

ABSTRACT

Title of Dissertation: 'THAT WASN'T JUST A PARTY:' RECONSIDERING
THE PLAYS OF ROBERT CHESLEY

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“That Wasn’t Just A Party: Reconsidering The Plays of Robert Chesley” is a reclamation project that is placing Robert Chesley as a significant voice of Gay and Sexual Liberation in the Post-Stonewall gay theatrical canon. As the majority of his plays were both unproduced and unpublished, this project serves to introduce a contemporary, mainstream audience to the dramatic writings of Robert Chesley. Chesley is best known for writing the first full-length AIDS play to be produced in the United States, *Night Sweats*. Unlike his contemporaries, Larry Kramer and William Hoffman, Chesley never saw his work cross-over into the commercial mainstream in part because of his commitment to staging graphic gay sex scenes. Sadly, Robert Chesley would become a victim of the AIDS crisis, dying in 1990.

The political and artistic ideologies represented by Chesley’s works are currently under-acknowledged within the gay American theatre canon. By exploring Robert Chesley and the way his work addressed the ideals of Sexual Liberation I am contributing

to the discourse of gay cultural criticism and gay theatre history. The current gay theatre canon lacks a figure that represented this political ideology within his theatrical texts.

‘THAT WASN’T JUST A PARTY.’ RECONSIDERING THE PLAYS OF ROBERT
CHESLEY

By

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Finally, I have to recognize the most important figure in this process—Robert Chesley. I am a fan of *Inside the Actor’s Studio* and at the end of each episode the guest is asked: “If heaven exists, what would you like to hear God say when you arrive at the pearly

gates?” My answer: “Robert Chesley has a table and bottle of Pinot Noir and girl, does he have some stories for you!”

Introduction

The Thing You Need To Know Is, It's All About Sex

Introduction

Years ago, when I was a Masters student, I was chatting about gay theater and popular culture with a friend. He mentioned a play that was full of “in your face” sex—he thought it was “right up my’ alley.” I asked for the title: “It’s called *Night Sweats* and it’s by this guy named Robert Chesley.” I had never heard of this writer, but I ordered a copy of the play and was stunned upon reading it. *Night Sweats* was unlike any play I had ever read. I was in the midst of writing my thesis on Larry Kramer’s *The Normal Heart* and, to me, *Night Sweats* was everything that Kramer’s play was not. Chesley’s text was funny, heartbreaking without being manipulative, and incredibly explicit—it included mutual masturbation, oral sex, and anal sex in the stage directions. I then read one of Chesley’s other plays, *Jerker*. Like *Night Sweats*, *Jerker* also placed gay sex front and center. I continued my reading with *The Dog Plays*, powerfully sad AIDS plays that still retained the element of the sensual. Then I hit a wall—there were no more plays that I could find via Internet searches or through Inter-Library loan. Even the literature exploring the gay male theatrical canon barely mentioned Chesley. While he was afforded some minor mention as the author of the first full-length AIDS play produced in the U.S. (*Night Sweats*), he was a background figure compared to his peers, Larry Kramer and William Hoffman. Were these three plays—*Night Sweats*, *Jerker*, and *The Dog Plays*—the sum total of Chesley’s playwriting career? Why was there so little discussion of his staging of gay sex—a shocking device—considering that he was writing in the early 1980s?

There had to be more to Robert Chesley—and there was. Through a Google search I discovered that a foundation had been established in Chesley's memory. The foundation's website included a complete list of plays written by Chesley and, to my surprise, there were nearly thirty plays listed. Victor Bumbalo was listed as the main point of contact for the foundation and I reached out to him via e-mail. Thankfully, he responded and was generous enough to send me a list of the items that had been archived following Chesley's death. All of Chesley's plays, journals, and other writings had been archived in the San Francisco Gay and Lesbian Historical Society. I went to San Francisco, sat in the Historical Society's reading room surrounded by boxes, reading plays that had never been published and most had never been performed. Sitting in that archive, I realized that I had an incredible opportunity. I would analyze and contextualize a broad swath of Robert Chesley's plays and in doing so, argue for his place in the gay male theatrical canon.

Robert Chesley dramatized, in graphic detail, gay sex and always presented the gay sexual culture as transformative and spiritual. He believed that sexual expression was at the heart of gay community formation. This celebration of gay sex stopped being part of the dialogue when the AIDS crisis began decimating the gay community. However, once the initial scourge of AIDS lessened, through education and treatment, gay sexual culture took a backseat, particularly in the political realm, to more mainstream issues of marriage and military service. A gay sexual culture still existed but was not as central to the gay community and the cultural texts being produced. By exploring Robert Chesley and his plays I am contributing to the discourse of gay cultural criticism that is trying to reintroduce the ideals of Sexual Liberation into our understanding of gay cultural history.

There is another inspiration for this project: Larry Kramer. I have always admired Kramer for his indefatigable manner, blunt style, and theatrical works. Kramer's importance to gay culture and gay theatre is undeniable. For example, his play, *The Normal Heart*, was a game changer in terms of how the politics of AIDS was perceived. In 2011 *The Normal Heart* was revived, to great acclaim, on Broadway. In 2014 many of the same cast members who had appeared in that celebrated revival returned to their roles in an HBO film adaptation of the play—a cinematic realization of Kramer's script that had long been in the making. The adaptation was, in the opinion of many critics, worth the wait. Kramer wrote the screenplay, adapted his own play, and the film version added greater depth to some of the play's subplots—particularly in regards to Ned, Kramer's alter-ego, and his doomed relationship with his dying lover and his fractured relationship with his brother. The film shows the characters as sexual men—including an explicit love scene between two of the characters, a scene that does not appear in the theatrical text. But one cannot ignore that nearly thirty years had passed between the original play and the film—Kramer had grown as an author.¹

Before the film adaptation the play had been awarded the American Theatre Wing's Tony award for best revival of a play, Larry Kramer made a statement in his acceptance speech that both angered me and made my commitment to asserting Robert Chesley's significance that much greater. He said: "To gay people everywhere, whom I

¹For critical response see Hank Steuver, "'The Normal Heart': Then and Now, An Outrage That's Still Relevant," *The Washington Post* May 23, 2014; Neil Genzlinger, "Raging Amid Tears in a Gathering Storm," *The New York Times*, May 22, 2014; Mary McNamara, "'The Normal Heart' Still a Powerful Call to Action," *Los Angeles Times*, May 22, 2014. For the long road to bring *The Normal Heart* to the screen see Patrick Healy, "A Lion Still Roars, With Gratitude," *The New York Times*, May 21, 2014. The film received sixteen Emmy nominations. However, it only won two awards—albeit one was the top prize—for Best Miniseries or TV Movie. The second award was for make-up.

love so, '*The Normal Heart*' is our history."² There are many things wrong with this statement, not the least being that *The Normal Heart* is an autobiographical drama where Kramer casts himself as the hero. However, the most problematic aspect of Kramer's assertion is that *The Normal Heart* expresses Kramer's anti-sex ideology, which he had held prior to the AIDS crisis.³ Therefore the play does not speak to *all* gay men. Many gay men, including Robert Chesley, vehemently rejected Kramer's view of Sexual Liberation as self-destructive and selfish.

Robert Chesley's plays also represent a history of gay men, however, unlike Kramer, Chesley's alternate view of gay culture has been routinely dismissed or relatively forgotten by theatre historians. By analyzing and contextualizing the plays of Robert Chesley, I am arguing that Chesley promoted a sex-positive, liberationist ideology throughout his writing career. The goal of this project is to explore the cultural and historical context of Chesley's plays that offer a narrative of Sexual Liberation, Gay Liberation, and erotic culture thereby addressing the gaps in the gay male theatrical legacy. Discussing Chesley's plays, and the political views expressed within them, expands our understanding of how gay theatre featured ideologies of gay liberation and erotic freedom. Chesley's plays reveal the important role that sexual expression played in both gay community formation and the creation of gay theatre, and reveals how the staging of sex could be used to promote liberationist ideals.

Theoretical Frame

² Larry Kramer, "Acceptance Speech for Best Revival of a Play," 2011 American Theatre Wing Tony Awards, <http://broadwayworld.com/article/2011-Tony-Awards-The-Speeches-Updating-Live-20110612>.

³ Larry Kramer's anti-sex views were a source of conflict between he and Chesley prior to the AIDS crisis. Kramer's views, and Chesley's responses are discussed in-depth in Chapter One.

While this project is focused on positioning Chesley within the gay theatrical canon, contextualizing his plays within the gay culture they were responding to is a necessity. This project has been buoyed by the work of gay cultural historians, particularly those who have focused on analyzing the sexual culture. The works of Michael Bronski, Eric Rofes, Patrick Moore, and Michael Warner, in particular, help to create a frame on which I have built my analysis of Robert Chesley's dramas. These writers emerged in the wake of the AIDS crisis and each historicizes the gay male sexual culture that had been minimized due to AIDS. But they did not simply historicize the culture. They argued that the gay male sexual culture had transformed itself into the culture of care and support that provided resources and education for gay men during the height of the AIDS crisis. Each of these writers celebrates gay male sexual culture and posits that the gay community would be well served by remembering the culture as it was and creating a post-AIDS sexual culture that would blend the erotic, the spiritual, and the political. Their efforts of historicization and reclamation makes these contemporary texts useful to understand the culture to which Chesley was a contributor

For example, in 1998's *The Pleasure Principle*, Michael Bronski, explicated the issue of sexual expression in gay cultural texts. Bronski wrote: "Gay culture...is simply how gay people live their lives: how they have sex, where they socialize...[gay] Identity is defined by sexual attraction to members of the same gender, sexuality is, necessarily, at the heart of gay culture."⁴ Michael Bronski also coins the term 'pleasure principle,' which he argues as a central element to contemporary gay culture.

⁴ Michael Bronski, *The Pleasure Principle : Sex, Backlash, and the Struggle for Gay Freedom* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1998)

Popular entertainment also allows us to contemplate aspects of our lives we may normally not feel permitted to address: sexual desire, pleasurable impulses, forbidden fantasies... We are permitted for the moment to experience what we are not allowed to experience... where the reality principle gives way, if only for a time, to the pleasure principle.⁵

Bronski, in his use of the term, is addressing pleasure that challenges society's repressive structures. Popular entertainment is at its core about seeking pleasure, whether it comes through catharsis at the end of a tragedy or orgasm at the conclusion of pornography. Chesley's texts reflect Bronski's 'pleasure principle' because many of them intended to stoke their audiences' desires, and sought to inspire both political and sexual passions.

Robert Chesley was heavily invested in advocating for the survival of pleasure, even as the AIDS crisis led to renewed crackdowns on gay sexual expression. Until his own diagnosis he celebrated gay sexual culture within his dramatic works. The same sense of joy Chesley had found in gay sex permeates Eric Rofes' *Reviving the Tribe: Regenerating Gay Men's Sexuality and Culture in the Ongoing Epidemic* (1994). His book, about reawaking the sexual impulse within the gay male community, provides a personal and theoretical insight into the psychological and emotional impact of the AIDS crisis on the gay community. He wrote:

We inhabit social worlds... that rarely understand or value sexual expression, so it is difficult to remember an era that attempted to conceptualize and experience sex in new ways. For a brief moment, a class of gay and bisexual men daringly entered a world that explored dynamic erotic questions. We crossed an initial bridge to claim desire for other men, only to find a second span whose crossing offered entry into an unexplored real of sexuality itself.⁶

⁵ Ibid

⁶ Eric Rofes, *Reviving the Tribe: Regenerating Gay Men's Sexuality and Culture in the Ongoing Epidemic* (New York: Haworth Press, 1994)

Reviving the Tribe contextualizes the gay male sexual culture of the post-Stonewall/pre-AIDS period in terms of how it shaped gay politics, culture, and the creation of a gay community. Additionally, he argues that the response to AIDS could not have occurred without the structures of support which had served the gay male sexual culture as they were transformed into structures of education and care-taking. Rofes also notes the important role that shame played in both the creation and historical revision of gay male sexual culture:

Gay male liberation of the 1970s emphasized the celebration of gay male sexuality...and the exploration of new ways of bonding. Sexual experimentation was a means whereby gay and bisexual men could free themselves of societally-imposed notions of guilt and shame around homoeroticism.⁷

Rofes's statement unequivocally argues that the sexual expression of the 1970s gay male culture was important to the creation of a gay community that could come together and fight against the AIDS crisis. Men created bonds of camaraderie through their experiences in gay sexual spaces and through their sexual intimacy, no matter how short-lived, they forged moments of connection. It was in this culture that Chesley found his voice as an artist and an activist.

The role of gay shame in the diminishment of texts celebrating gay male sexual culture is at the heart of Patrick Moore's appropriately titled *Beyond Shame: Reclaiming the Abandoned History of Radical Gay Sexuality* (2004). Moore's central thesis frames this project of reclamation and provides my main impetus to connect Robert Chesley's texts with a contemporary Liberationist text rather than simply situating him within the archive. Moore argues:

⁷ Ibid

Because of a lack of continuity between generations and a disavowal of our sexual history, the gay community has arrived at its present state: disassociated assimilation that excludes all except those leading the most traditional of lives... This is not a belief that we must return to sexual extremism; it is more a plea for the gay community not to abandon its own history... We are not shamed by our explorations. We are strengthened.⁸

Patrick Moore provides an important bridge between the legacy of gay male sexual culture and the assimilationist/liberationist debates historicized in my project. Moore's notion of shame, the powerful source of self-destruction Chesley dramatized in several of his works, continues to be at the center of the assimilation/liberation schism.

I would like to briefly discuss gay shame and how this project is contributing to an alternate context of the term. In recent years the term has been complicated within the world of queer studies and I would be remiss if I did not acknowledge that articulation of gay shame. Jack Halberstam, in his 2003 essay "Shame and White Gay Male Masculinity," brilliantly broke down the problematic nature of gay shame within the arena of queer studies. Most significantly, he noted, gay shame was often used in the formation of identity politics, particularly those politics which diminished the experiences of women and queers of color. In other words, gay shame was used to privilege the experiences of white gay men. Halberstam wrote:

gay shame has a tendency both in its academic and in its activist incarnations to become a totalizing narrative that balances out the consumer focus on 'gay pride' with faux-radical chic of white gay shame; because of its binary structure, shame/pride then seems to have covered the entirety of gay experience.⁹

⁸ Patrick Moore, *Beyond Shame: Reclaiming the Abandoned History of Radical Gay Sexuality* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2004)

⁹ Judith Halberstam, "Shame and White Gay Masculinity," *Social Text* 23, no.3-4/84-85, 2005

Halberstam continues by critiquing how those caught in the spiral of gay shame resolve their issues, and move into the other side of the binary, (pride), through the reproduction of gender-normative, masculine presentations—often at the expense of feminized and racialized bodies.¹⁰ I fully agree with Halberstam’s thesis but, for the purposes of this project, I am thinking about shame through the lens proscribed by Moore and other gay sexual critics. I am focused on examining the past experiences, explored in Chesley’s plays, but not through the lens of shame as has been the primary way of exploring the Sexual Liberation in the aftermath of AIDS. It is not about reinforcing the binary of shame/pride, but instead about acknowledging the important impact of the Sexual Liberation movement, and the culture it produced, as significant to gay cultural history.

Like Moore, gay historian and Sexual Liberationist, Michael Warner, also confronted this debate and discusses how the political divide has been recast within the historical and contemporary discourse as ‘good’ versus ‘bad’ gay men. In his 1999 text, *The Trouble with Normal: Sex, Politics, and the Ethics of Queer Life*, Warner explored contemporary ideas of sexuality, politics, and community. He frames this ‘good’ versus ‘bad’ gay conflict as he reflects on what he views as the overwhelming gay cultural focus on marriage:

Marriage, in short, would make for good gays – the kind who would not challenge the norms of straight culture, who would not flaunt sexuality, and who would not insist on living different from ordinary folk. These behavioristic arguments for gay marriage assume that marriage as a social institution...will modify “behavior” and that a culture of “gay bars, pornography, and one-night stands” is desperately in need of virtue.¹¹

¹⁰ Ibid

¹¹ Michael Warner, *The Trouble with Normal: Sex, Politics, and the Ethics of Queer Life* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1999)

Warner's argument is that the argument for gay marriage is, in some ways, a rehashing of the old debate regarding "respectability," an issue that has been a source of tension since the Homophile movement. The AIDS crisis understandably turned the gay community's political attention away from sex and towards survival. Warner believes that the almost singular focus on marriage equality is less about civil rights and more about 'domesticating' a gay community that could potentially be tempted back towards celebrating erotic freedom. The creation of the good gay/bad gay dichotomy is not unlike what Larry Kramer had attempted to do with *Faggots* back in the 1970s.

Warner, like Moore, also focuses on the role that shame has played in this debate. He describes "The Ethics of Sexual Shame" and states that shame is used to enforce 'normative' values and behaviors. Warner argues that gay marriage is being championed, at the cost of all other gay community issues. This is in order to cement the existence of "good" gays. They will then gain acceptance and 'normality' at the expense of those gay men who choose to reject marriage or, worse, embrace promiscuity, thus labeling them as 'bad' gays. By critiquing what he views as the trend towards assimilation. Warner sees the creation of "good" gays and "bad" gays within debates about gay culture and the call for a renewed commitment to the ideals of Sexual Liberation.

Writers such as Michael Bronski, Michael Warner, Eric Rofes, and Patrick Moore provide the historical framework of Gay and Sexual Liberation which support this project's assertion that Chesley's absence from the gay male theatrical legacy is, in part, due to the diminished impact that gay sexual culture had on cultural texts produced during that time period. Cindy Patton, an AIDS activist and health researcher who wrote one of the first texts to explore how science and public health policy was inadequate in

confronting the AIDS crisis, noted: "It is now commonly believed — among gay men as much as in society at large — that gay male sexual culture before AIDS was chaotic, amoral, and thoughtless."¹² Chesley's works exist as an archival counter-narrative, reflecting the history of gay male sexual culture, and by exploring his plays we can see how they speak to the gay male culture's renewed debates over sexual expression. Rofes, Warner Moore, and Bronski have worked to reclaim the gay sexual culture of the 1970s and to argue for its significance in creating gay culture. Chesley's plays provide examples of dramatic texts that sought to privilege erotic freedom and gay male sexual culture in the midst of the AIDS crisis.

Literature Review

There have been three significant contributions to discussions of Robert Chesley; two are dissertations that feature analyses of Chesley's works: Graham Anthony Dixon's *The Plays of AIDS*, published in 1997 and David J. Sorrells' *The Evolution of AIDS as Subject Matter in Select American Dramas*, published in 2000. There is also an M.F.A thesis, in Theatre Studies, entitled *Responding To The Plague Years: AIDS Theatre in the 1980s* (2009) by Jason Campbell. While these three projects offer the most in-depth examinations of Robert Chesley's plays, they do not offer explorations of Chesley's works beyond those texts that have already been discussed in other gay theatre histories: *Night Sweats*, *Jerker*, and *The Dog Plays*. In addition, their discussions focused solely on his published texts and each focused upon Chesley's work as an AIDS playwright and did not address his pro-sex political views.

¹² Cindy Patton, *Inventing AIDS* (New York: Routledge, 1989)

Campbell's thesis proved the most valuable to my dissertation project because of its rich biographical information, including interviews with Chesley's sister and his surviving friends. I am indebted to the groundwork Campbell provided; without this text I would not have the rich understanding of Chesley's early life nor the insight into how personal events shaped him as a playwright. Aside from the biographical insights, Campbell's analyses of Chesley's writings do not go beyond summaries of *Night Sweats*, *Jerker*, and *The Dog Plays*.

Dixon's work uses the works of critical theorists, most notably Jean Baudrillard and Jacques Derrida, to deconstruct the various tactics theatre artists have used to dramatize AIDS and the experiences of People with AIDS (PWA). He devotes an entire chapter to Chesley, but—similar to Campbell—focuses exclusively on *Night Sweats*, *Jerker*, and *The Dog Plays*. Dixon's work offers an intriguing critical study of how Chesley's works offered hope and positive images of gay men amidst the destruction and plight of AIDS. His study of *Dog Plays* is insightful as he bridges the imagery and themes of *Night Sweats* and *Jerker*, written when Chesley was still healthy, with the darker tones and sadness of *Dog Plays*, written from the perspective of the dying.

Sorrells' work on Chesley focuses only on *Night Sweats* in the context of early AIDS plays, along with Larry Kramer's *The Normal Heart* and William M. Hoffman's *As Is*. Sorrells' analysis of *Nights Sweats* consists of a plot summary.

Rob Baker's *The Art of AIDS* positions Robert Chesley as an early AIDS dramatist alongside William M. Hoffman and Larry Kramer. Baker provides in-depth analysis of both the Kramer and the Hoffman text, but his discussions of *Night Sweats*, *Jerker*, and *Dog Plays* do not go beyond summarizing plots. Additionally, he does not

contextualize Chesley's writings while Kramer and Hoffman's texts are viewed through the lenses of political and social discourse. He acknowledges that *Night Sweats* highlighted sexuality, unlike the AIDS plays of his peers, but argues that the erotic nature of the play overshadow any intended message. To be fair, Baker's work is an exploration of how various artists responded to AIDS and his section on theatre is relatively brief.

One cannot discuss contemporary gay male theatre history without mentioning John Clum's seminal survey of gay drama, *Still Acting Gay*. Clum is one of the only theatre historians to recognize Chesley's uniqueness in depicting gay desire upon the stage. He wrote:

Few playwrights in the history of drama have experienced or depicted the world as sensually as has Robert Chesley. Even at their saddest, his plays have an erotic charge that is missing in the more discursive AIDS plays—one might say in most drama.¹³

Like Baker and others, Clum limits his discussion to *Night Sweats*, *Jerker*, and *Dog Plays*. However, Clum does contextualize Chesley as representing liberationist philosophies within his classification within the AIDS sub-genre.

David Román's *Acts of Intervention* is a rigorous examination of how the gay male theatrical community responding to the AIDS crisis. In his discussion of early theatre responses to AIDS, Román recognizes *Night Sweats* as one of the earliest examples of AIDS drama. Unlike other analyses of the play, Román's treatment identifies Chesley as a pro-Sexual Liberation writer. However, he views this philosophical point-of-view as the reason why Chesley's works are not significant to understanding AIDS or gay theatre. Román argues that the play was out of touch with the needs of the gay community and nihilistic in its vision which led to its lack of success: "The combined

¹³ John M Clum, *Still Acting Gay: Male Homosexuality in Modern Drama* (New York: St. Martin's Griffin, 2000)

effects of the play's nonrealist form with the play's graphic display of sadomasochism, suicide, and despair alienated audiences."¹⁴ *Night Sweats* was performed in both San Francisco and New York, and was reviewed by multiple gay newspapers, yet Román only cites one writer's response. Román ultimately believes that the play failed when compared to other early AIDS plays. Nevertheless, in the final sentence of his analysis, Román softens the harsher critiques he has applied to *Night Sweats* by asserting that Chesley's work was merely out of sync with the audience. He wrote: "In his attempt to represent the fears and anxieties of many urban gay men in the uncensored vernacular of gay male sexual culture, Chesley was misunderstood...His interest in tapping into the gay psyche...was underappreciated at the time."¹⁵ There are also texts addressing both gay male theatre and AIDS theatre that never mention Chesley beyond putting him into a list of playwrights of the period. This is the case for Ian Lucas's *Impertinent Decorum*, an examination of American and British gay theatre from Oscar Wilde through 1994. Cindy J. Kistenberg's *AIDS, Social Change, and Theatre: Performance as Protest* only includes *The Normal Heart* and *As Is* as worthy of inclusion in a discussion of gay theatrical response to AIDS.

These existing scholarly treatments each offer insight into Robert Chesley, but they ultimately provide their greatest support for this project by reinforcing the need to recover Chesley's unpublished works from the archive. It is by reading these 'undiscovered' plays—and reading them in tandem with his more familiar works—that his total contributions to the gay theatrical legacy can be understood.

¹⁴ David Román, *Acts of Intervention: Performance, Gay Culture, and AIDS* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1998)

¹⁵ Ibid

Chesley's best known plays have always been discussed in terms of either how they compare with the works of his contemporaries, or their significance to AIDS theatre. There has never been an exploration of his texts as reflecting the ideals of the Liberation movements or even how his AIDS plays critiqued the anti-sex rhetoric taking hold in the gay community. By analyzing Chesley's AIDS plays in the context of his political views, and critically addressing his staging of gay sex, my dissertation reveals how Chesley differed from his more well-known contemporaries. This project also seeks to expand Robert Chesley's role within the gay male theatrical canon beyond his work as an AIDS playwright. The majority of Chesley's plays were comments and critiques on the cultural shifts occurring within the gay community. His absence from scholarship addressing the gay theatrical legacy, particularly his role as a Liberationist playwright, is an unfortunate side effect of the fact that the majority of his plays were never produced or published. However, by bringing his plays out of the archive, we can expand our breadth of knowledge about the gay male theatrical legacy, of which Chesley was an important voice, and perhaps finally bring his works to the stage.

The Gay Theatrical Canon and Chesley's Contemporaries

Before looking at the gay theatrical movement Chesley joined, it is necessary to clarify what is meant by the term 'gay theatre.'¹⁶ William Hoffman, in his introduction to a 1979 anthology entitled *Gay Plays*, defined gay plays in very broad terms, "one whose central figure or figures are homosexual or one in which homosexuality is a main theme.

¹⁶ I have always been a fan of the playwright Robert Patrick's definition of a gay play: "a gay play is a play that has sex with other plays of the same gender." Michael Paller, "Larry Kramer and Gay Theater," in *We Must Love One Another or Die: The Life and Legacies of Larry Kramer*, ed. Lawrence D. Mass (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1997)

A gay play is not necessarily written by a homosexual or for homosexuals.”¹⁷ In *Impertinent Decorum*, an exploration of how gay men have used the language and ‘maneuvers’ of theatre in shaping contemporary queer culture, Ian Lucas problematizes Hoffman’s definitions. “[there is] a significant difference between ‘gay theater’ and ‘the appearance of gay characters in mainstream plays...’ To reject the politics of gay drama completely is to claim that (homo)sexuality is not shaped by...society’s material structures.”¹⁸ Hoffman had an incredibly open view of gay theatre that would have allowed numerous works to classify as gay drama, even those with anti-gay views at their core. In contrast, Lucas had an incredibly limited view of the genre, namely aligning the cultural with political. Neither author finds the inclusion of the erotic as fundamental to identifying a text as an example of gay theater.

Richard Hall’s definition of what makes a gay play is a synthesis of both Lucas and Hoffman. He identified four elements he believed were necessary to constitute gay theatre. These are: community, identity, subject matter, and audience. Hall believed gay theatre must acknowledge the existence of a gay community. Connected to the recognition of community is identity, primarily an identity tied into liberation. Subject matter, for Hall, was the representation of sexuality onstage, particularly the representation of gay desire and sexual expression. Finally, audience is the gay community for whom the author creates their works, and inspires their inclusion of the

¹⁷ William M. Hoffman, Introduction to *Gay Plays: The First Collection* (New York: Avon, 1979); Robert Chesley derided Hoffman’s anthology, taking particular issue with Hoffman’s acknowledged exclusion of play texts deemed ‘pro-homosexual propaganda plays.’ He argued that the broad definition of a gay play offered by Hoffman would include works that function as anti-gay—presenting gay characters as villains or deviants.

¹⁸ Ian Lucas, *Impertinent Decorum: Gay Theatrical Maneuvers* (London: Cassell, 1994)

previous three elements.¹⁹ Richard Hall's rubric aligns with Robert Chesley's own vision of what gay theatre could and should be.

Chesley believed that the important way to think about gay drama was whether texts were 'pro-gay.'²⁰ He wrote: "there are a lot of truths that need to be told, and I expect there always will be. There is a need for plays of all types, from joyful to sorrowful."²¹ For Chesley, plays that spread the message that 'gay was good' acted as endorsements of the gay community, and he believed this message was one that needed to be heard by the audience.

When Robert Chesley began writing for the theatre he was inserting himself into a flourishing gay male theatrical movement. Chesley was very much a post-Stonewall Liberationist playwright and a voice representing San Francisco's gay community. The majority of significant gay plays during this period were set in and produced in New York.²² The distinction of Chesley as a voice for San Francisco is not a minor one and it may have had some impact on his success within the larger theatre scene within New York. The gay communities of New York and San Francisco are distinct—the latter very much identifies as a gay ghetto while the former includes the gay community as a culture within a culture that defines the New York melting pot. The experiences of gay people in San Francisco were completely different from those of their New York brethren pre-Stonewall Riots. Following World War II, San Francisco attracted those with same-sex desire, welcomed them, and these individuals began to form a new community. It was in

¹⁹ Hall, Richard, "The Elements of Gay Theatre" in *Three Plays for a Gay Theater & Three Essays* (San Francisco: Grey Fox Press, 1983); qtd in Ian Lucas, *Impertinent Decorum: Gay Theatrical Maneuvers* (London: Cassell, 1994)

²⁰ Robert Chesley, "On Not Ignoring Our History," Undated Manuscript, GLBT Historical Archive, San Francisco

²¹ Robert Chesley, "Gay Theatre for the 90's," Undated Manuscript, GLBT Historical Archive, San Francisco

²² Such plays are: *The Madness of Lady Bright*, *The Haunted Host*, *The Ritz*, *Boys in the Band*, *Street Theater*, *Torch Song Trilogy*, *As Is*, and *The Normal Heart*,

San Francisco that the early organizations fighting for gay civil rights would take shape and have their initial successes at the local level. During the early 1960s, when the police began cracking down on the community, the gay population in the city fought back and refused to live quietly—the police backed down in the face of public, political, and press scrutiny. These experiences were wildly different from those in New York where the police targeted gay men and lesbians indiscriminately and the idea of publicly coming out was unheard of—until Stonewall. This essentially means that San Francisco, while bolstered by the events at Stonewall, used that moment to strengthen an existing gay community and culture. In New York, the Stonewall riot was the beginning of a gay community coalescing around politics and culture.²³

Understandably, the different social and political histories of San Francisco and New York are also reflected in the early gay theatre communities in the two cities. New York's avant-garde and underground theatre scene, which would become Off-Off and Off-Broadway, produced gay plays but aimed them at a mixed audience. This was evident with the Caffe Cino, which saw the premieres of some of the earliest gay plays, such as *The Haunted Host* and *The Madness of Lady Bright*, or LaMaMa Experimental Theatre Club, which supported gay artists, particularly after the closure of Caffe Cino in 1968. But these spaces were devoted to producing new and exciting theatre—not just gay

²³ See Margaret Cruikshank, *The Gay and Lesbian Liberation Movement*, (New York: Psychology Press, 1992) and John D'Emilio, *Making Trouble*, ((New York: Psychology Press, 1992) for their explorations of how San Francisco emerged as the 'gay mecca' in the post-war United States. Christine Hanhardt's recent book, *Safe Space: Gay Neighborhood History and the Politics of Violence* (Durham: Duke UP, 2013) explores the creation of gay spaces within these two cities and how urban planning, gentrification, and policing formed what we now understand as the gay sections of San Francisco and New York.

theatre. In contrast, Theatre Rhinoceros in San Francisco, which began producing plays in 1977, was committed to be a gay theatre for a gay audience.²⁴

The American gay male drama entered the theatrical mainstream in 1968 with the off-Broadway productions of Mart Crowley's *The Boys in the Band*. For this project, understanding the play is significant because it was a text for which Chesley had very strong feelings thereby providing Chesley with material to respond to in his own plays. While he understood its importance, he reacted negatively to any revivals—he felt that the play did not present positive images of gay men to a post-Liberation audience.²⁵ Debuting one year prior to the Stonewall Riots and the birth of the Gay Liberation movement, the play was both a commercial success and a source of controversy. The significance of *The Boys in the Band* as a revolutionary text within the gay theatre canon cannot be diminished. To put it quite simply, *The Boys in the Band* was the first commercial gay play staged for a public audience. It was not addressing homosexuality through subtext, it was not presenting homosexuality as an illness or a threat, nor did it end in tragedy with suicide or murder. For the first time, gay characters were depicted onstage as regular people, with regular problems, and were depicted as being open and honest about their sexuality. Being gay was not the source of their unhappiness and at the curtain's close, everyone survived. The characters in *The Boys in the Band* are neurotic, unhappy, catty, and narcissistic—but they had those character flaws *and* they were gay;

²⁴ For further information on the missions of Caffè Cino and Theatre Rhinoceros see Wendell Stone, *Caffè Cino: The Birthplace of Off-Off Broadway* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2005) and Erik MacDonald's, "Theatre Rhinoceros: A Gay Company," *TDR* 33, no. 1 (Spring 1989).

²⁵ The most famous of Chesley's reactions was when he set up a fruit stand outside of San Francisco's Theatre Rhinoceros on the opening night of their *Boys in the Band* revival. Chesley sold tomatoes with the hope that theatre-goers would pelt the actors.

their flaws were not solely due to their sexuality.²⁶ These aspects of the play are what made it a revolutionary text in 1968.²⁷

The Boys in the Band was born out of the sense of unfairness over the lack of gay representation in the culture and one man's personal struggles with feelings of inadequacy. Mart Crowley, the playwright, found himself at a low point in the late 1960s. Suffering from depression he entered psychoanalysis, and from the insights he gained, he was able to explore his own personal issues, including his sexuality, in *The Boys in the Band*.²⁸

Around the same time that Crowley was struggling with his writing career he read an article by the *New York Times* theatre critic Stanley Kauffmann. The article, "Homosexual Drama and its Disguises," critiqued the three leading American playwrights of the time: Tennessee Williams, Edward Albee, and William Inge. Although Kauffman did not name the playwrights, he did note that all were homosexual and he asserted that all three were disguising homosexual themes and characters within their heterosexual characters. Kauffman argued that the playwrights presented distorted, and often grotesque, images of heterosexual marriages and family life.²⁹ Unsurprisingly, Kauffmann received both criticism and praise for his article, but most felt that he was unfairly attacking gay playwrights. Kauffmann then wrote a second article where he explained that he was not calling for these playwrights to stop writing, but rather he was opining that they should be free to explore their homosexuality and the lives of

²⁶ Both Harold and Michael identify by their religions, Jewish and Catholic respectively, and place the culture of their religion as partially responsible for their issues.

²⁷ John M Clum, *Still Acting Gay: Male Homosexuality in Modern Drama* (New York: St. Martin's Griffin, 2000)

²⁸ Crayton Robey, *Making the Boys*, 4th Row Films, 2011

²⁹ Stanley Kauffmann, "Homosexual Drama and Its Disguises," *New York Times*, 23 January 1966, sec 2, p 1.

homosexuals, just as heterosexual playwrights did.³⁰ Crowley took Kauffmann's second article as a challenge and began to write a play, based upon himself and his friends that made homosexual men the lead characters in a story about their lives and their issues. At the time, gay characters were either disguised, dead, or camp (the most prominent gay man in the mainstream culture was *Bewitched*'s Uncle Arthur, played by the mincing, but closeted, actor Paul Lynde). Crowley, by looking to his own experiences, and using the dialogue he heard from friends and fellow gay men, had a first draft of *The Boys in the Band* written in six weeks.³¹

The Boys in the Band takes place at a birthday party for Harold. Michael, the host, is an alcoholic and undergoing psychoanalysis, and he and Harold have a combative relationship. Harold's six closest friends are: Donald, who recently moved out of the city; Bernard, the play's only African-American character; Emory, the flamboyant 'life of the party;' and Larry and Hank, a couple in the midst of a fight regarding monogamy. The party is rounded out by the presence of the Cowboy—a male hustler who is Harold's birthday present—and Alan, Michael's friend from college who does not know that Michael is gay.

The plot of the play is essentially these men becoming more intoxicated and poking at each other's weaknesses and neuroses—becoming nastier to each other as the evening wears on. The sole heterosexual presence is Alan, who has left his wife and sought out Michael for reasons that remain unknown. Michael is convinced that Alan has come to confess his homosexuality. He knows that Alan had sex with Michael's college roommate, and creates a game to force this confession. When Alan takes his turn, he calls

³⁰ Stanley Kauffmann, "On the Acceptability of the Homosexual," *New York Times*, 6 February 1966, sec 2, p i .

³¹ Crayton Robey, *Making the Boys*, 4th Row Films, 2011

his wife and begins the process of reconciliation. The party ends with each of the men miserable, none more than Michael, who feels personally rejected by Alan. Harold viciously, and honestly, dissects Michael's despair as self-loathing.

You are a sad and pathetic man. You're a homosexual and you don't want to be. But there is nothing you can do to change it. Not all your prayers to your God, not all the analysis you can buy in all the years you've got left to live. You may very well be able to know a heterosexual life if you want it desperately enough—if you pursue it with the fervor that you annihilate—but you will always be homosexual as well. Always, Michael. Always. Until the day you die.³²

Harold exits with his gifts, including the Cowboy, and thanks everyone for the party. All of the friends exit except for Donald, who stays behind to support a shaken Michael. Donald breaks down himself, weeping as he wonders: "...If we . . . could just . . . not hate ourselves so much?"³³ Michael leaves the apartment as well, going to Mass, leaving Donald alone in the tatters of the birthday party.

The Boys in the Band, produced at the New Playwrights Union in New York, premiered in January of 1968. While the opening night was not sold-out, the second night of the play's run found patrons wrapped around the block to get tickets for the small venue—all on the word of mouth of those who had seen the production. By April the play had moved Off-Broadway and would run for over a thousand performances. Critical reception of the play was mixed. The *New York Times* reviewer, Clive Barnes, praised the drama as "the frankest treatment of homosexuality I have ever seen on stage."³⁴ Fellow gay playwright Edward Albee, and one of the writers critiqued by Kauffman, passed on

³² Mart Crowley, *The Boys in the Band*, in *Forbidden Acts: Pioneering Gay and Lesbian Plays of the Twentieth Century*, ed. Ben Hodges (New York: Applause, 2003)

³³ Ibid

³⁴ Clive Barnes, "Theatre: 'Boys in the Band' Opens Off Broadway," *New York Times*, April 15, 1968.

investing in the show. He felt that the play, while competent, was “ultimately damaging to gay respectability.”³⁵ In spite of this mixed reception, the play was a commercial success and quickly optioned to become a film. The entire original cast reunited for filming with a script adapted by Mart Crowley under the direction of emerging auteur William Friedkin. In an interesting coincidence, principal photography on *The Boys in the Band* began on June 28th 1969—only several miles from the Stonewall Riots occurring in Greenwich Village.³⁶

Stonewall, and the political movement that emerged from the turmoil, instantly preserved *The Boys in the Band* in cultural amber. The text, which had been such a zeitgeist moment in 1968 became a relic of pre-Stonewall thinking. The new Gay Liberation movement was insisting that “Gay Was Good,” and had no interest in a play that contained the line “show me a happy homosexual, and I’ll show you a gay corpse.”³⁷ Many of those gay men who had made the Off-Broadway production a great success turned against the film, including the Gay Liberation Front who led boycotts against theatres where it played.³⁸ And the theatrical production was also viewed through a new Post-Stonewall lens. Clive Barnes, *The New York Times* reviewer who had championed the play for its honesty, revisited the production in February of 1969 where he described it as a: “tragic play about wasted lives...Certainly among my friends and acquaintances there are homosexuals who are neither alcoholic, neurotic nor pathetic, and if they are not

³⁵ Crayton Robey, *Making the Boys*, 4th Row Films, 2011

³⁶ Ibid

³⁷ Mart Crowley, *The Boys in the Band*, in *Forbidden Acts: Pioneering Gay and Lesbian Plays of the Twentieth Century*, ed. Ben Hodges (New York: Applause, 2003)

³⁸ Crayton Robey, *Making the Boys*, 4th Row Films, 2011

as happy as everyone else, they are putting on a remarkably good act.”³⁹ It was not that the representations of gay men in *The Boys in the Band* had suddenly become false but they were the kind of self-loathing and miserable gay men whose presence seemed out of touch with the new cultural push for positive images of gay lives. When the play premiered in 1968 it marked the first time that gay characters were represented on stage and *none* of them died. Even though many of the characters were unlikeable, they still showed gay men as human beings with flaws and feelings—instead of predators, clowns, or corpses. When a community is starved to see themselves represented it is not surprising that they will overlook the problems of the text. In the aftermath of Stonewall, the politics of gay representation changed rapidly. *The Boys in the Band* achieved its canonical status because it was the ‘trailblazer.’ It is a play that was revolutionary when it premiered and it was the first mainstream representation of gay lives where gay men’s experiences were the focus of the play and every gay character was still alive at the end of the play. Because of the sudden cultural shift that occurred not long after the play’s premiere, *The Boys in the Band* instantly became a period piece. The other role that Crowley’s play had within the gay theatrical canon is that it became the play against which writers created anti-thesis texts. Gay playwrights recognized that Crowley had opened the door by putting gay lives onstage and, post-Stonewall, they began to focus on presenting honest, liberated gay characters in the theatre.

Arguably, one of the most significant plays of post-Stonewall gay theatre was Harvey Fierstein’s 1982, Pulitzer Prize winning drama, *Torch Song Trilogy*.⁴⁰ The

³⁹ Clive Barnes, “‘The Boys in the Band’ is Still a Sad Gay Romp,” New York Times, February 18, 1969.

⁴⁰ The first of the plays, “The International Stud,” premiered in 1978. The full play, consisting of three acts, premiered in 1981

triptych of one-act plays found its initial success in gay and experimental theatre. Early versions were produced in workshop at the Theatre Rhino and it premiered at New York's LaMaMa Theatre. The show would eventually make the jump from Off-Off Broadway to Broadway, where it would play for over one thousand performances⁴¹ *Torch Song Trilogy* enjoyed incredible mainstream success, winning the Pulitzer Prize and the Tony Award for Best Play, as well as receiving critical acclaim in the gay press, including a review written by Robert Chesley.⁴² In the play, Fierstein explores one man's search for love, family, and acceptance while also living as a proud and liberated gay man. The character of Arnold suffers from neuroses (although it seems more tied to his Jewish identity rather than his sexuality), but unlike the men in *The Boys in the Band* he refuses to give into self-loathing or despair. Arnold faces multiple trials throughout the three plays, yet in the end he comes out on top. He is liberated and content in the life that he has created for himself. The first play, *The International Stud*, finds Arnold singing the blues as he searches for the type of man described in the torch songs he sings.⁴³ Arnold delivers his monologues about his search for love, which includes a comic pantomime of anonymous backroom sex, and during the course of the play he meets Ed. Ed seems to fulfill all of Arnold's desires, except that Ed is still ashamed of his sexuality. He relegates Arnold to the role of 'dirty secret' even as he claims to love him. At the conclusion of *The International Stud*, Arnold breaks up with Ed and chooses to love himself more than the fantasy of the torch song.

⁴¹ John M. Clum, *Still Acting Gay* (New York: St. Martin's Griffin, 2000)

⁴² Powers, Kim. "Fragments of a Trilogy: Harvey Fierstein's *Torch Song*." *Theater* 14, no. 2 (1983) The copy of Chesley's review in my possession does not have publication information but during that time Chesley was writing reviews for a variety of gay publications on the East Coast.

⁴³ A torch song is a love song, usually about longing—deriving its name from the singer 'holding a torch' for an unrequited love. Examples of torch songs include *Showboat*'s "Can't Help Loving That Man," *Funny Girl*'s "My Man," and *Dreamgirls*' "And I Am Telling You." Fierstein, Harvey, *Torch Song Trilogy* (New York: Gay Presses of New York, 1981)

The second play, *Fugue in a Nursery*, occurs several years later as Ed and Arnold reunite at the former's farmhouse. Ed, now living with a woman named Laurel, and Arnold, now in a relationship with teenage hustler Alan. Laurel and Arnold battle over Ed, even though Arnold has no intention of taking Ed back. Alan and Ed argue over what Arnold deserves before having their own sexual encounter.⁴⁴ The sexual tension and romantic manipulation was heightened when the four actors performed the play on a giant bed.⁴⁵ At the conclusion of *Fugue in a Nursery*, Arnold has moved forward from the loneliness he experienced at the end of *The International Stud* and he and Alan commit themselves to each other. Ed, still unable to love himself even though he wants Arnold, marries Laurel.⁴⁶

The final play, *Widows and Children First*, is the most conventional in terms of structure. A domestic drama occurring five years after the events of *Fugue in a Nursery*, the play centers on the most contentious relationship in Arnold's life: his relationship with his mother. The play opens with Arnold (now a widow following Alan's death at the hands of gay bashers), raising his adopted teenage son, David. Ed, now separated from Laurel, has returned to Arnold and sleeps on the sofa. Arnold's mother comes to visit and their confrontation represents Arnold's actualization as a proud gay man worthy of love and the full rights of any other member of society. When Arnold attempts to find common ground with his mother through the fact that both of them are widows, his mother rejects the comparison between the two relationships. "Are you trying to compare my marriage to you and Alan? Your father and I were married for thirty-five years...you

⁴⁴ Fierstein, Harvey, *Torch Song Trilogy* (New York: Gay Presses of New York, 1981)

⁴⁵ Powers, Kim. "Fragments of a Trilogy: Harvey Fierstein's *Torch Song*." *Theater* 14, no. 2 (1983)

⁴⁶ Fierstein, Harvey, *Torch Song Trilogy* (New York: Gay Presses of New York, 1981)

have the nerve to compare yourself to that?”⁴⁷ Arnold lashes back: “Ma, you had it easy. You have thirty-five years to remember, I have five. You had your children and friends to comfort you, I had me!”⁴⁸ Kim Powers, in an analysis of the play in *Theater*, succinctly identifies the tension wrought from this scene when he writes: “a new and difficult truthfulness has been uncovered. The eternal bond (Mother/Son) has become less important than the sexual, societal conflict.”⁴⁹ Fierstein offers an ultimatum to society through Arnold’s final statement to his mother: “There is nothing I need from anyone except love and respect. And anyone who can’t give me those two things has no place in my life.”⁵⁰ Subsequently, Arnold’s mother leaves and he is left alone listening to the radio, while a song David called in as a dedication to him begins to play. Surrounded by tokens of those he loves and who love him, including a tin of his mother’s cookies, Arnold has found what he began looking for back at *The International Stud*: love.⁵¹ Powers rightly notes the power of this final tableau: “Fierstein’s final, all-inclusive choice is the radical one: to exorcise anger, vengeance, and martyrdom that make minority drama didactic and exclusive.”⁵²

Reviews of *Torch Song Trilogy* highlighted the humanity and humor of the pieces and noted that it represented a great leap forward in its depiction of gay lives from the despairing figures in Crowley’s work. Stanley Kauffmann, the critic whose attack on gay playwrights writing ‘non-gay’ plays led to the emergence of a gay theatrical genre, faintly praised *Torch Song Trilogy*. He wrote “...not the first valuable, nonvindictive gay work,

⁴⁷ Ibid

⁴⁸ Ibid

⁴⁹ Powers, Kim. "Fragments of a Trilogy: Harvey Fierstein's Torch Song." *Theater* 14, no. 2 (1983)

⁵⁰ Fierstein, Harvey. *Torch Song Trilogy* (New York: Gay Presses of New York, 1981)

⁵¹ Powers, Kim. "Fragments of a Trilogy: Harvey Fierstein's Torch Song." *Theater* 14, no. 2 (1983)

⁵² Ibid

but it takes first place in the field so far.”⁵³ However, the empathetic figure of Arnold, and his relatable struggles, led some critics to try to downplay the ‘gayness’ of the play and instead argue that it spoke to a universal audience. Edwin Wilson, reviewing the play for the *Wall Street Journal* reserved his praise for *Widows and Children First* which he celebrated because, “Mr. Fierstein transcends the homosexual emphasis of the evening and makes Arnold a person with whom everyone can empathize.”⁵⁴

Fierstein himself responded to the mainstream voices trying to claim *Torch Song Trilogy* as a universal work that transcended the gay subject matter: “Up yours! You know, it’s gay! That you can take it and translate it for your own life is nice, but at last I don’t have to do the translating—you do.”⁵⁵ Robert Chesley, whose writing career began as a journalist and theatre reviewer, felt that *Torch Song Trilogy* was an example of what gay theatre could and should be. He felt the strength of Fierstein’s play was in the playwright’s combination of anger and compassion.⁵⁶ He wrote: “Fierstein’s gay characters do not direct their anger at other gays...and they do not direct their anger at themselves...free from self-oppression, simply insist that they be treated as fully human.”⁵⁷ Fierstein was, for Chesley, a gay playwright creating pro-gay theatre which captured the complicated lives gay men had in navigating their community, love lives, and relationships with their families. At the time he was viewing, and reviewing, *Torch Song Trilogy* the issues Fierstein was exploring would have resonated deeply with the newly out Chesley.

⁵³ Stanley Kauffmann, *Theater Criticisms* (New York: Performing Arts Journal Publications, 1983)

⁵⁴ Wilson, Edwin. “Fierstein Torch Song Trilogy.” *New York Theatre Critics Reviews* V44 N9. June 30, 1982.

⁵⁵ Rob Epstein and Jeffrey Friedman, *The Celluloid Closet*, Tristar Pictures, 1996

⁵⁶ Chesley, Robert “The Importance of Gay Lives: Harvey Fierstein’s *Torch Song Trilogy*,” undated manuscript in the Gay and Lesbian Historical Archive

⁵⁷ Ibid

Following *Torch Song Trilogy* the gay theatrical canon underwent a massive shift, as did the entire gay culture, when the AIDS crisis began to impact gay men's lives. The works of Crowley and Fierstein are examples of two of the best known gay male dramas to premiere during the height of Gay Liberation. During this time there were theatres devoted to presenting gay plays to a gay audience, such as the Theatre Rhino, but gay culture was also featured in mainstream productions. One of the stand-out contributors was Doric Wilson, who re-imagined the events leading up to the Stonewall Riots in *Street Theatre*. Wilson included a meta-commentary on how far representations of gay lives had come by featuring Michael and Donald, from *The Boys in the Band*, in a cameo. In Wilson's play the two men represent the assimilationist voices Stonewall attempted to silence.⁵⁸ Another playwright, Terrence McNally, would emerge as one of the major voices in contemporary gay male drama. McNally had early Broadway success with *The Ritz*, a farce set in a gay bathhouse, which would be adapted into a movie (which unfortunately failed at the box office). In the spring of 1985, two plays exploring the effect of AIDS on New York's gay community premiered in New York. William M. Hoffman's *As Is* and Larry Kramer's *The Normal Heart* were two very different plays, yet both authors brought gay men's lives, and their struggles with AIDS, to the stage with humanity and honesty.

William M. Hoffman had been writing for the gay theatre throughout the 1970s. In fact, Hoffman edited the first anthology of gay plays, published in 1978. However, in the anthology (which includes his own historical farce), he explicitly excludes what he

⁵⁸ At the play's finale the majority of characters, including gay men and lesbians, run to join the riots. Larry and Donald, who have been horrified by the 'loose' morals of the characters in Greenwich Village, scream "You faggots are revolting!" to which Wilson's characters respond: "You bet your sweet ass we are!" and join in the fight. Doric Wilson, "Street Theatre," in *Out Front: Contemporary Gay and Lesbian Plays* (New York: Grove Press, 1988)

dubbed “pro-homosexual propaganda” plays. He felt that such plays served to “buck up the spirits of the minority” rather than simply focusing on telling a good story with gay characters or gay themes.⁵⁹ Thus, it is ironic that Hoffman’s most successful and important play served both purposes. Hoffman recalled that the genesis of *As Is* began in 1981 when the first article about a strange new disease killing gay men appeared. “Mine was a classic case. My first symptom was feverish laughter. Upon reading the *Times* article, I broke up and said something like, ‘They must have died of a combination of quiche and poppers.’”⁶⁰ While Hoffman’s reaction, in retrospect, seems like a line written for one of Crowley’s *Boys in the Band*, he notes that it was quickly replaced by an unending sense of grief and pain.

My next symptom, which occurred after a period of a sharply increasing number of deaths, was night terrors. "That could have been me," was the emotion I had after someone I'd had an affair with years before was rushed to the hospital in a coma. And shortly after that, I experienced overwhelming grief. I just couldn't stop crying. It felt as if I were witnessing the death of my entire youth. I was.⁶¹

Hoffman’s relationship drama *As Is* tells the complicated love story of Rich and Saul through a series of vignettes depicting different moments in their relationship and how AIDS impacted their lives, particularly in relation to Rich’s diagnosis. *As Is* was the first full-length AIDS play to premiere in New York, beating Kramer’s *The Normal Heart* by six weeks, and it found incredible commercial and critical success. Frank Rich, writing in *The New York Times*, found the play: “one of the few theatrical evenings in town that

⁵⁹ William M. Hoffman, Introduction to *Gay Plays: The First Collection* (New York: Avon, 1979);

⁶⁰ William M. Hoffman, “AIDS- Involved Drama Syndrome,” *POZ Magazine*, February 1997: http://www.poz.com/articles/237_1688.shtml

⁶¹ Ibid

may, if anything, seem too brief...It's a feat that Mr. Hoffman accomplishes with both charity and humor.”⁶²

As Is opens with Rich leaving Saul for a younger lover, who subsequently dies of AIDS. Rich himself receives the diagnosis and his world falls apart. He is rejected by his friends and family, fired from his job, and he is left alone. He returns to Saul and in spite of his behavior at the beginning of the play, Saul takes him back. When Rich tries to commit suicide, rather than facing the uncertainty of his future, Saul stops him. *As Is* ends with Saul committing himself as both caregiver and lover to Rich, who is now in the hospital. Saul promises to love Rich “as is.”

Hoffman’s play also gives a central voice to a non-gay character, an unnamed but compassionate Hospice Nurse. Unlike the heterosexual characters in previous gay dramas, such as *Torch Song*’s Laurel and Arnold’s mother, she is not there as an interloper or an enemy, but rather as a means of support. She, as well as characters appearing in Rich’s support group, offered the heterosexual audience a way into the play—through the suffering of straight characters who have been impacted by the way AIDS has affected their friends and family members. Accordingly, Hoffman is able to show the spreading impact of the disease. At its core *As Is* is a relationship drama between two men. The play’s primary audience was gay men looking to see their lives, and current trauma, represented. However, Hoffman was also able to speak to a wider audience by including the experiences of those outside the gay community.⁶³ John M. Clum described *As Is* as the “paradigmatic AIDS drama” because it reflected the

⁶² Frank Rich, “Stage: ‘As Is,’ About AIDS Opens,” *New York Times*, March 11, 1985

⁶³ William M. Hoffman, *As Is*, in *Forbidden Acts: Pioneering Gay and Lesbian Plays of the Twentieth Century*, ed. Ben Hodges (New York: Applause, 2003)

changing world and did so by looking at past, present, and future within one story.⁶⁴ *As Is* is a memory play. The relationship of the two main characters is told in a non-linear manner as each remembers the relationship, the partnership's demise due to Rich's selfishness, and the impact that the worsening AIDS crisis has on both men as they watch friends and lovers die and witness the culture they knew disappearing. Rich and Saul must suddenly let go of the past and the gay culture they loved. However, they are able to give up this sexual culture by holding onto the wonderful memories of the past. After Rich has been diagnosed, he and Saul reminisce about what life was like before AIDS. The sexual experiences they describe are memories but ones that they celebrate, not denigrate:

SAUL: God, I used to love promiscuous sex.

RICH: Hot, sweaty, steamy, smelly—

SAUL: Juicy, funky, hunks—

RICH: Sex.

SAUL: Sex. God, I miss it.⁶⁵

The characters in *As Is* look back on their experiences during Sexual Liberation as happy memories they cherish. They are not a source of pain or regret but Saul and Rich each recognize that the times they are describing have passed.

If the past is a source for joyful remembrance, then Hoffman paints the future as uncertain but infused with an element of hope. The play ends with Rich, now clearly ill and spotted with Kaposi Sarcoma lesions, in a hospital bed that he is unlikely to ever leave. The conclusion is emotional, but not tragic. Saul once again offers Rich stability and love. This time Rich is the more vulnerable partner and he accepts Saul's strength

⁶⁴ John M. Clum, *Still Acting Gay* (New York: St. Martin's Griffin, 2000)

⁶⁵ William M. Hoffman, *As Is*, in *Forbidden Acts: Pioneering Gay and Lesbian Plays of the Twentieth Century*, ed. Ben Hodges (New York: Applause, 2003)

and the sense of hope he is offering. Saul climbs into Rich's hospital bed and the two embrace.

As Is remains a remarkably important play to both gay theatre and the AIDS drama sub-genre because it combined pathos, empathy, romance, and 'pro-gay propaganda' in order to create a text that spoke directly to the gay audience who were facing the same issues as Saul and Rich. The play also gained commercial and critical success, unlike the AIDS plays of Robert Chesley, by speaking to straight audience and showing them the impact that AIDS was having on gay men's lives. Neither Rich nor Saul were tragic figures or victims but they were figures for empathy. They are like any other long-term couple facing a horrible illness—and pledging to be together in sickness and in health. The image of a gay couple embracing in a hospital bed became an indelible image of the AIDS crisis. In *The Normal Heart* Larry Kramer ramped up the sense of tragedy by staging a deathbed wedding at the conclusion of his impassioned drama.

Larry Kramer is one of the most important, and some would say, infuriating voices writing in the gay theatrical canon. After finding success in Hollywood as the screenwriter for films such as *Women in Love*, for which he received an Academy Award nomination, Kramer turned his attention to creating texts for the gay community in the post-Stonewall culture. However, he found himself disgusted with the hedonism of the sexual culture that had emerged in the 1970s—though he was a willing and active participant in that same culture. In 1978 he published a novel, *Faggots*, which satirized the gay culture, its obsession with beauty and sex, and dramatized his own search for love within the promiscuous scene. The novel was savaged by critics and Kramer was shunned by many within the gay community who felt he had attacked all gay men's sexual

behavior because he was self-loathing. The anti-sex message of *Faggots* placed Kramer on the outside of the gay culture until the emergence of a new threat, AIDS, would bring him back into the forefront.⁶⁶

In 1982, after reading about a cancer killing gay men, Kramer gathered a group of friends together to discuss what steps they could take to bring attention to this new disease and to try to stop it. The group called themselves the Gay Men's Health Crisis and began to serve the gay community by providing information, support for the infected, and lobbying for research and governmental assistance. The group became the preeminent AIDS organization during the early years of the health crisis but less than two years after it began in Kramer's living room he had been ousted.⁶⁷

Larry Kramer insisted that the GMHC be fierce advocates demanding attention—a view many in the group shied away from as they were still closeted—and informing gay men that sex was what was killing them. Kramer believed that safe-sex education should be of paramount importance while other members still held fast to their belief in Sexual Liberation. Kramer's other issue was his temper and inability to censor himself. He became famous for attacking fellow board members, particularly those in the closet, and government officials; he once called then-Mayor Ed Koch “a pig” on national television. The end of Kramer's involvement with the organization he had helped found came when he was not included with the group's first meeting with the mayor. Kramer threatened to resign if he was not allowed to attend—the group gladly accepted his resignation.⁶⁸

⁶⁶ Patrick Merla, “The Larry Kramer Story,” in *We Must Love One Another or Die: The Life and Legacies of Larry Kramer*, ed. Lawrence D. Mass (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1997)

⁶⁷ Ibid

⁶⁸ Ibid

The Normal Heart, Larry Kramer's incredible AIDS drama, is one of the most important AIDS texts ever produced. The play, which premiered in 1985, is an angry agit-prop diatribe against the government, the media, and anyone who stood by and 'allowed' AIDS to turn into an epidemic that Kramer viewed as a devastating event on par with the Holocaust. The play is, like *Faggots*, a thinly veiled autobiography dramatizing his rise and fall within the GMHC. The primary plot of the play followed Kramer's experiences with the GMHC. However, the text allowed Kramer to rewrite these events from his perspective and he casts an alter-ego, Ned Weeks, as the hero railing against injustice while no one understands the urgency. The parallel storyline occurring in the play is the love affair between Ned and Felix, a closeted New York Times writer. Their relationship is altered as Felix is diagnosed with AIDS and Ned cares for his lover while simultaneously fighting against the other members of the GMHC. The play ends with Ned is cast out of the organization he helped to found and then marrying Felix, who is on his deathbed. Felix dies after the vows are exchanged and Ned is left weeping in the arms of his estranged brother.⁶⁹

The staging of *The Normal Heart* reflected its intent—to rouse the audience to anger and action as well as tears. The set design is sparse, denoting just a few pieces of furniture, however, the set directions call for the walls to be covered with writing that changes nightly. Some of the facts included in the wall's writing are revised numbers of infected individuals, crossed out as the CDC updated their figures, the AIDS budget provided by Mayor Koch's office, tallies on the numbers of articles about AIDS published in major newspapers compared with the coverage by the *New York Times*, an

⁶⁹ Larry Kramer, *The Normal Heart*, (New York: Plume, 1985)

expansive text about the U.S government's knowledge of Hitler's Final Solution for the Jewish Race and the inability of American Jews to have preventive action taken, and an ever-growing list of names of those who had died from the disease.⁷⁰

The other central criticism of *The Normal Heart* is that Kramer used the play to once again promulgate his anti-sex message. A character expressing the idea that sex must change due to the AIDS crisis would not have been controversial if not for the fact that it was the exact same message Kramer had used in *Faggots*, only this time with the urgency of disease to support his views. In *Faggots* Kramer, through an alter-ego, criticized what he viewed as the gay culture's obsession with sex following Stonewall. Because of this precedent in Kramer's writing there is a sense of "I told you so," that runs through *The Normal Heart*. The message that the type of sex gay men were having is 'bad' is further complicated when Kramer puts these words in the mouth of one of the play's heterosexual characters. In an exchange between Ned and Dr. Emma Brookner, a physician treating many of the sick and dying gay men, she does not simply express concern over the gay community's sexual behavior with regards to disease transmission but castigates the entire sexual culture.

