

Boys Will Be Boys

Crowley's Characters

Get a Second

Opinion

BY GERARD
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When *The Boys in the Band* first opened in 1968, a full year before the Stonewall riots sparked the gay rights movement in America, Mart Crowley's comedy-drama about eight gay men gathered for a birthday party became an unprecedented success, running for a thousand performances Off-Broadway. By the early '80s, however, a newly politicized gay community was criticizing Crowley for his self-loathing and, frankly, embarrassing characters. But the tide appears to be turning, and its current revival at the WPA Theatre may help rehabilitate *The Boys in the Band* as the granddaddy of gay theater.

Actors David Drake, David Greenspan, and James Leecene—who are also playwrights whose work is part of the tradition Crowley's landmark play arguably launched—all say they pursued the opportunity to be in *The Boys in the Band*. A teenager when the play was first staged, Leecene recalls “a buzz about it everywhere.” But when he finally caught up with the film version as a hot-yet-out gay man, he was horrified: “I thought, ‘Oh my God, those are the choices?’” Take for instance, Emory, the

effeminate character Leecene plays: “Oh Mary,” Emory cries, “it takes a fairy to make something pretty?”

Today Leecene, who performed his one-man show *Word of Mouth* last season Off-Broadway, has a newfound appreciation for the play. “As a writer and a solo performer, it’s hard to find something I feel as passionately about as I feel for my own work. This play is brilliantly constructed and I think it’s the time to do it. I wanted to be part of that moment.”

After reading *The Boys in the Band* and responding to its “honesty,” David Drake actively sought to get the play revived. “I’m just not interested anymore in telling stories that I don’t believe in,” says Drake, who is best known for his solo show *The Night Larry Kramer Kissed Me* and is editor in chief of POZ, the lifestyle magazine

for people with HIV. Drake plays Michael, the conflicted central character who unleashes a vicious truth game on his friends, revealing in the process his deep-seated homophobia and self-loathing. “I have so much empathy for my character, and yet I am scared of him as well,” says Drake. “This is a play about repression.”

“None of these characters is a clean bill of mental health,” says Greenspan dryly. “But I don’t think the play suggests that this is what gay people are like.” Greenspan, whose most recent New York work was *Dead Mother: Or Shirley Not All in Vain*, plays Harold, whose 32nd birthday the men are celebrating. “It’s about the boys in this particular band—a very specific group of people who are not conscious. . . . You see how twisted these guys have gotten from whatever experience they’ve had. It’s like a bad family Christmas dinner.”

Drake, Greenspan, and Leecene point to several instances of misogyny, homophobia, and racism during the party. They are concerned that the audience at the first preview seemed to enjoy the racist jokes Emory makes at the ex-

pense of his best friend, Bernard, who is black. “It’s like we were giving the audience permission to laugh,” says Leecene.

But, says Drake, by the time his character launches into a racist tirade against blacks and Jews, the audience becomes uncomfortably aware of the full impact of those jokes they originally found funny. By play’s end, Emory begins to understand how his jibes affect Bernard. “And that’s how we become political beings,” says Leecene. “It’s when you begin to understand that your actions have some sort of effect.”

Although it belongs to another era, and the characters aren’t the most admirable, a ‘90s audience still has much to learn from Crowley’s play. Its title is inspired by a scene in Judy Garland’s version of *A Star Is Born*. Before Garland sings the torch song “The Man That Got Away,” she’s advised to pretend she’s singing just for herself and “the boys in the band.” Greenspan observes that Crowley’s characters are all carrying torches for unavailable people, looking for love in just the wrong places. “That’s still a relevant issue, and it’s what makes the play so powerful.”

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