



Moisés de Lemos Martins & Manuel Pinto (Orgs.) (2008)
Comunicação e Cidadania - Actas do 5º Congresso da Associação Portuguesa de Ciências da Comunicação
6 - 8 Setembro 2007, Braga: Centro de Estudos de Comunicação e Sociedade (Universidade do Minho)
ISBN 978-989-95500-1-8



The butch, the femme and the surrogate mother: Representations of women in contemporary queer drama

FRANCESCA RAYNER

Universidade do Minho ~ frayner@ilch.uminho.pt

Resumo:

The queer theatre that emerged in the '90's in England and the USA promoted a refusal of dominant sexual norms and an exploration of dissident sexualities. These dissident sexualities were primarily, though not exclusively, lesbian, gay and transgender. In its destabilization of sexual norms, queer theory focused upon the performativity of gender and sexual roles rather than casting them as fixed and essential. The hope was that in positioning gender and sexuality as performative, the inconsistencies within sexual norms could be highlighted and alternatives to them experimented.

Much of this queer work was written by gay men and dealt with themes of interest to them, such as the effects of the AIDS pandemic on sexual behaviour. This often meant that women's roles in queer drama were marginal or non-existent. This paper analyses representations of women in two queer plays. The first, Mark Ravenhill's 1996 *Shopping and Fucking* includes the resourceful Lulu among the trio of main characters who invent schemes to survive amidst the debris of a commodified and mediated society. The second, Phyllis Nagy's *Weldon Rising* (1992) takes place in the aftermath of a homophobic attack as the characters come to terms with the fact that they have not intervened to prevent it. It includes a lesbian couple for whom understanding what happened in the street before them leads to a redefinition of their sexual relationship. The paper raises questions such as the critique of traditional representations of women prompted by queer representation and the link between reconfigured representations of women and non-illusionist performance.

Palavras-chave:

Teatro queer, género, representação.

Queer theatre: an Introduction

The advent of AIDS in the 1980's not only changed gay lives, it was also a major factor in rethinking gay identity, community and culture. The seriousness of the pandemic and the various governments' refusal to fund research into the disease led to a growing sense of anger within the gay community, but also to new forms of self-organization and new sites of cultural representation. The need to talk honestly about sexual practices prompted reflection on the relationship between such practices and gay identities, drawing attention to the fact that the diversity of sexual practices within

the gay community was often not reflected entirely in the terms lesbian and gay. The urgency of the situation fuelled a growing frustration with reformist attempts to win equal rights and a new focus on direct action, often with a strong theatrical component, affirmed gay difference and rejected lesbian and gay assimilationism. In the cultural sphere, writers, film-makers and other cultural activists charted the changes brought about in gay lives by the AIDS pandemic and in the process, found new forms of address and new audiences.

The term that came to identify this disparate sense of a need for change was “queer”. The term was originally one of abuse levelled at lesbians and gay men but it was reclaimed in the late 1980’s as a sign that the shame associated with it could no longer harm or hurt, much in the same way that “nigger” was re-signified for black communities. Queer became a defiant badge of difference, a refusal to settle for social and sexual normality. It promoted a view that everything was ripe for re-signification, even personal and political relationships between lesbians and gay men, who came together to fight AIDS after a decade or more of separatism. Queer represented, for these reasons, a much-needed challenge to old certainties in the face of new realities. While its major focus was on the increase in homophobia directed against lesbians and gay men, this also led to an re-examination of what had been repressed in the lesbian and gay movement. Whereas this movement had emphasised the need to create positive images of lesbians and gays in cultural and political life in order to promote the struggle for lesbian and gay equality, queer promoted the need to represent lesbian and gay lives in all their complexity, whether they were acceptable to heterosexual society or not. Transsexuals and transvestites, who had been viewed with suspicion as too flamboyant to forward the case for lesbian and gay equality or poor copies of heterosexual originals had their important role in gay history restored and were often at the forefront of queer initiatives. Lesbians, who had, to a certain extent, promoted a non-threatening, non-sexual view of relationships between women during the seventies and early eighties, began to turn their backs on what was referred to disparagingly as “vanilla lesbianism” and the “sexual” itself now became a major locus of interest.¹