NED. They keep yelling at me that I can't expect an entire world to suddenly stop making love. And now I've got to tell them there's absolutely no such thing as safe sex . . .

EMMA. I don't consider going to the baths and promiscuous sex making love. I consider it the equivalent of eating junk food, and you can lay off it for a while. And, yes, I do expect it, and you get them to come sit in my office any day of the week and they'd expect it, too. Get a VCR, rent a porn film, and use your hands!⁷¹

⁷⁰ Ibid

⁷¹ Larry Kramer, *The Normal Heart*, (New York: Plume, 1985)

Kramer is not just reinserting his own anti-sexual liberation biases into his play but by having Emma state them he is both presenting gay sex as the problem and affirming the anti-gay belief that gay men were bringing this disease onto themselves. This is particularly problematic because the play was being presented to a straight audience as well as a gay audience. Kramer does have one of his characters offer a rebuttal:

MICKEY: I've spent fifteen years of my life fighting for our right to be free and make love whenever, wherever . . . And you're telling me that all those years of what being gay stood for is wrong . . . We have been so oppressed! Don't you remember how it was? Can't you see how important it is for us to love openly, without hiding and without guilt? We were a bunch of funny-looking fellows who grew up in sheer misery and one day we fell into the orgy rooms and we thought we'd found heaven. And we would teach the world how wonderful heaven can be.⁷²

Nevertheless, Kramer presents the views of Ned and Emma as the 'right ones,' and Ned does not even offer Mickey a response or an apology. The irony of Ned's denunciation of gay men thinking of sex during the crisis is that he takes a lover, the closeted *New York Times* reporter Felix, through the course of the play. Further complicating Ned's views, and therefore Kramer's views, is Felix's reveal that he and Ned had slept together previously in a semi-anonymous bathhouse encounter. This speaks to one of the many issues critics, including Chesley, have had with Kramer and his play—his hypocrisy. Larry Kramer, beginning with *Faggots*, argued that the sexual culture of the 1970s, which included a celebration of bathhouses, was damaging to gay men's quest for societal acceptance—that gay men should pursue monogamy rather than focusing on promiscuity. However, Kramer never shied away from discussing his own

⁷² Larry Kramer, *The Normal Heart*, (New York: Plume, 1985)

experiences with the baths nor did he deny being promiscuous. This hypocrisy would become a major source of tension between Chesley and Kramer in their encounters and would be dramatized by Chesley.

The Normal Heart was both a commercial success (it remains the longest running play at the Public Theatre), and it received critical acclaim—even from *The New York Times*, which the play depicted as an enemy of the gay people. Frank Rich, the critic for that paper, called it “a fiercely polemical drama”⁷³ and Liz Smith in the *New York Daily News* found it “an astounding drama...It will make your hair stand on end even as the tears spurt from your eyes.”⁷⁴ However, that did not mean that the play was without condemnation. Many pointed out that Ned Weeks, while compelling, was also self-serving and his own worst enemy. *The Normal Heart* made Kramer the hero of his own story, most notably by framing his detractors through his own lens.

In spite of its agenda and the aggressive—bordering on shrill—tone of the playwright, *The Normal Heart* was the “J’Accuse!” moment that the gay culture needed. Because Kramer was able to have it produced within a mainstream theatre, particularly a space as well-respected as The Public Theatre, he was able to reach a wide audience and demand that society no longer turn a blind eye to the “new Holocaust.” *The Normal Heart* is a problematic play written by a complicated figure within the gay theatrical canon but its passion, anger, and unflinching accusations against the powers that be make it one of the most important gay plays since *The Boys in the Band*.

I have focused on the four plays discussed above because they represent important works that inspired Chesley. Crowley’s work represented the kind of work that Chesley

⁷³ Frank Rich, “Theater: *The Normal Heart*,” *New York Times*, April 22 1985

⁷⁴ Liz Smith, “Review,” *New York Daily News*

did not want to write, as he did not consider it a 'pro-gay' play while Fierstein's play represented the blend of the personal and the political which Chesley found inspiring. Hoffman and Kramer's AIDS play represent the two major gay dramas produced during the period in which Chesley was writing, and Chesley's AIDS dramas offer an alternative exploration of the crisis and its impact on gay men's sexual freedom and their lives.

Limitations

In my effort to shape this project in a concise and manageable manner, certain choices were made and necessary parameters were established. In addition, limitations beyond my control were imposed and those must also be acknowledged. First of all, I want to clearly assert that this project is not a definitive biography of Robert Chesley. While I had access to Chesley's personal archive, the material at my disposal was by no means comprehensive, and I was still confronted with significant gaps in his biographic history. Luckily, as previously noted, Jason Campbell's research offered many insights into Chesley's early life.⁷⁵ However, there are gaps to understanding the details of Chesley's private life as an openly gay man. He lived in both New York and San Francisco, but I was unable to recover much information about his relationships or his day to day life within the cities. At the time of his death he was in a relationship with Gene Weber but any mention of Weber is absent from Chesley's surviving writings.⁷⁶ I

⁷⁵ Campbell acknowledged the role that his thesis advisor played in shaping his knowledge of Chesley's biography. Dr. Noreen Barnes had been involved in the San Francisco theatre scene with Chesley and some of his peers. She was able to connect Campbell with Chesley's sister who was willing to being interviewed.

⁷⁶ Gene Weber, whose papers are also housed in San Francisco's Gay and Lesbian Historical Archive, is an intriguing figure deserving of his own study, at least based upon anecdotes. When doing my research I was speaking with the archivists during a break and asked, "what is the weirdest thing you all have in your collection?" Instantly, the staff mentioned 'spice jars.' They explained that in their collection was a box of spice jars, the kind you would have in a kitchen spice rack, only these jars were filled with pubic hair. I asked whose collection they belonged to, it was Gene Weber. Weber, per their knowledge, was 'the' gay financial advisor/stockbroker in the Castro. Thus, he was very wealthy. They explained that Weber had three loves: photography, scuba diving, and hardcore sadomasochistic sex. His main claim to fame was that he had photographed an underwater fisting scene which appeared in *Drummer* magazine. Weber had owned several dungeons in the Castro at various times, and one of the acts he indulged in was erotic

was unable to glean information about Chesley's political affiliations, how his relationships may have affected his writings, or his writing process. Nor could I discover why certain plays were not produced or what steps Chesley took to get them produced.⁷⁷ Chesley's entire artistic output is impressive considering his relatively short career. He created 10 full-length plays, 21 one-act plays, two novels, erotic short stories, editorial essays, and news articles. My interest lies in exploring how Chesley's works were comments upon cultural events, as well as how his plays represent a specific Liberationist ethos that fills a gap in the existing gay male theatrical legacy. For this reason, I felt it better to create in-depth readings of specific texts rather than simply constructing a chronology. The choices made are not a reflection of whether texts are 'good' or 'bad,' nor does the inclusion or exclusion reflect a play's importance to Chesley's career.

Chapter Summaries

Chesley's works are reflections of the political and cultural events that inspired him and I made the choice to focus on specific texts and what they tell us about his experiences. Each chapter explores specific themes: Gay Liberation, Sexual Liberation, the AIDS crisis, and erotic representation.

In Chapter One, "Fags Are No Different Than People. Tell Them They Can't Have Something and It's All They Want:" The Life and Liberation of Robert Chesley," I explore the history of the early gay rights movement, from the Homophiles of the 1950s through the rise of Gay Liberation in the 1970s. I use this history to parallel Chesley's

waxing. He kept the pubic hair of his play partners in jars. When looking through Chesley's journals I found a Polaroid of a large wooden rack hanging on his apartment wall: it was labeled 'the infamous spice rack.' Alas, even with the plethora of pornography on the internet, I have been unable to locate a copy of Weber's famous photograph.

⁷⁷ If this information does exist it has essentially become inaccessible. Chesley, not considering the scholars who may one day be interested in him, primarily wrote his journal entries in pencil or using a pen that has since faded thus rendering the majority of his personal notebooks illegible.

own personal history, growing up closeted, his coming-out process, and how these experiences, including the traumatic end of his marriage, influenced his early plays. After coming-out Chesley embraced the gay community as a committed Gay Liberationist. Prior to his career as a playwright Robert Chesley was a journalist for several gay publications and it was in this capacity that he first encountered Larry Kramer. I discuss, in detail, how the two men represented the Liberationist/Assimilationist split that existed within the gay community.

Chapter Two, “‘I’m A Cocksucker! I’m Queer! And to Anyone Who Takes Pity or Offense, I say, Judge Yourself:’ Robert Chesley’s Celebration of Gay Sexual Culture” explores how gay Sexual Liberation shaped the creation of a public gay sexual culture, and advocated for sexual spaces. The chapter includes a discussion of Chesley’s critiques of the anti-sex ideology which had gained traction during the onset of AIDS.

Chesley’s personal struggle with AIDS and the role his illness played in shaping his final play is the focus of Chapter Three. “‘No Apologies, No Regrets:’ Robert Chesley as an AIDS Artist” explores Chesley’s last play, *The Dog Plays*, and how they address concepts of time, identity, and haunting.

I conclude this project with a brief coda, “Where’s the Fucking and Where’s the Sucking” that considers how Chesley’s work was received during his lifetime or if Chesley’s works could be staged today. Additionally, I look at how the mainstreaming of representations gay male sexuality, exemplified by the premium cable series *Queer as Folk*, signifies a shift in the acceptance of explicit eroticism in cultural texts.

Because the majority of Robert Chesley’s plays were never published I have provided an appendix of play summaries to provide the readers a greater understanding of

the breadth of Chesley's works. As has been noted, the majority of Robert Chesley's works were never performed or published. By exploring these forgotten texts, and situating them within the cultural events that shaped their creation, this dissertation is a project of recovery. The narrative of this project follows Chesley's own journey, from coming-out until his premature death. Chesley's plays celebrate the community he loved and the culture he embraced. Robert Chesley's placement within the gay theatrical legacy has, until now, been limited to his AIDS plays, but this project reveals his commitment to promoting liberationist ideology within gay theatre.

Chapter One

“Fags Are No Different Than People. Tell Them They Can't Have Something and It's All They Want.” The Liberation of Robert Chesley

"Gay pride meant no more...than being proud to be myself — honestly and openly, and for the first time in my life."⁷⁸

Robert Chesley

Robert Chesley believed that Gay Liberation saved him. The movement not only gave him the impetus to come out of the closet and claim his identity, but Gay Liberation had created a community where he would find a place and a purpose. This chapter focuses upon Chesley's personal history (his coming out journey, his transformation into a Gay Liberationist, and his conflicts within the gay community) and how he synthesized these personal and the political experiences into the fabric of his plays. All of the plays examined in this chapter—*For the Kids*, *Dear Friends and Gentle Hearts*, *The Lost Doll*, and *Happy V.D.*—reflect and respond to significant aspects of Chesley's personal development and subsequent political philosophies. Through an analysis of these plays, one can trace the ways in which Robert Chesley used his artistry and literary career to enter and then immerse himself in gay cultural discourse.

The Artist Comes of Age and a Movement is Born

Robert Chesley came of age knowing that he was attracted to those of his own gender, but he was not able to accept himself and his desires until he was well into adulthood. While he was experiencing his own struggles with self-acceptance he was

⁷⁸ Robert Chesley, "Who The Bigots Are," Unpublished Essay, Gay and Lesbian Historical Archive, San Francisco

also aware of the major historical and cultural shifts occurring around him. The Gay Rights movement grew and matured during the same years that Chesley grew and matured. When the Gay Rights movement coalesced into the Gay Liberation movement of the 1970s, prompting leaders to issue the clarion call to urban centers, suburbs, and rural communities: “Come out and join the fight!,” Chesley not only answered the call but embraced liberation and shared his personal journey within his autobiographical dramas. Exploring the rise of gay rights in America provides insight into the events and attitudes that shaped Chesley’s personal and artistic development, thereby offering us a deeper understanding of Chesley’s plays.

In Post-World War II America gay men were simply described in the mainstream media and scientific documents as homosexuals. It was a commonly accepted belief that homosexuals were sick individuals who preyed upon young men seeking to turn them into likeminded perverts. Another view described homosexuals as casualties of overbearing mothers and detached fathers; the very existence of such deviants rendered them fit only for intense therapy, prison, or a lobotomy.⁷⁹ The only solace offered to gay men during this period was the abundance of stereotypes (either overt effeminacy or criminal sexual deviants) that allowed them to pass undetected so long as they remained covert about their sexual desires. It was during this time period, when homosexuals were seen as both a threat to the fabric of society and national security, that the first gay rights organization emerged in the United States: The Homophiles.

The Homophile ideology is best described as accommodationalist. The Homophiles sought acceptance, and ultimately desired equal rights, but they believed in

⁷⁹ David Eisenbach, *Gay Power: An American Revolution* (New York: Carroll & Graf, 2006), 2.

conforming to societal standards set by the dominant heterosexual majority. Even the term *homophile* did not automatically imply homosexuality, but merely an interest in studying and/or supporting homosexuals. Homophiles communicated the idea that homosexuals were hard-working Americans, no different than their heterosexual peers. Members of the Homophile movement adhered to strict gender roles (for example, at demonstrations men wore suits and ties while women wore skirts or dresses). The group, in its desire to gain acceptance, criticized other gay men and lesbians who ‘flaunted’ their behavior and acted in violation of society’s norms.⁸⁰

The organization most closely identified with the Homophile movement was the Mattachine Society. Led by Harry Hay, the group was founded as a secret society of leftist gay men who came together in nightly meetings to give each other support and a sense of community. Hay named his group for Les Mattachines, a medieval European folk dance performed by unmarried clergy who performed in masks as they satirized the rich and powerful in the community.⁸¹ In founding the Mattachine Society, Hay envisioned that contemporary Mattachines would also speak truth to power even if they had to continue to hide behind masks of anonymity.⁸² In this way the early Mattachine society separated themselves from other Homophile organizations because they had specific goals for achieving gay rights. Some of their stated goals were to “unify those homosexuals isolated from their own kind...educate homosexuals and heterosexuals toward an ethical homosexual culture paralleling the emerging cultures of our fellow

⁸⁰ Ibid

⁸¹ Martin Meeker, “Behind the Mask of Respectability: Reconsidering the Mattachine Society and Male Homophile Practice. 1950s and 1960s,” *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 10, no.1 (2001)

⁸² David Eisenbach, *Gay Power: An American Revolution* (New York: Carroll & Graf, 2006), 19-20; Simon Hall, “The American Gay Rights Movement and Patriotic Protest,” *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 19, no.3 (2010)

minorities... To assist our people who are victimized daily as a result of our oppression.”⁸³

With these statements of purpose the Mattachine Society became the first group to define homosexuals as an oppressed minority group. Under Hay’s leadership the Mattachine Society took its cues from the Communist party, and focused upon getting their fellow homosexuals to view themselves as a separate class of people, rather than a part of the majority. Hay believed that by creating a prideful, gay constituency a mobilized militant organization with the ability to fight for their civil rights could be established.

By 1953 three additional chapters of the Mattachine society had opened in California and the original Los Angeles branch began producing *One*, a gay-run and edited newspaper that spoke to the Homophile audience. The newspaper published editorials calling anti-sodomy laws un-American and calling for homosexuals to be regarded as full citizens free from suppression. The editorial staff of *One* and members of the Mattachine Society did not shy away from provoking political debates, though they kept their distance from active political involvement.⁸⁴ This was in part due to the leftist ties of Hay and other members of the Society. As proud and active members of the Communist Party their very presence threatened the messages expressed in *One*. Harry Hay was called to testify before McCarthy’s House Un-American Activities Committee. In the course of his testimony Hay made provocative statements that implied that one day the homosexuals, being so despised by the majority society, might come together and

⁸³ Neil Miller, *Out of the Past: Gay and Lesbian History From 1869 to the Present* (New York: Alyson, 2006), 15-16

⁸⁴ While the magazine argued against sodomy laws the Mattachine Society never sought to make change via the political process. They did not endorse candidates nor did they seek to repeal laws through ballot initiatives or court cases.

wield political power, even subverting the existing political structures through infiltration with the goal of undermining American society and the government.⁸⁵

After Hay's performance at The House Un-American Activities Committee the mainstream media began to question organizations like the Mattachine Society and whether they had darker goals than expressing the 'normalcy' of homosexuals. The *Los Angeles Mirror* hypothesized that "scorned homosexuals could wield tremendous political power. A well-trained subversive could...forge that power into a dangerous...weapon."⁸⁶ Ultimately the leftist views of Harry Hay and the other founders of the Mattachine society were rejected by the society's new members and the original leaders of the Mattachines were ousted from their organization. Hay had a vision of a unified gay community taking political action and separating themselves from their subjugators. Others within the group, including Hal Call who led the coup against Hay, viewed the group and the movement as grounded in the culture of the time. Hal Call, unlike Harry Hay, rejected Communist ideology and instead focused on turning the Mattachine Society into a gay rights group.

Call's vision was an organization that performed charitable acts that benefited society, not just the homosexual community. Call believed in seeking a place at the table for homosexuals rather than creating an entirely separate dining room. The focus was on aiding society's evolution in how they viewed homosexuals rather than a revolution that changed the way homosexuals experienced their lives.⁸⁷

⁸⁵ David Eisenbach, *Gay Power: An American Revolution* (New York: Carroll & Graf, 2006), 21-22; John D'Emilio, *Making Trouble: Essays on Gay History, Politics, and the University* (Routledge: New York, 1992), 41; Craig A Rimmerman, *The Lesbian and Gay Movements: Assimilation or Liberation* (Boulder: Westview Press, 2008), 16

⁸⁶ Ibid

⁸⁷ Roger Streitmatter, *Unspeakable: The Rise of the Gay and Lesbian Press in America* (Boston: Faber and Faber, 1995), 21

The post-Hay Mattachine Society took a different approach. Rather than arguing for homosexuals as members of a separate minority group, the Mattachine Society argued for integration and advocated the view that an individual's homosexuality was irrelevant to their role as citizen. Their official stance was that the only difference between homo- and heterosexuals were their intimate desires. Rather than promoting the idea that homosexuals should be proud members of a minority class the Mattachines instead sought to create tolerance within the mainstream society by discussing the homosexual experience in society with respected heterosexual experts.⁸⁸ In a very short time the Mattachine Society transformed from a militant organization with leftist goals of equality into a conservative group focused upon accommodating existing social mores and structures that encouraged assimilation as the path to tolerance. The reasoning behind this pullback was reflected in the new Mattachine Society's pamphlet: "any organized pressure on lawmakers by members of the Mattachine Society... would invite an abundant source of hysterical propaganda with which to foment a...anti-homosexual campaign."⁸⁹ As much as this more cautious approach seemed to be a step backwards, the Mattachine Society still aimed to address issues important to gays and lesbians, but did so with the understanding that their new, more cautious approach would mean that the change would come more slowly.

As the original charter of The Mattachine Society on the West Coast began to fade from its dominant position as a gay rights organization, new chapters in New York and Washington D.C became vocal in their own advocacy efforts. In 1960 the New York

⁸⁸ David Eisenbach, *Gay Power: An American Revolution* (New York: Carroll & Graf, 2006), 21-22; Hall, Simon, "The American Gay Rights Movement and Patriotic Protest," *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 19, no.3 (2010)

⁸⁹ Neil Miller, *Out of the Past: Gay and Lesbian History From 1869 to the Present* (New York: Alyson, 2006), 306

chapter had surpassed the membership levels of the group based in San Francisco. Conflicts between the East and West coast, particularly with regards to money, led to the dissolution of a national Mattachine Society. With its newfound independence the New York chapter broke away from the Society's conservative goals and tactics. Inspired by the gains made by African-Americans with regards to civil rights, the New York Mattachine Society based their new campaigns for gay rights using similar tactics. Returning to the ideologies and strategies originally promoted by Harry Hay, the Society once again argued that homosexuals were a minority group in need of protection and recognition.⁹⁰ One of the central issues championed by the New York chapter was the quest to repeal sodomy laws, a goal inspired by the activities of Britain's gay rights groups. The English Mattachines took the view that gathering large groups of homosexuals to speak publically about sex and sexuality would only engender feelings of horror in the general public. In order to prevent this response, the British Mattachines gathered respected and 'respectable' heterosexual citizens from the mainstream, to speak about decriminalizing sex acts between consenting adults. Following the lead of the U.K Mattachine chapter, the New York Mattachine Society began enlisting sympathetic heterosexuals to speak to the homophile cause.⁹¹ While the New York chapter focused upon the public's perception in order to gain support for their cause the Mattachine Society of Washington D.C would take a different tactic by pursuing gay rights in the very halls of government where homosexuals continued to be demonized and oppressed.

⁹⁰ David Eisenbach, *Gay Power: An American Revolution* (New York: Carroll & Graf, 2006), 26-27. This is not to say that the vision of Harry Hay was once again embraced, the New York chapter rejected the original mission of creating a mass movement focused upon political action.

⁹¹ Ibid; Meeker, Martin, "Behind the Mask of Respectability: Reconsidering the Mattachine Society and Male Homophile Practice. 1950s and 1960s," *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 10, no.1 (2001)

They were determined to subvert the very structures that suppressed them by using the existing laws to argue for their rights as citizens. One man emerged as the face of both D.C.'s Mattachine Society and the homosexual's fight against the government: Frank Kameny.

Kameny was a WWII combat veteran who returned to the United States, earned his PhD and entered the U.S. Map Service at the height of the Cold War. In spite of his skills, Kameny was fired from his position when it was discovered that he had been arrested on a disorderly conduct charge in a San Francisco public restroom prior to his employment. He had not disclosed the arrest and was thus accused of both falsifying a government document and of being a homosexual, the second charge being enough grounds for dismissal as homosexuals were denied security clearances. Rather than accepting his job loss with shame, as his superiors no doubt expected, Kameny instead filed a lawsuit that claimed homosexuals were minority citizens. In doing so, Kameny also claimed that the refusal to grant security clearances (and thus employ) homosexuals was a violation of minority rights. The case was appealed throughout the federal courts, but eventually Kameny's request for a hearing in front of the U.S. Supreme Court was rejected which meant that Kameny ultimately lost his fight. What came out of his experience, however, was his decision to bring the Homophile movement to D.C., thereby ensuring that Kameny's crusade for equal rights would not be solitary.⁹²

The Mattachine Society of Washington D.C. would gain national attention when the group, and by default the gay community, had its first conflict with, and support from, the U.S Congress. In 1963 Conservative Congressman John Dowdy, who chaired the

⁹² Craig A Rimmerman, *The Lesbian and Gay Movements: Assimilation or Liberation* (Boulder: Westview Press), 18

committee that oversaw the government of the District, introduced a bill that would revoke the chapter's ability to fundraise. Frank Kameny spoke before the Congress, becoming the first openly gay man to do so, and defended his organization while also speaking to the minority rights sought by himself and his fellow homosexuals. Dowdy responded by decrying homosexuals as perverts and security risks. In the end the Congress passed an amended version of Dowdy's bill but it died in the Senate—the important outcome of this fight was that the American Civil Liberties Union reversed its policy with regards to homosexual discrimination and lobbied Congress to vote against the bill. Nine congressman issued a report condemning Dowdy and his legislation, and *The Washington Post* published an editorial citing the need to oppose the bill. In a very short span of time Frank Kameny went from being an unemployed federal worker to the public face and voice of gay rights. His refusal to accept discrimination not only helped to advance the Homophile cause, but revealed that supporters existed in the media and government institutions.⁹³

In testifying before Congress and speaking to the media Kameny went against the communication strategy of the Mattachine Society which had previously insisted that respectable citizens and experts should testify on behalf of the gay community lest the heterosexual society become frightened. Instead they began to articulate the philosophy that gay people and gay people alone should act as the experts on homosexuality, rejecting any point of view which labeled gay people as sick, deviant, or criminal. This point of view was succinctly summed up in the slogan: "gay is good."⁹⁴

⁹³ David Eisenbach, *Gay Power: An American Revolution* (New York: Carroll & Graf, 2006), 29-31.

⁹⁴ Neil Miller, *Out of the Past: Gay and Lesbian History From 1869 to the Present* (New York: Alyson, 2006), 312-313; Simon LeVay and Elizabeth Nonas, *City of Friends: A Portrait of the Gay and Lesbian Community in America* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1998)

The revitalized Mattachine Society first turned its attention to ending police entrapment (which they did successfully in New York City) and then addressed the issue of police raids upon gay bars. In the state of New York it was legal for the liquor authority to shut down bars and taverns which served open homosexuals. The Mattachine Society responded by filing a complaint against the state liquor authority for discrimination. In 1967 a state appellate court settled the complaint and ruled that the liquor authority could only revoke a bar license “if there was substantial evidence of indecent behavior.”⁹⁵ Ironically, the court's ruling, which was meant to settle the issue, would set the stage for the event which became a turning point in gay liberation: the Stonewall Riots.

In the very early hours of June 28, 1969 plain-clothed police officers from the public morals department raided the Stonewall Inn, a dive bar on Christopher Street. The Stonewall Inn was not representative of gay bars at that time nor was it raided simply because of its status as a gay bar. The inn was Mafia owned, which meant that its owners engaged in many unsavory and illegal activities. They cut corners with regards to safety, drugs were dealt with impunity, and the owners had a lucrative side business blackmailing patrons whose careers depended on their closeted status. It was this side enterprise that led to the raid that night. The police did not burst into the bar simply intending to rouse some drag queens and humiliate the gay patrons; they sought to shut down a notorious mob site that was bringing in millions of dollars through extortion and

⁹⁵ Neil Miller, *Out of the Past: Gay and Lesbian History From 1869 to the Present* (New York: Alyson, 2006), 319-20; Craig A Rimmerman, *The Lesbian and Gay Movements: Assimilation or Liberation* (Boulder: Westview Press, 2008), 19.

fraud. It was a bonus for the NYPD morals unit that they could close an infamous homosexual tavern at the same time.⁹⁶

The raid on Stonewall began like any other — a warrant was served because the establishment did not have a liquor license, patrons were ordered to leave the bar, patrons lacking ID or dressed in drag were taken to police headquarters.⁹⁷ In most instances patrons cooperated with the police out of fear of arrest or exposure.⁹⁸ Arrests made during gay bar raids in New York were often published in papers such as the *New York Times* and such exposure could lead to unemployment, eviction, imprisonment, or psychiatric commitment.⁹⁹ This particular evening, however, the patrons began responding in an unheard-of manner — they refused to put up with the humiliation. They refused to show identification, the transvestites and the transsexuals would not allow the police to examine them, and the patrons did not exit the bar quietly and disperse into the night.¹⁰⁰

As patrons emerged from the bar they struck poses and made pithy comments to the gathering crowd who greeted them with cheers. The party atmosphere of the crowd changed when the police paddy wagon pulled up to the bar to pick up the bar staff and remaining patrons. The crowd continued to make jokes until an officer attempted to shove a transvestite into the wagon. She retorted by slamming the officer with her purse and then she was clubbed by another officer's nightstick. That moment of violence

⁹⁶ David Eisenbach, *Gay Power: An American Revolution* (New York: Carroll & Graf, 2006), 86-8.

⁹⁷ An additional humiliation for the Stonewall patrons, which attracted a large portion of both transsexuals and transvestites, was the inspection to determine who were transsexuals and who were cross-dressed. Cross-dressing was a crime in New York, undergoing a sex change was not. So the police had the task of separating the two groups. In David Eisenbach, *Gay Power: An American Revolution* (New York: Carroll & Graf, 2006), 88.

⁹⁸ Neil Miller, *Out of the Past: Gay and Lesbian History From 1869 to the Present* (New York: Alyson, 2006), 335

⁹⁹ Writer and social commentator Fran Lebowitz discussed the publication of the police blotter, including raids at gay bars, in *The New York Times* in the insightful HBO documentary *Public Speaking*.

¹⁰⁰ David Eisenbach, *Gay Power: An American Revolution* (New York: Carroll & Graf, 2006), 88; Simon Hall, "The American Gay Rights Movement and Patriotic Protest," *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 19, no.3 (2010), 545-6

turned a raid into a riot. The crowd began taunting the police, screaming about brutality at the hands of the “pigs,” and then a cobblestone was thrown at a police car. The crowd unleashed a hail of bottles, rocks, pennies, and whatever other projectile was available at the outside of the bar and the police.¹⁰¹

The police took shelter within the bar but the uprising continued. A parking meter was ripped out of the street and used to beat down the front door, lighter fluid was poured in through the broken windows and another protester tossed in lit matches. Police backup was called in to clear the streets but as soon as the crowd would disperse more people would join in and restart the riot. As gay men, lesbians, transsexuals, and transvestites rained bottles and rocks down upon the police and set fire to garbage cans, a chorus line formed, proving that even in the middle of a revolution gay sensibility had a place. The mocking chant of the transvestites would become an iconic moment in this historical event:

We are the Stonewall girls
We wear our hair in curls
We wear no underwear
We show our pubic hair!¹⁰²

The Stonewall Riot was significant because it was the beginning of the end to the quiet long-suffering victimhood that had continued even during the height of the Homophile movement’s successes. Before Stonewall, gay men lived in fear of exposure and oppression; the significance of Stonewall to Gay Liberation was that the event itself gave gay men a moment to look to for inspiration as they struggled to create a community and a culture within a society where change occurred slowly. As Margaret Cruickshank

¹⁰¹ David Eisenbach, *Gay Power: An American Revolution* (New York: Carroll & Graf, 2006), 90-1.

¹⁰² Neil Miller, *Out of the Past: Gay and Lesbian History From 1869 to the Present* (New York: Alyson, 2006), 336

wrote: "it was fitting that a new phase of the old struggle...had its start in a bar, for bars hold a central place in gay culture: often they were the only places where people could be open."¹⁰³ After Stonewall, Gay Liberation entered a new period of radical transformation and gay community formation became the new political focus. It was this new world of Gay Liberation that welcomed Robert Chesley. The nascent gay community had evolved, in a relatively short period of time, from the accommodating Homophiles, seeking civil rights but not trying to upset the larger culture, to the in your face forces, such as the Gay Liberation Front, that emerged post-Stonewall. The community reveled in its newfound visibility and sought to upset the status quo by demanding their freedom from the repressive state and a medical community that pathologized their desires. Robert Chesley came of age as the gay community was evolving. His personal experiences in some ways parallel those of the community he would join and would become the inspiration for some of his earliest plays.

Chesley Early Years

Chesley was born in New Jersey in 1943 to a privileged and political family. His father was a physician and his mother was both a socialite and a socialist who taught Chesley a formative lesson: the rights of one are the rights of all.¹⁰⁴ Following his parents' divorce in 1948, Chesley, his mother, and his sister moved to California where Chesley would experience class shock: even though his family lived quite comfortably

¹⁰³ Margaret Cruikshank, *The Gay and Lesbian Liberation Movement* (New York: Routledge, 1992), 69

¹⁰⁴ Robert Chesley, "Erotic Liberation and Censorship: Prudery as a Tool Of The Right." Undated Speech, Gay and Lesbian Historical Archive, San Francisco

they were considered lower-class when compared with the wealth of their new neighbors.¹⁰⁵

Chesley once said that he knew he was gay by the time he was four, although at the time he did not know or have the language to identify himself as gay. He remembered being considered a sissy from the very beginning: "my first memories were sissy; wanting to play with the girls and with the girl's things. Of course you don't get any support for being sissy in our culture."¹⁰⁶ Chesley was bullied throughout his youth but would eventually find friends as well as solace in playing and composing music. The repressive nature of society, his own feelings as an outsider, and the expectations placed on him by family, all led Chesley away from his homosexual desires and deeper into the closet. His most significant act of repression occurred following college graduation when he married his first cousin, Jean.¹⁰⁷

It is important to understand that Chesley's marriage to Jean, a woman, was not a farce or a façade: the two truly loved each other. The marriage lasted nearly 12 years and the two did form a very close bond. Chesley once said: "we made a little fortress against the world, bolstered each other's defenses, and tried to get through the world."¹⁰⁸ Sexually, however, the two were completely incompatible and the physical nature of their relationship was an unmitigated disaster. Chesley was a virgin on his wedding night and

¹⁰⁵ Jason Campbell, "Responding To The Plague Years: AIDS Theatre In The 1980s." M.F.A Thesis, Virginia Commonwealth University, 2009

¹⁰⁶ Tish Dace, "Stranger's Kiss: Robert Chesley Talks About His Controversial Plays," *New York Native*, 9 February 1987, 34

¹⁰⁷ Jason Campbell, "Responding To The Plague Years: AIDS Theatre In The 1980s." M.F.A Thesis, Virginia Commonwealth University, 2009

¹⁰⁸ Tish Dace, "Stranger's Kiss: Robert Chesley Talks About His Controversial Plays," *New York Native*, 9 February 1987, 38

while he did try to perform sexually for his wife he knew that he had never satisfied her. After a few years the marriage became completely sexless for both.¹⁰⁹

Robert Chesley was 32 years old when he first had sex with a man and this act both led him to come out and also ended his marriage. Ironically, his coming out was partially facilitated by a gift from his wife: Karla Jay and Alan Young's seminal text *Out of the Closets/Voices of Gay Liberation*. This book was incredibly significant, not only to Chesley, but to thousands of gay men and women struggling to come out in the early 1970s. When it was published in 1972 the anthology was the first collection of positive writings for and about gay people to appear in the United States. In 1974 the book's impact became even greater when it was distributed as a mass-market paperback. This meant that the book was available at mainstream retailers, like grocery stores, and not just in small gay bookstores in large urban markets. Karla Jay recalled, in the twentieth anniversary reprinting, that they were constantly approached by men and women who were saved by the book. Some, like Chesley, were given the encouragement to finally come out while others were saved from suicide by realizing that they were not alone.¹¹⁰ Some of the essays included in the book were the Radicalesbians "The Woman Identified Woman," Carl Wittman's "A Gay Manifesto," and Martha Shelley's "Gay is Good."¹¹¹

After identifying as gay, and allying himself with the Gay Liberation movement, Chesley sought to find a community in the small New York town where he lived and

¹⁰⁹ Ibid

¹¹⁰ Karla Jay and Allen Young, "Introduction," in *Out of the Closets: Voices of Gay Liberation* (New York: New York University Press, 1992)

¹¹¹ Karla Jay and Allen Young, *Out of the Closets: Voices of Gay Liberation* (New York: New York University Press, 1992)

taught school.¹¹² This new phase of Chesley's life irrevocably ruptured his relationship with his wife and the two divorced in 1976.

It is unclear why Jean Chesley gave her husband *Out of the Closets*, or even if she fully realized that in doing so she would bring her marriage to an end. It can be inferred from some of Robert Chesley's personal writings that his wife knew he had same-sex desires, thus the inability to perform sexually with her, and she may have thought that he could come out as a gay man while still being married to her. When he had his first sexual experience with another man, a revelatory act for him, she suddenly had to face the reality that her husband's explorations of his identity, and the physical pleasure he had denied himself, meant that he would be committing adultery. It may have been fine for Chesley to identify as gay when it was a more abstract concept, but once he had actually had sex with another man the very foundation of their marriage had been altered.

The end of the marriage was complicated and did not spell the end of their relationship. The divorce began amicably enough with Chesley seeking to assuage his guilt via financial support, including weekly alimony, giving Jean sole ownership of their property, and providing her with medical insurance. In spite of Chesley's acquiescence to all of his wife's needs, the legal dissolution of the marriage was a bitter one and the divorce was granted on the grounds of cruel and inhumane treatment at the hands of Robert Chesley. Officially, Jean and Robert Chesley's marriage ended because of his

¹¹² David Lample, "Playwright Robert Chesley: Waking Up To The Dark Side of Romance In '*Night Sweat*,'" *The Advocate*, 20 May 1984, 49

refusal to engage in sexual relations with his wife and the ensuing mental anguish that such a refusal caused.¹¹³

Chesley's coming out meant more than the end of his marriage it also meant a new beginning in terms of his career. Following college Robert Chesley and his wife had settled in upstate New York where he taught at a private school.¹¹⁴ While Chesley had never intended to be a teacher, he found success in this profession. Nevertheless, after nine years of teaching privileged children in a rural environment, he relished the chance to make some changes. While his decision to live openly gave him the impetus to remake his life both personally and professionally, it also complicated his last few months at the school. In the period before his voluntary resignation from teaching Chesley experienced intense prejudice and bullying from the community where he had been a valued member for nine years. When Robert Chesley came out he viewed it as a paradigm shift and felt it was important that those who knew him were aware of his identity as an 'out' gay man. Quite simply, Robert Chesley made sure that his community recognized him as an out and proud gay man and this truth, he felt, should extend to his peers and his students at the school where he taught.

Chesley looked back upon his coming out process and the unexpected problems it caused in a 1976 essay for *The Gay Weekly*.¹¹⁵ Chesley's essay, "The Schoolteacher Steps Out," was a first-person account of the controversy that ensued when he came out in the community and at the school where he taught. Chesley submitted his resignation to

¹¹³ Robert Chesley to Lynn Hanig, Attorney at Law, 1976, copy in the Gay and Lesbian Historical Archive, San Francisco and Lynn Hanig, Attorney at Law to Charlotte Frank, Attorney at Law, June 18, 1976, copy in the Gay and Lesbian Historical Archive, San Francisco.

¹¹⁴ Tish Dace, "Stranger's Kiss: Robert Chesley Talks About His Controversial Plays," *New York Native*, 9 February 1987, 38

¹¹⁵ The Gay Weekly was an insert published in conjunction with the larger *Gay Community News*, based out of Boston

the school's headmaster indicating that he would not be returning once the current school year ended. Chesley told the headmaster he was coming of the closet and intended to work for the gay movement the following year — a pronouncement that led the headmaster to congratulate him on his bravery. Chesley then announced his intention to come out to his students in the last few weeks before the school year concluded. He felt it was important that the community, and particularly young people, were aware that gay people existed in their midst. He then requested that he be able to wear a gay pride button at the graduation ceremony. Chesley was assured by the headmaster that any parent who complained would be told that the teacher's sexuality was their own private business and had no relation to their abilities as a teacher. When Chesley raised his concern over the "molestation issue" the headmaster assured him it would not be an issue provided that Chesley did not discuss his intimate behavior with the students. After speaking to the headmaster, Chesley came out to his fellow faculty members and after receiving mostly positive reactions to his announcement he considered the matter settled.¹¹⁶

Chesley continued to teach while also taking steps to create gay community resources in the surrounding area, including a proposal for a Gay Community Center in Poughkeepsie. However, this goal—and the school's goodwill towards Chesley—was short-lived. The simple issue of a mailing address ended up complicating his relationship with the school's headmaster and made his last few months of teaching a source of tension.¹¹⁷

As it turns out, Chesley—the burgeoning gay rights activist and community planner—was also homeless. When his marriage to Jean dissolved and he had to move

¹¹⁶ Robert Chesley, "The Schoolteacher Steps Out," *The Gay Weekly*, 17 July 1976

¹¹⁷ *Ibid*

out of their home, Chesley made the unorthodox decision to begin living in the private school where he taught. Sleeping on a couch and living out of his suitcase, Chesley also used the school's address as his own mailing address. It was *this* address that was printed on the bottom of the gay community center proposal he was distributing.¹¹⁸ The proposal, featuring the school's mailing address, was sent to the local community college, a small school that employed several school parents.

Several weeks after posting the proposal Chesley began to notice that the headmaster was behaving strangely and one day during a private meeting Chesley learned the cause of his irritability. The headmaster had been receiving complaints from parents with regards to the school's address on a Gay Liberation flyer, an act that was in conflict with the school's policy of political neutrality. Chesley was accused of blatantly bringing his homosexuality into the school and creating an unhealthy distraction for the children. His sexuality now had bearing on his efficacy as a teacher. Chesley challenged the headmaster's assertion and argued that it was not unhealthy for children, particularly the adolescents he taught, to think about sexual matters but he offered to step back from distributing the community center proposals while he was still at the school. The headmaster had a more extreme solution to the issue: he determined that it would be best for Chesley to spend the last month of school doing research in Boston, far away from the children and ("not to worry") Chesley would be kept on payroll and his transportation costs would be covered. Chesley, concerned with preserving his dignity, agreed to abide by whatever choice the headmaster made but he argued that the headmaster was making the wrong decision by placating to hysteria and possibly fomenting a witch hunt of other

¹¹⁸ Ibid

homosexuals in the community. Chesley's concerns were dismissed. After all, other homosexuals in the community had not been so bold to come out publicly. In the end, Chesley was allowed to keep his job with the promise that he would be discrete and that discretion included not wearing a gay pride button at graduation. Chesley agreed to the conditions. He subsequently participated in the commencement and concluded his nine years of teaching with well wishes from the school. This gracious sendoff was punctuated by having the yearbook dedicated to him.¹¹⁹

In recounting his personal story, Chesley examines the consequences of coming out, particularly in a small town, and the criticism that he faced. In the end he felt that the joy coming out brought to his life outweighed the uncomfortable nature of his last few months teaching. He wrote: "I enjoyed it. It was fun telling people...But it is more than enjoyable. It is also healthy to be openly what one is."¹²⁰ Although Chesley celebrated his experience of coming out, he did not overly romanticize it or simply look back at that time through rose-colored glasses. He acknowledged that for some people he ceased to be Robert Chesley, a man they had known for nine years, and instead became "the homosexual." The books he had his students read, the movies he showed in class, and the way he spoke to the children began to be called into question as outside forces wondered whether his choices came from his position as teacher or as a "sexual deviant." He wrote of his one regret:

I am sorry I was forbidden to talk with the students about homosexuality... God forbid that they should realize that homosexuals exist around them and are people too. God forbid that

¹¹⁹ Robert Chesley, "The Schoolteacher Steps Out," *The Gay Weekly*, 17 July 1976

¹²⁰ Ibid

they should realize that some people think it is all right to be a homosexual.¹²¹

Chesley's first full-length play, *For The Kids*, dramatized both his coming out process and the difficulty he faced within the workplace. In *For The Kids*, Andrew, the protagonist, is simply trying to work and live the happy life he has made for himself, a life that includes secretive sex with men. Andrew takes the giant step in coming out because he could no longer stand the injustice he sees being visited upon a child, Teddy. Teddy's crime, for which he is victimized multiple times, was bringing what had been a private taboo into a public setting — he brings a book about Gay Liberation to school. The possession of this text, combined with Teddy's characterization as a slight, quiet, and fragile child leads his fellow students to label him queer and violently attack him. The response of Teddy's parents, of the other teachers, and of the headmaster is in line with Chesley's own school conflicts. Teddy's parents fear for their son's soul and the other teachers fear that his presence serves as a disruption now that his identity has been compromised by bringing the book into the school. Both parents and school representatives are shocked when Andrew implies that Teddy can be homosexual and normal, homosexual and happy. Their attitude, and inability to see that Teddy was the innocent victim of a hateful crime, is what spurs Andrew. Andrew, while reluctant and fearful, takes the step and comes out in order to make a larger point — that gay people, including gay children, are everywhere.¹²²

At the end of *For The Kids* Teddy is still a victimized child who faces further emotional victimization at the hands of his parents. The headmaster and other bigoted

¹²¹ Ibid

¹²² Robert Chesley, *For The Kids*, 1981, Unpublished, GLBT Historical Society, San Francisco.

teachers are still in charge of the school, and Andrew has lost everything but his pride. Chesley does not offer a happy ending in *For The Kids* because the movement towards civil rights had yet to find a happy ending. Gay Liberation was still a work-in-progress. But in the play's bleak—albeit realistic—ending Chesley did offer the gay audience an image of a heroic gay man (Andrew) while illustrating that work still needed to be done through the character Jack.

The character of Jack in *For The Kids* is interesting in that he is Andrew's greatest ally, yet he is also his greatest antagonist. Even as Andrew faces down the bigoted headmaster and Teddy's intolerant parents his greatest threat comes from Jack—which is ironic because Jack is both his friend and sometimes lover. In the play's conclusion it is implied that Jack is the one who anonymously accuses Andrew of having an inappropriate relationship with Teddy. It is in refuting this accusation that Andrew comes out while vehemently denying impropriety with any student. In taking a stand Andrew accepts that there are consequences to his coming out: he loses his job, friends, and with the lingering accusation against him, his reputation. Jack's impetus in betraying Andrew is that Andrew's "personal is political" convictions risk exposing Jack's own identity. In turning his back on Andrew Jack fits the "closet queen" identity defined by gay activist Carl Wittman, which Wittman described in "A Gay Manifesto" (1969):

To pretend to be straight sexually, or to pretend to be straight socially, is probably the most harmful pattern of behavior in the ghetto...the married guy who makes it on the side secretly; the guys who will go to bed once but who won't develop any gay relationships; the pretender at work or school who changes the gender of the friend he's talking about... If we are liberated we are open with our sexuality. Closet queenery must end.¹²³

¹²³ Carl Wittman, "A Gay Manifesto," In *Come Out Fighting: A Century of Essential Writing on Gay and Lesbian Liberation*, ed. Chris Bull (New York: Nation, 2001), 67

Unlike the perpetually single Andrew, Jack is described as having a girlfriend who is always with him at social functions while he has sex with men in the privacy of his home. Wittman has a far more sympathetic view of closet queens in his manifesto than Robert Chesley has of them in *For The Kids*. While Wittman calls for all gay men to come out the closet, he still claims closeted gay men as brothers to be supported and accepted, writing: "each of us must make the steps toward openness at our own speed and on our own impulses. Being open is the foundation of freedom: it has to be built solidly."¹²⁴ Nevertheless, Jack does not seem interested in establishing this foundation of freedom; he has no sympathy for Teddy and believes Andrew is foolish for risking everything to help a child who, in his opinion, brought this on himself.

While Wittman and other liberationists believed in universal coming out they also believed in continued support for those who stayed within the closet. Chesley, through his characterization of Jack, shows that this unlimited support for staying in the closet can backfire because it means that those who are so focused upon staying in the closet, and being accepted by the larger society, can become enemies of liberation. Jack does not support Andrew's coming out and he views Andrew's self-exposure as a threat to his own job security. Accordingly, Jack takes advantage of the belief that gay men are child molesters, and uses public paranoia to distance himself from Andrew, thus assuring his own ability to pass as straight and enjoy the pleasures of both a gay identity and the privileged class.

For The Kids is at once a coming out narrative and also a work that dramatized the battles between the gay community and a rising conservative movement that attacked

¹²⁴ Ibid, 72

the gay community and their political achievements. *For The Kids* was also one of the few plays where Chesley directed his critique at heterosexual society since the majority of his works focused upon ideological differences within the gay community. Chesley found a sense of belonging and community after coming out but he never viewed Gay Liberation or gay politics uncritically.

In addition to the significance of *For The Kids* as an autobiographical play, within the text of *For The Kids* are messages that advocate for Gay Liberation. Chesley championed the idea that gay people are part of society and asserted that the myth of the predatory gay child molester is just that: a myth used to frighten people against homosexuals. Unfortunately, at the same time that gays and lesbians were seeking their liberation and civil rights, a conservative Christian movement was emerging to combat what they viewed as America's hijacking at the hands of radicals and perverts.¹²⁵ One concerned citizen was Anita Bryant, a former beauty queen and born-again Christian who had gained success and popularity as the spokeswoman for Florida orange juice.¹²⁶ Her campaign focused on efforts to repeal laws that were now giving gays and lesbians' legal protections from discrimination in Florida's Miami-Dade County. Bryant's campaign became a template for repeals across the country. She even gave her movement the histrionic title "Save our Children." What made Bryant's campaign so dangerous was that it combined the image of the concerned mother with the most vicious vitriol and lies against an emergent minority community and then added the massive financial and media

¹²⁵ Ibid, 278

¹²⁶ *The 700 Club*, which continues to be broadcast today is the media program by evangelical leader Pat Robertson. The *PTL*, or *Praise The Lord*, was a television station run by Rev. Jim Bakker who also appeared in multi-hour daily shows with his wife Tammy Faye Bakker. PTL was eventually acquired in a hostile takeover by Moral Majority founder Jerry Falwell and Jim Bakker would go to Federal prison for fraud. For more information on the Bakkers and the rise of televangelism in the 1970s see the brilliant documentary *The Eyes of Tammy Faye* by Fenton Bailey and Randy Barbato. Neil Miller, *Out of the Past: Gay and Lesbian History From 1869 to the Present* (New York: Alyson, 2006), 372

support offered by hugely successful religious programming such as the PTL and 700 Clubs.¹²⁷

Another dangerous aspect of Anita Bryant's campaign is that she made an argument that appealed to a silent majority that, previously, had not given any thought to gay rights. She said:

Behind the high sounding appeal against discrimination in jobs and housing, which is not a problem to the 'closet' homosexual, they are really asking to be blessed in their abnormal life style... What these people really want hidden behind obscure legal phrases, is the legal right to propose to our children that there is an acceptable alternate way of life.¹²⁸

For mainstream society, unfamiliar with the goals of the Gay Liberation movement or post-Stonewall rhetoric surrounding gay citizens, Anita Bryant did not appear particularly harsh or unfair. She was not proposing that gay people be sent to jail or once again subject to lobotomies, she was simply arguing that they stay in the closet, refrain from giving into their sinful desires, and to stop asking 'normal' society to treat their deviance as anything but abnormal and sick.

Bryant would also take the tactic favored by bigots pushing back against inevitable social change: she denied any personal animus with the group she was committed to oppressing. Instead Bryant turned the argument towards mainstream society and countered that they were being forced deny their beliefs in order to placate a minority whose very existence was threatening to the social order. She stated:

I don't hate homosexuals! But as a mother I must protect my children from their evil influence... Militant homosexuals want their sexual behavior and preferences to be considered respectable and accepted by

¹²⁷ Craig Rimmerman, *The Lesbian and Gay Movements: Assimilation or Liberation?* (Boulder: Westview Press 2008), 127

¹²⁸ David Eisenbach, *Gay Power: An American Revolution* (New York: Carroll & Graf, 2006), 279.

society. They want to recruit your children and teach them the virtue of becoming homosexual.¹²⁹

Anita Bryant's campaign was victorious, not only in the Miami-Dade County fight, but in cities all over the United States. Bryant's crusade fomented a more insidious view of homosexuals—one that argued that gay men preyed on youth. It is this homophobic attitude that Chesley powerfully illustrates in his play *For The Kids*. The trope of "they want to recruit your children," has become a mainstay of anti-gay bigotry since Anita Bryant. In 1978 California State Senator John Briggs jumped on this anti-gay bandwagon when he fought to ban openly gay teachers from holding jobs in public schools.¹³⁰ The Briggs Initiative not only sought to repeal gay rights laws, but also aimed to put new legal discriminations against gays and lesbians on the books. Proposition Six would make it legal to fire any teacher, counselor, or school administrator who was: "advocating, soliciting, imposing, encouraging, or promoting private or public sexual acts...between persons of the same sex in a manner likely to come to the attention of other employees or students."¹³¹ In his campaign Briggs used unproven statistics from disreputable studies and unsubstantiated anecdotes about child molestation and rape to indict the entire gay community. Unlike Anita Bryant, Jim Briggs lost his campaign of bigotry when his initiative failed by 3 to 2 margin. Ironically, it wasn't the gay community's outcries that ultimately turned the tide, but rather it was the public opposition from former California Governor Ronald Reagan that helped to seal Briggs's

¹²⁹ Ibid, 279

¹³⁰ Neil Miller, *Out of the Past: Gay and Lesbian History From 1869 to the Present* (New York: Alyson, 2006), 374

¹³¹ David Eisenbach, *Gay Power: An American Revolution* (New York: Carroll & Graf, 2006), 288

political fate.¹³² Reagan wrote: "Whatever else it is, homosexuality is not a contagious disease like the measles. Prevailing scientific opinion is that an individual's sexuality is determined at a very early age and that a child's teachers do not really influence this."¹³³ Reagan's statement was published in a Los Angeles Herald-Examiner editorial a week prior to the election and his views were re-published in newspapers across California.

The ideals expressed by Briggs's proposition were not unlike the conditions placed upon Chesley after his own coming out and involvement in the gay rights movement became public knowledge at the school where Chesley was employed. *For The Kids*, in addition to dramatizing Chesley's personal experiences, also exists as a theatrical piece that explores the incredible political significance of coming out in the first decade of Gay Liberation. The very idea of coming out underwent a transformation since the Homophile movement of the 1950s and early 1960s. In that decade coming out meant reconciling one's own homosexual desires to oneself and revealing that identity to others who shared it. Coming out was something that was done amongst gays and lesbians: sexual identity was not something shared within the larger family or kinship structure. The Stonewall Riots and the ensuing liberationist movement changed that. Embracing the leftist conceit of 'the personal is political' coming out was recast as not only a personal decision, but a revolutionary political act. To that end, gay historian John D'Emilio wrote: "the open avowal of one's sexual identity, whether at work, at school, at home... symbolized the shedding of the self-hatred that gay men and women

¹³² Reagan was not a friend to the gay community, and he articulated his dislike for the gay lifestyle in his repudiation of Briggs, but he believed the Briggs Initiative overstepped the bounds and violated privacy rights. Craig Rimmerman, *The Lesbian and Gay Movements: Assimilation or Liberation?* (Boulder: Westview Press 2008), 130

¹³³ Ronald Reagan, "Editorial: Two Ill-advised California Trends," *Los Angeles Herald-Examiner*. November 1 1978, p. A19.

internalized."¹³⁴ It was only through coming out, according to the liberationists, that gay men and lesbians could claim their rightful place in society. Coming out was an act of self-interpellation. Not only did coming out require acceptance of oneself but the act of coming out denied repressive heterosexual societal structures the opportunity to label and oppress based upon their definition of homosexual identity. Coming out gave a gay individual the chance to give themselves their own name—lesbian, gay—instead of accepting the names thrust upon them by a bigoted society. Chesley's next play would examine the toll that anti-gay bigotry had had on individuals throughout history.

Dear Friends and Gentle Hearts, also written in 1981, is a work that suggests a strong emotional connection between Chesley and the historical figures he scribes. As penned by Chesley, these characters suffered despair, shame, and grief because they were unable to embrace their sexuality. Framed as a ghost story, the play is a poetic, sensual, and deeply sad narrative through which Chesley imagines the life and death of 19th century American composer Stephen Foster.¹³⁵

Whether Stephen Foster, the historical figure, was homosexual is unknown but he has been the subject of inquiry due to his sensitivities, unhappy marriage, and close relationship with a gentleman by the name of George Cooper. What is known is that Stephen Foster was a deeply unhappy man who crafted beautiful songs that helped to define American popular music.¹³⁶ By looking at the facts of Foster's short life one can see why Chesley felt a connection to him. When Foster was 23 years old he married the

¹³⁴ John D'Emilio, *Making Trouble: Essays on Gay History, Politics, and the University* (New York: Routledge, 1992)

¹³⁵ Chesley's love of Foster's music is apparent throughout his life as he includes Foster's songs in his plays *Come Again*, *Beatitudes*, and *Dog Plays*.

¹³⁶ Billy J. Harbin, Kim Marra, and Robert A. Schanke, ed., *Gay and Lesbian Theatrical Legacy: A Biographical Dictionary of Major Figures in American Stage History in the Pre-Stonewall Era* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2005), 169-171

daughter of family friend. Foster's only child was born exactly 9 months after the wedding and his marriage ultimately descended into a series of unhappy separations. The one person Foster created a significant bond with was George Cooper, a man who became Foster's songwriting partner and collaborator in the last year of Foster's life. During their partnership, Foster and Cooper composed 21 songs within a notably short period of time. This collaboration was unusual because prior to this partnership Foster had either written his own lyrics or had very short-lived working relationships with other lyricists (prior to meeting Cooper Foster had never worked with anyone more than three times). The nature of the relationship between Cooper and Foster was not solely that of a composer and a lyricist, but also one of a dependent and caregiver. By the time the two men met Foster had descended into hopeless alcoholism and was distanced from his own family, compelling Cooper to care for his partner. Ultimately, despite his efforts, Cooper could not save Foster. In January of 1864 Stephen Foster, weakened by a fever, fell in his hotel and cut his neck on a nightstand pitcher that broke as he fell. Cooper was the one who found him, lying in a pool of his own blood. Once Foster was in the hospital it was Cooper that stayed by Foster's bedside. Unfortunately, the severity of Foster's wound—exacerbated by his weakened state—resulted in his death three days later at the age of thirty-eight.¹³⁷

The title of Chesley's play, *Dear Friends and Gentle Hearts*, is derived from the words that were scrawled on a scrap of paper found in Foster's pocket at the time of his death. These words, Foster's final legacy, inspired Chesley. Not only did he write this play to help him claim Foster as a member of the gay community, but Chesley composed

¹³⁷ American Experience, "Stephen Foster," Transcript accessed via <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/amex/foster/filmmore/pt.html>

a Stephen Foster-esque melody using what may have been Foster's final lyrics. Chesley created a story he could deeply identify with: Cooper's struggles were not unlike his own. Both Chesley and Foster were unhappily married, both men created art, and both men struggled with despair, however Chesley was able to escape Foster's fate because of his commitment to Gay Liberation. In *Dear Friends and Gentle Hearts* Chesley takes the opportunity to rewrite the end of Foster's life, connecting the composer's unhappiness to his closeted state and bringing an element of dignity to Foster's ignominious end. The ultimate goal of the play is to show how Gay Liberation could, and was, saving lives. Chesley knew the toll that denying one's sexuality could take—it almost drove him to suicide—but unlike Foster, he was saved by Gay Liberation in the form of a book, *Out of the Closets*, that told him he was not alone.

