

# The WOW Factor: Lesbian Representation and Impact in Late-20th Century Theatre

2019

Brenna L. Maginness  
*University of Central Florida*

Find similar works at: <https://stars.library.ucf.edu/honorsthesis>

University of Central Florida Libraries <http://library.ucf.edu>

Part of the [Playwriting Commons](#)

---

## Recommended Citation

Maginness, Brenna L., "The WOW Factor: Lesbian Representation and Impact in Late-20th Century Theatre" (2019). *Honors Undergraduate Theses*. 483.  
<https://stars.library.ucf.edu/honorsthesis/483>

This Open Access is brought to you for free and open access by the UCF Theses and Dissertations at STARS. It has been accepted for inclusion in Honors Undergraduate Theses by an authorized administrator of STARS. For more information, please contact [lee.dotson@ucf.edu](mailto:lee.dotson@ucf.edu).

THE WOW FACTOR:  
LESBIAN REPRESENTATION AND IMPACT  
IN LATE-20<sup>TH</sup> CENTURY THEATRE

by

BRENNA MAGINNESS

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements  
for the Honors in the Major Program in Theatre  
in the College of Arts and Humanities  
and in the Burnett Honors College  
at the University of Central Florida  
Orlando, Florida

Spring Term 2019

Thesis Chair: Vandy Wood

## **ABSTRACT**

The intent of this thesis is to investigate the influence of 1980's and 1990's lesbian playwrights on modern queer representation in theatre. By analyzing the successful works of troupes and artists born out of the Women's One World (WOW) Café, it became apparent that the greatest changes in lesbian portrayal on stage came from queer and feminist authorship. Additionally, WOW Café became the common denominator in the success of many lesbian playwrights due to the freedom it gave its writers and performers. As an independent theatre, WOW allowed its members to experiment with few rules, and offered a stage to pieces too experimental, feminist, or queer to see commercial Broadway success. Thesis discussion includes analysis of historically homophobic theatre, the techniques and topics conveyed in the work of The Five Lesbian Brothers and Split Britches, and the importance of WOW as a stepping stone for the success of plays like Lisa Kron's *Well*. Lesbian-centric work is often left out of theatre history in classrooms even today, and by diving deeper into the important history of queer women in drama, the intent of this thesis is to add to the academia in a way that helps future lesbian artists, performers, and students recognize themselves in the narrative.

## **ACKNOWLEDGMENTS**

I would like to thank Vandy Wood for her constant support and guidance throughout the thesis process, as well as Dan Jones and Aaron C. Thomas for their encouragement. I would also like to thank the Burnett Honors College for providing the scholarship funds that allowed me to travel to New York City, and the women at WOW Café who were so inviting during my visit.

Thank you to my family for always cheering me on and supporting my diverse academic interests.

Finally, thank you to Karoline Ingalls for always carrying my books.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

<b>CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION</b> .....	1
<b>CHAPTER TWO: KEY TERMS AND DEFINITIONS IN LGBTQ HISTORY</b> .....	4
<b>CHAPTER THREE: EARLY 1900’S LESBIAN DRAMA</b> .....	9
I. <i>The Children’s Hour</i> by Lillian Hellman .....	9
II. <i>The Captive</i> By Edouard Bourdet .....	12
III. <i>The God Of Vengeance</i> By Sholem Asch .....	16
IV. Obscenity and Legal Action .....	20
<b>CHAPTER FOUR: SPLIT BRITCHES</b> .....	24
I. <i>Split Britches</i> .....	24
II. <i>Little Women</i> .....	28
<b>CHAPTER FIVE: THE FIVE LESBIAN BROTHERS</b> .....	32
I. <i>Brave Smiles... another lesbian tragedy</i> .....	32
II. <i>The Secretaries</i> .....	36
<b>CHAPTER SIX: LESBIAN REPRESENTATION ON BROADWAY</b> .....	41
I. <i>Indecent</i> by Paula Vogel.....	41
II. <i>Well</i> by Lisa Kron .....	46
<b>CONCLUSION</b> .....	49
<b>REFERENCES</b> .....	51

## CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

In 1997, lesbian performer, playwright, and director Carolyn Gage published “Take Stage!: How to Direct and Produce a Lesbian Play,” a source book built to cover every aspect of creating a lesbian production from choosing a script and cast to handling publicity and protesters. Her guide, published almost at the turn of the century, proved she was no stranger to the unique predicaments that arise when trying to publish work by, about, and for lesbians. She writes in the introduction, “Lesbian theatres, like Lesbians, are not supposed to exist. The men occupy center stage in patriarchy. Lesbians have no place in this theatre. It is time for us to take stage.”<sup>1</sup> Gage declared this in the opening pages of her book after over a decade of queer writing and performance, seemingly as both a warning and a call to action. For lesbians in theatre in the 1980’s and 1990’s, the most successful performance space was often in independent women’s theaters. Still, plays featuring lesbian characters were not a new concept— some like Lillian Hellman’s *The Children’s Hour*, which was published in 1937, gained traction with mainstream audiences, though Hellman’s play still portrayed a lesbian character as scandalous, ashamed, and “sad and dirty.”<sup>2</sup> Other plays in the first half of the century, like Sholem Asch’s *The God of Vengeance* made waves by alternatively portraying love between queer women as pure and

---

<sup>1</sup> Carolyn Gage, introduction to *Take Stage!: How To Direct And Produce A Lesbian Play* (repr., Lanham, Maryland: Scarecrow Press, Inc, 1997), xi.

<sup>2</sup> Nina Rapi, "'That's Why You Are So Queer': The Representation Of Lesbian Sexuality In The Theatre", in *Daring To Dissent: Lesbian Culture From Margin To Mainstream* (repr., London: Cassell, 1994), 45.

innocent through the characters of Rifkele, the daughter of a brothel owner, and Manke, a woman working in the brothel below Rifkele's room. This positive representation on Broadway ultimately led to the company being taken to court on indecency charges in New York City in 1923—16 years after the play's premiere in Europe.<sup>3</sup>

Notably, these plays and a handful of other early works featuring same-sex female relationships were not written by queer women, and did not often exist without backlash or making headlines. In plays like *The Children's Hour* and the similarly antagonizing *The Captive* by Edouard Bourdet, lesbians functioned as the enemy and drove the conflict of the piece. Their identity, simply by existing, caused trouble. As plays like these gained attention and progressed onto larger stages with larger audiences, their characterizations cemented in the minds of heterosexual and cisgender crowds whose exposure to lesbianism was often limited to what was presented to them by authors also working outside of the LGBTQ community, further fueling the presentation of lesbians as the antagonists. This limitation of lesbian representation to authors outside of the community consists largely of the issue in queer characters of the early half of the century, and while pieces like *The God of Vengeance* proved that it was possible to depict positive queer interaction, it would not be without social and legal consequence.

Unlike previous portrayals of lesbian women in theatre, playwrights and troupes in the 1980's like *Split Britches*, *Five Lesbian Brothers*, Lisa Kron, and Holly Hughes created positive examples of queer women on stage, whose conflicts began to involve less grappling with the

---

<sup>3</sup> Charles Isherwood, "Review: In 'God Of Vengeance,' A Nice Jewish Family Lives Above A Brothel", *Nytimes.Com*, 2016, <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/12/29/theater/god-of-vengeance-review.html>.

shame of loving women and more acceptance, if not celebration, of these relationships. This was achieved through further dependence on independent theaters, where playwrights and actors had more freedom for experimentation. Through these small companies, particularly the Women's One World (WOW) Café Theatre, lesbian playwrights began to reclaim their characterization from discriminatory authors of the first half of the century, and created a new wave of theatre; one specifically tailored to a queer audience and community.

