation of the discursive pronoun “My” thus re-contextualises and sutures an attempt at “re-mapping” or embodying the queer body to the specific autobiography and performative acts of Miller himself. The conflict of signification that such a re-contextualisation invokes thus illegitimises his claim to “queer” corporeality, since it defines such a corporeality in strictly singular terms. In ironic reference to Freud’s deviant hysterics, Miller proposes that his body struggles for phenomenological and performative expression, invoking “symptoms” that should ideally disavow oppressive psychoanalytical drives toward “being cured” (and thus erased), in favour of jouissance, celebration and consolidation. However, Miller’s “organic” role as an

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authoritative voice, and his reliance upon the seeming validity and universality of his (specifically gay) “experience” and articulations of reality is limiting and is subsequently erased by its conformity to conventional performance practices that foreground the authentic presence and authoritative word of the performer. This approach diffuses the radical potential of his text, and results in placing his fixed identity/social position in conflict with the very queer he claims to “be”; he does objectively comment upon the performative inconsistencies of his body in performance (re. Brecht), but proffers it as an essential text to be fetishistically explored rather than radically deconstructed.

The spectators are invited to celebrate the spectacle of the presentation of his body, thus affirmatively politicising their communally aroused (gay) desires within the scopophillic process. As he strips naked, he moves into and amongst the audience and invites their illicit touch, offering his deviant corporeality for intimate examination and associative contemplation, thereby impelling the (predominantly gay male) spectator to confront their own corporeal sensations and subconscious desires in stimulative response to such a union. The dramatic tension of the moment “climaxes” with Miller laboriously invoking his revealed penis to “get hard... because the world can still be a fine place” (329). However, contrary to the more humorous and camp fantasy elements of his autobiographical recollections, it is this performative moment that breaks with the illusory boundaries of the performance and is transgressively and directly situated in “the real”, as Miller removes the theatrical mask of his performance and reveals the sexual potency of his erotic presence. The “artifice” of performance is thus problematised by the sudden tension posed by his own exposed sexuality, which transforms the role of the audience from passive spectator to active voyeur. The spatial demarcations of the performance space and the place of the spectator in relation to the performer are hence transgressed, and could be seen to envisage the form of “cruel” catharsis that Artaud had articulated decades earlier (the
spectator’s body communally responding to the spectacle of Miller’s sexualised body in communal jouissance and morphological unity). This boundary crossing, however, is hardly unique within the context of an increasingly common avant-garde approach to performance, but it is the very “nature” of the performer’s “marked” deviant corporeality, its uncompromising visibility and tangible contact with the audience that truly invokes a potential space for deconstruction and self-reflexivity within the spectator that Artaud and his contemporaries envisaged. It is the embodiment of the deviant, the articulation of perversion and the “danger” that the unpredictably fluid space that their presence evokes within the performance, where the site of a truly queer performativity can begin to emerge. The (heteronormative) spectator is confronted by an eroticised “Other”, and subsequently forced to evaluate their internal physical and emotional responses to such embodiment and sexual spectacle.

However, it is the very “nature” of that Other within the space that also problematises any real attempt at a specifically “queer” reading of this corporeal text, since Miller’s “mantra” (to use Peggy Phelan’s phrase¹¹⁴) to induce an erection, and the ideological minefield invoked by such a fetishisation of the masculine phallus, is a highly contentious and less than effective political path to take in attempting to project a “queer body”. Ironically (or deliberately), Miller’s penis symbolically fails to finally “get hard”, but the commonly gay male constitution of the audience in such traditionally gay-themed performance spaces (the essentialist community whom he addresses) is quite effectively interpolated within the celebrated voyeuristic physicality of the moment. His sexuality is hence recuperated and re-politicised in conjunction with the discourses of disease and disintegration that underpin its emotive narrative trajectory:

Get hard, because it still feels good to be touched ...
get hard because there is so much that has gone ...
get hard, because you can remember you are alive ...
get hard because I am queer and it is good and I am
good and I don’t just mean in bed ... (329)

Miller, therefore, actively re-inscribes the sexual as a point of affirmation and
rejuvenation in a rather sex-radical style that derives much inspiration from Genet. His
body is deployed as an object to both arouse and re-affirm gay male desire, thereby re-
politicising that desire in the process and corporeally uniting the performer and
spectator in a celebration of an essentialised gay sexuality. However, his failure to
attain an erection at the “climax” of the performance is quite interesting in that it
would have probably proved to be the most radically effective point at which to
invoke a much more political affect in the text; though an affect that would have had a
much more subversive impact if re-contextualised within a predominantly
heterocentric space, where the connection between performer and spectator would
have evoked a far more interesting and charged response (a problem discussed in
Chapter Four). Regressively then, Miller’s text can be ineffectively consigned to the
context of a more anticipatory performance practice, wherein such transgressive
subject matter has come to be expected by an all too knowing and de-sensitised
audience. The radical potential of Miller’s “dangerous” body is thus constrained by
the internalised regulations of re-presenting the body in public, the limits of
performance practice itself and the extremes to which such performance should go.

Despite an unsurprisingly supportive response from the largely gay male audience (an
uncritical stance that has become quite problematic in ascertaining the “value” of such
work, which tends to bestow iconic status merely because of its content), the rather
prescriptive narrative of the spoken text and its consistently exclusive direct address to
the privileged white penis, merely results in enclosing the performance and consigning
it to the rather limited (from a queer perspective) and essentialist confines of gay
(male) performance. Despite the fact that such a tense corporeal moment plays an important role in the re-inscription of an affirmative post-AIDS sex-positive gay male sexuality, performance theorist Peggy Phelan contends in her rather scathing attack on the piece:

> there must, however, be something other than the penis, flaccid or erect, that is crucial to the nomination of queer bodies. The potential promise of the word “queer” is that it opens up a different order of bodily and sexual identities. (Phelan: 33)

For Phelan, Miller’s rather insistent focus upon the unproblematised presence of his penis, sutures the work firmly to the traditions and signifying practices of a specifically gay performative economy, within which exclusivity, narcissism and phallogocentricism does little to break new ground for a progressive queer performance. His subjective “queer body” hence fails to “live up” to the promise of its enunciation, if such a proposition could actually be embodied in any real corporeal form. Miller’s desire to be gay sex-positive thus re-ifies sex as the transcendental signifier of a naturalised identity, and the resulting unchallenged privilege accorded to the spectacle of his white penis within a phallogocentric economy, is problematic in relation to his attempt to articulate a unified queer body. This attempt at homogenous unification is counter-productive within such a potentially fluid matrix, whereas a more opaque, collective or fragmented approach to bodily presentation and signification (as attempted by Weaver and Shaw for example) is far more productive:

> Tim Miller is not a lesbian. Nor is he a woman. (Or at least not in public). As far as I know, he is not a transsexual or a hermaphrodite. The body performed and displayed in Miller’s MY QUEER BODY is what would have been formerly called a young-white-gay-man’s body. (Phelan: 30)

The problem facing gays and lesbians in the queer new millennium is the dilemma posed by having to seemingly maintain a coherent identity, whilst simultaneously
attempting to unravel the oppressive binary of the hetero/homo divide. And yet, as Lynda Hart argues: “How do we resist reifying a metaphysical core without eliminating politically constructed identities?” Queer theory’s contentious response to such a dilemma is, of course, the thesis that identity categories are performatives, acts of signifying systems that merely gain efficacy through unchallenged stylised repetition and social conditioning. But these theories of performativity are quite problematic in relation to theories of performance and theatre. Spectators who are marginalized by the imposition of restrictive identity categories are sutured to such formations, since a reliance upon identification is crucial in producing a motivated drive towards social and ideological change. Therefore, how do such sutured spectators “identify” with more fluid and multiple categories in performance, and is it possible to gauge such responses? Where can a site of “inclusive” interpellation of identification be located within such practices? Miller not only performs naked, but makes his performance of nudity an issue, which epitomises what Jill Dolan sees as the “efficacy” of theatrical performance, since it “offers a temporary and usefully ephemeral site at which to think through questions of the signifying body, of embodiment, of the undecidability of the visual, and of the materiality of the corporeal.” Yet this efficacy in terms of queer performance is undermined by the way in which Miller’s corporeality is deployed within the text, “solidified” as a material given rather than “dissolved” as a fluid possibility.

*My Queer Body* fails as a queer text because it refuses to challenge or engage with the constructedness of Miller’s gay identity, or even attempts to articulate a queer deconstruction of his social subjectivity and the potential re-readings/presentations

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that his body could provoke. His validated autobiography authoritatively affirms his
privileged gay white male identity in a celebration of the whiteness of his flesh and
the potency of his phallus. This embodiment of sexual potency may envisage the
radical potential that Leo Bersani has located in the deviant imagery of Genet, but
queer discursives are unable to reconcile with such delimiting rhetoric. Miller’s
conceptually “queer” body is thus the product of a specifically (heteronormative)
masculine signifying practice, that does little to intervene in the hegemonic “order of
things” or the imbalances of binary configurations. His subcultural audience is made
up of the very community from which he speaks, and so he is in essence “preaching to
the converted”. The content of his text makes little attempt to confront his
relationship with the gaze of the spectator, or problematise that relationship, since he
merely conforms to the contextual expectations of the event and his own “history” of
performance. He is “known” for constructing specific performative texts that embody
specific (gay) narratives, aimed at specific (gay) audiences. And as his “body” of
work attests, from Sex/Love/Stories in the early nineties to the more recent Shirts and
Skin, his consistent motivation is the exploration of a specifically “Gay” body in
relation to a specifically “Gay” community. The value and impact of such work
within the community is of course indisputable, but is far less affective when sited
within a specifically queer paradigm of performance. Miller’s empathetic spectators
are the ideal audience for such work (similar to the “reading communities” of Stanley
Fish), with shared material conditions and a universalised spectatorial position; but
the political efficacy of such work is denied any true potential by the lack of
dissemination it received within the wider (heteronormative) community, and the
horizon of conflict possible by the re-location and re-activation of his body within the
mainstream. His body is celebrated as the essential gay male, unified despite the
incessant assaults of homophobia and disease, but nowhere near the critical impact his
marked body could achieve.
An effective means of possible re-inscription or the enabling of a queer interpretation of Tim Miller's *My Queer Body* could lie in the erasure of the corporeal presence of Miller himself from the equation, as evidenced by Jill M. Carleton's *re-performance* of the text in 1996.\(^{117}\) Following a viewing of Miller's original 1992 performance, Carleton was so "moved" by such an autobiographical explication of the "gay male condition" that she decided to try and find out what it would be "like to be in a queer man's body", and hence sought to achieve a re-connection with Miller's "queer" body through a re/performing of the work entitled *Our Queer Bodies*:

> What does it feel like to attempt to occupy Tim Miller’s autobiographical body? What can my performance of *My Queer Body* tell us about embodiment as a tool for extending our understanding of performed autobiography? (Carleton: 74)

By the use of a videotaped document of Miller's "original" text to construct a highly mimetic interpretation of the piece, and utilising the communication techniques of E.L.P. (*Everyday Life Performance*\(^{118}\)) Carleton was able to transcribe the video text into a re-enacted live text; yet it was also a transcription that succeeded in re-locating Miller's text to the queer paradigm that he so resolutely failed to achieve himself. The E.L.P. process of repeated listening, transcription, mimicry and performance immersed Carleton in *My Queer Body* "in a way that other methods might not" (75), and as a performing analyst she was thus able to re-locate and embody certain aspects of the text spatially, temporally and corporeally, yet with a far greater potential for transgression. Following the work of performance artist Anna Deveare Smith's performative transcription of twenty-six tape-recorded interviews for her piece *Fires In The Mirror* (1993), the E.L.P. technique allows a "performative way of creating empathy and sensitivity in approaching the Other" (ibid), and enables a unique


\(^{118}\) Developed by communication theorists Robert Hopper and Nathan Stucky, see Carleton pp. 74-77.
alternative to the limited subjectivist systems of “method” acting since the process begins with the ephemeral traces and external details of voice, breath, and rhythm rather than the internal ideological and motivational processes of “the self”. As an exploration of gay male masculinity, Carleton was aware of her inability to “be” Miller, but felt that by placing her body into a situation that echoes his, in order to “take up his intentions” (as influenced by the work of Merleau-Ponty), thus rejects the processes of logocentric thought in favour of a more corporeal attempt to “synchronize one’s perception of existence with another’s”. Her aim was to slip fluidly into “a concept” of the body (namely Miller’s) and thereby (unintentionally?) expose its phantasmatic nature and potential for re-appropriation, re-signification and re-presentation. Whereas the written analysis of a performed autobiography is evidently an act of separation in the objective act of documentation, an attempt at re-embodiment of the Other as an accessible form of analysis and explication from within, is a far more intriguingly queer objective to attempt:

embodiment as a way-of-knowing can supplement textual approaches to the study of performed autobiography if researchers place their own bodies in the world of the performed autobiography under study. Such embodiment can create a sense of the researcher as object, create proximity between the researcher and the performance being analysed, and provide the researcher access to emotional experiences unavailable through spectatorship and written criticism. (Carleton: 77)

However, in her re-performance of the text/body, Carleton herself “becomes” the object of inquiry, the material subject of the gaze of “her community”, and she is unable to “rest in the security of the disappearance of [her] body that writing about Tim Miller may provide” (77). She therefore witnesses herself “from both the first-person and the third-person perspective”, and the iterative processes and conditions of the production of her own identity in the community are foregrounded within a process of queer disunity. In order to be fluidly “caught up in the object”, she must first renounce the epistemological privilege that a seemingly disembodied observation allows, and such proximity transforms the text from solely an object of consumption
or appropriation to a more fluidly “interactive map”, allowing her access to the
inhabitation of Miller’s affective/affected life. By performatively replicating Miller’s
movements and bodily inflections, Carleton creates a process of feeling (as a result of
such conditioning) that locates Miller’s corporeal experiences in her own muscles:
“Feeling, like belief, follows the body, and if, through mimetic attempts at
embodiment, I trace movement that is new to my bodily repertoire, I may find myself
on new affective ground” (78). This hyper-real form of re-embodiment then provides
quite an interesting and alternative epistemological process for exploring the
autobiographical performances and identities of Others and is, therefore, an effective
strategy for exploring a queer body in performance. The tensions caused by Miller’s
text, namely the inscriptions he has carved into his flesh and his “truthful” authority as
an “organic” identity, are evacuated by Carleton’s corporeal invasion of Miller’s
text/body. The inter-textuality of Carleton’s material presence, combined with
Miller’s narratives and the re-embodying performative nature of his “identity” as a
textual construct, begin to embody the type of fragmented “queer body” that Peggy
Phelan proposed in her critique of Miller’s original text. It is not only a body that is
full of inconsistencies and playful signification, but more importantly full of potential
for subversion and re-configuration.

