

MART CROWLEY:

Where the Boys Are Now

MART CROWLEY HAS BEEN WRITING FOR THE stage for nearly thirty years. His first and most famous play is *The Boys in the Band*, a comedy-drama about a group of gay men gathered together at a birthday party. When the landmark play opened Off Broadway in 1968, it was lauded as the most frank portrayal of male homosexuals ever seen on stage (this was a year before the Stonewall uprising galvanized the gay rights movement in America). The play ran for a thousand performances and spawned a successful 1970 film adaptation which Crowley wrote and co-produced. This spring marked the publication of a collection of the 61-year-old, Los Angeles-based playwright's work, *Three Plays by Mart Crowley* (Alyson Publications), and the first major New York revival of *The Boys in the Band*. Gerard Raymond interviewed Crowley for the *Quarterly* during rehearsals of the WPA Theatre production of *The Boys in the Band*, which opened Off Broadway in June.

- **GERARD RAYMOND:** How did you come to write *The Boys in the Band*?
- **MART CROWLEY:** I had worked as a screenwriter at Paramount and got fired, then I worked in television for about six months.



Mart Crowley

By the summer of 1967 I was pretty frustrated; it was impossible to get a job. I was hysterical, and in my mind washed up, finished. Some wealthy friends were going away on a trip and they asked me to house-sit their mansion in Beverly Hills—there was a complete staff and breakfast was brought to my room every morning. I thought I should make use of these two months with everybody taking care of me. So every morning for a week I would lie in bed and make notes and then one morning I went down to the library and opened up my Olivetti and began to write. I

started on page one and went straight through. I wrote the first draft of the play except for the short last scene in about five weeks.

● **RAYMOND:** Writing a play in 1967 in which the characters were open about being gay from the very first line—did you have any idea how daring this was for the time?

● **CROWLEY:** I didn't have anything on my mind except writing the play, getting through it. Other people thought I was a bit out of my mind. They said things like, "This is a very good therapeutic exercise for you, but try to steel yourself in case nobody wants to do it." They thought I was in a very fragile mental state, and I guess I was. I was a desperate guy who had been very disappointed, who was very angry about a lot of things, and who had a lot of free time, and I was getting more than a lot of resentment off my chest.

● **RAYMOND:** Although it was a critically acclaimed hit in 1968, the play and the film based on it have been attacked since then by many people who considered the play's portrayal of gay men, and of the main character in particular, to be very negative and full of self-hatred. Now *The*

Boys in the Band is being honored as the granddaddy of gay plays. What are your feelings about this?

● **CROWLEY:** My life has been a roller-coaster ride—ups and downs. This just seemed to me like one more fall and rise. Initially, nobody labelled it a gay play at all; it was just a play which happened to be about gay men. Gay theater as such came into being much later, and eventually gay activists began to think the play was negative.

I don't regret anything. That was the way I honestly felt back then. People began to hold the standards of the play against the changing attitudes of society. I think it should be considered in its own period. Nowadays, thank God, we are hopefully finished with the terminally politically correct 1980s, and the play is being reexamined for its portrayal of the gay experience at that particular moment in time. And of course, just because we have gay pride month now doesn't mean guilt has gone out of the window with every conflicted person. *The Boys in the Band* is a play about accepting yourself.

● **RAYMOND:** What did you do after the play was successfully turned into a film in 1970? The plays you wrote after *The Boys in the Band* did not fare very well.

● **CROWLEY:** My second play, *Remote Asylum*, was a real disaster. It was simply savaged, quite unfairly I thought. The next play, *A Breeze from the Gulf*, got respectable reviews but it also failed. Then I produced the television series *Hart to Hart* from 1979 to 1983. During most of the '70s I sat in an office at some Hollywood studio writing scripts that never got done. I also have a trunk of rejected, unproduced plays.

● **RAYMOND:** Wasn't there talk about a sequel to *The Boys in the Band*?

● **CROWLEY:** [After the success of the original production] the producers, Richard Barr and Charles Woodward, kept after me year after year to write a sequel. But I thought I'd done it and that was that. Now, so many years into the AIDS epidemic, I, like everybody else in the gay community, have lost some really close friends, and I have begun to feel that maybe I do have to do something else to say. It's like that phrase: "When a student is ready, the teacher will be there." Now I see and hear things all the time that I jot down. I've even come up with a title: *The Men from the Boys*.

MART CROWLEY

- **RAYMOND:** This season's Off Broadway production of *The Boys in the Band* is the first major revival in New York since the play's premiere twenty-eight years ago. Did you do any rewriting?
- **CROWLEY:** No. I only wanted to do some cutting because I think audiences of today have attention spans that are very different from the audiences of 1968. They were stunned at the WPA when I walked in and said I wanted to cut the play! It's usually the other way around—the author not wanting a word touched and the producer begging for trims. They were surprised. But what surprised me is that the actors came up with various different versions of the play. We found that the Samuel French acting edition doesn't quite match the original Farrar Straus & Giroux edition, which doesn't quite match the new Alyson edition. I like the newly published version best because it's got it all in it. But that's both good and bad. Stock and amateur companies that use this latest publication would be ill advised to do every word. They should compare it with the Samuel French version and make cuts in that too! And I'm not talking about the "infamous" stuff. Just the flab.
- **RAYMOND:** Given that the play is now almost thirty years old, did you have to update or explain the references?
- **CROWLEY:** Some of the references are, of course, obscure, because we don't have the same pop icons now. But the emotional base of the play is something that, hopefully, I don't have to explain to anyone, particularly the audience. As far as the interpretation is concerned, I am as curious as the next person to see what this director and this group of actors are going to do.
- **RAYMOND:** What are your feelings when you see *The Boys in the Band* today?
- **CROWLEY:** It's such a personal play—the memories are quite complex. Writing the play was definitely cathartic for me. I think that ultimately it must have been a kind of official coming out, announcing my homosexuality with the work. This may sound immodest of me, but I'm still moved by it! •••

Gerard Raymond is a freelance writer on theater and film.

Two new compact disc releases from MCA Records, *Broadway Bound: New York's Greatest Theater Songs by the Stars* and *Porters, and Jerry Herrington*, feature Alan Chapman, Rick Callahan, Leonard Bernstein, Dennis Markson, Stephen Hoffman, Mimi Finkler, Francesca Blumenthal, Lawrence, and Joe Keenan. The Broadway singers and theater orchestra.

An MCA Records release, *Box* is a collection of musical highlights from the Great American Songbook. Among the classics from 1938 to 1988 are Mary Martin's "Daddy," Irving Berlin's "Morning," Ethel Merman and others, as well as many other songs. The material was recorded in a special sampling of numbers from the *Best Little Whorehouse* in New York.

The combination of what is going on in the world and the combination of what is going on in the theater about English theater and the excitement about the thought of doing it in New York is going into the maze where