An investigation into anti- and pro-queer theatre in the last century culminates in the focus of my research; the impact of lesbian playwrights and theatres in the creative explosion of queer women's theatre of the 1980's and '90s. By detailing the important changes Kron, Hughes, and other authors made to the representation of lesbians on stage in this time, we can begin to understand the important transition for theatrical literature on queer women from derogatory early productions, to inclusive, small venues of the 1980's, to the directly-influenced Broadway successes of Paula Vogel's *Indecent* and Lisa Kron's *Well* in the 2000's.



## CHAPTER TWO: KEY TERMS AND DEFINITIONS IN LGBTQ HISTORY

For clarity, I will begin this thesis by defining key terms in the LGBTQ community that will become a consistent part of the language throughout my analysis. Because many identities and terms used in my research originated in or have evolved from community slang, it is important to define how these words will be used for this specific project. Often, I use the term *queer* to refer to women who engage sexually or romantically with other women. An umbrella term like *queer* allows me to include women who may not self-identify as lesbians, same-sex relationships where one or both women might identify as bisexual, singular bisexual women, and women with individual or unlabeled gay experiences. The term *lesbian* will also be heavily used throughout my research, as a term to describe women who engage in sexual and/or romantic relationships with other women. Throughout this thesis, the term will also be used to describe specific relationships between two women, whether they consider themselves to be individually bisexual or lesbian.

Still, I would be remiss to engage in these terms, among others, without recognizing their difficult histories and the way certain words have been both used oppressively and reclaimed from within the oppressed community itself, most importantly the word *queer*. While in the 19<sup>th</sup>-century the word was used derogatively towards LGBTQ people, queer activists in the 1980's and 90's began to use the term as a political reclamation. As noted in an anonymous leaflet distributed at a New York pride march in 1990, reclaiming *queer* was "a way of reminding us

how we are perceived by the rest of the world.”<sup>4</sup> As the leaflet suggests, and as has been supported by other LGBTQ individuals over time, the gender neutrality of the word *queer* suggests a unification of the community, as an umbrella term that all LGBTQ people can fall under. As the anonymous author says, “QUEER can be a rough word but it is also a sly and ironic weapon we can steal from the homophobe’s hands and use against him.”<sup>5</sup> As may be apparent from its history and reclamation, the acceptance of terms like *queer* greatly depends upon the author. With shows like *Queer Eye* and the emergence of “queer studies” in academia, the term is more often benign than not, but the context of the word and queerness of the speaker should at least be considered when attempting to judge a piece’s intent.

To investigate queer terms and history, I turned to Thomas R. Dunn’s book *Queerly Remembered: Rhetorics for Representing GLBTQ Past*. In his research, Dunn investigates the history of queer language and its evolution, both culturally and individually through case studies. I believe that by observing these studies, we can begin to recognize and understand the difference between the use of certain terms and the mindsets of their users over time. For example, in 1914, seven years into the run of *The God of Vengeance* and about a decade prior to the publication of *The Captive*, sexologist and physician Dr. William J. Robinson published his opinions on homosexual “inverts,” as was the “prevailing medical term for a homosexual in the early twentieth century.”<sup>6</sup> *Inverts* is just one example of the language surrounding homosexuality in the early 1900’s. In the brief excerpt of Robinson’s study, words quoted include: “inverts,

---

<sup>4</sup> "Queers Read This: A Leaflet Distributed At Pride March In NY", Qrd.Org, 1990, <http://www.qrd.org/qrd/misc/text/queers.read.this>.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Thomas R. Dunn, *Queerly Remembered: Rhetorics For Representing GLBTQ Past* (repr., Columbia, South Carolina: University of South Carolina Press, 2016), 1.

abnormality, inferior,” and “step-children of nature.”<sup>7</sup> Clearly, Robinson represented a subcategory of doctors and medical professionals who viewed homosexuals as lesser-than individuals.