As an emblematic product of a “heteronormative symbolic order” (whether
homosexual or heterosexual), the male body is inevitably the primary site for effective
sexo-linguistic subversion and the possibility of a horizon of queerness. The lesbian-
feminist discourses that dominate queer theory which sought to “re-focus” the
material sources of linguistic product in order to induce a new formation of the
symbolic (re. Wittig), thus contend that the only real hegemonic assault and political
efficacy of queer performance/s must be to re-address and reinscribe the fragility of
the masculine body in its many embodiments; in particular its deployment as a
dominant signifier of phallogocentric power:
For lesbians and gay men, the production of real intervention - and by this I mean intervention that produces social change - requires the agency of living bodies. Our bodies are the issue. How we use them to define and defy the regimes of cultural practice determines the reconstructive moments of our future. (Phelan, 1993: 34)

Queer perspectives, then, expose the unstable and performative aspects of identity, and its deployment as a tool of ideological control. By decentring the nature of masculine identity, sexuality becomes a product that is theatrically and "dramatically produced" through behaviour and gesture, projected and re-enacted through performative actions that exist within a fluid and shifting field of meaning. Queer theorists are not necessarily satisfied with merely analysing subordinate lesbian and gay communities as the exclusive site of sexual difference, but more specifically interrogate the very structures and binaries through which they gain meaning, and thereby seek to deconstruct texts that had previously been assembled through heterocentric discursive paradigms, enabling alternate sub-texts and paradigms that re-configure the nature of deviancy to heterosexuality itself. Heterosexuality is hence once again projected as a contentious social structure that masks an inherently fluid deviancy beneath, and the highly contentious idea that heterosexuals themselves are potentially just as "queer" as homosexuals. As a critical framework, queer studies focuses upon a deconstruction of artistic, cultural and literary texts, in order to foreground their unmarked inconsistencies and inscriptions as a product of culture and society, and hence the tenuousness of the mechanisms of their functioning. "Queer" as a philosophical practice, however, acknowledges the impossibility of moving totally outside common conceptions of sexuality, since it is materially impossible to truly place ourselves "outside" of the heterocentric matrix (even if the matrix itself seeks to achieve this end), nor entirely inside, because each of these terms comes into being, of course, through their relation to each other.

The overall aim of queer theory then is to negotiate limits, and thus expose regulatory
structures that impose imbalances of power and gender/sexual hierarchies. Yet, whilst purporting to address the categories of sex, sexuality and gender as strategic performative articulations of an oppressive heterocentric hegemony, there is also a recurring hegemonic discourse shaping queer theory itself (one that is quite distinctively “lesbocentric” in momentum, as discussed in Chapter Two), which can also be seen as discursively delimiting and oppressive in relation to non-polymorphous forms of identity, if such a utopian formation is possible. With lesbian-feminist revisions of psychoanalysis and discourse theory forming the basis of queer, the dominant order and linguistic field of the “masculine” is hence the most “essential” site of contention. Yet where does this notion of course place the “queer male” within such a matrix? The possessive and volatile reaction to masculinist appropriations of “queer” identity, as evidenced by Phelan’s criticisms of Miller’s work, thus implies an additionally “masked” exclusivity from within such a seemingly “open” discursive paradigm, that finds its efficacy in explorations of butch/femme role-play and a re-configuration of the feminine.

From a queer viewpoint, heterocentricism is constructed and proliferated through a specifically masculine linguistic field (irrespective of gender and sexual orientation) and, therefore, it is only through an alternate non-masculine field of signification that subversiveness may be attained and regulatory categories subverted. Queer male theorists have hence found themselves almost forced into the identity category of “gay” in order to access any form of radical critique or subversive economy, since queer seems to be a contemplative ideal that is beyond their reach from within such a “lesbocentric” discursive field. However, a “gay theory” is limited not only by the contentiousness of its essentialist polemics (irrespective of its value within social “reality”), but more importantly by the oppressive privilege of its engendered sexual
perspective from within a particularly reiterative homo-patriarchy. If gender and sexual epistemology is the construct of a masculine linguistic paradigm, a process of queering can be seen as attainable only when enunciated through a more polymorphous understanding of the feminine, as a repudiated and, therefore, subversively potent locus of re-interpretation. Although the concept of "the lesbian" identity is also another example of a problematic and exclusionary essentialist identity category, a "lesbian theory" and corporeality that is "othered" and detached from a masculine specificity is thus more open to play and re-signification, and an effective point of departure to begin to unravel the "phallacys" and performatives of heterocentric discourse. Queer performance, then, is able to explore these critical frameworks that deconstruct the performative nature of regimes of power and corporeal concepts of "the body", and can thus attempt to locate new ways of re-articulation and embodiment. The queer body can be seen as a body in flux: moulded and constrained by external condition, yet conflicted by internal instability. Theatre and performance provide the context within which it can exhibit the performativity of "symptoms", in conflict with an analytical and interventionist gaze.

The performance work of "transgender" artist Doran George perfectly engages with the complex issues surrounding queer discourses, and the problematic nature of their actual embodiment in performance. The queer texts "he" constructs, not only engage with queer interventions in identity politics, but also focus upon the deployment of the corporeal body as raw material through which to explore issues of ontological inscription and genealogical critique. By performatively challenging the oppressiveness of the heterocentric gender mould, with a free-flowing form of opaque and explorative approach to gender and sexuality, his work unrelentlessly foregrounds

119 An analysis of current Gay media and cultural practices today, only reveals the extent to which Lesbianism is regarded as a subordinate and consistently undervalued role in a male dominated system of power, mediation and politics.
the discursive taboos of forbidden and fetishistic desire (from the erotic perversions of “piss-sex”, scarification and “scat”). By making visible the disavowed and irrational, George attempts to cartographically embody forms of desire that exist in alternate linguistic domains, thus envisioning an Artaudian form of confrontation within the psychic communion between a “liberated” performer and a conditioned spectator. One of his first performances, *Hetero Hell* (commissioned as part of a festival of “queer” and trans-gender performance in Amsterdam in 1996), could be regarded as an example of the “ideal” queer text, in that it directly attempts to put into practice the theoretical complexities and theatrical potency of a queer deconstructive performance. The traditionally “heterocentric” institution of marriage (in both its hetero and homo manifestations) marks the starting point from which identity categories are fragmented by an external play on gender signifiers, and a fluid transgender exchange. The performance begins with a highly theatricalised and overly grotesque enactment of the traditional wedding, in which George is forced to adopt the oppressive gender masks of a performed and “dressed” masculine identity, in a binary union with his grotesquely exaggerated “wife”. The parodic extremity with which both George and his female partner enact and struggle with their assigned genders, conflicts quite effectively with the spasmodic rebellion of their dissenting flesh beneath the costume. A flesh that yearns to be released, not only from the imposition of sexed clothing, but from the tension of an imposed fusion of oppositional bodies, and the institutional prison of their “legitimate” union. The ideal wedding soon disintegrates into a nightmarish vision of imposed balances of power, as George violently enforces his masculine privilege over a subordinate female. This oppressive coupling subsequently initiates an internal rebellion as the feminine compulsions from within his transgendered corporeality struggle to assert control, and the oppressiveness of his performance of masculinity is deconstructed within the performance. The accepted “drag” of the masculine and its performative iterations begin to conflict with the inconsistencies of the body that it seeks to conceal and contain. The phallic symbols
of his empowered masculinity, as represented by his formal suit and performative gestures, are thus ironically subverted by the revelation of the fetishised deviancy beneath (in the form of S & M paraphernalia), the opaque significations of his body (that signify both male and female) and the deflection of erotic signification to his exposed buttocks and anus. The phallic potency of the penis is thus re-consigned to an exhibition of his “feminised” anus, which is both symbolically sealed and penetrated by a “butt plug”. George seeks to reject and disavow the power of his deliberately masked and “erased” penis, in favour of the spectacle of a feminised submission. The subsequent removal of the “butt-plug” thus signals the “release” of identity from its constrained vessel (his body) and initiates the beginning of a more fluid strategy of performance and structure of meaning. Phrases of abstract movement interplay with the performative significations and impositions of gender, and the inter-relations of power that are inherent between the two “sexed” bodies become far less specific, providing a more dynamic economy of inter-changeability. Masculine phallic symbolism is visibly projected upon George’s body, but subsequently detached in a mock castration and re-applied to the female body of his “partner”, its power now re-consigned. Gender as performative “drag” (in the Butler sense) is thus epitomised in the tension between George’s shifting enactments of femininity and masculinity, the opacity of his own foregrounded transient corporeality, and the grotesque exaggerations of his hetero-patriarchally ‘sexed’ and objectified female partner. As his partner proceeds to penetrate a feminised George with her “strap-on” phallus, notions of gender and power are thus ironically deconstructed and explored in a more playfully erotic and fluid re-configuration that is quite definitively queer. In addition, the spectator is hence invited to revel in such transgression and exchange, and thereby engages with the debates surrounding the illusory ontology of their own bodies and identities in a form of Brechtian critique.

However, even though an objective (and simplistic) concept of the phallus is
presented within the performance, the corporeal presence of George’s own penis is safely hidden from view (unlike Tim Miller’s more problematic phallic display); George’s deliberate foregrounding of its “disappearance” thus impels the spectator to contemplate its significance in relation to the opaque body of which it is a “part”. George’s body-text is adorned with cultural signifiers of gender and sexuality that both mark and conflict, not only through the exchange of gendered clothing, but more importantly in a cartographical analysis of his queer corporeality. His physical body can be seen as a mass of fragmented tensions and contradictions, signifying male at one moment then proceeding to subvert the signification. His penis is masked, yet his buttocks and anus are offered to the spectator for erotic examination, directly engaging and problematising the notion of a “heterocentric” specular gaze, in favour of a more fluid object of desire in inter-sexual signification. He problematises both the legitimacy of essential masculinity and usurps and re-consigns traditionally erotic projections of feminine sexuality upon his own opaque body, in a spectacle for the heterocentric gaze. And in parallel to this, his denial of an eroticised projection of masculinity or a fetishistic phallic economy can equally intervene in the expectations and assumptions of the gay male gaze.

In his next work, entitled Rather Refuse (1997), George develops these explorations of the body as a “queer text” by tracing the journey of his own body from polymorphous purity into the perversity bestowed upon it by discursive inscription and the limits of sexual subjectivity. Emerging Venus-like from a shell, his body is iconically framed and offered for aesthetic appreciation; and yet, its visibility is fragmented, filtered and abstracted by inconsistent streams of light. His body is again a mass of contradiction and counter-discourse: signifying both male and female in transgenderal flux, “his” penis once again hidden from view between his legs. The opacity of such a body, therefore, seeks to deflect the intrusive gaze, the semiotic inscriptions of the spectator and the discursive significations of gender. His performance is a combination of the
more conventional deployments of gay drag with the queer corporeality of his contradictory body.

As the performance progresses, sculpted gesture and the performatives of an androgynous utopian purity, mutate into the more frenetic urgency of corporeal exploration, sexual awakening and the symptomatic spasmodic convulsions of a body in flux, culminating in a final transcendence into liberated perversion. The oppressiveness of binary forms of gender, and the tension caused by the integration of oppositional elements of masculine/feminine, active/passive, dominant/subordinant, conflict and interact; and in a powerful re-articulation of the body, a more fluid configuration of gender and sexual performance that renounces the corporeal restrictions of the "normative" in favour of a more potent and playful transgression is made possible. In the final climactic moments of the performance, George’s disavowed penis is revealed and juxtaposed with the opacity of his transgendered physicality, and the openly feminised anus that has played such a prominent role in this spectacle is inscribed with scatological taboo, thus blurring the boundaries between fetish, psychosis and hysteria in an Artaudian form of queer catharsis. The spectator is thus encouraged to gain pleasure in the specular indeterminism and transformation of George’s body, whilst ideally remaining actively aware (in a Brechtian sense) of the processes of bodily inscription and the political inconsistencies of their own socially produced corporeality.

In the early stages of the performance text, George attempted to embody the very maternal materiality of psychoanalytic theory, fluid and free of the doctrines of the symbolic order that seek to inscribe marks of sex and gender, thus encoding specificities of sexuality in post-oedipal harmony and social subjectivity. By rejecting paternity, or at least consuming it within a more polymorphous state, this maternalised "subject" is, therefore, free to explore the excesses and inconsistencies of the material
realm; and even the final revelation of the penis is subverted by the radical jouissance of libidinal discharge, anal penetration and the fetishisation of taboo objects of desire.

