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The Indelicate Question of the Delicate Staging of Gayness

I enjoyed the opportunity to direct a play for Project Spotlight. I was assigned to direct a play that was operating under the working title *The Story of a Gay Ghost Haunting an Apartment*. I felt I was assigned to that play because I was the only gay director, but I did not feel that there was any negative stereotyping that went into that decision. In fact, it was probably best that I directed the play because it was written by a straight female college student. A few of the other directors told me that they were glad *I* was directing it, because I could play it without overt “gayness” that others might attempt. Suddenly I became the speaker of the gay community.

There was this notion that because I’m gay I would somehow be able to handle a comedy about a gay ghost with a deft hand that would not offend the LGBTQ community, which can be sensitive to types and tropes, character mannerisms and dialog delivery, and justifiably so. Being older than the other Project Spotlight students, I do not think they knew that I’m a relatively thick-skinned gay because when I was growing up gays had not obtained the *right* to be sensitive. In the 1990’s gay rights had in some ways expanded past the hate and persecution that led to the Stonewall Riots in 1969 that continued to suppress and demonize the community in the 70’s and 80’s. In the 90’s gays were finally able to co-exist. But that is all we could do... exist. In most settings, we couldn’t be sensitive and certainly couldn’t show gay pride! In directing this show, I was posed with an uncomfortable question:

How do we stage gay?

To answer this question, I called upon one of the lords, saints and saviors of both gay and theatre communities, Tony Kushner. If I had to point to one piece of art that allowed me to be who I am today it would be Kushner’s *Angels in America* (premiering in May 1991, two months before I was born). I specifically focused on Marianne Elliot’s 2018 production which was mounted at the Neil Simon Theatre to much critical acclaim. Andrew Garfield’s performance was heralded by all, but it was not without controversy. Garfield became a hero in the community for his portrayal of Prior Walter, but his comment “every Sunday I would have eight friends over, and we would just watch Ru (the drag queen icon’s show *Ru Paul’s Drag Race*).

This is my life outside of this play. I am a gay man right now just without the physical act -- that's all" (France) resonated as queer baiting. The straight actor's rhetoric trafficked in gay stereotypes which stirred up much sensitivity in a community desperately looking for an icon that drums up pride in both gays and straights, uniting communities. Being gay does not grant me immunity from the backlash as I must perform a balancing act of staging a *celebration* of what it means to be gay and not a stereotype. I used Garfield's overwhelmingly successful performance and his personal pitfalls as a guide to forge my own directorial vision of performing gay. The first question revolved around casting.

How do I audition gay?

The very writing of this question makes my skin crawl, but it is an uncomfortable truth that must be acknowledged. What exactly should I be looking for when I am casting a gay character? Femininity? Flamboyance? Do I have to cast based on gay stereotypes? My first inclination was to cast a gay man, because that will solve all my problems... right? Perhaps, all the backlash Andrew Garfield faced would've been nullified if he was actually gay. However Tony Kushner came to the defense of Garfield and denounced the notion that it mattered whether the actor was gay or straight, stating "what am I supposed to do, say to actors, 'Who do you sleep with?' before I give them a role? I mean, it's disgusting" (Nathan). This had a profound effect on me, changing my thought process.

Going into casting I decided to do my best to drop all notions of connecting an actor to the character and set out on the pursuit for the best actor. That seemed fair. Ironically, there were a lack of guys to cast for all the Project Spotlight shows, so I left auctions gay ghost-less. The playwright knew an actor, who I automatically gave the part to because I needed the principle role filled. This turned out to be a blessing bestowed on me by one of Kushner's angels. The actor I ended up working with was not cast due to any perceived or lack of perceived *gayness*. He was just guy. A guy who happened to be playing a gay character. This greatly simplified the process, as now this actor and role could be treated just like any other actor and role. Perhaps that is what I want. To be treated like I'm everyone else, in other words, *not queer*. So that was my approach with the actor. I did not want there to be any sense that I was more concerned with his character than any of the others.

How do I get my actor to play gay?

The answer to this indelicate question is an easy one. You can't play gay. Just as you can't really play mad or sad or redneck or Canadian. What can be played are objectives and motivations. The great irony of this show is even though the character of Benji was written to be a gay ghost, none of his objectives or inner conflicts, save one revelation of past abuse, resemble those that most gay characters or gay people deal with. This differs greatly from Kushner's work, where "all of the major male characters in *Angels* are gay-some are 'out' and others are 'closeted' but all must deal with their sexuality centrally" (Fisher, 110). This difference may be connected to the Project Spotlight playwright being a heterosexual woman. The inner struggle that Kushner has lived with reverberates through all his gay characters in a manner that is seemingly absent from Benji the gay ghost.