Under the influences of post-structuralist and feminist theory, fuelled by the energy of queer direct action, the emergent academic discipline of queer theory in the nineties sought to theorize a more complex notion of sexual identity. This included a critical perspective which treated sexuality as a distinct area of concern from gender, underlining how the two were often conflated erroneously. In a recent essay, Judith Butler (Butler, 1997:3) remembered why some queer theorists felt a need for this separation:

To mark sensuality off as a domain separable from gender seemed to many of us, especially of the queer persuasion, to emphasise sexual practices rather than either gender or sexual identity and to allow for forms of “dissonance” to emerge between gendered self-understanding and forms of sexual engagement.

Thus, although queer theory retained a sense that questions of sexuality could not be discussed *without reference* to questions of gender, it also made clear that they could not be *reduced to* questions of gender. Notions of male effeminacy as indicative of homosexuality, for instance, simply read sexuality off from gender difference without allowing for the ways in which it was a distinct domain from gender. The queer theory of the period saw the relationship between sex, gender and sexuality as marked by *incoherence* rather than the linear correspondences characteristic of sexual norms. Butler herself (Butler, 1993:315) stressed that “there are no direct expressive or causal links between sex, gender, gender presentation, sexual practice, fantasy and sexuality”. As such, a woman

¹ It should also be noted, however, that this movement anticipated queer in the sense that the “sex wars” of the 1980’s within the lesbian community had already helped to clarify a need for a more diverse view of lesbian sexual practices. Indeed, for this reason, many lesbian theorists, such as Judith Butler and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick were at the forefront of the queer critique

who had sexual relationships with other women did not necessarily identify with men, even if she chose to present herself in public in ways traditionally considered masculine.

Queer was, therefore, very much connected with a move away from the identity politics of the 1980's, which in many ways had played into the hands of corporate power. Campaigning for better representation of marginalised groups had become very appealing to sectors of the advertising industry, for whom the "pink pound" was an indication of higher disposable incomes, while a recognition of diversity had been transformed into a form of niche marketing. Such processes were seen to have not only to have effected a greater division among better off and less well off lesbians and gays, but also to have become increasingly ineffective in the changed circumstances of AIDS.

Instead, the new queer theory emphasised sexual identities as performative, that is, the result of a socially enforced repetition of certain acts and gestures that created the illusion of a stable and coherent sexual identity. Such an approach de-naturalised both homosexuality and heterosexuality and, following Foucault, cast the insistence on the need to identify with them as the effect of repression rather than liberation. Queer thus challenged the very basis of sexual norms: the division of identities into those that are socially sanctioned and those that are outlawed, by emphasising the ways in which such borders are constantly transgressed.

The new queer movement often made use of theatricality to make political points. Activists in Paris covered Cleopatra's needle with a giant condom for instance, and "die-ins" and "kiss-ins" took place outside organizations considered homophobic or which had refused to fund AIDS research. In Portugal, activists organized a successful protest outside the offices of the Porto Editora dictionary because of an entry on homosexuality that still referred to it as an illness. Soon such movements began to have an influence on the theatre world itself and by the mid-1990's, a new wave of defiantly queer plays hit London. Although they did not represent a complete break with existing English theatre practices, they were seen as radically different both at the level of content and form. Whilst earlier English political theatre such as that of Howard Brenton and David Hare had been strongly informed by a desire to move towards socialism and greater social justice, the new queer plays remained sceptical of such grand narratives. Instead, they portrayed a generation who were disorientated by consumerism and communication technologies and who lacked political direction. This was, after all, the generation growing up under Margaret Thatcher's maxim "There is no such thing as society". Unlike previous lesbian and gay plays which involved mainly affluent, white males with established social bonds, new queer plays often focused on the disenfranchised and the marginalized and the breakdown in human communication engendered by globalization, conspicuous consumption and mediatization. Whereas previous generations of playwrights had looked guardedly but optimistically towards the future, queer theatre saw the future as more of the same, a spiralling downhill movement from which the powerless were unable to escape.