In contrast to Tim Miller’s rather fixed identitarianism in *My Queer Body*, Doran George’s queer body is quite effectively a mass of contradiction and performative play. His materiality does not conform to the “normative” expectations of regulatory systems, but reveals the indeterminacy that lies beneath such ordering binarisms, in conflict with the opaque substance of his own performative inscriptions. By actively invoking the linguistic assumptions of gender and sexuality, and re-mapping their semiotic systems of signification upon the surface of his textual body, a conventionally queer *theoretical* practice can begin to be embodied.

This chapter has sought to explore the complex and contradictory project of engaging queer theory with performance practice, and the creative limitations of heteronormatively ordered theories of “acting” and “the body in performance”. If the “truth” of the body in performance lies within a pre-discursive metaphysical experiential realm (ala Merleau-Ponty or Artaud), then it is a corporeality that, by disavowing the oppressive limitations of the symbolic, begins to envisage the polymorphously perverse corporeality of the “queer real”. Queer performance then, is not only a *conscious* act of re-vision and re-inscription of the linguistic processes of embodiment, but more importantly (and contentiously) lies at the very material essence of the body itself. Although notions of ‘spectatorship’ and ‘objective’ forms of written analysis provide insightful hermeneutic possibilities, a process of disembodiment will always be central to academic discourses that tend to elevate the researcher’s *writerly* subjectivity, whilst disavowing them any perception of their own position as a queer body in a “world of others”:

The subject returns from its recessive poststructuralist death, but it returns removed, counter-mimetic, not as originary. The subject returns as a subject’s guise, indeed performative, like a ghost in a body-suit, donned and wielded in a show of
social and political significances, manipulating and bent on exposing the historical mechanisms of a social drama which has parsed its players, by bodily markings, into subjects and objects. (Schneider, 1997: 180-181)
Chapter Four:

QUEER IN (G) THE MILLENNIUM

I. Subcultural Limitations.

The central aim of the previous chapters was to explore the tension and creativity that was invoked by the application of queer theoretical and revisionist perspectives to ideas of theatre, performance and subjectivity. Yet, by aligning queer strategies with such artistic forms as experimental performance and minority theatre, the real potential of these deviant strategies is somewhat disempowered and misdirected in that it is concentrated within types of performance that are, in effect, already "deviant" since they are culturally permissible sites for transgression (in whatever form). Political theatres and experimental forms of performance are already regarded as conventional sites for the articulation of alternate perspectives and creative forms, which are aimed at specific "types" of spectator, such as "minority groups" or the "artistic elite" of high culture. Spectators who are seemingly more receptive to and expectant of dissident strategies, which thus evacuates such radical performance of its true affective potential, because it is already "preaching to the converted". The political efficacy of such performance is also disavowed on a much wider socio-cultural scale, since it is regarded as a permissible, socially acceptable and rather inconsequential forum for counter forms of speculation, expression and critique, which tend to be limited in dissemination due to their lack of "popularity" or appeal to the "general masses". These discourses, therefore, have no real impact upon the hegemonic harmony of a "heteronormative" audience (in all its diversity) since they
are not really able to infiltrate social and cognitive structures at any real or confrontative level. Although artists such as Artaud, Brecht or Genet are widely accepted as “classical” innovators of the “avant-garde”, the true value of their “queer” work on theatre and performance has consistently remained within the contextual parameters of academic and middle-class inflections of value and creativity, that delimit their true potential on a much wider cultural and political level. By remaining on the fringes of theatre practice, experimental and political performance will inevitably fulfil their function as “obscure” forms, whose ideology is only of value to a fixed notion of a homogenous audience made up of radical intellectuals and high art aficionados, and subsequently denied its overall objective of reaching the “mainstream”.

Contemporary theatre and performance are, therefore, problematically differentiated by common cultural binarisms that place a concept of “theatre” within the realms of tradition, popularity and mainstream value in opposition to a less accessible concept of “performance” that is defined by suppositions of eccentricity, elitism and a lack of social relevance. Since theatre itself as an art form has suffered the uncertainties of under-funding and a general lack of “popularity” in the face of cinema, television and other media practices, it has fallen victim to a general culture of commercialism and the search for mainstream appeal (no matter how limited), and has hence lost much of its post-war potential as an influential cultural form. The radical potency of the politicised theatre that emerged in the early to mid twentieth-century has since dissipated (albeit with the occasional exception) to the level where the theatre “industry” has now become the locus of formulaic re-production and “safe” thematic
articulation (such as musical theatre or Shakespeare), or alternatively postmodern pastiche. The power dichotomy of a dominant mainstream theatre in opposition to a more subcultural fringe practice, merely reflects and reiterates conventional hetero-patriarchal social structures and ideologies that uphold current cultural values, with minor dissident factions consigned to the peripheries. As a peripheral practice then, experimental performance lacks the real subversive efficacy that a queer strategy demands, since it is limited by the same problematic balances of power and dissemination that undermined lesbian and gay theatre.

Since mainstream theatre functions under the seemingly singular premise of commercial success, the danger of innovation as a tenuous and unpredictable approach to the form thus relegates non-conformist theorists and practitioners to the safe confines of an under-funded fringe venue, or as a contemplative subject for academia. Such relegation succeeds in inscribing the work with an elitist and inaccessible value, which immediately constructs a barrier between the work and the audience it seeks to reach. This once again perpetuates traditionally divisive patriarchal notions of the danger of educating and inciting the masses, in favour of a more pacifying and simplistic emphasis upon subjection and “entertainment”. It is a common misconception that hence assumes a homogenised understanding of the heterocentric (uneducated) mainstream audience, in opposition to a perverse intelligentsia and a minor and disconnected “other” (the queer).

Since lesbian, gay and now queer theatre can be seen to have evolved out of the traditions of marginalized fringe and avant-garde practices, it has consequently only
really succeeded in reaching an audience that is seemingly already sympathetic to the ideologies it envisages. Yet, since queer performance aims at the dissolution of fixed social and sexual practices in favour of a more open configuration of fluidity, it is provided with the opportunity to experiment with the misconceptions and reading practices of the minority audiences of the fringe as a “rehearsal” for a much larger project. However, despite resistance to such fluidity from some sections of the lesbian and gay community, it is still a community that is open to the idea of subversion due to its already subversive relation to a dominant heterosexist society. Therefore, these minority audiences would be more receptive to engaging with these new sexual paradigms, which could be seen to undermine the overall efficacy of queer performance as a subjectively cathartic and deconstructive strategy. The real efficacy of such work could only truly fulfil its true potential when re-directed at the seemingly fixed subjectivity of the “majority” audience of the mainstream, since it is an audience that is conventionally far more hesitant of deviant narratives and the radical effects of attempts to shatter the illusions of social conformity and the deconstruction of “safe” identity.

Though many theorists will contend that mainstream theatre is already infused with queer textuality, since an analysis of many canonical texts of theatre history can reveal a queer sub-text or strategy within,¹²⁰ it is this very lack of specificity and visibility that is the central problem of such queer protocols of reading. The application of queer readings of mainstream texts does enable a space for alternate interpretation, but

it deflects such interpretations to an (intangible) idea of a “queer reader” as an identity formation that is aligned with the same homogenised gay and lesbian spectator. If a queer ideology *apriori* exists within such texts, how is it able to penetrate the conscious reading protocols of the heterosexual spectator if it is only seemingly visible to the queer? How can queer visibility be evoked to such a degree within the mainstream that it achieves its aim of “de-centring” the spectator from the internalised iterations of their identity (and is that truly possible)? Sub-cultural performance spaces then, should no longer be the locus for articulating queer discourses, and the means by which such an infiltration of the mainstream can start to be achieved had clearly started to emerge long before “queer” as a strategy was formulated.

The problematic divisions between mainstream/sub-cultural theatre and performance and the common assumptions of the “constituencies” of their apparently oppositional audiences have recently been explored by theorist and gay historian Alan Sinfield who, in a recent interview with artist and writer Neil Bartlett, illustrated the complexities associated with exploring queer performative strategies and readings from within the mainstream. Bartlett himself is extremely dismissive of the idea of subcultural work, maintaining that “queers” have always been active within the structures of mainstream theatre practice, in all its forms, from behind the scenes to centre stage (as explored in his queer musical theatre text *Night After Night*). However, as an “out” gay artist he is one of the few British practitioners to begin to articulate and explore that transformation from the subcultural gay fringe to a more “queer mainstream”.

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As a gay activist in the politically volatile eighties, Bartlett’s early writing and theatre work was quite distinctively aligned with agit-prop forms of political theatre and the experimental avant-garde that remained from the seventies (see Chapter Two). Early work that was quite focused upon staging the debates and gay politics of Britain in the eighties, and the devastating effects of AIDS on the gay community (with such works as *That’s What Friends Are For* or *That’s How Strong My Love Is* for example). As Sinfield recounts:

Bartlett’s writing in the mid-to late-1980s was almost archaeological - telling us things we didn’t know about our tradition, cutting them in with our lives today. I valued this work particularly because when he wrote “we”, he meant “we gay men”.¹²²

Bartlett was, therefore, directly addressing his early gay texts to a problematically assumed “we” (though the political context of such an address was inevitably vital), and his “archaeological” practice of reclaiming historical figures (irrespective of the potential problem of such contemporary inscription) had much in common with the approach to gay theatre associated with early Gay Sweatshop, particularly the works of Noel Greig and Drew Griffiths. This community-binding form of empowered gay theatre was a necessary reaction to the devastating political climate of the eighties, but it was not really until Bartlett set up his own company Gloria at the close of the eighties (a time when queer discourses began to emerge), that his work began to take on a more open and “queer” dimensionality (though not necessarily consciously).

Contrary to the rather stark and emotive polemics of his earlier monologues, his work with Gloria (est. 1988) though drawing upon the iconography of gay culture and

tradition, queerly juxtaposed such diverse contemporary material with the life-stories of historically re-marked gay figures (ie. "gay" in that they were "known" to engage in same-sex activity). Iconic figures such as Simeon Solomon in *A Vision of Love Revealed in Sleep* (1989-90) or La Zambinella in *Sarrasine* (1990-91) were intercut with (authentic) monologues from both his own autobiographical experiences of gay life and those of the drag queens that formed the rest of his cast. A dialogue was thus initiated between such contrasting 'texts' that articulated both commonality and difference by a cross-referencing, integration and conflict between historical referents and epistemologies of the past, and the contemporary signifiers of gay culture in the eighties and nineties (ie. Bartlett’s "clone" moustache, butch tattoos and sado-masochistic adornments).

As a collectively devised piece of theatre (similar to Gay Sweatshop), Bartlett and the performers created a text that attempted to detach itself from the emotively affirmative and "therapeutic" impetus of some eighties gay political theatre:

> Most plays featuring AIDS are less ambitious in form and theme: they aspire to represent the human reality of the epidemic. They hope thereby to draw the attention of the wider community to the emergency and, above all, to help gay people with the (inter) personal dilemmas of bereavement, stigma, loss of health, and impending death. The main orientation is toward individual therapy. (Sinfield, 1999: 317)

Yet Bartlett’s play is also quite distinctive in that the work gives a voice to those identities of gay culture that have been so contentious, ie. the drag queens. Drawing upon the working practices of the avant-garde and performance art, "found" material is appropriated and re-inscribed: "historical or personal material stolen, borrowed, re-
worked and re-placed, spoken with a new meaning". The text, therefore, takes on a more postmodern and eclectic structure, since it uses extracts from Solomon's original poetic prose as the base upon which to construct a layered polytextuality of classical prose, contemporary ironic excess and polysemic tension:

REGINA: She was wicked. She was not as other men are. She hath mingled with the ungodly ...

... And Quentin Crisp. Eighty year old and still tinting! An inspiration to us all. (92)

This textual juxtaposition, which places the material in "the mouths of the particular queens who made this show", thus begins to problematise the very opposition of "performance" (in the ironic spectacle of the drag queens) and "performativity" (in their own individual life-narratives that illicit and inscribe contemporary meanings and identities to the historical texts). The drag queens were in Bartlett's words "the perfect foil for the emotive, personal seriousness of my own performance", but more importantly embodied "the unacceptable face of gay history" in that they refused to conform to types of identity formation that were valued as "positive" by gay cultural assimilationism; formations that favoured a hyper-masculinity (another form of drag) to which Bartlett himself ascribed in his "leather clone" dress and muscular corporeal spectacle: "[the] play is shot through with the fear, shame and tenacity of what Bartlett recalls 'a very specific time'" (Sinfield: 327).

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Bartlett’s 1992 production of *Sarrasine*, once again attempted to articulate a distinctive tension between his own definition of his work as “gay theatre”, and the much more “queer” performative nature of the text. In the play, Bartlett quite directly focuses upon the performative nature of gender and identity, and the signifiatory potential of collective and fragmented subjectivities. The central character of La Zaminella in the work is played intermittently by two different drag artists and a “real” woman, all of whom bring multiple resonances and interpretive strategies to the role, in conjunction with their diverse age, gender and sexuality. The inter-relations of the characters themselves within the narratives of the text are also quite complex, consisting as they do of a woman’s obsession for a woman who is really a man, juxtaposed with an alternative text involving the (wo) man’s earlier relationship with a man, the Sarrasine of the title. The gender and sexual roles within the text thus fluctuate between the various performers, projecting multiple configurations and performatives of gender and identity. Although the use of the biographical life-narratives of the performers tends to recuperate the text within a more gay polemical context (in a similar vein to Tim Miller), *Sarrasine* is a vital stage for Bartlett who is queerly beginning to explore the constructed and interchangeable nature of gender and sexuality in conflict with a notion of an essentialised identity (though Bartlett’s “queer” approach to performance significantly precedes its cultural emergence in the UK).