It is because of this clear negative judgment that Robinson is such an intriguing window into the shift happening in the twentieth century. Within a decade, he had been otherwise convinced, reporting in an article instead that his view on homosexuals had “become broader, more tolerant, perhaps even sympathetic.”<sup>8</sup> Robinson had reevaluated his point of view as a doctor and concluded, as was the growing belief at the time, that homosexuals were not *inverts*, but rather members of a separate, third sex.<sup>9</sup> It is monumental and necessary to recognize the speed of Robinson’s transition towards acceptance in the 1910’s and 20’s, as it sets the scene for our understanding of the speed of evolution that comes with the renaissance of queer drama in the 1980’s and 90’s. This definition of gay men and lesbians as a third sex fits with the ideology in Edouard Bourdet’s *The Captive*, as will be seen and discussed in the following chapter. While Bourdet’s play was published in 1926, a year after Robinson’s article, it was a similar exposure to gay and lesbian representation to which Dunn says Robinson attributed his growth from “antagonism to neutrality.”<sup>10</sup> As a counselor and researcher, he was exposed to many gay men and women who defended their “condition” through reputable literary writers, including Shakespeare, Byron, and Whitman.<sup>11</sup> Though it is clear through his report that Robinson himself did not believe in the reclamation of famous artists as gay by his patients, the observation still

---

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 2.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

stands as an important one to the overarching theme of this thesis; the importance of representation in queer authors and themes for queer audiences. Even when literary representation of gay and lesbian characters was lacking and often misrepresented, LGBTQ people still managed to find connections through the arts, and grasped at them whenever possible. And if this was a commonplace enough coping mechanism and self-assurance in the 1920's, there is no doubt that it was just as necessary in the later half of the century when lesbian playwrights began to take a more prominent and recognized role in the arts. This is part of what makes this era so interesting and necessary to study in an examination of queer literature and drama—in the 1920's we are right on the precipice of a nation's transition from disinterest and aversion to reluctant neutrality and interest in the Other.

While in the 1920's we are far from the acceptance of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, we cannot speak to the progression in late-20<sup>th</sup> century queer women's theatre without being educated on how far we have come, and the language and culture we are reclaiming. Thus, it is entirely necessary for me to begin this thesis first with a focus on early-20<sup>th</sup> century opinions on, and plays about, queer women. Only then will I be able to properly speak to where we are now in queer literature. Therefore, the intent of this thesis is to focus on the important transformations happening in the recording of queer and lesbian stories in the 1980's and 1990's—and how this period contrasts from the less laudatory work of the first decades of the century. As Dunn notes, “the erasure of entire sets of people from history also functions to sustain dominant culture... the early-twentieth-century gay men and lesbians who drew upon the past in their attempts to persuade Robinson ask us likewise today to reflect upon how contemporary GLBTQ persons in Western

culture utilize their pasts to appeal to audiences or publics.”<sup>12</sup> This mindset is largely important to analysis of modern queer writers and texts. By not elaborating on the history of the LGBTQ community and its literature, we are feeding into a heterosexual history, just as was done in the past.

---

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 3-4.

## **CHAPTER THREE: EARLY 1900'S LESBIAN DRAMA**

It would be difficult to recognize positive representation in late-twentieth century queer drama without recognizing how far we have come. To do this, I will look at early works with varying degrees of homophobia and positive queer characterization, through Lillian Hellman's *The Children's Hour*, Edouard Bourdet's *The Captive*, and Sholem Asch's *The God of Vengeance*, as well as the reception and legal and social ramifications of their popularity.

### **I. *The Children's Hour* by Lillian Hellman**

*The Children's Hour*, written in 1934, is one of the most well-known pieces of lesbian-centered theatre from the twentieth century. The plot follows two schoolteachers and close friends, Martha and Karen, who own and run a boarding school for young girls. When one of their troublemaking students, Mary, feels targeted by the two women, she runs to her grandma, Mrs. Tilford, and starts a rumor, hoping to switch the focus from herself to them. In a moment of ingenuity, she claims that Martha said she was jealous of Karen's engagement, and that "it was unnatural for a girl to feel that way."<sup>13</sup> Mary's continual use of the word "unnatural" sparks her grandmother's interest, and Mrs. Tilford continues to spread word of the women's lesbian relationship to the other parents, who quickly rush their children out of the school much to Martha and Karen's confusion. When the two women finally discover why their students have disappeared, they are appalled and offended at the notion. Karen finally addresses the rumor out