The position of women in this wave of queer plays was contradictory. If, on the one hand, the focus on processes of marginalization and alienation encouraged a new type of theatre writing from women dramatists such as Sarah Kane, on the other hand, the focus on relationships between men in many of the queer playwrights tended to consign women to secondary or marginal roles.² The example of Mark Ravenhill's 2006 *Product* illustrates the contradictions of this position. The piece is essentially a monologue by a male film producer trying to sell a film script to a young actress. The actress listens in silence to the monologue and then at the end of the piece, simply walks offstage without saying a word. While this silent rejection is designed dramatically to speak volumes about the quality of the script, it is nonetheless a less than satisfying role for an actress to play. As queer theatre

² Julia Salmeron has provided an excellent analysis of Sarah Kane as a queer playwright in a paper given at a round table on Queer Theatre in London, 2006 entitled "The Violent Audience and the Violent Body of the Play: Sarah Kane's Queer Plays" (unpublished).

positioned itself as a challenge to previous theatrical models, the rest of the paper examines to what extent this also involved a reworking of stage representations of women by analysing two well-known queer plays: Mark Ravenhill's *Shopping and Fucking* (1996) and Phyllis Nagy's *Weldon Rising* (1992). It questions notions of queer theatre as essentially male-defined, whilst also suggesting that the retrospective canonization of certain queer plays nevertheless runs the risk of ignoring queer's contribution to changing roles for women.

“We are family”: Mark Ravenhill's *Shopping and Fucking*

Mark Ravenhill's 1996 *Shopping and Fucking* is probably the single most influential British play of the Thatcher generation and not just because of its title. The title certainly formed part of its notoriety – a municipal law preventing soliciting by prostitutes prevented the theatre from advertising the play in full and theatre employees were not allowed to mention the name of the play for which they were selling tickets. However, interest in the play had as much to do with the radical content and innovative staging of the play as with the choice of a headline-grabbing title.

The play revolves around a trio of characters, Mark, Robbie and Lulu. Mark and Robbie have had a sexual relationship and there is a suggestion that this may have involved Lulu as well. Yet none of the characters have sharply defined and consistent sexualities in the play, at best they are casually bisexual, although Lulu does seem to have a less sexual role than the two men. She functions as something of a surrogate mother to them. It is Lulu who chooses the individual ready-made meals which feed the trio and who forces Mark to eat when his drug addiction removes his appetite. It is Lulu who invariably comes up with the schemes for making money. The trio is temporarily disrupted by Mark's relationship with Gary, a sexually abused rent boy. However, by the end of the play, the trio has reformed after its chilling symbolic expulsion of Gary.

The twin subjects of the title are woven together throughout the play. Lulu and Robbie attempt to recuperate the money they have lost through distributing free Ecstasy tablets by establishing a phone sex line where they arouse callers with rewritten excerpts from major cultural narratives such as *Romeo and Juliet* or Adam and Eve. Mark's first sexual encounter with Gary is shaped by the two discussing how much money should be paid for which sexual activity and is punctuated by the sound of money from the slot machines in the shop downstairs. The play presents a world where economic relations have come to define emotional and sexual ones and where the forces of globalisation and consumerism have reached into even the most intimate human experiences. Gay relationships are seen to have been as affected by capitalist relations as those of heterosexuals. Mark, for instance, sees love as mere dependency and prefers the anonymity of paid sexual transactions to more personalised human contact.

As the characters invent survival schemes and put them into practice, they tell each other stories. The play begins with a collective story where Mark relates buying Robbie and Lulu from a fat man in a supermarket so they become his sex slaves. The same story is repeated at the end of the play with a violent twist. Gary is brought to the house by Mark to meet the others. The trio begin their story once again, but now it is Gary who is bought as the sex slave and the story ends with the suggestion of a violent anal rape onstage. The horror of this episode is offset, however, by the ending, where the trio gently feed each other from their individual meals in a gesture that hints at a certain re-established community between the three, however fleeting.