Dear Friends and Gentle Hearts occurs 40 years after Foster's death as George Cooper, now an old man, listens to Fourth of July celebrations in which Foster's music is joyously sung and celebrated. Weeping over his loss, Cooper engages in an act that is at once horrifyingly macabre and desperately romantic. As Cooper reminisces on the physical love that he once shared with Foster, he removes a pair of preserved hands, Foster's hands, which he keeps in a jar. Lying on the bed, lost in memory, he masturbates himself to orgasm with the pieces of Foster that he has kept with him for 40 years. As he ejaculates, Foster's apparition appears before Cooper and it implores Cooper to let him rest in peace—peace he can only find if Cooper burns the music manuscripts in his possession. Cooper is devastated by the sight of his lover after so many years and initially refuses to accommodate Foster's request. He argues that the songs Foster penned are full of hope, hope that Foster found in their love together. Foster explains that the songs are

tainted, tainted by the grief he felt by dishonoring his wife. Cooper acquiesces so that his lover can finally find peace and burns the sheet music while the titular song, composed by Chesley, plays:

Someday this song will be sung,
 When comradeship will dawn.
 Someday this song will be sung,
 When you and I are gone.
Dear Friends and Gentle Hearts,
 Our love will then be free.
Dear Friends and Gentle Hearts,
 Someday our love can be.¹³⁸

The ghost story brings a sense of the fantastic to the play but Chesley anchors the true tragedy of the piece in the reimagining of Foster's death as a deliberate suicide rather than an accidental fall while sick or intoxicated. There is no historical evidence that Foster's death was caused by his own hands, although his alcoholic descent could be seen as slow suicide. Chesley's decision to reframe Foster's death, and Cooper's cover-up of the suicide, is done in order to dramatize Foster's turmoil over hurting his wife and finding joy in Cooper's embrace. Cooper's monologue detailing the "true story" of Foster's death is the climactic moment of the play:

You knew what you were doing to yourself. I know you knew, for that is what your eyes said: when I could catch her eyes, they told me. I would have to carry you to your lodgings, I held you up when you vomited... I got you to your room as you coughed yourself into a fit ... I would undress you and warm you ... I held you close to me under the covers and made love to you ... and then I despaired, for I loved you, but that made no difference ... and then that January morning I found you dying on the floor, your throat slashed so clumsily, slashed so you couldn't talk, though you had not succeeded in stopping your life, and still your eyes pled: help me, stop me ... instead I try to help you back to life because I love to you, I needed you ... disposed of the bloody razor that lay by you, and smashed your nightstand pitcher. I was desperate: it had to look like an accident. It

¹³⁸ Robert Chesley, *Dear Friends and Gentle Hearts*, 1981, Unpublished, GLBT Historical Society, San Francisco

was a foolish, wild scheme, but the serving girl was easily bribed, and the world believed her story as they still do.¹³⁹

This monologue is the most significant moment of the play. Chesley has re-imagined Foster's death as an act of suicide rather than an accident—but of utmost importance is that Chesley creates a reason for Foster's suicide. Chesley's Foster kills himself because he is gay and cannot live with himself. Even though he loves Cooper, he is horrified by how he is betraying his wife and that shame leads to his self-destructive behavior and his death. For Foster, it was preferable to be remembered as an alcoholic who wasted his talents and died from an accident that occurred in a stupor, than to be known as a homosexual.

Neither Foster nor Cooper had the option of living their lives openly because of the times in which they lived. Foster was trapped in a loveless marriage, and the shame over its failure could have contributed to his early death. Chesley found kinship with Foster because of his own struggle coming to terms with his sexuality and his own failed marriage. In two sexuality surveys, one from 1976 and the other 1977, Robert Chesley reflected on his marriage and the bond he felt with his wife. The Foster that Chesley created was driven to suicide not only because of his shame, but because of the 'taint' he had brought to his wife. Chesley identified with this feeling intimately. Chesley's own self-loathing, particularly his fears over having ruined his wife's life led him to seriously contemplate suicide.¹⁴⁰

Dear Friends and Gentle Hearts is a powerful autobiographical work because within the doomed love story of Foster and Cooper, Chesley pours his own emotions over

¹³⁹ Robert Chesley, *Dear Friends and Gentle Hearts*, 1981, Unpublished, GLBT Historical Society, San Francisco

¹⁴⁰ "Sexuality Survey: Gay Male Questionnaire," Karla Jay and Allen Young, 1977.

his marriage into the play. It cannot be understated how deeply Chesley loved his wife, and wanted to make his marriage work, even when looking back from the contented space that coming out had brought him. To the query, “describe the time you fell the most deeply in love?” Chesley responded: “Deepest love for my wife...Major love of my life is my wife, even now.”¹⁴¹ Within *Dear Friends and Gentle Hearts* there is a sense that through the ghost of Foster, Chesley is expressing his regrets. He never regretted coming out, nor did he regret his choice to live as a liberated gay man. But, he did regret, for years, that his happiness came at the expense of his wife.

Further evidence of Chesley’s deep affection for his ex-wife can be traced in the survey he took in 1977 when he was living in New York City, separated but not yet divorced. In response to the survey’s query: “What is the importance of emotion to you sexually...the connection between love and sex...Have you ever been in love?,” Chesley offered an exceptionally long answer. Within his response, he wrote: “Emotional involvement is best...love, alas, has not been part of my sex life—and sex, alas, was not a part of my love life with my wife....As for love: with my wife it was very deep and embraced all aspects of our life together; it was very interdependent and overly protective of each other.”¹⁴² In this same survey Chesley was also asked to describe his coming out process and sexual evolution. He wrote: “In some ways I had always been aware of being Homosexual, and I had been unable to face this...getting married made it the more difficult to face, as I had then involved another person who was and is very dear to me in

¹⁴¹ “Questionnaire On Male Sexuality,” National Organization For Women-New York City Chapter, 1976

¹⁴² “Sexuality Survey: Gay Male Questionnaire,” Karla Jay and Allen Young, 1977.

my self-deception....I went through a stage in which I planned to remain sexually inactive as after all I was married and very much in love with my wife.”¹⁴³

That answer is incredibly important to understanding why Chesley identified with Foster on such an intimate level. Chesley had contemplated living a life without sex, without being true to himself, because of how much he loved his wife and was terrified of ruining her life. That fear is what had led him to contemplate suicide. Foster married because it was expected of him, the option of living life openly was not available to him, and the betrayal of his wife in the arms of another man led to his death, at least this is the re-imagined tale that Chesley has woven for the doomed composer. Robert Chesley escaped Foster’s tragic fate, due, in part, to the saving grace of Gay Liberation. However, the honest love that he had for his wife remained, even after their bitter divorce. Chesley never regretted his marriage, never looked back on the eleven and a half years he spent in a companionship relationship with his wife, as something to be dismissed. *Dear Friends and Gentle Hearts* is imbued with Chesley’s sadness over his marriage’s demise and the shame he felt for hurting her, an inevitable side-effect of his coming out.

Despite the acrimonious nature of their divorce, the relationship between Jean and Robert Chesley continued after the dissolution of their marriage. Perhaps in an attempt to avoid therapy (Chesley detested the psychiatric profession), he wrote an autobiographical novel called *Cassandra: The Marriage Closet*, as a means to examine what his marriage meant, what went wrong, and to explain why he had made the choices which could be seen as selfish in retrospect. *Cassandra* is an odd piece of work due to its form rather than content. The novel can be seen as a form of textual docudrama; it is written in a

¹⁴³ Ibid

third-person narrative which makes the text a dispassionate examination of a life rather than a personal memoir. In the novel Chesley essentially tells his story up until the moment the paradigm shifts with his coming out. He explores his complicated relationship with his mother, his struggles with his sexual desires, and his love for and frustration with “Cassandra.” The text was never published, perhaps due to its intensely personal nature, and as stated above, it reads like an attempt to avoid therapy rather than a legitimate memoir. Moreover, the novel does not appear to have experienced a readership beyond Chesley and a few close friends.¹⁴⁴ In 1987 Chesley wrote an informal afterword to the novel in his private journals which provides insight into his thinking about the breakup of his marriage and the complicated friendship he had with his ex-wife. Chesley knew his wife was a fragile woman (she suffered from severe dyslexia as well as depression), and despite the immitigable issue of his sexuality, he still loved her. He felt that supporting Jean financially was the honorable thing to do considering the depth of guilt he felt over trapping his wife in a sexless marriage, betraying her trust, and abandoning her. With the benefit of hindsight, Chesley understood the mistakes he had made; in his desire to remain friends with a woman he adored he created an emotional dependency that took its toll on both Jean and himself. He wrote: “almost every morning I was awakened by a call...very frequently these calls were suicide threats, “baby I can't go on,” she'd say and then hang up. Many times these calls turned into bitter and

¹⁴⁴ I had the opportunity to skim the manuscript—I was limited by time within the archive—and I found it to be a bland docu-drama. The novel is written as fiction but is clearly non-fiction with the names changed. Based upon the comments made in the Afterword it is clear that Chesley wrote this novel as a form of therapy, to deal with his complicated feelings towards his ex-wife and his mother, and to find closure. It seems that no attempts were ever made to publish the book or that he intended the work to be distributed beyond his immediate circle.

vituperative quarrels.”¹⁴⁵ Eventually these quarrels caused the two to stop speaking.

Chesley continued to send the alimony checks, pay for her car, and provide her medical insurance. This financial dependence continued until Jean Chesley announced her intentions to marry again. Robert Chesley not only felt the relief on his wallet but also was happy because it meant his wife was finally letting go and moving on with her life, and she did. Jean Chesley remarried, had a child and the last Chesley knew of her (because he refused to pry into her life), she had finally found happiness.¹⁴⁶

In addition to exploring his own kinship with Stephen Foster, Chesley also use *Dear Friends and Gentle Hearts* to communicate a message of self-acceptance and pride. From the beginning of his playwriting career Chesley believed that gay theater and gay plays had an inherently political purpose. He fervently believed that gay plays should espouse a pro-homosexual agenda. Expressing this belief, Chesley wrote: "gay pride is self-acceptance, without shame of one's sexuality — a willingness to be as open about one's sexuality, life and loves as heterosexuals are about theirs."¹⁴⁷ Chesley wrote *Dear Friends and Gentle Hearts* to express his beliefs about the role gay theatre could play in empowerment. *Dear Friends* is a powerful play that used the familiar tropes within heterosexual theater (for example, the dramatization of a premature death) in order to tell the story of one of gay cultures own icons, even if that icon's membership in the gay community was not openly acknowledged. Gay theater historian John Clum wrote: "much of gay drama is an expression of what might be called the historical impulse in gay literature — the impulse to detect and define the collective past of gay men to affirm

¹⁴⁵ Robert Chesley, "Afterword to *Cassandra: The Marriage Closet*," 1987. The Gay and Lesbian Historical Archive, San Francisco

¹⁴⁶ Ibid

¹⁴⁷ Robert Chesley, "On Not Ignoring Our History," Unpublished Essay, Gay and Lesbian Historical Archive, San Francisco

a sense of identity and solidarity."¹⁴⁸ In these impulses Clum identified both the romantic (which present gay relationships as normal and the right to sex and love as paramount) and the canonical (which dramatize the experiences of historical gay figures in order to celebrate gay creativity and the contributions that gays have had upon the larger culture.)¹⁴⁹

Dear Friends and Gentle Hearts could be seen as problematic to Chesley's vision of gay plays as communicating a pro-homosexual agenda since the central figure committed suicide because of his shame. However, Chesley ultimately does express the importance of gay pride and liberation with this play because it is by looking back at the life and death of Foster that a gay audience can see how far they have come. With *Dear Friends and Gentle Hearts* he was able to tell elements of his own story (and reimagined Foster's tale) through the prism of Gay Liberation. This prism makes Foster's suicide' more tragic because it shows the historical damage that shame caused while simultaneously asserting that Gay Liberation was committed to removing shame and saving lives.

Out of the Closet: A Liberated Robert Chesley

Robert Chesley came out, and he shed the feelings of shame and embraced Gay Liberation. However, this act destroyed his marriage and ended his teaching career. Chesley looked forward and began his second act by moving to New York City. In the city Chesley found two forms of expression that would shape the rest of his life: theatre and sex.. Sexually, Chesley was a late bloomer, but he embraced America's sexual revolution and the sexual liberation of gay culture. At 32 year of age he learned the joy

¹⁴⁸ John M. Clum, *Still Acting Gay*, (New York: St. Martin's Griffin, 2000)

¹⁴⁹ Ibid

and pleasure of sex and began to embrace the kinks and fetishes that had only existed in his fantasies up until that point, particularly an obsession with spandex and tights that would exist until his death. Insight into Chesley's sexual desires and behaviors are revealed through the aforementioned 1977 sexuality study as well as through Chesley's responses to yet another study conducted a year earlier in 1976.

The 1976 survey was conducted by the New York Chapter of the National Organization for Women with the purposes of "better understanding how men feel about sex and their own sexuality."¹⁵⁰ Although Chesley's involvement in the study is evidenced by the fact that his responses to this earlier survey were found amongst his papers, it is unclear as to what came of Chesley's anonymous participation—or whether or not his answers were documented or utilized in any particular manner. We do know, however, that the 1977 survey was disseminated by Karla Jay and Allen Young and published in 1979 as *The Gay Report: Lesbians and Gay Men Speak Out about Sexual Experiences & Lifestyles*. Chesley's contributions, along with thousands of other men and women who contributed, became part of statistical analyses of behavior.¹⁵¹

In his response to the 1976 survey questions, Chesley wrote very honestly of needing an emotional connection in order to have satisfying sex, acknowledging that when he simply pursued physical pleasure he found those encounters ultimately unsatisfying. The palpable joy that Chesley had in being intimate with men, particularly after denying himself for so long, is present in his answer to the following survey question: "Do you have your best orgasms during fellatio, masturbation, intercourse, or other activity?" His answer: "Best orgasms can occur anyway with men, sometimes just

¹⁵⁰ "Questionnaire On Male Sexuality," National Organization For Women-New York City Chapter, 1976

¹⁵¹ "Sexuality Survey: Gay Male Questionnaire," Karla Jay and Allen Young, 1977.

by holding them."¹⁵² To another inquiry regarding his views on the purpose of sex he responded: "Sex (for me) is a need — but is closely bound to emotional needs; it also means self-acceptance, starting with accepting and enjoying one's body, but going on from there to acceptance of oneself as a whole person."¹⁵³

In 1977, when Chesley participated in the second sexuality survey, his desire for emotional fulfillment is still present. His lack of a relationship with another man had not prevented him from enjoying sex, in the less than two years since his coming out Chesley had more than 70 sexual partners. He wrote:

Emotional involvement is best, but I fairly frequently have sex without it, and rather dislike myself afterwards... there are times when I'm just simply horny and sex is necessary as I rarely masturbate nowadays... animal need, that, and I suppose it must be met, though I tend at times to feel degraded by it. But true lovemaking, involving the acceptance of one's own body and the endorsement inherent in the ability to give pleasure and express love through sex — that's another matter and I strongly feel it is one of the cornerstones for self-acceptance.¹⁵⁴

These two surveys not only provide insight into how Chesley viewed and explored his sexuality after coming out, but they also reveal a commitment to gay sex as a foundational element of gay community formation. Even though Chesley himself wanted a deep emotional connection with a lover he recognized that sex was a base need and in the course of both surveys he expressed an attitude that individual desires and needs are just that, individual. When asked to comment on kinks and sexual acts that did not interest him, he did not judge those who enjoyed those experiences, he simply acknowledged that it was not for him.

¹⁵² Robert Chesley, "Questionnaire On Male Sexuality," National Organization For Women-New York City Chapter, 1976

¹⁵³ Ibid

¹⁵⁴ Robert Chesley, "Sexuality Survey: Gay Male Questionnaire," Karla Jay and Allen Young, 1977.

Chesley's sexual experiences were a fundamental part of his coming out process as well as instrumental in shaping his views of Gay Liberation. From the beginning of his playwriting career Chesley brought an element of the sexual into his works. By exploring Chesley's early autobiographical dramas, we can see how he incorporated his own sexual journey, and its effects on his path of self-discovery. These reflections on his own path into self-acceptance culminate in works that blended his personal narrative and the politics of Gay Liberation. Two works that reflect Chesley's growth as a sexually aware gay man, free from shame, and his commitment to the ideals of Liberation, are *The Lost Doll* and *Happy V.D.*

Chesley recognized the importance of coming out narratives in the creation of a pro-homosexual canon of gay theater. In his time as a theater critic he became very familiar with this trope as the coming out narrative became very popular in the late 1970s and into the early 1980s. Although Chesley recognized that many of these coming out plays were not successful artistically, he believed that coming out plays served an important purpose in communicating a message of self-acceptance to a gay audience.

The Lost Doll: An Object Lesson in One Act is narrated by a guardian angel, and tells the story of John, a child shamed by his own parents for behaving like a sissy (he plays with the titular doll). John grows up to be a closeted young adult who seeks to deny his true nature by pursuing a relationship with a woman he loves, but does not desire. It is only at the urging of his girlfriend that John acts upon his true sexual desires and, in doing so, he finally accepts his identity as a gay man and, subsequently, throws himself into the hedonistic pleasures available in a gay community. However, coming out as gay is not the same as accepting one's self as gay, and the guardian angel can only

watch as John seeks to fill the emptiness that still exist inside him with meaningless and emotionless sex. John's constant mantra throughout the play is "I hate myself. I want to die."¹⁵⁵ John admits that he is gay but he cannot allow himself to believe that he is deserving of happiness because he refuses to let go of the shame from his childhood. It is only when the Angel gives John a (literal) kick in the ass and hands him the doll taken away from him in childhood that John begins to reconcile the shamed child with the gay adult.¹⁵⁶

In *The Lost Doll*, the audience first meets John, the central character, at age four as he holds his doll, Jenny. His father admonishes him that "Boy's don't play with dolls! Boy's don't like dolls!" John's Mother returns the doll to John and tells him that by playing with dolls he will become a better husband and father—and tries to be reassuring by saying that he isn't a sissy.¹⁵⁷ The Angel identifies this moment as the one which birthed John's sense of shame and self-hatred and it is the first time he utters the phrase "I hate myself, I want to die," which will become his mantra. The scene ends with him throwing away his beloved doll.¹⁵⁸

¹⁵⁵ Robert Chesley, *The Lost Doll*, 1983, Unpublished, GLBT Historical Society, San Francisco

¹⁵⁶ Robert Chesley, "On Not Ignoring Our History," Unpublished Essay, Gay and Lesbian Historical Archive, San Francisco

¹⁵⁷ The actions of John's mother are reminiscent of the segment "William Wants a Doll" in Marlo Thomas's groundbreaking 1974 album, and subsequent television special, *Free to Be You and Me*. In the segment William asks his parents for a doll and he is continuously offered toys they consider more appropriate, such as a basketball or a baseball glove. Williams excels in all the sports he tries but he still wants a doll—even though his requests are met with scorn and mockery. Finally, Williams's grandmother gives him the doll and tells his family not to worry. William is simply preparing so that he will know how to care for his own child when he becomes a father. The distinction between this scene in *Free to Be You and Me* and *The Lost Doll* is that Chesley's John is not practicing to be a father. Chesley's John is a 'sissy,' and Chesley is arguing that there is nothing wrong with that. For more on *Free to Be You and Me* and its impact on gender-neutral child rearing see Karin A. Martin, "William Wants a Doll. Can He Have One? Feminists, Child Care Advisors, and Gender-Neutral Child Rearing, *Gender & Society* Vol.19, no.4 (August 2005)

¹⁵⁸ Robert Chesley, *The Lost Doll*, 1983, Unpublished, GLBT Historical Society, San Francisco.

The first time John has sex with a man leads to his self-discovery: "I no longer hate myself! I don't want to die! I don't even want to be normal! I'm gay!"¹⁵⁹ With this twist on John's mantra the narrative and tone of *The Lost Doll* changes; John falls in love with the first man he slept with and subsequently had to nurse his first broken heart and then proceeds to search for love with five hundred different men. One of the ways in which John's self-hatred expresses itself is through his promiscuity, but Chesley makes it clear that the issue is not that John is having sex with men, but rather that he uses sex to numb his emotional pain and feelings of shame.

In the course of this exploration John experiences the embarrassment—and discomfort—of genital crabs and his response to this unsavory, but not life-threatening experience, is to once again state: "I hate myself. I want to die." This is the first sign that coming out did not bring resolution to his earlier self-hatred. John does not hate himself because he is gay, his revelation of his sexuality was one of his few moments of joy, he hates himself because he feels like he still has not found what he is looking for: love This is a truth further revealed by John's inner monologue:

So it didn't work out between Paul and me, and who give a fuck? Three months down the tube, but I'm not going to let it depress me—I went through that when I broke up with Alan. Shit, no! I'm going to have a good time, and I know how! A little artificial stimulation, fuck up my head a bit, to ease the pain, baby, and I'll get over it. And then fuck, fuck, fuck, fuck, fuck, fuck! You only live once! And I love living!¹⁶⁰

The Angel reveals that the relationship fell apart because John was unable to love himself, thus he would not let Paul love him, and whenever he felt the relationship becoming too real he would escape to the clubs, and the bars, and the baths. John's self-

¹⁵⁹ Ibid

¹⁶⁰ Ibid

hatred creates a self-fulfilling prophecy. Because he cannot love himself, it becomes difficult for others to love him, and then when he is rejected, he once again expresses his self-hatred.

John rejects those who seek emotional intimacy, in order to avoid getting hurt, and instead buries himself in mindless sex, seeking to fill the place in his heart that was hollowed out when he was rejected in childhood. His behavior does not arise from his gay identity but because, as he constantly repeats throughout the play, "I hate myself. I want to die."¹⁶¹

In *The Lost Doll* Chesley is expressing his own view that what matters is not the number of sexual encounters one has, but what is motivating sex: intimacy and connection or shame and self-hatred. John struggles through self-destructive behavior. Because he sees himself as nothing more than a sexual object undeserving of love he does not care whether he lives or dies. Chesley challenged the trope of tragic gays, victimized by their sexuality. He did not offer a conclusion that allows his central character to find happiness, but he does offer hope as John is on his way towards reconciling the confused and scared sissy boy with the man he has become. This is done, in part, by using the character of the Guardian Angel as a *deus ex machina* who alters John's path of self-destruction by reuniting him with the titular lost doll. In doing so, John is able to realize that the pain he feels stems from the earliest rejection he felt—when he was shamed for loving his doll. Chesley's *The Lost Doll* concludes with John being offered a second chance. The Angel notes that he cannot promise that John will

¹⁶¹ Robert Chesley, *The Lost Doll*, 1983, Unpublished, GLBT Historical Society, San Francisco

ultimately be okay but that he may escape his self-destructive shame spiral by embracing the sissy boy he was and letting go of his past feelings of rejection.¹⁶²

The Lost Doll, *For The Kids*, and *Dear Friends and Gentle Hearts* each dramatize internal and external conflicts shaping gay and lesbian experiences within their community. What Chesley does with these early plays is to blend the personal, pulling from his incidents in his own life, with the political ideology he embraced. His plays also reveal that he was comfortable critiquing his own community, pointing out what he considered to be dangerous ideas that threatened the sense of kinship that tied together the diverse members of the gay and lesbian community. Looking at the texts within the context of historical events and political strife reveals how Chesley was seeing the ways that theatre could be used to comment on his own experiences and the tensions within the gay community he loved. Chesley's willingness to comment and critique the rhetoric he viewed as divisive within the gay community came to a head in his public clashes with fellow writer and activist, Larry Kramer. It is this conflict that he powerfully dramatized in *Happy VD*.

Conflicting View: Robert Chesley vs. Larry Kramer

Upon moving to New York City Chesley found a new career writing for the gay press. One of Chesley's first major assignments was interviewing writer Larry Kramer about his recently published novel, *Faggots*. Upon its release the book was celebrated by some in the gay community and loathed by others. Chesley's long interview with Kramer, the article he published several weeks later, and Kramer's anger over how

¹⁶² The rejection of the shame spiral is one that Chesley would consistently return to in his AIDS plays. *The Lost Doll* was written in 1983 as the AIDS crisis was beginning to consume the gay community but is not an AIDS play. Its exploration of the connection between self-loathing and sexual excess makes it a precursor to the more in-depth examinations of these subjects within his AIDS texts.

Chesley used his own words to expose him as a sex-negative hypocrite, would be Chesley's first public fight with Kramer and reflect Chesley's further incorporation of his politics into his writings. Kramer and Chesley's personal conflict, the rhetoric of the debate, and the assimilationist/liberationist tension that this debate reveals are issues that Chesley would return to throughout his writing career.

Understanding what initiated the conflict between Kramer and Chesley depends upon whose history you read. In *We Must Love One Another or Die: The Life and Legacies of Larry Kramer*, a definitive collection of essays where Chesley is mentioned numerous times, Kramer is painted as the wronged party. Within the volume, Patrick Merla, a former editor of the *New York Native*, one of New York City's prominent gay newspapers, implies that Chesley was nothing more than a spurned lover who found some satisfaction in attacking Kramer in the gay press.¹⁶³ However, if one goes back to the lengthy article published in *Gay Week* in 1978, one discerns the true source of conflict between the two men. The article, "It's Hard to Walk Away From a Good Blow Job: An Interview with Larry Kramer,"¹⁶⁴ was penned by Chesley and includes a discussion between Kramer and Chesley following the publication of Kramer's novel, *Faggots*. The controversy occurred because Chesley added his own editorializing commentary, one that critiqued many of the things that Kramer said. Kramer, who did not appreciate seeing his hypocrisy in print, attacked Chesley as a one-night stand with a poisoned pen.¹⁶⁵

¹⁶³ Patrick Merla, "A Normal Heart: The Larry Kramer Story," in *We Must Love One Another or Die: The Life and Legacies of Larry Kramer*, ed. Lawrence Mass (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1997)

¹⁶⁴ Robert Chesley, "It's Hard to Walk Away From a Good Blow Job: An Interview with Larry Kramer," *Gay Week*, 1978.

¹⁶⁵ Neither Kramer nor Chesley ever denied that following the interview the two men had sex. There is nothing in Chesley's writing to ever indicate that he wanted to pursue any type of relationship with Kramer, the main emotion that comes across in Chesley's writings about Kramer and their interactions is one of bemusement rather than infatuation. It is unclear why Kramer and his supporters believe that Chesley had any lingering sexual attraction to Kramer. See "Robert Chesley to Dino," 30 December 1981, copy in The Gay and Lesbian Historical Archive, San Francisco

It is important to note that when Chesley wrote the *Gay Week* article he had only been out of the closet for three years. Kramer, on the other hand, had been living as an openly gay man for a much longer time. This difference in personal experiences caused the two men to have very different views of the sexual revolution and the importance of sexual freedom to Gay Liberation. For Chesley, who had repressed himself for so long, gay sex was not only fun but also important for community formation; sex was a language with which gay men could communicate through. Kramer saw the excessive focus on sex as shallow and believed that gay men should focus more attention on obtaining civil rights and respectability, things which he believed could only be gained by engaging in 'appropriate' sexual behaviors. The philosophical differences between the two men are clear in the following exchange:

Kramer: I mean, I'm asked to support — I'm asked to sign petitions to help people who have been nabbed by policeman for sucking off guys in the toilets of the IRT! I won't! They shouldn't fucking well be sucking off people in the IRT!

Chesley: I'm not sure I agree with that...

Kramer: You don't?! You want to see your mother or father, or your brother and sister sucking off people in the IRT? They don't do it, why should we?

Of course I respond that I would indeed like to see everyone fucking and sucking in the IRT — and everywhere else; that, indeed, I find our society far too fearful of sex and sensuality...

Kramer: What you are arbitrating is unlimited promiscuity in the streets! And that's just ridiculous!¹⁶⁶

The above exchange is between two men with different, but valid, points of view. The problem comes a moment later in the article when Kramer reveals his hypocrisy.

¹⁶⁶ Robert Chesley, "It's Hard to Walk Away From a Good Blow Job: An Interview with Larry Kramer," *Gay Week*, 1978.

Chesley asks whether he participates in the gay life that he excoriates in *Faggots* and Kramer responds in the affirmative: “Well, certain things. I go to the baths, which I find useful.”¹⁶⁷ Chesley then critiqued Kramer and his novel as problematic:

[I]t should be noted that the broad range of gay social and sexual experience described in *Faggots*, then, can be divided into three types experience, vis-à-vis its author: 1) those experiences which Kramer still enjoys, at least some of which he participates in with what must be a considerable degree of guilt; 2) those experiences which he has enjoyed but has now abjured; and 3) those experiences which he felt he had to have in order to write the book, and which, presumably, he did not (consciously) desire or enjoy... It is my belief that Kramer's approach to each of these three areas of experience is very likely to make as few of them extremely slanted, and hence *Faggots*, which purports to be an analysis of the entire gay scene, is, in fact, only valid as an individual study — one person's relation to gay sex and lifestyles.¹⁶⁸

The problem with Kramer's novel is not that he wrote a highly personal individual exploration of the gay scene. The problem, which Chesley notes, was that *Faggots* was held up by many in the gay press as the definitive exploration of gay life in 1970s New York, a statement which Kramer did nothing to refute as he enjoyed his newfound status as an important voice in shaping gay culture.

The 1978 *Gay Week* article was the first textual contretemps between Kramer and Chesley, but it was not the last. In 1981 a strange new disease was starting to kill young and previously healthy gay men quite suddenly. Kramer, understandably concerned, published his now famous personal appeal in the *New York Native*: “It's easy to become frightened that one of the many things we've done or taken over the past years may be all that it takes for cancer to grow.”¹⁶⁹ This appeal did not sit well with Chesley and brought forth all of his previous criticisms of Kramer. Chesley responded in the “Letters to the

¹⁶⁷ Ibid

¹⁶⁸ Ibid

¹⁶⁹ Patrick Merla, “A Normal Heart: The Larry Kramer Story,” in *We Must Love One Another or Die: The Life and Legacies of Larry Kramer*, ed. Lawrence Mass (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1997), 37

Editor” page of the *New York Native* where he succinctly wrote: “read anything by Kramer: closely. I think you’ll find the subtext is always: the wages of gay sin are death.”¹⁷⁰ Chesley’s attack did not go unnoticed and Kramer struck back. Chesley described their dispute in a letter to a friend:

I have been in the past very critical of Kramer, finding him to be a deliberate guilt-monger, anti-gay and anti-erotic, authoritarian, etc...Two weeks ago he got his revenge: an article more than two pages long, beginning on the front page, attacking me for attacking him as well as attacking the gay community for indifference. So okay, sort of — although I could take issue with a lot he said. He started, on the front page, with alleging that the reason I been critical of his writings is because I’m a rejected trick of his — well, I would have been embarrassed for the paper even if it had had nothing whatever to do with me. What a stupid, dirty thing to see in print! And, of course, it was a lie — whether deliberate or not, I don’t really know. Yeah, Kramer and I had a cuddly Princeton rub¹⁷¹ right after I finished taping the interview, and then I went home and struggled for weeks writing up the interview, and ended up writing a damning (and funny) piece — the best analysis of *Faggots* and the thinking behind it that have been written, I humbly think...I presented the article to Kramer before it was published, making a totally misguided gesture of friendship...And — of course! — My offer to be friendly was rejected...So there, for two weeks on New York newsstands was Larry’s version of this ridiculous story, saying that I not been entirely honest with my readers and that I’ve criticized him because he rejected me sexually...It’s the material for comedy — both the idealist and the cynic make their own worlds.¹⁷²

Chesley would dramatize these textual battles with Kramer throughout his theatrical career, particularly when advocating for sexual liberation. The entire “It’s Hard To Walk Away From A Good Blow Job,” experience would become a source of drama and satire in the text that blended the personal and political: *Happy VD*.

Happy VD is a play that represents the synthesis between Chesley the personal dramatist, Chesley the political activist, and his evolution into Chesley the Liberationist.

¹⁷⁰ Ibid

¹⁷¹ A Princeton rub is a slang term for frot, or penis to penis erotic rubbing. See Piepenburg, Erik “What’s Rub Got to Do With it?” *Out* (February 2006)

¹⁷² “Robert Chesley to Dino,” 30 December 1981, copy in The Gay and Lesbian Historical Archive, San Francisco

For the first time Chesley used theatre to encapsulate a specific event which would change the course of his life, and career, and to solidify his position as a Gay Liberationist—in this case his debate with fellow playwright and activist Larry Kramer. The title is a play on words—not only does it reference Valentine's Day, the day the action of the play occurs, but also the scourge of venereal disease which is an underlying source of the tension between the two men.

The action of *Happy VD* occurs in a New York apartment and consists of a long dialogue between two men—Stu and Bert. Stu is a thinly disguised caricature of Larry Kramer and Bert stands in for Chesley. The two men are ex-lovers meeting for a passive-aggressive philosophic discussion. It is in this discussion where Chesley uses a theatrical milieu to articulate his philosophies of sexual liberation and to label the anti-sex moralism of Kramer and his ilk misguided and potentially dangerous. The dialogue between the two men is pulled straight from the “Letters to the Editor” page of the *New York Native* and the previously discussed *Gay Week* interview that first brought Chesley and Kramer together.

The issue that Chesley had with Kramer was not simply that they held different views but that Kramer was so strident in his moral superiority — and it is this attitude that peppers Chesley's article that makes him so ripe for satire and mockery in *Happy VD*. As Chesley wrote: "underneath Kramer's basic argument that the present-day gay scene makes love impossible is a certain measure of prudery, a sense that sex is evil — and alluring trap, as when he tells us that we should want to walk away from a good blow

job."¹⁷³ And then, of course, there is Kramer's hypocrisy and it is that more than anything else which I believe made his anti-sex tirades so troubling for Chesley. Chesley's view was that society would be better off if more people engaged in an open expression of sexuality and sensuality — an idea that Kramer attacked as anarchic and unlimited promiscuity.

Much of the humor Chesley is able to bring to *Happy VD* comes when Chesley uses Kramer's exact words to mock him and to reveal the hypocrisy and self-loathing that underscore his language. Chesley's wit is in using Kramer's own rhetoric to ultimately support Bert's accepting view of the many different desires that populate the gay community and to reveal Stu as a close-minded hypocrite towards sexual needs that differ from his own wants:

Bert: The world knows you don't approve. You wrote a book about it, remember?

Stu: I said what I have to say.

Bert: The most guilt-ridden and self-hating, twisted piece of crap I've ever seen.

Stu: Not everyone sees it that way, you know.

Bert: Sure I know.

Stu: Even gay people don't.

Bert: Gay people love to hate themselves.

Stu: A lot of gay people are seriously concerned about our self-destructive lifestyles. The drugs, the dangerous sex, abusing our bodies—

Bert: I know about that, thank you. I call it guilt and homophobia.¹⁷⁴

In 1981 Kramer wrote an appeal, published in *The New York Native*, encouraged the gay community to donate money to support research into why gay men in New York are suddenly dying from the rare cancer Kaposi's sarcoma or virulent pneumonia. Chesley respected Kramer for taking on this incredibly important and admirable cause

¹⁷³ Robert Chesley, "It's Hard to Walk Away From a Good Blow Job: An Interview with Larry Kramer," *Gay Week*, 1978.

¹⁷⁴ Robert Chesley, *Happy V.D.*, 1981, Unpublished, GLBT Historical Society, San Francisco.

but he took issues with Kramer inserting his own anti-sex views. Kramer wrote: "The men who have been stricken don't appear to have done anything that many New York gay men haven't done at one time or another."¹⁷⁵

Chesley wrote a letter in response to Kramer's "Personal Appeal," published in the *New York Native*. In the period between the publication of Chesley's article and the exchange that occurred in the pages of the newspaper, there is no record of any communication between Chesley and Kramer.

Robert Chesley responded to Kramer's article in a subsequent issue of the *Native*:

It is always instructive to look closely at emotionalism for it so often has a hidden message which is the real secret of its appeal. I think the concealed meaning of Kramer's emotionalism is the triumph of guilt: that gay men *deserve* to die for their promiscuity. In his novel *Faggots*, Kramer told us that sex is dirty and that we ought not to be doing what we're doing. Now, with Kaposi's sarcoma attacking gay men, Kramer assumes that he knows the cause (maybe it's on page 37 of *Faggots*? Or page 237?), and—let's say that it's easy to become frightened that Kramer's *real* emotion is a sense of having been vindicated, though tragically: he told us so, but we didn't listen to him; nooo—we had to learn the hard way and now we're dying...I ask you to look closely at Kramer's writing because I think it's important for gay people to know whether or not they agree with him. I am not downplaying the seriousness of Kaposi's sarcoma. But something else is happening here, which is also serious: gay homophobia and anti-eroticism.¹⁷⁶

Chesley's issues with Kramer were entirely based on what he felt was Kramer's sense of "I told you so," that permeated his article. Chesley was offended that Kramer took a mysterious health crisis, whose breadth was not yet known, and used it to propagate his anti-sex politics. Kramer had used *Faggots* to rail against a culture he saw as too focused on sexual fulfillment and now he was using the deaths of several gay men as vindication

¹⁷⁵ Larry Kramer, "A Personal Appeal," *New York Native*, November 1981

¹⁷⁶ Robert Chesley, "Letter to the Editor," *New York Native*, November 1981

for the book's rejected thesis. Chesley used the theatre as a way to dramatize what he viewed as Kramer's hysteria and to propagate his own view of Kramer as a hypocrite.

The significance of *Happy VD* is that it is the first play in which Chesley directly and unabashedly articulates his views on Sexual Liberation within a dramatic text. The attacks he directs towards Kramer's hypocrisy in *Happy VD* would become a central aspect of his later plays that supported the continued need for Sexual Liberation even as AIDS shifted the paradigm. As his dramatis personae in *Happy VD* argues:

Stu: It's what they're doing to their bodies. You have a choice about that, after all.

Bert: And if you abuse your body you deserve to die?

Stu: You're risking your body.

Bert: The death penalty—for poppers?¹⁷⁷

Chesley's overarching issue with Kramer and Kramer's rhetoric was because he viewed prudery as one of the main obstacles towards self-acceptance. As his fictionalized counterpart notes—gay men do not deserve to die simply because they engage in behavior that some people find distasteful. Chesley sees Kramer's viewpoint as too rigid and judgmental. Chesley's issue is not that Kramer wants to see gay men reform their sexual behavior but that Kramer believes that gay men who express their sexuality in certain ways are 'asking for' the consequences—even if the consequences are an unknown, and fatal, disease.

Further evidence of this position can be found in Chesley's article, "Who the Bigots Are." In the article, Chesley strongly articulated his belief that anti-sex forces within the gay community had the potential to be as harmful as the mainstream bigots. He wrote:

¹⁷⁷ Robert Chesley, *Happy V.D.*, 1981, Unpublished, GLBT Historical Society, San Francisco.

Sexual prudery is also found in the tendency of many gays to deplore many forms of sex or lovemaking which they find offensive... This prudery, even within the gay movement, often links up with heterosexist standards as well, as some gays work long and hard to present to society a 'respectable' image... these gays agree with anti-gay bigots who are horrified by promiscuity, public sex, anonymous sex, S&M, water sports, scat or whatever — and they hasten to assure the bigots that they aren't that way. They also are very often eager to suppress any open discussion of these aspects of gay life.¹⁷⁸

The above quote not only applies directly to the conflict Chesley had with Larry Kramer, but it also reflects how Chesley used theatre to express his political and cultural views—that sex had a central role in both gay politics and culture. *Happy VD* not only let Chesley get the last word in his fight with Larry Kramer, but the play also dramatized the moment when Chesley evolved from a political liberationist into an activist fighting for the ideals of both the Gay and Sexual Liberation movements.

This chapter has provided insight into both the personal and political events that shaped Chesley's identity as a gay man. By examining some of his earliest dramatic works one can see how both his life experiences and commitment to Gay Liberation would help define his contributions to the gay theatrical canon. *For The Kids* dramatized the personal experiences Chesley had coming out as a schoolteacher while also critiquing the dominant media narrative being propagated by Anita Bryant and John Briggs. The play created a counter-narrative for its intended gay audience which reified the "Gay is Good" rhetoric of the Gay Liberation movement. *Dear Friends and Gentle Hearts* and *The Lost Doll* each highlighted the psychological and emotional turmoil that shame brought to gay men both historically and in contemporary culture. In *Dear Friends and Gentle Hearts*, Chesley speculates on the sexual identity of one of America's great

¹⁷⁸ Robert Chesley, "Who The Bigots Are" Unpublished Essay, Gay and Lesbian Historical Archive, San Francisco

cultural figures and claims him as a member of the gay community. His identification with Stephen Foster's own life story transformed the gay history play trope into a text through which Chesley could see his "less traveled" road, and how coming out had "made all the difference."¹⁷⁹

The Lost Doll identified the role that shame, guilt, and self-destruction continue to play amongst members of the gay community, but unlike the tragic characters of the pre-Stonewall theatre, this drama ultimately concludes on a message of hope. *The Lost Doll* suggests that through the ideals of the Gay Liberation movement and the strengthening of gay communities across America, gay men could find their way out of the spiral of self-hatred.

And finally, *Happy VD* brought together Chesley's personal experiences with his political consciousness in a dark comedy that simultaneously explored his evolution as a writer and his commitment to the emerging gay sexual culture. It was Chesley's commitment to the equally significant Sexual Liberation movement that represented his next evolution as an activist and established him as a playwright whose works create a counter-narrative to the dominant views of gay culture and gay drama during the period of 1978-1989.

¹⁷⁹ Robert Frost, "The Road Not Taken," in *The Poetry of Robert Frost: The Collected Poems, Complete and Unabridged*, ((New York: Henry Holt, 1969)

Chapter Two

“I’m a cocksucker! I’m queer! And to anyone who takes pity or offense, I say, judge yourself.” Robert Chesley’s Celebration of Gay Sexual Culture

The Stonewall Riots was a political and social revolution that helped to bring gay men together in a united community, flexing their newfound sense of strength and social visibility. The champions of Gay Liberation worked together to be heard in the halls of government, battled against discrimination, fought against prejudice, and supported each other through the coming-out process. Gay Liberation was not concerned with sexual freedom beyond the repeal of anti-sodomy laws—Gay Liberationists sought to make homosexual behavior *legal* and no longer classified as pathological. It was the marrying of the emerging sexual culture with the optimism and in-your-face attitude of Gay Liberation that created the Sexual Liberation movement amongst gay men.¹⁸⁰ Sexual Liberation as an ideology and goal focused upon the spiritual connection forged between men who had sex together while simultaneously arguing that the act of homosexual sex, in itself, was a revolutionary statement and political act. Buoyed by Sexual Liberation, gay men were encouraged to experience power and pleasure in honest expressions of their identity. Leather historian Mark Thompson described this new sensation: “gay liberation had given gay men power over their own lives...and gay men decided not only

¹⁸⁰ I am using the terms ‘Sexual Liberation’ and ‘Gay Liberation’ in reference to the political movements occurring within this particular time period and within a particular segment of society, namely the urban enclaves known as ‘gay ghettoes.’ Gay Liberation, in particular, has gone through numerous waves, from the Homophiles and continuing today in the fight for same-sex marriage equality. Sexual Liberation is focused upon the period, between Stonewall and the AIDS crisis, when gay male sexual expression flourished within these communities. There were other sexual liberation movements occurring in tandem within the heterosexual community and the lesbian community.

to protect and nurture...but to pleasure themselves as well.”¹⁸¹ However, as a historian of gay sexual culture Patrick Moore reveals when he looks back on the ways in which gay cultural history has been written, Sexual Liberation’s importance has been minimized in telling the story of Gay Liberation.

Many gay men developed their identities as gay men through their sexual experiences. At the same time, they created a culture through their shared sexual experiences and the community that formed through both political action and erotic exploration deserve equal consideration. The creation of a community through shared sexual experiences was a goal of Sexual Liberation. For Robert Chesley, it was this movement, even more than the politically charged Gay Liberation revolution, where he found his place as an activist, playwright, and gay man.

By addressing the significance of Sexual Liberation in the life and work of Robert Chesley, this chapter considers the development of the public sexual culture associated with the Sexual Liberation Movement, and the ways in which Chesley explored this culture within his theatrical works. By “public sexual culture” I am referring to the performativity of sexual personas, the presentation of communally sanctioned dress and behavior, and the establishment of sexual spaces that fostered community and ritualized erotic experiences. For the purposes of this particular discussion I am limiting my exploration to the spaces Chesley dramatized within his works: the bathhouse, sex clubs, Jerk-Off clubs, and finally the return to city spaces, such as the park, once the AIDS crisis forced the closure of sex spaces.

¹⁸¹ Mark Thompson, ed. “Introduction,” in *Leatherfolk: Radical Sex, People, Politics, and Practice* (Los Angeles: Alyson, 2001)

It was in the public sexual culture where gay men could express their desires as well as forge a sense of community. Before Stonewall, sexual pleasure had been furtively sought and gay men faced personal risk in the pursuit of erotic stimulation and companionship. In the decade between Stonewall and the AIDS crisis, the period of Sexual Liberation in which Chesley was a participant, two men engaging in penetrative anal intercourse was seen, by some, as an act of revolution. That was the statement of French gay activist and author Guy Hocquenghem. Hocquenghem was a major force in France's Gay Liberation movement, as well as part of the May 1968 Paris revolution. He was an author, both fiction and academic prose, as well as a militant who helped found the Front Homosexuel d'Action Revolutionnaire (the French equivalent to America's Gay Liberation Front) in 1971. In 1972 Hocquenghem wrote *Le Desir Homosexuel* (*Homosexual Desire*)—a polemic arguing that Western's society's privileging of the Phallus was instrumental in the oppression of women and homosexuals. Hocquenghem believed that if the desire of the homosexual, the anus, became a source of privilege rather than a taboo, then all of the oppressive social structures inherent in Western capitalist society would be equally inverted.¹⁸² He argued that anal sex was more than just an expression of desire; it was the act of being liberated from that shame and the repression that had kept gay men in the closet prior to the Stonewall Riots. Hocquenghem boldly stated: "Fuck me in the ass...and in doing so we will liberate ourselves."¹⁸³ Hocquenghem believed that the act of penetration made men physically vulnerable while simultaneously defying traditional codes of masculinity as proscribed by society (namely,

¹⁸² Lawrence R. Schehr, "Defense and Illustration of Gay Liberation," *Yale French Studies* no. 90 (1996); Guy Hocquenghem, *Homosexual Desire*, trans. Daniella Dangoor (Durham: Duke University Press, 1993)

¹⁸³ *Ibid*

the capitalist structures that demanded adherence to heteronormative and reproductive behaviors). Moreover, Hocquenghem not only praised the pleasures and politics of anal penetration, but he even ventured to declare that the male anus itself was a site of revolution and that it should be viewed as public space for the pursuit of pleasure. As presented by Hocquenghem's writings, the philosophy of Sexual Liberation championed a rejection of shame and repression by embracing desire and erotic experiences, regardless of how those sexual expressions were perceived by the larger society.

Hocquenghem's view of gay male sex as a form of political and cultural protest is not unlike the ideology expressed in the works of Robert Chesley. There was no relationship between these two men, it is unclear if Chesley would have even have heard of Hocquenghem. However, both men believed that sexual expression played a significant role in creating a gay culture and community. While this does not link them, as there is no tangible connection, I do find Hocquenghem compelling because it represented a prose articulation of similar ideas that Chesley was attempting to explore within the theatre. Chesley's explicit dramas, and their unflinching language in both spoken text and stage directions, were his articulation of Sexual Liberation. For Chesley, theatre served a purpose in keeping the revolutionary, transgressive, and transcendent nature of gay sex front and center in the gay male audience's minds.

While Robert Chesley did not privilege anal sex in the same manner as Hocquenghem, he did share Hocquenghem's belief that *desire* was central to gay community formation and fulfillment. The successes of Sexual Liberation were derived, in part, from the flourishing of pleasure spaces. The existence of sites wholly devoted to the

pursuit of erotic experience was integral to the building of a community and culture linked by same sexual desires.

When Sexual Liberation was at its height gay sex was denied the shield to privacy by the power structure that protected the sexual behaviors performed by heterosexuals.¹⁸⁴ It was not until 2003 that “sodomy”—a formal term that often refers to anal sex, but is also used to infer any non-procreative act of penetration—was illegal. Before the 1999 decision, *Lawrence v. Texas*, which declared sodomy laws unconstitutional the previous challenge, 1986’s *Bowers v. Hardwick*, concluded with the U.S Supreme Court finding that there was no right to sexual privacy outside the realm of normative (marital) sex. The case was brought when Hardwick, a gay man, entered his home with a male partner with whom, in the privacy of his bedroom, he engaged in sex acts. A neighbor, who only witnessed the two men entering the home together, called the police. The police entered Hardwick’s residence, pulled the two men from the bed, and arrested them both for sodomy. The lack of protection within private spaces contributed to the creation of a public sexual culture—embracing Hocquenghem’s exaltation of pleasure. Eric Rofes, who both experienced and witnessed these shifts, remembered: “for the first time ever, a community standard developed that transformed anonymous sex into a good thing...casual sex encounters no longer took place simply because men needed to conceal their identities...the more tricks one had, the more one helped to push the revolution along.”¹⁸⁵ It was in those spaces where Sexual Liberation flourished, cultural types were created, and a community found affection and brotherhood.

¹⁸⁴ William L. Leap, ed, *Public Sex/Gay Space* (New York: Columbia UP, 1999)

¹⁸⁵ Eric Rofes, *Reviving the Tribe: Regenerating Gay Men’s Sexuality and Culture in the Ongoing Epidemic* (New York: Haworth Press), 1996

A distinction must also be made as to what is meant when using the terms “private” and “public” in relation to gay sex spaces. Public does not necessarily imply that the sex acts occurring within those spaces are on full view to anyone and everyone, although that is sometimes an element. Public denotes a space that is accessible and without restriction. For example: a bathhouse is public because anyone can enter it by paying the entrance fee, but once inside that bathhouse much of the sex between men occurs behind closed cubicle doors and is not visible to other attendees. On the other hand, access is limited when it comes to entering private space and, thus, much of what occurs there is inherently hidden from the eyes of the general public. A person’s home or a “members only” organization is considered a private space.¹⁸⁶

When discussing the sex spaces associated with Sexual Liberation, it is necessary to define what is meant by “space” as opposed to “place.” This differentiation is informed by theorists such as Michel de Certeau. Per Certeau, *place* is a location—a bathroom is a place, an alcove in a public park is a place, and a hot tub is a place—and place, in this context, is inherently neutral. Place becomes *space* when both actions and meanings transform the nature of the site.¹⁸⁷ A public men’s restroom is a place where men go to relieve themselves, that is its designed function—but once that restroom becomes a location where men go to engage in anonymous sex the restroom becomes a space pregnant with meanings in relation to the sexual acts that are occurring within its walls. If a restroom stall is fitted with a “glory hole” (a hole cut into a wall through which men stick their penis so that that this organ can be greeted with an open mouth or hand), then

¹⁸⁶ William L. Leap, ed, *Public Sex/Gay Space* (New York: Columbia UP, 1999)

¹⁸⁷ Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984) quoted in William L. Leap, ed, *Public Sex/Gay Space* (New York: Columbia UP, 1999)

that restroom stall becomes a space for faceless sex.¹⁸⁸ A place's function as space can often be culturally specific and its designation as *space* may be unwritten and unknown unless one has access to a community's codes and scripts. Without that knowledge and access, that which signifies space may be where others simply see place.¹⁸⁹

The gay sexual culture and the places where it found expression primarily occurred in the gay ghettos that emerged in major metropolises in the post-Stonewall 70s. New York's Greenwich Village and San Francisco's Castro District were two major centers of gay migration, receiving more than twenty thousand gay men—including Robert Chesley—who had journeyed to these gay enclaves with hopes of living openly and having sex freely.¹⁹⁰ This new culture of sex and its role in fostering the revolutionary ideals of Sexual Liberationists occurred in the baths, alternative sex clubs, and Jerk-Off clubs. The public sexual culture and the celebration of spaces that shaped behaviors would be explored in the work of Robert Chesley.

The Cultures of Place and Space: Bathhouses, Sex Clubs, and Jerk-Off Clubs

The Bathhouse

Bathhouses had existed in large urban centers since the turn of the century as male-only sites for relaxation. It was in the 1950s and 1960s that these homosocial places became sites used almost exclusively by homosexual men. Since gay sex was prosecuted

¹⁸⁸ Holmes, Dave, Patrick O'Byrne, and Stuart J. Murray. "Faceless sex: glory holes and sexual assemblages." *Nursing Philosophy* 11, no. 4 (2010): 250-259.

¹⁸⁹ To use a contemporary example—many Americans first exposure to the idea of public restrooms being sites of gay sex came with Congressman Larry Craig's arrest in the Minneapolis airport. Craig, a conservative family values politician, claimed that he was innocent of soliciting sex and went into a restroom to use the facility as the place it was. However, his use of specific signals, such as toe-tapping, was read by many as Craig knowing exactly what he was doing because he was following specific scripts followed by those cruising for anonymous sex in that space. A heterosexual male going into the Minneapolis airport could use that restroom without incident because without knowing the cruising signals he would never traverse the invisible place/space barrier of that restroom.

¹⁹⁰ Patrick Moore, *Beyond Shame: Reclaiming the Abandoned History of Radical Gay Sexuality* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2004)

as a criminal activity, meeting and having sex in bathhouses carried with it significant personal and professional risks, nevertheless, the baths still offered its attendees some specter of safety.¹⁹¹ In order to protect these sites—and the patrons that visited—bathhouses did not blatantly advertise their services. Typically, bathhouses were unmarked buildings that, upon first entrance, did not appear to provide anything beyond health club offerings, such as saunas or steam rooms.¹⁹² It was only upon paying the entrance fee and then moving through several locked doors and corridors, that the sexual spaces within the bathhouse would be visible. These extra layers of security were done, primarily, to delay the police during raids.¹⁹³ The locations of bathhouses, as well as other spaces for anonymous sexual encounters, were common knowledge via discrete ‘health club’ announcements in the gay press, or were spread by word of mouth within the community.¹⁹⁴ As the gay community began to emerge with the rise of Gay Liberation, bathhouse increasingly symbolized freedom and became institutions that gave men pride in themselves and their sexuality. Erik Rofes explained how “gay men required a venue in which to have fast, easy sex...they liked having this kind of sex while being witnessed by each other...the baths married the need for community with the need for touch in a new way.”¹⁹⁵ Bathhouses provided gay men a multiplicity of erotic pleasures: anal sex, oral sex, frottage, and/or orgies could all be pursued or one could simply find sexual release by being a voyeur to these acts. What mattered was not what one *did* at the

¹⁹¹ Ira Tattleman, “Speaking to the Gay Bathhouse: Communicating in Sexually Charged Spaces,” in *Public Sex/Gay Space*, ed. William L. Leap (New York: Columbia UP, 1999)

¹⁹² Hammers, Corie. "An Examination of Lesbian/Queer Bathhouse Culture and the Social Organization of (Im) Personal sex." *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography* 38, no. 3 (2009)

¹⁹³ Ibid

¹⁹⁴ Richard Tewksbury, "Cruising for Sex in Public Places: The Structure and Language of Men's Hidden, Erotic Worlds." *Deviant Behavior* 17, no. 1 (1996)

baths—what mattered was that one experienced the culture of the baths as either a witness or active participant.

In addition to functioning as sex spaces, bathhouses served many other important roles in creating a vibrant and unified gay community. The baths were also sites of entertainment and artistic expression. Some baths commissioned gay artists to create erotic murals for their walls, not only providing them a chance to create work that would be seen by thousands of people, but also creating the opportunity for them to display their work for an audience that would understand and appreciate their art. Others hosted bands or staged cabarets. To that end, the most famous of these bathhouse entertainments occurred at New York's Continental Baths where a then-unknown Bette Midler, accompanied by an equally unknown Barry Manilow, would give concerts to a sea of men in towels.¹⁹⁶

The baths also functioned as community centers. Holiday parties were a major draw, particularly fun, libidinous soirees that boasted "Gay Pride" or "Halloween" themes. The baths also hosted communal gatherings for Christmas and Thanksgiving. Gay men who had been rejected by their biological family could gather with an alternate family that would always welcome them at the baths. Gay men could also receive sexual health screenings, including tests for venereal disease, and be educated about safe(r) sex practices from gay health workers.¹⁹⁷ These examples, some of the many benefits bathhouses offered their patrons, demonstrate how the public sex culture reinforced the ideals of Gay Liberation *and* supported the goals of Sexual Liberation. It was this

¹⁹⁵Eric Rofes, *Reviving the Tribe: Regenerating Gay Men's Sexuality and Culture in the Ongoing Epidemic* (New York: Haworth Press), 1996

¹⁹⁶Allan Bérubé, "The History of Gay Bathhouses," *Journal of Homosexuality* 44: 3-4 (2003)

¹⁹⁷Ibid

blending of community, culture, and sexual exploration that made bathhouses preeminent amongst gay sex spaces. A diverse swath of gay men, regardless of race, class, or age, came together to make connections with their gay brethren in the baths and these sites—secluded from the outside world—allowed the men inside to behave without risk of judgment or repercussion. In the bathhouse one could look and/or touch with the knowledge that upon crossing the threshold and entering the baths, one invited the opportunity to become a sexual subject and object of desire.

Sex at the baths was, in some ways, a form of interactive theatre. The performance began upon entering a bathhouse, and through that act one became both an actor and an audience member in relation to the sexual show occurring on the stages within. Once the entrant had registered and paid the cashier (a fee that was calculated depending upon what was wanted—a locker or a room), he was handed a white towel and a key, and in later years, a condom.¹⁹⁸ It was after this exchange, and the passing through the various security doors, that the patron then entered the public sex space.

The layout of bathhouses varied from location to location, but they tended to have a similar structure. Inside would be a café, a gym area, swimming pools, hot tubs, and an orgy room with mattresses upon the floor. The primary feature of most baths was long hallways, lined with the doorways to rooms. “The architecture and design...create multiple public and private spaces where men can defy usual sexual convention with the guarantee of a sexual encounter...their design promotes ‘alternative’ sexual practices.”¹⁹⁹ These halls were designed to keep foot traffic moving and cruising opportunities steady.

¹⁹⁸ It was more expensive to rent a room, but that was a guaranteed semi-private space for the entire evening, while renting a locker, for the storage of personal items and clothes, meant that the patron was on public display for the entirety of their visit. Allan Bérubé, “The History of Gay Bathhouses,” *Journal of Homosexuality* 44: 3-4 (2003)

¹⁹⁹ Dave Holmes, Patrick O’Byrne, and Denise Gastaldo, “Setting the Space for Sex: Architecture, Desire, and Health Issues in Gay Bathhouses,” *International Journal of Nursing Studies* 44 (2007)

The rooms could have doors open, signaling an invitation to participate or watch the action, or the doors could be closed, thereby signaling the desire for privacy. The physical set-up of the bathhouse was designed to facilitate anonymous and efficient sex, allowing men to utilize their time in order to find gratification with as many partners as desired.

In describing the form and function of the bathhouse layout, Ira Tattleman, an architect who has written extensively on bathhouse design, employed theatrical terms: “by entering the building, once accepts a position in the performance and rituals of the space.”²⁰⁰ Similarly, Corie Hammers, a scholar of queer public sexual cultures, in writing about the structures of bathhouse interactions, described how participation was ‘scripted’ for those entering the bathhouse. These stage directions were both explicit (rules of behavior were posted) and implicit, (behavior was tacitly enforced by the interactions occurring between patrons).

Ironically, the scripting of these performances primarily centered on silence, or a lack of verbal interaction. One of the primary reasons for silence was the risk of intrusion by police; the threat of danger from the outside world led to the creation of silent signals. One of the ways participants communicated with unspoken signs was via a ‘towel code.’ Men could be completely nude within the baths, but the towel worn around the waist served a purpose in their cruising efforts. The manner in which the towel was knotted or draped signified behavior being sought, i.e. whether one was a ‘top’ or ‘bottom’ and/or looking for anal or oral sex. The towel functioned as an emblematic costume. The body of the performer within the space was incredibly significant, particularly when one

²⁰⁰ Ira Tattleman, “Speaking to the Gay Bathhouse: Communicating in Sexually Charged Spaces,” in *Public Sex/Gay Space*, ed. William L. Leap (New York: Columbia UP, 1999)

considers that verbalizing wants and needs was discouraged. Richard Tewksbury has written extensively on the silent communication that comprised the cruising experience.

He wrote:

Body language often involves motion and signals. As attention is maintained between men, these signals frequently involve touching oneself...Body rubbing is done in conjunction with eye contact. To create the most direct message possible, a man move, rubs, or serially poses while maintaining what he hopes is a mutually held gaze.²⁰¹

Body language, including the presentation of one's own body or the groping of a potential partner's body, spoke volumes about one's interests. A similar means of signaling desire was achieved by one's position in their room. A man on his stomach with his buttocks displayed, or spread, was issuing an invitation for penetration; an open door meant that any were welcome—although a man retained the right of refusal for any reason. The bathhouse was a space beyond language; verbal communication gave way to codes of presentation and silent cues. Ira Tattleman recounted how one of these silent cues, a cracked door in this case, could create an experience:

A man was sucking my cock and somehow the door of our cubicle was open. I didn't see anyone enter the room, but suddenly I was aware of lips and tongues and fingers all over my body. Six or eight men were contributing to my pleasure...When I came, I came in surges...While it was happening I was scarcely aware of who these men were or what they looked like or what they were doing. When it was over I sat up on the bed. I thanked the men. We chatted idly.²⁰²

What Tattleman is describing is, in some respects, an ideal experience that was promoted by Sexual Liberationists. Within the space, Tattleman used the unspoken code of invitation, a cracked door, to make a connection with another man. And then by

²⁰¹ Richard Tewksbury, "Cruising for sex in public places: The structure and language of men's hidden, erotic worlds." *Deviant behavior* 17, no. 1 (1996): 1-19.