Bartlett’s appointment as Artistic Director of the Lyric Theatre, Hammersmith (in 1994) also marked quite a turning point in his career as a radical fringe practitioner, since he now had access to the “mainstream” that queer performance so importantly
In an interview with Alan Sinfield, Bartlett discusses the inherent reductiveness of fringe theatre in addressing deviant perspectives from "outside" of dominant culture, and his urgent desire for such strategies to be explored more effectively from within. Although he acknowledges that his work is still aimed at a predominantly "gay" audience, it is still nonetheless open to multiple interpretation, the problematic nature of assuming a fixed notion of "the audience" and the limiting imposition of the presumption that the "gay artist" must necessarily promote a distinctively "gay agenda". For Bartlett, the mainstream is the perfect location for "arguing with that culture on its home ground":

By "mainstream" I mean those points of entry which the mainstream allows me, to its mechanics and economics, by accident ... points of aesthetic excess at which the mainstream becomes ripe for my evil purposes, for plucking. So my mainstream is very picky; one that most people wouldn't recognise. It is deeply queer, kinky, complicated, melodramatic, over-determined, disruptive and disrupted.\(^{124}\)

He thus acknowledges the limits of a more specifically subcultural approach to queer performance, and the potential efficacy of a more subversive strategy of perversion from within the mainstream. More recent work such as *Lady into Fox* (1996), directly illustrates this shift from the earlier political works to a more experimental and queer approach to theatre and performance. Rather than dealing with specifically gay characters and narratives (whether historical or contemporary) and the evocation of a "homosexual" desire, Bartlett demonstrates a far more open approach towards the exploration of desire and sexuality, in all its manifestations. *Lady into Fox* for example, is quite visibly concerned with the transformation (literally) of a seemingly ordered hetero-sexuality into something far more irreducible or ordered by conventional sexual discourses.

\(^{124}\) Bartlett, in conversation with Sinfield, p.218.
The transformation of the play’s middle-class heroine, Mrs. Tebrick, into a fox, acts as a provocative stimulant for the textual deconstruction of hetero-patriarchal languages of gender and sexuality and their relation to desire and love. The character’s performative transformation into a more fluid and animal configuration is liberating, since the performer is suddenly unbound and free of the dictates of gender performance, just as the character she plays is unbound and free of humanist sexual discourses and social institutions. She is queerly liberated in spite of her husband the patriarch’s attempts to maintain and enforce regimes of human behaviour, gender and sexuality. He desperately attempts to impose social performativity upon her and contain this fluid re-configuration, thereby perpetuating the tenuous nature of their heteronormative marriage, love and desire. His oppressive attempts are futile in relation to her new “queer” animality, and he is finally forced to reassess his own sexuality in relation to this transformed deviant object of desire, a fox. His conventionally ordered heterosexuality is thus repudiated in favour of the bestial desire he feels for his transformed “wife”, and he consequently opens himself up to an exploration of perversity. Even though his perfect wife has transformed into an alien “other”, he is still determined to uphold the institution of marriage no matter how perverse it has become. The narrative can, therefore, be seen as an ideal and ironic metaphor for the discourses of queer theory (and the general fear of manifestations of the Other so inherent within the heterocentric matrix) that propose sexuality as fluid in relation to the construction of sexual relationships, categories and objects of desire. His heterosexuality is readily open to adopting a deviant re-configuration when faced with having to reassess the transient nature of love and desire.
Bartlett’s work then, has only really begun to propose the rather contentious form of radical theatre that this thesis aims to envisage, and the mainstream (in whatever way one may define such a concept) is definitely the vital location for the activation of queer strategies that begin to unravel the structures of “normativity”. Despite the radical yet limited reach of the experimental fringe, there have been a number of instances in the past decade where a distinctively queer paradigm was evident in a variety of fairly influential mainstream pieces of theatre. Influential not only from within the limited confines of London’s West End, but on a much wider scale with both regional and international cultural infiltration. There are in particular two core mainstream texts that have achieved much in initiating the beginnings of a distinctly queer theatre practice in the final years of the last millennium, Mark Ravenhill’s *Shopping and Fucking* (1996) and Terence McNally’s *Corpus Christi* (1998).

The nineties, to many cultural commentators, witnessed quite a “revolution” in the emergence of openly gay theatre within the mainstream. The Royal National Theatre’s staging of Tony Kushner’s *Angels in America Part One: Millennium Approaches* in 1992 and *Part Two: Perestroika* in 1993, were widely hailed as forms of “epic” theatre that finally brought a specifically gay voice to a *fin de siecle* mainstream. Kushner’s award-winning “gay fantasia on national themes” is quite a notable accomplishment, in that it succeeds in re-introducing a deeply politicised approach to theatre to a normally resistant and de-politicised “audience” and mainstream theatrical culture. However, his texts achieve this by traditionally integrating both implicit and explicit didacticism with a inherently emotive sentimentality, that merely returns the work to the conventions of political fringe
theatre and the affirmative, unproblematic representation of gay sexuality (though rather consistently aligned with AIDS). *Angels in America* as a polemical text raises some extremely important questions, but fails to truly deal with them in any focused or analytical way, but rather consumes them in overly sentimental triviality, that projects a spectacle of AIDS and homosexuality which is quite insidiously problematic in that the "plague" is presented as a rather "righteous" phenomenon that ennobles the good and punishes the bad.

In the early moments of the play, two characters are presented to us, both of whom have discovered that they have been infected by AIDS, Prior Walter and Roy Cohn. As the narrative unfolds, Prior Walter's experience of the disease is explored with typically conventional ideas of "strength", "compassion" and "courage" that align him quite positively with his role as ideal gay citizen (despite his stereotypical vocation as "interior designer" and "caterer"). As a symbol of the essential contemporary gay identity, he represents the utopic face of modern homosexuality that gay patriarchy is so keen to promote. In stark contrast, however, the character of Roy Cohn is represented as an embittered and unpleasant person who's death from the disease is painful, degrading and, therefore, a stereotypically fitting end to such a "negative" gay character. This negativity, of course, is conveyed as a direct result of Cohn's role as the typically repressed and internally confused homophobe, who denies the imposition of a gay identity in spite of the fact that he engages in sex acts with other men. His crime then, is the rejection of his "natural" identity and membership of the "community", which is thus punished by self-loathing, sociopathology and a painful death. The play thus ironically approaches AIDS in a similar vein to the anti-gay
religious right, who interpret the disease as a punishment to those who “wickedly” refuse to conform to a certain social order, lifestyle and identity. Cohn sees homosexual identity as valueless and ineffective and he is punished accordingly, whereas Prior Walter’s acceptance and openness towards his identity “saves” him from such a fate, since in the final moments of the narrative he appears beside the play’s prophetic Angel, empowered by his noble battle against AIDS and the support of his community. Such gay moralist ideology, though effective in bringing issues regarding AIDS and homosexuality to the mainstream, also tends to promote a sanitised and idealist idea of gay sexuality that repudiates any idea of non-conformity to such identities or ideologies, and consequently fails to problematise or challenge its heterocentric audience in any way. The promise of controversy that the play originally envisaged is hence undermined by spectacle and sentiment, which not only fails to explore its issues in any affective way but also promotes a mythology of homosexuality that is consistently intertwined with disease and punishment.

However, some critics have found a distinctively queer value in Kushner’s epic, in that it not only explores the more traditional “minoritising” polemics of the gay community (as evidenced by its use of stereotypically camp cultural references, iconography and excessive spectacle), but also exhibits evidence of a more subtle interest in new configurations of sexuality. Even though AIDS is quite specifically (and stereotypically) a “gay disease” in the play, as a “Gay Fantasia on National Themes” it also uniquely locates such typically gay concerns and identities within the heart of mainstream culture and society. Therefore, Kushner’s representation of the ideal gay protagonist is placed at the heart of “normative” society, sharing common
concerns and objectives with that of its “straight” counterpart, rather than as an exclusive and marginalized “other”; in fact *Angels In America Part Two: Perestroika* even concludes with a utopian vision of the future of the “gay citizen”. The play hence foregrounds and re-locates gay issues to the trans-national and existentialist sphere, and consciously projects a political and theoretical consciousness of the radical potential of fluid configurations and harmonious identities. As David Savran states in a recent interview with Kushner:

> Like Queer Nation, “Angels in America” aims to subvert the distinction between the personal and the political, to refuse to be closeted, to undermine the category of the “normal”, and to question the fixedness and stability of every sexual identity.  

Similarly to queer theory, *Angels in America* explores notions of sexuality and identity, and as Roy Cohn’s explosive attitude towards sexual identity illustrates, subjectivity and the social construction of sexual identity are far from as essentially fixed as commonly perceived. Even the play’s metaphorical Angel is “Hermaphroditically equipped” with numerous transgender sexual organs. However, despite the play’s queer ideological impetus to “remake America”, there is a general lack of clarity and “ambivalence” towards the overall aim of the piece, and the specifics of any real strategy of subversion:

> We won’t die secret deaths anymore. The world only spins forward. We will be citizens. The time has come. Bye now. You are fabulous creatures, each and every one. And I bless you: *More Life*. The Great Work Begins.  

The commercial success of such a “classical epic” as *Angels in America*, however, did in one sense pave the way for a number of other specifically gay-themed plays to have

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126 Prior Walter’s concluding address from *Angels In America Part Two: Perestroika*, p.99.
access to the mainstream (despite some critical dissent), most notably Jonathan Harvey’s *Beautiful Thing* and Kevin Elyot’s *My Night With Reg*:

By 1994 the London press, provoked mainly by the cross-over success of Jonathan Harvey’s *Beautiful Thing* (1993), was complaining about an alleged flood of gay plays... the *Standard* ran on the next day an article by veteran critic Milton Shulman, titled so as to mock our distress over AIDS: ‘Stop the Plague of Pink Plays’. (Sinfield, 1999: 340)

As discussed in the introduction, Harvey’s *Beautiful Thing* did tend to perpetuate certain permissible and stereotypical codes for the representation of “controversial” material. Although the positivity of the play’s success and its endorsement of gay love is invaluable, as Sinfield continues “the success of *Beautiful Thing* does suggest that the mainstream is changing. Harvey’s play makes rather shrewdly the case for regarding seriously and sympathetically gay feelings among young people” (340). However, the narrative structure of the text and its characters does conform quite typically to the “problem play” genre, in which homosexuality is a “condition” to be sympathetic of, and a sociological “effect” of the break down of traditional hetero-patriarchal familial structures (both gay characters are the “product” of broken working-class families). Any political potential within the text is thus dissipated by a traditionally emotive and entertaining love story, which is detached from any sense of an anchored social reality that it originally attempted to construct by its “fantastical” resolution. The positivist value of this play is of course vital, but within the context of the mainstream its efficacy in challenging the conceptions of the audience in any affective way due to its final elevation to the realms of fantasy is undermined. The audience is made aware of the *illusion* of the text (similarly with *Angels in America*), which dissipates any impact it may have on a cognitive, political or de-centring level. The social condition of homosexuality is thus something to be sympathetically pitied,
celebrated in its utopic ephemerality, but not really viewed as any form of threat to the heteronormative harmony of the "real". The homosexual is, therefore, allowed its performance within the superficial realm of theatrical spectacle, but the safe boundary between spectacle and spectator is safely un-transgressed on any "dangerous" level.

The radical impotence of Harvey’s work is re-iterated by Sinfield, who recalls how:

The 1994 London dispute about the alleged flood of gay plays was triggered by the transfer to the West End of Beautiful Thing. Charles Spencer in the Daily Telegraph welcomed Harvey’s next play, Babies (1994), specifically because ‘his plays are accessible to anyone who happens to be sitting in the audience’. They were not like ‘some new drama’ that seem ‘intent on making any heterosexual in the audience feel uncomfortable, if not downright unwelcome’. That is the point: mainstreaming, by definition, ensures that, if anyone is to be uncomfortable, then it will not be heterosexuals. (346)

From an American perspective, however, John M. Clum sees the play as “a textbook example of how gay drama liberates and transforms the oppressive givens of realistic drama” (Clum, 2000: 227), and hopes that the play will “liberate young gay playwrights and eventually, make mainstream British drama gayer and livelier” (229). Interestingly, Clum argues that the “essential” differences between American and British gay drama are traceable to a specific difference in notions of “identity”; citing a statement by British journalist James Collard, Clum observes:

“in America ‘gay’ is something you are while here in Britain, while we have co-opted a lot of American gay culture, including the notion of gay identity, we also draw on an older, European idea of ‘gay’ as something you do”. American gay plays tend to focus on identity and politics while British plays present sexual practice as the primary bond joining gay men. (261)

Whereas plays such as Terence McNally’s Love! Valour! Compassion! (1995) focus upon affirmation and community in the face of adversity from AIDS and homophobia, British gay theatre, as perceived by Clum, tends to present a rather “staid” and cynical view which could be seen as a more “queer” analytical practice. Contrary to “queer drama”. Clum sees more value in “gay drama” since it is “less interested in social
critique or change than in staking a claim for gay people within a more compassionate, open society” (266), but also acknowledges the double standards of such an approach:

Gay (as opposed to queer) drama tends to be about the gay bourgeoisie and tends, as mainstream drama does, to accept middle-class ideals and aspirations even as it critiques them. (ibid)

Occupying a more contentious position within this gay/queer and American/British dichotomy is Kevin Elyot’s 1994 play *My Night With Reg*. Synonymous with this “uniquely British” type of negative and ineffective gay theatre that Clum proposes, Elyot’s play also presents a seemingly stereotypical view of the contemporary “gay lifestyle”, but it is hardly a view that mirrors McNally’s more positive representation. Elyot alternatively presents an embittered bunch of middle-aged “queens” who delight in verbally torturing and betraying one another, and rather than becoming “united” and ennobled in the face of AIDS and death, it becomes just another subject to be mocked:

Throughout our history, gay men have developed strong positive bonds that often are in sharp contrast with the bitchy, bickering stereotype of much homophobic drama and film. Nor are we the isolated figures of film and television - the queen without a life or society. That is the myth straight use to keep young gay men in the closet. One of the greatest and most unique virtues of *Love! Valour! Compassion!* is its depiction and celebration of the links of love, loyalty, and patronage that are forged in gay society.... ... AIDS is treated with unabashed sentiment in moments like Buzz’s kissing of James’s Kaposi’s sarcoma lesion, or as part of a more pervasive sense of mortality. In Elyot’s play, AIDS is a mordant joke. However, AIDS is not the only bleak element in the play. Like much British drama, Elyot’s play is one of misunderstandings and missed connections. (275-276)

The gay community of *My Night With Reg* is represented as conventionally incestuous, exclusive and superficial, thus problematically presenting common assumptions of the “tragedy” of such a detached and superficial culture. A culture that once again is overshadowed by the punitive moral spectre of disease and death:

GUY: It’s funny - glancing through the names in my address-book, I realised I didn’t like most of them and the ones I did like had
either split up or died...
... God, the two of you!