As the ending suggests, Ravenhill's aim is not to glorify a society where social relations have given way to economic ones, but to critique just such a society. As Dan Rebellato has argued, despite his reputation for sensationalism “Ravenhill is profoundly moral in his portraiture of contemporary

society. His vision is elliptically but recognisably social, even socialist.”³ Ravenhill himself has commented that the play is “satirically swiping at a kind of moral and spiritual emptiness, where everything is defined in terms of consumption. The characters (...) are desperately trying to find a different set of values. But they can’t.”⁴ Ravenhill’s vivid picture of a generation lost in a commercial culture by which they seem both repelled and entirely seduced makes clear that this is a society obsessed with the self and therefore unable to take care of the weak and the powerless. Gary tells Mark that he contacted the council to try and get help with the stepfather who was sexually abusing him. The response of the council official was first to ask whether the step-father used a condom and then to offer him a leaflet. Against such indifference, as Ravenhill has himself pointed out, there comes a point in each of his plays where the characters realize that they have to take care of each other. Mark learns to care for Gary and the trio look after each other to the best of their abilities.

The force of Ravenhill’s critique often takes the form of satire or black humour. Robbie tells of an incident at the hamburger chain for which he works where he was attacked by a customer unable to cope with the choice between a hamburger with or without cheese. Similarly Mark’s new age rationalization of a desire for no human intimacy is undercut by irony. He explains to Gary:

*Listen. I want you to understand because. I have this personality you see? Part of me that gets addicted (...) So I attach myself to others as a means of avoidance, of avoiding knowing the self. Which is potentially very destructive. (...) Which is why, though it may seem uncaring, I’m going to have to go. You’re gonna be OK? I’m sorry it’s just –*⁵

When Gary begins to cry, Mark does, however, make the decision to take him into his arms. The sexual explicitness of the language and staging, of the play which includes scenes of gay male sex, are designed not only to shock the audience, but also to encourage them to distance themselves critically from such a society and work towards a more fair and equitable one. Ravenhill’s highly experiential theatre, which has been referred to as “in-yer-face theatre” for its raw energy, is designed to provoke people out of their indifference and into reflecting on the society in which they live.⁶

The choice of a trio at the centre of the play also forms part of Ravenhill’s critique. As he indicates, they are characters in search of alternatives, even if they are ultimately unable to find them. The triangle both disrupts what Alan Sinfield has referred to as “the terrorism of heterosexual coupling”⁷ and also counters explicitly one of Margaret Thatcher’s most homophobic measures: Section 28 of the 1998 Local Government Act. Under this law, local authorities and artistic foundations were banned from promoting what were referred to as “pretend families”, in other words any familial formation not made up of a mother, a father and children. The trio of Robbie, Mark and Lulu, however flawed, do act as a family in the sense that they share the same living space and attempt to look after each other, helping each other through problems of drug dependency or the threat of physical violence. Indeed the most violent characters are identified with the traditional family structure - the violent step-father who abused Gary and the psychopath Brian who weeps at videos of his son playing the cello only to change the video to show a former employee being violently tortured. This critique of the traditional nuclear family and attempt to depict characters living together in alternative elective structures also challenges conventional onstage representations of women within the family. Lulu’s position within this

³ Dan Rebellato, Introduction to *Mark Ravenhill: Plays: 1* (London Methuen:2001), p.x

⁴ Quoted in Dominic Cavendish, “On Theatre”, *Independent*, 27 September, 1996

⁵ Mark Ravenhill, *Shopping and Fucking* in *Mark Ravenhill: Plays 1 Op. Cit.* p.33.

⁶ The term “in-yer-face” was first used by Aleks Sierz (Sierz 2001).

⁷ Sinfield made this comment in a seminar on the limits of a queer reading in *The Two Noble Kinsmen* and *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* at Sussex University (30/10/2002). This seminar appears as an article entitled “Cultural Materialism and Intertextuality: The Limits of Queer Reading in *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* and *The Two Noble Kinsmen*” in *Shakespeare Survey* 56 (*Shakespeare and Comedy*), (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), pp. 67-78

“pretend family” is relatively conventional in that she takes on the role of carer and provider. However, the ways she does this are far from conventional – the average housewife does not often resort to phone sex or drug dealing to keep the family together. Moreover, the lack of a biological connection between the three characters suggests that family roles have been fundamentally recast, with the “surrogate mother” at the head of a temporary and far from typical family. This opens up notions of the family not just for lesbians and gays, but for all those for whom the family is not necessarily the nuclear family. After all, there are an increasing number of heterosexuals for whom the traditional family bears no relation to the structures of love and support they have themselves created.