²⁰² "New Hope for the Heteros" (1984) quoted in Ira Tattleman, "Speaking to the Gay Bathhouse: Communicating in Sexually Charged Spaces," in *Public Sex/Gay Space*, ed. William L. Leap (New York: Columbia UP, 1999)

expressing his desires within this open environment his intimacy with one man became a communal act. What turns this anecdote from a sexual story into a Sexual Liberationist story is his note that after the sex was completed this group of men then took the time to engage in a friendly conversation. That chat session was part of the goal of Sexual Liberation: finding connection because of and then beyond the sexual act.

The baths existed for the expression of sexual desire amongst like-minded men and by entering the bathhouse one became privy to those sexual scripts through observation and tacit participation. My use of the term scripting borrows from Robin Bernstein's exploration of race and material culture. In her essay "Dances with Things: Material Culture and the Performance of Race," she defines scripts as "not a rigid dictation of performed action but...a necessary openness to resistance, interpretation, and improvisation."²⁰³ Bernstein argues that material culture scripts human behaviors, objects influence the actions of individuals. For the men in bathhouses, the space scripts their behaviors—the layout of the baths, the cracked door, and the silence which creates the need for non-verbal communication via towels. Bernstein wrote: "that which I call a 'scriptive thing' ...broadly structures a performance while simultaneously allowing for resistance and unleashing original, live variations."²⁰⁴ In other words, scripts shape the events but do not remove the individuality of the performer who is still in control of the event. Tattleman's experience in the baths was scripted by the openness of the cubicles and the unspoken invitation to participation but the actions of the men participating, and their choice to have an intimate conversation, was a variation on the event that made the encounter unique to Tattleman.

²⁰³ Robin Bernstein, "Dances with Things: Material Culture and the Performance of Race," *Social Text*, no. 101 (2009)

The ‘scriptive thing’ was most evident in the orgy rooms. These spaces were powerful reminders of how much had changed in such a brief period of time as they represented the shift from the solitary homosexual desperately seeking contact (life before Stonewall), to a literal coming together of dozens of men in a continuous chain of pleasure. One man described being part of this erotic, communal space:

While I was sucking on it guys gathered around until I could feel a hand searching my ass, then a moist cock filling that hole, until I knew that fantastic feeling of being entered from both ends, filled with cock... The room was filled with the sounds of cocks fucking moistened assholes and the sucking sounds of cocks slipping in and out of many mouths.²⁰⁵

What this participant described was beyond sexual pleasure—the reference to being filled was not solely about stimulation but the emotional and psychological sense of belonging found in that room. Both the men and the space were being filled and the body and space, in that moment, were solely dedicated to mutual pleasure and forming a temporary community within a space devoted to sex. In that orgy room gay men were liberated and together. Per Bernstein, the script were not just the behaviors within the orgy room, but the Liberation being felt by those participating and observing—that sense of communal brotherhood was the variation that was not implicit in the structure of the performance.

As the baths became more popular during the flourishing years of Sexual Liberation, gay businessman took advantage and began opening newer, more exciting, and more complex locations within the gay ghettos. The image of the gay entrepreneur exploiting the desires of the gay population was satirized in Chesley’s 1984 black comedy *Night Sweats*. As I will discuss a bit later in this chapter, one of the patrons of the

²⁰⁴ Ibid

²⁰⁵ “Sweet Ass at the Baths” (1982) quoted in Ira Tattleman, “Speaking to the Gay Bathhouse: Communicating in Sexually Charged Spaces,” in *Public Sex/Gay Space*, ed. William L. Leap (New York: Columbia UP, 1999)

play's Coup de Grace club, is one such entrepreneur who confesses his 'sins' against the gay community before his death.

Sex Clubs

Not all sex spaces had the celebratory brotherhood feeling of the baths. Sex club culture was defined by its strict enforcement of behavior and dress. The bathhouse and the sex club were similar in that both were sites of public sex. The same men who frequented the baths and reveled in the sense of community offered there were just as likely to patronize sex clubs, however, the baths and the sex clubs functioned—and were viewed—in very distinct ways. Bathhouses were welcoming—any gay men could come into a bathhouse and find something: sex, exercise, or conversation. Sex clubs, on the other hand, were more restrictive with codes of dress and conduct. Accordingly, these spaces became infamous for accommodating hardcore sex and eventually giving birth to the “Clone” identity and culture within gay communities.

One of the most famous Sex Clubs was New York's Mineshaft. The Mineshaft has entered into the realm of myth; afforded a stature and exaltation it lacked during its existence, in part because so many writers have discussed their experiences within the space.²⁰⁶ It is important to note that The Mineshaft was not a unique space in the gay culture. Numerous clubs offering similar sexual experiences existed in gay ghettos, particularly in San Francisco. Nevertheless, the Mineshaft has achieved a certain reverence and, subsequently, it has become emblematic of the larger gay sex club culture. To this end, while this chapter will focus on exploring The Mineshaft's particular

²⁰⁶ Another reason that The Mineshaft has entered the public consciousness, unlike other spaces, is that it was featured in pop culture. Most notable was the space's role in William Friedkin's controversial 1981 film *Cruising*, a murder mystery set in the world of gay male sadomasochism.

offerings, it is important to note that numerous other sex clubs—including San Francisco’s Ramrod, Ambush, and Toolbox—were just as significant. All of these spaces, and those of their ilk, were worlds of leathersex and sadomasochism that required men to perform overt and exaggerated presentations of masculinity.

The notion of violating sexual taboos was front and center at the beginning of The Mineshaft. When the club first opened it included such extreme elements as a scat room²⁰⁷ and a motor oil-filled grease gun (wielded by the club’s bartender) for the purpose of prepping a bottom for fisting. The scat room eventually was shut down and motor oil was exchanged for tubs of Crisco shortening.²⁰⁸

The Mineshaft grew in popularity and became popularly known as a hardcore gay sex space, catering to the leather and sadomasochistic scenes. Douglas Sadownick, who has written extensively on gay sexual culture, fondly remembered the scenes performed at the Mineshaft:

You pass through an archway into a large dark room. Slings hang from the ceiling. Another wall offers glory holes....a man swings in a sling, with an ethyl chloride soaked rag stuck in his mouth, a bottle of poppers under his nose, as a chap wearing top sticks two fingers in a tube of Crisco and then smears them on the ring of his still tight ass hole...A man lays naked in a bathtub, awaiting either a community sacrament or a community degradation – depending what your state of mind is.²⁰⁹

As suggested by Sadownick’s recollections, the men patronizing sex clubs went on journeys into the darker side of sexuality and together came out on the other side

²⁰⁷ Scat is the fetish of being sexually stimulated by being defecated on or defecating upon another.

²⁰⁸ Patrick Moore, *Beyond Shame: Reclaiming the Abandoned History of Radical Gay Sexuality* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2004)

²⁰⁹ Douglas Sadownick, *Sex Between Men: An Intimate History of the Sex Lives of Gay Men Postwar to Present* (San Francisco: Harper Collins), 1996.

having experienced orgasmic and spiritual ecstasy.²¹⁰ At first glance the above experience may seem no different than the bathhouse encounter recounted by Tattleman. However, the sexual acts performed at The Mineshaft were not focused upon creating a sense of brotherhood or friendship. In contrast, the hardcore sex experienced at the Mineshaft was about the Sexual Liberation espoused by Hocquenghem. When the man on the bottom allowed himself to be used as nothing more than a receptacle for another man's pleasure his submission freed him from the concerns of the outside world as he was completely in the care of a dominant. The top, by using the bottom in whichever way he saw fit, took back control and was seen as a masculine man—an identity denied to him by mainstream society which continued to equate homosexuality with femininity.²¹¹ The setting of the Mineshaft highlighted the different type of sex that was to occur within the space. The baths had cubicles with cots and doors—space that was built for intimacy as well as anonymity. The Mineshaft offered no such accessories. Instead of cots there were slings and glory holes (which reduced men to their orifices) and the function of the sexual acts was an expression of dominance and submission and not, as occurred in the baths, a source for bonding.

The proprietors of these clubs understood that the types of sex being offered in their walls did not appeal to a majority of gay men, nor did these spaces promote behavior for the fainthearted or uninitiated. These sex clubs policed their doors to keep out those who were not costumed appropriately—coming to the door wearing sweaters,

²¹⁰ Patrick Moore, *Beyond Shame: Reclaiming the Abandoned History of Radical Gay Sexuality* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2004)

²¹¹ Patrick Moore, *Beyond Shame: Reclaiming the Abandoned History of Radical Gay Sexuality* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2004)

slacks, or other bar/disco wear guaranteed rejection.²¹² Hypermasculinity was the element that signaled if one was a patron of a space like the Mineshaft. The look of these men would be commercialized within the gay community into an identifiable “type” known as the Clone. The name clone came from the fact that the men who participated in this culture dressed and presented themselves in a particular manner, thus they all looked alike. It was this form of presentation that Robert Chesley embraced within his own life.

Gay clones’ public presentations communicated their sexual behaviors. Michael Bronski described the sudden emergence of clone culture and the iconic status it achieved relatively quickly: “Black jeans, tightfitting T-shirts, flannel shirts, leather chaps, vests, harnesses, ripped jeans, and boots were all designed to show off the sexualized male form...It publicly identified men as gay to one another and, because they all looked alike...part of a community.”²¹³ The clone was uber-masculine rebelling against mainstream society’s continued representation of gay men as femme.

Presentational strategies within this world were typically Butch. For example, these men usually fashioned themselves after so archetypically masculine icons as bodybuilders and blue-collar workers, and commonly wore work boots, flannel shirts, and button up Levi's and had gym bodies, short haircuts, and mustaches or beards. Moreover, clones dressed in such a way to highlight male erotic features and availability. For example, these men frequently wore formfitting T-shirts and Levi's that outlined their musculature, genitals, and buttocks. To highlight the penis even further, they often wore no underwear.²¹⁴

Finding sexual partners within the gay community, particularly in the bar culture, was often dependent upon physical beauty. Clones did not privilege looks in the traditional sense and it was often the men who did *not* fit societal standards of beauty that

²¹² Ibid

²¹³ Michael Bronski, *The Pleasure Principle: Sex, Backlash, and the Struggle for Gay Freedom* (New York: St. Martin's Press), 1998.

²¹⁴ Gilbert Herdt ed, *Gay Culture in America* (Boston: Beacon Press), 1992.

found themselves the most sought after within Clone spaces. “Masculinity replaced beauty as the prime determinant of sexual appeal...an ugly lug with a beer gut, bald head, and hirsute back could be the hottest guy in the place.”²¹⁵ In addition to being identified with a particular look, clones pursued specific sexual behaviors in addition to S/M. Clones’ sexual pursuits became known as “tricking,” anonymous one-off sexual encounters, and the hunt for tricks was known as Clone cruising. The act of tricking consisted of specific, and highly performative, types of behavior. The idea of cruising was mentioned earlier, in regard to the act of perusing men patronizing a bathhouse. Clone cruising had a certain predatory aspect as the act of tricking, the intended endgame of cruising, was a dominant expression of sexual desire.

Tricking frequently involved deep throating, hard fucking, and heavy tit work...Fellatio often included vigorously jamming the penis completely down the throat which frequently caused gagging or choking. Anal intercourse usually entailed strenuously ramming the penis entirely up the anus while painfully slapping the buttocks. Nipple stimulation commonly involved robustly sucking, pinching, or biting the nipples to the point of pain.²¹⁶

Sex club spaces, such as The Mineshaft, was instrumental in the creation of the Clone culture and the specific sexual acts performed by the men in this subculture. The Mineshaft policed its entrants insuring that those within the space would be consenting to participate in the acts of Clone cruising and tricking. This form of sexual expression would be potentially problematic or potentially traumatizing in a bathhouse setting where all the men were nude and thus unable to signify their desires beyond ‘top or ‘bottom’ without words. Sex clubs, whether they were hardcore spaces or Jerk-Off clubs, made

²¹⁵ Patrick Moore, *Beyond Shame: Reclaiming the Abandoned History of Radical Gay Sexuality* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2004)

²¹⁶ Gilbert Herdt, ed., *Gay Culture in America* (Boston: Beacon Press), 1992.

understanding and accepting the behaviors occurring within their walls part of the price of admission.

Like traditional sex clubs, Jerk-Off (aka J/O) Clubs also served an important function for gay men. However, these spaces specifically existed to appeal to gay men who were still seeking bonds of sex and intimacy during the height of the AIDS crisis. While the bathhouses encouraged behavioral shifts by providing condoms and safe sex literature, J/O clubs promoted “safer sex” by catering to men who chose to limit their sexual behavior to masturbation, solo and mutual. Fantasy, including erotic talk *about* kink and fetish, were welcome into these new clubs, thus appealing to those who had engaged in a variety of sexual activities before AIDS.

Bathhouses and sex clubs were some of the most prominent, and infamous, spaces in the gay community during the 1970s. Post-Stonewall, gay men embraced Sexual Liberation and the idea that having sex, particularly public sex, was participating in the revolution. However, unbeknownst to the community reveling in celebratory atmosphere that gave birth to the intimacy of the baths and the hardcore hedonism of the Clones, there was a looming threat. This threat would not only decimate the gay community but turn spaces that functioned as sites of belonging and desire into sites of death and infection.

A Dream Deferred: AIDS In San Francisco and Its Impact on the Spaces of Sexual Liberation²¹⁷

On July 3, 1981 *The New York Times* published an article entitled “Rare Cancer Seen in 41 Homosexuals.” The article described how doctors in New York and San

²¹⁷ I am focusing upon the impact of AIDS in San Francisco for three relevant—and related—reasons: 1) All the plays discussed in this section are set in San Francisco, 2) San Francisco is home to one of the largest gay communities in the United States and, accordingly, faced incredible devastation during the onslaught of the AIDS epidemic, 3) San Francisco was Robert Chesley’s home during this time period.

Francisco had been tracking the diagnosis of a rare cancer called Kaposi's Sarcoma, a fast spreading and lethal cancer that was increasingly found among elderly patients in homosexual communities. No one could have known that this article would mark the entrance of AIDS into the public's consciousness. Strikingly, the tone of the article suggests the unusual nature of the study, yet it did not transmit a sense of panic or alarm.

In the *Times* article, Dr. Lawrence Altman wrote:

The reporting doctors said that most cases had involved homosexual men who have had multiple and frequent sexual encounters with different partners, as many as 10 sexual encounters each night up to four times a week...Many patients also reported that they had used drugs such as amyl nitrite and LSD to heighten sexual pleasure. Cancer is not believed to be contagious, but conditions that might precipitate it, such as particular viruses or environmental factors, might account for an outbreak among a single group. The medical investigators say some indirect evidence actually points away from contagion as a cause.²¹⁸

In San Francisco the imminent threat of a new disease, that was seemingly striking only gay men, was not communicated in the media, but within the community. In the 2011 documentary *We Were Here*, San Francisco resident Ed Wolf, a gay man who lived in the Castro District during the AIDS crisis, described the first time he became aware of this strange new disease:

We were at the Castro theatre to see a double feature...I ran down to the Star Pharmacy to get some rolling papers and in the window I saw some Polaroids. In one the man had his mouth open and inside was this big purple spot. In another picture he had his shirt pulled up, and there were more big purple spots. A handwritten note underneath the pictures said 'watch out guys, there's something out there.' I went back to the theatre, shaken. My friend Michael had woken up a few days earlier with a red spot in his eye and he went to the eye doctors and no one knew what it was. It turned out that he had K.S in his eye. And I realized that it was already here, in line with me.²¹⁹

²¹⁸ Lawrence Altman, "Rare Cancer Seen in 41 Homosexuals," *The New York Times*, July 3, 1981

²¹⁹ *We Were Here*. DVD. Directed by David Weissman, Bill Weber (San Francisco: Red Flag Releasing, 2011)

Wolf personalizes the horror-film quality of the looming AIDS crisis—the disease had crept up on them, without their knowledge, and by the time they realized it existed—it was too late. While 1981 was the year that the threat of AIDS became known, it is now believed that AIDS began affecting the health and well-being of San Francisco’s gay population as early as 1976 and that by 1979, ten percent of the community had already been infected. By 1981, twenty percent were infected, and by 1985—when a blood test became available—fifty percent of the gay men in San Francisco were infected with the virus.²²⁰ Considering the fact that gay men came to San Francisco in the 1970s in order to pursue their dreams of community and sexual freedom, it should come as no surprise that the transmission rate of the virus was rampant like wildfire before anyone had any knowledge of its existence.

When this ‘mysterious gay cancer’ began spreading, no one knew what was causing seemingly healthy gay men to suddenly become sick and die. Previously healthy young men would come into the hospitals with *Pneumocystis carinii pneumonia* (PCP) and be dead within ten days.²²¹ By the end of 1981, the disease had killed 121 men out of the 270 cases that had been reported to the Center for Disease Control that year.²²² Men were becoming sick, and dying, yet there was no name for the disease causing these infections, nor was there any information about why gay men were its victims. The men who were dying were not ‘just’ gay, but were also typically men that engaged in sex with multiple partners and had a history of sexually transmitted infections, the medical community dubbed those diagnosed with opportunistic infections such as KS and PCP, as

²²⁰ Ibid

²²¹ Ibid

²²² “A Timeline of AIDS,” AIDS.Gov: <http://aids.gov/hiv-aids-basics/hiv-aids-101/aids-timeline/>

suffering from GRID, or Gay Related Immunodeficiency. The scientific community was literally saying that an outside contagion was linked to homosexuality

Within a year of the 1981 outbreak, medical researchers began to suspect that GRID was not a disease linked to the patient's sexuality, but rather it was traced to an outside agent and that men in the gay community were susceptible to infection due to their sexual behaviors. Dr. Altman, again writing for *The New York Times*, described the work being done at the Center for Disease Control (CDC).

Federal epidemiologists investigating a serious disorder of the body's immune system that has mostly afflicted male homosexuals reported new evidence yesterday suggesting that the outbreak is linked to an infectious agent. Dr. Harold W. Jaffe...said in an interview. 'They do show pretty convincingly that this is not occurring as a random event among homosexual men.' No specific infectious agent has been identified, he said, but scientists at the Atlanta facilities are intensifying laboratory efforts to identify a virus, bacteria or other micro-organism as a possible cause.²²³

The term AIDS entered the lexicon in 1982, in part because gay men were not the only population segment showing signs of the disease. Officially, the CDC dubbed AIDS a '4H' disease as it seemed to inordinately affect homosexuals, hemophiliacs, heroin users, and Haitians.²²⁴

In San Francisco the deaths from AIDS became 'an avalanche,' as men lost friends, coworkers, lovers, or simply noticed people they used to see every day, their barista for example, disappear.²²⁵ In *We Were Here*, Guy Clark, a flower vendor in the Castro, described how every week you would get the *Bay Area Reporter* to read the obituaries (which had gone from a page to a booklet) and find out who had died. He

²²³ Lawrence Altman, "Clue Found on Homosexuals' Precancer Syndrome," *The New York Times*, June 18, 1982

²²⁴ Paula Treichler, "AIDS, Gender, and Biomedical Discourse: Current Contests for Meaning," in *AIDS: The Burdens of History*, eds. Elizabeth Fee and Daniel M. Fox (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1988)

²²⁵ *We Were Here*. DVD. Directed by David Weissman, Bill Weber (San Francisco: Red Flag Releasing, 2001)

noted how men he used to see walk by him on the street would be there one day, go into the hospital, and be gone five days later.²²⁶

In 1983 San Francisco General Hospital designated Ward 5B the official AIDS ward, and it was the first of its kind in the world. All of those who cared for patients were volunteers as the mode of transmission was still unknown and a great deal of fear existed over caring for AIDS victims.

When the cause of AIDS was initially unknown a great many myths about sources of infection were explored within the gay press. Some of these myths laid that blame on certain sexual practices practiced by subcultural groups within the gay community. Once AIDS was identified as a virus conspiracy theories about why gay men were so heavily targeted began to appear. The reason these myths matter to our understanding of the early years of the AIDS crisis is they speak to the division that arose in the gay community with regards to the continuation of a sexual culture, and certain behaviors, once the crisis began.

When gay men began suffering from the same rare infections in a variety of cities, such as New York, San Francisco, and Los Angeles, initially it was believed that something within the gay culture was the root cause—the only thing these men had in common was their participation in the gay male sexual culture. One of the first links investigated was the use of poppers, or amyl nitrate, an inhalant many gay men used during sex to intensify their orgasm.²²⁷ In San Francisco researchers looked into a brand of poppers being manufactured for and sold by the popular gay club, The Ambush.

²²⁶ Ibid

²²⁷ Paula Treichler, "AIDS, Gender, and Biomedical Discourse: Current Contests for Meaning," in *AIDS: The Burdens of History*, eds. Elizabeth Fee and Daniel M. Fox (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1988), 200

Though investigators were shocked by the seedy nature of *The Ambush*, the ultimately concluded that even a poorly produced batch of amyl nitrate was unlikely to lead to the types of diseases they were seeing. And considering that the same infections were being found in other cities, and amyl nitrate had been used safely for well over a century, they publicly announced there was no link between the use of poppers and GRID.²²⁸

One myth regarding AIDS in the early years of the crisis was the “Overload theory.” This theory posited that AIDS was not simply caused by a new, or re-emerged, virus but instead was the result of an immunological collapse caused by the ‘gay lifestyle’ in combination with a virus. In other words: gay men had contracted so many sexually transmitted diseases during the heyday of gay Sexual Liberation and done so many questionable drugs, such as poppers, that their immune system did not stand a chance against this virus. Infection came from the introduction of a new virus but the inability of gay men to fight the disease, thus the soaring death rate, was the result of the gay lifestyle occurring in places like the Castro. Steven Seidman points out the cynical and problematic aspect of this ‘theory:’

The Overload theory posits a more direct, ironic, and insidious dynamic: the immediate sensual pleasure of ‘promiscuous’ sex sets in motion a hidden telos of disease and death. The very act of sexual union—with its cultural resonances of love and the production of life—is turned into an act of death as bodily defenses collapse.²²⁹

The “Overload theory” maintained a prominent conspiracy theory well into the first decade of the AIDS crisis; Seidman’s article is from 1988 and does not describe it as a debunked. This theory was so dangerous because it both equated sex with death, as

²²⁸ Randy Shilts, *And the Band Played On: Politics, People, and the AIDS Epidemic* (New York : St. Martin’s Press, 1987), 187

²²⁹ Steven S. Schwartzberg, “Struggling for Meaning: How HIV-Positive Gay Men Make Sense of AIDS,” *Professional Psychology: Research and Practice*, Vol. 24, no. 4 (1993)

Seidman notes above, but it holds that gay men are responsible for their suffering. Unlike Shilts, placing the blame at the feet, or penis, of one gay man cutting a sexual swath, those subscribing to the Overload conspiracy can state that gay men brought this upon themselves through their promiscuity. Ultimately, this theory of the disease was dismissed, particularly once AIDS began affecting the non-homosexual population. Unfortunately, the moralizing against the gay sexual culture would continue and the sexual gay culture was still seen as partially responsible for the impact of the virus. In 1984 the discovery of a new virus, called HTLV—III by NIH research Dr. Robert Gallo, ARV by San Francisco researcher Jay Levy, and LAV by Professor Luc Montagnier from France's Pasteur Institute, meant that the disease killing gay men in droves was not caused by their lifestyle or their behavior.²³⁰ As Gary McDonald, then executive director of a Washington D.C AIDS organization, succinctly stated in 1985: "AIDS is not transmitted because of who you are, but because of what you do."²³¹ In spite of this incredible scientific discovery, and the ensuing research that followed the isolation of the virus, the notion of gay men dying from "Overload" continued. By the end of 1983, almost fifteen hundred people had died of the disease.

In San Francisco, the gay community responded to the AIDS onslaught by coming together to care for each other and demanding support from an inattentive government. Suddenly, political activists involved on the grassroots level of politics were thrust into the spotlight. Questions about treatment, about medical care, and about care-giving support for the sick and the dying were central; however, there was also a

²³⁰ "A Timeline of AIDS," AIDS.gov: <http://aids.gov/hiv-aids-basics/hiv-aids-101/aids-timeline/>

²³¹ Paula Treichler, "AIDS, Gender, and Biomedical Discourse: Current Contests for Meaning," in *AIDS: The Burdens of History*, eds. Elizabeth Fee and Daniel M. Fox (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1988), 204

question about how the community itself could continue to thrive if faced with this epidemic. These questions were complicated, of course, by the community need and desire to continue to have sex, love each other, and pursue the dream of Gay Liberation. Unfortunately, the community split, particularly over the issue of the bathhouses.²³²

The Bathhouse Debates

When the AIDS virus began to spread and suspicions began to grow about the relationship between sexual conduct and transmission of the disease, there were immediate calls for gay men's behaviors to change. However, this view was not held universally within the gay community. Some leaders of the Gay Liberation movement viewed Sexual Liberation as a freedom they had won and without concrete evidence that sexual behavior was the source of infection, the calls for an immediate halt to their thriving sexual culture was seen as a hysterical response. Frank Kameny held the view that promiscuity was a right. He wrote: "I have never looked upon promiscuity as a dirty word. It is a natural and normal style of living."²³³ The gay newspaper, *The Advocate*, reflected the similar views of its publisher and editor who felt that "recreational sex was an integral part of male homosexuality."²³⁴

As previously suggested, the bathhouses were at the heart of San Francisco's gay sexual culture. During Sexual Liberation's heyday the baths would host hundreds of men and were a primary space where men had sexual contact with each other. The bathhouses came under scrutiny by both the medical community and members of the gay community as the numbers of sick and dying gay men began to grow at alarming rates. The turning

²³² *We Were Here*. DVD. Directed by David Weissman, Bill Weber (San Francisco: Red Flag Releasing, 2011)

²³³ David Eisenbach, *Gay Power: An American Revolution* (New York: Carroll & Graf, 2006)

²³⁴ *Ibid*

point of the AIDS crisis and the start of San Francisco's 'bathhouse debates' began in 1983 when scientists were convinced that AIDS was caused by a virus and that the disease's transmission was linked to bodily fluids, blood and semen in particular.²³⁵

The battle over the bathhouses' continuing existence, and the division that this debate caused within the gay community, became a central issue in San Francisco in 1984. On one side of the debate were those who sought to close the bathhouses. The proponents of closure, including then-Mayor Dianne Feinstein, argued that the bathhouses were sites where gay men engaged in sexual behavior that spread AIDS, therefore these sites posed a public health risk. The opponents of closure argued that bathhouses acted as safe sites for the expression of gay sexuality, versus risky venues such as parks and public bathrooms, and could serve as sites of intervention encouraging condom use, education, and testing. By closing the baths, they argued, the sexual behavior would not cease, it would simply move to areas, such as public parks, where men would be more focused upon not being caught by the police or gay-bashers than engaging in safe sex.²³⁶ The two opposing viewpoints on the bathhouse issues were clearly defined, but the battle that would ensue between the two groups would be a complicated and lengthy fight.

In the beginning of 1984, San Francisco was the home to fourteen bathhouses and average attendance ranged between three and twelve thousand patrons a month. By the middle of 1984, attendance had dropped significantly as the death toll and infection rates were rising. As an example of how quickly AIDS was altering the bathhouse culture,

²³⁵ Robin Marantz Henig, "A New Disease's Deadly Odyssey," *The New York Times Magazine*, February 6, 1983

²³⁶ Culhane, John. "Book Review: Sex, Fear, and Public Health Policy." *Yale Journal of Health Policy and Ethics* 5 (2005): 330-1

consider that one year prior, in 1983, openly gay San Francisco Supervisor, Harry Britt, had written that “in the baths are the elements we will seek in the new society...friendship and caring, delight in sexual play, and an experimental approach to sexuality.”²³⁷ By the following year all talk of play had disappeared from discussions about the baths. As a bathhouse historian and proponent of their cultural significance, Alan Berube noted that the topic of sexual pleasure was absent from the bathhouse debates, which was ironic as that was one of their main purposes.²³⁸ Instead the debates focused upon protecting civil liberties from government intrusion.

One of the central problems faced by those arguing for the closure of the bathhouses was that the transmission of AIDS was tied to behavior, not location, and that the baths served as community centers where information could be disseminated. In San Francisco the gay community’s response to AIDS was relatively swift; this was in part due to the strong community ties created by the sexual culture. By 1984 San Francisco’s public health officials had formally linked the AIDS virus to the sexual behavior gay men were engaging in—but this behavior also occurred in bedrooms, in baths, in clubs, in bars, and in the park.²³⁹ Dr. Mervyn Silverman, then Director of Public Health, noted that while between five and ten percent of the gay community regularly visited bathhouses, those numbers did not explain the high rates of infection. He acknowledged that the

²³⁷Gerre Goodman, George Lakey, Judy Lashof, and Erika Thorne, *No Turning Back: Lesbian and Gay Liberation for the '80s* (Philadelphia: New Society Publishers, 1983), 100-1.

²³⁸Allan Bérubé, “Prophesy, 1984,” *Harvard Gay & Lesbian Review* 5, no. 2 (30 April 1998): 10.

²³⁹Christopher Disman, “The San Francisco Bathhouse Battles of 1984: Civil Liberties, AIDS Risk, and Shifts in Health Policy.” *Journal of Homosexuality* 44, no. 3-4 (2003)

bathhouses were not the source of AIDS and that closing them would only have a minor impact on the growing epidemic.²⁴⁰

The fear of AIDS, and the shift from hedonism to caregiving within gay culture, were reasons for the rapid decline in bathhouse patronage. In 1983, after attendance rates had dropped fifty percent, the Sutro Baths published a series of ads designed to bring men back by assuring them that the *type* of sex they had was what mattered when it came to health concerns, not *where* they enjoyed themselves.²⁴¹ Along with promotional campaigns, the baths also did their part to help alter sexual behavior by distributing condoms to their patrons.²⁴²

The participation of bathhouse owners in actions that sought to stem the tide of AIDS infections was not seen as enough by some within San Francisco. Mayor Feinstein stated that had AIDS been a heterosexual issue, the bathhouses would have been closed—she consistently argued for immediate closure and dismissed the argument that the baths offered more than just sex.²⁴³ However, Silverman took a more politically cautious approach—and in 1983 his reply to a local activist would haunt his tenure as Director of Public Health.

Larry Littlejohn, a local activist who had founded the Society for Individual Rights, a San Francisco Homophile organization, believed that the immediate closure of

²⁴⁰ Mervyn F. Silverman, MD, MPH, “Public Health Director: The Bathhouse Crisis, 1981-1984,” an oral history conducted in 1992 and 1993 by Sally Smith Hughes, PhD, in *The AIDS Epidemic in San Francisco: The Medical Response, 1981-1984, Volume I*, Regional Oral History Office, the Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley, 1997 quoted in Christopher Disman, “The San Francisco Bathhouse Battles of 1984: Civil Liberties, AIDS Risk, and Shifts in Health Policy,” *Journal of Homosexuality* 44, no. 3-4 (2003)

²⁴¹ Randy Shilts, “An Evening at The Sutro Baths: How the AIDS era has affected patrons of the only coed bathhouse in S.F.,” *San Francisco Chronicle*, 27 June 1983.

²⁴² Bob Lynch, “Bathhouses, Sex Clubs Going ‘Condom’: Owners Reach Voluntary Agreement With City,” *California Voice*, 2-8 February 1984 quoted in Christopher Disman, “The San Francisco Bathhouse Battles of 1984: Civil Liberties, AIDS Risk, and Shifts in Health Policy,” *Journal of Homosexuality* 44, no. 3-4 (2003)

²⁴³ Larry Liebert and Evelyn Hsu, “Feinstein Would Shut Bathhouses,” *San Francisco Chronicle*, 5 April 1984.

the bathhouses was necessary to prevent the spread of AIDS. Silverman disagreed, stating that it would be “inappropriate and in fact illegal for me to close down all bathhouses.”²⁴⁴ He insisted that his role, and the role of the Department of Public Health, was to educate people about the spread of AIDS rather than dictate their behavior.²⁴⁵ In further communications, Silverman informed Littlejohn that bathhouse owners were embracing guidelines to help reduce infection rates, and that as bathhouse attendance had decreased, those who were still visiting these sex spaces were being educated and that some high risk behaviors were no longer as popular. Silverman, reiterating the view held by the medical community at-large (that behavior, and not location, was the source of transmission), wrote: “if the bathhouses were to close the community might perceive that the problem of AIDS is solved.”²⁴⁶

Local gay activist Larry Littlejohn had not been satisfied with Dr. Silverman’s response to his concerns. In the spring of 1984 he informed the Harvey Milk Lesbian/Gay Democratic Club, one of the central gay political organizations in San Francisco, of his intent to put forth a ballot initiative that would ban sex at the baths, effectively closing them. He put forth a press release and began the drive to collect the necessary signatures with the aim to override the Department of Public Health’s policies. There was tremendous fear that Littlejohn’s action, though coming from a good-hearted place, would have incredibly damaging ramifications on a gay community already under siege. The petition required less than ten thousand signatures, which represented just over one percent of the city’s population, and a vote to close bathhouses would most likely be an

²⁴⁴ Christopher Disman, “The San Francisco Bathhouse Battles of 1984: Civil Liberties, AIDS Risk, and Shifts in Health Policy.” *Journal of Homosexuality* 44, no. 3-4 (2003)

²⁴⁵ Ibid

²⁴⁶ Christopher Disman, “The San Francisco Bathhouse Battles of 1984: Civil Liberties, AIDS Risk, and Shifts in Health Policy.” *Journal of Homosexuality* 44, no. 3-4 (2003)

overwhelming ‘yes.’ Littlejohn’s initiative would effectively allow voters to place the blame for AIDS squarely on the shoulders of gay men who had engaged in the sexual culture. The gay community instantly became mobilized around the need to stop this political maneuver and San Francisco officials, including Dr. Silverman, were caught between tacitly endorsing spaces they knew to be sites of transmission, and losing the trust of a wounded gay community who was depending on them for support.

The response to Littlejohn within the gay community was divided. Supervisor Harry Britt, who kept changing his views on the baths, supported the petition as did prominent gay activist, Bill Kraus and journalist, Randy Shilts.²⁴⁷ However, bathhouse owners and other members of the gay press attacked Littlejohn.²⁴⁸ The editor of the *Bay Area Reporter* dubbed Littlejohn a traitor and the owner of the Sutro Baths called him ‘a hemorrhoid on the asshole of the gay community.’²⁴⁹ Two days after Littlejohn’s initiative announcement, the Stonewall Democratic Club met to discuss closing the baths and one of the invited speakers was Dr. Silverman. Silverman noted that he and other officials had been placed in a difficult position: they hated the ballot initiative, but they were confronted with seeing the numbers of the infected rise every day. At the end of the meeting a vote was taken regarding closure—out of the hundred people present, those favoring closure were outnumbered five to one.²⁵⁰

The actions of Littlejohn forced Dr. Silverman out of his behind-the-scenes role and made him the public face of San Francisco’s response to the AIDS crisis. At his first

²⁴⁷ Christopher Disman, "The San Francisco Bathhouse Battles of 1984: Civil Liberties, AIDS Risk, and Shifts in Health Policy." *Journal of Homosexuality* 44, no. 3-4 (2003)

²⁴⁸ Paul Lorch, "Killing the Movement," Editor’s Viewpoint Feature, *Bay Area Reporter*, 5 April 1984.

²⁴⁹ Gary Schweikhart, "Littlejohn Agrees to Compromise at Sentinel Forum on Bathhouses," *San Francisco Sentinel*, 12 April 1984.

²⁵⁰ Michael Helquist and Rick Osmon, "The Bathhouse Controversy: A Time for Action: We Really Need to Think Carefully," *Coming Up!* April 1984 reprinted in "Sex and the Baths: A Not-So-Secret Report." *Journal of Homosexuality* 44, no. 3-4 (2003): 153-175

press conference, held in the days following both of the Democratic Club's meetings, he was met by protesters dressed in towels with signs bearing phrases such as "Out of the Baths and Into the Ovens" and "Out of the Tubs and Into the Shrubs."²⁵¹ Silverman, who had been considering overriding the views of the Democratic Club and announcing the baths' closure, ultimately decided against it citing both lack of evidence and questions of legality.²⁵²

In the aftermath of Silverman's punt, choosing to delay a decision, the gay community began drafting letters to Silverman, primarily in support of the baths continued existence. There were those who agreed with Littlejohn and Shilts. Frank Robinson, a local author, wrote a letter, expressing concern over the blame the gay community could face should AIDS begin spreading in the heterosexual population.²⁵³ A group of activists, bathhouse owners, and representatives of AIDS service groups came together to oppose closure of the baths, instead urging a search for alternatives. The San Francisco organization of People With AIDS, represented by Bobbi Campbell, who would dub himself the K.S poster boy in 1981, also opposed closure. He wrote: "The issue is the education of gay men as to what specific sexual practices carried risks for AIDS...the baths should make structural and functional changes to encourage and facilitate low-risk, safe-sex practices."²⁵⁴ Some of the changes proposed were turning on the lights, supplying condoms and educational material, and closing group sex spaces

²⁵¹ Christopher Disman, "The San Francisco Bathhouse Battles of 1984: Civil Liberties, AIDS Risk, and Shifts in Health Policy." *Journal of Homosexuality* 44, no. 3-4 (2003)

²⁵² Ibid

²⁵³ Frank M. Robinson, "Not Just an Open and Shut Case," quoted in Christopher Disman, "The San Francisco Bathhouse Battles of 1984: Civil Liberties, AIDS Risk, and Shifts in Health Policy." *Journal of Homosexuality* 44, no. 3-4 (2003)

²⁵⁴ Bobbi Campbell, Open Letter from People With AIDS, 2 April 1984 quoted in Christopher Disman, "The San Francisco Bathhouse Battles of 1984: Civil Liberties, AIDS Risk, and Shifts in Health Policy." *Journal of Homosexuality* 44, no. 3-4 (2003)

within the baths.²⁵⁵ People With AIDS viewed the closure of the baths as a potential slippery slope, giving other cities the precedent to close gay bars as well as baths, and to increase discriminatory policies against gay men and those with AIDS. Those fighting to keep the baths open believed that closure would be a first step in the erosion of hard fought gay civil liberties and could have a domino effect across the country.²⁵⁶

Mayor Dianne Feinstein, though deeply concerned by the plight of AIDS sufferers and their families, was less sympathetic to the gay male community, particularly in regard to their focus on sexuality. She made her feelings on the bathhouse issue known in the days after Silverman's press conference. In an on-the-record interview she stated: "AIDS means one thing, and that is that you die. And therefore, if you want to avoid it, the message has to go out. Not in a namby-pamby way."²⁵⁷ Feinstein, unlike Silverman, refused to separate the space from the behavior and therefore ignored the larger question of how to educate and protect sexually active men if they pursued their behaviors in unregulated spaces, whether that was the park or the bedroom.

Dr. Silverman's second press conference on the bathhouse issue was a complete reversal of the statement made just five days prior. Surrounded by a group of gay activists and medical professionals, Silverman announced:

All sexual activity is to be eliminated in public facilities in San Francisco where the transmission of AIDS is likely to occur...bathhouses, sex clubs, and the back rooms of certain bookstores...locations which particularly foster meetings between gay and bisexual men who indulge in multiple sexual encounters.²⁵⁸

²⁵⁵ Ibid

²⁵⁶ Christopher Disman, "The San Francisco Bathhouse Battles of 1984: Civil Liberties, AIDS Risk, and Shifts in Health Policy." *Journal of Homosexuality* 44, no. 3-4 (2003)

²⁵⁷ Larry Liebert and Evelyn Hsu, "Feinstein Would Shut Bathhouses," *San Francisco Chronicle*, 5 April 1984.

²⁵⁸ Dr. Mervyn Silverman, Press Statement, 9 April 1984 quoted in Christopher Disman, "The San Francisco Bathhouse Battles of 1984: Civil Liberties, AIDS Risk, and Shifts in Health Policy." *Journal of Homosexuality* 44, no. 3-4 (2003)

Absent from Silverman's blanket ban were previous discussions of condom use and fluid exchange—the exclusion of distinctions made between high and low risk sex came as a surprise to many of the men standing behind Silverman as he make his pronouncement. In a meeting between Silverman and many of these activists held in the days prior to the press conference they were assured that Silverman was going to ban high-risk activity while leaving safe-sex as an option within the venues. Following the press conference many of the gay men who had seemingly supported Silverman announced their intention to oppose the ban as it was stated.²⁵⁹

With the institution of a ban on all sexual activity within the baths, Littlejohn dropped his petition.²⁶⁰ Those in favor of closing the baths had won the public battle. However, Silverman's ban had no teeth—bathhouses were granted licenses by the Police Department, and not the Department of Public Health, so even if the baths were given health inspection violations, that had no impact on their license.²⁶¹ Nevertheless, the legally unenforceable ban, in tandem with the sharp drop in bathhouse attendance, led to the closure of baths and public sex spaces over the next several years. In April of 1984 the Catacombs, an infamous fisting club, held its final party. Per the educational material distributed by Silverman's department, the proprietors provided condoms, gloves, and surgical soap to the patrons. The following month the Caldron, which had become a space for masturbation-only parties as well as safe-sex events, closed.²⁶² That June the

²⁵⁹ Disman, Christopher. "The San Francisco Bathhouse Battles of 1984: Civil Liberties, AIDS Risk, and Shifts in Health Policy." *Journal of Homosexuality* 44, no. 3-4 (2003)

²⁶⁰ Sex clubs were not explicitly mentioned in Silverman's ban because these spaces were not seen as solely sites of sexual behavior—they were primarily bars/dance clubs who allowed sex to occur within their spaces. Baths were perceived, particularly by the heterosexual media and government institutions, as existing for sex—they completely discounted the other purposes the baths served to some men.

²⁶¹ Ray O'Loughlin, "S.F. Health Director Announces Ban on Sex In Baths, SexClubs," *Advocate*, 15 May 1984.

²⁶² Christopher Disman, "The San Francisco Bathhouse Battles of 1984: Civil Liberties, AIDS Risk, and Shifts in Health Policy." *Journal of Homosexuality* 44, no. 3-4 (2003)

Sutro Baths, which had led the way in advertising that sexual behaviors needed to be curbed, but that baths—as sites and locations—were safe, closed its doors.²⁶³

As the baths and other sex spaces were slowly disappearing, it seemed as though the bathhouse battles were over. However, in May of 1984 an article in the San Francisco *Examiner* revealed that Mayor Feinstein, who had stayed out of the debate aside from a few public comments, had used the San Francisco Police Department to spy on the gay community and their sexual behaviors within the ‘safe spaces’ of the baths. After Larry Littlejohn had announced his petition, Feinstein personally ordered four undercover police officers to enter the baths, pose as patrons, and report on any sex acts they witnessed.²⁶⁴ The report was then sent to the Mayor and not shared with any other departments, including the Department of Public Health. When the surveillance was revealed, Feinstein invoked her right to gather all the relevant facts and refused to apologize or release the report.²⁶⁵

In the early years of the AIDS crisis, science often took a back seat to moralism, particularly in discussions of gay men’s sexual behavior. Mayor Feinstein wanted the bathhouses closed and was using the Department of Public Health to sanitize the image of the city. Dr. Silverman, in looking back on Feinstein’s decisions, wrote about the role that the police report played in influencing her views:

There were a number of things that obviously indicated high risk behavior. There were a lot of things in there which had nothing to do with high risk behavior, but that were abhorrent to her. The interactions that took place in

²⁶³ Randy Shilts, “A Farewell ‘Orgy’ at Sutro Baths: Casualty of AIDS Crisis Closes Doors,” *San Francisco Chronicle*, 4 June 1984.

²⁶⁴ Dave Farrell, “Cops spy on bathhouses: Mayor ordered secret visits; report ‘steamy,’” *San Francisco Examiner*, 31 May 1984, East Bay edition, sec. A.

²⁶⁵ Randy Shilts, “Feinstein Defends Use of Bathhouse ‘Spies,’” *San Francisco Chronicle*, 1 June 1984.

these locations were basically abhorrent to the mayor. I think sex is an issue for her. And especially this kind of blatant, raw sex.²⁶⁶

Members of the gay community, including Harry Britt, condemned Feinstein's actions, while others simply wondered why she did not just ask the gay men she knew about what went on.²⁶⁷ The anger many in the gay community felt at Feinstein's use of police surveillance went beyond the bathhouse debates, it touched upon the deep anger many held toward the police.²⁶⁸ The actions of Mayor Feinstein, allowing the police to invade the space where they could express their sexuality without fear, were seen as an additional blow.²⁶⁹

Robert Chesley's Sexually Liberated Theatre

The four plays discussed in this section can be labeled Robert Chesley's Sexual Liberationist plays in that they reflect his commitment to the continuation of gay sexual culture and comment upon the spaces that promulgated this ethos. However, all of these plays were written in the context of the AIDS crisis and this influenced how Chesley presented these spaces. In each play the sexual spaces are either presented in a form that has been warped by the AIDS crisis or as an embodied memory—there is a slight exception in *Jerker* as it endorses the existence of a sexual space that the character themselves do not access. These plays, *Night Sweats*, *Jerker*, *Come Again*, and *Pig Man*,

²⁶⁶ Mervyn F. Silverman, MD, MPH, "Public Health Director: The Bathhouse Crisis, 1981-1984," an oral history conducted in 1992 and 1993 by Sally Smith Hughes, PhD, in *The AIDS Epidemic in San Francisco: The Medical Response, 1981-1984, Volume I*, Regional Oral History Office, the Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley, 1997 quoted in Christopher Disman, "The San Francisco Bathhouse Battles of 1984: Civil Liberties, AIDS Risk, and Shifts in Health Policy." *Journal of Homosexuality* 44, no. 3-4 (2003)

²⁶⁷ Brian Jones, "Cops Spy on Baths; Mayor Won't Apologize for Covert Mission," *Bay Area Reporter*, 7 June 1984.

²⁶⁸ Part of this stemmed from the outrage following the death of Harvey Milk and George Moscone in 1978, an assassination that had led to Feinstein's promotion, and the sympathy expressed, by the department, for their killer, Dan White. When White received the lightest sentence for manslaughter, as opposed to double murder, thousands of gay men rioted at City Hall. In response to the riot, the police stormed a gay bar in the Castro district and beat patrons while shouting anti-gay epithets.²⁶⁸ When Dan White was released from prison in January of 1984, the gay community protested at City Hall and held a rally in the Castro.

²⁶⁹ Christopher Disman, "The San Francisco Bathhouse Battles of 1984: Civil Liberties, AIDS Risk, and Shifts in Health Policy." *Journal of Homosexuality* 44, no. 3-4 (2003)

are each celebrating sexual spaces by exploring what has been lost with the closure of the baths and sex clubs. *Jerker*, again being an exception, implicitly supports the existence of J/O clubs as sites of contact and community in its depiction of two isolated men who reach out to each other for connection. These plays all reflect upon the role that space played in shaping both the philosophy of Sexual Liberation and the sense of community felt amongst gay men. While the texts themselves do not explicitly situate space as an important aspect of Sexual Liberation, Chesley's specific references to certain clubs, and the behavior that occurred within those walls, and the consciousness raising element of the baths makes these works significant to understanding Chesley and what was lost in the gay sexual culture with the closure of these sites. The texts were Chesley's way of fighting against the changing perception of Sexual Liberation, brought upon by the AIDS crisis, and those spaces that he viewed as necessary to the continuation of the gay community he embraced.

Night Sweats is a dark comic nightmare fantasy of one man, Richard, who joins the Coup de Grace club, a space that offers men all the joys of a bathhouse as well as the chance to design their own suicide rather than face death from HIV or live with the constant fear of infection. One of the suicides witnessed by the audience is the death of bathhouse owner William Jephtha Williams, henceforth referred to as Williams. His sole scene takes place in a crematorium decorated to resemble a medieval dungeon (replete with a shrouded corpse of a fellow club member hanging upon the wall). Williams, acting the part of a prisoner, is strapped down to a table by two torturers as the Grand Inquisitor reads Williams's list of sins: being a white upper-class American male in possession of a 'good body,' being well-educated, having achieved success and great wealth, and being

pretentious in his choice of furniture. Williams confesses that his main source of wealth is the Sepulchre Baths and Disco.²⁷⁰ When the Grand Inquisitor presses Williams for further admissions: he refuses. However, when the torturers squeeze a pair of tongs to the base of his penis, the pain and resulting surge of pleasure leads to a final confession ejaculated with orgasmic triumph.

I killed you all! I killed you...Because you deserve to die, faggots! We all deserve to die! You fools! You assholes! You stupid faggots! I chose the money! Money is a bigger and harder dick than you've ever seen! Money is the biggest and hardest dick there is! Money is the dick of death!²⁷¹

Chesley uses this confession of Jephtha Williams to satirize specific anti-sex and anti-bathhouse critiques that flourished during the AIDS crisis. Within the gay press there where voices arguing against the continued operation of public sex spaces, going so far as to allege that bathhouse operators, the majority of whom were gay, were more concerned with making money than saving lives; more focused on keeping their businesses open instead of preventing the spread of AIDS. Jephtha Williams is the representation of everything hated and feared within those articles—but Chesley creates a character so over-the-top in his bourgeoisie pretensions that his confession becomes a moment of black humor rather than incendiary condemnation.

This argument against public sex spaces—that they, and their benefactors, profited from the precarious behaviors of their patrons—was articulated in a 1982 *New York Native* article entitled “We Know Who We Are: Two Gay Men Declare War on Promiscuity”:

Promiscuity has spawned an industry which has a stake in keeping us promiscuous, even if it kills us...Will bathhouses willingly post warnings

²⁷⁰ The darkly comic irony of his space's name is that a sepulcher is a vault or burial tomb..

²⁷¹ Ibid

and risk hurting business? In short, is the bathhouse/backroom industry going to prove itself so different from the tobacco lobby...To date there has been little rational discussion about the impact of promiscuity on gay male culture; the present health crisis provides the unique opportunity for such a dialogue to begin.²⁷²

Notably, the aforementioned article correctly points out that not all segments of the gay population were enthused about the proliferation and acceptance of public sex spaces, particularly the inclusion of these spaces as elements of Liberation. However, the authors' argument is undercut when they callously accuse fellow gay men of death profiteering and the message of the article was weakened by its dismissal of the important role that Sexual Liberation played in creating and sustaining a gay community. Authors Callen, Berkowitz, and Dworkin defended against charges of sex negativity, but in doing so they belittled those who found fault with the article's sex-negativity:

The motto of promiscuous gay men has been 'so many men, so little time.' In the 70s *we* worried about so many men; in the 80s *you* will have to worry about so little time. For *us*, the party that was the 70s is over. For some, perhaps homosexuality will always mean promiscuity. *They* may very well die for that belief.²⁷³

In the course of their argument, Callen, Berkowitz, and Dworkin shift from the inclusive 'we' of the 1970s to the exclusive 'you' of the 1980s, but also argue that there has been a division of 'us' versus 'them' in regards to thinking about the sexual culture. The other central issues with Callen, Berkowitz, and Dworkin's argument is that 1) many public sex spaces had transformed themselves as sites of safe(r) sex; and 2) bathhouses functioned as more than just spaces for anonymous sexual encounters—for some men the baths were a place to meet friends, exercise, or to escape from the tension and stress of

²⁷² Michael Callen, Richard Berkowitz, and Richard Dworkin, "We Know Who We Are: Two Gay Men Declare War On Promiscuity," *New York Native*, November 8-21 1982.

²⁷³ *Ibid*, emphasis mine.

the outside world. In *Night Sweats* Chesley satirizes the position being articulated by these three authors, as well as the other anti-bathhouse voices, by presenting a bathhouse owner who not only fulfills their callous stereotype of the bathhouse owner as an amoral entrepreneur but reveals that he is a full-fledged villain conspiring to exploit his space, and murder his fellow gay men, all in the name of money.

In contrast to Williams' darkly comic death scene, the aborted suicide of Richard, the play's protagonist, is one of the most hopeful and celebratory scenes in the entirety of Chesley's canon. The characters of *Night Sweats* are enthralled as they watch Richard being anally penetrated by a Hunky Man, another Hunky Man kneels and performs fellatio on Richard—as the three men approach orgasm, the first Hunky Man raises a dagger and prepares to stab Richard in the neck at the moment of climax. Before the simultaneous act of sex and death are completed, there is a sudden interruption and the darkness of the scene is washed away in bright sunlight as three men in nun drag burst in the room.²⁷⁴ Sister Tom, Sister Dick, and Sister Harry have come to spread their message of love and to save Richard, not just from death but from the fear that has brought him into the club.

Richard: But I'm going to die!

Tom: Yes, yes. But meanwhile you're going to live! Live until the very moment you die! (Tom embraces Richard) and make love! Make love in every possible, safe and sensible way! Enjoy it all, from the most delicate cruising to the heaviest S and M trips! Oh yes! So long as you do it with your head and heart... just — for heaven sake! — Do it with love! Rejoice! Rejoice in your body... Have the courage to love. And have the courage to hope. You can wake up from this nightmare!²⁷⁵

²⁷⁴ A reference to the Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence—a collective of men who dress in nun drag, and perform with appropriate nun names, such as Sister Anita Blowjob, and are both a protest and charity organization. For more information see “Sistory” at www.thesisters.org

²⁷⁵ Robert Chesley, *Night Sweat*, *Hard Plays/Stiff Parts*, (Alamo Square Press: San Francisco), 1984.

With *Night Sweats* Chesley created a play that both critiqued the rising tide of anti-sex space ideology that he felt threatened gay culture while celebrating gay sex and sensuality. Tom's monologue was Chesley's message of hope for, and his belief in, the resilience of gay men and the bonds they could continue to build through physical expressions of love and brotherhood. The Coup de Grace club is a warped view of sexual spaces—that they had transformed from spaces of intimacy and fraternity into spaces where men waited to die in the throes of a fantasy. This club is not unlike the nightmarish vision being promulgated by Dworkin, Callen, and Berkowitz—and it is Tom who disrupts the nightmare with his command for gay men to continue finding connection and community through sex. Chesley left the audience with a feeling of hope rather than despair and it was this same view that was neatly summed up by Charles Jurist in his published response to Callen, Berkowitz, and Dworkin's attack: "I will continue to be 'promiscuous.' I won't be scared out of seeking fulfillment. Nor will I consider my behavior in any way as self-destructive. I see it as life-affirming. I refuse to blight my life in order – supposedly – to preserve it."²⁷⁶

Night Sweats' ultimately hopeful message was to communicate that the problem was not in the spaces of Sexual Liberation but in the minds of those who would transform those sites of community into Williams's aptly named sepulcher. The final message of *Night Sweats* (make love in every safe and sensible way and always do it with your head and heart), was one of the central tenants of Sexual Liberation. For Chesley the preservation of a gay culture that did not include Sexual Liberation as inherent to

²⁷⁶ Charles Jurist, "In Defense of Promiscuity," *New York Native*, December 6-19 1982.

community formation was ultimately not preserving gay culture, at least not a culture he could identify with.

Giving Each Other a Hand: J/O Clubs and *Jerker*

In 1985 that Chesley wrote a play that dramatized both this new mode of sexual exploration and the bonding experiences that men turned to as the sexual culture was changing. This play was *Jerker, or the Helping Hand: A Pornographic Elegy with Redeeming Social Value and a Hymn to the Queer Men of San Francisco in Twenty Phone Calls, Many of them Dirty*. *Jerker* is a nontraditional love story between two men, Bert and J.R., who never physically meet during the course of the play. The relationship begins as a series of sexually explicit phone calls between the two men and together they share intense sexual fantasies over the phone. Over time these calls turn from being solely about finding sexual release, and a relationship grows between the two men. Bert and J.R. begin having conversations that are not exclusively sexual—they talk about their lives and their affectionate friendship turns into love.

With *Jerker*, Chesley continued to advocate for sexual liberation and erotic freedom, depicting the bonds men could create from anonymous sexual encounters, while highlighting the immensely satisfying outlet that could be found in the new sexual reality. While it is true that contact had become fraught, penetration and fluid exchange between men now carried an immeasurable risk of AIDS transmission, the need to reach out to another man for intimacy had not disappeared—that is the Liberationist message being explored in *Jerker* J/O clubs, the spaces that supported the new safer sex culture, caused a resurgent celebration of masturbation and mutual masturbation as the primary method of sexual bonding amongst gay men in public spaces. What made Chesley's endorsement of

J/O culture different from those in the more conservative, sex-negative factions of gay society was that he was not prioritizing masturbation *over* other forms of sexual exploration. Chesley continued to honor the risky sexual experiences of the past as worthy acts while simultaneously using them as prime material for masturbatory fantasies. J.R and Bert have each become isolated in this new reality—the spaces they discuss having visited in the past no longer exist—but it was from those spaces that the men were able to connect, Bert had once given J.R his number. The two men in *Jerker* do not have a space where they can explore each other safely—they are trapped in their own spaces, alone, and while they can connect over the phone they never experience contact.

With this play Chesley celebrated the memories of a time when sex between men was not simply viewed as a means of threatening transmissions. *Jerker* presented the new reality of the sexual culture and within the play Chesley argued that Sexual Liberation must focus upon helping men connect with one another and creating new spaces that encouraged intimacy during the health crisis.. *Jerker* was Chesley claiming these new means of sexual connection as sex-positive. He used the stage to celebrate J/O culture. By depicting this loving relationship, which evolved from a series of mutual masturbatory fantasies experienced by each man in solitude, Chesley supported the significance that J/O clubs could have. Imagine how the relationship between J.R and Bert could have evolved and deepened if they found a space where they could not only share fantasies but touch each other. In *Jerker* Bert tells J.R. about his most perfect cruising experience as J.R. silently masturbates:

I took him up to my apartment... We went straight to the bedroom and stripped, and I pulled down the Murphy bed and we cuddled and played

around for a bit before he started working on my ass. He rolled me over onto my stomach and told me just to relax ... he was kneeling between my legs, and he worked my asshole with lube for the longest time, getting it to relax so there was just no tightness, no fear, just letting go... Then he lowered himself onto me and slid his cock in all the way, but so gently and smoothly... I don't think my ass has ever felt so sensitive. His cock felt warm in me, and full, so nice and full. So he began sliding in and out of me... I've never had such a gentle, sensitive fuck, before or after... And then he whispered in my ear: 'you're gonna feel me cum inside you'— and I did: I felt his cum pulse up his shaft inside my ass, I could count the pulses — (JR cums silently) — and it felt warm and good, one of the most wonderful things I think I've ever felt, one of the most wonderful connections I think I've ever had with another person, one of the most beautiful acts of love I think I have ever known.²⁷⁷

When Bert describes the feeling of one man being inside of another man without any barrier, feeling that man's release inside of him and the connection that formed between the two, *that* is the moment when J.R. orgasms. The scene between the two men took place within a private place, rather than a public space, but it represents the notion of memory as fantasy that was explored within J/O clubs. Chesley recognized that gay sex needed to change, but it did not mean that the type of sex that had flourished during the 1970s was to suddenly be viewed with disdain. If those sex acts had to become a memory—at least between men who were not monogamous with each other—then it should be a memory that is celebrated, cherished, and used to create the same depth of intimacy between men who are experiencing each other's bodies in different ways.

With *Jerker*, Chesley also created a counter-argument to the idea that sex spaces were either not necessary or lacking the same sense of connection. J/O clubs offered just as much potential for connection and intimacy as the baths or the clubs in a safe sex atmosphere.

²⁷⁷ Robert Chesley, *Jerker*, Hard Plays/Stiff Parts, (Alamo Square Press: San Francisco), 1985.

