

Constituting Community:

***The Gay Heritage Project* and that Performative Power of Theater**

Late in *The Gay Heritage Project*, Damien Atkins performs a scene in which “HIV/AIDS” is put on trial and convicted of the murder of one hundred million people. Even though he is not HIV positive, nor had any loved one die of AIDS, Atkins declares “while I’m very glad that you’ve been convicted of one hundred million counts of murder, I would like to add another charge to that list. I would like to add theft. I can’t even really be sure what you stole from me. But I know that you did.” In this scene Atkins expresses a sense of grief, not just for the many people who tragically died of HIV/AIDS, but for the loss of a wealth of knowledge of gay historical events and figures that disappeared with the death of the victims of HIV/AIDS. In this scene, Atkins gestures toward a chasm between an older generation of gay men who are familiar with historical events and icons that are central to the constitution of gay community, and a younger generation who are disconnected from a communal gay history. In contrast to the collage of scenes that make up *The Gay Heritage Project*, *Body Politic*, by Nick Green, dramatizes this chasm through a narrative memory play. In *Body Politic*, an older man, who belonged to the *Body Politic* collective, recounts stories of the rise and fall of the Toronto LGBT political newspaper of the same name and the momentous events of Canadian LGBT activism that the newspaper covered to young man who he invited to his home for a sexual encounter. Both plays were programmed at Buddies in Bad Times Theater this past season, a season that centered on “personal and collective histories.” Along with what Evalyn Parry notes

in her season program note, quoting Gertrude Stein “Let me recite what history teaches. History teaches,” *The Gay Heritage Project* and *Body Politic* performatively constitute gay community through two different strategies attending to two different demographics: One strategy, as Parry draws our attention to, appeals to a young generation *pedagogically* by teaching them about the history of the community they to which they belong, while the other appeals to an older generation *nostalgically* by capitalizing on their potential personal connection to the events and icons that are situated as Canadian gay history.

The concept of performativity I appeal to here, which must be clearly and discretely identified because of the endless proliferation of uses and misuses of the term, is aligned with the concept outlined by J.L. Austin in *How To Do Things With Words*, and further elaborated by Pierre Bourdieu and Judith Butler. In *How to Do Things With Words*, Austin outlines a general definition of the performative utterance when he writes a performative utterance “is not to *describe* my doing of what I should be said in so uttering to be doing, or to state that I am doing it: it is to do it” (6). The equality, or congruity, of the performative as defined by Austin can be expressed as follows: The utterance equals the act. For example, in order to make a promise, it is customary to say “I promise”- the utterance, in most cases, performs the act of promising. In the case of these two plays, the act of witnessing these plays, like the act of uttering “I promise,” performs the act of constituting community.

I define “community” in a way similar to, but fundamentally different from, how Michael Warner defines “public.” In his book *Publics and Counterpublics*, Michael Warner defines a public as “a space of discourse organized by nothing other than

discourse itself” (67) that is addressed to an indefinite number of strangers (74).

Following from this conception of a “public,” a community differentiates itself from the more general concept of public insofar as community is not indeterminate – its members can be enumerated. In this formulation, community is defined as a group of people who share a geographic location, race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, language, politics, or as is the case with these two plays, through a shared history.¹ Though often formed because a group of people share a similar identity, communities can also coalesce around shared history that can be, though not always are, expressed as an identity category: An individual may, after living in a particular city for sometime, belong to the community of that municipality, but still not express their identity as such. For example, I have lived in Ithaca on and off for five years, and feel that I belong to the Ithaca community, but I do not identify as Ithacan. Through the experience of witnessing *The Gay Heritage Project* and *Body Politic*, an audience member, though they may not identify as gay, is invited to become a part of a gay community.