Building community: Phyllis Nagy’s *Weldon Rising*

Since the murder of the transsexual Gisberta in Porto by a group of young men, there has been an important public debate on the question of collective social responsibility for individual acts of violence against those who are sexually different. Phyllis Nagy’s 1992 *Weldon Rising* deals with a homophobic attack against a young gay man and the ensuing guilt and reparation of those who witnessed the attack but did not intervene. Nagy is an American writer working in London and although the play is set in New York, the atmosphere of backlash against lesbian and gay visibility that saturates the play transfers equally well to the streets of any other capital city where the rights won by queers to walk the streets in safety and to express affection publicly are under increasing attack, whether in a post-Reagan, post-Thatcher and post-AIDS environment or in the present day against a background of important struggles to win marriage and adoption rights.

One of the features of the play that immediately distinguishes it as a queer play is the cast of characters. They include two lesbians, Tilly and Jaye, a transvestite sex worker named Marcel, the lover of the man who has been murdered, Natty Weldon, and, in flashbacks the dead Jimmy and his killer, referred to simply as Boy. Crucially, these characters, who span a continuum of sexual difference, all share the same residential area – Little West 12th Street in the meat-packing district of New York. Unlike the gay drama of earlier decades, therefore, where affluent gay men lived separately in their own middle-class communities, the characters here are forced through lack of resources to live together somewhat less than harmoniously. Marcel reacts with annoyance to the presence of the two lesbians and Tilly and Jaye wonder how they came to live among so many gay men. All are subject to homophobic killers like Boy in the streets. The end of the play, however, involves a fragile, temporary moment of queer community building, expressed in explicitly sexual terms.

At the beginning of the play, the characters appear paralysed, locked into patterns of isolation from which they are unable to escape. This paralysis is accentuated by the surreal heat wave that mounts throughout the play and whose beginning is located precisely at the moment of Jimmy’s murder. The relationship between Jaye and Tilly at the beginning of the play seems to have become reduced to the repetition of the familiar. The jokey tone between them hides an edge that occasionally surfaces in moments of acute emotional disillusionment. Tilly only wants to drink beer and watch what goes on in the street, ignoring Jaye’s attempts to make love to her. Jaye can no longer stand being inside, but Tilly will not go out into the streets with her. Inside, they surround themselves with empty beer bottles in their room. “We used to be civilized” states Tilly, a comment that straddles both her own sense that they should have done something to save Jimmy’s life, but also her sense of the degradation of her relationship with Jaye.⁸ Such degradation is embodied in Jaye’s command that Tilly go down on her knees and tilt her head back so that Jaye can feed her beer. What should be a loving gesture is deeply embroiled in an unedifying power struggle.

⁸ *Weldon Rising* in Phyllis Nagy: *Plays: 1* (London Methuen 1998), p. 8. All subsequent references are to this edition and have page numbers in brackets.

Jaye and Tilly are both described in detail by the author in her introductory notes. Tilly is described as “not quite 30, but older than she’d like to be. Pretty enough, which is problematic for her. Naturally curious and incongruously romantic”. Jaye, on the other hand, is described as “not quite 30. Very fit, clean and thoroughly gorgeous. Mean, caustic and not afraid of being unsympathetic. Not at all coy or girlish, but not butch either”. Despite Nagy’s disclaimer, the two are framed as a butch-femme couple, with Jaye playing butch to Tilly’s femme. Such butch-femme role playing had been frowned on by lesbians in the seventies and eighties for supposedly replaying the norm of the heterosexual couple with a masculine and a feminine partner. Butches were portrayed as really wanting to be men and femmes were dismissed as lost heterosexual women. However, queer theory in the ‘90’s sought to reclaim such role-playing for its parodic potential. Sue-Ellen Case’s “Towards a Butch-Femme Aesthetic” (Case 1993) for instance, notes that such roles were invariably acknowledged as such, rather than representing biological birthrights or essentialist poses. As such, they were ironic comments on masculinity and femininity rather than attempts at the “real thing”. Moreover, they often functioned as strategies of flirtation and seduction between women, who would dress in a certain way so as to indicate their favoured type of sexual partner. In the second part of her essay, Case (Case, 1993:301,304) analyses the performance work of the lesbian theatre group Split Britches and their ironic use of butch-femme role playing as “a strategy of appearances” which “replaces a claim to truth.” She notes that:

these roles qua roles lend agency and self-determination to the historically passive subject (the female subject), providing her with at least two options for gender identification and with the aid of camp, an irony that allows her perception to be constructed from outside ideology, with a gender role that appears as if she is inside it.