JOHN: A bit out of order, weren’t we?

GUY: It never seemed to stop.

JOHN: Should’ve graduated in shafting. I might have got a First, then.

GUY: And the rivalry! Whoever you had, Daniel had to have, and vice versa.

JOHN: Yeah.

GUY: Anyway ...

Although Elyot could be regarded as queerly critiquing the oppressions of the gay culture he represents, its potential queer efficacy is also undermined in that it fails to re-direct its critical anger back at the very audience it seeks to address. By the end of the play “everyone is either dead or in bad faith and very frightened; insofar as anyone begins to open up, it gets them nowhere” (Sinfield: 328), but in contrast to Clum’s negative reading of the play’s treatment of AIDS, Alan Sinfield sees Elyot’s approach as “a purposefully unAmerican, unheroic version of AIDS - wry and understated, furtive and thwarted, class-conscious, and virtually without uplift” (ibid). This difference between British and American responses to AIDS in gay drama is clearly due to the fact that, as Sinfield continues, “the experience here has been different”:

There is a different density in UK experience, chiefly because the initial transmission of HIV was slower and later... As with so much of the metropolitan imagery of gayness - blue-jeans and T-shirts, short hair and moustaches - we have been getting our stories about AIDS from the USA. We have adopted candlelit vigils, quilting, buddying and photo-obituaries, none of which has much historic resonance in Britain. We have imagined that the US experience has been our ours. We have not been writing AIDS drama because it has been done for us. Except that it hasn’t - the plays have not been about UK experience.

(328-29)

Whereas theatrical representations of the subject have been mediated primarily through British productions of American classics such as Larry Kramer’s *The Normal Heart* in 1985 (with the exception of Andy Kirby’s *Compromised Immunity* or Noel Greig’s *Plague of Innocence*), British theatre on the whole “has made a very poor response to the subject and challenge of AIDS”. And as Ian Lucas continues:

Mainstream theatre has largely ignored the “problem”, heterosexualised the context in order to make it more “universal” (commercial), or allowed us the honour of viewing imported (mainly American) plays.\(^{128}\)

It is highly questionable, therefore, whether Elyot’s *My Night With Reg* can be seen as a “successful” play on either a gay or queer level, due to its conformity to heteronormative assumption and hegemonic harmony. Despite its obvious association of homosexuality with AIDS, John M. Clum sees the play far more problematically as “a dark vision more because of the lovelessness than because of the shadow of AIDS” (Clum: 277). This “dark vision” is, in Clum’s view, a typical fascination that is common to “British audiences”:

*My Night With Reg* is a witty, well-written play, but what is Elyot’s point of view toward the piquant happenings he has created? Is this a satire, a social corrective, or simply a picture of London gay life as he has experienced it, a world where friendships aren’t really friendships and relationships aren’t particularly loving?

The play contains typical elements of gay drama, much camp behaviour and a dose of nudity as well as a complex set of diversions from realism. Irony abounds, but Elyot finds little to celebrate. Is celebration possible within this kind of post-Beckett drama of non-connection and meaningless action? (ibid)

Perhaps it is within this process of “non-connection” and “meaningless action” that a queer subversive strategy in the play can begin to be unravelled.

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\(^{128}\) Ian Lucas (1994), as cited by Sinfield, p.326.
II. Queering the Mainstream.

In the final stages of the pre-millennial nineties, a play emerged that can truly be seen to have epitomised an approach to mainstream theatre that envisaged the radical potency of queer textuality. Mark Ravenhill's controversial and vibrant play *Shopping and Fucking* (1997), quite effectively captured a distinctively queer impetus in theatre that had much in common with similar trends in queer cinema\textsuperscript{129}: ie. the celebration of youthful nihilism, sexual excess and deviant non-conformity. Yet, the importance of the play lies not only in its postmodern approach to narrativity and character, but more vitally in its impact upon the canon of mainstream theatre itself.

Ravenhill's text is quite distinctively a product of the deconstructive queer nineties, in that it deliberately sets out to destabilise notions of social conformity and sexual repression, and signals the beginnings of a more dissident approach to sexual representation and theatrical experimentation. Constructed out of a fragmented and episodic narrative structure, the play still maintains an overall surface impression of realism and, therefore, does not directly alienate its audience from the material (as with certain elements of the fringe and avant-garde). It is specifically within the tension evoked between the explicit content and detached characterisation that its queer affectiveness lies. *Shopping and Fucking*’s anarchic narrative explores the lives of three young adults who live meaningless lives in a meaningless world:

I have a tendency to define myself purely in terms of my relationship to others. I have no definition of myself you see. So I attach myself to others as a means of avoidance, of avoiding knowing the self... if I don’t stop myself I repeat the patterns. Get attached to people to these emotions then I’m back to where I started.130

Its central character, Mark, is a sexually ambivalent drug-addict with a fetish for under-age rent boys, who along with ex-lover Robbie and “fag-hag” flatmate Lulu, have co-constructed a queer world of co-dependence that revels in the transgressiveness of an under-culture upon which the heteronormative world both feeds and relies upon for its existence. It is a queer under-culture within which deceit replaces honesty and performative game-playing for passion, in a celebration of sexual excess and deviance. The characters are the dis-affected products of the phantasms of ideological “truth” and the failures of normative social structures, who are hence compelled to reconstruct a world of their own out of the taboos of society: sexual perversion, chemical stimulation and illicit transaction. Ravenhill’s play is an intertext of abstraction, cynicism and bleak humour, but is also a piece of theatre that is quite influenced by the nihilist structures and radical attitudes of new queer cinema, and the potency of queer forms of social deconstructionism. The spectator is drawn into an excessive underworld of forbidden values, and encouraged to identify with such moral excess and sexual intensity. Ideologically, the text “speaks” about the inherited legacy of social transaction by which our day to day existence is oppressively determined through what (and who) we buy and sell, and the types of values we place upon such corporeal commodities (what is used and abused, and what is given away). Ravenhill constructs an intricate narrative that is made up of the

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130 As stated by the character of Mark in Mark Ravenhill (1997), *Shopping and Fucking*, London: Methuen, pp.30-31.
title's main components ("shopping" and "fucking"), thereby reducing life to its capitalist and "carnal" elements. But his overall aim with the text is to shock the audience with its explicit enactment of taboo sexual acts, that both fetishise the spectator's voyeurism and the tension caused by such a resistant yet curious gaze. The spectacle of sexual taboo "climaxes" with the enactment of a homosexual "rape", in which a teenage rent boy (Gary) pleads with Mark to penetrate his anus with a knife in order to re-live and exorcise the traumatic memory and fetishistic desire of childhood paternal abuse. The play's characters embody a disturbing and damaged mentality that both attracts and repels in equal measure, thus problematising the relationship between the character/performer and the audience. The main criticisms levelled at the play have consistently focused upon this lack of "empathy" in the characterisation, and the aimless and negative dénouement of the "unhappy" ending with its refusal of narrative closure and the restoration of hegemonic equilibrium, in favour of a cyclical return to the stark aimlessness of the play's opening.

It is interesting that in his exhaustive and detailed discussion of the history of homosexuality in drama, *Still Acting Gay*, John M. Clum makes no attempt to discuss *Shopping and Fucking* or Ravenhill's work in general as playing any role in contemporary gay theatre. The play is merely mentioned as part of an appendix, wherein alongside the works of Ravenhill's female equivalent, Sarah Kane, is merely described as "over-rated", and a play within which "Meaning is not only lost; it is feared". The play thus manifests the same uniquely British "dark vision" that so disconcerts Clum and other critics who have dismissed *Shopping and Fucking* as

lacking in “honesty”, “compassion” or any form of sympathetic stimulus for the audience who “should” feel something towards such “tragic” characters. Yet Ravenhill’s disavowal of “meaning” could be seen as a deliberate intervention in the reductive empathetic processes of realist drama, in order to re-focus the spectator’s gaze more actively upon the queer aesthetics of transgression it presents. In contrast to Kushner’s *Angels in America*, the spectator is not consumed within epic spectacle and emotive identification that undermines any real political debate with the work. Ravenhill on the other hand encourages the spectator to consciously revel in “acts” of transgression, and the minimalist spectacle of problematic forms of sexuality, which are effectively accentuated by an intrusive and aggressively “in your face” soundtrack that both fragments and punctuates any form of linear narrative or emotive stimulus.

The characters attempt to disavow or refuse to conform to the dictates of society, but are preyed upon by its underlying perversity; they are, therefore, liberated because they are able to re-construct their lives to their own requirements, and are seemingly aware of the phantasmatic nature of heteronormative social values and their reliance upon deviance to support such structures. As Alan Sinfield argues:

> This play is challenging in different ways for different audiences, but for me it says something like: OK, so we didn’t make it to the utopian vision of Gay Liberation (there is plenty of talk of utopia in *Shopping and Fucking*, but mostly from the maudlin Brian and from Robbie when he takes the Ecstasy tablets he is supposed to be selling). We have settled for the cosiness of the 1-2-1 (as the contact adds have it: most of the plays about AIDS [...] offer that as the remaining affirmation)... Again, we are learning to acknowledge and accommodate a range of S/M and fetishistic practices that previously would have been thought embarrassing, if not disgusting. For Robbie, Lulu and Mark, more or less anything goes. But does that mean we can have any experience that we can afford to pay for? (1999: 353)

The value of *Shopping and Fucking* is evident in the fact that the play quite effectively accessed the (erratic) mood of the theatre audiences it “reached”. Rather than being consigned to the fringe (where it first emerged) or merely regarded as a minor
infiltration of the mainstream, the play went on to not only tour nationally but was also re-staged in a number of key mainstream theatre venues world-wide, from New York to Cape Town. It is a play that succeeded in bringing a much younger and diverse audience to the theatre, one that was far more receptive to such subversive thematic strategies and, therefore, the perfect audience to begin to explore a new queer theatre in the twenty-first century. As evidenced by the popularity of other nihilist works by such playwrights as Sarah Kane and Irvine Welsh, audiences in the nineties were seemingly now more open to the idea of breaking new ground or exploring new configurations of sexuality and social order, as Michlene Wandor concludes:

The overall vision is profoundly nihilistic - as far as men are concerned. Neither shopping nor fucking appear to bring anything desirable with them, and the focus appears to impute blame to inadequate earlier families, so that subsequent parenting becomes impossible. In the face of this, even homosexuality offers only a series of further exploitative and violent possibilities for men. Women do not exist here - except as implicitly absent mothers. (Wandor, 2001: 229)

The controversy that these more nihilistic and youth-centred queer visions in theatre have evoked is also quite effectively illustrated by the recent furore directed at Terence McNally’s Corpus Christi (1998). In contrast to his earlier positivist and ennobling gay drama Love! Valour! Compassion!, McNally explores the ultimate thematic and cultural taboo with Corpus Christi, by envisaging a distinctively queer re-interpretation of the story of Christ. The overwhelming effect of such a transgressive endeavour was illustrated by the numerous “fatwas” and bomb threats that were levelled at both the author and the company for daring to attempt such a blasphemy. Even though theologians, painters and writers have consistently speculated on both Christ and his disciples’ sexuality for centuries, to actually enact such a concept before an audience is seen by many of “heteronormative culture” (and
the religious right) to be the ultimate impossible perversion.

McNally as a playwright has consistently occupied rather a shifting and contentious role in recent gay and queer theatre. Whereas *Love! Valour! Compassion!* fits more easily into the canon of "affirmative" gay plays, other works such as *Lips Together, Teeth Apart* (1992), have demonstrated quite a distinctively queer approach. *Lips Together, Teeth Apart* is a play that quite queerly:

> turns the tables by making four heterosexuals the object of the homosexual gaze and locates those heterosexuals literally in the middle of a gay subculture with which they refuse to assimilate. The play avoids the usual problematising of gay characters by privileging a gay point of view toward heterosexual behaviour. (Clum, 2000: 244)

It is the heterosexual characters in the play, therefore, who perform traditional homosexual stereotypes: "artistic temperament, shame, lack of self-worth, disease, camp and petty bickering" (248), and John M. Clum also finds McNally's work problematic since, in a similar vein to Kevin Elyot, it is "disconnected from the real problems facing gay men" (279). It is the valorisation of youth culture and social anarchy in these works that Clum sees as problematic to the seemingly more "authentic" experiences of "his generation":

> Youth is sexy; age isn't. Youth is idealistic and optimistic; age is anxious and cynical. (280)

McNally's "arrested development" then as a playwright, to use Clum's phrase, is primarily a result of the fact that his "self-identification is all over the place" (281); and so it is identity that once again signals the mark of authenticity for gay theatre.
The main theatrical importance of *Corpus Christi*, however, (blasphemous content aside) is that it is quite specifically a queer “event”, a communal exploration of and intervention in the nature of “truth” and transgression between the audience and the performers. The negative media hype that surrounded the play was crucial in that it succeeded in projecting such debates into mainstream discourse, thereby disseminating queer strategies into the very heart of cultural debate. The audience is thus fully aware that they are actively engaging with and witnessing a moment of transgression, challenging social discourses on morality and tradition in favour of experiencing a deliberately queer “reading” of cultural mythology. The audience is hence openly adopting the role of deviant other in opposition to judgmental and oppressive socio-cultural dissent, irrespective of their own actual sexual or social status. This active process of consensual “othering” is consequently quite effective in exposing to the audience not only the experience of oppression, but the questionable nature of normative ideas of value and truth.