Memories of Clubs and Clones in *Come Again*

Chesley would celebrate the culture of sex clubs and the Clone community with 1987's *Come Again*. This play was explicit sexual entertainment with a didactic element. By staging various tableaux of sensual experiences, Chesley sought to engage and energize his gay male brethren into both renewing the fight for Sexual Liberation and protecting sex clubs. *Come Again* is a non-linear series of scenes in which various characters celebrate the diversity of sexual expression amongst gay men. These include reflections on the rituals of bondage, the sense of belonging felt between two men in a relationship, or the sheer joy felt in anonymous encounters. Each character also directly addresses the audience and speaks about these experiences and how they are transformative and transgressive. One of the characters is introduced with his direct address: Jimmy first appears as a spectator character, entering through the house and taking a seat with the audience to watch the events onstage. He then rises from his seat, takes his place onstage, and speaks to the audience: "Magic. I mean sex magic... That's magic when you see a guy and he sees you, and the attraction is mutual, and you get it on together and it's great because it's all just purely sexual, just pure sex."²⁷⁸ Jimmy's pure sex is a paean to the Clone sex found within the walls of sex clubs. Jimmy's fantasy is set in The Ambush, a San Francisco sex club, very similar to the Mineshaft, that closed in 1986. He sets the scene:

In a fantasy I beat off to sometimes, I'm standing around the Ambush. Never mind the fact that there isn't any Ambush anymore; I can fantasize about anything I damn well please, can't I? Remember that. So I'm standing around the Ambush, horny, and this guy comes in... 'Wanda' enters. He is about the butchest thing you ever did see... he saunters up to

²⁷⁸ Robert Chesley, *Come Again: An Entertainment During the Siege*, 1987, Unpublished Manuscript, GLBT Historical Archive, San Francisco

Jimmy and stands in front of him, looking him up and down frankly, and liking what he sees.²⁷⁹

One of the most important moments is when Jimmy comments that the events being portrayed are his fantasy and therefore not subject to judgment from others. The anti-sex forces could advocate for the closure of sites like The Ambush or The Mineshaft and they could denigrate the type of sex that happened in those spaces, but they could not diminish the important role those spaces played in the sexual lives of gay men. The physical locations of these sites might have been affected by outside forces, but the cultural significance of these spaces could always persist in the fantasies of their patrons or would-be patrons.

Jimmy's fantasy is not just a memory of the Clone tricking that had flourished in the pre-AIDS gay sexual culture, but sets the scene as being specific to the Ambush and the sexual space it provided for the realization of desires.

Wanda reaches out with one hand to 'test' Jimmy's tits, finding them through his shirt and pinching and yanking them; Wanda is good, and Jimmy's pleasure is evident in a suppressed shudder as he continues to stand at attention...Wanda ... then grabs Jimmy's tits and yanks them harshly...Jimmy, very turned on, is still playing merchandise-under-inspection when Wanda suddenly lets him go, stands back, looks at Jimmy's hard-on, takes a puff of his cigar and nods to himself, as if deciding 'he'll take it.' He clenches the cigar between his teeth and suddenly reaches under Jimmy's crotch with one arm and hoists him over his shoulder...Wanda strides over to the pool table. Jimmy is now in his sacrificial victim fantasy:

Jimmy: HEY! HEY! WHAT'RE YA DOIN' TO ME? HEY! HEY!
PUT ME DOWN! PUT ME DOWN!

*(The Ambush men pin Jimmy down. Jimmy, meanwhile, is enjoying all this immensely...struggling and yelling...The Ambush men have undone Jimmy's jeans and yanked his jockey shorts down to his shins. His tits are getting good attention and 'Wanda' is jacking him off.)*²⁸⁰

²⁷⁹ Ibid

²⁸⁰ Robert Chesley, *Come Again: An Entertainment During the Siege*, 1987, Unpublished Manuscript, GLBT Historical Archive, San Francisco

The importance of the Ambush to Jimmy's sexual fantasy is not just the type of sex he is having but also the presence of men who are clearly identified as Clones. The Ambush was the space where this type of hardcore Clone cruising and tricking could occur. Additionally, Jimmy's fantasy is equally tied to the presence of other Clones who observe and then take part in the sexual act—an element that would not have occurred in a private sexual encounter between Jimmy and Wanda. As evidenced by the aforementioned scene, Chesley balances unabashed eroticism while acknowledging how sexual behavior had changed by 1987. Jimmy's fantasy could have concluded with "Wanda" jamming his cock into Jimmy's throat or up his ass. Instead, Jimmy's sexual desires are both a blend of the hardcore hedonism of spaces like the Ambush and the Mineshaft, and the inclusion of safe sex into his fantasy.

It is unfortunate that *Come Again* was never produced nor published but it exists as an archival text articulating the beliefs of those in favor of preserving Clone culture and the sexual culture of sex clubs—even if it is simply acknowledging that men should be able to fondly remember their experiences without guilt or shame. It is that argument driving the play's final scene. One by one the actors who make up the ensemble enter the stage creating an impromptu 'locker room' setting where they huddle together.²⁸¹ One of the performers not only breaks the fourth wall but creates a meta-narrative where the conceit of the play as an artistic work drops and the text and characters insert themselves into the "real world," by informing the ensemble that there is a large police presence outside. The men begin to fight amongst themselves at this news.

²⁸¹ The reason I point out that the actors enter and not the characters is that Chesley called for the actors to double up roles if necessary.

Rob: We don't have to let them in!

Cort: Oh, yes we do—if it comes to that.

Rob: Fight them!

John: That'd just make trouble

...

Rob: We haven't done a fucking thing wrong! All the so-called sex in this show has been so safe it's almost ridiculous!

...

Rob: We have to humanize the laws on sexual matters! The laws as written were written by people who think sex is dirty! We are not obscene!

Michael: All the sex I've ever seen is beautiful.

Rob: Or funny.

Jimmy: Or both.

Billy: Well, so, can we finish the show now, guys, huh?

John: Yeah.

Rob: Are you nuts? The police are out there!

John (to Rob): What do you propose to do, Stella?

Rob: Fight them... Wake up! Where do you think they're going to stop if you don't put up some resistance? Your bedroom door? Don't kid yourself!

...

Skip: The basic issue is erotic rights, and we've gotta be up front about that, no matter how unpopular the issue is now. There's no point in trying to get our other rights while ignoring the basic reason we're denied them!

...

(There is a sudden, awesome pounding at the back of the house—presumably the entrance to the performance space: three loud thuds. Everyone stands transfixed for two or three beats, and then, one by one, each Performer turns his head to look out at the audience.)

John (to the audience): Well, what're ya gonna do, huh?

Rob (to audience; a challenge): Yeah.²⁸²

The play ends with that question—how far is the audience willing to let anti-sex forces into their bedrooms and sex spaces in order to have the appearance of safety?

Chesley intended to use *Come Again* to make a political statement that was increasingly unpopular: that the rights won in the fight for Gay Liberation were hollow victories if Sexual Liberation was sacrificed under the guise of health concerns. *Come*

²⁸² Robert Chesley, *Come Again: An Entertainment During the Siege*, 1987, Unpublished Manuscript, GLBT Historical Archive, San Francisco

Again was Chesley's most experimental play in terms of its lack of narrative and presenting its characters solely through their expression of sexual desire, nothing else is learned about the various characters beyond the aspects of their sex lives that the audience witnesses. It was also his most political play with regards to expressing the importance of Sexual Liberation and erotic freedom in the continuing survival of the gay community he knew and loved. Chesley's characters refused to apologize for their sexual desires or how they chose to express themselves. In the final tableau, when the men come together to fight, the central point being communicated is that the loss of sexual spaces is just the first step taken to limit gay men's sexual freedom. If men do not speak up when the Ambush is shut down—even if they never patronized sex clubs or explored the Clone culture—then there is nothing to stop anti-sex forces from demonizing any space where gay sex occurred, even someone's bedroom. *Come Again* further strengthens its argument in favor of these clubs continued existence by stressing that the sex within the club fits the definition of safe, albeit rough, sex.

With *Come Again*, Chesley was dramatizing the balance between the new and old worlds of Sexual Liberation during the 1980s. He refused to back away from his belief that Sexual Liberation, and the connections formed in sex clubs, were foundational to the gay community. In his final Sexual Liberation play Chesley would present a world without these types of spaces—and in his representations of the continuing gay sexual culture he shows how without these spaces, and the sense of intimacy and brotherhood they offered, sexual expression becomes darker and less about connection.

Pig Man: Gay Sexual Culture and the Absence of Liberated Space

1987's *Pig Man*, Chesley's final full-length play, pulled no punches in its critique of hypocrisy and prudery within the gay community. Much of the sex in *Pig Man* represents darker expressions of sexuality—they are not occurring in the celebratory spaces of the baths or the specific world of the clubs. The sex scenes reflect the gay sexual culture after the spaces have been closed and sex has been pushed, as it was before Stonewall, back into dark corners. Chesley does not present these character's sexual wants for judgment, but rather he dramatizes them in order to expose the range of sexual expressions that continued to flourish within the gay community. *Pig Man* tells the story of Boy—so called because of his boy next door quality—who is on the quest to find the elusive Pig Man, a promiscuous gay man having unprotected sex, whom he holds responsible for the death of Philip, Boy's lover. His search for Pig Man leads Boy into a variety of spaces, including alleyways, the park, and the back room of a porn theatre, where he finds a variety of men searching for pleasure in the only spaces left available to them following the shuttering of the baths and clubs. Throughout his journey Boy is disgusted by the kinds of sexual expression he finds and grows increasingly strident in his view that the sexual culture should be eradicated within the gay community. The characters he meets are unlike Tom, Jimmy, or J.R—they are neither seeking contact or reflecting upon what is lost—they are simply looking for the fulfillment of their erotic desires. While Boy judges these men, Chesley does not—his play presents the reality that the sexual culture was continuing in spite of the AIDS crisis but that the loss of space meant that the idealism and shared experiences of the baths and clubs gave way to a more solitary and selfish culture focused solely upon having an orgasm.

In *Pig Man*, Chesley argues that the acts seen in the play may not be arousing to the majority deserve the same protections as the more “acceptable” types of gay sex.

Chesley also addressed these concerns in his undated essay, “Who The Bigots Are”:

Sexual prudery is also found in the tendency of many gays to deplore many forms of sex or lovemaking which they find offensive, as if the issue weren't letting people do what they want to do, so long as no one is hurt. This prudery, even within the gay movement, often links up with heterosexist standards as well, as some gays work long and hard to present to society a ‘respectable’ image... These gays agree with anti-gay bigots who were offended by promiscuity, public sex, anonymous sex, S/M, water sports, scat or whatever — and they hasten to assure the bigots that they aren't that way. They also are very often eager to suppress any open discussion of these aspects of gay life.²⁸³

Chesley noted that the anti-sex forces within the gay community were determined to suppress images of alternative sexual expression lest they undermine the normative model of respectable gay coupledness being promoted as legitimate representations of the gay community. Gayle Rubin, in her seminal essay “Thinking Sex,” wrote about the judgment cast upon any sexual behavior that deviated from the norm.

Modern western societies appraise sex acts according to a hierarchical system of sexual value. Marital, reproductive heterosexuals are alone at the top of the erotic pyramid. Clamoring below are unmarried monogamous heterosexuals in couples, followed by most other heterosexuals. Solitary sex floats ambiguously... Stable, long-term lesbian and gay male couples are verging on respectability, but bar dykes and promiscuous gay men are hovering just above the groups at the very bottom of the pyramid. The most despised sexual castes currently include transsexuals, transvestites, fetishists, sadomasochists, sex workers such as prostitutes and porn models.²⁸⁴

According to Rubin, gay and lesbian couples who mimic the heterosexist model of marriage have the best chance of gaining respectability in society but because their sexual acts can never be reproductive they will never gain the full acceptance that

²⁸³ Robert Chesley, “Who The Bigots Are” Undated Essay, Gay and Lesbian Historical Archive, San Francisco

²⁸⁴ Gayle Rubin, “Thinking Sex: Notes for a Radical Theory of the Politics of Sexuality,” in *Pleasure and Danger: Exploring Female Sexuality*, ed. Carole S. Vance (Boston: Routledge), 1984.

monogamous heterosexual couples receive. Those individuals who reside at the bottom of the pyramid will never gain sexual citizenship and full erotic rights as long as the existing hierarchical structure exists.

If we consider Chesley's *Pig Man* through the lens of Gayle Rubin, prudery and hypocrisy becomes even more pronounced. Chesley believed that the anti-sex bigots (embodied by the character of Boy), used the AIDS crisis to gain acceptance by heterosexual society by giving them a minority to suppress in the name of survival. *Pig Man* presented certain transgressive sex acts that were not the norm in representations of gay male life, but did so through the lens of a prude. By doing this, Chesley critiqued the policing of sexual behavior under the guise of promoting safety. While depicting one man's horror at what he sees, Chesley shows the practitioners of these 'extreme' sex acts as happy with *their* choices.

Boy's journey highlights what Chesley discusses in this essay. He meets a cast of characters whose sexual desires, and the spaces they inhabit, disgust him.²⁸⁵ But Chesley does not present these characters for judgment—he presents *Boy* as the character to be judged. The scenes of sexuality presented in the play are boundary pushing, particularly in that they do not conform to safe sex guidelines. Boy dismisses the possibility that the men acting out their desires are doing so because that is how they express their sexuality and find their liberation. Chesley presents Boy as an unreliable narrator, blinded by his own prejudices. Boy views his time speaking with these men and witnessing these sexual acts as a dark journey into the underbelly. In contrast, Chesley is not asking the audience to judge those men Boy meets but he does present them as solitary and searching—a far

²⁸⁵ Robert Chesley, *Pig Man*, 1987, Unpublished Manuscript, GLBT Historical Archive, San Francisco

cry from the united front presented in *Night Sweats* and *Come Again*. In *Pig Man* Chesley creates a vivid image of the myriad of sexual experiences that are still part of the gay community and how the absence of sexual spaces makes the scenes discomforting rather than celebratory.

As Boy begins his quest Chesley presents him as a warped sexual flâneur. The flâneur, who first appeared in the works of French poet Charles Baudelaire, is the wanderer, searching for meaning as he walks the city streets. The flâneur was given further definition by twentieth century theorist Walter Benjamin, in his seminal work *The Arcades Project*, who situated flâneur as the observer of both the imagined city, being able to see the history and the ritual of certain sites and spaces, and the physical materiality of the spaces that exist in the present.²⁸⁶ I state that Boy is a warped version of Benjamin's flâneur because: "the point of the flâneur...is to lead us toward an 'awakening' – the moment at which the past and present recognize each other...His tool for achieving this is...empathy...One of the main tasks of his writing was to rescue the cultural heritage of the past in order to understand the present."²⁸⁷ Boy's journey does not lead him to empathy nor does he embrace the culture of the past, the sexual spaces whose closure have brought about the absence of community space, to inform his understanding of the men he meets. The first character Boy encounters is a married man who spaces to utilize the glory holes in order to receive oral sex from men. The man explains how his presence in this sex space, receiving oral sex from another man, does not make him gay.

²⁸⁶ Heather Marcelle Crickenberger "The Flâneur as Narrator," *The Structure of Awakening: Walter Benjamin and Progressive Scholarship in New Media*, <http://www.thelemming.com/lemming/dissertation-web/home/flaneur.html>, 22 July 2007

²⁸⁷ Bobby Seal, "Baudelaire, Benjamin and the Birth of the Flâneur," <http://psychogeographicreview.com>, 14 November 2013

In a survey of sex spaces Michael Helquist and Rick Osman wrote about this behavior in reference to gay bookstores but their findings also apply here: “for a great many men the bookstores continue to be an opportunity to explore their desires for sex with men; this is especially true for those who do not identify as gay men.”²⁸⁸ These bookstores, which in reality were porn stores rather than a traditional space for selling reading material, offered video booths showing pornography. Within the space that housed these booths the presence of glory holes was typical and reinforced the ability of men seeking sex with other men to not identify as gay. In a glory hole a man inserts his penis through a hole cut into a door/wall/or divider. On the other side an orifice will be there to accept what is offered and the two men never see each other—they do not exist apart from their genital/orifice interaction.

Boy’s final stop on his journey, the source of his greatest horror, is a private home where he witnesses a fisting orgy. The use of the house is significant in two ways. First, Chesley appears to be referencing San Francisco’s infamous Catacombs, a leather S/M space, in his description of what Boy witnesses. The Catacombs was a short-lived, invitation only, club that existed from 1975 to 1981. The club was actually in the basement of San Francisco sadomasochist Steve McEachern’s home. The Catacombs was not a typical public sex space, it was not open for cruising the same way the bathhouses or sex clubs were. Gayle Rubin described McEachern’s method to creating a successful club:

To be invited to the parties, you had to be on Steve’s list. To get on Steve’s list, you had to be recommended by someone he knew...even if

²⁸⁸ Michael Helquist, “Beyond the Baths.” *Journal of Homosexuality* 44: 3-4 (2003)

you were on Steve's list, you did not just drop in. You made an advanced reservation to be admitted to the party."²⁸⁹

As noted in the beginning of the chapter, 'members-only' clubs are considered private space—open only a specific view. However, the Catacombs existed as a hybrid private/public space in that to outsiders it was a private space, by invitation only, but inside the Catacombs was a public sex space. Participants observed and took part in sex scenes. In this way, the Catacombs offered a more inclusive version of the sexual expression seen at other sex clubs.

The Catacombs, unlike the Ambush or the Mineshaft, was devoted primarily to the practice of fisting, or handballing, although other S/M sex scenes occurred in the space. In his article for *Drummer* magazine, Jack Fritscher described a typical scene at the Catacombs: "40 men variously hanging in leather slings, tied down on restraint tables...or laid back on waterbeds and mattresses while 40 other men massage Crisco up their fists to start the one finger march to a full fist gliding up the asshole to the elbow."²⁹⁰ Fritscher's recollection of the space matches the scene described by Boy within the play:

The music was low, the lighting was dim, but the smell was heavy: Crisco and amyl and I don't know what all. And upstairs there were two floors...room after room, on either side of the corridor...the slings were still slung. I couldn't believe my eyes. I was so horrified and so repulsed, repelled and revolted...One guy there had some other guy's fist shoved up his ass to the elbow for three and half hours that I saw! God only knows how long he'd been in the sling before I first looked in!²⁹¹

²⁸⁹ Gayle Rubin. "The Catacombs: A Temple of the Butthole." *Leather-Folk: Radical Sex, People, Politics and Practice*. Boston: Alyson Publications (1991).

²⁹⁰ Jack Fritscher, "The Academy: Incarceration for Pleasure," *Drummer* 145, December 1990, as found in *Gay San Francisco: Eyewitness Drummer Magazine*, at www.JackFritscher.com

²⁹¹ Robert Chesley, *Pig Man*, 1987, Unpublished Manuscript, GLBT Historical Archive, San Francisco

Boy not only enters a space that is reminiscent of an infamous sex space but also witnesses, what he considers, a perversion of space. The space in question is the anus of the fistee. The idea of the anus as not just a site of pleasure but a distinct space was articulated by Guy Hocquenghem who argued that society deemed the anus “the original form of private property.”²⁹² He believed that by penetrating the anus moves it from a private space imbued with shame into a locus of desire. The fisting scene that Boy witnesses is less about the physical place where the action is occurring and more about the occupied space, the anus, that is being removed from the renewed place of shame, as a site where infection occurs, that it was forced into due to the AIDS crisis.

Boy’s opinion of these men, he deems them a blight on society, was what Chesley believed was a danger to the gay community and the Sexual Liberation movement. It is also interesting to note that the behavior that completely repels and repulses Boy, the fisting, is not automatically an unsafe sex act, but rather it is an *extreme* sex act. As an extreme sex act, it is potentially dangerous if the participants do not know what they are doing, but it is not a sexual activity that carries a high risk of disease transmission.²⁹³ The power of the fisting, which Boy is unable to see due to his own prejudices, echoes Leo Bersani’s 1987’s essay “Is the Rectum a Grave,” in which he directly critiques the conflation of anal penetration with death. In this essay Bersani bluntly argues that “to be penetrated is to abdicate power,”²⁹⁴ This assessment, at first glance, seems a direct contradiction to the celebration of the anus espoused by Hocquenghem but in actuality

²⁹² Steven Botticelli, “Thinking the Unthinkable: Anal Sex in Theory and Practice.” *Studies in Gender and Sexuality* 11, no. 3 (2010)

²⁹³ For further explication on the practice of fisting, and the minimal risk of HIV transmission see Gayle Rubin. “The Catacombs: A Temple of the Butthole.” *Leather-Folk: Radical Sex, People, Politics and Practice*. Boston: Alyson Publications (1991).

²⁹⁴ Leo Bersani, “Is the Rectum a Grave?” *October* (1987)

Bersani argues that sex is always infused with power.²⁹⁵ The penetrated, by willingly allowing entrance to his private space, subverts expectations—he becomes empowered by having someone take control.

One can view the series of encounters within the *Pig Man*'s sexual underworld in two different ways: Boy's perspective and Chesley's perspective. The gay prudery that Chesley warned against in his essay informs Boy's opinions—he only becomes more stridently opposed to the continued existence of a sexual culture. Further, it is important to note that none of the men Boy meets are unhappy because of their sexual desires. They each recognize that they are pursuing sexual desires considered alternative within their own community. They refuse to apologize for their needs and do not believe they are behaving in ways that are harmful to others. Chesley viewed the sexual activities pursued by these men as legitimate and as worthy of inclusion in discussions of gay sexual culture as sex between men in monogamous committed relationship, regardless of how unsavory and non-erotic their behaviors appeared.

The contrasting idea put forth by those committed to Sexual Liberation, the view put forth by all the figures Boy encounters in his dark journey, is dramatized in *Pig Man*'s climactic scene when Boy finally confronts the elusive titular character.

The scene in question occurs at a costume party where Boy intends to expose Pig Man as a murderer, as someone who willfully spreads disease through dangerous sex.²⁹⁶ Pig Man is ultimately revealed to be Dr. Pimangeros, the preeminent safe-sex doctor treating the gay community. Pimangeros goads Boy about his own sexual behavior until

²⁹⁵ Steven Botticelli, "Thinking the Unthinkable: Anal Sex in Theory and Practice." *Studies in Gender and Sexuality* 11, no. 3 (2010)

²⁹⁶ It is important that Pig Man is accused of having dangerous sex, not necessarily unsafe sex.

Boy, enraged, snaps that his actions are no one's business but his own—and that is the point. The Boy's rights are Pig Man's rights and that is both the definition of a free society and the point of the Sexual Liberation movement. When Boy, in shock, asks how Pimangeros can run the Safe Sex Foundation and still believe in an individual's sexual rights—regardless of the risk involved—the doctor responds:

Thanks to our work, every gay man we could possibly reach in this city has the information available to him to make an informed decision about how to reduce his risk of contracting AIDS...I happen to have our guidelines right here, printed up on convenient pocket-size calling cards...Safe sex practices, possibly safe sex practices, and un-safe sex practices, all listed quite clearly...So you can make your own informed decision about what type of sex to have: of course just exactly what decision you make is none of my goddamn fucking business, yes?²⁹⁷

Pimangeros's speech was Chesley's contribution to the debate between those who valued Sexual Liberation as integral a movement as Gay Liberation and those who sought to reframe promiscuity as self-destructive, fighting to diminish the role of public sex as a central element of gay culture. Douglas Crimp, who witnessed and commented on this battle, wrote that what the anti-sex forces never understood was that the gay community's focus on Sexual Liberation was what allowed the gay community to survive in those early years of the health crisis.

We are able to invent safe sex because we've always known that sex is not, in an epidemic or not, limited to penetrative sex. Our promiscuity taught us many things, not only about the pleasure of sex, but about the great multiplicity of those pleasures. It is that psychic preparation, that experimentation, that conscious work on our own sexualities that has allowed many of us to change our sexual behaviors.²⁹⁸

²⁹⁷ Robert Chesley, *Pig Man*, 1987, Unpublished Manuscript, GLBT Historical Archive, San Francisco

²⁹⁸ Douglas Crimp, "How to Have Promiscuity in An Epidemic" quoted in *Public Sex/Gay Space*, William L. Leap ed, (New York: Columbia UP), 1999

Crimp argued that the anti-sex element within the gay community was so obsessed with repressing the behavior they found unsavory that they refused to acknowledge that the focus on safe sex education and the dissemination of sexual health information was entirely the doing of the pro-sex forces within the gay community. In *Pig Man*, the men engaged in sex acts Boy views as unnatural all had to be sought out, they inhabit spaces that have been pushed into the margins because of the advocacy of anti-sex forces embodied by Boy..

Chesley believed that the message of Sexual Liberation should not be lost due to AIDS and he believed the anti-sex forces within the gay community viewed the onset of the AIDS crisis as the excuse they needed to suppress sexual behaviors they viewed as deviant. Once they were able to close and/or police the spaces where these sexual acts occurred they could refocus attention away from Sexual Liberation that they felt had distracted from the civil rights pursuits of the Gay Liberation movement. Crimp wrote:

If discussions of gay sexual behavior began by acknowledging the extraordinary difficulties gay men have lived with, both before and during the epidemic, and how bravely and ethically most of us have lived with these difficulties, I doubt anyone would be so quick to label our behavior self-destructive. Indeed, the opposite is the case. Gay men's behavior throughout the AIDS epidemic has been profoundly self-protective. In our struggle to protect our lives, many of us have also fought to preserve the publicly accessible sexual culture that has nurtured us, provided a sense of community, solidarity, and well-being – given us, in fact, the courage and will to save ourselves... We learned about safe sex in our own community, from each other, in bars, bathhouses, and sex clubs.²⁹⁹

Chesley used the theatre to convey his view that sexual behavior was only self-destructive when driven by impulses such as self-hatred; consenting adults should be able to act on their sexual desires, no matter how transgressive or non-normative they seemed;

²⁹⁹ Douglas Crimp, *Melancholia and Moralism: Essays on AIDS and Queer Politics* (Cambridge: MIT Press), 2002.

and ultimately, an individual's sexual behavior was no one else's business. Chesley, and other proponents of gay Sexual Liberation, understood that their behavior was never going to be accepted by mainstream society. They believed that the greatest danger was the gay community turning its back on erotic rights and rejecting the sexual spaces had helped to create the very community in the decade after Stonewall.

Together *Night Sweats*, *Jerker*, *Come Again*, and *Pig Man* represent Chesley using the theatre to bring politics, philosophy, and sex together in texts and productions that were funny, arousing, and intent on fighting against the rising tide of anti-sex rhetoric that was attempting to redefine gay culture while simultaneously celebrating the philosophies of Sexual Liberation and the spaces which had flourished during this period of revolution. For Robert Chesley, Sexual Liberation was as important a movement as Gay Liberation. Chesley believed that the right to pursue sexual pleasure with other men in a variety of acts and with a wide range of partners was not only a right to be protected but he also believed that in those acts of pleasure gay men created community, brotherhood, and culture. However, the sense of brotherhood that Chesley celebrated in his earlier work would become more nuanced; reflecting the bonds forged by shared erotic experience as well as the bonds formed by care-givers, the sick, and the dying.

In the wake of AIDS, the anti-sex forces Chesley criticized in his plays would ultimately succeed in shuttering sexual spaces. In the early years of Sexual Liberation no one could have foreseen the devastation gay men would face in a few short years. The outside force of AIDS and the trauma it inflicted on both bodies and psyches would halt gay sexual culture and bring back the shame and fear that Hocquenghem had sought to banish. The disease not only killed the ideals and philosophies espoused by Sexual

Liberationists, but it silenced their voices as Hocquenghem, Foucault, and Chesley would all succumb to AIDS-related illnesses.

Reframing Sexual Liberation as an unfinished revolution on the “stage of life,” Patrick Moore posits that gay sexual culture was as he reflected upon how this period of time has been dismissed, like Chesley, from canon consideration:

Was this performance worth the risk? We cannot know, as the performance was never finished. It was a rehearsal that will forever be judged as opening-night. This, ultimately, is the cultural impact of AIDS. In addition to the loss of individuals and what they might have achieved, the investment in the great sexual experiment of the 1970s was forfeited and the behavior that made it possible was forever cast in the shadow of self-destructive indulgence.³⁰⁰

Moore is reframing Sexual Liberation as an unfinished revolution. Unlike the way in which Gay Liberation rendered tangible changes in the lives of gay men, Sexual Liberation and its most potent affects suddenly and forcibly ceased to continue. Moreover, because gay sex—particularly the anal sex—was so intrinsically linked to death and disease, emboldening erotic freedom was no longer considered a viable revolutionary ideal. In reading Chesley within and against the public sexual culture that had flourished in the time between Stonewall and AIDS, the importance of Sexual Liberation to the gay community becomes clear. Moreover, Chesley’s works offer dramatic proof that many within the gay community did not accept the narratives that framed Sexual Liberation as inherently immature and self-destructive—narratives that often tinge the discourse of gay sexual culture.

³⁰⁰ Patrick Moore, *Beyond Shame: Reclaiming the Abandoned History of Radical Gay Sexuality* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2004), 13

Robert Chesley highlighted the blight of AIDS in his plays from the moment the disease first appeared as a ‘gay cancer’ and he would continue to dramatize not only the devastating toll the disease was taking on the men infected, but also the emotional and spiritual trauma experienced by the gay community as a whole. Throughout this fight Chesley never turned his back on Gay or Sexual Liberation—these two movements had given him too much to reject them outright. However, Chesley’s final play, a triptych of one-acts, three distinct plays connected by similar themes, was informed by Chesley’s own AIDS diagnosis, and thus reflect his altered views on both the gay sexual culture and the community.

Chapter Three:

“No Apologies, No Regrets:” Robert Chesley as an AIDS Artist

As the 1980s continued the AIDS crisis in the gay community worsened. The Sexual Liberation movement that Chesley had sought to advocate for within his plays was fading fast. The sexual spaces were shuttered and the subcultures within the community were being decimated. Following his inability to get some of his pro-Sexual Liberation works produced Chesley met with his friend and fellow playwright, Cal Yeoman. During their meeting Chesley and Yeoman agreed with the sentiment that gay theatre needed to become more sexual in response to, what they perceived as, hysteria of the fraught times. However, Yeoman was concerned by Chesley’s insistence that the safe sex being propagandized in the gay community was not really sex—this led Yeoman to wonder if his friend was being safe in his own erotic behavior.³⁰¹ And, unfortunately, his concern was well founded. Chesley had told friends, including Yeoman, he did not believe in getting tested for AIDS even when the test became readily available in 1987. He had explained to his sister that since there were no successful treatments for the disease he did not see the advantage of learning his status.³⁰² But, in 1988 Chesley began to find Kaposi Sarcoma lesions. That spring he took the test and learned that he was HIV positive.³⁰³ For the second time in his life, Chesley had to come out to his family and

³⁰¹ Robert A. Schanke, *Queer Theatre and the Legacy of Cal Yeomans* (New York: Palgrave, 2011),

³⁰² Jason Campbell, “Responding To The Plague Years: AIDS Theatre In The 1980s.” M.F.A Thesis, Virginia Commonwealth University, 2009

³⁰³ At the time of his diagnosis Chesley was in a long-term relationship with Gene Weber, though whether the two were in a monogamous relationship is unclear. However, in the relatively short number of years where Chesley was sexually active with other men he documented his sexual encounters in the hundreds. Since, as we now know, the AIDS virus had been present in San Francisco since the late 1970s and the incubation period could be several years, it is unknown whether Chesley’s seroconversion occurred after the discovery of the disease, and his ignoring safe sex warnings, or

friends with a previously undisclosed facet of his identity. He called a friend, the playwright Victor Bumbalo, and tried to console him by explaining “I’ve only got a few spots.”³⁰⁴ His sister remembered receiving the call from her brother and she could tell that he had been crying. He asked her to not tell their mother—he wanted to be able to break the news to her in person.³⁰⁵

Once Chesley had received the diagnosis, he refused to hide his status as a Person with AIDS (PWA). Like his coming out process from the previous decade, he did not do this by any half-measures. Chesley displayed his body, often wearing as little clothing as possible, so his lesions and gaunt appearance would be visible and unavoidable. This conscious choice served to critique AIDS hysteria and combat the erasure of stigmatized bodies from both the gay community and the larger society. Chesley’s former lover, Mark Chester, a photographer of San Francisco’s sadomasochist community, featured Chesley in a series of erotic photographs. In some of these images Chesley wears a spandex superhero costume that displays his erection and his lesions. Both Chesley and Chester believed these photos depicted Chesley’s strength (symbolized by the costume), his belief in the gay sexual body (signified by the erection), while also situating Chesley in a liminal space between life and death (as suggested by the visible lesions). These three elements together present an image of how Chesley and Chester viewed the gay men of San Francisco at that time—debilitated but not defeated.³⁰⁶ Chesley’s

from a sexual encounter that occurred within the context of a stable relationship. I note this because it is unfair to imply that Chesley’s behavior, and his commitment to upholding the ideals of Erotic Liberation, led to his infection.

³⁰⁴ Jason Campbell, “Responding To The Plague Years: AIDS Theatre In The 1980s.” M.F.A Thesis, Virginia Commonwealth University, 2009

³⁰⁵ Ibid

³⁰⁶ Robert A. Schanke, *Queer Theatre and the Legacy of Cal Yeomans* (New York: Palgrave, 2011),

determination to be out as a PWA was one shared by fellow activists who also refused to accept the stigma and shame scripted on them:

Visibility actively and publicly resists the internalizations of shame and guilt that people with HIV/AIDS have often been made to feel in the aftermath of their diagnosis... Those... who publicize their seropositive status do so at least in part to resist the emotional exhaustion that guilt and shame work upon an individual.³⁰⁷

Robert Chesley's refusal to feel guilty or ashamed was not just made visible in the photographs he posed for or the ubiquitous public displays of his body, but it was also realized through the final plays that he created. The three final plays authored by Chesley are known as *The Dog Plays* and they were written over the course of five months in 1989. The plays are intended as a triptych—three plays connected by themes—rather than a sole narrative spread across three acts. These three texts could stand independent of one another but lose their emotional efficacy if performed or read out of context. Chesley described these works as “unremittingly sad...odd...and the only thing written since the Diagnosis.”³⁰⁸ For Chesley, *The Dog Plays* were his first “AIDS plays.” Previously, his dramatic works may have addressed the consequences of AIDS on the community, but they had not fully wrestled with the devastation caused by the disease itself, as he had explained to Tish Dace in a 1987 profile in the *New York Native*:

All the plays are about various aspects of the effects on our lives and the effects on our community. I don't think even *Jerker* is an AIDS play. It's a play set in 1985, but the disease itself is not the subject of the play, and the disease itself is not the subject of *Night Sweat* either. Fear is the subject. Fear of touching — and the implications for the community.³⁰⁹

³⁰⁷ Dan Brouwer, “The Precarious Visibility Politics of Self-Stigmatization: The Case of HIV/AIDS Tattoos,” *Text and Performance Quarterly*, Vol. 18, no. 2 (1998)

³⁰⁸ The Robert Chesley Foundation, *Plays by Robert Chesley* (New York: Broadway Play Publishing, 2005)

³⁰⁹ Tish Dace, “Stranger's Kiss: Robert Chesley Talks About His Controversial Plays,” *New York Native*, 9 February 1987, 38

Unlike his earlier plays, *The Dog Plays* were written from the perspective of someone who had had his sense of identity upended by the disease. To Chesley's mind, they were his first and only AIDS plays because they were written by, and from, the perspective of someone who is living with the illness and struggling with their impending death. Chesley, in an interview with *The Advocate*, stated: "Before being diagnosed with AIDS, I was writing plays for gay people, and everyone was welcome. Now I'm writing plays for people with AIDS"³¹⁰ What is implied by Chesley's statement is that his previous works, from *For the Kids* to *Jerker*, were written to speak to the entire gay community and their shared experiences. However, once he became a Person With AIDS, he sought to create a theatrical experience that spoke to that specific emotional journey.

Chesley was dying as he wrote *The Dog Plays* and he most likely knew that these three plays would be the last works he would ever create for the theatre. Since he had used playwriting as a means to explore the other significant moments in his life, it makes sense that he would use the stage to process his own mortality. At the same time, he created works that mourned for all that had been lost—not only for the lives lost, but also for the loss of a culture that had, for a brief moment, been glorious.

What is also notable about *The Dog Plays* series is that one can trace the development of Chesley's personal coping process through the development of his dramatic work. In psychological terms, the narrative progression of the three *Dog Plays* can be interpreted through Elisabeth Kübler-Ross's Stages of Grief as described in her well-known book, *On Death and Dying* (1969). According to Kübler-Ross (a Swiss-American psychiatrist,) the stages of grief are: Denial, Anger, Bargaining, Depression,

³¹⁰ Jason Campbell, "Responding To The Plague Years: AIDS Theatre In The 1980s." M.F.A Thesis, Virginia Commonwealth University, 2009

and Acceptance. For Kübler-Ross the creation of this arc served a similar purpose as Chesley's final plays: to privilege and bring attention to the dying rather than focusing on the grief of those who are left behind.³¹¹ One of the most misunderstood elements of the stages of grief, and which she continuously tried to clarify, was that they were 'neat and easy' stages one passed through linearly. On the contrary, the stages were not stops one had to 'hit' on their way to death but instead offered descriptions of what the dying were experiencing in order to normalize the process and validate their emotional journey. The first stage, denial, occurs in the aftermath of diagnosis—the afflicted becomes numb from the shock. However, denial is a necessary stage as it insulates the dying from becoming overwhelmed. It is out of that state of denial that the individual can begin to process their new reality. Anger, a new stage, manifests in different ways. There can be anger at a higher being for this diagnosis, anger at other individuals who are not similarly afflicted, and the anger can also be internalized. But, as Kübler-Ross notes: "underneath anger is pain,"³¹² and that pain, physical, psychological, and emotional, can be given form and words with anger. Bargaining is that period where one attempts to negotiate with the universe—that if one does some act, or pledges to live in some new manner—then perhaps they can be saved from the various forms of pain they fear. Depression is the stage of the present—when one grieves for themselves, their friends, their family, and the life they have created—and questions whether they should, or can, continue. Acceptance is the final stage. If depression is the stage of the 'now' then acceptance is the stage of the future.³¹³ For those suffering with AIDS, it was accepting the new reality where friends

³¹¹ Elisabeth Kubler-Ross, *On Death and Dying: What the Dying Have to Teach Doctors, Nurses, Clergy and Their Own Families*. (New York: Taylor & Francis, 2009)

³¹² Ibid

³¹³ Ibid

and lovers disappeared, and for Chesley, it was processing this new reality through theatre.³¹⁴

Chesley's plays feature aspects of these stages across all the three plays. (*Wild Person, Tense (Dog)*) explores Denial (as Dog refuses to confront his own Diagnosis) as well as Bargaining (revealed by the fact that Dog struggles to avoid stigma by passing as healthy). *The Depuration of Rover* is an interlude about Anger—Fido's anger that Rover continued to act on his desires regardless of who he was potentially hurting. The play is also about Depression—depression about Fido's own illness but also depression over the new reality where you only learn someone has died by finding a small impromptu memorial. *Hold* is a play about Acceptance—the acceptance of death and being able to hope that something was on the other side of the slow wasting away that was death from AIDS.

The *Dog Plays* also feature the return of an artist with whom Chesley felt a deep kinship as both a gay man and a composer: Stephen Foster. In one of his earlier plays, *Dear Friends and Gentle Hearts*, Chesley had explored his own emotional turmoil over the end of his marriage, through a ghost story featuring Stephen Foster and his, alleged, lover. Chesley also found inspiration in the music of Foster in other plays. In *Come Again* one of the interludes features two men, one of whom is nude and fitted with a dog collar, being serenaded, by his lover, with the Foster song 'Old Dog Tray.'³¹⁵ In his production notes for the play Chesley directs the use of three Stephen Foster songs after each play. The order of songs was designed to be: "Gentle Annie" after (*Wild Person, Tense (Dog)*);

³¹⁴ Ibid

³¹⁵ In a play not discussed in this project, *Beatitudes*, Chesley uses a piece of Foster's music, to great emotional effect, at the work's conclusion.

“Old Black Joe” after *The Deploration of Rover*, and “My Old Kentucky Home, Good Night” as the finale following *Hold*. Chesley insisted that the original arrangements, highlighting what he described as Foster’s “heartfelt lyrics,” be used. He noted that at the end of the staged reading, as the entire cast sang “My Old Kentucky Home, Good Night,” “the houselights were brought up, and the audience joined in: ‘weep no more my lady...’ It helped.”³¹⁶

The use of Foster’s music adds another element to *The Dog Plays*—bittersweet nostalgia. Susan Key, an ethnomusicologist, wrote about sentimentality within Stephen Foster’s ballads. She wrote: “One of the most characteristic textual devices of the sentimental ballad was to portray an individual narrator in the throes of nostalgia... The narrator’s individual experience was a synecdoche for the broader social experience of alienation.”³¹⁷ Chesley, though not a narrator, creates characters within *The Dog Plays* who embody the various emotions, grief, anger, uncertainty, and/or shame that had come to define the gay community at the time. His characters each express longing—longing for health, for their past sexual culture, for their lovers. Within the *Dog Plays*’ unifying emotional theme of loss is the evocation of a time that has passed. Key described the use of this trope within Foster’s melodies:

The portrayal of bittersweet emotions stimulated by the contemplation of something lost to the narrator became the nineteenth-century songwriter’s favorite device. Most nostalgic songs... juxtapose an idealized past and an alien present, but allied techniques include the juxtaposition of an idealized “far” and an alien “near.”³¹⁸

³¹⁶ The Robert Chesley Foundation, *Plays by Robert Chesley* (New York: Broadway Play Publishing, 2005)

³¹⁷ Susan Key, “Sound and Sentimentality: Nostalgia in the Songs of Stephen Foster.” *American Music*, Vol. 13, no.2, (1995)

³¹⁸ Ibid

Chesley, with his understanding of music and belief in the beauty of Foster's lyrics, found the audience sing-along helpful because, as Susan Key concluded: "the sentimental ballad is...self-referential, and the act of singing or even listening is transformative."³¹⁹ The audience, by expressing their sorrow for the past they have lost, and in singing these lyrics as a group they were able to grieve and celebrate what they had, together.

(Wild) Person, Tense (Dog)

The first play, *(Wild) Person, Tense (Dog)*, is set in a San Francisco leather bar—but it is a nightmarish version of the bar. The scene is lit with faint red and amber lighting. Within the space are mannequins, with spotlights shining on their crotches. The only sound heard is the music, suffocating percussive beats that increase the tension of the scene. Initially the only visible thing onstage is a large digital clock displaying red numerals. The clock works in 'real time' throughout the majority of the play but a loud ticking is often heard to emphasize the silence during pauses. The use of time in the play is not just a staging choice, but reflects Chesley's view on how time, and how time is experienced, has been altered by AIDS. For the lead character, Dog, his past, present, and future are all about to intersect in this brief moment that is *(Wild) Person, Tense (Dog)*.³²⁰

³¹⁹ Ibid

³²⁰ The name Dog is used in each play but each time it is a different character. The use of dogs, and dog imagery, comes up in several of Chesley's plays. His first commercial and critical success came with the play *Stray Dog Story*, about a dog who is turned into a young man and left to figure out the culture he finds himself alone in. When asked about his use of this animal imagery Chesley responded: "Dogs have always been a part of my life. They are my totem animal...there's a sensuality when a dog gets on your bed and cuddles up next to you and you have warmth together and you move together. It's a sensual lovely, lovely thing." Tish Dace, "Stranger's Kiss: Robert Chesley Talks About His Controversial Plays," *New York Native*, 9 February 1987, 38

Dog enters the bar, described as a “45 year old San Francisco faggot, wearing some leather, sexy enough, but not out to impress anyone.”³²¹ He edges around the stationary mannequins, and immediately begins speaking directly to the audience. He is unnerved because just outside the bar, he saw “a ghost, but he ain’t dead yet.”³²² As Dog pauses and breaks his contact with the audience, to fetch a bottle of water, the music once again begins to play. The sound continues until Dog returns and begins to once again speak to the spectators. He describes what he has seen:

I don’t know who he is. I mean I do know I’ve seen him, but I don’t know who he is. I know I’ve seen him, and I know where I’ve seen him, but I didn’t expect to see him again. I didn’t expect to see him again because the last time I saw him was, I think, a year ago or so. A year or so ago, and at that time he didn’t look like he would live that long. But there he is, still alive. I don’t know how. (Bitterly) I don’t know why, either....Where I’ve seen him—where I used to see him—is on Castro Street. Not that I wanted to look, or is it crueler not to look, to ignore what you don’t want to look at? To ignore—not a what, but someone, a person you don’t want to look at? There he was, there on the sidewalk, sitting on the sidewalk. Of course he knew he was going to be looked at—or not looked at. Either way it’s cruel. The whole fucking thing is cruel...He was just sitting there...this guy, this ghost, this reminder, sitting there...That’s where I saw him, used to see him, up until a year or so ago...I assumed he was dead.³²³

Dog is not simply rattled because he has seen someone he assumed was dead—he is upset because this ‘ghost’ represents the larger disturbing trend occurring in San Francisco’s gay community. The cruelty he speaks of is the death that occurred before the physical death. James Dawes described the cruel nature of how AIDS not only stole one’s life, but imposed a singular identity as an AIDS victim. He wrote:

Unlike many victims of cancer, diabetes, and other diseases, AIDS victims are turned physically inside-out: their bodies become the involuntary narratives of the illness within; their interior lives are obscenely

³²¹ Robert Chesley, *(Wild) Person, Tense (Dog)*, in *Plays by Robert Chesley* (New York: Broadway Play Publishing, 2005)

³²² Ibid

³²³ Ibid

publicized... And thus the cultural logic of AIDS transforms the body into a sign. Identity is flattened out, reduced to an exposed surface, and edge. Lesions become names, the first and primary bearer of social identity, and names become an invasion of privacy... If disease is unseen, it can never be treated; but when it is seen, it can become an annihilation of individuality.³²⁴

Dog cannot even remember the name of the ghostly person he has seen, though he recognizes him by sight a year after last seeing him. He notes the internal conflict over how to behave when seeing this person, this person who has been reduced to his illness. The conflict he feels is whether to ignore this physical manifestation of the walking dead or to acknowledge the individual who has been reduced to occupying the liminal space between presence and absence. He calls him a ghost—he referred to him as a ghost when he was still visibly alive on the Castro a year before—signifying that Dog believed this man had already become one of the dead when he was still in the process of dying.

Dog, preoccupied with trying to recollect how he knew this ghost, shakes himself out of his morose thoughts. He tells the audience that he came out to the bar to get away from being depressed, that there is still more to life than the unrelenting sadness experienced every day. Dog wants to relax, to feel good on a Saturday night, like the old days. He advises the audience to listen to the music while he begins to cruise the bar.³²⁵ The music returns for several moments but is then interrupted by the sound of coyotes howling. Buck, ‘the ghost,’ enters the bar.

Buck’s appearance reflects his ill state. His clothes are too large and ragged and his hair is unkempt and thin. The physical representation of the ravages of AIDS is

³²⁴ James Dawes, “Narrating Disease: AIDS, Consent, and the Ethics of Representation,” *Social Text* no. 43 (Autumn 1995)

³²⁵ Robert Chesley, (*Wild*) *Person, Tense (Dog)*, in *Plays by Robert Chesley* (New York: Broadway Play Publishing, 2005)

incredibly significant as Chesley does not spare his audience the reality of what AIDS does to the body. AIDS has robbed Buck of everything—he is not even referred to by name outside of the stage directions—he is just ‘the ghost.’ Addressing this physical devastation, Daniel Goldstein, an artist who was diagnosed with AIDS during the first wave of the crisis, described how AIDS radically altered victims’ appearance in the documentary, *We Were Here*. He noted that it was a wasting disease, that he lost all of the fat from his buttocks and his face—and his appearance became so alarming his own mother asked him to stand on his head in order to let some blood flow back into his cheeks. He remembers how all of a sudden the Castro, which had been filled with beautiful men, was suddenly full of men who looked like the figures liberated from Nazi concentration camps.³²⁶ Robert Burns Neveline, describing the importance of unabashedly portraying the ravages of AIDS, underscores the important cultural work that artists like Chesley and Goldstein were engaging in:

AIDS does not exist apart from its representations. But only in accumulation, and over accumulation, of representations will make AIDS, and the bodies of persons with AIDS, radically visible and therefore viable: granted life, authorized to be written and read, allowed to mingle, or condemned to wither away, or condemned for withering away.³²⁷

The presence of Buck is important because he is the spectre of AIDS disrupting the atmosphere of the bar. Without his presence Dog can pretend that AIDS is not impacting his life, that he is still able to go out and enjoy himself without intrusion of reality. Buck’s appearance makes the devastation of the disease impactful to the audience. By

³²⁶ *We Were Here*. DVD. Directed by David Weissman, Bill Weber (San Francisco: Red Flag Releasing, 2011)

³²⁷ Robert Burns Neveline, “Skeletons in the Closet: Paradox, Resistance, and the Undead Body of the PWA,” *College Literature* vol, 24 no. 1 (February 1997)

presenting Buck as being ravaged by the disease Chesley refuses to ‘closet’ the effect that AIDS is having on members of the community—as much as they may want to forget.

Dog continues to cruise the bar, unaware of Buck’s entrance, but throughout the course of the play Buck only has eyes for Dog and all of his dialogue is directed towards him. Dog’s dialogue is split, some of his statements are directed towards the audience but many of his ruminations are him speaking aloud to himself.

Buck: You won’t find peace tonight, Dog...Look at me, Dog. I’m here.
 Dog: He’s here. He’s in here...It must be odd for him to be in here. It must be hard. Why is he here? Not that he shouldn’t be. It’s his right, of course...What would I do? Would I come here...I don’t even know why I am here tonight...But I won’t look at him again.
 Buck: Until I tell you to, Dog.
 Dog: Why should I? After all, I don’t know him.
 Buck: You do know me, Dog. It’s just that you don’t know that you do, or won’t let yourself. I’m Buck. Remember Buck? Fuck-a-Buck?
 Dog: It does hurt. It is cruel. In a way, he shouldn’t be here. Nobody is going to talk to him. It’s not just me. But nobody’s to blame. He isn’t to blame either.
 Buck: It’s my identity, Dog. That’s why you don’t recognize me, why you don’t see me.³²⁸

Dog is unnerved by Buck’s presence and then upset by his intrusion into this space because Buck is *not* a person, but rather he is an identity robbed of his humanity; a walking stigma and reminder of the disease and the death that was impacting countless gay men.

While it is not clearly stated in the stage directions, the most common mark of AIDS that served as the stigma was the Kaposi Sarcoma’s lesions that often appeared on the infected individual’s bodies. The telltale purple spot, which was the first indicator of

³²⁸ Robert Chesley, *(Wild) Person, Tense (Dog)*, in *Plays by Robert Chesley* (New York: Broadway Play Publishing, 2005)

the AIDS virus in San Francisco, would communicate without words a person's seropositive status.

Psychologist Gregory Herek defined stigma from its historical origins to its current usage: "Originally, the term stigma referred to a visible marking on the body ...the mark signified social ostracism, disgrace, shame, or condemnation. ...Modern social scientists have used stigma to describe a socially undesirable characteristic."³²⁹ Also of note in relation to 'stigma' is the work of sociologist Erving Goffman. Goffman, who wrote in depth about stigma and its role in shaping social interactions, described stigma as:

an attribute that is deeply discrediting within a particular social interaction...stigma spoils an identity by preventing the stigmatized from meeting expectations for particular kinds of social interaction...stigma is not inherent in an attribute in itself, but rather in social interactions where the attribute is relevant to the participants expectations about what the other person should be.³³⁰

Buck's stigma of AIDS, the Kaposi Sarcoma lesions and the wasted gaunt appearance, instantly creates the discomfort that Dog denotes and spoils his identity, as Goffman notes. Buck cannot interact with others in the same way as Dog, his status as a dying PWA is too visible, Dog wonders why Buck would enter the space? He enters knowing that no one will interact with or talk to him or even, based upon his recollection from their street encounter, look at him. Buck is physically present, he is not a vision only Dog can see, but his stigma, the signs of his illness, makes him socially invisible. Buck brings death into the bar and as this space is an area that, ostensibly, offers escape from the horrors of outside, he does not belong. Buck is the walking dead, Chesley even

³²⁹ Gregory M Herek, "Illness, Stigma, and AIDS." *Psychological Aspects of Serious Illness: Chronic Conditions, Fatal diseases, and Clinical Care* (1990)

³³⁰ Erving Goffman, *Stigma: Notes on the Management of Spoiled Identity*, (New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 1963)

notes that he may resemble “an AIDS zombie” and the dead are not welcome amongst the living. This upsets the temporal reality that Dog has created for himself, where once he has accepted someone’s death, they are gone. He does not have the energy to re-accept their presence should his belief in their passing be premature. The stigma Buck carries means that he is already dead even if his physical body continues to function in the present.

Goffman identified six aspects to the stigma that impacted how the stigmatized bearer was perceived in their social interactions. I have highlighted two of these elements with regards to how they relate to the interaction that occurs within *(Wild) Person, Tense (Dog)*: “1) a stigma’s concealability, the extent to which the stigma is hidden or obvious...; 2) aesthetic qualities, the more that others perceive the condition as repellant, ugly or upsetting, the more stigma is attached to it.”³³¹

In reflecting upon these aspects in relation to *(Wild) Person, Tense (Dog)*, one can immediately see how the concern regarding “aesthetic qualities” of a visible stigma can be signified: Buck is wasting away from his illness within a very public venue. The physical signs of his body’s disease are evidenced within the bar—a site that still functions as a place to meet a romantic or sexual partner—and the presence of someone who is obviously ill can upset the perceived nature of this space. In the specific case of AIDS, the aesthetic qualities and the perceived peril associated with stigmas are linked and intensified due to the bar setting. The men within the space, as signified by the mannequins with spot-lit crotches, are seeking sexual contact from their fellow patrons. Yet Buck, as a victim of a disease spread through sexual contact, is a physical

³³¹ Erving Goffman, *Stigma: Notes on the Management of Spoiled Identity*, (New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 1963)

manifestation and reminder of what could result from the pursuance of sex. If one enters the space to escape the constant images of disease, dying, and death in order to enjoy intimate contact (like they did ‘in the old days’), then the intrusion of the outside world via a body stigmatized by AIDS upsets the social contract of the bar.

The first element that Goffman identified, concealability, is not relevant to Buck, who cannot hide his illness, but it is important to Dog. Dog tries to make Buck feel more comfortable in the bar by revealing his own seropositive status: he removes his jacket thereby revealing his hidden K.S. lesions. Buck is not impressed nor is he mollified by Dog’s attempt to find common ground.

Dog: Maybe take my jacket off casually, so he can see I’ve got lesions on my arms...Let him know he’s not alone. Of course he’s not alone. This is San Francisco, after all. He must know, like I know, that at least half these guys—well, even if they’re not showing any symptoms...

Buck: Yeah, I know. Course I know. But it makes a difference when you can still think you’re healthy...it makes a difference when you can still pass for healthy...There’s a difference of identity, Dog.³³²

Dog is only stigmatized by AIDS if and when he removes his jacket—with his jacket as a shield, he is able to pass as healthy and is accepted as worthy of inclusion by the other men in the bar. In writing about the phenomenon of passing, communications scholars Catherine Squires and Daniel Brouwer defined passing as:

the interplay between three actors or groups: the passer, who (usually) performs a privileged identity; the in group clairvoyant, a member of the passer’s non-privileged group who can see through the pass; and the ‘dupe,’ a member of the privileged group who believes the pass.³³³

Thus, in the bar scene of *(Wild) Person, Tense (Dog)* Dog is the *passer*: his illness is not known until he willingly reveals his infected status to a fellow member of his identity

³³² Robert Chesley, *(Wild) Person, Tense (Dog)*, in *Plays by Robert Chesley* (New York: Broadway Play Publishing, 2005)

³³³ Catherine R. Squires and Daniel C. Brouwer, “In/Discernible Bodies: The Politics of Passing in Dominant and Marginal Media,” *Critical Studies in Media Communication*, Vol. 19, no. 3, 2002.

group. Buck is the *clairvoyant* as he was already aware of Dog's status, in part due to his seemingly omniscient state of knowing what Dog is thinking—a gift/curse granted by the fact of his own death, and the silent members of the bar are set-up as the dupes whom Dog is cruising.

Dog's act of passing is not presented as malicious but rather it is born from fear. Dog does not want to become Buck—that is his fear; that he will end up a ghost who people will not even look at. To pass as HIV negative is, for Dog, the ability to retain his identity as a San Francisco faggot rather than be seen as a PWA, the walking dead, or a ghost. But Dog's need to make Buck feel welcome by revealing his arms, and thus his stigma, reveals his act of passing. Catherine Squires, a critical race studies scholar and Daniel Brouwer, a queer theorist, note that “when a person is accused of performing the ‘wrong’ identity, it prompts commentary and action...In the aftermath of discovery, passers do not seem to fit in either community.”³³⁴ Thus Dog, now openly wearing his stigma, is left in a liminal state.

Visible disabilities...result in social identifications that cause or complicate problems of self-definition. No longer able to pass as HIV negative or healthy, the individual moves from having a discreditable status to a discredited one. The inability to avoid disclosure forces him to accept an illness identity and contend with the associated stigma.”³³⁵

While Dog was initially welcomed in the bar, the visibility of his K.S. lesions threatens to shift his identity from one who is welcomed in the space to one whose presence is unwelcome; a shift from being read as a gay man living in San Francisco into an ill and infected body. Nevertheless, Dog still has the benefit of being able to resist the scripting

³³⁴ Catherine R. Squires and Daniel C. Brouwer, “In/Discernible Bodies: The Politics of Passing in Dominant and Marginal Media,” *Critical Studies in Media Communication*, Vol. 19, no. 3, 2002.

³³⁵ Jacqueline Lewis, “Status Passages,” *Journal of Homosexuality*, Vol. 37, no.3, 1999

of his body by spectators: once he puts his jacket back on his perceived status shifts from being discredited back to credible. The liminal state that Dog finds himself in is the space between being seropositive, infected with the AIDS virus, and becoming a PWA which—at the time of Chesley's writing—reflected imminent death.

Now that Dog's previous act of passing has been revealed, Dog is finally able to look at Buck and the two begin speaking to each other. Buck tells Dog *their* story. He describes their initial sexual encounter, a fast oral session in the park, and then a more intimate assignation in Buck's apartment. He notes that there was never a third time, but they would see each other, smile and remember what they had shared. Buck notes that he left San Francisco, moving to Texas and then Florida, where he became ill. He returned to San Francisco and found himself on the street, untouchable and un-see-able. That was when he saw Dog again:

I saw that twenty dollar bill in my cigar box and I looked up to see who put it there, and I saw you: you, Dog. But I saw that you did not want to see me, that that twenty dollar bill was a wall you were erecting, that the purpose of the twenty dollar bill was to buy you blindness, to buy you blindness in the light of day.³³⁶

This statement is Chesley's powerful indictment on denial and how the divisions between the sick, the dying, and the healthy are fracturing the community. Dog, who knows that he is sick, willfully blinds himself to the suffering of those around him, but attempts to assuage his guilt through an act of charity.

As Buck tells their story—the various encounters that have brought them together up to this night—Dog is remembering/re-living their sexual encounter, becoming breathless as he remembers Buck, and remembers the joy of the contact he used to feel in

³³⁶ Robert Chesley, *(Wild) Person, Tense (Dog)*, in *Plays by Robert Chesley* (New York: Broadway Play Publishing, 2005)

making contact with another man, even if it only lasted a few minutes. Buck is entirely focused on the present while Dog is caught in the memory of the past—they are each experiencing different temporal realities.

I can remember what it used to be like...Am I remembering it, or just imagining it...And maybe we'd lie together for a bit, and then he'd turn me over and begin licking my ass...Maybe a finger, then, up my ass, and then another, sliding in and sliding out, loosening my asshole, loosening me... His cock, then, pushing in, and it hurts...It hurts, but I let go, and he shoves his cock in: it's there, it's there — ah!
 Buck: Blind Dog! Blind Dog! But blind Dog knows: he can't buy himself out of this one after all... I AM YOU, DOG.
 Dog (orgasm): I...! You...! Buck! Buck!
 Buck: That's it, Dog: I...Am...Your...Ghost!
 Dog (*lowering his head to look again at Buck, not comprehending*): Was your name Buck? Is it?
 Buck: I...Am...Your...Ghost.³³⁷

Buck is not Dog's literal ghost but he is Dog's future. He is what Dog is in the process of becoming no matter how hard he tries to pass as healthy among the living. Dog has been blind not only because he refused to see Buck and remember that they had once shared a connection but also because he has been in denial and will not allow himself to see that they are once again connected by their shared diagnoses.

Dog is haunted by the memory of men he used to see at these bars and with whom he made connections, both emotional and sexual. Dog's inability to face the new realities of life does not allow him to mourn; to grieve for himself, for Buck, and for all the other ghosts haunting the Castro. Eric Rofes, a gay author and activist who witnessed the AIDS epidemic, described how the expression of grief itself became a kind of stigma:

hiding from grief has become common practice...mourning is shunned by some who feel it makes us compliant with HIV — our grief is evidence that the epidemic has succeeded in robbing us of so much. Many gay men

³³⁷ Ibid

avoid mourning in an attempt to deny the power and the devastation caused by AIDS.³³⁸

In his belabored attempt to avoid the grief and devastation that surrounds him, Dog attempts to keep himself numb and blind—an effort that leads him to escape into the bar at the play’s start. However, the bar did function as a site of connection, as it had in the past, just not in the way that Dog had imagined it would.