Marianne Elliott's artistic vision makes her direction of pieces like *Angels in America* and *War Horse* unmatched, but what I try implement in my own process is her explorative character work with actors. She works intimately yet collaboratively with actors. Detailing her scene work process Elliot states "we keep talking about it and then we try it on its feet, and I add things that are new, to try different things, and they add things that are new, to try different things. It's a constant finessing" (Rothstein). This is the same process I took with the actor who played Benji, but I went into scene work conversations knowing that I did not want to stress the actor with the winless vortex of analyzing the gay ghost's *gayness*. Rather, we discussed the character totally separately from the label of gay. I mentioned that sense a new person is moving into the apartment Benji haunts, he may want to clean up because he normally doesn't have reason to clean. The actor added on, as he felt that Benji would defiantly sing while he cleaned. This led me to pose the question; if he's a ghost can he somehow conjure music to be played while he cleans. This organic conversation felt kin to those Elliot has with her actors as she describes it as having a "stone and you chip away and chip away and chip away and eventually you end up with this beautiful sculpture, this amazing being. You keep going, keep going, keep going. It's a process of togetherness, because you are contributing and they are contributing to create this character." This contribution ultimately led to us adding in little singing vignettes during scene changes, where Benji could conjure up music that would represent his feelings while he angrily or merrily cleans. These moments and details we created gave the character of

Benji a fullness that could either live with or supersede the label of gay. The actor at one point asked me,

Do I need to take on a specific posture or voice to play this character?

No! I exclaimed this in authority as if it was a terrible question. It's not an outrageous question because shouldn't the character have some type of mannerism or attribute so that we can associate him with being gay? Where does the director, actor and audience form the depiction of a gay mannerism if not from stereotypes? Instead of embarking on potential perpetuating of stereotypes, I chose to give my actor the freedom to be himself. I let the actor use his personal mannerisms, cadence and posture as I allowed those choices to fall wherever it may, creating a character from a human truth rather than a gay stereotype.

This hands-off role I played in the actor's physicality works in this piece, as much of the movement and blocking has satirical and comedic intentions. Physicality was of the upmost importance in Andrew Garfield's portrayal of a gay man, where Prior Walter's inner conflict manifested itself in contracting AIDS which effects the mental and physical nature of the character. But Garfield's deliberate physicality does not portray the label of gay, but rather depicts the pain and regret gays in the AIDS Crisis faced. My persistence in Benji's posture and voice to be tied to those of the actor, was so that he could portray Benji's humanity and not his label.

How can I make gay funny?

The laughs moments that open in the piece I directed only generate themselves under the assumption that the audience knows that Benji is gay. So how to indicate to the audience that the character is gay? At this point the piece has been retitled *The One with the Ghost*, the actor and his character now operate outside of a gay stereotype and there is minimal dialogue noting Benji is gay, leaving very little indication to the audience of the critical plot piece... he's a gay ghost. I stripped the actor of the responsibility of trying to project anything that felt close to gayness, but I put that burden on myself and the production team.

My actor no longer is forced to act gay or comedic, or worse comedically gay; he just needs to act. For the jokes to land I used sound, lights and props to exaggerate the aspects of gay that my actor could not. Building upon the Elliot inspired scene work process, we created this

world where our ghost could conjure aspects of gay culture, that would still prompt the laughs desired by the playwright. Benji at a snap could conjure bright twirling lights when he was happy, classic Celine Dion and funky CeeLo Green songs to assist in him while he cleaned, and props to be thrown on stage from the wings that would assist in his snarky remarks toward his straight friends. The technical aspects were meant to create laughs that were not out of satire but out of celebration. These tech aspects could still be critiqued, but at least I controlled them. The laugh moments were no longer the duty of a straight actor trying to be gay, but the responsibility now belonged to a gay director who watched the end of Titanic too many times.

On the second to last dress rehearsal, the actor playing Benji seemed concerned that he wasn't doing enough. He felt like he was just being himself in the fabulous ghost play I created, stating

It doesn't feel like acting. Is that right?

Yes! Because you can't act gay! I wanted Benji to be... well what I want, and what Kushner wants and what the entire gay community wants... to be ourselves. I wanted Benji to not be a ghost with the label gay but a ghost with gay spirit. A spirit to be *prideful* of. Despite all his critiques, Andrew Garfield has probably put this to words better than anybody. When he received his Tony Award for *Angels in America*, Andrew Garfield spoke about acting Prior Walter's spirit, a spirit that represents the best of the LGBTQ community, as "it is a spirit that says 'no' to oppression, it is a spirit that says 'no' to bigotry, 'no' to shame, 'no' to exclusion. It is a spirit that says we are all made perfectly and we all belong" (Jensen).

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