This “deviant” role is increased for the audience members as they enter the theatre, since they not only face the wrath of the protesters outside, but are also searched as they enter the auditorium, thus revealing the “danger” of being positioned in a deviant relation to the norm. As a perceivably “heterocentric” audience (as defined by mainstream homogenaic terms), their normative relation to the processes of mainstream theatre is thus totally re-configured, in that they are made aware of their normatively unquestioning relation to mainstream theatre discourse; but more importantly, the social efficacy of usurping such traditions and the value of transgression is overwhelmingly enforced. Although a definition of the audience as
"heterocentric" is problematic in that it also homogenises a concept of "the audience" that is impossible to determine, it is a referent to a culturally produced protocol of "theatre-going" that despite its diversity on a number of gender, sexual and ethnographic levels, is consistently immersed within theatre discourses that seek to delimit what mainstream theatre practice and reception should entail. Theatre discourses are perpetuated that, therefore, seek to construct and address a type of audience wherein "difference" is unmarked in favour of a commonality of cultural expectation, and an assumed prerequisite of spectatorial passivity. However, the volatility of the experience of being a spectator to *Corpus Christi* could be seen to shatter such homogeneity, since differences are immediately brought to the surface and play a vital role in the audience's awareness of one another, and the play that they are witnessing.

The transgression of spatial boundaries is quite important to this type of radicalised queer theatre, as illustrated upon the audience's entry into the auditorium/theatre space. In a rather Brechtian fashion, there is at first no real demarcation between audience space and performance space and, therefore, conventional demarcations between the "real" space of the audience and the fantasy space of the performance are erased. The actors are dressed in everyday clothes, indiscernible from the audience members, which thus implies a sense of commonality and community in the act of transgression about to take place:

> The house lights are still up as the ACTORS begin to drift on stage. They are wearing street clothes. They may either talk among themselves, greet people in the audience, or quietly prepare for the performance. Some of them will check the props tables, which are visible stage right and left. The mood is informal, lightly bantering, loving even. (McNally, 1998: 1)
Although this approach to theatre is hardly revolutionary, and owes much to the work of Brecht and the political theatre of the fringe, it is the specific social context and political environment within which such an approach to theatre takes place that gives *Corpus Christi* its particular effect. In fact, such a “de-political” and conventional use of “political theatre” techniques is infused with a renewed efficacy and importance here, since it defiantly takes place despite an external environment of threat and denunciation.

Contrary to the usual aesthetic spectacle expected of mainstream theatre, the performance space is minimalist to the extreme, thus placing specific focus upon the queer re-interpretation of the narrative that is articulated. It is this re-interpretation that is crucial to the event, and not the typical illusory trappings of a passive realist theatricality. The performers make no attempt to “embody” their characters, make no claims to authoritative truth, but merely “spin a bottle” in order to decide which one of them will introduce this “rebirth” to the audience: which one of them will be the first to transgress. As the characters/performers are introduced, they are “baptized” and blessed for their “divinity as a human being” which is celebrated in all its diversity. Even though Christ/Joshua and his disciples are all represented as “gay”, McNally goes to great lengths to construct characters that are “against type”. The fluid way in which the performers move in and out of character thus intervenes in any real possibility of character-identification or realism. A multiplicity of identity is, therefore, projected that conveys a number of performative significations, but more directly foregrounds the act of performance itself as a process, and as a consciously
constructed role that is thus transitory and open to re-interpretation and inhabitation by other bodies. The “relevance” of this queer re-interpretation of the story of Christ is hence unfixed, re-configured and re-contextualised. The inscription of homosexuality within such a hommosocial erotic structure is parodic and inevitable, and the “campness” of such a fusion of the biblical context with the contemporary gay male’s acerbic wit both ironic and poignant. This juxtaposition of gay culture and identity with religious iconography thus attempts to problematise the transience of epistemological structures of “truth” and “value”, with the tenuous alignment of an iconic narrative with the seemingly “real” narratives of contemporary life. The text is, therefore, merely reveling in the deviance of such an act of “queering”, and not necessarily imbuing the work with any real significance.

The lack of specificity in McNally’s play is supported by critical responses to Corpus Christi (such as Clum’s) that whilst celebrating the production’s defiance in the face of extremist condemnation, attacked its overwhelming lack of “relevance” to the “gay community” it was seemingly addressing. Since Joshua (like Christ) is finally betrayed by Judas and crucified in a rather detached manner, critics have condemned the play’s dénouement for “missing an opportunity” to make his death relevant to gay men today (ie. by stereotypically being beaten to death by homophobes or to die of AIDS). By having Pilate condemn this “queer” Jesus to death, instead of a right-wing politician, the political ideology is subsequently regarded as dissolved and lacking in real political efficacy. What these critics fail to realise is that by refusing to conform to an accepted gay politics or social relevance, in favour of exposing how readily discourses can be deconstructed and re-interpreted (and the social controversy such a
process invokes) is where its value as a radically queer piece of theatre lies. It is in the very act of transgression from within the mainstream of theatre and cultural discourse that a queer vision can begin to be articulated. McNally does not set out to make a piece of “gay theatre”, but more importantly begins to envisage a type of theatre wherein the boundaries between epistemology, representation and performance can begin to submerge:

**The Actor Playing John:** Our Play is over but the end is still to come. All these things you have seen and heard are the first birth pangs of the new age...

**The Actor Playing Thaddeus:** Maybe other people have told His story better. Other actors. This was our way.

**The Actor Playing Simon:** If we have offended, so be it. (80-81)

During a time when theatre as a practice is generally regarded to have lost its impact in any real political or ontological way, the renewed cultural potency of plays such as *Shopping and Fucking* and *Corpus Christi* have revealed the inherent value of applying queer theatrical strategies to the mainstream. The achievements of such artists as McNally and Ravenhill (though not exclusively of course) have revealed the over-riding need for a queer approach to performance, and the innovation it envisages for theatre practice in the new queer millennium:

The crucial issue now is not the contested place of gay men in our society, but what “gay” will mean in the twenty-first century, whether the term has outlived its historical moment, and how same-sex desire fits into a larger constellation of issues. For those of us invested in theatre, the issue is also what theatre will mean for gay men. We’re out onstage and off. Now what? (Clum, 2000: 317)
Chapter Five:

Queer in(g) the Audience?

Although this thesis has up until now focused upon the complex nature of locating a distinctively queer approach to theatre and performance, and the political efficacy of actively rearticulating theatrical practices and codes from within a queer matrix, the one vital ingredient to such a process is, of course, the audience/spectator. A “queer vision” may be possible from the perspective of the artist or performer, or even the revisionist queer theorist, yet to attempt to gauge the role of the spectator within such a transgressive signifying process is a far more difficult objective to achieve.

The past few decades have seen a substantial rise in research that is centred upon the need to develop a quite sophisticated “theory of audiences”. Anti-theatre practitioners such as Antonin Artaud, Bertolt Brecht and their later disciples, all strived to construct works that relied quite heavily upon the vital significance of the spectator in relation to the theatre text. As discussed in Chapter One, the emergence of avant-garde and experimental approaches to theatre and performance strived to demystify and expose the illusionistic and epistemological apparatus of (an apparently rigid) mainstream theatre. This transgression of conventional theatrical conventions and spatial demarcations achieved, as Edward Braun argues “an additional advantage ... [in that] ... this implied a polemic against the bourgeois theatre of escapism and illusion” (Braun, 1977:39), which attempted a direct communion between audience, performer and text. This rejection of naturalist theatre traditions was the site at which

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the focus shifted quite remarkably to the dominance of the audience over the text.

And so, performance texts that developed from within this context reflected the growing obsession within the field for an “activated” and productive relationship with their audience. Despite the fact that marginalised communities came to realise the political efficacy of such an approach to theatre (mainly through agit-prop theatre), any real form of theoretical analysis of the text-audience dynamic was fairly minimal until recently. The emergence of “performance theory” (re. Schechner), which devalued traditional text-based analysis in favour of a more focused assessment of the ephemeral “event” of performance itself, therefore, re-directed critical emphasis away from traditional values of the “author” and the “word”, to more complex notions of the “subject” and the “gaze”. However, these early concepts of “the audience” and the possible implications of radical forms of theatre that attempted to subvert dominant ideologies in a collaborative act of transgression, tended to project a rather homogenised concept of what an audience is, as opposed to of who the audience is diversely made up.

Performance theory was, in effect, a direct response to drama criticism that had consistently privileged the material written text over the ephemeral performance. Criticism that perpetually denigrated the value of non-normative theatre practices that nihilistically sought to alienate its audiences, and hence undermine the role of theatre as a central cultural medium. Performance theory has thus developed from a distinctively non-literary perspective, rejecting as it did the limited theoretical paradigms of conventional dramatic criticism, in favour of a more inter-disciplinary approach. A new theoretical paradigm was developed that began to re-evaluate the
place of the audience as an active contributor to, and creator of, the theatrical event. The audience, therefore, becomes an active participant, and the conventional boundaries between performer and spectator subsequently begin to erase. Within such an approach, traditional spatial demarcations between subjects, artists and receivers are not so rigidly perceivable, and more fluid and reciprocal configurations are ideally made possible. This new sociological, psychological and anthropological approach to performance and theory has established a paradigm within which the role of the audience is vital in consolidating and contextualising the overall perception of the performance text/event. In conjunction with developments in Semiology, critical theorists have succeeded in truly expanding our concept of theatre in all its multifaceted complexity. The diversity of semiotic readings of theatre and performance have, therefore, illustrated the impossibility of constructing specific analytical models within which a complete analysis of a performance is attainable:

"To analyse the codes and signifying systems of a performance is not to rediscover what the author and director had previously established secretly, once and for all. It is to organize the performance and the text as a possible circuit of meaning whose productivity and coherence are more or less great according to the theatre event in question, but also according to the analyst. (Pavis, 1982:195)"

However, these theatre semioticians, though vital in exploring the plurality of the performance text, still tended to project a concept of the audience’s role within such a process as rather minimal and homogenous in nature. By shifting the focus onto the audience as a dominant cognitive role in the process, analytical understandings of theatre and creativity are subsequently challenged, forcing theorists to re-evaluate their own perceptions and values in relation to the processes of analysis.

133 See Mukarovsky (1941), Elam (1980), Pavis (1982).
Yet, how is such an intangible approach to theatre evaluated? And why should one critical response to a performance be privileged over another?

In performance, if the audience is the dominant source of meaning in relation to the text, how can such meaning be evaluated in any real qualitative sense, since each audience is consisted of a multiplicity of spectator-subjects? An early strategy was to attempt to homogenise this concept of “the audience”, with its apparently shared system of semiotic engagement that is inherently produced and fixed due to their cognitive place in culture and society. However, more recent studies of the audience (in particular the feminist analyses of Jill Dolan, 1988) have effectively re-articulated the “varied responses of spectators mixed across ideologies of gender, sexuality, race and class” (121), thus deconstructing such earlier notions of “the audience” that really perpetuate a white, heterosexual and middle class male subjectivity. These feminist critiques not only reveal the oppressiveness of such critical assumptions, but also seek to reinscribe the value of performance texts that “break the heterosexual contract that informs representation and the enculturation of gender” (Dolan: 11), by re-contextualising the audience as heterogeneous and receptively fluid. The rather self-reflexive and contemplative forms of theatre that have evolved in the last thirty years (in particular Richard Schechner’s early work with The Performance Group) re-centred the role of the audience within such symbiotic communication, but still tended to overlook the social construction of the audience itself. As an art form, performance may have achieved some form of liberation from the “tyranny” of the written text and the “emancipation of the elements of the theatrical performance” (Dort, 1982: 63), but an understanding of the problematic involvement of the audience in conjunction
with such a liberation was still fairly limited by the assumptions of subjectivity.

I. Theorising the Spectator

As discussed in Chapter One, the theories of Antonin Artaud (as mediated by Martin Esslin and practised by Peter Brook) had an immeasurable influence upon the development of new experimental and queer approaches to theatre and performance practice. And yet, it was the work of Bertolt Brecht that had quite a significant influence upon the development of studies of the audience/text relationship. Like Artaud, Brecht’s influence is locateable in a number of contemporary theories from postmodernism to feminism, and in other audience-centred art forms such as Cinema. His foregrounding of the importance of the audience has had quite a vital effect in practices that seek to activate the role of the spectator within the text. This activated reciprocity between audience and theatre not only opens each performance text to multiple and transitory forms of signification, but also evokes a more conscious awareness within the audience of their role in such an inter-dependent practice and their potential for envisaging new meanings. As Phillip B. Zarrilli argues:

The invitation to collaborate varies, of course, from the implicit to the explicit, and from the token to the literal; the guiding characteristic is that the stages uses some form of the “you” address in its relation to the audience. One could think of this as a “we” voice in the sense that the audience joins the actors in the stage enterprise, but I prefer to retain the strict sense of “you” as the spoken to in the act of speech.