Nagy’s lesbian couple take butch-femme role playing a stage further in emphasising the flexibility of such roles. As Nina Rappi (Rappi, 1994:5) has argued, lesbian theatre involves:

an interplay between subject (desiring) and object (desired). These two positions are interchangeable, reversible – playfully occupied or abandoned at will, both within the sexual arena and outside it.

In this instance, Jaye and Tilly exchange roles and positions of power throughout the play, emphasizing the flexibility of the roles they adopt. This is evident in the next scene where we see them together. Tilly, now apparently in control, is applying nail polish to Jaye’s feet with a strong suggestion that this has followed on from sex. The nail polish has been stolen “on an impulse” by Jaye who adds that it is not only her that steals, for Tilly has also stolen apples and oranges and would have stolen bananas also, but they wouldn’t fit in her bra. This suggests that the stealing is part of their game-playing, but there is an equal suggestion of a psychological and financial interpretation. Tilly comments that maybe they steal “to fill a void” and that it is a reaction to Jimmy’s death. As she suggests “We witnessed a horrible crime and we’ve responded by becoming criminals ourselves”. She then adds “And we can’t afford to pay, anyway, We spend all our pennies to make rent on an unglamorous shitbox in a menacing neighbourhood” (16). The scene ends with them leaving the flat for a beer run and having to pass by the grieving Natty Weldon.

The next scene is a flashback to Jimmy’s murder. As with the previous scene, where sexual, psychological and financial interpretations of the need of the two women to steal are woven together in such a way as to suggest there is no underlying truth, this non-naturalistic scene weaves together the voices in the street of the Boy, Marcel, Jimmy and Natty and the comments of the two lesbians in their apartment as each witness the event from their own perspective. The horror of the murder scene and

the lack of intervention of any of the characters binds them together in a communal guilt, which is nevertheless experienced in isolation.

As Tilly and Jaye return from their beer run, they encounter Natty and Marcel in the street. They switch on a radio and share the beer between them, although an ironic tone undercuts any attempt to idealize this community. "Looks like we're having a block party" says Jaye laconically (28). Marcel and Jaye insult each other. Marcel tells Jaye to go and live in Brooklyn "with the rest of your sisters" (29) and Jaye jibes that Marcel seems not to have had any business in a while. However, Tilly and Natty seem to communicate on a deeper level of intimacy almost immediately, even if somewhat disconnected. Tilly expresses her love through her fears "Mostly though, I'm afraid I'll lose Jaye. And then I would crumble up and blow away. Like a panic napkin" (29). She goes on to talk about the lack of certainty in love where you can love someone one day and not love them the next. "Love makes spontaneous decisions" she concludes, to which Natty adds "And so does hate. Cowardice" (29-30). Tilly then tells the story of how she met Jaye at Kennedy Airport, who mistook her for someone else. She relates that every year on the same day, they both go back every year to Kennedy Airport to flirt with the flight attendants. In this scene, the mood has shifted subtly from a mood of collective guilt to one that begins the difficult process of reparation, both for Jaye and Tilly's relationship and the small queer community.

When Natty complains that the heat is making him come out in boils, Jaye reaches out to touch his skin. He flinches at what is the first sign of physical contact between men and women in the play. From this moment on, the four of them collectively piece together the events of the night Jimmy died and their own roles in what happened. This involves acknowledgement of guilt on all sides. Tilly admits "We watched from above. We thought we were safe". Jaye adds "I drank beer and thought...how lucky I am not to be him" (33). When Natty exclaims in disbelief "How could you. How could you *watch*" Jaye replies "How could you *run*" (33). Crucially, this sense of shame at the murder is connected with the experience of being queer in a homophobic society. Natty talks about his difficulty in getting rid of the shame of being gay, to which Jaye replies "We're sick to do it (tell people we're gay), but we do it anyway. And then, one day, we get well. Shake the shame right outta our hair and wonder, well, why in the fuck did we let it get the best of us". The trick is to get rid of it. *Before* the point of implosion. *Before* it eats us to pieces" (34).

