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Theater

Return of the One-Man *Band*

"THANK GOD, HOMOSEXUALS HAVE A WONDERFUL sense of humor about themselves," Mart Crowley chuckles, recalling how during the 1990 San Francisco revival of his landmark 1968 play, *The Boys in the Band*, some guy set up a tomato stand outside the theater. Crowley admits he was terrified, but even if some audience members did buy the tomatoes, none was thrown onto the stage. In June, nearly three decades after the play was written, Crowley's frank and unapologetic portrayal of eight gay men gathered together for a birthday party will see its first New York revival, at off-Broadway's WPA Theater. *The Boys in the Band* is, as the playwright once called it, "this gorgeous little monster that won't die."

When it premiered at a small New York theater on Easter Sunday more than a year before the Stonewall riots, Crowley's play was hailed as a major breakthrough. The 1970 movie version, as the late Vito Russo pointed out in his book *The Celluloid Closet*, has the distinction of being the first Hollywood film in which all the principal characters are homosexual. By the time Russo was writing, in the early 1980s, many gay people had

condemned and distanced themselves from the play's protagonist, Michael, accusing Crowley of creating a self-loathing embarrassment to the gay community. Russo himself wrote that Michael "captured the essence of self-hatred and summed up a generation of gay men who were taught to blame all their troubles on their homosexuality."

Spending the Easter week with his octogenarian aunt and uncle in his hometown of Vicksburg, Mississippi, 60-year-old Mart Crowley is remarkably sanguine about the exaltation, crucifixion, and now resurrection of his first produced work for the theater. "My life has been a roller coaster ride," the playwright explains in his honey-and-molasses Southern drawl. "It's exciting for the play to be done in Manhattan after 28 years. How it will turn out I have no idea. It's another roll of the dice."

Although he could neither type nor take shorthand, the Mississippi native wound up in Hollywood in the early '60s as secretary to actress Natalie Wood, whom he'd befriended in New York while he was assisting on the film *Splendor in the Grass*. The

STAGE RIGHTS:
Playwright Mart Crowley in a New Orleans theater.

Gerard Raymond also contributes to The Village Voice and Harper's Bazaar.

CHICKEN • SHANGHAI LOBSTER • GRILLED DRY AGED CZECHUAN BEEF • CRISPY DUCK • SIZZLING WHOLE FISH • BARBECUED SALMON
 MALLMON R
 NAME CITRUS NOODLES • BROCCOLI RABE DUMPLINGS • LAMB SPARERIBS • LAMB DUMPLINGS • ORIENTAL ANTIPIASTO • LOBSTER PANCAKE • TEMPEUR
 PAKSHIMI • PARSNIP & POTATO PANCAKES • THAI BEEF SATAY • AUSTRALIAN ORGANIC FREE RAN
 GE LAMB • WASHBI CRUSTED COD • SAUTEED CALF
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Crowley is now thinking about a sequel to *Boys*.

actress later told a reporter that it was she who did the typing, while Crowley did all the dictating. More a friend than an employer, Wood also gave him a present of six months' psychoanalysis. "She thought I was in need of it, and I was," says the Catholic-school-educated Crowley. "I was just very neurotic."

Crowley sold his first screenplay to 20th Century Fox in 1962, but the studio pulled the plug on the production at the last minute, and Crowley plunged from hot young writer to nobody. Five years later, fired from a project at Paramount and after an unsuccessful stint in television, he was, at age 32, "hysterical, washed up, and, in my mind, finished." So that summer of 1967, housesitting a Beverly Hills mansion, with servants to do his laundry and serve him breakfast in bed, Crowley wrote the first draft of *The Boys in the Band*.

"Why, this is like some weekend at Fire Island," protested the shocked agent in New York to whom he showed the play. Crowley nevertheless persuaded her to pass the script on to Richard Barr, who'd previously produced Edward Albee's controversial *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* Barr and Albee presented the play at a four-day workshop in the West Village, and it turned into a sensation overnight. Previously, homosexuality onstage had been presented as a shocking secret; in *The Boys in the Band*, the characters are gay the moment the curtain rises. And their dialogue reaches new heights (or lows) of bitchy repartee. "It was the way we talked," says Crowley, who adds that he never consciously tried to break new ground. "Listen. I was just getting off my chest a lot of resentment."

Revisiting the play today—in the wake of the Broadway success and the gay community's adulation of Terrence McNally's in many ways similar *Love! Valour! Compassion!*—one is struck by the flourishing of gay life in pre-Stonewall New York; by the loving relationship, despite marital spats, of the well-adjusted gay couple Larry and Hank; and by the crackling wit and humor. (Crowley says he has it from a reliable source that shortly after the

play opened, Princess Margaret entered the sitting room of a country home saying, "Who do you have to fuck to get a drink around here?") As for Michael's infamous "You show me a happy homosexual, and I'll show you a gay corpse," it's important to note the context of his speech, and remember that he also says, "If we could just *learn* not to hate ourselves quite so very much." Says Crowley, "I think it's a signal for him to change, to try to accept who he is. This play is about the difficulty of coming out, particularly during that period."

After *Boys in the Band*, Crowley's next two plays were unsuccessful, his screenwriting efforts came to naught, and he turned to producing the television series *Hart to Hart* in the early '80s. In his latest play, *For Reasons That Remain Unclear* (so far produced once, in Maryland, and included with *Boys* in Alyson Publications' June edition of *Three Plays by Mart Crowley*), a middle-aged writer confronts a Roman Catholic priest in a hotel room in Rome. Readers may recognize in the writer a more adjusted version of the conflicted Michael. And now Crowley is thinking about writing a sequel to *Boys*, which he has titled *The Men From the Boys*: "It wasn't until AIDS that I've begun to feel that maybe I have something else to say."

I ask Crowley about the title of his famous play. He says that in the era of the big band, at the end of a set, one frequently heard the band leader or the singer call for a round of applause for the boys in the band. But there is another, subliminally gay reference as well. In George Cukor's *A Star Is Born*, James Mason gives Judy Garland words of encouragement before her screen test: Just remember, he says, it's 3 o'clock in the morning at the Downbeat Club and you're singing for yourself and for the boys in the band. "And I as much as anybody else know what it is to be at the downbeat club at 3 o'clock in the morning," says Crowley with good humor. This time, however, there may be another round of applause for *The Boys in the Band*.

—GERARD RAYMOND