(Zarrilli, 1995: 29)

Brecht’s vision of an empowered theatre with the ability to activate social and political change, and his attempts to break the conventions of the spectator/performance exchange, has had an immeasurable effect upon theatre practice in the twentieth century and theories of reception. His epic theatre sought to truly
revolutionise the potential of theatre to transform the social processes of production and reception and hence formulate a role for theatre that transcended its traditional cultural use. A role that proposed to reveal how (particularly mainstream) theatre predominantly reflects specific ideologies, by foregrounding how it could also be deployed as a politically subversive stimulant:

Brecht’s theory and practice raise the issue of the ideological status of theatre and of the political undertaking, either implicit or explicit, of an audience (Bennett, 1990: 23)

The audience is, therefore, placed at the critical core of Brecht’s work, whereas more traditional forms of realist theatre are exposed as re-iterators of social structures to which the audience (in its passive demarcated space) are powerless in any way to counteract. Naturalist representations of (heteronormative) reality are thus oppressive, since the audience is uncritically drawn into psycho-social identification and seemingly blindered to the larger implications of socio-cultural hegemony that mask the underlying ideologies and codes of cultural production and reception.

Brecht (in a queer sense) sought to expose the “covert relationship” between theatre and the dominant ideology that supported it, and quite radically attempted to envisage an oppositional practice and a search for a new (queer?) audience. Yet Brecht’s ideas were consistently concerned with process rather than attempting to formulate a fixed type of theory, since he felt that a fixed (pre-queer) theoretical system “could not continue to make contact with its audience in the consistently variable conditions of social reality” (Bennett: 25). However, the activated audience in Brecht’s ideal “model” tended to be made up of the oppressed (authentic and heteronormative) working classes, who would be more sensitive to such an approach to theatre, unlike
the (privileged and perverse) bourgeois elite. In addition to Brecht's work on theatre, the works of other theatre visionaries such as Meyerhold and Piscator were of equal importance to this new era of theatrical innovation. In parallel with Brecht, they also sought to demystify theatre as a practice and make accessible a type of new theatre that would address the audience in a far more politically direct manner. However, there was also a tendency at this time to be overly anticipatory and prescriptive of the "type" of audience that was being addressed, and so a pre-formulated sense of audience "reaction" to the work was already inscribed within the structure of the text. This anticipated response, coupled with the deployment of the performer to manipulate and prompt audience reaction, produced an overall effect in such work that was far from liberating. This manipulation of the audience merely reified the authority of the text and the author-director over a rather controlled and intellectually de-valued spectator. These practices that attempted to correlate the cultural codes of the text with the manipulated response of the audience, are also traceable within more recent practices of a pre-queer "gay" theatre. A theatre practice wherein political specificity and the coded correlation between spectator and cultural text is crucial to the evocation and manipulation of an activated response from a "homogenously" positioned audience. The emotional involvement that was required by Meyerhold and Piscator, however, was rejected by Brecht who placed value upon intellectual contemplation over the unpredictable chaos of emotion, ie. *Verfremdungseffekt*. 

In a similar vein to Artaud's concept of "cruelty", Brecht's idea of the "alienation-effect" was to foreground for the spectator how the codes and institutions that have been naturalised by social discourse, were merely discursive and historical effects and
were hence changeable. By exposing the theatrical processes and alienating the spectator from passivity (in favour of a communicative consciousness that questions those social structures and discourses that are normatively accepted and universalised), an interactivity is initiated by which the spectator can start to be *queered*.

Though Brecht's work is hardly the definitive model for such a transgressive approach to the spectator/text, it invokes a number of starting points to begin to evaluate the processes of production and reception, and the potential of alternative and deviant practices. Brecht's theatre repudiated the idea of a fixed process of perception, but rather identified it as a process which is "bound by the conventions and codes that form the discourse of a particular ideology" (Bennett: 32); an ideology that may not necessarily connect with that of the audience, but it is the interaction between the two that "constitute performance". The illusive spectacle that conventionally masks ideology is thus dissipated by an objective and rejuvenated analytical gaze, that reveals the contingency of social and cultural discourses and the ideological interpellation of the audience:

... Brecht's work makes manifest the productive role of theatre audiences and positions that role ideologically. Any research in reception then must also look to production and deal with issues which are cultural as well as individual. (Bennett: 35)

The value of Brechtian theories of the spectator and the text to the formulation of queer performance and queer protocols of reading are quite evident despite the fact that his approach tended to overlook the fragmented diversity of the audiences he addressed. However, this diversity in reading practice was later analysed by a number of theoretical developments under such umbrella terms as "Reader-Response
Theory”\textsuperscript{134} or “Post-structuralism”,\textsuperscript{135} the former with its focus upon the role of the “reader” in constructing meaning in the text, and the latter with the destabilisation of subjectivity and a celebration of multiplicity. All of these critical paradigms have provided the foundations upon which current theories of queer intervention and reading have evolved. The legitimacy of queer theory as a uniquely contemporary framework is thus questionable given such a proliferation of historically “queer” instances.

\textbf{II. Queering the Spectator}

The main problem with much of pre-nineties research on spectatorship and its relation to the text has been the complex nature of grasping exactly “who” or “what” the spectator is, and how “reader response” is far from definitive or unquestionable. This sociological approach to epistemology tended to overlook the way in which processes of meaning were “hierarchised” in every aspect of “social reality”. Theatre and performance texts as “cultural objects” are perceived and produced by collective structural codes, and so the “meaning” or code of a text is only “manifest” within the social context of its reception, and seemingly not on some form of individual or subjective level. However, the emergence of feminist and later queer theoretical perspectives effectively illustrated the sociological and ideological processes involved in the subjective ways in which texts are “chosen” to be evaluated. These theoretical perspectives and practices have sought to expose how the tension and conflict invoked


\textsuperscript{135} See Barthes (1973), Derrida (1976), Habermas (1979), Belsey (1980), and Norris (1982).
between the reader and the text/author, can effectively expose its underlying ideology and contingency. By rejecting the “preferred reading” and the hierarchy of the text over the reader, the deviant viewpoint could hence begin to emerge.

This practice of “reading against the grain” of ideology and meaning has thus become a vital tool in the articulation of queer discursive strategies: the exposition of deviant subtexts or the deliberate activation of a “perverse” interpretation. A political strategy that is not only a way of re-interpreting the world, but more importantly seeks to change it. Queer re-readings of canonical texts (from literature and painting to cinema) should not, however, be the only way of projecting deviant discourses into the mainstream, since these discourses still tend to remain restricted to the margins (outside) of queer academia, and fail to truly infiltrate the hetero-patriarchal (inside) mainstream wherein they could attain their full subversive potential. Queer theatre practices on the other hand, due to their collective and confrontational nature, are the perfect site for exploring the relationship between an embodied “queer text” and the reading protocols of the spectator. In contrast to the notion of a “constituency” audience that is so prevalent to specifically gay and lesbian theatre, queer performance has as its ideal object the heterocentric mainstream in all its inconsistency. By repudiating the idea of subjectivity as a fixed and uniform ontology in favour of a plural notion of a fragmented and fluid identity, queer textuality envisages the stimulation of a pleasurable approach to reading that embodies Barthesian subversive jouissance to the extreme. The multiplicity of codes available to the reader in the construction of meaning is for Barthes the ultimate in (queer) bliss:

Text of pleasure: the text that contents, fills, grants euphoria; the text that comes from culture and does not
break with it, is linked to a “comfortable” practice of reading. Text of bliss: the text that imposes a state of loss, the text that discomfits (perhaps to the point of a certain boredom), unsettles the reader’s historical, cultural, psychological assumptions, the consistency of his tastes, values, memories, brings to a crisis his relation with language.

(Barthes, 1975: 14)

Such a description of the blissful queer text echoes Artaud’s desire for a theatre that abolished tradition in favour of physical immediacy and cathartic subversion. This pleasurable text, therefore, projects a concept of “cruel” theatre that aims at transcending the safe communality of the audience as a collective, in favour of a direct contact with the individual spectator. Yet, Barthes’s writings on theatre also find much inspiration in the work of Brecht: “we have not yet established adequate modes of questioning for the definition of different theatre audiences” (27), since he encouraged audiences to re-envisage the “commonplaces of everyday life”.

The emergence of alternate and oppositional theoretical positions have been vital in initiating a re-development of theatre and performance analysis in contemporary culture. Recent critical practices that have drawn from the works of Derrida, Lacan and Foucault have resulted in the development of radically diverse and deviant practices of reading performance, all of which have led to a focus upon the importance of the audience’s role in the structure of meaning and transgression (in conjunction with the deviant practices of the artist). “Reading against the grain” is an effective method for re-reading canonized texts, thereby exposing their universalistic and hetero-patriarchal assumptions. This process of reading thus takes place at the “intersection” of positions that are generated by the text and the spectator’s social/cultural identity. However, when this notion of identity is counter to that assumed by the textual address, a multiplicity of inconsistencies and conflicting
discourses are queerly invoked. The resulting tension is both effective for a queer reading of a canonic text by a “queer reader”, and alternatively to illicit a tension in a “heterocentric reader” when faced with reading a queer text.

The notion of pleasure in spectatorship, then, is derived from the activity of the interpretation of a multiplicity of both “transparent” and “opaque” signs in performance, which is seemingly heightened by the very immediacy of that exchange in relation to the ephemerality of the performative event. Unlike more conventional theatre practices, experimental performance’s tendency to repudiate ideas of narrative and representation also problematise conventional reading practices, in order to open the spectator to the de-centring potency of exploring “the margins of theatre” (Feral, 1982: 179). The discourses surrounding the nature of pleasure, desire and confrontation in performance, however, owe much to the work of recent feminist film theorists such as Laura Mulvey and Teresa De Lauretis. Mulvey’s seminal work “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema” (1975) is widely (though not unproblematically) credited with evoking a whole new approach to the analysis of audience reception and the disruption of more homogenous practices in classic narrative cinema:

Mulvey writes that by avoiding narrative forms that invite male identification and female passivity, male visual pleasure can be circumvented. The voyeuristic/scopophilic gaze can be broken down and critical distance can be imposed to break the “sleeping,” fantasy state of the passive spectator. Just as Brecht argued that theatrical pleasure mystifies and perpetuates a hierarchy social class, Mulvey argues that visual pleasure reifies relations of gender and sexuality. (Dolan, 1991: 49)

And yet, it is also vitally important to differentiate between the rather fixed nature of film as a medium, in opposition to the possible unpredictability of a live performance
that is vulnerable to active intervention, and the “presence” of the spectator/performer.
Unlike performance, film textuality and the signifying systems of the “mise-en-scene” are also framed and mediated by the guiding “eye” of the camera and authorial intent, which is a problematic limitation that is not so attainable in live performance. That aside, Mulvey’s thesis is influential in exploring the notion of the spectator’s “unconscious structures of viewing” which, as she argues, are formed by a dominant order of representation, within which desire and sexual significance are encoded by a specifically hetero-patriarchal order:

... the position of the spectators in the cinema is blatantly one of repression of their exhibitionism and projection of the repressed desire on to the performer. (Mulvey, 1975: 9)

For Mulvey, cinematic pleasure is consistently produced through an active/passive heterocentric matrix that privileges a phallic hetero-masculinity over a passively fetishised feminity (and a repudiated marginality of deviance). Feminist film theorists, however, have hence counteracted the received definitions of the hetero-patriarchal gaze by emphasising the value of transgressive readings “against the grain” and re-configurations of a more fluid textual pleasure. “Reading against the grain” is the ideal strategy for marginalised spectatorship, since it is a powerful strategy for re-reading heteronormative codes and the tenuousness of their construction. The tension caused by spectators who fall outside of the textual address (ie. specifically aimed at the white, heterosexual, middle-class and male) thus reveals the oppressive operations of power inherent within such an address. Post-Mulveyan film theorists have subsequently called for a counter-cinema, which would directly challenge discursive assumptions and dislocate the control of such a dominant mode of film practice.

Theorists that have found much inspiration in this counter approach to film practice in
Brechtian theatre, especially strategies of alienation, disruptive narratives and an intervention in character identification and performativity.

However, one of the leading theorists in the field, and ironically the very person to first articulate the need for a specifically queer theory, Teresa de Lauretis (as discussed in the introduction), has subsequently illustrated that a counter-practice or a deconstructive approach to such texts does not really "displace" the hegemonic structures of mainstream cinema (or theatre). For de Lauretis, the exposition of these "oppressive apparatus" is not enough, and she calls for the development of a new (queer) practice that functions outside of epistemological paradigms, thereby denying discursive closure and the restoration of hegemonic harmony that is so typical of the mainstream. The development of these alternate texts that explore the "radically other forms of pleasure" may relate to Barthes's concept of (queer) jouissance, but more importantly they also project a far more open and fluid form of spectatorial address, which is by far the most productive direction to take in contemporary practice. Conventional spectatorial methods that seemingly privilege the dominance of the spectator in a reading of the text, and how the text itself fulfils the desire of the gaze and the power hierarchies of heteronormativity, would hence be problematised within such a re-contextualisation. The fluid nature of identity and the "anxiety" evoked by the spectacle of conflicting and perverse desires and opaque signification, would ideally deconstruct the prescribed spectatorial gaze, in favour of a communal questioning of the text amongst the audience. The "event" of cinema or theatre would thus be foregrounded, and its relation to subjective positions of power exposed amongst a fragmented community of voyeurs. However, it is live performance as a
cultural tool that has the real potential to take this transgression that step further and transcend the "safe space" of the auditorium. No matter how important the transgressive encoding of the production/reception exchange, it is within the corporeal and ephemeral act of performance itself that a queer form of synthesis can be imagined. The spectator would approach the text with an inscribed "horizon of expectations" that are already pre-shaped by the "interpretive community" of which they are already constituted, and this "horizon" would thus ideally frame the protocol of reception and signification by which the text is processed and fixed. However, by problematising this pre-shaped protocol of perception, not only within the text itself but also the wider social discourses that surround such deviant textuality (as with McNally' *Corpus Christi* discussed in Chapter Four) and the spectator's discursive interaction with other spectators, a deconstructed intertextual debate is invoked that begins to dissipate such a prescriptive methodology in favour of a more open and contemplative response. The code systems of theatre are thus re-invigorated with a new horizon of receptive potential. A performance may activate a diversity of readings, but it is the audience itself which truly ascribes relevance or meaning to its resulting semiosis. It is, therefore, within this post-performance discourse between or within spectators that the affects of a queer strategy of performance could possibly (or impossibly) begin to be gauged.