As Dog recovers from his orgasm, Buck exits the scene. The scene reverts from dreamlike fantasy into the harsh reality—the clock once again begins to tick and the suffocated percussive music starts playing. Dog once again turns and speaks to the audience:

He's gone...I'm relieved. I know I shouldn't be, I know it's wrong, but I am. There's only so much — grief you can allow into your life beyond a certain point. I don't know what happens to the grieving that isn't done...I know I'm betraying this guy. No — I'm not betraying this guy, but something bigger...Betraying – a dream, the dream I used to have: I'm pretending I never had this dream, because it doesn't fit in nowadays, there's no place for it. Things are different, everything changed.³³⁹

The betrayal Dog speaks to is the betrayal of the Sexual Liberation ideal that made San Francisco bloom as a haven for gay men in the 1970s. By moving past denial and accepting his new identity as a gay man with AIDS, Dog must turn away from the past. His visit to the bar is an example of him clinging to a life that is no longer there—if he must stop passing as healthy then his community must stop trying to act as though nothing has changed. Dog’s final line to the audience is that “times change,” and, as noted, the very nature of time has been changed.³⁴⁰ Dog is left alone onstage as the music

³³⁸ Eric Rofes, *Reviving the Tribe: Regenerating Gay Men’s Sexuality and Culture in the Ongoing Epidemic* (Harrington Park Press: New York, 1996)

³³⁹ Robert Chesley, *(Wild) Person, Tense (Dog)*, in *Plays by Robert Chesley* (New York: Broadway Play Publishing, 2005)

³⁴⁰ Ibid

rises. The clock, which has kept real time throughout the play, begins to speed up, faster and faster, until the stage goes black and the clock blinks out. Time has changed: past, present, and future blur together until time runs out.

French philosopher, San Francisco leather bar patron, and AIDS victim, Michel Foucault, addressed the ambiguous temporalities of time; that time is not a fixed understood concept, when he wrote:

the epoch of simultaneity...the epoch of juxtaposition, the epoch of near and far, of the side by side, of the dispersed....our experience of living in the world is less of a long life developing through time than that of a network that connects points and intersects with its own skein.³⁴¹

The first decade of the AIDS crisis, when Chesley was writing, was one of these epochs. It was a period in which a community was both coming together and fracturing at the same time. Within the play, there is a simultaneous experience within the past, when Dog remembers Buck, and the present, as Buck reveals himself to Dog, and at the play's conclusion the clock speeds into the future. The character of Dog in *(Wild) Person, Tense (Dog)* is in the midst of this temporal uncertainty when his presence *in the present* is interrupted by the past and the future. These interruptions are signified by the appearance of Buck, whom Dog believed to be dead, along with the revelation that Buck represents what Dog *is in the process of becoming* by virtue of his infection. The clock, visible to the audience, is a physical emblem of "the passage of time" with the stress being placed on how time, and the men present in this current skein, are in the process of *passing*. It is this temporal uncertainty, marked by a struggle against time, that is succinctly explicated by Foucault's contemporary, Jacques Derrida:

³⁴¹ Michel, Foucault and Jay Miskowiec, "Of Other Spaces," *Diacritics* (1986) quoted in Dixon, Steve. "Theatre, Technology, and Timem" *International Journal of Performance Arts and Digital Media*, Vol. 1, no. 1 (2005)

The present is what passes, the present comes to pass, it lingers in this transitory passage, in the coming and going, between what goes and what comes, in the middle of what leaves and what arrives, at the articulation between what absents itself and what presents itself... Presence is enjoined, ordered, distributed in the two directions of absence, at the articulation of what is no longer and what is not yet.³⁴²

Dog is caught in the temporal confusion that Foucault and Derrida both commented upon, where the present was seemingly slowing down and the passage of time was speeding up, killing PWAs incredibly quickly, and slowing down, as men wasted away and metaphorically died while still being present. Thus, each tick of the clock and flip of a number marks a moment closer to physical death *and* the metaphorical death of a culture that Dog is desperately trying to hold onto. It is a luminal, in-between, space that Dog occupies. On one side he has the leather bar and all it represents, the life and culture that is being lost. On the other side is Buck, who represents a loss of identity, dignity, and eventually, life. Buck, though visible to Dog, has been made absent by his illness and Dog, because he, too, is infected, is being made absent.

(*Wild*) *Person, Tense (Dog)* Chesley chose the song “Gentle Annie” to be performed at the end of (*Wild*) *Person, Tense (Dog)*. The lyrics of the song are about the loss of a love, the titular gentle Annie, but rather than being mournful the song compares the love to the blooming of flowers.

Thou will come no more, gentle Annie,
Like a flower thy spirit did depart;
Thou art gone, alas! like the many
That have bloomed in the summer of my heart.³⁴³

³⁴² Jacques Derrida, *Specters of Marx*, trans. Bernd Magnus and Stephen Cullenberg (New York: Routledge, 1994) quoted in Powell, Benjamin D. and Tracy Stephenson Shaffer, "On the Haunting of Performance Studies." *Liminalities: A Journal of Performance Studies* 5, no. 1 (2009)

³⁴³ Stephen Foster, “Gentle Annie,” *Center for American Music Library at the University of Pittsburgh*: <http://www.pitt.edu/~amerimus/lyrics.htm>

The love of the singer for his Annie, whose love lasted briefly like a flower or a season, is fitting for the story of Dog and Buck. The two men only loved each other twice but the impact they had upon each other's lives was great. Buck, like so many, has gone, but he lives on through Dog and the other men he touched. And then, Buck helped Dog see clearly, to bring him out of his self-imposed blindness towards change and his own shifting identity. After doing so, after once again making a connection—Buck is gone, and Dog has been impacted.

The Depuration of Rover

The Depuration of Rover opens on Fido, a fat faggot in his forties, who leads the audience on an evening walk through the Castro. During the walk he narrates how times have changed, but insists that San Francisco still remains a haven for young gay people in spite of all the loss.

About ten years ago there was such a party here! Such madness, such joy! A coming out party for a million guys...It was for beautiful guys, and the beauty hurt. It dazzled the eyes...My neighborhood has been through a lot, over the years...It ain't what it was, and I don't expect it ever will be again. But I think—I like to think—that there's a joy here again, a type of joy, even in these times, and a justifiable pride. Because we've proved ourselves. Times are hard...We're going to be here when the hard times are over; we're going to make it through.³⁴⁴

The sense of something good coming out of the struggle with AIDS was a sentiment many shared, including a PWA interviewed by the researcher, Steven Schwartzberg.

"There's going to be a lot of positive stuff that comes out of this. Gay people can now say 'we' as a people in a way that we couldn't before this happened."³⁴⁵ Unlike the fracturing

Chesley explored in *(Wild) Person, Tense (Dog)*, *The Depuration of Rover* takes a more

³⁴⁴ Robert Chesley, *The Depuration of Rover*, in *Plays by Robert Chesley* (New York: Broadway Play Publishing, 2005)

³⁴⁵ Steven S. Schwartzberg, "Struggling for Meaning: How HIV-Positive Gay Men Make Sense of AIDS," *Professional Psychology: Research and Practice*, Vol. 24, no. 4 (1993)

hopeful view of the community. Even as the gay community was losing aspects of the culture that had defined it, it was gaining a new sense of coming together and caring for one another. Connection was still of utmost importance.

Fido comments upon this change in the community as he walks down the street. He notes that he never fit into the Castro throng—he wasn't beautiful enough for those men—but now the neighborhood has become his. Not because the beauty has been lost, but because the way that men relate to each other has changed. The men have come together to fight a war and in their struggle for survival their bonds have become less focused upon physical attributes and more on emotional support.

During Fido's walk the lights come up on a window display center stage. In the window there is a framed photograph of a young man. The picture is large enough to be visible to the audience and it has a small placard underneath, replete with a bouquet of yellow roses next to the picture frame. Fido stops and begins to speak to the photograph

So you're dead too now? We never met. I never knew you. Never even knew your name. Until now. Rover. Rover: 1947 to 1989. That's all. God, you were beautiful... Whoever you were, Rover, I loved you, I envied you, I desired you... And now you're dead.³⁴⁶

As Fido relays to the audience, he did not know Rover but his death is no less impactful to him. Rover represents those million beautiful men who dazzled him and his loss is one more strike against the community and the culture created in the Castro. Rover was part of the world *before*—when a man's beauty was touchable, even briefly, and a sense of belonging and joy was found in the acts of touching, being touched, or witnessing the

³⁴⁶ Robert Chesley, *The Deploration of Rover*, in *Plays by Robert Chesley* (New York: Broadway Play Publishing, 2005)

touching. This memorial, though small and unofficial, also informed the community that one of their own had died.

Jennifer Power, in her discussion of the public memorials and their effect on the grief process, highlights the important role that the type of memorial Fido is looking at had within the gay community during the early years of the AIDS crisis. She wrote: "AIDS memorials created a public platform in which people affected by HIV/AIDS could grieve...Moreover, the memorials highlighted the absence of formal public acknowledgment or memorialization of people who had died from AIDS."³⁴⁷ The memories of Rover, and the emotional impulses that seeing this memorial bring up, are both numerous and fleeting. The response to Rover is ephemeral; gone as soon as the picture has faded from sight. The memorial itself, even after it is removed and replaced, stands as a physical indicator that Rover existed and mattered.

The overwhelming numbers of the dead, and the fact that so many just disappeared, made these memorials significant: it meant that these men were deserving of remembrance.³⁴⁸ Returning to memorializing efforts, Jennifer Power distinguished these types of displays as "counter-memorials" which she defined as "memorials that attempt to challenge mainstream attitudes...Firstly, the very act of memorializing an individual...is a declaration that they deserve to be remembered in a way that is dignified and celebrated."³⁴⁹ The memorial for Rover, and the many men like him in San Francisco, is a counter-memorial because, in the eyes of the larger society, gay men

³⁴⁷ Jennifer Power, "Rites of Belonging: Grief, Memorial and Social Action." *Health Sociology Review*, Vol. 18, no. 3 (2009)

³⁴⁸ *We Were Here*. DVD. Directed by David Weissman, Bill Weber (San Francisco: Red Flag Releasing, 2011). The men

³⁴⁹ Jennifer Power, "Rites of Belonging: Grief, Memorial and Social Action." *Health Sociology Review*, Vol. 18, no. 3 (2009)

dying of AIDS did not deserve to be memorialized. The fact that the centerpiece of the memorial is yellow, roses signifying his sexual fetish, is a further transgression against mainstream sensibilities. Rover was not a figure of grand importance but he meant something to those who loved him and they created this small memorial, in the community, so that anyone walking down the street could take a moment to mourn his loss, or just the sense of loss brought forth by seeing yet another young man felled by AIDS.

As Fido has been speaking to the picture, Dog, a forty-five year old San Francisco faggot, strolls onto the scene. Fido comments about the beautiful yellow roses and wonders if the color is significant. Dog comes up behind him and notes that they mean exactly what Fido is thinking.³⁵⁰ The two men begin to speak about Rover. Dog explains that he had heard Rover was ill and that he had meant to get back in touch with him, but now he sees he's too late. He and Rover had been roommates during the 1970s and Rover had loved to party. Dog shares that he loved Rover, but that being in a relationship with Rover was difficult—Dog ended up cleaning up his act, but Rover kept on partying and was addicted to speed (which, he surmises, gave him the energy that made him so beautiful). Yet and still, Dog deduces that the Rover he had known was damaged even prior to his addictive behaviors—he was an orphan reared by fundamentalist grandparents and then he was drafted to Vietnam. Dog notes that after Vietnam, Rover did not want to do anything but party and even though he was talented, he wasted it all on hedonistic pursuits.³⁵¹

³⁵⁰ Rover was the Golden Shower Queen and the yellow roses signify his status.

³⁵¹ Robert Chesley, *The Deploration of Rover*, in *Plays by Robert Chesley* (New York: Broadway Play Publishing, 2005)

Rover found a place of his own in San Francisco because his desire to just pursue pleasure had become a hallmark of the Sexual Liberation movement, which flourished in the Castro. However, as Dog notes, Rover did not slow down when the paradigm shifted in 1981.

He kept right on playing. He could come up with any number of reasons...His attitude was that if we'd all done what we were supposed to do, there wouldn't have been any gay life at all...And then there was a certain logic to the next line he took up: that we'd all heard the same message about safe sex plenty, and that anyone who chose to fuck with him knew just as well as he what the risks were, and that it was their own choice, and nobody else's business.³⁵²

Clearly, Rover's rationale for continuing his reckless behavior could be seen as a symptom of his drug addiction. However, his theoretical position is very much aligned with the arguments and central themes explored in Chesley's previous plays. *The Deploation of Rover* is Chesley's sobered reflection on the views he had doggedly fought for prior to his own diagnosis, and while Chesley refuses to apologize for his commitment to Sexual Liberation, *The Deploation of Rover* does recognize that the issues he was confronting were far more complicated than the black/white dichotomy he had previously accepted and championed. Fido explains that Rover's choices, however unintentional, did have consequences—and Fido has to live with them, and will die from them, as he has been infected. Dog notes that he never accepted Rover's logic but in the end, his main hope is that Rover did not suffer. Fido points out that this wish does not mean anything as suffering exists around them on a grand scale. In the face of that suffering, and what he sees on the AIDS ward, Fido is able to let go of his bitterness by

³⁵² Ibid

asserting that nobody deserves what AIDS is doing to them.³⁵³ This ability to rise above his anger, directed not just at Rover, but all the men who shared his view of the sexual culture in the first waves of the AIDS crisis, is significant. In much of the media, including the gay media, at this time (1989), the sexual culture of gay men was being rewritten as both the cause of the disease as well as the downfall of the gay community. Steven Seidman described this cultural revisionism in his direct critique of the historicizing AIDS:

Sexual promiscuity stands at the center of the gay media response to AIDS...It is, moreover, seen as having a direct causal relation to the current epidemic...for gay liberationists whose ideals are perceived to have faded behind a wave of self-indulgence, AIDS has functioned as an appropriate symbol for the failure of current gay life.³⁵⁴

Chesley, in *The Deploation of Rover*, now viewed Sexual Liberation through shades of grey but he still refused to assign blame for the suffering that was happening. Dog and Fido are angry but not at Sexual Liberation. They are angry at the perception that what they had experienced through their sexual exploration, the sense of community and connection, was being denigrated. As Bert said in *Jerker*: “it wasn’t just a party.”³⁵⁵ Dog and Fido recognize what they gained from Sexual Liberation—they just wish that the devastation of AIDS had not destroyed the culture and tainted their memories.

Dog agrees with Fido, that no one deserves the suffering, while describing how Rover, and the parties, gave him some of the best times of his life. He refuses to

³⁵³ Robert Chesley, *The Deploation of Rover*, in *Plays by Robert Chesley* (New York: Broadway Play Publishing, 2005)

³⁵⁴ Steven Seidman, “Transfiguring Sexual Identity: AIDS & The Contemporary Construction of Homosexuality,” *Social Text* no. 19/20 (1988)

³⁵⁵ Robert Chesley, *Jerker*, in *Hard Plays/Stiff Parts: The Homoerotic Plays of Robert Chesley* (San Francisco: Alamo Square Press 1990)

apologize for the fun he had and he refuses to apologize for Rover because, in the end, Rover was a good person and a good friend.³⁵⁶

As the two men stare at the photograph Dog says goodbye and then begins to weep. Fido pulls him into a hug and holds him while he cries. When Dog breaks the embrace he acknowledges that the tears are not just for Rover. Fido, echoing his opening speech, tells Dog that there is hope. Sensing that their time together has come to an end, Fido and Dog introduce themselves; thank each other for the shared moments, and Dog exits, leaving Fido at Rover's memorial.³⁵⁷ Dog and Fido's experience together mirrors the type of brief sexual encounter the two men may have shared before AIDS thus proving Fido right: there can still be joy found in the Castro. They touched each other's souls in the way they previously may have touched each other's bodies. To reference Kantrowitz: they saw their spirits glaringly naked before they ever knew the other man's name.

The fact that this encounter occurred in front of the memorial, the mourning place for the dead, lends the moments shared by Dog and Fido an even deeper significance. Again, one could argue that they were re-enacting a ritual: a ritual of sexual communion. Rather experiencing a shared orgasm, however, they both engage in a ritual of shared grief that culminates in a psycho-emotional catharsis. The culmination of their encounter is the embrace through which Dog can say goodbye to a friend with whom he shared joy and Fido can grieve for the beauty of all the men in Castro signified by Rover's

³⁵⁶ Arnie Kantrowitz, one of the founders of New York's Gay Men's Health Crisis, one of the first organizations dedicated to fighting AIDS, also refused to rewrite his history, stating: "My experiment in sexual anarchy was a rare delight, a lesson in license, an opportunity to see both flesh and spirit glaringly naked. I will never apologize to anyone for my promiscuity. Quoted in Steven Seidman, "Transfiguring Sexual Identity: AIDS & The Contemporary Construction of Homosexuality," *Social Text* no. 19/20 (1988)

³⁵⁷ Robert Chesley, *The Deploration of Rover*, in *Plays by Robert Chesley* (New York: Broadway Play Publishing, 2005)

presence/absence. Jennifer Power, citing Clifford Geertz, described the role that ritual played in the spiritual lives of its participants: "Ritual...can demonstrate the discrepancy between how the world currently is and how the world could or should be in the eyes of its participants...these ceremonies shape the spiritual consciousness of individuals, which in turn influences the way in which they view their everyday world."³⁵⁸ Fido and Dog separate from each other changed by the ritual of mourning they have experienced together. And through this participation, their view of the world is altered. Dog's recollections of Rover have softened as he is ultimately remembered as a generous, good man rather than a partying speed addict. Fido's viewpoint is also tempered by Dog's humanizing of Rover. Through his interaction with Dog, Fido is able to let go of his anger toward Rover and realize that both he and Rover are victims. Jennifer Power continued her discussion of the transformative power of ritual by explaining that "participation in acts that mark a tradition...can generate a strong emotional bond between individuals and a passionate connection to the focus of the ritual."³⁵⁹ Thus, Fido and Dog, through their feelings toward and about Rover, are brought together and they make a connection. Through this impromptu lamentation they have not only formed a bond, but their relationship to Rover and his memory is also reconciled. Robert Burns Neveldine, in writing about the experiences of PWAs, described the depth of this fleeting moment:

Relationships with those who shared the death encounter and survival are always considered of particular significance. Those who have been through the same thing seem to feel a special understanding and

³⁵⁸ Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures*, (New York: Basic Books, 1973) quoted in Power, Jennifer, "Rites of Belonging: Grief, Memorial and Social Action." *Health Sociology Review*, Vol. 18, no. 3 (2009)

³⁵⁹ Jennifer Power, "Rites of Belonging: Grief, Memorial and Social Action." *Health Sociology Review*, Vol. 18, no. 3 (2009)

empathy... Shared feelings, memories, perceptions, and interpretations of the event are all significant in these bonds.³⁶⁰

Dog continues walking and Fido is left alone before the picture of Rover. In dramatic fashion, the absent Rover in the picture is replaced by the physical presence of Rover.

(Rover is facing us with his head bowed, and his hands together in front of him. He's wearing only beltless jeans, which ride his slender hips, and his body is lean and muscular, with steel tit rings; he is glistening with sweat and panting — we have caught him during a momentary pause in his dance ... Rover unfurls large gold fans he is holding, and dances.)³⁶¹

As Rover dances Fido speaks directly to him, enthralled to be so close to the beauty he was unable to touch during Rover's short life:

So you went off to play... While I stayed home and guarded the bones. I loved your beauty. And I'll admit that if I'd had your beauty I might have gone off to play, too. But I loved your beauty because—because it lit up the world, so brightly, lit up my life, too... That doesn't exactly justify anything you did... But I don't know the right or wrong of it all... Maybe there isn't any right or wrong about it. Maybe there's just joy and sorrow.³⁶²

Fido finishes his speech—his eulogy for Rover and all of the “Rovers” lost in San Francisco—and Rover finishes his dance. As Rover stands panting he looks over and sees Fido for the first time. He picks up one of the yellow roses and reaches through the picture frame to give the flower to Fido with a blessing as he begins to fade: he pants out his sole line: “speed performs miracles.” Fido, unable to look away as he watches this man who is emblematic of all the men he loved, wanted to love, and who are now gone

³⁶⁰ Robert Burns Neveldine, “Skeletons in the Closet: Paradox, Resistance, and the Undead Body of the PWA,” *College Literature* Vol, 24 no. 1 (February 1997)

³⁶¹ Unfortunately, *The Dog Plays* were only performed as staged readings, never in full production, so it is unclear how Chesley envisioned the appearance of Rover. In reading the text, it seems as though he hoped for a photographic image to fade within the frame and to have the actor step into the space and interact.

³⁶² Robert Chesley, *The Deploration of Rover*, in *Plays by Robert Chesley* (New York: Broadway Play Publishing, 2005)

responds: “Love performs miracles!” Rover disappears entirely as he tells Fido: “then the lover is blessed!”³⁶³ Fido is left alone before an empty memorial, holding a flower. The moment that he ached for has passed and once again he is left alone.

Hold

The last of *The Dog Plays*, *Hold*, is a play about ghosts and a play that functions as a ghost, in the Derridean sense of hauntology: “in the theatre of memory...the dead speak to the living...Jacques Derrida coins the term ‘hauntology’ to describe ‘a logic of haunting’ in which ‘a specter is always a revenant. One cannot control its comings and goings because it begins by coming back’³⁶⁴ *Hold*, is about ghosts and the impact that their specters have upon the living. The presence of the ghosts Chesley has captured within this text are the spirits of a generation of gay male San Franciscans dead before their time from AIDS. They are brought forth by the act of the reader or the embodied performance of an actor on the stage. The memories, and feelings, of the forgotten—gay men whose experiences were lost with their deaths—haunt the play. By engaging with the archive, the available text of the play *Hold*, the spirits whose presences are intangible within the repertoire are transmitted to a new generation who can sense their presence. In this way Chesley has created a play that is both haunted and haunting.

Hold is set in Dog’s San Francisco apartment.³⁶⁵ Dog stands and looks out of his window. Behind Dog, in bed, sits Lad. There is no expository information given about their relationship—one assumes that they are lovers, but it is clear that something is ‘off’

³⁶³ Ibid

³⁶⁴ Jacques Derrida, *Specters of Marx*, trans. Bernd Magnus and Stephen Cullenberg (New York: Routledge, 1994) quoted in Timothy Raphael, “Mo(u)rning in America: Hamlet, Reagan, and the Rights of Memory,” *Theatre Journal*, Vol. 59, no. 1, 2007

³⁶⁵ The Dog character in *Hold* bears no relation to the Dog character within the previous play. It is unclear why Chesley reused the same generic names. I would speculate that the use of these almost cliché common dog names was done in order to highlight the everyman quality of the characters.

regarding their interaction. Lad begins talking about a dream. Dog inquires, in what seems to be an odd question, if that is Lad he hears. Lad laughs and tells Dog “It always was.”³⁶⁶ Dog urges Lad to continue describing his dream. While Lad speaks to Dog directly, Dog neither looks at nor directs his comments to Lad. In the dream Lad has driven out of the city, heading north, to find clarity, air, and the stars.

I'm standing on a rock, a great rock, and all around me are the mountains, on all sides...The air is so pure ...It is unbelievably clear...So clear the first stars are out before the rim of the sun slips behind the mountains! They air is thin, sharp! And the stars, then! Dog, Dog! You should see! I've never seen stars like these...But there's more, Dog: something wonderful happens, but it's something that must be. It's why I needed to be free, it's why I needed this infinite space.³⁶⁷

As Lad exalts the freedom he has found, Dog undresses but continues to not look at, or interact with, Lad. Lad concludes his dream with a tearful, ecstatic vision of what he had found on the mountain:

Oh God, at last! At last! My brothers! My brothers are there! Standing by me on that mountain! They are there! Their deaths in the city, their deaths were too many, far too many; the terror was too great...Even through years and years of their deaths, day by day, I could not comprehend, could not see! These are the men I've loved, and now they stand beside me on that rock! I know each one!³⁶⁸

The conclusion of Lad's speech, combined with Dog's question about his presence and his inability to look at him, reveals the truth about this 'dream.' Lad has not awoken from a vision—Lad is revealing what he has seen because Lad has died. Dog is being haunted by the spirit of his dead lover. Performance studies scholars Benjamin Powell and Tracy Stephenson Shaffer, borrowing from post-structuralist theorist Jacques Derrida, articulate an idea of 'ghost' that I find relevant to the Lad character. They write: “The ghost is not a

³⁶⁶ Robert Chesley, *Hold*, in *Plays by Robert Chesley* (New York: Broadway Play Publishing, 2005)

³⁶⁷ *Ibid*

³⁶⁸ *Ibid*

static identity, rather it haunts as a non-sensuous sensuous...the tangible intangibility of a proper body without flesh, but still the body of someone as someone other.³⁶⁹ The ghost exists although we often do not see it.”³⁷⁰

Dog does not seem surprised or afraid of Lad’s presence which the spectator can take as a sign that this act of haunting is not the first time it has occurred. Dog cannot banish Lad because Lad’s very existence is predicated upon Dog. Derrida noted that hauntology functions in two simultaneous directions.

What is important about the figure of the specter, then, is that it cannot be fully present: it has no being in itself but marks a relation to what is *no longer* or *not yet*. Provisionally, then, we can distinguish two direction in hauntology. The first refers to that which actually is (in actuality is) *no longer*, but which is still effective as a virtuality (the traumatic compulsion to repeat, a structure that repeats, a fatal pattern). The second refers to that which (in actuality) has *not yet* happened, but which *is already* effective in the virtual (an attractor, an anticipation shaping current behavior).³⁷¹ (emphasis in the original)

Lad’s specter is more than just the grieved seeing his dead lover. As Dog speaks he undresses, and the removal of his clothing reveals a body spotted with Kaposi Sarcoma lesions. Dog is just another of the ‘too many’ whose death is occurring in San Francisco. We can also read Dog and Lad within Derrida’s dual direction notion of hauntology. Lad is dead, but the trauma of his loss causes his specter to visit Dog in a re-traumatizing repetition through which Dog must grieve all over again when Lad is no longer present. Dog has not died yet, but his future is signified by the marks on his body, and Lad’s story anticipates what will occur in his near future.

³⁶⁹ Jacques Derrida, *Specters of Marx*, trans. Bernd Magnus and Stephen Cullenberg (New York: Routledge, 1994) quoted in Benjamin D. Powell and Tracy Stephenson Shaffer, “On the Haunting of Performance Studies,” *Liminalities: A Journal of Performance Studies*, Vol.5, no. 1, 2009

³⁷⁰ Ibid

³⁷¹ Mark Fisher, “What is Hauntology?” *Film Quarterly*, Vol. 66, no.1, 2012

This placement of the two men into the larger tragedy of AIDS speaks to Avery Gordon's description of haunting: "The ghost is just the sign...that tells you a haunting is taking place. The ghost is not simply a dead or missing person, but a social figure...Being haunted draws us affectively...into the structure of feeling."³⁷² Lad is but one of many gay men who have been taken away from the city by AIDS. By ostensibly writing a play about ghosts and a mourning lover, Chesley has actually created a text that spoke to the haunted city and community. The place that had once been a site of celebration has been transformed into a space of grief that is haunted by singular ghosts and a culture that was 'killed' by AIDS.

After Lad has shared his dream, Dog offers to tell a different story—the story of how Lad went away. He does not tell it to take away the beauty of Lad's vision but to share the reality of what it was like for those left behind.

So, Lad...You went away. Little trips at first, little—lapses...Confused was the term we used. No one wanted to say what we all knew...You looked awfully ill...You were not there...I hated correcting you when you were—mistaken, confused...We had no—way between us for that, and it puzzled you. Perhaps you sensed something was wrong then. I don't know...And then the next Wednesday...you went missing. With your car. Without your medications...For two days we didn't know where you were... Friday they found you...You had driven off into a ditch, and spent two days and two nights in that car. I don't know why you were still alive. They brought you back...San Francisco General. That's where you died. That's where guys are dying right now. Guy's we've both loved...Chances are, that's where I'll die, too. (*Lad comes up behind Dog and embraces him from behind*) I wish you were really here, Lad.³⁷³

Lad is visible, and finally touchable, because Dog is unwilling to let him go; the only trace of Lad's existence is in Dog's memories. The fact that Dog's grief seems to

³⁷² Joshua Gunn, "Mourning Speech: Haunting and the Spectral Voices of Nine-Eleven," *Text and Performance Quarterly*, Vol. 24, no. 2, 2004

³⁷³ Robert Chesley, *Hold*, in *Plays by Robert Chesley* (New York: Broadway Play Publishing, 2005)

evoke Lad's physical presence makes *Hold* more than a play about mourning. *Hold* is a play that is melancholic for the dead and death. Melancholic grief, which has its roots in Freudian psychoanalysis, is described as:

The curiously pleasurable experience of repetition compulsion, of moving back and forth between trauma and reflection, grief and consumption, is often described as a kind of unsuccessful mourning or melancholia...Normal mourning concerns the physical process by which an individual is able to detach himself from a loved object that has been lost...Melancholia, however, involves an identification and internalization of the lost object as a phantasmal body, a spectral consumption of the imaginary object and the consequent inability to expel or detach.³⁷⁴

The phrase 'curiously pleasurable' may seem out of place with the deep sadness of *Hold* but when one considers how the encounter between Lad and Dog is a physical embrace, albeit short-lived, it is applicable. Dog is able to touch Lad again, he cites this as one of the central things he misses. The ability to *hold* his lover creates a kind of psychic pleasure within the pain. The normal mourning process was interrupted by the cause of Lad's death. As Dog describes, Lad went away before he died. While he was still physically present, though ill, he became intangible to Dog. The aspects of his personality that made him the man Dog loved were taken by the disease. This loss before loss, as well as his own impending death, moves Dog into a state of melancholic mourning where he is unable to let go of Lad because he is driven by the desire to *hold* and to not be left alone.

Joshua Gunn, writing about the September 11th terrorist attacks, borrowed from Diana Taylor to explicate further on the role of trauma in melancholic haunting:

³⁷⁴ Joshua Gunn, "Mourning Speech: Haunting and the Spectral Voices of Nine-Eleven," *Text and Performance Quarterly*, Vol. 24, no. 2, 2004

The mournful experience of haunting seeks to move us from the embodied stuttering of the repertoire arising in traumatic experiences to the comforting past-ness and silence or archival spectatorship...Melancholic haunting, consequently, is of a different category. While it is a kind of mourning, melancholic haunting resists the work of mourning...Melancholic haunting seems to capture the pure effect of the collapse of archive and repertoire, a continuous, embodied enactment, citation, and iteration of archival traces of the lost.³⁷⁵

Dog is caught in the repertoire because his haunting and his mourning are tied to his memories. It is not a picture, a video, or even a letter that leads Dog to imagine the embodied presence of Lad.

Hold ends with Dog letting Lad go and Lad disappearing. As Dog is left alone he once again looks out the window to San Francisco General Hospital and remarks: "A short distance. Maybe only a little time."³⁷⁶ Dog is alone, marked by the stigmatic lesions which have signified him as one of the walking dead, and his only comfort is found in the knowledge that he just has to wait a little longer and then he can be reunited with his lover, friends, and community. As Lad described in his vision of 'Heaven,' he is surrounded by his brothers, all of the men he has ever loved. Dog looks towards the hospital, where all the men he has ever loved have gone, are in, or are going, without fear, but a sense of urgency. However, Dog's fatalism is not nihilism. It was a belief shared by many gay men whose lives had been defined by death during the AIDS crisis. One HIV-positive man wrote: "I don't know if I really want to get old: there's not a lot of people left in my life...I don't know what value there is in surviving for the sake of just surviving...Death might be a welcome relief from what this is, what life has become."³⁷⁷

³⁷⁵ Ibid

³⁷⁶ Robert Chesley, *Hold*, in *Plays by Robert Chesley* (New York: Broadway Play Publishing, 2005)

³⁷⁷ Steven S. Schwartzberg, "Struggling for Meaning: How HIV-Positive Men Make Sense of AIDS," *Professional Psychology: Research and Practice*, Vol. 24, no. 24, 1993

Hold was the final piece of theatre written by Robert Chesley. Within this short, six-page play, Chesley created a play that haunts and is haunting. However, when one looks at *The Dog Plays* together as an intended triptych, one can see that he created a work that functions as a historical memory play. As theatrical scholar Brian Walsh wrote:

To perform history produces an experience of pastness that highlights a sense of loss and distance, provoked by the knowledge that historical people and events, like the theatrical people and events representing them onstage, are fleeting...the people and events of the past are themselves gone and irretrievable, just as the performance will soon be.³⁷⁸

All plays that invoke historical figures or events function, in some respect, as memory plays—the very act of using history brings up memories. However, Chesley was creating this version of a historical memory play in the present time. Chesley was writing his histories of San Francisco, and his memories of people lost, as it was happening. He was not given the time, literally, for hindsight. His intent with *The Dog Plays* was not just to create works that presented the history of what happened but to create plays that spoke to the men that these events were happening to. In some ways this complicates Walsh's explanation as he speaks to distance increasing the efficacy of the performance where I would argue that *The Dog Plays* did not require this sense of space and time to impact the sense of loss or the irretrievability of those who are gone.

What ties these three plays together is the immeasurable sense of loss that permeates the texts. By archiving these three experiences of men surviving during the AIDS crisis, Chesley not only records what happened, but he imbues the texts with the spirits of those who were there. The ghosts of the repertoire are able to impart themselves on a reader or spectator, to create a new hauntology over time and distance.

³⁷⁸ Brian Walsh, "Theatrical Temporality and Historical Consciousness in 'The Famous Victories of Henry V,'" *Theatre Journal*, Vol. 59, no. 1, 2007

At the conclusion of *Hold* the song “My Old Kentucky Home, Good Night” is played. The song is a ballad about the loss of a way of life but instead of mourning for what is no longer present, it urges a celebration for what had been. The final lyrics of the first verse and the chorus reflect this emotional shift:

By'n by hard times comes a-knocking at the door,
Then my old Kentucky home, good night!
Chorus

Weep no more, my lady,
Oh weep no more today!
We will sing one song for the old Kentucky home,
For the old Kentucky home far away.³⁷⁹

The song is a summation of the three *Dog Plays*. The difficult times are at the door and the gay community must say good night, and goodbye, to both the people who have been lost but also the culture of San Francisco. However, Chesley, through Foster's lyrics, implores his brethren to not weep anymore but instead to process their grief, in *Hold* it is Dog letting go of the ghost of his lover, and to remember.

Robert Chesley's last words were written on November 7th 1990—a journal entry where he simply noted, “Vito (Russo) died today.”³⁸⁰ Chesley died on December 5th 1990 at San Francisco's Mount Zion Hospital from AIDS related complications. He was survived by his lover, Gene Weber, who would also die of AIDS related complications in October of 1992. No memorial service was held for Chesley, though a celebration of his life and work was held at Los Angeles's only dedicated gay theatre, Celebration Theatre.³⁸¹

³⁷⁹ Stephen Foster, “My Old Kentucky Home, Good Night!,” *Center for American Music Library at the University of Pittsburgh*: <http://www.pitt.edu/~amerimus/lyrics.htm>

³⁸⁰ Robert Chesley, *Personal Journals*, November 1990, Gay and Lesbian Historical Archive, San Francisco

³⁸¹ Myrna Oliver, “Robert Chesley; Wrote 1st Play on AIDS,” *Los Angeles Times*, December 10, 1990

The Dog Play's encapsulate what Chesley felt was the most important gain he had made by coming out: a community of men who loved each other. This triptych of plays marked a shift in tone as a writer. Chesley's diagnosis turned his focus from being the determined activist advocating for his hard fought rights with dark humor to a more contemplative writer reflecting on time, choices, love, and loss. Robert Chesley crafted his identity with the ideals of Gay and Sexual Liberation informing his politics and prose. *The Dog Plays* continue Chesley's belief that erotic contact was incredibly important to creating bonds amongst gay men—this is seen in each of the three texts. But, rather than having an activist intent, Chesley created this work to mourn: to mourn for the culture that had been lost, the men who were gone, and for himself. Dog's final line: "Maybe only a little time," can be read as Chesley moving into the acceptance stage of his process of both grieving and dying. Community was of utmost importance to Robert Chesley and in his final piece of writing he finds comfort knowing that the thousands of gay men who had been lost to AIDS, his community, were awaiting him.

Coda:

“Where’s the Fucking and Where’s the Sucking?”:
Hard-Core Theatre, *Queer as Folk*, and Reviving Robert Chesley

The three previous chapters have focused on contextualizing the works of Robert Chesley and arguing for his placement within the gay theatrical canon. His earlier plays explored the ideals of Gay Liberation and Sexual Liberation, movements he was deeply invested in, and his later plays addressed the AIDS crisis by focusing upon the grief felt by the dying as well as those who loved and cared for them. Chesley’s commitment to advocating for Liberation, particularly Sexual Liberation, make his play unique compared to those of his peers. Even during the AIDS crisis Chesley believed that theatre could be used to affirm that gay male sexuality was transformative, spiritual, and political—his plays stand in direct contrast to the narrative that portrayed gay sex as infectious. Even when he faced his own diagnosis, and channeled that sense of melancholy into his final play, he refused to apologize for the ecstatic sexual culture in which he participated. The plays of Robert Chesley serve as archival reminders that the theatre played a role in creating the celebratory, and community building, period of gay sexual culture that flourished between Stonewall and the AIDS crisis

The chapters in this project have focused upon situating Chesley’s texts within their historical and cultural context and how these plays deepen our understanding of the period and the culture. What has been absent, thus far, from this exploration is to consider these plays in performance. Of all the plays discussed in the central chapters of this dissertation, only two, *Night Sweats* and *Jerker*, received full productions.³⁸²

³⁸² *Night Sweats* and *Jerker* both received full productions in both New York and San Francisco. *The Dog Plays* was produced in staged readings in both cities as well as Los Angeles.

Reviews of these productions are mixed—some found the plays to be important works addressing issues not explored in other gay plays while some found them intensely problematic. The majority of review ‘clippings’ located in the archive relate to the three productions of *Night Sweats* in New York, Los Angeles, and San Francisco. While *Night Sweats* was reviewed, primarily, by the gay press it also received critical attention in the mainstream papers *Los Angeles Times* and the *Bay Area Reporter*. In briefly discussing these reviews I do not intend to focus on the critiques of the production quality (such as the acting or the sets), but instead I will focus on the response to the plays’ content in order to consider how Robert Chesley’s work was received during his lifetime. The opinions of these reviewers are, of course, purely subjective, but their commentary could offer insight into why Chesley’s plays were not greater successes.

The majority of critical attention was given to *Night Sweats* even though *Jerker* would be the greater commercial success—this in part due to *Night Sweats*’s distinction as being the first full-length play to address the AIDS crisis as well as the play’s controversial nature. Reviews addressing Chesley’s approach to ‘staging’ the AIDS crisis, are mixed but those who found the play worthy of viewing far outweighed the voices dismissing it entirely. In the “negative camp” the reviewer for the *Daily Californian*, who wrote:

A play that addresses itself to a chosen group can be as valid as one that appeals to broader audiences. However, there is a danger that in its enthusiasm for its own kind of play a gay audience...will give its seal of approval...regardless of artistic merit...*Night Sweats* may be about death or fantasies...but it certainly isn’t about the unique issues surrounding the dilemma of AIDS.³⁸³

³⁸³ “Review,” *The Daily Californian*, August 14, 1985.

The reviewer took issue with what he viewed as *Night Sweats*'s lack of artistic merit. He felt it was a badly written play and he critiqued Chesley for his lack of specificity in addressing AIDS rather than addressing the larger issues of self-acceptance and love within the play. Steve Winn, writing for the *San Francisco Chronicle*, went further and critiqued the play for trivializing the issues it purported to address. Winn stated: "There's a good gay/bad gay mentality that simplifies the issues...for all its ostensible toughness *Night Sweats* is soft-centered and soft-headed. It's alternatively preachy and palliative, rarely provocative."³⁸⁴ While these two reviews definitely castigate *Night Sweats*, the harshest review for the play was in an undated edition of *Male Review*. The critique, which is a blurb underneath a cast photo, calls Chesley's text "a broadly drawn grotesquerie which confronts most of the negative images of the 'gay lifestyle' head on and the show is incidentally sprinkled with some forceful nudity."³⁸⁵ This review simply dismissed the play as a grotesquerie featuring nudity—the irony is that at the end of this blanket rejection of the play, the magazine touts their exclusive interview with Chesley appearing in the next issue! The *Male Review* blurb also incorrectly stated that the majority of critics had disliked the play—that is simply not true. While none of Chesley's reviews are uncritical, the vast majority of reviewers did encourage their readers to see the show.

Frontiers, reviewing the Los Angeles production, believed the play was "for those who are willing to see themselves in a dark mirror without losing their humor. One may alternately laugh and cringe. But a little Kleenex is now in order, too."³⁸⁶ The *Bay Area*

³⁸⁴ Steven Winn, "Lurid Cartoon Humor In a Play About AIDS," *San Francisco Chronicle*, Undated

³⁸⁵ "Night Sweat: A Symptom of our Nightmare," *Male Review*, Undated

³⁸⁶ Justin Smith, "Night Sweat Revisited," *Frontiers*, July 31-August 7 1985

Reporter felt that the play spoke to a San Francisco audience, and dismissed New York and L.A audiences for not ‘getting it,’ when the reviewer wrote “To call an entire community, even one as amorphous as the gay community, to really love one another is a radical solution.”³⁸⁷ Jerry Douglas, reviewing the play in *Stallion*, found the play problematic as it had a rich first act but a polemical and overly sentimental second act. However, Douglas believed that if Chesley were to revisit his play and edit out the didactic nature of the play’s finale, “*Night Sweat* could easily make the transition from ghetto to mainstream theatre. Even in its present raw state, it is more than halfway to being an important work of political art.”³⁸⁸ *Coming Up!* argued that the play was the best thing to happen to San Francisco’s Theatre Rhinoceros and the reviewer concluded his essay by stating: “*Night Sweats* may shock you, outrage you, and change the way you think about AIDS and its ‘victims,’ is there any better recommendation?”³⁸⁹

Jerker became Chesley’s most produced work (productions of it continue today) and the critical response was primarily positive. Tish Dace, writing in *The Nation*, found the play to be successful, although he acknowledged the overt sexuality would prevent it from reaching the cross-over audiences seeing Hoffman’s *As Is* or Fierstein’s *Safe Sex*, both of which were reviewed in the same issue. Dace noted that the play had the potential to alienate audience members uncomfortable with the voyeuristic nature of the play’s first half (watching two men engaging in dirty talk and masturbation) but he felt that the emotional core of the play was worth waiting for. In the end he found *Jerker* to be the most emotionally moving of the three plays.³⁹⁰

³⁸⁷ R. Bluestein, “Review,” *Bay Area Reporter*, July 25 1985

³⁸⁸ Jerry Douglas, “Review,” *Stallion*, Undated

³⁸⁹ Mario Mondelli, “Review,” *Coming Up!*, August 1985

³⁹⁰ Thomas M. Disch, “Theatre,” *The Nation*, May 16 1987

Jerker's New York production took place at the Sanford Meisner theatre in Chelsea, a space that was not exclusively catering to gay audiences, and the *New York Times* reviewed the play. Stephen Holden noted that the production is a "cry of solidarity" with the San Francisco gay community being ravaged by the AIDS crisis. He notes, like Dace, that the play is not for the squeamish but he finds the argument that Chesley is presenting in *Jerker* to be of utmost importance. He wrote:

Jerker accurately bills itself as "a pornographic elegy with redeeming social value," and its gamy language and simulated autoeroticism are definitely not for squeamish tastes. But they serve a poignant purpose by pointing out, more bluntly than any other play dealing with acquired immune deficiency syndrome, how the epidemic has threatened one of the fundamental reasons for an entire group's very existence—its freedom of erotic expression—and challenged its hard-won self-esteem.³⁹¹

While Holden found the play's frank examination of how the AIDS epidemic curtailed the sexual culture to be one its selling points, Robert Julian, writing in the *San Francisco Sentinel*, found the sexuality of the piece its central problem. Julian stated:

I cannot conceive of a piece of theatre that more classically illustrates the narrow, confining, ghetto mentality...It is my observation that the male gay community's obsession with the penis has been recently replaced by a fetish for disease. *Jerker* begins with the former...and ends with the latter. In this respect, Chesley seems to be giving his audience what it wants.³⁹²

And it seems that with *Jerker* Chesley did give the audience what they wanted, no matter how much it dismayed Robert Julian. Nevertheless, while *Jerker* would continue to have more and more productions in small gay theatres across the country, it was also the last of his plays to receive a full production. The lack of production for the majority of Chesley's plays is an unknown. Reasons for why Chesley did not have these plays

³⁹¹ Stephen Holden, "Jerker on AIDS," *The New York Times*, May 1 1987

³⁹² Robert Julian, "In the Ghetto: The Art-and Philosophy- of New York's 'Gay Theatre.'" *San Francisco Sentinel* June 19 1987.

produced in his lifetime could be myriad: producers not liking the plays, producers not liking him, a lack of funding, Chesley not pursuing production, or overly complicated staging that was unrealizable. As to why Chesley's plays continue to not be produced: the primary reason is that the majority of Chesley's plays are unpublished and/or unknown. One of the goals of this project is to lead theatre artists to Robert Chesley as his work continues to resonate in its exploration of relationships, politics, and sexual expression. Chesley's belief in bringing the tenets of Sexual Liberation to the stage, and the potential issues surrounding the way in which Chesley's insisted on highlighting erotic (or, as some would argue, pornographic) representations are the focus of this coda. Accordingly, I am interested in raising two rhetorical lines of query related to Chesley's erotic representations. The first concerns Chesley's staging of erotic behavior during his lifetime. Did Chesley's ideal staging blend high and low art, namely theatre and the pornographic? Or should we consider his plays erotic art—and how does that differentiation matter? The second line of inquiry considers Chesley's work through a contemporary lens. How has an audience's reception of explicit gay male sex changed in the decades since Chesley's death? Could this shift in acceptability mean Chesley's plays could be produced?

Before discussing these queries further, it is necessary to clarify specific terms. In particular, it is important to explain how I am distinguishing pornography from erotic performance and what is meant by referencing high and low art. In viewing theatre as 'high art' I am following the line of classification that Jill Dolan noted, but did not agree with, in her essay "Geographies of Learning: Theatre Studies, Performance, and the Performative" where she described how the emergence of cultural studies and its interest

in 'low art,' such a pornography, has situated theatre, and its focus on the canon and commercialization, into the realm of 'high art.'³⁹³ Robert Allen, a distinguished American Studies scholar, wrote that theatre has become high art because:

The potentially subversive qualities of the theatre have been obscured in modern times by its full incorporation into mainstream, middle-class culture: theatre is taught in universities and kept alive as a cultural phenomenon by government grants.³⁹⁴

While I reject Allen's dismissal that theatre lives only due to the resuscitative power of government grants I include his statement on the 'high art' status of theatre because it speaks to how Chesley's work could once again subvert expectations and make us reconsider, as Dolan wanted, theatre's place in the high/low debate. On the opposite side of this slippery dichotomy is 'low art,' which includes pornography but has also included cinema, television, and mass market fiction.³⁹⁵

The question of 'what is pornography?' is incredibly complicated. In discussing the plays of Robert Chesley the question is about distinguishing pornography from the erotic and in which genre do these plays fit. Jerrold Levinson, a philosophy and aesthetics scholar elucidated five insights regarding the erotic and the pornographic in art. Two of these distinctions are of particular significance:

pornography has a paramount aim, namely, the sexual satisfaction of the viewer, erotic art, even if it also aims at sexual satisfaction on some level, includes other aims of significance...whereas we *appreciate* (or relish) erotic art, we *consume* (or use) pornography...our interactions with erotic art and pornography are fundamentally different in character.³⁹⁶

³⁹³ Jill Dolan, "Geographies of Learning: Theatre Studies, Performance, and the" Performative," *Theatre Journal* 1993

³⁹⁴ Robert Allen, *Horrible Prettiness: Burlesque and American Culture* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1991) quoted in Jill Dolan, "Geographies of Learning: Theatre Studies, Performance, and the" Performative," *Theatre Journal* 1993

³⁹⁵ Jill Dolan, "Geographies of Learning: Theatre Studies, Performance, and the" Performative," *Theatre Journal* 1993. Since Dolan published this essay I would argue that the line between high and low has become even more blurred with the golden age of television—can we say that *The Wire* and *NCIS* are on equal footing in terms of cultural significance just because both are produced for television?

³⁹⁶ Jerrold Levinson, "Erotic art and Pornographic Pictures," *Philosophy and Literature* 29, no. 1, 2005

Pornography's main function is to arouse the viewer, or reader, to orgasm—it has not function beyond its use as a sexual aide. The erotic, per Levinson, is arousing *and*...The *and* is significant as it can refer to the educational, entertaining, horrifying, hilarious, etc...The erotic within the art is but one facet of the experience. There is a distinction to be made between pornography and works that feature elements of the pornographic. That adds a further layer of depth to considering Chesley's plays in performance. Linda Williams, in her seminal exploration of pornography *Hard Core: Power, Pleasure and the Frenzy of the Visible*, cited as the two most important features of the hard-core. The 'frenzy of the visible' and the 'money shot.' Williams described the thrill of pornography as being the desire to see as much as possible with regards to human sexual behavior. The frenzy of maximum visibility centers on seeing what is typically not seen during sex—the orgasm. Seeing the ejaculating penis is the goal of hard-core pornography. The 'money shot' (referred to as such because, ostensibly, that is the moment the audience has paid to see), is the scene of the penis ejaculating onto someone or something—the visibility of semen is of utmost importance to the climax of hard-core pornography created for heterosexual and gay male audiences.³⁹⁷

The question regarding Chesley's plays is: are his plays pornography or are they erotic theatre that incorporated elements of the pornographic? I am arguing that they are the latter. If we consider *Jerker*, one of the two Chesley plays to be staged during his life and the one play that is occasionally still produced, we can see how Chesley blended aspects of the pornographic into an erotic, but still high art, theatre experience. *Jerker's*

³⁹⁷ Linda Williams, *Hard Core: Power, Pleasure and the Frenzy of the Visible* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989). Expanded Paperback Edition, 1999

early scenes are incredibly erotic as the two characters describe, in detail, the sexual experience they are imagining—and there is an additional layer of titillation for the audience as they watch the men performing masturbation onstage. However, later scenes are intended to arouse the audience to anger and then pathos. The intention of Chesley, with *Jerker* is to create a play, and a production, that is both arousing and emotionally resonant.

Robert Chesley was not alone in creating scenes of gay sexual expression for the stage. During the same period in which Chesley was writing Harvey Fierstein's *Torch Song Trilogy* featured a comic pantomime, albeit fully-clothed, of an anonymous sexual encounter and Martin Sherman's Holocaust drama *Bent*, produced on Broadway in 1980, had a graphic sex scene between two men that occurred entirely in dialogue as the two characters were unable to touch each other.

Where Robert Chesley differed so radically from his contemporaries is that his plays were both erotic and pornographic in their approach to staging gay male sexuality—including erections, bondage, and ejaculation. The most explicit example of Chesley's sexual staging occurs in *Come Again*. Chesley's text called for the three sexual elements, erections, bondage, and ejaculation, within this one play.

Come Again is a non-traditional narrative—a series of vignettes dealing with themes of sex, love, and freedom. The play opens with a bondage scene—one of the characters is mummified until another character enters, unbinds him, and then masturbates him onstage. In a later scene one of the men performs a striptease that concludes with him totally nude and then masturbating, ejaculating on the stage. As he is performing another character is directed to sit amongst the audience and masturbate, but

not orgasm, during the dance. Another scene has two men engaged in a ‘dirty’ phone call, with one of the actors in a phone booth set, and the scene concludes with one of the men ejaculating onto the glass of the booth. If we imagine these scenes in performance they encapsulate what Williams described as the central features of the hard-core genre—the visibility of both the erection and the male orgasm. *Come Again* should not, however, be categorized as pornography.

Come Again was not simply about presenting live masturbatory material—the play had a greater message and sought to arouse the audience to activism as well. The play’s vignettes culminate in the characters calling the gay men in the audience to stand up for the sexuality they have seen onstage and experienced *offstage*—to fight against the forces seeking to curb sexual liberties. Using sex to drive forward a message is what made Chesley a playwright who used the elements of hard-core to create Gay Sexual Liberationist theatre. Chesley used eroticism to titillate, arouse, entertain, and ultimately communicate an ideal to an audience—that is what makes *Come Again* erotic art that utilized pornographic imagery and not pornography.

Chesley’s integration of hard-core elements may have played a role in the lack of production for so many of his works. The frenzy of the visible that is seen in his plays made his works problematic for the time in which he was writing. First, plays such as *Come Again* were written during the height of the AIDS crisis when bodily fluids, semen in particular, connoted contagion as well as pleasure. Secondly, the performance of live sex acts hindered the type of theatres where Chesley could have his plays staged—and the performance of live, gay, sex acts further complicated where he could have his works produced. Even the Theatre Rhinoceros, where he had staged *Night Sweats* and *Jerker*—

both of which featured hard-core scenes—would not stage *Come Again*. The theatre had taken funding support from the National Endowment for the Arts.³⁹⁸ The conservative political climate had chilled funding for art and theatre and the AIDS crisis had led to intense scrutiny of any artistic representation of sex between men or hard-core pornography.³⁹⁹ The Rhino's rejection of Chesley's later works was due, Chesley believed, to his continued celebration of gay sex onstage.⁴⁰⁰

If the hard-core eroticism of Chesley's plays played a role in his inability to have his works produced by theatre companies, then another question arises: could his work be performed *now*? I would argue that yes, they could, because both gay and mainstream culture have evolved. Part of this shift is due to the AIDS crisis, amongst gay men, as being perceived as a manageable disease rather than a decimating plague. When Chesley was writing his plays the AIDS crisis, and preventing infection, was consuming the gay community—and this was reflected in the art being produced. Robert Chesley was carrying the banner for a cause that had been lost—the continuation of the gay sexual culture.

In the decades after Chesley's death there has been a long, and slow, evolution in how gay men's sexuality was represented and that has finally led to resurgence in cultural texts that feature sex between men. Film, television, and theatre had struggled with honest depictions of gay men in romantic relationships—in particular with how to portray

³⁹⁸ Erik L MacDonald, "Theatre Rhinoceros: A Gay Company." *TDR* Vol. 33, no. 1 (1989)

³⁹⁹ For an in-depth exploration of the censorship of gay and lesbian art by the NEA see Tim Miller and David Román, "Preaching to the Converted," *Theatre Journal* Vol. 47, no. 2 (1995)

⁴⁰⁰ Robert Chesley, "Gay Theater for the 90s." Unpublished Essay. Copy in The Gay and Lesbian Historical Archive, San Francisco

love scenes.⁴⁰¹ At the time Chesley was writing there were attempts to unflinchingly depict gay men loving each other, like the 1982 film *Making Love*. That film was stymied by trying to show same-sex lovemaking that both straights and gay could watch while simultaneously trying to be “an important movie.”⁴⁰² Subsequently, the filmmakers approached this perceived challenge by showing two men kissing passionately—and then a cutting-away to them in bed after the presumed sex act had concluded. Anecdotal accounts had members of the straight audience walking out, booing, or throwing things at the screen when the kiss occurred. In contrast, gay audiences were left wondering what happened to the love scene they were promised?⁴⁰³ Another ‘80s film, *Cruising* (1981), was a murder mystery set in the world of gay leather and sadomasochism. It turned off gay audiences in its depiction of gay men as either predators or sissies, and censors severely limited what director William Friedkin could show which made the film narratively muddled.⁴⁰⁴ Throughout the 1980s and 1990s, gay love scenes, and sex scenes, were explored in independent cinema but remained elusive in the mainstream.

The shift in representing gay men as sexual beings happened, in part, in the theatre with the works of, for example, Terrence McNally, with *Love! Valour! Compassion!* and *Corpus Christi*, and Paul Rudnick, with *Jeffrey* and *The Most Fabulous Story Ever Told*.

⁴⁰¹ Larry Kramer cites this discomfort with portraying two men in a physical relationship as one of the central reasons why it took so long to create a film adaptation of *The Normal Heart*. Barbra Streisand purchased the rights after the play’s premiere but it took almost thirty years to create an adaptation. Kramer, in celebrating the 2014 HBO film, critiqued Streisand and stated that her uneasiness in seeing two men in a sexual embrace was the reason they were unable to work together on a film. Patrick Healy, “A Lion Still Roars, With Gratitude,” *New York Times*, May 21 2014

⁴⁰² Vito Russo, *The Celluloid Closet: Homosexuality in the Movies* (New York: Harper & Row, 1981)

⁴⁰³ Ibid

⁴⁰⁴ Hollywood folklore held that Friedkin had to cut 40 minutes of sexually explicit material from the film in order to receive MPAA approval, and distribution. In 2013 actor/director James Franco “re-imagined” this lost footage in the independent drama *Interior Leather Bar*. The film explores the notion of what can be shown before a film crosses into pornography as well as what it means for actors of different sexualities to negotiate boundaries when real sex acts are being performed on camera. See James Franco and Travis Matthews, *Interior Leather Bar*, DVD, Strand Releasing, 2013; For information about the response to *Cruising* see Vito Russo, *The Celluloid Closet: Homosexuality in the Movies* (New York: Harper & Row, 1981)

But texts that have aimed to present the explicit eroticism, as Chesley, have primarily been seen in film and television. A noted change in how the lives, and sex lives, of gay men were explored occurred with the 1999 premiere of the premium cable series *Queer as Folk*. The explicitness of *Queer as Folk* represented a major change in the visibility of gay sex in a cultural text which had crossover appeal to both the gay community and the mainstream. Acclaimed novelist Andrew Holleran wrote, upon the premiere airing of *Queer as Folk*: “You’d never know it watching *Queer as Folk*...but for a long time this country was unnerved by the problem of making a film about homosexuality...not to mention the sheer uncertainty of just what America would allow when it came to depicting gay sex.”⁴⁰⁵ Only a decade after Chesley’s death, *Queer as Folk* was produced on a major premium cable channel. Showtime, the channel which aired the series, had a unique advantage in what it could present to the audience—premium cable is not subject to FCC (Federal Communications Commission) regulations.⁴⁰⁶ Because of the freedom of pay cable the show was able to feature scenes of nudity, public sex, masturbation, oral sex, analingus, and anal penetration. Ron Cowen and Daniel Lipman (the series creators and longtime writing and romantic partners), wrote:

Queer as Folk...gave us an arena in which to portray people as they’ve never been portrayed before. As the very first line in the very first episode states, ‘the thing you need to know is, it’s all about sex.’” For gay people that’s especially true. And not just about having it...Celebrating it, instead of being ashamed, fearful, condemned, punished. ...Unfortunately, in our culture...

⁴⁰⁵ Andrew Holleran, “A Brief History of a Media Taboo,” *The Gay and Lesbian Review Worldwide* Vol. 8, no. 2 (April 30, 2001)

⁴⁰⁶ Pornography, which falls under the obscenity classification is a line that has still not been crossed by premium cable, primarily due to their reliance on major cable companies offering their channels. See: <http://www.fcc.gov/guides/obscenity-indecency-profanity-faq>. The MPAA, whose ratings apply to film (but their guidelines are often reflected in how televisions is rated) considers a scene X-rated, or pornographic, if arousal is visible. Because women’s arousal is not so obvious this is, partially, responsible for the disparity of female to male nudity on premium cable. The one notable exception was when premium cable aired the documentary *Inside Deep Throat* which aired the climactic scene without censorship.

behavior is limited in its depiction... We must be polite. Close the bedroom doors. It's nobody's business. But not on QAF... QAF is intended as a celebration of gay life. We made an early decision never to moralize or judge our characters or their world.⁴⁰⁷

There are three major differences between the sex depicted on *Queer as Folk* and the sex Chesley sought to stage. First, there is a difference between having an actor perform a choreographed sex act and asking the actor to actually penetrate, stimulate a fellow actor, or self-stimulate to orgasm. However, the camera, and its ability to frame what the spectator sees, allows the viewer to take in more of the sex acts being performed as it fills the screen. The second distinction between the works of Chesley and *Queer as Folk* is liveness—no matter how erotic Brian and Justin's sex scenes may appear, the mechanically reproduced nature of the image cannot offer the same experience of watching Chesley's characters engage each other live while surrounded by fellow spectators. The third difference between Robert Chesley's theatrical texts and *Queer as Folk* is the latter's mediatized existence. Performance Studies scholar Philip Auslander, who has written extensively on liveness and mediatization, argued that "whether the image conveyed... is live or recorded... its production as televisual image occurs only in the present moment."⁴⁰⁸ Even though one can go back and re-watch *Queer as Folk* via DVD or re-airings viewing a television show cannot capture the ephemeral nature of live performance.