Following this, they reconstruct together their separate interrogations at the police station. Jaye says to the police "My lover and I were watching television. Yeah. That's right. She's my lover. You got a problem with that? Okay, so we're watching television and we hear this noise from the street. I hear somebody say FAGGOT. I always hear that word when it's said. Always" (35). As each character constructs the story they told the police, each of them describes the murderer differently. For Jaye the murderer was "a fair-haired tall white guy....Like the kind of jerk I used to date before I got wise", but for Tilly, he was "Small, delicate, wiry. With devastating hands". For Marcel, he was "a FAT motherfucker" (36). The murderer here is construed as their individual nightmares of the event. Yet when Boy enters the police station, all of them, except Natty, immediately say "That's him". This leads to a vituperative speech from Boy:

I'm gonna let you put me on the news and I'm gonna nod my head at a lot of stupid people talking about misunderstanding and compassion and bad upbringings and I'm gonna fucking laugh out loud. What? Who said something about bias crimes? What the fuck is BIAS? This is about HATE. And there isn't a lawyer or a doctor or any fucked up fucking do-gooder alive who can do a damned thing about it. You wanna fight me, you got to FIGHT me. (37).

Ironically, this unmediated statement of homophobic hate seems to clear the air. Amid empty beer bottles, Jaye spins Marcel round in the shopping cart. Tilly takes a piece of broken glass from

Natty's perfume bottle and dabs it on her wrists and neck, cutting herself in the process. Marcel comments caustically "Chanel is not an equal opportunities employer. Chanel knows which wrists it belongs on" (38) while Tilly wails "Oh, god WHY did we choose to live in a neighbourhood full of gay men" Because we think we *are* gay men" replies Jaye tartly (38). On the radio, bridges collapse from the heat, which is one hundred and eighty degrees and rising. In a sudden flash of hot white light Marcel and Tilly hold each other. A headlamp shines at Marcel, but he is unwilling to advance towards his customer. Tilly encourages him, to which Marcel replies "I didn't think I'd live to see the day when a lesbian became my pimp". Tilly simply responds "Times change" (41). As the car begins to levitate, Marcel disappears in an explosion of hot white light. Tilly cleans herself to Donna Summer's "Could this be Magic" while Natty and Jaye dance. Jaye asks where the music is coming from, to which Tilly replies "Nineteen Seventy something. Before we were mean" (43). This locates queerness in a particular time and place, creating a sense of a lost paradise in the wake of AIDS. The scene suggests some of the difficulties lesbians and gays encountered as the pandemic and its ravages took its toll on their lives and their awareness of what had been lost in the process.

Yet the sense of loss is quickly replaced by hope. As the others dance, Tilly removes her blouse then undresses completely to put on a dazzling white suit from Natty's clothes collection, Natty begins shaking violently and falls to his knees as Jaye cradles him. "I've never held a man in my arms like this," she admits "Never wanted to. Still not sure I want to" (43). Tilly goes over and kneels down with them. Natty continues to shiver but he is smiling. The music seems to get louder as Jaye and Tilly kiss. "Hey you never touch me in public" says Tilly, "Things change" repeats Jaye (43). Tilly and Jaye then dress Natty in Tilly's clothes. The stage direction says "*Strangely, they fit rather well*" (44). Jaye removes Tilly's jacket and her own blouse. Grasping Natty's hand, she takes Tilly's breast in her mouth. They begin to make love, still holding Natty's hand. Jimmy enters dressed in white with a knife in his hand. He gives Natty the knife and leads him through a gigantic map of the meat-packing district saying "Tear up the world for me" (45). Jimmy lifts Natty up in his arms and they pass through the map. Jaye and Tilly are left alone onstage. There is a flash of white light and they disappear. The torn up map begins to shake violently and the play ends.