---

<sup>13</sup> Lillian Hellman, "The Children's Hour", in *Forbidden Acts: Pioneering Gay & Lesbian Plays Of The Twentieth Century* (repr., New York: Applause Theatre & Cinema Books, 2003), 204.

loud, saying “It makes me feel dirty and sick to be forced to say this, but... there isn’t a single word of truth in anything you’ve said. [It’s] a great, awful lie.”<sup>14</sup> Throughout the confrontation, which grows to include Mary and her increasingly transparent story, everyone dances around the controversy without speaking precisely about what Mary claims to have seen and heard. Mary describes hearing “funny sounds”<sup>15</sup> and seeing them kissing, and Karen clarifies the accusation as “kissing each other in a way that—women don’t kiss one another.”<sup>16</sup>

The play then glosses over the trial, alluding in the next scene that Martha and Karen brought a libel suit against Mary’s grandmother, Mrs. Tilford, and lost. The two women have shuttered themselves in, avoiding contact with the town, but Karen’s fiancé Joseph Cardin works to raise their spirits by promising them both an escape from the city for his and Karen’s honeymoon. Still, Karen notices reservation in her fiancé’s tone and interactions. The biggest surprise comes when Martha reenters following Cardin’s departure. Karen begins to suggest that the two of them go away and start a new life when Martha becomes fixated on assuring Karen that she loves her “like a friend the way thousands of women feel about other women.”<sup>17</sup> Moments later, however, she is doubting herself. “I have loved you the way they said,” she admits. “There’s always been something wrong... I feel all dirty.”<sup>18</sup> When she leaves the room, a gunshot is heard. Martha has committed suicide. Poetically late, Mrs. Tilford arrives to confess that she now knows her granddaughter was lying. She is distraught upon hearing of Martha’s death and will not leave until Karen accepts her help in rebuilding her life. The play ends with

---

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 214.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 217.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 219.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 231.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 231-232.

Mrs. Tilford leaving Karen alone, to open the window and sit on the ledge, distractedly waving goodbye.

As might already be apparent through my chosen quotations, this play is full of both subtly and blatantly homophobic language. Phrasing like “unnatural, dirty, sick, and wrong” is reminiscent of the language seen in Thomas R. Dunn’s *Queerly Remembered*, as used by early-twentieth-century society. This rhetoric is a sign of a time that saw lesbianism as the antagonist in popular literature, and a situational issue rather than a state of identity. The negative portrayal of lesbianism is twofold in *The Children’s Hour*. The first offense is the suggested affect the two women have on the children in their care. According to Benjamin Kahan’s “The Walk-in Closet: Situational Homosexuality and Homosexual Panic in Hellman’s *The Children’s Hour*,” “the plausibility of [Mary’s lie] is enhanced by fears that... schools are breeding grounds for lesbian contagion... Mrs. Tilford’s fear is that Karen and Martha will infect the children with lesbianism.”<sup>19</sup> Therefore, the removal of students from Karen and Martha’s care implies the parents’ belief that only through exposure to women engaging in lesbian acts will the children be influenced to lean towards lesbianism themselves. Rather than being innate, the insinuation is that queerness is an addictive choice.

The second negative portrayal of lesbianism in *The Children’s Hour* is that of Martha’s realization of her feelings for Karen. As Kahan notes, “this second model or version of situational homosexuality suggests that once one has engaged in same-sex acts, or in Martha’s case, desires, one is, in pathologizing language of the period, “addicted” to homosexuality,

---

<sup>19</sup> Benjamin Kahan, "The Walk-In Closet: Situational Homosexuality and Homosexual Panic In Hellman's *The Children's Hour*", *Criticism* 55, no. 2 (2013), 186-187.