The collage of small scenes that made up *The Gay Heritage Project*, presented on a stage flanked by a half-dozen wooden chairs, often mentioned cultural and historical references, from Leonard Da Vinci to Lady Gaga, that are identifiable to an audience that *does* identify as gay. By presenting gay cultural references, *The Gay Heritage Project* performatively constituted community. As short scenes were performed one after another, and occasionally interrupted by a montage of images of gay cultural icons projected on a screen at the back of the stage, the audience understood themselves as having a common place in the present world when laughter, or silence, or tears are heard in the dark space

¹ Identity can fashion itself to an individual, while community emerges when a *group of people* come together.

of the audience. Though, as suggested in its very title, the play appealed to an audience that identifies as gay, only through the performance itself, through the dynamic between the three actors and their public, did community materialize. Through recognizing the reactions of other spectators, each member of the audience felt a sense of belonging to a larger whole. Community was performatively constituted through recognizing not just the cultural and historical references that elicited a similar reaction from most in attendance, but by recognizing each other as having a common place and perspective of the world that makes Joan Crawford, or Madonna’s “Like A Prayer”, particularly meaningful.

The brief cultural and historical references throughout *The Gay Heritage Project* were not only affective, but are pedagogical. Through a series of scenes in which two children play with their “Gay Canadian Action Heroes,” the audience is told the story of some of Canada’s most important LGBTQ activists. In these scenes, *The Gay Heritage Project* informed a younger Canadian audience of an important part of their history they otherwise would not have known about, which in turn, connected them to an older generation who survived those tumultuous times. Through pedagogical modes, *The Gay Heritage Project* also constituted community performatively. By *learning* together in the theater, and learning material that older audience members indicate they are already familiar with through reactions that suggest recognition, younger audience members are welcomed into a community through the historical pedagogical modes subtending the play. Because the play, in its very title, is identified as belonging to a gay cultural sphere, those who *do not* identify as gay are also constituted into community. If, community can coalesce around factors other than shared identity, then by learning about gay heritage, audience members performatively constitute community insofar as they witness the play

together. An audience member who does not identify as gay would, I submit, recognize the meaning of certain gay cultural phenomenon to the gay community after witnessing *The Gay Heritage Project*.

The Gay Heritage Project not only taught its audience about gay history, but also about queer theory. The engagement with queer theory was not purely pedagogical, but rather, challenged some widely accepted ideas from an affective, personal, and theatrical perspective. In other words, *The Gay Heritage Project* asked: How do we *feel* about the arguments presented by queer theory? In a scene that revised the story of *The Wizard of Oz* and placed the search for gay heritage as the central problem of the story instead of Dorothy’s quest for home, Michel Foucault was exposed as the Wizard who masterminds the project of queer theory. Exposing Foucault and his theories, theories that limit the possibility of gay history, as covertly directing the development of queer theory writ large, *The Gay Heritage Project* suggested that there is something else behind these ideas that inhibit connecting to a history. Though the arguments of queer theory and Foucault in particular are accepted as persuasive, they are resisted in the play on the grounds that such arguments deny the individual a sense of belonging to something beyond themselves in their current historical moment. In a short conversation after the show, Andrew Kushnir admitted that the “numbers add up”, but “they don’t feel right”. As Kushnir noted, *The Gay Heritage Project* demanded, in terms of queer theory, that we examine *how we feel* in order to determine if the arguments being presented are ones we actually believe in.

The Gay Heritage Project presented a collage of scenes that grapple with the relationship between history and community. By teaching us about Canadian gay history

and queer theory, while maintaining a theatrical and affective response to these kinds of knowledge, *The Gay Heritage Project* struggled with the possibility and potential of gay heritage on all fronts: pedagogical, political, cultural, and emotional. This struggle, that took place not just on stage, but in the audience, constitutes all who participate into a community.