Such a gloriously apocalyptic ending, combining a contemporary queer microcosm and macrocosm, expresses the urgency of the queer movement and something of its energy. *Weldon Rising* is, for me, one of the best queer plays of the 1990's because of its sense of what was at stake for lesbians and gay men during that period and the ways in which they tried to face up to such challenges. In terms of representations of women, *Weldon Rising* is highly innovative in its portrayal of the shifting balance of power between the two women and its defiantly sexual representation of their relationship. On a wider level, the attempts of the male and female characters in the play to come to terms with personal and social demons dramatises the difficult but necessary approximation between lesbians and gay men in the 1990's to explore what they might have in common. Yet the non-naturalistic techniques of the play undermine any attempt to create certainties out of these new realities, emphasising their provisional and localised status.

Conclusion

The two plays discussed in this paper illustrate the ways in which queer theatre reworked representations of women in the 1990's. *Shopping and Fucking* depicts the breakdown of the traditional family and the ways in which both heterosexuals and homosexuals were building new forms of family amid the chaos left by globalization and the anti-social measures of the Thatcher government. In these alternative family structures, women continued to play a key role, though in changed circumstances. For *Lulu*, the family cannot remain apart from globalization and consumerism in a separate sphere of domesticity. Keeping the family together invariably means being part of such

movements. However, the forming and the reforming of the family indicate a renewed attention to what constitutes a family that replaces the biological with the elective. *Weldon Rising* deals with the manifestation of homophobia as violence within queer communities already marginalized by lack of financial resources. Forced to live together in the same poor neighbourhoods, men and women had to learn new ways in which to be together and lesbian relationships had to come to terms with the fact that the visible homophobia in the streets also had had a negative effect on their relationships, as it forced them to internalize notions of shame and guilt and often to struggle with each other. However, just as the word queer itself represented the stigma of shame, but was resignified to make it a badge of lesbian and gay pride, the shame that haunts the characters of *Weldon Rising*, both at themselves and at what has happened in the streets, becomes the basis for a shared taking of responsibility that brings together the four characters. As they come to terms with their guilt at not having intervened to save Jimmy, they also learn to live with the internalized guilt of being gay, helping each other to learn new strategies of survival in a homophobic society.

In both plays, there is a strong sense of a need for collective action to redress social and sexual inequalities, but in neither of them is there a name given to the society both gesture towards. There is no heroic narrative of salvation in socialism. There is little sense of lesbian and gay liberation. In *Shopping and Fucking*, Robbie explicitly states that there are no more grand narratives, only minor ones. Even theatrical grand narratives are treated ironically. Lulu reads a speech by Irina from Chekhov's *Three Sisters*, for instance, before she strips for her audition for the shopping channel. In *Weldon Rising*, there are glimpses of alternatives in the very meltdown that takes place around them. When the radio news states that the bridge is down, Marcel comments ironically "So much for the bridge and tunnel crowd" (39). In this play, it is the marginalized who survive the heatwave, because they are used to taking the heat. Even when Marcel and the two lesbians disappear in flashes of white light, there is something benevolent about the occurrence, almost as if some divine force is on their side. For these reasons, I don't consider either of the plays pessimistic or nihilistic because the pressure for change is always there, even if rarely attained.

Yet what is the status of such queer plays and their representations of women nearly ten years on? While Ravenhill has been performed in a variety of European and North-American settings, Nagy has not. This would seem to indicate that there is a danger that the queer canon that is formed will continue to privilege the work of male dramatists, with Sarah Kane an important and vital exception. This would be to ignore an important body of work by queer women dramatists and to limit representations of women. The sexual lesbian butch-femme couple in Nagy's play are very different to the representations of women as marginal supportive figures to the sexual gay men in much queer drama by male dramatists. To use Sue-Ellen Case's terminology, they represent the feminist as opposed to the female subject. The non-naturalistic technique of Nagy is also quite unique. *Shopping and Fucking* creates a provocative and satirical take on reality, but *Weldon Rising* challenges the status of reality itself, weaving together past and present actions through memory and desire. Nagy's work does not fit as comfortably into the theatrical mainstream as Ravenhill's does. It is more elusive and self-deprecating. Yet it is vital that any queer canon includes both of these works so that contemporary queer theatre does not simply represent the work of a new generation of Anglo-American male dramatists.

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