Tim Miller's *My Queer Body* for example (as discussed in Chapter Three), can be regarded as a failure in embodying the queer intervention it proposed, since he failed to truly problematise the spectatorial gaze he was addressing. As a text that was

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136 See Bennett, p.149.
constructed within and addressed to a "constituency" audience or interpretive community, Miller failed to radically intervene in the privileged gaze of the gay male audience to which his body was offered and affirmed. As a celebration of gay masculine sexuality and political affirmation his text succeeded in re-iterating and unquestioning the assumptions and cultural ideologies of the spectators, rather than subverting their perceptions of the "queer body" or enabling a critical engagement with their constructed identities, desires and community. His "queer" body may have disconcerted the gaze of a heterocentric audience, but gay male spectatorial engagement failed to be confronted. The spectatorial context is thus vital to the activation and definition of transgression, and should Miller's body-text be placed within the interpretive community of the heterocentric mainstream the receptive effects of such a deviant spectacle and corporeal presence could radically begin to be envisaged. The deviant celebration and spectatorial contact with his naked perverse flesh would, therefore, begin to have the desired effect that his performance text so utopically attempts. Queer performance is thus effective when it transgresses all performance contexts and spectatorial boundaries, engaging with all "types" of theatre and performance. Since the aim of such work is to destabilise and subvert the exchange between audiences and texts, its impetus is to not only invade the mainstream as a more obvious target to subvert, but more importantly to undermine the rigid defences of marginalized spectators themselves; thus revealing the constructedness of their own socio-cultural marginality. The gay and lesbian spectator is hence as potent a subject for deconstruction as the seemingly oppressive heterosexual.
Teresa de Lauretis’s vision of an alternative performance practice that functions “outside” of culture is a rather utopically queer notion, in that it proposes an almost nihilistic rejection of “the mainstream” and the structures it perpetuates. Yet as Jill Dolan points out in her analysis of the “feminist spectator”, the central problem is “Where do you actually stand when you step outside of representation, and who stands with you?” (1988: 119) Her solution to this dilemma once more returns to the lesbian-feminism that is so inherent within queer discourse, since “the lesbian subject” offers the closest view of an outside perspective and is the most radical location from which to subvert representation:

A lesbian on the street representing a subversion of gender ideology through a butch or femme role is in some ways the perfect illustration of the Brechtian “not...but”, foregrounding for her unwitting spectators the in-betweens of nonpolarized gender identity.

(Dolan: 14)

Unsurprisingly, Dolan’s concern with re-activating audience reception once again refers back to Brechtian practices, and how they may inform issues surrounding gender and performance. Brecht’s concept of the Verfremdungseffekt is particularly appropriate as a means by which to “trouble” gender relations: “Rather than being seduced by the narrative that offers a comfortable gender position, the spectator is asked to pay critical attention to the gender ideology the representational process historically produces and the oppressive social relations it legitimises” (ibid).

“Critical attention” that is so crucial to Doran George’s re-presentation of opaque gender identity for example, as discussed earlier. By focusing spectatorial gaze specifically upon the inconsistent significations of his body in performance as the central locus of meaning in the space, the audience is thus immediately encouraged to engage with
their prescribed interpretive assumptions and the coded conventions of a gendered body in performance.

The role of the spectator in the theatrical event is undeniably complex and elusive. Of all of the elements of the production process, both pre and post performance, the spectator emerges as the key driving force behind its efficacy as a radical moment. Communicative systems, horizons of reception and codes of re-signification all activate a decoding process that if re-deployed will not only begin to re-configure receptive conventions and artistic methodologies, but more importantly the ability to expand and subvert the boundaries of culture itself. The scale and diversity of “non-normative” approaches to theatre and performance practice that function outside of the mainstream, is evidence enough of the growing desire to re-articulate and transgress the regressive boundaries of theatre and performance as an art form. The value of these alternative and fragmented practices is difficult to assess, but they are vital because they take forms of theatre out into communities who have little in common with the visions of the mainstream, thereby reaching new spectators with new protocols of reading that are not so readily infused with ideological prescription. However, the marginalisation of such practice is, as discussed in Chapter Four, reductive in that as an “outside discourse” its transgressive potential is de-politicised since it is denied access to the very spectators and institutions wherein it could achieve the most effect. The problematic project of queer performance in the new millennium has only just begun, and as Alan Sinfield concludes:

None of these strategies emerges as the magical answer. The task is not to specify the one, true strategy, but to be flexible and cunning - as dominant ideologies are. (1999: 339)
Conclusion

Queer Trouble?

Although queer can be described as a logical development in twentieth-century gay and lesbian politics and scholarship, its progress has not been uncontentious. As the point of convergence for a potentially infinite number of non-normative subject positions, queer is markedly unlike those traditional political movements which ground themselves in a fixed and necessarily exclusionist identity. In stretching the boundaries of identity categories, and in seeming to disregard the distinctions between various forms of marginalised sexual identification, queer has provoked exuberance in some quarters, but anxiety and outrage in others. (Jagose, 1996: 101)

The sceptical and rather suspicious way in which queer critical frameworks view identity categories has been criticised by many of its opponents as a highly “apolitical or even reactionary form of intellectualising” (ibid). In fact, a number of anti-queer theorists have accused such a destabilising process as inherently “homophobic”, since it deliberately disavows the “common sense” nature of such a seemingly “trans-historical” lesbian and gay identity. Yet, what these criticisms of queer theory consistently ignore is the “ideological dimension” which, as Lee Edelman argues, “reinforces the hypostatization [reification] of the ‘natural’ upon which homophobia relies and thus partakes of an ideological labour complicit with heterosexual supremacy” (1994: xviii). For what this convergence of “common sense” and “knowledge” continually tends to reify is the unacknowledged and legitimate “operation of unexamined ideological structures” (Jagose: 103).

The inevitable contentiousness that has surrounded queer theory over recent years has mainly focused upon its efficacy as a political strategy. A “coherent and unified identity” has been a crucial pre-requisite for the consolidation of lesbian and gay
politics since the seventies. However, as Judith Butler contends, “the deconstruction of identity is not the deconstruction of politics; rather, it establishes as political the very terms through which identity is articulated” (1990: 148). It is the deployment of the term “queer” itself that has evoked the most dissent, since “the simplest objection to queer comes from those one might expect to be among its constituents, and yet are neither interpellated by the term nor persuaded that the new category describes or represents them” (Jagose: 103). Rather than embrace the term for its potential political re-deployment, a number of objectors, often seen as endemic of the “gay generation gap” (see Reed, 1993), are unable to accept such a historically pejorative term as a positive means of identification.

Advocates of this queer reclamation of previously oppressive forms of terminology perceive such an act as a powerful form of cultural re-appropriation, since it is “strategically useful in removing the word from that homophobic context in which it formerly flourished” (Jagose: 104), whereas, in contrast to such optimism, its opponents argue that such a utopian endeavour “misrecognises” the fact that such a change in nomenclature and semantics fails to really “transform cultural assumptions and knowledges” (ibid). If such a re-signification were truly attainable then there would inevitably be an endless supply of “neologisms” to take its place:

Whatever social transformations may be secured by proliferating queer as a positive term of self-description, they will be neither absolute nor uncontestable. Even though queer has been appropriated by a new generation, which recognises itself in that term without equivocation, homophobia is not going to be rendered speechless or lack an intelligible vocabulary with which to make itself understood. (Jagose: 104-105)

This counter-productive reading of “queer” that perpetuates associations with “perversion” and “illegitimacy” envisages that such a strategy is in danger of
alienating itself from the very community that it seeks to radicalise. And the “trendiness” that has come to be associated with such a paradigm that foregrounds style over substance has, as Lee Edelman argues, created “a version of identity politics as postmodern commodity fetishism” (1994: 114). The effect of which Donald Morton complains, “trivializes the very notion of queerness by reducing it to nothing more than a ‘lifestyle’, certain ways of talking, walking, eating, dressing, having your hair cut and having sex” (1993b: 151). The elitism of queer intellectualism has also constructed an “increasingly specialised vocabulary and analytical models” (Jagose: 110) that disavows any real sense of “accountability” outside of the academic context of its articulation, by intellectuals “whose privilege is said to insulate them from the ‘reality’ they nevertheless feel licensed to analyse” (ibid). And more controversially, the deployment of queer as an “umbrella” term to seemingly “unite” a diversity of divergent identities (“the oxymoronic community of difference”) problematically proposes a commonality that fails to acknowledge their fundamental difference. A failure which also “raises the possibility of locating sexual perversion as the very precondition of an identificatory category, rather than a destabilisation or variation of it” (Jagose: 113-114), thereby allowing a “collective” of all non-normative sexuality (including rape, sado-masochism and paedophilia). Such an indiscriminating coalition of non-normative sexual identity, therefore, destabilises the respectability and political achievements of the very lesbian and gay community that have provided queer the opportunity of articulation. Donald Morton also doubts the ability of queer theory to sustain any real form of radical critique, due to the ease by which it has become

137 Cited by Duggan, 1992: 19.
“institutionalised” and appropriated in order to “consolidate a hegemonic postmodern culture”:

the “dreamlike” success of Queer Theory today is enabled precisely by its tendency to endorse and celebrate the dominant academy’s narrative of progressive change. (1993a: 123)

However, queer’s overall impact upon identity politics has yet to be fully determined. As Jagose argues, “Queer has little to gain from establishing itself as a monolithic identity category” (126). It does not project itself as some form of “improved version” of lesbian and gay identity, but rather as a strategy by which to question “the assumptions that - intentional or otherwise - inhere in the mobilisation of any identity category, including itself” (ibid).

The aim of this thesis has been to attempt to locate and explore examples of a “queer” methodology in performance that significantly precede its recent deployment in contemporary critical discourse. Whereas, queer is perceived as a distinctively late twentieth-century paradigm, it is evident from this research that it draws much from the previous experiments and frameworks of both the theatrical avant-garde and the cultural strategies of postmodernism. The seemingly “groundbreaking” and “radical” perception of queer theory is, therefore, questionable given the fact that its discursive strategies were already in place: in fact, the oppressive regimes of “heteronormativity” that queer frameworks need to articulate in order to legitimise its critique, could be seen to be already decidedly “queer”. It is this disparity that advocates of the “queer movement” fail to truly address, since it undermines the efficacy of a seemingly
radical critical paradigm that assumes a dominant heteronormative matrix through which all identity/sexuality is ordered. By promoting itself as a utopian and liberating "solution" to such "rigid conventions", it needs to first disseminate the idea that such conventions are rigid in the first place.

Theatre has consistently been the medium wherein ideas of the “human condition” and its place within society have been explored and debated (from within both the experimental avant-garde and the mainstream). Queer protocols of reading that seek to reclaim or foreground deviant sub-texts in culture and society are thus subversive only in relation to a “pre-existing” deviance that is already locateable “outside” of the queer paradigm. As discussed in Chapter One, the works of Artaud, Brecht and Genet, can be “read” as queer only in relation to the already inherent deconstructive strategies (drawn from the avant-garde) that were being deployed. They may not have perceived themselves as having a “queer identity", but demonstrated a common distrust of social control, morality and epistemology that they worked through within a more in-determinant (ie. pre-queer) and fluidly deviant context. Artaud and Genet both utilised the spectacle of taboo and psycho-sexual configurations that, in the case of Artaud, may not be deemed “gay” or “queer, but were just as crucially “deviant”.

Similarly, Brechtian theoretical methodologies may not have specifically focused upon “sexuality” in any explicit sense, but his performative strategies on gender and the re-activation of the spectator/text dynamic provided the key framework by which political theatre as a medium could begin to envisage a postmodern/queer approach to performance practice and readership.

Theatre and performance have consistently played a vital role in developing works
that deliberately set out to disconcert or confront its audience in some way, a fact that queer has profitably been able to capitalise upon. It is the ideal location wherein to exploratively “play out” and experiment with the complexities of such an “abstruse” theoretical paradigm, or attempt to reconcile its inevitable conflicts. Despite its contentious nature, queer demonstrates, as Annamarie Jagose argues, “a conceptually unique potential as a necessarily unfixed site of engagement and contestation” (1996: 129). Queer is an identity category that has no desire to consolidate or stabilise itself, and maintains an understanding that even its own efficacy is subject to “exclusionary and reifying effects far in excess of those intended” (131). Performance, therefore, provides the creative context within which such effects and excesses could begin to be envisaged:

Queer is not outside the magnetic field of identity. Like some postmodern architecture, it turns identity inside out, and displays its supports exoskeletonally. If the dialogue between queer and more traditional identity formations is sometimes fraught - which it is - that is not because they have nothing in common. Rather, lesbian and gay faith in the authenticity or even political efficacy of identity categories and the queer suspension of all such classifications energise each other, offering in the 1990s - and who can say beyond? - the ambivalent assurance of an unimagined future. (Jagose: 132)
Bibliography


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