Like *The Gay Heritage Project*, *Body Politic* performatively constitutes community through pedagogical and nostalgic modes. These modes are metaphorically anchored in the play by the older man, Phillip, who nostalgically recounts his memories of his time as a writer and collective organizer for the LGBT political newspaper *Body Politic* to the younger man, Josh, who he has invited to his home for sex via a smartphone hook-up app. When recounting the stories of the raid on the *Body Politic* collective after the publication of an article on man-boy love and the infamous bathhouse raids and ensuing protests in 1981, Phillip, at times without being aware of it (especially while high), teaches a history of Canadian LGBT activism to Josh. An audience member who remembers these events and the general social, political, and cultural life attending these stories would, through identification with Phillip, also indulge in nostalgia. Conversely, Josh, and members of the audience who are too young to remember these events, are pedagogically engaging with the past by learning about these events through Phillip’s stories. Josh echoes the two modes of community constitution when he, while trying to seduce the older man, asks: “Are you going to make me do all the work?” to which Phillip replies “Yes.” Josh, is indeed, going to do the “work” in terms that pedagogy is a kind of a labor – effort is required to understand events and issues from the past that may not be familiar to an individual’s lived experience in the contemporary moment. In

contrast, Phillip who declares that he won't do any labor in this seduction, is disavowing “work” and indulging in pleasure – Phillip lived through the events and issues from the past he is telling Josh about and consequently, he requires less effort, if any at all, to understand them. Both young and old, on stage and in the audience, are constituted into community through the stories, both within the play and in the theater, that are being shared.

When the events of the protest that followed the bathhouse raids in 1981 are recounted, the audience is incorporated into the world of the play, furthering constituting it as a community. Standing atop a bed and facing directly to the audience, the lesbian character, Deb, recounts her story of leading the protest. As she rallies the protesters, she speaks directly to the audience and rallies us as well. This staging strategy situates the audience of the play as the “sea of people” that she says she saw as she stood atop a car and consequently theatrically interpellates the audience as the gay community of protesters. We, the audience, are bound, not just to each other as a “cluster” or “crowd” that is witnessing the play, but we become bound to those in the past, that made up of “sea of people” she is describing. Across time, community is constituted through the performative act of witness – the audience in the present is constituted as a community through being addressed as an audience in the past.

The final scene of the play also bound the audience together as a community in the present that was connected to a community in the past. In the last moment of the play, the collective members of the *Body Politic* say “Goodnight” to Phillip, who has just sent Josh home. Despite how the members of the collective from Phillip's past are saying “Goodnight,” they do not leave but stand in door frames at various places on the set. At

the very last moment of the play, Josh joins the members of the collective at a door frame framed by light to also say “Goodbye.” Because it is the last moment of the play, the words “Goodnight” can be understood as being both directed to Phillip within the play and to the audience who is also set to leave the theater. Like the members of the collective, who say “Goodbye” but don’t leave, the past, be it in the form of the momentous events of Canadian history depicted in the play that centered around a newspaper called *Body Politic*, remains as well with both Phillip and the play’s audience. Because Josh is also included in this last moment, saying “Goodbye” but not leaving (in fact, Josh arrives to say “Goodbye”), a more recent past remains with Phillip and the play’s audience as well. For Phillip within the play, Josh embodies the most recent past, and for the audience, the play that they just witnessed is the most recent past. Both these recent pasts stick with Phillip and the audience respectively. Because the audience must reckon with both pasts, *Body Politic* as a political newspaper that documented Canadian LGBT history and *Body Politic* as a play that was just witnessed, the audience has a common experience, either engaged with pedagogically or nostalgically, that performatively constitutes them into a community.

I attended performances of *Body Politic* and *The Gay Heritage Project* with a friend of mine who my partner met at the Y on College Street in Toronto who is eighty-two years old. As I sat next to him in both performances, I had a very palpable sense of a divide between the nostalgic and pedagogical effects of these plays. Over the course of our friendship, he had taught me so much about the history of gay life in Toronto as he nostalgically reminisced about his past. After *Body Politic*, he remarked that the political newspaper was like “Someone had opened a door open wide,” and that they gay

community was forever changed. His nostalgic indulgence at the theater, that reminded him of when a newspaper threw the doors wide open for the gay community, was a pedagogical experience that threw the doors wide open for me, as a member of the gay community in Canada, in the present, and in the past.