However, the significant role that the internet has played in changing how television is watched, how interactive comment streams, bulletin boards, and fandom spaces, does mean that television can incorporate an element of liveness, albeit

⁴⁰⁷ Paul Ruditis, *Queer as Folk: The Book*, (New York: Pocket Books, 2003)

⁴⁰⁸ Philip Auslander, "Ontology vs. History: On Making Distinctions Between Live and Mediatized Performance," Third Annual Performance Studies Conference, Atlanta, GA, April 1997.

mediatized liveness. This is especially evident when considering *Queer as Folk*—and is why, in part, why I cite this show as potentially signifying that there may be an audience for Chesley's plays. While the online community surrounding *Queer as Folk* are not the focus of this dissertation section, the issues and dynamics it highlights speak further to liveness in relation to viewing a television show. *Queer as Folk* ceased its production before the explosion of real-time social media like Twitter, Facebook, and Tumblr—all platforms that have transformed how shows are experienced by bringing together the audience into a live conversation as they watch alone at home. However, *Queer as Folk* was a presence on pop culture message boards, including Television Without Pity and Yahoo Groups.⁴⁰⁹ These boards were not 'real-time' but they did function as live interactions between oneself and other spectators.

Queer as Folk, as a television show, was both a reproducible text and it existed within the context of an online culture who brought an aspect of mediatized liveness to the show. What links *Queer as Folk* to considering Chesley's works being produced today is the notion of an audience. Robert Chesley was creating theatre for a gay audience but he never explicitly stated that he had no interest in seeing his works performed in a commercial 'cross-over' theatre—the sexual explicitness of his plays albeit guaranteed he could not find that success in the early 1980s. He wanted to stage men masturbating themselves, and each other, in full view of the audience—and this was during the same cultural moment where *Making Love* was being jeered for showing two

⁴⁰⁹ I would be remiss I did not share that I was a member of such a group—a group dedicated to discussing, promoting, and creating culture texts celebrating the Brian/Justin relationship within the show. At the beginning of the second season there was, for this segment of the fandom, a pivotal moment in the characters relationship. The moderators of the group, and a group of members, raised funds and had flowers delivered to the creators and writers of the series to thank them for having these two characters 'make love,' rather than 'have sex.' One could think of this as the mediatized version of providing the playwright/composer/conductor/lead actor flowers during the curtain call.

men kissing. *Queer as Folk* was sold as a show for a gay audience—Showtime advertised heavily at Pride events and in the gay media—but it found its largest audience amongst heterosexual women. The same audience that watched *Queer as Folk*, and created a fan culture around certain couples in the show, may be a sign that Chesley's audience is out there. Chesley's used erotic theatre to advocate for the ideals of Sexual Liberation in a changing gay culture. *Queer as Folk* had a similar purpose—to present gay characters whose lives were focused on pleasure rather than politics.

Belinda Cossman, a Canadian Law Professor writing about sexual citizenship, described *Queer as Folk* thusly:

Queer as Folk follows the sexual exploits of five gay men who are unapologetically eroticized. They have sex—lots of it—with many sexual partners. They are pleasure seekers—sex and drugs and the throbbing beat of techno-pop...It is a story about sexual difference, about bodies saturated with sex, and about the difference that this sex makes.⁴¹⁰

To this end, in the first sex scene between Brian and Justin (characters who would emerge as the most popular couple on the series), *Queer as Folk* set the tone for the way it would routinely present over-the-top and unflinching sex between men, and unapologetically sexualize the male body for the audience's consumption. Without any sort of conversation between the two characters, Brian strips off his clothes, presenting his fully nude body to the camera. Although the framing prevents us from seeing his genitals, he douses himself in water, and voraciously kisses Justin. The scene then cuts to the two men in bed, both completely nude, with Brian straddling and masturbating Justin (although the genitals are unseen) the hand gestures and facial responses between the men clearly indicate what act is being performed). The depiction of anal sex between

⁴¹⁰ Brenda Cossman, "Sexing Citizenship, Privatizing Sex," *Citizenship Studies* Vol. 6, no. 4 (2002)

men has long been a taboo—even Chesley’s plays rarely feature anal intercourse—but at the end of the premiere episode of *Queer as Folk* the taboo was not only broached but fully breached. Brian and Justin, back in bed, explicitly demonstrate for American audiences what two men do in bed together. First, Brian educates Justin by introducing him to rimming (anilingus); the two then assume a missionary position with Brian on top with Justin’s legs over his shoulders. Justin rolls a condom onto Brian’s penis and then the two engage in sweaty, noisy, enthusiastic penetrative anal sex. Several episodes later a more explicit representation of anal sex, featuring these two characters, appeared. The camera pans through Brian’s apartment and finds Brian and Justin having sex—Justin is on all fours as Brian kneels behind him. This scene was not only one of the most explicit of the show’s first season but an extended, more graphic, version of the scene was included as a bonus feature on the DVD!⁴¹¹ *Queer as Folk* threw down the gauntlet in terms of how gay sex could be represented in cultural texts. Sheri Manuel wrote:

Graphic sexuality is politically strategic in so far as empowering queer sex; relegating it not to silence and invisibility, but to the foreground as desired object. In its uninhibited and uncensored characterizations, it stimulates the symbolic consumption of homosexual sex through homoerotic voyeurism of what was previously invisible in the mainstream.
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The in-your-face presentation of gay male sexual behavior on *Queer as Folk* combined with the live and interactive internet culture that spawned from the show’s airing created a community of participatory spectators. This show not only represented a paradigm shift

⁴¹¹ *Queer as Folk*, “Smells Like Codependence,” episode 7 [season 1, episode 7], January 28, 2001

⁴¹² Sheri L. Manuel, “Becoming the Homovoyeur: Consuming Homosexual Representation in *Queer as Folk*,” *Social Semiotics* Vol. 10, no.3 (September 2009)

in how gay male sexuality was represented on television.⁴¹³ It is true that live theatre and television are completely different forms with different strategies—in part, television has to try to reach the widest audience possible in order to justify its production costs.

Theatre, on the other hand, is more segmented in terms of appeal. There are gay theatres, such as the Theatre Rhinoceros, that produce works intended to reach a gay audience—if there is cross-over interest that is a bonus, not a necessity. However, the diverse audience that watched *Queer as Folk*, and created an interactive fan culture, does speak to how the acceptance of erotic gay texts has grown since Chesley was seeking to mount productions of his work. This shift in representation, as well as how the AIDS crisis has lessened, are why this is the moment to reconsider Robert Chesley.

The goal of this project has been to explore the cultural and historical context of Robert Chesley's plays and, in doing so, argue that he has a place within the gay theatrical canon. Chesley's works reflect the history of gay male sexual culture in the period from 1978-1989, but they also provide the other side of the debate over Sexual Liberation and the AIDS crisis—a debate where anti-sex voices like Larry Kramer have been privileged. The chapters in this project focused upon specific themes found within the plays of Robert Chesley: Gay Liberation, Sexual Liberation, the grief of AIDS, and the staging of gay male sex onstage. Through these chapters I hope to formally situate Robert Chesley as a significant voice for post-Stonewall Liberationist ideals and a champion of the pre-AIDS gay sexual culture. In doing so, I have revealed how reading

⁴¹³ Since *Queer as Folk* ended its run in 2005 gay sex scenes have become far more common on premium cable and even network series. The most recent show to feature explicit gay sex is HBO's series *Looking* set in contemporary San Francisco. Network television recently broke new ground in featuring gay sex with the ABC series *How To Get Away With Murder*. The pilot episode featured two men passionately kissing and then one of the men performing analingus on his partner is heavily implied.

the works of Robert Chesley in their historical and cultural context allows us to see a gap that has traditionally existed in theatre history narratives regarding the contemporary gay male theatre canon. By highlighting Chesley's role in the creation of gay-themed theatrical works, I hope to help fill this gap and expand our understanding of gay male theatre during the period of 1978-1989.

Appendix

Title: *Hell, I Love You*

Year: 1979

Availability: Unpublished—available in Robert Chesley's archive at the San Francisco Gay and Lesbian Historical Archive

Actor Requirements: Two men, mid-thirties. It is noted that Nicholas is to wear his keys on the left and Sammy is to wear his keys on the right. This establishes that Nicholas is the sexually dominant partner while Sammy is the submissive.

Setting: An apartment in the San Francisco Tenderloin neighborhood.

Production History: Produced at the Theatre Rhinoceros in 1980

The play is a conversation between two lovers, Sammy and Nicholas, in their San Francisco apartment. Nicholas is depressed and Sammy is frustrated because when Nicholas is depressed he won't talk to him. Sammy's constant refrain throughout their conversation is that he loves Nicholas but he is miserable with his life in San Francisco: he has no friends, when Nicholas is depressed he shuts Sammy out, and their decision to be monogamous means Sammy misses the intimacy he has in connecting with strangers. He mentions his past relationships with Kevin and Ellie, and notes that always made sure Sammy felt loved, and he does not receive the same assurances from Nicholas. Nicholas tells Sammy to return to New York, that he cannot offer Sammy what he needs, Sammy refuses, once again reiterating that he loves Nicholas. Sammy reflects that he misses having sex with different people, though he loves sex with Nicholas, and he notes that he gave up this need to be with Nicholas. He then changes the subject and explains that he saw Vito at a meeting to organize protests against Cruising. He talks about chatting with Vito about making a gay positive film, that Vito loved the idea. Then Sammy bursts into tears because Vito sensed that he was miserable, that all of his friends from New York know that he is miserable. As he has been sobbing, Nicholas has been undressing

Sammy. As Sammy once again tells Nicholas that he loves him, Nicholas leads Sammy offstage into the bedroom.

Title: *A Christmas Card*

Year: 1980

Availability; Unpublished—available in Robert Chesley's archive at the San Francisco Gay and Lesbian Historical Archive

Actor Requirements: Al, a gay man in his mid-thirties; Richard, a 'hunky,' gay man, age not specified; the Virgin Mary (unclear whether the role is to be played by a woman or a man in drag); Mrs. Greenfell, very elderly and small.

Setting: A candlelit bedroom in San Francisco's Tenderloin neighborhood

Production History: Unclear. Amongst Chesley's papers were 2 photographs from a production but neither photo had any identifying information regarding the location or date.

The play opens with Richard and Al in bed together. Richard is jerking Al off, telling him to shoot his load on Richard's face. When Al climaxes, Richard leans over so the ejaculate hits his face, he then rubs Al's penis all over his face. The two start laughing, kissing, and hugging. The two settle into bed and wish each other a Merry Christmas. The two make jokes about the room smelling like ham when Al explains that the lube smells like cloves. Al then starts discussing how the lubricant is advertised as 'ultra-pure' and he wonders what they mean—does that mean other types of lubricants are less than pure? Al then wonders about tainted food and drinks, but then he realizes he should not be so concerned considering that he kisses and licks the asses of strangers. He then takes the moment to tell Richard his name, but Richard has fallen asleep. He wishes him Merry Christmas and thanks him for the sex. As he sits and lights a cigarette the Virgin Mary walks in whistling Ave Maria. All of her lines, though appearing as text in the script, are to be whistled and mimed. The two introduce themselves to each other but when the Virgin Mary begins to call Al 'my child' he stops her. He is not her child, he does not abide by any religion that preaches against being gay or enjoying sex and his soul is no one's business. The Virgin Mary asks him to think of his sins but Al tells her to think of her own sins, or God's sins, he then tells her to visit his neighbor Mrs. Greenfell.

Al tells her that Mrs. Greenfell is alone, poor, and semi-invalid. When Al rescued her after a fall he had to listen to her moan in pain and complain about the ‘colored’ girl who was supposed to look after her. He explains to the Virgin Mary that everyone has their decent side and their foul side—even God—and until God makes a difference in his life, he will worship people’s decent sides. When the Virgin Mary tries to appeal to Al with a religious ditty, he is still unmoved. Finally, the Virgin Mary gives up, produces a rubber chicken from under her robe, and disappears. Al mockingly calls it a miracle to be consecrated and falls asleep next to Richard. As they sleep, Mrs. Greenfell enters and stares at them. She points out that in a few decades they will shrivel up and die; ashes to ashes. As she turns to leave she states that her son did not even send her a card this year, but what does a Christmas card once a year even mean?

Title: *Home*

Year: 1981

Availability: Unpublished—available in Robert Chesley's archive at the San Francisco Gay and Lesbian Historical Archive

Actor Requirements: Two men, mid-thirties. Setting: An apartment in the San Francisco Tenderloin neighborhood.

Production History: Never produced. Intended to be incorporated into a larger play that would serve as a sequel to *Hell, I Love You*.

Home opens with Nicholas alone, reading. Sammy enters the scene, the two greet each other, but then Nicholas returns to his book. Sammy is upset that Nicholas does not ask where he has been or what he has done—that if he had it would mean that he cared. Nicholas responds that he does care but that Sammy can take care of himself. Sammy tells Nicholas he has been wandering the streets for two days and that if Nicholas cared he would have come looking for him. Nicholas points out that he assumed Sammy wanted to be alone; Sammy replies that that is Nicholas's modus operandi. Sammy explains that he came home yesterday but Nicholas was not home. Nicholas had gone to the wine country with friends and had had a good time. Sammy is angered that Nicholas was not home waiting, that if the roles were reversed he would not have gone on a day trip, he would have waited at home to see if his lover needed him. Nicholas wants to know why Sammy is so angry; Sammy responds that the letter he received was a kick in the teeth. Nicholas calmly responds that he simply does not know if they can live together. Sammy tells him that coming home yesterday was a test that Nicholas failed; Nicholas refuses to be guilt tripped. Sammy realizes that Nicholas does not understand just what he has done—Sammy explains that he has spent a year trying to make the relationship work and that when Nicholas was faced with having to acknowledge his lover's needs he threw a tantrum. Nicholas accuses Sammy of wanting to end the

relationship but using their fight to paint Nicholas as a convenient scapegoat. Nicholas gives Sammy another letter to read—Sammy does so, silently, on the bed.

As he reads he begins to sob and when he finishes the letter he weeps and refuses to let Nicholas touch him. Nicholas apologizes but Sammy tells him to fuck off. Nicholas picks up his book, lies on the bed, and starts reading. Sammy stares for a minute and then begins hitting Nicholas. Nicholas leaps up and punches Sammy, knocking him to the floor. Sammy gets up, calling Nicholas a shit, grabs the two letters and exits. Nicholas resumes reading on the bed. Sammy reenters, looking the same as he had at his first entrance, stares at Nicholas and calls him ‘a complete shit.’ He exits and Nicholas puts his head on the pillow and sobs.

Title: *Fuck*

Year: 1981

Availability: Unpublished—available in Robert Chesley's archive at the San Francisco Gay and Lesbian Historical Archive

Actor Requirements: Two men, mid-thirties. Setting: An apartment in the San Francisco Tenderloin neighborhood.

Production History: Never produced. Intended to be incorporated into a larger play that would serve as a sequel to *Hell, I Love You*

Fuck is set in the same apartment. The scene opens with Nicholas fucking Sammy and jerking him off. The two come together and they lay there, Nicholas still inside Sammy. Nicholas welcomes him home and tells him he belongs here. Sammy takes a long while to respond and he tells Nicholas that he doesn't know if he belongs here, or anywhere. Sammy pulls away and states that whether they love each other doesn't matter, that maybe they are wrong together, that they make each other wrong. Nicholas wonders if Sammy will ever forgive him for the letter. As Sammy gets out of the bed and cleans himself off he explains that he is not holding the letter against Nicholas, he is agreeing with him. Nicholas pulls him back into bed and they both say that they love each other. Sammy says their love for each other makes everything worse, they are both in limbo. Sammy tells Nicholas that their upcoming separation will be good for them, and when they both return to San Francisco, they can decide on their future. Nicholas tells Sammy that he wants his forgiveness and his love, Sammy admits that Nicholas confuses him. Nicholas tells Sammy 'I do.' Sammy tells him that they'll see. The lights fade as they stare at each other.

Title: *A Dog's Life*

Year: 1981

Availability: Unpublished—available in Robert Chesley's archive at the San Francisco Gay and Lesbian Historical Archive

Actor Requirements: One man, Manny, no age or identifying information.

Setting: A park bench in New York City.

Production History: In 1981, *A Dog's Life* was produced as one play within "City Pieces" by the Chelsea Gay Association Theatre Project in New York. The only surviving copy is a rough draft, complete with scratched out edits and additions.

A Dog's Life opens with Manny seated on a Central Park bench, at his side is a sealed container. He watches the joggers and comments on their looks. He then holds back tears as he announces, to no one, that this is it. He starts speaking to his Dog, K-Y, whose remains are in the container, about how much he will miss him, how much he envied his ability to be so loving, and how he envies that dogs can hump in public with no one threatening to bash them. He gets choked up remembering how cute K-Y was, how sweet, and how life without him seems a little less joyful. He remembers the good times with K-Y and his former boyfriend Ralph, and now both have left him. Manny cries but then gets up and carries the carton to the park's Rambles to spread the ashes. As he walks away he realizes he should get another dog, to keep the faith.

Title: *April First*

Year: 1982

Availability: Unpublished—available in Robert Chesley’s archive at the San Francisco Gay and Lesbian Historical Archive

Actor Requirements: Three actors. Kevin is described as mid-thirties, “tall, alarmingly thin, and bearded;” Sammy is thirty-nine wearing butch drag but is neither super masculine nor feminine; Len is “good-looking, in his early thirties.”

Setting: An apartment in New York’s city’s Saint Mark’s Place.

Production History: No production history

April First begins with Kevin, nude, lying on the sofa bed in his New York apartment. He is woken by the buzzer and he opens the door to let in Sammy, who is carrying luggage. The two greet each other warmly but the happy moment is dimmed when Kevin asks when Sammy is moving ‘out there,’ to San Francisco. Sammy talks about how he wants to move, how New York does not offer him the chance for peace, but he worries that Kevin thinks he is deserting him, again. Sammy assures him that wanting to move is about him, not his feelings for Kevin, and in reality moving is just a fantasy. Kevin is still angry but admits that he does not have the energy to fight with Sammy. After a beat Sammy confesses that he did fall in ‘love’ with an accountant who tied him up, but since he has a lover he doubts they would work out. Sammy admits that he is infatuated with the yearning whether it comes from a new lover or a move across the country. Len, their friend, enters the scene. He greets them both and inquires about Sammy’s trip, and Kevin shares that Sammy met a guy who tied him up. Len and Kevin tease Sammy while Len gets ready to go out dancing. Kevin and Sammy make plans to go eat while they gossip about Len’s fling Brian, a party boy who is running Len ragged. Kevin, agreeing to go get food with Sammy, exits to get dressed. Sammy and Len discuss how Kevin was while Sammy was away—he wanted to be left alone. Sammy admits he does not know what to do, and Len tells Sammy that Kevin knows that Sammy is worried

that he is dying. Sammy admits that he is worried about that, and that he doesn't think he can handle it. Brian buzzes and Len exits. Sammy and Kevin resume their conversation—Sammy says that he is worried about dumping his fears on Kevin but he does love Kevin. Kevin says that he loves Sammy—but neither of them knows what they mean when they say 'I love you.' Sammy tells Kevin that they need to talk, that the two of them are in this relationship, and Kevin becomes angry. He tells Sammy that even though he does not want to dump his fears on Kevin does not mean that that is not exactly what Sammy is doing. Kevin, in a burst of anger, tells Sammy that everything is not okay and to stop pretending. Sammy, realizing what he has been doing, apologizes. The two forgive each other and Sammy says that he wants to see it through, with Kevin, regardless of what happens. They kiss and exit the apartment.

Title: *Somebody's Little Boy*

Year: 1982

Availability: Unpublished—available in Robert Chesley's archive at the San Francisco Gay and Lesbian Historical Archive

Actor Requirements: Rob, a gay man in his late thirties; John, a gay man who can be any age over twenty-five, very masculine and handsome; Rob's shadow, who is male.

Setting: Rob's apartment, the setting can be any major American city.

Production History: No production history

The play opens in Rob's apartment. Littered throughout the space are items from the previous evening: Rob's leather and clothes, rope, poppers, lubricant, and a cum towel. The candles are all burnt low and the ashtray is full. Rob is wearing his bathrobe and John is wearing his leather. The two exchange contact information and embrace, groping each other, but then break apart. John exits and Rob stares at the closed door. As Rob stands, a Shadow appears, watching Rob throughout the rest of the play. Rob looks at the card and learns his partner's name: John Kirov. As he cleans up he recalls what he had learned about John: he likes to be tied up and penetrated, he likes to be held, just like the Shadow did. He wonders about John: is his real name Ivan, did his babushka come out of real bondage in Russia, does she know about her little boy? As he gets a cup of coffee he focuses on the previous evening, how John didn't make a sound when he came, how the towel smells like him. Rob wonders what he wants—does he just want to be touched, to feel good for just a brief time? He notes that even if he wants more, he cannot have it, two bodies can be close but they can never merge. Rob admits that he gets by, he is still reminded and he never forgets, but he goes on. He finishes cleaning but decides not to change the sheets, the white sheets that look like a shroud. Rob corrects himself by saying that 'he' is not dead, even though absence can feel like death. He remembers that when he was with 'him' but 'he' was absent he would imagine drowning 'him.' Rob

buries his head and admits that he still sees 'him.' Then in an anguished howl of grief he screams the name David and begins sobbing. At the acknowledgment of his name the Shadow smiles and nods at the weeping Rob.

Title: *Et Tu, Lesbo*

Year: Between 1981-1984

Availability: Unpublished—available in Robert Chesley’s archive at the San Francisco Gay and Lesbian Historical Archive

Actor Requirements: Jan, a lesbian; June, a lesbian, Jane, a lesbian; the playwright, a gay man.

Setting: A “wimmin’s coffee house in San Francisco. A large sign reading “NO MEN” must be prominently displayed.

Production History: No production history.

Et Tu, Lesbo opens with Jan reading and drinking tea. June enters and serves her a bowl of fruit salad. Jan comments about the lack of bananas and June comments that the Collective has decided to no longer serve bananas. Jan expresses that she likes bananas, and is reprimanded that such thought is self-oppressive, and when she wonders if the fruit could be sliced she is rebuffed. Jane enters the scene, angrily denouncing men and wondering how they could come from a woman’s womb. She is furious that as she walked down the street she was attacked by a group of Stanford jocks who began whistling and cat-calling her. She explains that she turned around and cursed them out, telling them that she was a lesbian, and then jumped on the bus. Jan has been making noises of agreement and tries to calm Jane down. June enters to take Jane’s order. Jane tries to order a cup of Emperor’s Choice tea; she is told that the Collective no longer serves it due to it being patriarchal. She selects Sleepy Time and a Kaiser roll—her choice of bread is met with June’s furious stare—so she alters her selection. June exits and Jan and Jane begin discussing their dream, a world without men, and what a wonderful place that would be. No war, racism, oppression, or killing. They agree: kill all men and everything would be perfect. When Jan wonders about faggots, Jane says they should be killed as well, even if they are good decorators and florists. When Jan points out one gay man they both like, Roger, Jane is willing to sacrifice him for the greater

good. Jan then tells Jane about the horrible event that had happened last night outside her building: a drag queen had been murdered by a group of kids and the corpse was visible on the sidewalk. Jane comments that it is disgusting—drag humiliates and oppresses women and therefore the drag queen deserved what happened to him. June enters and overhears their conversation and points out that the deceased was an old woman, not a drag queen. Jan and Jane immediately express horror about the violence women face but June comments that the kids thought she was a drag queen as well. The Playwright enters the scene and addresses the audience with the moral of the story: if it can happen to me, it can happen to you. Jan, Jane, and June immediately begin attacking the Playwright and shouting to kill him. The Playwrights screams about the state of their souls as the women tear him apart onstage.

Title: *Happy V.D*

Year: 1981

Availability: Unpublished—available in Robert Chesley’s archive at the San Francisco Gay and Lesbian Historical Archive

Actor Requirements: Stu, a man in his forties; Bert, a man in his forties.

Setting: A New York City apartment. The only lighting is to be provided by onstage candlelight

Production History: No production history.

Happy V.D. opens with Bert and Stu, relaxed after eating dinner, drinking brandy.

The two begin teasing each other and then toast the one year anniversary of their break-up. Their teasing turns tense as Bert begins needling Stu about his need to psychoanalyze and his masochistic tendencies. When Bert toasts to Valentine’s Day and the lie of romance, citing Rock Hudson and Doris Day, Stu toasts his wish for loving each other in healthy ways. Bert responds that he was never the sadist Stu and his psychologist made him out to be, Stu responds that Bert is really a masochist considering how he abuses his body in back rooms and bathhouses. Bert reminds Stu that his disapproval of such things is well known, he did publish a book that Bert describes as “guilt-ridden, self-loathing crap.” Stu contests Bert’s description and cites other gay men who express his same concerns over drug use and promiscuity. Bert dismisses these views and cites that everyone has problems: that is life. Stu responds that heterosexuals don’t have the same problems with sexually transmitted diseases. Bert acknowledges that these are a problem—but they are not Divine Retribution, which is how Stu sees the new ‘gay cancer.’ Bert is incensed that Stu sees the men dying as deserving their fate, that they brought this disease onto themselves. Stu responds that gay men are doing it to themselves and it is their responsibility to make changes. Bert accuses Stu of wanting to call a halt to gay culture, Stu cannot counter that statement. Bert pours more brandy for

the two men and toasts to their deaths. Stu refuses to drink to that morbid statement. Bert continues railing against Stu, his belief that marriage and monogamy will solve all of gay men's problems, and his 'sexual fascism.' Bert counters Stu's vision of happiness by pointing out that his sister was almost killed by her husband when he suspected her of being unfaithful. Stu argues that one example of a bad marriage is no reason to stop pursuing 'a normal life' while Bert argues that using men who enjoy fisting as emblematic of the gay community is equally unfair. Stu changes the subject and asks if Bert has seen someone die of gay cancer, a term Bert hates, and he responds that he knows someone dying at that very moment. Stu points out that the death is ugly and should scare people. Bert points out that his fear is somewhat different seeing as he has the disease. This confession shocks Stu and renders him speechless. Bert answers the silence by stating that Stu's moralizing and fear-mongering is repulsive as he has no idea what it means to be infected, to face an imminent death. Stu wonders if this is why Bert invited him to dinner, and Bert responds that he invited Stu so he could tell him to go to hell. Stu gets angry, throwing his drink, and damning Bert for doing this to him, that he should feel guilty for what he has done. Bert, who has stayed calm throughout this rant, tells Stu that he has no regrets and he will continue to fight for sexual rights and gay culture until his final breath, that he will fight Stu until he is dead. Bert tells Stu that he has experienced love and beauty, and that having those experiences made living worth it. Stu responds that Bert is paying the price for his experiences and he feels sorry for Bert. Bert mocks Stu and says that is full of self-pity because he wants what Bert has; he wants to be sick as it would validate all of his self-hatred. Bert then tells Stu not worry, he is not going to die of gay cancer, he has plans, plans he does not want Stu to interfere with. As

Bert shows Stu to the door, Stu tells him that he loves him. Bert tries not to laugh and shows him out. After Stu has left, Bert makes a phone call and confirms an appointment, he then states that he has changed his mind and does want his hide preserved and sent to a friend on the next Valentine's Day. Bert hangs up, blows out the candles, and exits.

Title: *Dear Friends and Gentle Hearts*

Year: 1981

Availability: Unpublished—available in Robert Chesley’s archive at the San Francisco Gay and Lesbian Historical Archive

Actor Requirements: George, a man in his sixties; Steve, a “ghost” who can appear as his age when he died, thirty-seven, or older.

Setting: A Greenwich Village room on July 4th, 1904

Production History: No production history

The play opens with George writing at his desk as the sound of drunken revelry and firecrackers occur offstage. George comments about celebrating America with heavy drinking and smiles to himself. The smile fades when he hears the revelers singing *Camptown Races* and *Oh! Susannah!* George comments that Steve will never die, not as long as America sings his songs. His words seem directed to Steve, but there is no one else in the room. George suddenly starts weeping with grief and pain, and he remarks that even after forty years his wounds seem fresh. George then stands, crosses to a cupboard, and removes a large jar which contains two human hands, severed at the wrist and pickled. As George removes the hands, and dries them with a towel, he begins to speak of love directed to the absent Steve. He reminisces about how they met and how they loved each other. As he is speaking he undresses and then masturbates himself to orgasm with the severed hands. As he climaxes, the ghost of Steve appears. George is startled, puts the hands down, and cleans himself. Once he has finished, he once again makes eye contact with Steve. George agrees to speak with Steve but he fears what will be asked of him. Steve assures George that he does not want the hands, though what George did to get them was indecent, what he wants is peace. He tells George that he has been wandering in death and cannot rest until George honors his request. George then goes to the same cupboard which held the hands and removes sheet music. Steve asks George to burn them. George wants to know why? The songs are beautiful. Steve responds that they are

tainted, they represent what was wrong with him, and they must never be sung. George, after contemplating the music, agrees to destroy them for Steve, but first Steve must allow him to speak. George delivers a long impassioned monologue to Steve and explains the truth behind his death that it was a suicide which George covered up as an accident. He tells Steve that he cursed their love as he waited and when he learned Steve had died he celebrated, because in Steve's death he found life. Steve understands George's emotions and confesses that he sought death because his life had brought pain to those he loved—George as well as his wife, Jane. Steve felt shame for abandoning his wife in order to find physical pleasure with George. Steve killed himself in order to find peace. George tries to assure Steve that his love was pure, that he never acted out of malice. Steve implores George to burn the music as it is a reminder of his tainted love. George cannot accept this but he burns the music. As he and Steve watch the first sheet catch fire the song, "Dear Friends and Gentle Hearts" is heard.

Title: *For the Kids*

Year: 1981

Availability: Unpublished—available in Robert Chesley's archive at the San Francisco Gay and Lesbian Historical Archive

Actor Requirements: 4 men and 4 women ranging in age from mid-twenties to mid-forties. No racial specifications are made.

Setting: Classrooms in a private day school in New York and Andrew's apartment.

Production History: No production history. Per the Robert Chesley Foundation website Chesley 'withdrew' the text for unknown reasons.

For the Kids is set at a small private day school in suburbia and centers on the strong personalities of the teachers, administrator, and the parents of one of the students. The play, broken into two acts, begins at the end of a Monday school day in May. Fairy, "fifth grade teacher, forty-five years old, untidy, earthy and warm," sits in the teacher's lounge. Rushing into the scene is Cynthia—"science teacher and home room teacher for sixth grade. In her forties, strong, the mother of three, self-dramatizing and silly"—loudly complaining to anyone who will listen about the atrocious behavior of her students. As she complains she wonders about the behavior of the older children, who at lunch attacked a fellow classmate, Teddy. During this discussion Jack enters the staff room; he is described as an "English teacher and home room teacher for seventh grade. Twenty-eight years old, good-looking, a charmer and a joker." As they continue berating the children they discuss how they have a history of driving away music teachers with their behavior—the most recent victim was Mrs. Winyard but prior to her was a man whose name Cynthia cannot remember so she describes him as "the little fairy." Entering the conversation is Andrew, the play's protagonist: "teacher of mathematics and home room teacher for the eighth grade. Thirty-five years old, mild." As the 'bitch session' winds down Jack leaves—but not before Fairy invites Jack to dinner, and asks that he bring along his girlfriend. Jack accepts and exits the scene. George, the headmaster—

"thirty years old, very straight and square"—enters and asks to speak to Andrew alone. The two begin discussing the incident with Teddy, who at the very least has a broken nose from the assault, and George tells Andrew that disciplining the eighth graders may not be necessary as Teddy may have brought this incident upon himself.

Cynthia returns to the staff room, disrupting the conversation but soon breezes back out. Andrew is upset at George's plan to have Teddy complete his schooling at home. When he learns that George has yet to speak to Teddy's mother he requests to be at the meeting, as Teddy's home room teacher. George accepts this proposition and leaves as Fairy returns. Andrew shares George's plans, and beliefs that Teddy brought the violence on himself by having a copy of the book—Fairy is appalled at this news. She argues that if George succeeds in removing Teddy from the school then the only lesson the children learn is that intolerant behavior is acceptable. She offers to support Andrew, and Teddy, against George's solution.

Scene Two occurs that evening in Andrew's apartment where he is sharing drinks with, and receiving a back massage from, Jack. Andrew asks Jack what he should do and Jack warns against trying to change their minds. As Jack cracks jokes, and flirts, Andrew mopes and contemplates getting drunk. Then the phone rings again. It is one of Andrew's students calling with a math question but once Andrew has provided academic support the tone of the conversation shifts to the afternoon's events.

As Andrew continues to mope he contemplates calling Teddy and offering support but Jack nixes the idea and argues that Teddy asked for what he received. As Andrew continues to fret and expresses his hatred for having to stay in the closet, Jack

offers Andrew a fuck "for old time's sake" and to help get his mind off things. As the two exit to the bedroom Andrew expresses his relief that at least he has Jack.

Scene Three occurs the next day in George's office and opens with Cynthia informing George that students are out of control in the aftermath of the "Teddy incident." Their recent behavior includes calling a girl who tried to defend Teddy a "lesbo," and Cynthia found harassing notes written by one of the boys. As she leaves the room, telling George he should have canceled school, Andrew enters George's office. Immediately the two begin to disagree on their suggestions to Teddy's mother—particularly when George mentions Teddy's need for psychiatric counseling. Andrew wonders whether a psychiatrist is necessary since Teddy isn't a disturbed young man, George seems stunned by this assertion.

Once it is resolved that Teddy will not return to school and that he should seek psychiatric care George and Andrew's conversation turns towards punishment for the attackers. George intends for them to spend the time usually devoted to sports on yard work and cleaning the school grounds—but refuses to cancel the upcoming game. Andrew pushes for cancellation and George erupts.

The two men step back from this heated conversation and turn back towards how they should approach Teddy's mother in their afternoon meeting. Andrew expresses reservations at the suggestion of a particular psychiatrist, he mentions that he's not the most open-minded therapist, but quickly explains he was told this by a friend who had had a bad experience. George then asks whether Andrew is gay and Andrew denies that he is—but then asks if that would make a difference to George. George responds in the affirmative, both in regards to his position in the school and his ability to participate in

the afternoon meeting with Teddy's mother. The scene ends with Andrew exiting once he assures George that he is not gay and that he will support George's decisions in the meeting.

Scene Four opens in the faculty lounge where Rose—"art teacher, any age from 20 to 45, wispy and harried look, easily upset"—sits crying on the sofa. Fairy enters and begins to comfort, apparently the students have trashed her art room, again—but this time their actions were deliberately cruel. Fairy leaves to find George so a clean-up crew can be sent—Andrew has entered the scene, he is grading papers and distracted from the events around him, and Cynthia has come in to berate Rose for missing her shift as lunch monitor. Rose eventually exits, after some insincere consoling from Cynthia—and Andrew finally inquiries into what occurred. Cynthia tells him the kids trashed the art room, again, but then her topic of conversation turns to Teddy, and Andrew valiantly tries to ignore her.

Their conversation is interrupted with the return of Fairy and soon Cynthia leaves. Fairy wonders what she can do to help Andrew—and he reveals that George asked if he was gay, and he had to deny it, and the entire situation is almost too much to handle. Fairy begins to tell Andrew about the art room but George enters and explains the clean-up is underway. He informs Andrew the meeting with Teddy's mother may not go well—it seems that Teddy may have suffered permanent hearing loss from the attack and his mother is incredibly angry. Jack then enters the room to ring the bell, signaling the end of lunch; George tells Andrew that one of the attackers vandalized the art room—painting "Teddy is a faggot," in tall letters. Andrew and Fairy react with shock and

disgust but Jack just cracks a lame joke—"I don't exactly blame the kids. Apparently he is a faggot,"—and rings the bell, signaling the end of Act One.

Act Two opens in George's office where Andrew sits waiting for the meeting to begin. Jack enters and the two begin to fight, Andrew is still upset over Jack's comment at the end of the previous act, and Jack warns Andrew not to do anything stupid—and breaks from his usual jocular manner to warn Andrew that they have to stick together during this crisis. Their conversation is interrupted by Rose who inquires as to whether she should attend the faculty meeting regarding the vandalism in the art room—Andrew agrees that she should attend and also offers to ask George once he returns to the office. Both Jack and Rose exit as George enters. He informs Andrew that he was correct—the task of yard work was not an appropriate punishment for Teddy's attackers as they seemed to enjoy the activity, but he still has no plans to cancel the upcoming game. Then Mrs. Matthews, Teddy's mother, appears, visibly angry, for the meeting. She berates the two men for not appropriately controlling the students and allowing such a violent incident to occur in their school. George defends the actions of his teachers and turns the conversation towards Teddy's role in provoking the attack.

Andrew tries to diffuse the situation by urging both Mrs. Matthews and George to not make assumptions about what this book may mean. The conversation turns away from the book, although Mrs. Matthews is adamant that Teddy will deny owning the book, and towards Teddy receiving his school work at home for the remainder of the year. As the meeting winds down, and George apologizes for the incident and Mrs. Matthews decides to explain the reasons behind her anger. Mrs. Matthews leaves and George is immediately relieved—the meeting wasn't easy but at least she left calmer than

when she entered. Andrew says very little, and George notices his hang-dog expression—the scene ends with Andrew exiting and promising to talk to George in the morning.

The next scene opens in Andrew's apartment where he is restless and chain-smoking—Jack enters bearing beer. The two begin discussing the events of scene one and Mrs. Matthews' reaction to Teddy being outed—Andrew feels helpless and angry while Jack argues that it is none of their business and mockingly tells Andrew that he could out himself as a solution. Andrew assures Jack that they are both still closeted—but George may suspect that he is hiding something—so he has made a decision. Andrew is going to come to George even though it will mean losing his job so he can support Teddy from a place of honesty. Jack is less than pleased at this development, reminding Andrew that people become hysterical and start witch hunts. Jack warns Andrew that he will receive no support from George, his actions may do more harm than good, and Jack has no intention of putting his job in jeopardy to provide support. The two begin to fight, and Andrew calls Jack a chickenshit coward, but soon he backs down. He appreciates the advice, and he values Jack's friendship, but he has to do what he believes is right. Scene two ends with Jack kissing Andrew and calling him a fool.

The final scene of *For the Kids* opens in the faculty lounge, where Andrew sits alone and smoking. He is waiting for the emergency meeting to begin and he tells Fairy, the only other faculty member there, that he intends to come out. She wishes him luck and expresses her pride in him. George enters as Fairy exits and before Andrew can begin George informs him of another development, and another scheduled meeting with Teddy's parents—Andrew has been accused, anonymously, of having had sexual

relations with Teddy. Andrew immediately denies the charge, and is furious that he cannot know who his accuser is, and angered when George does not come to his defense. Their discussion is interrupted by the arrival of Cynthia, Fairy, Rose, and Teddy's parents. George begins the meeting by informing everyone that due to the seriousness of the assault he has cancelled sports in order to punish the students involved. He then explains that the situation is more far-reaching than first thought—the Matthews found Teddy's diary and it seems he is not the only boy engaging in such questionable behavior. The meeting quickly spins out of control. Fairy is angry that Teddy's privacy has been violated while George believes that in the face of such indecent behavior the school must take action. Cynthia supports George and argues that she would not want her children exposed to "that sort of thing," and Rose stuns everyone when she bursts into tears and confesses that her brother is gay and the hatred and prejudice being expressed is inhumane. She tells the group that her brother is a fine man, he is not immoral nor is he sick—and with that she flees the lounge. Cynthia and Jack both support George but Andrew stands with Fairy and Rose and asks for a moment as he has something very important to add to the discussion: he outs himself.

The Matthews exit but Andrew does not stop, he tells George that he will continue to fight so that kids know there are gay people in the world and they are just like everyone else. George reminds Andrew of the accusations made against him and encourages him to keep silent unless he would like to risk facing charges. With that George leaves and reminds everyone that school will begin shortly. Everyone begins gathering materials except Andrew who is out of a job. Fairy and Rose express their support while Cynthia expresses shock and then dismay when she realizes the yearbook

has been dedicated to Andrew and it is too late to make changes! Jack has been silent throughout the entire meeting and refuses to support Andrew when pressed by Fairy. Andrew shares that he has been accused of having sexual relations with Teddy and George is blackmailing him into keeping silent. Fairy and Rose both offer their support and promise to stand up to George and keep fighting for the cause. Fairy and Rose both exit and Jack and Andrew are left alone in the lounge. Andrew asks Jack a simple question: "was it you?" Jack does not respond but looks coldly at Andrew before pushing the school and leaving. The play ends with Andrew alone on stage, trembling.

Title: *Stray Dog Story*

Year: 1982

Availability: Published in 2005's Broadway Play Publishing's collection: *The Plays of Robert Chesley*

Actor Requirements: The play requires 1 woman, doubling two roles, and three male actors for the central roles. Additional roles are to be doubled and can be portrayed by two to four additional actors.

Setting: Manhattan—the ten scenes occur in a variety of locations including apartments and the New York City streets.

Production History: First presented as a staged reading by The Glines at the Shandol Theatre in New York in May of 1982. The first production took place at Theatre Rhinoceros's Studio Rhino in San Francisco that June. The play had a full production by the Meridian Gay Theater at New York's Shandol Theatre in January of 1983.

The play begins with Jon, "a lonely faggot," lying in bed with his faithful dog Buddy. Jon shares his wish with Buddy, which is that his sweet-natured dog would become a man because if Buddy were human he would be a perfect lover. No sooner has Jon exited to brush his teeth than Buddy is visited by the Fairy Dog Mother who grants Buddy's wish—to become a man and be with Jon as a human companion. Jon returns, noticeably shocked by the transformation but once he looks into the eyes of the now human Buddy he realizes that the same sweet dog heart, and brain, is within this new form. Jon begins to explain to Buddy that he will need to learn about being a person, wearing clothes, eating food, and getting a job. The scene ends with the two making love.

The next scene finds Jon and Buddy walking along a New York street, both attired in what Chesley describes as "standard Village gay male attire" and into a group of thuggish kids who begin taunting them. When Jon and Buddy turn to run Jon is set upon, beaten, and stabbed by the kids. Buddy responds in true dog fashion, he runs at the kids and rips the throat out of one of the assailants, killing him. As the kids flee, with Buddy growling after them, he turns to help Jon up, but Jon lies dead in a pool of blood.

Weeping, and licking the blood from Jon's face, he promises to take Jon home and stay with him forever.

Scene three finds that Buddy has made true on his promise—Jon's corpse is lying in bed while Buddy frets, he has no food and no idea what to do now that Jon is gone. As Buddy cuddles the corpse a thief comes through the window and is horrified by the sight. Buddy, in his naiveté, offers the thief money if he will bring Buddy food—the thief accepts the cash and exits bearing Jon's television as well. But then Buddy and Jon are discovered by the building super and one of Jon's friends. Both are horrified and try to capture Buddy who slips out the window after biting the friend's hand.

The next scene opens on three faggots standing outside a gay disco and dishing about Jon's murder. Buddy enters, lost and asking everyone he sees if they could help him find Jon's apartment. He tries to enter the disco but is refused due to lack of identification—Buddy is confused since Jon removed his collar in the first scene and told him it was no longer necessary. Then Brett, "a good-looking faggot in semi-leather drag," sees Buddy, cruises him, and invites him back to his place. The comic misunderstanding begins when Buddy asks if Brett has any meat at home, to which Brett responds: "yeah, I got a nice, big piece of meat for you." The miscommunication continues when Buddy asks if Brett will be his new 'master,' not understanding the differences between a dog master and a human master.

Scene five picks up with Buddy and Brett at Brett's apartment. Brett, misunderstanding Buddy's request for a master, begins sexual role-play with a very confused Buddy who is still seeking food. Once Brett realizes that Buddy is not into an S&M scene he takes pity on Buddy and takes him to bed. The first act ends with Buddy

promising to be Brett's, always, and Brett concerned over Buddy's extreme one-night stand fantasy. The next act opens in Brett's apartment where Buddy lies snuggled in bed while Brett prepares to go out. Brett tells Buddy that their time together was fun but now Buddy has to leave. Buddy is both crestfallen and confused.

The next scene opens on the street in front of Brett's apartment where a Bag Lady sits. As the Bag Lady talks to herself and two well-dressed fags who walk by dishing about the latest news—including the information that the gay politician, Burleigh, who was discussed on the television Jon was watching in the play's opening scene, has been shot and killed. As Brett tries to help Buddy figure out how to return home, Buddy spots a man who looks like Jon. In true dog nature he tries to verify his belief that Jon has returned by sniffing the man's butt. The man, who is not Jon, becomes incensed when Buddy gives him a sloppy kiss and begins to rant against Buddy and Brett. The police officer arrests and brutalizes Brett and Buddy responds by biting the officer on the leg. Buddy then flees the scene, apologizing to Brett, while the Bag Lady cackles.

Act Two Scene Three occurs that evening—Buddy comes upon a candlelight march in honor of Warren Burleigh, the gay city council member who was killed because of his sexuality. The scene opens with a Leatherman Activist and a Demonstrator sharing their views on the murder, and gay politics in general, while Tom distributes candles amongst the crowd. Tom meets Buddy and explains the significance of this demonstration—and Buddy learns that as a person he is a homosexual, and shares that Jon was murdered in the streets. Tom begins addressing the crowd and tells Buddy's story, and in doing so he tells Buddy that he is loved and that all of his gay brothers and sisters are on his side. Tom and the crowd begin to sing "We Shall Overcome," and

Buddy joins in, baying emotionally. The crowd, and Tom, turn against Buddy—shouting him down as an asshole, a fascist, a plant—and Tom pushes Buddy to the ground, and the crowd moves on past him, one demonstrator even kicking a very confused Buddy.

The next scene occurs immediately after the demonstration. The two S&M leathermen from Act One appear again, the S leading the M on a chain, and they pass by Dondi, a drag hooker. Buddy limps into the scene and Dondi takes pity when Buddy breaks down. Dondi offers to buy Buddy a meal but this brief moment of kindness is short-lived when police beat and arrest Dondi. When Buddy tries to intervene he is threatened as well.

The final scene of the play occurs several months later, during the winter. The setting is the street outside of the restaurant where Jon used to work, and visible through the frosty windows are warm, happy, and drunken patrons—including Brett. The Bag Lady sits outside, next to overflowing garbage cans, mumbling to herself. The kids from scene two, the kids who beat Jon to death, amble down the street singing, and for fun they kick the Bag Lady's bags and her. Buddy enters the scene, dressed in the rags of his original clone clothes, shivering. He hides when he sees Brett and Brett's date exit the restaurant. The Bag Lady invites Buddy, whose name she knows, to sit with her, that they will keep each other warm until they freeze to death. The two share a bottle of wine, even though Buddy's dog heart cannot take the alcohol. The two snuggle together—and then Jon appears, naked and bathed in a golden glow. He holds out his arms to Buddy. The two express their love for each other—and finally Buddy is reunited with Jon, and they ascend to heaven together.

Title: *The Lost Doll*

Year: 1983

Availability: Unpublished—available in Robert Chesley’s archive at the San Francisco Gay and Lesbian Historical Archive

Actor Requirements: John, a young man; the Angel, no gender or age specifications.

Setting: A bare stage with two distinct playing areas.

Production History: No production history

The Lost Doll opens on a bare stage with two distinct playing areas: one for John and one for Angel. Angel enters his light and addresses the audience, until the conclusion of the play all of his text is directed to the audience. The Angel talks about the downsides of his job, 24 hour days, 7 days a week with no vacation, and how he is on his first assignment. The lights come up on John, dressed as an infant. The Angel then addresses how the Boss has struggled keeping up with the population boom of this new species, so corners sometimes get cut, and that can make the job difficult. His attention is directed back towards John, now four years old and holding a doll. The Angel puts on the mask of John’s Father and begins browbeating his son for holding the doll, named Jenny. He snatches the doll away and John begins to cry. The Angel then puts on the mask of John’s Mother, who returns the doll and tells him that he can still grow up to be a ‘real man’ and not a sissy—that he should play with boys more, to not be a sissy for his parent’s sake. The Angel removes the mask but is concerned when John throws down the doll and states, in what will be an oft-repeated line “I hate myself. I want to die.” The Angel looks through his files trying to find something that will help John build his self-esteem. He sees musical ability and we next see John, now seven, with a violin. He plays, and his playing grows stronger, as he ages from seven to twelve. The Angel points out that the Father still did not approve and the Mother was convinced that his playing did not mean he was gay. We then see John at thirteen, masturbating to a body-builder

magazine when his Mother walks in. The Mother is horrified and sends John, who once again hates himself and wants to die, to a psychiatrist. The Angel, as the Psychiatrist, tells John he is in a phase and will grow to like girls. A few years later the Angel checks on John's progress with girls, John struggles, forcing himself to respond physically, with Jane, Joan, and Jennifer. Each encounter ends with the girl storming away until Jenny. John wants to marry her but she refuses, even though she loves him, until he tries sex with a man. John has sex with a man and suddenly exclaims that he no longer hates himself nor wants to die: he's gay! The Angel begins blowing up a male love doll and explains that things were still hard for John as he fell in love with the first man he slept with, was rejected, and then had sex with five hundred different men as the years went by. John has found sex but not love, and his insistence that he hates himself and wants to die returns. John sabotages his relationships with his inability to love himself. The Angel addresses the audience and states that ordinarily John would have had a 50/50 chance at finding happiness but a new factor, which some think is the Boss's idea of a joke, complicated matters. John begins angrily fucking the deflating love doll and claiming that he deserves to die. The Angel watches this angrily until he intervenes. For the first and only time, he directly interacts with John. He kicks John on his buttocks and tells him to wake up and die right! John is shocked and then he sees his beloved childhood doll Jenny. As John holds Jenny and weeps the light on his playing space goes dark. The Angel tells the audience that John's story is not over and things may get worse, or maybe not, maybe things will get better. The lights fade on the Angel.

Title: *Night Sweats*

Year: 1984

Availability: Published in Alamo Square Press's 1990 collection *Hard Plays/Stiff Parts*.

Actor Requirements: The production has thirty roles for eight actors. Four roles, The Director, Tom, Allan, and Richard, cannot be doubled. The other parts are to be played by the remaining members of the cast. The only racial specifications are that The Director and Jephtha Williams must be played by white actors.

Setting: A night club in the near future.

Production History: First produced in May 1984 by Meridian Gay Theatre at New York's Shandol Theatre and then produced at San Francisco's Theatre Rhinoceros.

Act One Scene One opens with Richard's voice-over. He had called to make an appointment at the clinic, to deal with symptoms he thinks he has, but he learned the doctor had quit his practice and was hospitalized with 'it.' As Richard drifts off to sleep the lights come up on a scaffold. A prisoner walks up the stairs accompanied by two Hangmen. As the Director watches the prisoner is hanged and pronounced dead. As the Director exits the two Hangmen discuss paying ten thousand dollars for a final orgasm. The first Hangman, who is called Bunny, has chosen to disco to death; the second Hangman thinks he will choose terminal sex. They exit with the corpse.

Act One Scene Two is set in the Director's office. Richard is welcomed to the Coup de Grace: the Ultimate Experience! Richard is satisfied with what he has seen and pays the club fee, ten thousand dollars. The Director then asks Richard to share his reasons for coming to the club, that it is essential that his personal statement is verbalized. Richard explains that his friend, Michael, has been gone for several months and he does not think he can face the next year, year and a half. The Director offers his sympathies but then continues on with business: making sure that Richard has put his affairs in order, drawn up his will, and made arrangements for post-Experience communication with loved ones. Richard provides a sealed envelope to be delivered to

his ex-lover Allan. The Director then encourages Richard to think about what he wants his Experience to be, that it should have meaning, and that he should both speak with other club members and witness Experiences while at Coup de Grace. As Richard exits, the Director opens the sealed letter and begins reading.

Act One Scene Three finds Richard sitting as two Disco Bunnies dance to the throbbing music. As the Bunnies dance off together, Tom enters and cruises Richard—the two introduce themselves and start talking. Richard explains that he was a landscape architect and Tom had worked in City Hall and was active in gay politics. The two talk about the buzzwords of the club—the Experience and its Significance. Tom asks Richard to come to bed with him and as they embrace he explains that this is his last night.

Act One Scene Four is set around a card table. Five Cardplayers discuss the state of the food at the club as three of the men play cards. The game consists of each man flipping their dealt card to see who has received the Ace of Clubs. After several hands the Third Cardplayer is the only one to not have been dealt that card. All the men kiss and hug the Third Cardplayer, and then the First Cardplayer strangles him. After choking him into unconsciousness, the First pulls out a gun and shoots the corpse in the head.

Act One Scene Five is the next morning. Tom and Richard are in bed together, kissing and masturbating. They come, and then Richard licks the semen from Tom's belly. Tom thanks Richard for a great final night. Richard is upset because he is starting to have feelings for Tom. Tom comforts Richard and says that he is not alone, a lot of men are constantly searching for a lover, and Tom can tell that Richard is still in love with his ex, Allan. Richard does not disagree but explains that it does not matter now; he is committed to the Experience. He then asks Tom to explain what his Experience will be.

Tom, reiterating that gay politics are his passion, has worked to stage a very ugly gay-bashing outside of the Club's walls—so that the Significance of his Experience is truly significant. Richard explains that Allan was once bashed, and Tom realizes that he met Allan at that time. Tom tells Richard that he doesn't belong at the Club, that he still has hope with Allan, and that he wants to be rescued. Richard explains that he can't be rescued—no one knows that he is at the Club.

Act One Scene Six is a gunfight between a White Hat and a Black Hat. The Black Hat shoots the White Hat, who collapses to the floor. When the Black Hat approaches to deliver the death blow, the White Hat leaps up and shoots the Black Hat dead. The White Hat stands over the body and remarks that he was a good guy.

Act One Scene Seven begins with the Director giving the Fag-Bashers instructions for Tom's Experience. As they exit, Richard enters the office—he has decided on his Experience. The Director senses his despair and realizes that Richard has chosen terminal sex. At first he tries to talk Richard out of his choice, stating that terminal sex is usually for those men who have lived for sex, and that does not seem to describe Richard. The Director notices a change, he thinks Richard has fallen in love and is looking to be rescued—he tells him to really consider what he wants from his Experience.

Act One Scene Eight is set in a laboratory—Hornetman, a comic book villain is laughing maniacally as he has Bobin in chains. The two go through the comic book dialogue when Ratman bursts in to save Bobin. He is captured as well. Richard has been watching this Experience alongside the Director and is shocked when Allen sneaks in behind him. Allen and Richard exit to Richard's room. Hornetman is killed by Ratman

and Bobin. As the scene is cleaned up, a Guard rushes in to tell the Director that there has been a break-in. The Director instructs them to find the interloper and bring them to him. Act Two Scene One is a club member's Experience. Dressed as Lucia di Lammermoor he lip-synchs to Joan Sutherland's version of the opera's mad scene. At the end of the aria, Lucia stabs himself in the breast, staggers, and dies.

Act Two Scene Two opens with Richard and Allen sitting on Richard's bed. Allen is imploring Richard to leave with him. Richard snaps that he is diseased, that he will destroy Allen. Allen tells Richard that they must leave, now. They are interrupted by the arrival of the Director and two Guards. Allen exits with the Director while a Guard remains to watch Richard.

Act Two Scene Three is in a crematorium where two Workers are burning corpses. As they work, The First Worker shares that the Director is nervous because the two fag-bashers never returned from Tom's Experience outside the club, and there has been no mention of Tom's death in the press—it appears to have been a set-up.

Act Two Scene Four is once again in the Director's office. He and Allen are discussing the thwarted rescue of Richard. Allen is disgusted with the Director's business—murder. The Director argues that he is merely offering mercy killings and that without men like Richard he would be out of business. The Director tells Allen that he cannot save Richard from his choice of a dignified and beautiful death. Richard's Experience has been scheduled for that evening. The Director then informs Allen that by breaking in he too will die, but he offers Allen his choice of Experience, gratis, if he behaves during Richard's final moments. He invites Allen to join him for the Experience of Jeppy William; one of Coup de Grace's founding members.

Act Two Scene Five is Jephtha Williams' Experience—a Grand Inquisition. Williams is interrogated and tortured. He confesses to a variety of sins, including being a faggot who focused upon material wealth and success. His final confession is that he killed everyone, he allowed the government to experiment with new viruses in his bathhouses, and he did so to make money. With a final triumphant howl Williams is slid, still alive, into the crematorium.

Act Two Scene Six is Richard, still under guard, awaiting his Experience. He contemplates what has brought him here and he realizes while he was creating gardens for other people, he never cultivated his own. He allowed it to become overrun, choked, and that is why he cannot accept love: he does not love himself. He regrets bringing Tom and Allen into his nightmare. The Guard then announces that it is time. They exit.

Act Two Scene Seven is Richard's Experience. Club members enter the Disco and watch as Two Hunky Men, wearing only jock straps and boots, oil their bodies. Richard enters, alone, and steps onto the platform where the Hunky Men wait. The Hunky Men begin fondling and undressing Richard. The Director and Allen enter the space, as a Guard trains a gun on Allen, and watch the scene. Richard is blindfolded as one Hunky Man finger-fucks him and the second fondles his cock. The assembled club members begin chanting a poem. On the platform Richard is being penetrated by one of the Hunky Men as the second has knelt before him and is sucking him. As the sex act is reaching its climax, the First Hunky Man raises a dagger over his head and prepares to stab Richard in the neck. Suddenly, light streams into the space as Tom and the two fag-bashers, all dressed as nuns, burst into the room. The dagger and revolver threatening Richard and Allen are lowered and Richard removes his blindfold. Tom has come to

rescue Richard, to assure him that though he will die, he must make sure to live while he can. Tom tells Richard to rejoice in love, that that is the way to wake up from his nightmare. Allen and Richard embrace. As everyone begins dancing to disco music, Bunny enters for his Experience. However, Bunny has changed his mind. He shouts to the audience “I don’t want to die! I want to live!”

There is an alternate ending to be performed on Saturday nights and the nights of the full moon: Act Two Scene Eight is homage to Pasolini. After Bunny’s final cry and the blackout, a voice is to call out “One, Two, Three, Four” and the actors, all in the same positions they held at the beginning of Scene Seven. All the actors wear half pig-masks and perform Scene Seven again only instead of saying the dialogue they communicate through grunts and oinks. The unfurled banner for Bunny’s experience is an image of a pig’s head surrounded by sausages. The final sounds of the play are Bunny squealing in terror.

Title: *Jerker or The Helping Hand: A Pornographic Elegy with Redeeming Social Value and a Hymn to the Queer Men of San Francisco in Twenty Phone Calls, Many of Them Dirty*

Year: 1986

Availability: Published in Alamo Square Press's 1990 collection *Hard Plays/Stiff Parts*.

Actor Requirements: Two men, age ranging from mid-thirties to early fifties. Race is not specified.

Setting: Two distinct playing spaces, each with a bed and bedside table.

Production History: First produced at Los Angeles's Celebration Theatre. The play then received productions in New York, Chicago, and San Francisco.

Scene One opens with both J.R and Bert in their respective beds. Bert is asleep while J.R sits up stroking his erection through his underwear; with the other hand he dials a phone number. The lights come up in Bert's room as he answers his ringing phone. Immediately, J.R begins talking dirty and Bert reciprocates. The two men begin masturbating and describing what they are doing to each other. The scene ends when J.R cums quietly and hangs up the phone.

Scene Two begins with each man in bed, though both are awake this time. J.R dials Bert and they begin their dirty talk. J.R takes the lead and has Bert pull on his underwear, ordering him to masturbate in his underwear while he does the same. The two engage in incest fantasy, imaging that they are two brothers doing nasty things together. After they both cum, they laugh and both admit they liked the fantasy. Before hanging up J.R tells Bert to save the dirty underwear for the next time they talk.

Scene Three has J.R dialing Bert's number but no one is home, the answering machine picks up. J.R hangs up.

Scene Four is immediately after J.R has hung up the phone, as he plays with himself as smile comes to his face. He masturbates almost to the point of orgasm and

then dials Bert. When the answering machine picks up, he orgasms and the sound is captured on the machine. J.R laughs, kisses the phone, and hangs up.

Scene Five is J.R dialing Bert, but Bert's bed is empty. After a few rings Bert enters, naked and towel-drying himself. He answers, J.R invites him to play; Bert briefly puts him on hold while he finishes drying. When he returns he has combed his hair and is playing with himself. Bert immediately calls J.R 'little brother' and starts telling him that he has big plans. He spins the fantasy—they are two brothers walking into the woods, then Bert ties J.R to a big tree with a blindfold on. As Bert 'tortures' his little brother, J.R has been masturbating furiously. Bert is describing fantasy cock and ball torture but he instructs J.R not to cum. The two men cum together the moment that Bert describes kissing J.R. Their fantasy role play, of J.R as the naughty little brother and Bert as the dominant, continues as they wish each other sweet dreams.

Scene Six opens with Bert sitting in bed, still awake, when J.R calls him. When asked if he wants to play, Bert defers. He has spent the day with a friend who is not doing well and he is not in the mood for fun with his 'brother.' He promises to play another time and hangs up. Bert stares at the phone for a long moment before hanging up.

Scene Seven finds Bert in bed watching television—he turns off the set as soon as the phone rings. He picks up and the two begin playing. Bert wonders how J.R pictures him, J.R laughs and says that he knows; they have met before. Bert has no memory of giving J.R his number and he asks for his 'little brothers' name, J.R gives it. The two then begin their playtime in earnest, with Bert reprimanding J.R for cumming in his underwear. As he 'spanks' J.R it is enough to push J.R over the edge and he cums. They

play until Bert cums and then say goodnight, using each other's names for the first time. When they hang up, both are smiling.

Scene Eight has the lights come up on Bert's bed; he is crying and initially ignores the phone. When the machine picks up, he changes his mind and picks up the receiver. Bert does not want to play, and he tells J.R that he is not okay, but he will be. J.R wishes him a good night and tells him that he likes him. Bert smiles and tells J.R he likes him as well. They hang up and Bert lies down in the dark.

Scene Nine occurs immediately after J.R has hung up. He re-dials Bert's number and offers to talk, just talk. Bert starts sobbing as he explains a friend is in the hospital, on a respirator, and it is hard to see such a beautiful man reduced to this ill husk. J.R tells Bert he wishes he could hold him and asks Bert to tell him about his friend. Bert describes David and explains he is like so many men who came to San Francisco. Bert says that he was sexy and fun, he took advantage of the sexual atmosphere. He rants against those saying 'the party's over' by explaining that it was more than a party, and that no one deserves the suffering David is going through. Bert exclaims he has no regrets. J.R tells Bert that he was in Vietnam, he saw horrible things, and he nearly died. His death would have been for nothing and while there he saw things that were 'immoral' and nothing that he saw in the Castro could ever be described that way. Bert and J.R admit that they are each scared but that loving each other is the way to beat back their fears. The two say goodnight and hang up.

Scene Ten opens with Bert laying in bed, another man beside him. When J.R calls he speaks quietly to him. J.R can sense that Bert cannot talk but he does ask after David.

J.R says that he is okay, and he asks J.R to call him tomorrow. As they each hang up J.R kisses the receiver.

Scene Eleven, the lights come up on Bert as he smokes a joint, looks at a porn magazine, and strokes himself. J.R calls and he immediately picks up the phone, but before they begin playing he wants to talk, he enjoys J.R's voice. He wants to know about J.R, such as what the initial stands for. J.R provides the answer, James Reilly, but stops there; he explains to Bert that he likes anonymous encounters. He refuses to give Bert any other information, but he does share that they used the same urinal just a few weeks ago—he knows what Bert looks like. Bert is stunned and tells J.R to introduce himself next time, J.R rebuffs him. J.R tells Bert a story about San Francisco, about anonymous encounters, and his best sexual experience. As Bert tells the long, very detailed story, about his anonymous sexual encounter J.R masturbates silently. At the end Bert explains that this encounter stands out as more than just great sex, it was a wonderful connection with another man, and they brought happiness to each other before going their own ways. Bert thanks J.R for letting him remember the love and they wish each other good night.

Scene Twelve begins with Bert lying in bed but he turns on the light when J.R calls. He explains that he is not feeling well but assures J.R he never stays sick for long. He asks J.R to tell him a story, a bedtime story with a happy ending. J.R takes a moment but then thinks of a fantasy he has had for a long time, one he has never shared with anyone. He explains that it is not a sexual story but an affectionate fantasy. J.R explains that he and Bert are two young princes and together they walk through the Forbidden Forest facing peril and frights. But then they see a beautiful palace and enter, they are led

up the stairs to a steaming bath; they undress, and enter the bath which washes away their weariness. Then, after leaving the bath, they sit down to supper and await their host. He appears, a beautiful man without age, and his appearance takes away the prince's last bits of sorrow. The three men speak about all of the prince's hardships and fears and in doing so, they prince's and the man begin to understand each other. Then they rise from the table and go to bed. In a large bed the three men, one made of magic, hold each other, kiss, and go to sleep. Bert thanks him for the story and tells him to call again soon. J.R explains he is going out of town for a week but will call when he returns. J.R promises that when he calls again they will return to their filthy sexual fantasies.

Scene Thirteen has both beds shrouded in darkness as the two men exchange answering machine messages. Bert leaves a drunken message for J.R, that he misses his 'brother' but the machine cuts him off before he finishes. The second machine captures J.R laughing and telling Bert to be ready with his cock out next time J.R calls him.

Scene Fourteen, J.R is in bed playing with himself. He dials Bert's number but the machine answers; the away message is a Judy Garland song. J.R tells Bert he will call back later; he hangs up the phone and continues to fondle himself.

Scene Fifteen picks up immediately after the previous call. J.R. is still gently masturbating as he croons the dirty fantasies he wants to play out with Bert. He dials the phone as he begins stroking himself in earnest. The phone rings several times when a woman's voice answers the phone. J.R immediately begins his dirty talk when he suddenly realizes he misdialed. He orgasms and then starts laughing as he hangs up the phone.

Scene Sixteen begins immediately after J.R has hung up the phone, he is still laughing as he redial the phone. Bert's machine, the Judy Garland song, once again picks up the call. J.R giggles over his mistake before saying good night.

Scene Seventeen finds J.R dialing Bert but the machine picks up again. J.R is puzzled about where is his 'brother' could be and he grimaces as he hangs up.

Scene Eighteen opens with J.R calling Bert but still getting the answering machine. He explains that he has asked around and is concerned since no one has seen Bert for weeks. For the first time he leaves his callback number on Bert's machine.

Scene Nineteen has J.R once again calling Bert's empty room and getting the machine. He explains that he is worried about Bert. Before he hangs up he tells Bert that he loves him and tries not to cry as he hangs up the phone.

Scene Twenty opens with J.R once again dialing Bert. This time the lights do not come up on Bert's room. After two rings a recorded voice informs J.R that the number has been disconnected. J.R hangs up the phone and begins sobbing.

Title: *Beatitudes*

Year: 1985

Availability: Unpublished—available in Robert Chesley’s archive at the San Francisco Gay and Lesbian Historical Archive

Actor Requirements: George, Marge, Ginge, and Sarge (father, mother, daughter, and son) are designated to be played only by white actors. Madge, Rodge, and Hank the Hologram One are also specified as white while Hank the Hologram Two is specified as black. There are seven additional male roles and five female roles. It is specified that all of the roles except the central family unit have been written so they can be doubled by four actors—three men and one woman. Except for the racial specifications noted above, the casting can be color-blind.

Setting: A suburban home.

Production History: No production history

The play opens on the “typical” living room of a “typical” family home in the suburbs—the room is dominated by the large picture window and a large television set. The family enters the room; they are George, the father, Marge, the mother, Sarge, the son, and Ginge, the daughter. As they enter the family dog, Mr. Bones, can be heard barking outside. The four enter and recite a variety of clichés such as “there’s no place like home” and “home is where the heart is.” George takes the moment to gather the family around in him in a beatific pose while he extolls on every moment being special because their family is happy. He continues by offering a prayer while he hugs his family to him:

At the end of the prayer the family turns their attention to the presents they have purchased for themselves at the Church bazaar. George holds up a leather bound set of books, the history of the world, and Marge admonishes his purchase: “George, you don’t read,” which George responds to by pointing out the pictures. The first sets of engravings they come upon are of the Great Plague. Marge has purchased a set of English tea cups—she destroyed their previous set in an “ungovernable fit of temper,” according to George. They then turn their attention to Ginge’s purchase—a flashy necklace,

bracelet, and pair of earrings. George and Marge do not approve of such jewelry and deem them only appropriate for dress-up or Halloween. Sarge is reluctant to share his purchase—some old body-building magazines—but George thinks his purchase is fine and that there's nothing wrong with Sarge pursuing a rock hard body. The convivial tone of the scene is broken when Ginge declares one of the bodybuilders sexy—no one talks that way in the family, it's not Christian. Ginge blames her slip on the kids at school and before long George forgives her and the warmth returns to the scene. Sarge reveals his final purchase, an old oil lamp, not unlike the one from the Aladdin stories, but he refuses to let anyone else try to rub the lamp before him. As the family turns back to admiring each of their purchases George realizes that his books had been owned by the Church's organist, and that some of their other purchases may have been his possessions as well. Marge is shocked because he had been such a sweet young man, although maybe the rumors of him being too sweet were true since he did of that 'funny' pneumonia.

The scene changes as the family prepares for dinner, the dog is let in, and all but Sarge exit to get ready for dinner. Once alone Sarge rubs the lamp and a Genie emerges. Sarge calls for the rest of the family, who enter. The Geni informs that they, as a family, have been granted three wishes. George, with his understanding of history, and classic television, makes sure that the Geni won't grant wishes with unpleasant consequences. That order comprises his first wish. His second wish is his attempt at being unselfish—he wishes that his happy family, a good Christian family, “go on forever and always be as pleasing in the eyes of the Lord as we are now!” While George is making his wishes the family dog Mr. Bones is growling and barking. George then make the classic final

wish—he wishes for unlimited wishes—the Geni promises to be their servant forever, the family poses in another group hug, and the dog howls as the first act concludes.

Act Two begins at Thanksgiving. As the family sits down for their meal George makes another wish, for the President to say grace for them, and he does so through the television: “George, Marge, Ginge, and Sarge. I want to thank Our Maker especially. I want to thank Our Maker for making you. Lord, we thank you for this Typical American Family.” As the family begins to pile their plates with food George asks everyone what they are most thankful for—Marge is thankful for her care free kitchen; Ginge is thankful that no one in the family, including the dog and her kitten will ever die; Sarge is less forthcoming. Even as George lists all of the items he now possesses Sarge does not respond with the same level of joy and the scene becomes tense. Sarge bursts into tears, which only angers George further as ‘boys don’t cry’ and they are a Happy Family! Sarge finally calms and explains that he wants to go to school. The family responds that the world is dangerous, things are getting worse on the outside, and this proves that the Lord does not want the family to leave their home.

As George has been speaking a woman in rags, holding a crying baby, has appeared in the picture window behind the family. As she stands there begging the family continues eating, first Ginge notices her and expresses disdain and when Marge notices her she asks Sarge to change the channel. The Woman eventually falls and sinks gradually below window-level; her hand, clutching desperately at nothing, is the last we see of her.

With the war against poverty and racism settled Sarge asks his father a truly important question: are he and Ginge getting any older? George and Marge confess that

they wished for their children to stay their current age—the children are not pleased. While they complain about their desire to grow up their parents extoll the joys of childhood and command them to enjoy these carefree years—they'll consider letting the children age in a few years, what's the rush after all! Meanwhile, a riot is occurring outside. Ginge, Sarge, and Marge begin to understand what is occurring.

George wishes his family's attention turned away from the horrors outside and Marge wishes away her concerns—the immediately turn away from the window and continue their banal conversation. The family, including Mr. Bones who has been brought onstage, assembles in a beatific group hug as they thank God that his will be done.

Act Three begins with the family's picture window showing a desolate landscape and a large silver machine in the living room. The children enter and George informs them that as they are undergoing certain biological changes, and since there are no other people around, this invention is here to help them. Ginge is the first to use the hologram machine, and she begins creating the hologram. She types in responses to the various questions: Height, weight, race, hair color, size, personality, and voice. The machine begins to vibrate and the door opens revealing Ginge's hologram: a gorgeous black hunk named Hank 1 dressed only in speedos. Ginge is pleased but George is not and he immediately rejects Hank 1, who promptly disappears. George answers the questions this time and when the door of the machine slides open Hank 2 appears—once again a gorgeous hunk in speedos, but this time he's white. Hank 2 leads Ginge upstairs to her bedroom and promises that he'll show her what to do. Sarge, who had been quite intrigued by the two hunks, requests to go next. George and Marge refuse, he is still too

young, and Sarge storms offstage blaming them if he commits any sins. George, alone, programs the machine for himself and the door slides open to reveal Henriette, a French maid in a skimpy outfit, George is pleased and the two exit together. Then Marge enters the living room and programs the machine, she has also put on Ginge's flashy jewelry from Act One, and Hank 2 emerges. After a beat Sarge appears, programs the machine, and Hank 1 emerges. As Sarge stares he is playing with himself and almost orgasms before Hank 1 has even touched him. Hank 2 and Sarge embrace and Sarge climaxes from the passion of the kiss—during this embrace George has appeared in the doorway and stares at the scene in horror. George is shocked that his son is a homosexual and Marge and Ginge, now clothed in a negligee, appear. George forces Sarge to reject Hank and then wishes for his son to be moral and upright. Sarge decries their home having become a spiritual wasteland full of products, machines, and gimmicks and that no one should want to go on forever. He exits but George immediately wishes him back. Sarge, being the true owner of the lamp, wishes to be allowed to leave with no wishes being made about him. His wish is granted but before he can exit Ginge cries that she wants to leave as well. She programs the machine so that Hank 1 reappears, grabs his hand, and she, Sarge, and the hologram exit. Marge is weeping but George is angered. He wishes for replacements—but this time they are to be normal, decent, obedient, Christian versions of Sarge and Ginge. The two replacements appear and the family once again assumes the happy family pose.

Act Four opens with the hologram machine absent from the room and outside the picture window signs of life have started to return. The television begins calling for Marge and imploring her to turn it on—and it immediately begins playing a commercial

for a new breakfast cereal. The television voice describes the happy children eating their new cereal while Marge begins to cry quietly. She calls in George and together they coo over the little kids and how much they remind them of Ginge and Sarge. Marge suddenly has an idea—grandchildren! Ginge and Sarge should get married and move to the houses on either side of theirs but Marge wonders how the two kids can have courtships since no other children exist. The television provides the solution—the replacement Ginge and Sarge enter and the family sits together.

The television plays out the courtship of Rodge and Ginge and Sarge and Madge and the events on the television are being watched as though they are home movies rather than fictional creations. The television show ends with the two couples in love. George wishes for Rodge and Madge to appear in real life and they appear. The two couples exit together and Marge exclaims that it doesn't seem real...but then her smile fades when she remembers that it isn't real. George ignores her and continues to plan the wedding and he wishes for the children's dream homes. When Marge has an outburst that nothing is real and everything is fake, George makes a wish and has her replaced with a happy, unthinking version of Marge. The act concludes with Rodge and Ginge and Sarge and Madge being married in front of the television with Billy Graham officiating while Marge and George smile beatifically.

Act Five begins in darkness as we once again hear the voice of Billy Graham as he introduces Jesus Christ, who recites a slightly different version of the Beatitudes: "Blessed are the rich in material possessions...Blessed are they that do no mourn...Blessed are the bold...Blessed are the merciless...Blessed are the war-mongers." George and Marge have been revealed in the light of the television. The two

begin exchanging pleasantries but the conversation is one-sided as all Marge says is “yes dear!” She leaves George in front of the television with a beer and a cigar while he relaxes happily. George slouches in front of the television when Henriette, the saucy French maid hologram beckons him and he exits. The living room is empty except for the glowing lamp and then the family dog appears. Mr. Bones rubs the lamp and the Geni appears. Mr. Bones makes his wish and the Geni grants it. The Geni decides to destroy himself and undo all that has been done. A loud rumble commences then silence and darkness.

The final scene of the play occurs outside of the family’s home, a dark late-winter landscape. Stones mark a crude grave. Marge, dressed simply, walks to the grave. George enters carrying the History of the World volumes in his arms. Marge carries a small bouquet of snowdrops—the first flowers of spring. As she places them on the grave Sarge, Madge, and Rodge enter the scene—both Rodge and Sarge carry babies. The five stand by the grave and try to articulate their grief but they cannot except to say that they have survived a year...except for Ginge, who died giving birth The five embrace each other and then Marge drinks some water from one of the china tea cups seen in Act One. They listen to the birds chirp as the sun rises and the dog wags his tail.

Title: *Come Again*

Year: 1987

Availability: Unpublished—available in Robert Chesley's archive at the San Francisco Gay and Lesbian Historical Archive

Actor Requirements: Casting should be interracial but one role is specified to be played by a white actor, Tristram Shandy. There are twenty roles, twelve of which are to be doubled by eight actors.

Setting: San Francisco in the late 1980s. The staging is minimalist with just a few set pieces that are rearranged between scenes. Due to the scenes of bondage, including erotic mummification, Chesley notes that these scenes should be directed under the supervision of an experienced bondage master.

Production History: No production history. Chesley intended the play to be the first of a diptych. In the preface he notes that that *Come Again* has two references to a play entitled *Promiscuous Love*, which was unwritten at the time and if it were ever completed, no copy has survived.

Come Again: An Entertainment During the Siege consists of scenes connected by an overall theme: to provide an erotic experience to an audience for whom sex has become equated with AIDS. The play is also highly meta-theatrical as the fourth wall is broken and the actors break character.

The First part of the play is broken into three scenes—and Chesley does not ease his audience into the erotic spectacle they are about to witness, he has them entering the playing space while the sexual performance is occurring. Edward is mummified, with his tits and thong-bound cock and balls exposed, or at least accessible. John, dressed as a leather top man enters and approaches Edward and stands looking at him. He then begins to touch and stroke Edward's bound limbs, body, and head, as if gently bringing him back to this world. John then jacks Edward off, perhaps while twisting one of his tits with the other hand. He then cuts Edward free of his mummification. Edward, nude, sits up on the play table and smiles at John; John kisses him and holds him in his arms. Edward thanks John, who expresses his pleasure and then offers Edward a drink. The scene ends

with John giving Edward a beer and a towel, leaving Edward, still naked, drinking a beer and facing the audience alone onstage.

Scene two immediately begins with Edward drinking his beer and looking at the audience, until he is ready to speak. When he is ready he asks them directly:

"Connections. Can I make love to you? Can I make art for you? Is what is in me in you? Can we connect?"

Scene three opens with Edward dressed in a set piece representing an inn—and then Edward is handed a copy of *Tristram Shandy*, from which he begins to read chapter one of the seventh book. As he reads *Tristram Shandy* enters the stage, described as a "thin 18th century gentleman looking both ill and a bit daft...he is comically attempting to sneak up upon and capture an unseen fly." *Tristram* continues his dumb show while Edward reads and soon another 18th century gentleman, *Euginius*, enters. The two pantomime a conversation as Edward continues to narrate the scene, using only the text of *Tristram Shandy*. The tone of the scene changes when *Death* enters, cowl wearing and scythe wielding, to take *Tristram*. And though he gets close, his presence induces a violent coughing fit that leaves *Tristram* unable to breathe, the gentleman bows low to greet death and avoids his scythe. As *Euginius* and *Tristram* continue their conversation *Tristram* revels in escaping death, a passage which Edward reads out in a joyful and celebratory fashion.

The lights come up and the stage has transformed from an 18th century inn into a contemporary double bed. This scene is about Edward and Michael. A performer sets the scene for us: "we are in an apartment on Hartford Street, not far from the heart of the Castro. It is a night in September—one of those very rare warm nights, so Edward has

fallen asleep with window open." Michael enters. As he undresses he addresses the audience in a hushed tone so as not to wake Edward. He shares that the two fought that evening and after being together for fifteen years they know to give each other space. Edward was upset because his boss at the flower shop is...going out of business, and when he gets upset he doesn't want comfort. As Michael gets into bed he inadvertently wakes Edward and the two apologize to each other.

The next scene begins the following morning; Michael is sitting on the bed, naked. In each scene the characters have been introduced by a slide projecting their names—this time the slide has Michael's name upside down and backwards. As Michael is preparing to begin his scene he notices the mistake and breaks the theatrical illusion when he glares at and exasperatedly calls for the lighting tech, Dennis, to fix the mistake. When the slide is projected correctly Michael addresses the audience:

Michael's scene continues into the third scene of Part Two—as he dresses in jeans, a work shirt, and sneakers, the set is rearranged. Bales of hay hide the bed, loose straw covers the floor and two lines of laundry stretch across the stage. When the stage is set Michael once again addresses the audience—he wants to share a dream from his childhood. The rest of the scene is unspoken choreography described in the stage direction.

Part Three begins with the set pieces from the previous scene being taken offstage. Michael enters, once again wearing his belt, and sets up a canvas, easel, and a small table set with paints and brushes. Then Skip enters and poses nude for Michael—he is described as young and in good shape but his most attractive quality is the confidence he has in his own skin. Throughout the scene Michael is focused upon his

painting and his own reaction to Skip's nude presence. After several long moments of painting and posing the two begin to talk. Michael confesses to being hard while painting, but not because of Skip, but because painting is 'his' sexual release. He confesses that his lover, Eddy, knows but it is not an issue because they are separated, sexually, at least. Eddy's desires, bondage, don't match Michael's. Skip compliments the paintings but Michael admits that he has no luck selling them because of his shyness—he's so shy it took him months to ask Skip to pose. He admits to being especially shy around those he desires, Skip preens and admits that he is in the business of being desired. Michael admits that his true desire is in the act of looking, but he admits that he will get himself off once Skip leaves—and he bets that Skip will never guess where he cums. Skip has a moment and then realizes the answer—Michael cums in his paints. The lights fade as Michael continues painting.

When the lights come up Michael has left. Skip dresses for the next scene while the previous set pieces are struck. He outfits himself in a jock strap, jeans, white socks, cowboy shirt, and cowboy boots. When he is dressed he speaks to the audience: "My body. My being is my body. I feel my being in every part of my body, and it is beautiful: it is life: it is me."

The next scene is transitioned into immediately—performers bring out a simple black coffin, no lid, and place it onstage. Two mourners enter, stand by the coffin, and look into throughout Skip's speech. Skip once again addresses the audience directly.

Part Four begins immediately after the lights come back up—Skip and the mourners have exited the stage and the coffin and flowers are removed. Once the stage is bare the lights go down and projected onto the screen is: Skip and Jimmy. In the light of

this projection a man using Canadian crutches enters through the house and takes a front row seat in the audience—this audience member is Jimmy. Once he is seated the scene begins with a voice over the loud speaker.

Skip enters and begins dancing to sleazy disco music, he is wearing the same outfit as before but has added a hard hat and mirrored sunglasses to his ensemble. He strips, not focusing on any one particular audience member, until he is clad only in hat, sunglasses, boots, and jockstrap. As he strips he plays with his cock in the jockstrap until he is hard—the performance concludes when, in the glare of the spotlight, he pulls the jockstrap down to his thighs and jacks himself off. As Skip jerks off onstage Jimmy should be masturbating himself in the audience—though, unlike Skip, he may not cum. When Skip finishes his performance he bows to audience applause, gathers his clothes, and exits as the lights fade.

The lights come up and performers enter to towel off the stage, while they clean up Jimmy, using his crutches, gets onstage. Once the scene is set Jimmy again addresses the audience. He describes his fantasy for the audience—that he is back in the leather bar, the Ambush. There he meets a butch leather top-man named Wanda who manhandles him, pulling his nipples and roughly stroking him. Jimmy is laid out by Wanda and the other leather men in the bar. They proceed to roughly stimulate and masturbate Jimmy who is loving the rough treatment.

Just as Jimmy orgasms the power goes out—bathing the stage in darkness and killing the music, the only sound heard onstage is Jimmy panting. A performer enters the stage and strikes a match to illuminate his face. He addresses the audience: "It seems we're having a little problem with the electricity. We'll have to take a little break now to

see what we can do about it. Why don't you stand up and stretch for a bit. We should get things going again soon." At the end of those directions the house lights come up and the intermission is cued.

The second half of the play resumes with a performer informing the audience that the city, i.e. San Francisco, had turned off the power, he states that this is not an unusual occurrence in gay clubs at this time. The production is now being run on the power of a generator and the players have collected flashlights and hurricane lanterns, just in case, but that the show must go on. The first scene of this second part occurs between Jimmy and Rob. A phone booth is onstage and as Rob is crossing the phone begins to ring—and he chooses to answer. The voice on the other end belongs to Jimmy, who is and unseen voice for the entirety of the scene, and from his tone it becomes clear that this is to be a dirty phone call. Jimmy, though not visible to the audience is looking down on Rob and Rob, through the magic of theatrical contrivance, can see Jimmy silhouetted in his window. The two begin their sexual encounter with Rob removing his cock from his jeans and making himself hard yet he remains aware that he could be caught at any moment. Rob jerks himself off with Jimmy's encouragement and he ejaculates on the glass of the phone booth. Jimmy wishes Rob goodnight and with the encounter over Rob exits the stage. The light stays on the phone booth and a few beats pass once Rob has exited—and the phone begins to ring again.

The performers enter the stage to assemble the next scene and in doing so they hand Rob a dog collar, leash, and dog treats. Rob calls for Tray, a good looking male performer, to join him onstage. Once onstage he commands Tray to strip, which he does obediently, and then Rob collars him and tells him to sit. Tray immediately begins

performing his canine role, being affectionate and obedient yet occasionally nuzzling Rob's crotch and begging for treats. As this occurs Rob sings, without a trace of irony or humor, Stephen Foster's "Old Dog Tray." When the song concludes the two leave the stage and the lights go down.

The next scene begins with the set having been rearranged with a bed, chair and table, upon this table porn magazines and stationary are visible. A performer enters to set the scene for the audience. On the side of the stage with the table and chairs we are in Rob's kitchen on Monday and the side of the stage with the bed is Cort's bedroom and it is Wednesday. With those instructions the performer exits, the lights go down, and when they come back up the scene has begun. We see Rob, sitting at his table and wearing only a jock strap, looking at his pornography and masturbating into the jock strap. Simultaneously the lights come up on Cort, who enters fully clothed and carrying a sealed manila envelope. He sits on the bed and begins to touch himself as he feels and smells the envelope. He opens the package and begins to read from the piece of paper enclosed. As Cort has been reading this letter Rob has brought himself off—timing his orgasm to the word 'stain.' When he reaches the conclusion of the letter Cort can no longer hold back and he removes the jock strap from the packaging and begins to breathe in its scent. Meanwhile, Rob begins to write a letter, reading aloud the same text that Cort received. As he writes Cort is masturbating, caressing himself with the jock strap, and finally places it over his face as he brings himself to orgasm. The two men have each completed their tasks and the scene ends with each man placing their individual jock straps in the envelopes, both smiling as they look at the package in their hands.

The next scene is Cort's coda once again addressed directly to the audience.

The next scene begins immediately after Cort's soliloquy. The performers enter and set up a puppet booth, similar to what one sees when they watch a Punch and Judy show. The lights come up in the puppet booth and Cort takes his place behind the puppet booth. The title of this puppet show: "my first orgasm, when I was fourteen." We see a boy Cort puppet, excited because he has finished his homework, visited by an angel Cort puppet who admonishes him to focus on schoolwork rather than playing. Boy Cort complains about his upcoming assignment and that he is being forced to assist his mother at the church rummage or as he calls it, rubbish sale. But the Angel Cort insists that he behave, do his work, and not do anything wicked—like watching Batman on television. Boy Cort doesn't see the problem watching Batman, yes it's stupid but it makes him feel 'funny,' in a good way. Boy Cort decides to obey the Angel and sits down with schoolwork but before he can even begin reading the Devil Cort puppet appears. The Devil Cort thinks Boy Cort should be watching Batman—he thinks that Boy Cort should dress up as Robin while watching the show; he can pretend that he is having exciting adventures with Batman! Boy Cort runs off to change into his sister's ballet tights and leotard and soon reappears as the Robin Cort puppet. As Robin/Boy Cort waits for the show to begin, the Devil Cort tells him to stuff socks down his trunks, and young Cort agrees. He returns, with padded puppet crotch, and watches Batman, excitedly climbing over the furniture and as he becomes more excited by Batman he begins to rub himself against the furniture until he climaxes. The Devil Cort disappears with a triumphant laugh—and then the Angel Cort appears and accuses Boy/Robin Cort of wetting his pants, which are really his sister's ballet clothes. The Angel Cort begins to shame Boy Cort: "You're probably going to die! And your parents will be so ashamed of you they'll want to forget all about you—

their only son! A monster with a horrible, disgusting, incurable disease! Boy Cort, now thoroughly shamed, hides the evidence, returns to his schoolwork, and promises his mother that he will help her at the rummage sale. As Boy Cort is trying to behave the Angel Cort is there calling him a thief, liar, and monster with a horrible disease. As Boy Cort settles down to his reading the Angel Cort disappears...but then the Devil Cort re-enters and whispers to Boy Cort that he still has his Robin costume and can still dress up and have adventures with Batman. With a final wicked laugh the puppet curtain closes and the lights go out.

The human Cort enters the stage as the puppet booth is being struck from the stage—but he still has the Angel Cort puppet on his right hand and the Devil Cort puppet on his left. Cort addresses the audience, telling them that his game continued for years but he was constantly pulled between the admonitions of the Angel and the temptations of the devil, which often came to him in dreams—and it his dreams that form the link between his past game and present fantasies. He removes the puppets from his hands and begins to speak about the present. He dreams about pig sex, hot nasty sex, the kind he hasn't had for years—his only outlets are jerking off, fantasy, and costumes. In particular he still has a fetish for superhero costumes and tights, a fantasy he assumed was unique to him, until he saw an ad, placed by Billy: "guys in tights turn me on. Let's dress up and play: J/O only. Call 451-4256."

The next part of the scene is the encounter between Billy and Cort and is entirely wordless. An ultraviolet light is turned on and the two men begin a sensuous dance as they undress each other and then outfit each other in either full superhero costumes, skin-tight fluorescent spandex, or footed tights with a tank top—whatever the costume the

effect is that the men glow in the ultraviolet light—and both men put on nylon hoods. The effect is that the men's crotches, asses, legs, and curves are showcased by the skintight material—and the seams are placed in order to accentuate attributes like the ass. The two then begin an erotic dance, groping each other, breathing in the scents of their partners' genitalia, and concluding with Billy jerking off Cort through the layers of spandex—but just as Cort is about to climax...the power goes out. Offstage voices begin snarky commentary in the dark. John comes onstage with a candle and performers enter with flashlights, helping Cort and Billy offstage and dismantling the scenery. After a brief delay a performer informs that they are ready to continue, although the lights have still not come back on. Billy enters and takes the candle as John exits—he to the audience by candlelight.

The next scene begins and Billy is the central performer again. As he speaks a performer pings a triangle steadily throughout. He shares a recent dream; he was visited by the spirit of his deceased Uncle Charlie. Uncle Charlie lights his candle, he is standing behind Billy and the two never look at each other—and Billy addresses the audience throughout the scene. Uncle Charlie is a man in his mid-thirties dressed in the style of the late 1950s, early 1960s, and he holds sheet music in his hand. During the scene offstage performers create 'music' for the scene using sleigh bells which work in concert with the triangle. As Billy remembers how wonderful Charlie was with children, Charlie is trying to give Billy his music, the string quartets he wrote. Charlie tells him the music was his life, but they have never been played, and his voice is in the music. As Charlie explains the importance of the music Billy asks if Charlie was gay—Charlie ignores the question and sadly mentions that he wrote three quartets and one unfinished

one—one quartet for each decade of his life—and no one knew he wrote them. Billy wonders if Charlie's wife Peggy knew of his music—and that is when Charlie responds.

The next scene continues with Billy, but now he is joined by John who is once again dressed as a leather top. He enters carrying a large gear bag and a kerosene lantern—performers set the scene by lowering a hook from the ceiling. When the scene is set and the performers have exited John orders Billy to his side. The two kiss lovingly, John then orders Billy to remove his jeans—and Billy complies with the order. Once Billy is sans pants John hands him ear plugs which he orders Billy to wear—Billy complies. After Billy loses his hearing, John binds Billy's head with an Ace bandage, blinding him. Each wrist is then bound in the bandages, then the hands are tied together with rope, John then leads Billy to the hook, center stage, and ties Billy's bound hands to the hook, but with his back toward the audience. John then produces a lead pipe from his bag and binds Billy's boot-clad feet with the pipe and more rope. Once Billy is completely bound John admires his handiwork and plays with Billy's cock, balls, and tits through the union suit he was wearing under his jeans. After lightly stimulating the blind, deaf, and bound Billy John pulls from his bag a cockstrap which he uses to bind Billy's cock and balls. After playing with Billy's genitals and tits John comes downstage and begins a monologue—all the while Billy is waiting.

At the end of his speech John moves towards Billy, upon whom a faint golden light has begun to shine. As the light intensifies Billy becomes more and more aroused, and John watches intently. The moment the light reaches its peak intensity Billy releases a sustained, stylized, and theatrical orgasm. As Billy slowly comes down from his experience the individual light dims and the stage lights slowly come up. John then

unbinds Billy's genitals, removes the pipe from between his boots, unties his hands, takes off the blindfold, and unplugs his ears. As they kiss and embrace John shares with Billy and the audience a line with dual meanings and incredible profundity: "we got our power back."

As Billy exits and a performer raises the hook John comes downstage to address the audience. John continues speaking, providing a summation of the codas or credos, extolled during the play. As he does so each of the named performers returns to the stage, in the order of their credos. However, their entrance is casual rather than pretentious, and they are no longer dressed as they were when in character. Instead the men are dressed as a haphazard football team—albeit a football team with bits of leather, glitter, and genderfuck drag included in the outfits. As they pose like a football team awaiting a pep talk John puts on the coaches cap and turns to address them. The pep talk is interrupted when one of the performers informs John that when he left the theatre during the blackout he noticed a large police presence outside...so he bolted the door. The men begin to fight amongst themselves at this news. There is a final blackout, three more knocks on the door, and then the lights come up to signal the end of the play.

Title: *Pigman*

Year: 1986

Availability: Unpublished—available in Robert Chesley’s archive at the San Francisco Gay and Lesbian Historical Archive

Actor Requirements: Three actors playing the same primary roles. The remaining roles are to be doubled and played by six men and one woman.

Setting: Various San Francisco locations in the summer and fall of 1985.

Production History: No production history. Chesley brought the play to both LaMaMa in New York and Theatre Rhinoceros in San Francisco but both passed on staging the play.

Act One, Scene One opens with Boy, described as a 30 year old neat, attractive guppy, who in previous years would have sported a mustache and the ‘clone’ look. He introduces himself to the audience as John Goode but his friends call him Boy. Boy considers himself a responsible citizen: he has a good job, a good car, he takes care of himself and he no longer does drugs—though he does allow himself occasional marijuana, cocaine at a party, and he has his alcohol intake under control. The one main thing separating Boy from any other man is that he is gay. He notes that everything was going well; he even had a lover, until two months ago. The scene flashes back onto Philip, whom Boy notes was a beautiful guy. As Boy describes how they met, Philip was Boy’s waiter at brunch and they had moved in together by the end of the evening, we watch Philip write a note, pick up a gun, and go into the bathroom. After two misses, Philip succeeds in shooting himself. Boy enters the scene, returning to the apartment, and finds the note. The note is Philip’s suicide note where he explains that he has killed himself after finding a red spot. He worries that he gave ‘it’ to Boy and he knows who gave ‘it’ to him—he wants Boy to find him and avenge his death. Philip says they met when he was drunk and high, and he did not even think to ask about a condom. The man knows he has AIDS yet continues to sleep with multiple partners, without a condom. He is known as Pigman and can be identified by the pig hoof he wears on a necklace. Philip

is so horrified by what he has read that he steps into the bathroom and finds Philip's body. The scene ends with Boy vomiting.

Act One Scene Two follows immediately after Boy's bout of illness. Boy tells the audience that the week passed by in a dream as he arranged Philip's funeral. After burying his lover he describes coming home to an empty apartment, looking over the city, and remembering Philip's final request. Boy knows Pigman is out there, murdering people with sex. Unsure how to proceed he seeks advice from Dr. Pimangeros, a gay physician and founder of San Francisco's Safe Sex Foundation—when the audience first sees Dr. Pimangeros he is shooting heroin in his office. Pimangeros's dialogue is all in rapid patter throughout the scene as his attention is divided between Boy and the multiple phone calls interrupting them. Boy shows the Doctor Philip's suicide note and requests any support he or the Safe Sex Foundation can provide. As the doctor peruses the note while on the phone he states, in error, "I am Pigman." He then tells Boy to go home, get some rest, and to put all the unpleasantness behind him. Boy continues on, pressing Pimangeros to help him stop Pigman. Pimangeros wonders what Boy wants him, or the foundation to do. All they can provide is education and the promotion of safe sex. He writes Boy a prescription and tells him to go home and forget Pigman. The scene ends with Boy ushered out of the office and Pimangeros on another call.

The next scene opens with Boy determined to find Pigman, regardless of what Pimangeros had told him, and he begins his journey. He goes to Ringold Alley, where he encounters two drunk 'maidens' stumbling down the street. He pretends to cruise the men all the while looking for Pigman's trademark necklace. He then shares a joint with Gerald, who starts to cruise Boy aggressively but Boy rejects his advances and instead

asks whether Gerald has ever seen Pigman, he tells him that Pigman is spreading AIDS. Gerald begins to tell Boy that he has it all wrong, that AIDS comes from the Mayor's office, that Diane Feinstein came up with the idea after killing Harvey Milk. As Boy listens to Gerald's conspiracy theory, Pigman has entered the scene unseen and begins an orgy of oral and anal sex with the Ringgold 'maidens.' Boy is only alerted to his presence when Pigman begins making pig snorts during his orgasm. Boy begins shouting for police and blowing his whistle but is mistaken for a gay basher and beaten by the 'maidens' as Pigman exits.

Act One Scene Four has Boy continuing his journey, this time looking for Pigman in the bushes of Buena Vista Park. As he walks through the park, decrying the disgusting activities taking place, he comes across a Bush Queen. The Bush Queen is bent over with his bare buttocks visible to anyone passing by. Boy describes this type of man as 'garbage,' the Bush Queen is aroused by who he thinks is his next sex partner. As the Bush Queen grows more and more turned on by Boy's degradation, Boy is horrified and demands the Bush Queen stand-up and pull up his pants. The Bush Queen, unsure of what is happening, does so. Boy wants to know why the Bush Queen is behaving the way he is, whether he has heard of AIDS, and if he is afraid to die? The Bush Queen responds that he would rather die of AIDS than boredom, that he is only alive when he is having sex in the park, and that Boy should mind his own business. Boy returns to the task at hand and asks if the Bush Queen has ever seen the man with the pig's hoof around his neck. The Bush Queen says yes, calls him Dr. Dick, and states that he has had sex with man. Boy responds that Pigman killed his lover and is out to stop him. The Bush Queen, thinking that Boy is crazy, directs him deeper into the park. The Bush Queen once again

drops his trousers as Boy exits. Pigman then enters and begins having sex with the Bush Queen.

Act One Scene Five opens on a panting and exhausted Boy, who spent the night walking the park looking for Pigman. Dispirited, he returns to his apartment, calls in sick to work, and begins to catch up on his messages. First, he receives a message from his mother inviting him, and any special lady friends, for Christmas. Boy explains to the audience that he hasn't told his parents he's gay, that they had campaigned with Anita Bryant and just wouldn't understand. The next call is from an old college friend, Julia, who tells him it is very important that he call. He calls her and she immediately begins asking about his health, and if he's sure he doesn't have AIDS? Boy tells her is fine, he has changed his lifestyle, and he is as sure as anyone can be. Julia's concern is that Boy could have given her AIDS, due to the long incubation period. Boy doesn't know why she suspects him: they never had penetrative sex in college, only oral sex. Julia's concern is that she is getting married and she wants to insure she hasn't exposed her fiancé. Boy snaps at her for automatically thinking of him and AIDS but they conclude their conversation on better terms. After hanging up he checks the final message on the machine: it is a series of pig snorts. Boy is horrified that Pigman has his number!

Act Two opens with Boy more determined than ever to find Pigman. He recounts his journey into San Francisco's sexual underbelly and the various men he meets all speak to the audience. Throughout the scene a shadow play of various sex acts is being projected behind the actors. First, he comes across a Married Man in a porn theatre who explains he comes into these spaces in order to get oral sex; then he meets a Hustler on the street who tells the audience that he thinks he has AIDS but he has no choice but to

keep hustling in order to survive; in a porn shop Boy meets a Fat Queen who waxes rhapsodic about oral sex and his need to be used, regardless of the risk; in an alley he meets a Clone cruising for anonymous sex. The Clone points out that these encounters could be incredibly meaningful, and that his now dead lover began as just another anonymous partner, and they loved each other. Boy then seeks Pigman in a bar where he meets an Alcoholic Faggot who shares his sob story; next, he goes into a watersports club where he meets a Latrine Queen. The Latrine Queen explains that he had beat AIDS with clean living and positive thinking. Boy leaves the Latrine Queen to search at a fisting party where he meets a Fistee who explains the spiritual experience he has being fisted. As the Fistee looks out over the streets, remembering friends who had died, and sees them beckoning him to join them. After leaving the fisting party, Boy explains that he searched for weeks with no signs of Pigman and he was shocked by the degradation he had witnessed, and stunned that men still went into the few bathhouses that remained open. The act ends with two bathhouse patrons telling Boy that what occurred behind closed doors was no one else's business. Boy is left shouting at them as they close the door.

Act Two Scene Two opens with Boy, who has grown tired and jaded and bitter throughout his long and fruitless search, nursing a cup of coffee at a late-night diner while he engages Homer, the short order cook with a doctorate in history, in a philosophical discussion. Boy doesn't understand why all these men continue to fuck and he grows angry when Homer defends the right of people to action different ways. A young man named Clyde who is described as young, pretty, and clean-shaven, has also been listening to Boy and joins him in the booth. As they talk about how terrible gay

culture is, including the fight for erotic freedom, it becomes clear that Boy and Clyde are perfect for each other. Boy invites Clyde over to his place and the two kiss primly as they leave the diner. As they leave Boy does not notice the customer he almost walks into as he is exiting — Pigman. Homer greets the customer as Doc as the lights fade.

Boy takes Clyde home with him and then invites him to spend the night — but only because of how late it was and how tired they were. Boy's bedroom is described as decreed with posters from the safe sex foundation "proclaiming the joys of hugging, dry kissing, massage, cuddly, fantasy and mutual masturbation." As Boy and Clyde prepare for bed, stripped down to their jockey shorts, Boy offers Clyde a massage and as he massages he monologues his anti-sex beliefs. During this speech Boy was surreptitiously checking Clyde for any marks, lesions, and swollen glands. Finding nothing, Boy lets Clyde give him a massage. Clyde returns the subject of Pig Man and believes that he may be able to help Boy in his search. In his suicide note Philip identified the Ambush as the bar where he met Pig Man and Clyde believes that that friend of a friend may be able to help them find and identify Pig Man. Any excitement over this new source of information is muted when Clyde finds a red spot on Boy's hindquarters — Boy nervously laughs that this is nothing more than a birthmark. Clyde's discovery coincides with the phone ringing, the machine picks up, and the end of Act Two is the same as Act One: a message of pig snorts and a low sexy chuckle plays as Clyde and Boy look at each other in horror.

Act Three Scene One finds Boy telling the audience that he had lied about the birthmark and that he has experiencing symptoms, but since he did not intend to exchange fluids with Clyde, there was no harm in the white lie. Clyde and Boy have come to the Ambush, both dressed as Clones. Among the bar patrons are Homer, Gerald,

and the Fistee. Boy points out that the Ambush was celebrating that evening: Harvey Milk's murderer Dan White had committed suicide earlier that day. As Boy and Clyde mingle amongst the patrons they make snide comments but finally meet up with Clyde's roommate's friend. As Gerald and Homer hold court, expounding upon their conspiracy theories, Clyde tells Boy that Pigman has been there and that his telephone number is on the bathroom wall. Boy then asks Bart, the man they came to the Ambush to meet, about a man with a pig hoof's necklace. Bart calls him Dr. Pigdick and explains that the totem around his neck is not a hoof but a penis. Bart promises to call Clyde if he can help the two men find Pigman, Boy then goes to write down the phone number. As Boy returns from the bathroom, he is puzzled. The number was disconnected, yet the number and the handwriting seemed familiar to Boy.

Act Three Scene Two has Boy and Clyde out of their Ambush costumes and at a dead end. Clyde then enters with an invitation to a Halloween party that Pigman will be attending. As Clyde focuses on planning their costumes, Boy goes to Dr. Pimangeros for a check-up. Like in his previous appearance, the Doctor is doing drugs before Boy enters the room. Pimangeros begins by lecturing Boy about not following his previous orders: to not look for Pigman. He withholds Boy's test results unless Boy promises to abandon his search for Pigman. Boy promises to stop...after the Halloween party. Pimangeros then tells Boy that the test results were inconclusive and requires an exam. As he examines Boy, he presses him for information about his search for Pigman. Boy explains that he intends to expose Pigman, at the party, as a murderer and if the unmasking does not stop him, he would take drastic measures to stop him. Pimangeros finishes his exam and promptly hospitalizes him for further tests, which means Boy will miss the party.

Act Three Scene Three begins immediately after Boy has been taken from the doctor's office. In a choreographed medical whirlwind Boy is panicked about leaving the hospital. As he is poked and prodded by the nurses, and drugged against his will, Boy begins to voice a fantasy. He dreams of being with Clyde, their love transcending the need to exchange bodily fluids, and he wants to be married in the Mormon Church. The scene ends when he is served dinner, pork chops, and the sight of the dish cuts through the drug haze and he remembers Pigman. He breaks loose and runs offstage.

Act Three Scene Four opens on Clyde masturbating to cartoons when Boy suddenly rushes in. As the two get into their costumes Boy hides the same gun Philip used to kill himself in the stuffed animal he carries with his costume. The two finish dressing and exit for the party.

Act Three Scene Five opens on the party as guests mingle and banter. Boy and Clyde, dressed as Buster Brown and Shirley Temple, and look for Pigman. The two split up to search and as Boy exits Pigman, dressed in evening wear and a pig's mask, enters and begins flirting with an oblivious Clyde. Boy enters the scene and confronts Pigman, who seems surprised to see Boy. As Pigman asks what Boy intends to do, he grabs Clyde and threatens to exchange bodily fluids by force. Boy pulls out the gun and points it at Pigman. Pigman throws Clyde to the floor and asks what Boy wants him to do? Boy responds that he wants Pigman to remove his mask and reveal his identity. The other party guests seem surprised that Boy doesn't know—the man is the host of the party. Boy tells the guests that Pigman has been spreading AIDS, of being Pigman, and of murdering his lover. The guests mock Boy and Clyde throughout the stand-off. Pigman then reconstructs 'the crime' he is being accused of: having lots of sex, leaving his number

scrawled on walls, then finding spots on his body and shooting himself in the head.

Pigman tells Boy that Philip killed Philip, and that Philip's phone number was the one scrawled on the Ambush bathroom wall. Philip murdered himself rather than take responsibility for his actions. Pigman taunts Boy about his relationship with Clyde. Boy senses that he is losing the battle so he brings up the man he knows can stop Pigman, the founder of the Safe Sex Foundation. Pigman counters by asking whether Boy has been having safe sex. When Boy screams that his sex life is none of Pigman's business, Pigman responds that that is exactly the point. He then voluntarily removes his mask—Pigman is Dr. Pimangeros. Boy, realizing that he has lost, leaves with Clyde.

In the epilogue Clyde and Boy, still in their costumes, address the audience. They reveal that their encounter with Pigman has taught them the dangers of freedom without responsibility and they have decided to get married. The two are planning a church wedding and they intend to wait fifteen years, or until there is an AIDS vaccine, before having sex. They have also decided to adopt a child and move out of the city. The play ends with them wishing the audience a good night as they chastely kiss.

Title: *The Dog Plays ((Wild) Person, Tense (Dog); The Deploration of Rover; Hold)*

Year: 1989

Availability: Published in Alamo Square Press's 1990 collection *Hard Plays/Stiff Parts*.

Actor Requirements: *(Wild) Person, Tense (Dog)* requires two actors, race not specified; *The Deploration of Rover* is for three actors, race not specified; and *Hold* requires two actors, race not specified

Setting: *(Wild) Person, Tense (Dog)* is set in a San Francisco leather bar. The only necessity of staging is a large digital clock with red numerals; *The Deploration of Rover* occurs on a bare stage with only a large display frame for Rover's memorial; *Hold* is set in Dog's San Francisco apartment and requires a bed.

Production History: Presented as a staged reading in New York by Three Dollar Bill Theater at Apple Corps Theatre in February of 1990.

(Wild) Person, Tense (Dog), is set in a San Francisco leather bar—but it is a nightmarish version of the bar. The scene is lit with faint red and amber lighting. Within the space are mannequins, with spotlights shining on their crotches. The only sound heard is the music, suffocating percussive beats that increase the tension of the scene. Initially the only visible thing onstage is a large digital clock displaying red numerals. The clock works in 'real time' throughout the majority of the play but a loud ticking is often heard to emphasize the silence in pauses.

Dog enters the bar, edges around the stationary mannequins, and immediately begins speaking directly to the audience. He is unnerved because just outside the bar, he saw "a ghost, but he ain't dead yet." As Dog pauses and breaks his contact with the audience, to fetch a bottle of water, the music once again begins to play. The sound continues until Dog returns and begins to once again speak to the spectators. Dog is not simply rattled because he has seen someone he assumed was dead—he is upset because this 'ghost' represents the larger disturbing trend occurring in San Francisco's gay community.

Dog cannot even remember the name of the person he has seen, but he knows that he has seen him before. Dog shakes himself out of his morose thoughts. He tells the

audience that he came out to the bar to get away from being depressed, that there is still more to life than the unrelenting sadness experienced every day. Dog wants to relax, to feel good on a Saturday night, like the old days. He advises the audience to listen to the music while he begins to cruise the bar. Buck, 'the ghost' enters the bar. Dog continues to cruise the bar, unaware of Buck's entrance, but then he does see Dog and the two begin a dialogue without ever really speaking to each other.

Dog tries to make Buck feel more comfortable in the bar by revealing his own seropositive status—he removes his jacket which reveals his hidden K.S lesions. Buck is not impressed, or mollified, by Dog's attempt to find common ground. Dog is finally able to look at Buck and the two begin speaking to each other. Buck tells Dog their story. He describes their initial sexual encounter, a fast oral session in the park, and then a more intimate assignation in Buck's apartment. He notes that there was never a third time, but they would see each other, smile and remember what they had shared. Buck notes that he left San Francisco, moving to Texas and then Florida, where he became ill. He returned to San Francisco and found himself on the street and that was when he saw Dog again:

As Buck has been talking Dog has been remembering/re-living their sexual encounter. Both men climax when Dog remembers Buck's name and when Buck reveals that he is Dog's future. As Dog recovers from his orgasm, Buck exits the scene. Dog once again turns and speaks to the audience. Dog is left alone onstage as the music rises. The clock, which has kept real time throughout the play, begins to speed up, faster and faster, until the stage goes black and the clock blinks out.

The Deploration of Rover opens on Fido, a fat faggot in his forties, who leads the audience on an evening walk through the Castro. During the walk he narrates how times

have changed but San Francisco still remains a haven for young gay people in spite of all the loss.

Fido notes as he walks down the street that he never fit into the Castro throng—he wasn't beautiful enough for those men—but now, now the neighborhood has become his. Not because the beauty has been lost but because the way that men relate to each other has changed. The men have come together to fight a war and in their struggle for survival their bonds have become less focused upon physical attributes and more on emotional support. During the walk the lights come up on a window display center stage. In the window is a framed photograph of a young man, large enough to be visible to the audience, with a small placard underneath, and a bouquet of yellow roses next of the picture frame. Fido stops and begins to speak to the photograph of Rover.

Fido notes that he did not know Rover but his death is no less impactful to him. Rover represents those million beautiful men who dazzled him and his loss is one more strike against the community and the culture created in the Castro. Rover was part of the world before—when a man's beauty was touchable, even briefly, and a sense of belonging and joy was found in that acts of touching, being touched, or witnessing the touching.

As Fido has been speaking to the picture, Dog, a forty-five year old San Francisco faggot, strolls onto the scene. Fido comments about the beautiful yellow roses and wonders if the color is significant. Dog comes up behind him and notes that they mean exactly what Fido is thinking—Rover was the Golden Shower Queen and the yellow roses signify his status. The two men begin to speak, brought together by this informal memorial site, about Rover as Dog had known him personally. Dog explains that he had

heard Rover was ill, and had meant to be in touch, but now he sees he's too late. He and Rover had been roommates during the 1970s and Rover had loved to party. Fido mentions that he works in an AIDS ward at the hospital, so he sees young men wasting away before him every day, and even with all he sees it hurts to see these memorials. To only get to know these men who he had loved, even without knowing them, only after their death. Dog shares that he did love Rover, but that loving Rover was difficult—Dog cleaned up his act but Rover kept on partying, addicted to speed which gave him the energy that defined his beauty. The Rover he had known was damaged before the speed though—an orphan, raised by fundamentalist grandparents, and then being drafted to Vietnam. Dog notes that after Vietnam Rover did not want to do anything but party, even though he was talented, he wasted it all on the party. Dog notes that Rover did not slow down when the paradigm shifted in 1981.

Fido explains that Rover's choices, however unintentional, did have consequences—and Fido has to live with them, and will die from them, as he has been infected. Dog notes that he never accepted Rover's logic but in the end, his main hope is that Rover did not suffer. Fido points out that this wish does not mean anything as suffering exists around them on a grand scale—and in the face of that suffering, and what he sees on the AIDS ward, Fido is able to let go of his bitterness by asserting that nobody deserves what AIDS is doing to them.

Dog agrees with Fido, that no one deserves the suffering, while describing how Rover, and the parties, gave him some of the best times of his life. He refuses to apologize for the fun he had and he refuses to apologize for Rover because, in the end, Rover was a good person and a good friend. As the two men stare at the photograph Dog

says goodbye and then begins to weep, Fido pulls him into a hug and holds him while he cries, when Dog breaks the embrace he acknowledges that the tears are not just for Rover. Fido, echoing his opening speech, tells Dog that there is hope. Sensing that their time together has come to an end, Fido and Dog introduce themselves and thank each other for the shared moments. Dog continues walking and Fido is left alone before the picture of Rover. Then the absent Rover in the picture is replaced by the physical presence of Rover. Rover begins to dance ecstatically within the frame. As Rover dances Fido speaks directly to the presence before him, enthralled to be so close to the beauty he was unable to touch during Rover's short life. Fido finishes his speech, his eulogy for Rover and all of the Rovers lost in San Francisco, and Rover finishes his dance. As he stands, panting, he looks over and sees Fido for the first time. He picks up one of the yellow roses and reaches through the picture frame to give the flower to Fido with a blessing. Fido, unable to look away as he watches this man who he loved, without ever having known him, responds with his own blessing. Rover disappears entirely and Fido is left alone, before an empty memorial, holding a flower.

Hold is set in Dog's San Francisco apartment. Dog stands and looks out of his window. Behind Dog, in bed, sits Lad. Lad begins talking about a dream. Dog inquires, in what seems to be an odd question, if that is Lad he hears. Lad laughs and Dog urges him to continue describing his dream. While Lad speaks to Dog directly, Dog neither looks at nor directs his comments to Lad. In the dream he has driven out of the city, heading north, to find clarity, air, and the stars. As Lad exalts the freedom he has found, Dog undresses, revealing that he is covered with Kaposi Sarcoma lesions. Lad concludes

his dream with a tearful, ecstatic vision of finding all of his deceased gay brethren waiting to greet him.

The conclusion of Lad's speech, and Dog's unwillingness to look at him, reveals the truth about this 'dream.' Lad has not awoken from a dream—Lad is revealing what he has seen because Lad has died. After Lad has shared his dream, Dog offers to tell a different story—the story of how Lad went away. He does not tell it to take away the beauty of Lad's vision but to share the reality of what it was like for those left behind. *Hold* ends with Dog letting Lad go and Lad disappearing. As Dog is left alone he once again looks out the window to San Francisco General Hospital and remarks that he will be there soon.

Accessing the Works of Robert Chesley

Primary Archive:

Robert Chesley's Papers (1965-1990) can be accessed at:

San Francisco's Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, and Transgender Historical Society
657 Mission St., Suite 300
San Francisco, CA 94105
Phone: (415) 777-5455
Fax: (415) 777-5576

His collection features 12 cartons, 2 oversize boxes, and 2 oversize folders. Per the finding aid: The Robert Chesley papers document his life as a playwright, theater critic and sexual outlaw. The collection is divided into eight series: Correspondence; Journals and "Crazy Books"; Writings, including plays, short stories, novels, and journalism; Writings by Others; Subject Files; Personalia; Photographs and Posters; and Audio. Highlights include nearly 20 years of correspondence and over 10 years of personal diaries, drafts of plays and materials related to his prolific career as a journalist and theater critic, and souvenirs from his sexual encounters. A finding aid is available at http://www.glbthistory.org/research/FA/glbths_1993_06_RobertChesley_FA.pdf

Full access to the archive does not require membership to the society; however research hours are limited to the first and third Saturday of each month, from 1pm-5pm. Members can access the reading room Wednesday through Friday, from 11am-5pm, in addition to the Saturday hours—appointments are necessary. Membership fees for students range from \$30-49, regular membership ranges from \$50-99.

Additional Archive:

Reed College Library
S.E. Woodstock Boulevard
Portland, OR 97202

Chesley's alma mater has within their Special Collections all of Chesley's musical scores, unpublished plays and journalism (1976-78). The archive at Reed College would be most useful for those interested in exploring Chesley's musical output.

The Special Collections are open to all researchers but it is highly recommended that researchers reach out to Gay Walker, the Special Collections Librarian, so she can assist in locating and providing the needed material. Her contact information is Email: walkerg@reed.edu; Phone: 503-777-7782

Related Archive:

The papers for San Francisco's Theatre Rhinoceros (1968-2009) are located at the University of California, Berkley's Bancroft Library. The collection is open to researchers. As many of the libraries archival materials are stored offsite it is recommended that researchers contact the library in advance to insure material is onsite. The Theatre Rhino was Chesley's primary theatrical producer in San Francisco and this archive may provide valuable supporting research into his productions and later tensions with the Theatre.

The archive consists of 26 cartons, 1 box, and 2 oversize folders. These consist of Production files: materials related to productions, co-productions, benefits, proposed productions, theatre rental, award ceremonies, contests, and anniversaries/seasons; Playscripts: produced playscripts and correspondence, playscripts and other materials regarding submissions for consideration; Fundraising files: correspondence, applications for grants, and related materials; Staff files: correspondence and other materials of Artistic Directors, Associate Artistic Director, General Manager, and Secretary of the Board; Organization files: correspondence, agreements, contracts, leases, Board of Directors files, Facilities Committee files, press clippings, general staff files, and other organizational related materials; Chronological files: primarily Board of Directors minutes and other organizational files arranged chronologically; and Audio/Visual: materials documenting productions. A more detailed finding aid is available at: [http://www.oac.cdlib.org/findaid/ark:/13030/c8n29z94/entire_text/?query=Theatre Rhinoceros Records](http://www.oac.cdlib.org/findaid/ark:/13030/c8n29z94/entire_text/?query=Theatre%20Rhinoceros%20Records)

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