becoming a homosexual.”<sup>20</sup> Once again, homosexuality is treated in this instance as a vice that, once chosen, cannot be retracted. Martha’s admission of love for Karen, in her mind, is a death sentence. Kahan remarks that bad habits, like homosexuality, are associated with location at the turn of the century, like the boarding school.<sup>21</sup> Because Martha’s realization and reaction to her homosexuality is so short-lived, it is more likely to fall under the umbrella of a “homosexual panic.”<sup>22</sup> Martha’s homosexual realization, admission, and death all occur in the matter of a couple pages. She places the blame of their ruined reputations on herself, despite having nothing to do with the initial rumor. Further, she sees herself as an antagonist, and ultimately suggests that the only end to her “dirty” homosexuality is to die. Ultimately, the nature of homosexuality in *The Children’s Hour* as a contagious, life-ruining incident rather than an identity serves to prove the negative stereotypes gaining traction in popular, heterosexual entertainment at the turn of the century.

## **II. *The Captive* by Edouard Bourdet**

While *The Children’s Hour* used its homophobic rhetoric and characterization to heavily suggest that the homosexuality within the script was frowned upon, Bourdet’s *The Captive* adds the mystery of the unknown to approach a similar storyline—the susceptibility of a young woman to the seduction of an older lesbian, despite the adoration of her would-be fiancé. First premiered in French as *La Prisonnière* in 1926, it was adapted to English the same year and performed in New York. *The Captive* begins with Gisele and Irene, two sisters of a French

---

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 187.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid, 188.

diplomat, discussing the mysterious disagreement between Irene and her father, Montcel. It is when Irene is called to speak to her father that we discover the truth—she refuses to relocate to Italy with her father and sister, but will not admit to what is keeping her in Paris. When her father threatens to speak to her close friends, the D’Aiguines, she tells him that she wishes to stay in Paris because she believes that their family friend Jacques Virieu will propose to her soon. This appeases her father, but when he leaves she calls upon Jacques to speak with her in confidence. She does not, after all, wish to marry Jacques, but asks him to act as a partner in her lie without revealing her true reason for staying in Paris. It becomes clear, through Jacques’ investigation into Irene’s relationship with the D’Aiguines, that the real reason for her refusal to move is not an affair with a man but rather “another kind of bondage.”<sup>23</sup> Jacques informs Monsieur D’Aiguines that he believes a woman is seducing Irene. “But it’s impossible!” M. D’Aiguines initially argues. “Irene is much too well balanced...”<sup>24</sup> When M. D’Aiguines admits that the woman who has seduced Irene is his wife, however, he launches into a speech fraught with warning against a “them” never explicitly referred to as lesbians:

Don’t wait! There’s no use. She’ll never return—and if ever your paths should cross again fly from her... Otherwise you’ll spend your existence pursuing a phantom which you can never overtake. One can never overtake them! They are shadows. They must be left to dwell alone among themselves in the kingdom of shadows! Don’t go near them... they’re a menace! Above all, never, try to be anything to them, no matter how little—that’s where the danger lies... Understand this: they are not for us. They must be shunned, left alone... It’s mysterious—terrible!... Under cover of friendship a woman can enter any household... she can poison and pillage everything before the man whose home she destroys is even aware of what’s happening to him.<sup>25</sup>

---

<sup>23</sup> Edouard Bourdet, "The Captive", in *Forbidden Acts: Pioneering Gay & Lesbian Plays Of The Twentieth Century* (repr., New York: Applause Theatre & Cinema Books, 2003), 139.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 140.

M. D'Aiguines warns Jacques, who loves Irene, against falling into the trap of thinking that he can change her sexuality and convince her to love him. Irene, however, speaks of fighting herself for control in her affair. She calls it "a prison to which I must return captive, despite myself."<sup>26</sup> This, along with M. D'Aiguines speech, leads the audience to consider Mme. D'Aiguines to be a powerful force, capable of capturing the affections of men and women who see no way to escape her attraction once within. When Irene offers herself fully to Jacques, she visibly struggles with herself to kiss him, another attempt to fight her homosexuality. After seeing how hard she is working to be the woman he wants, Jacques agrees to be with her, and when the third act resumes a year later, it opens to the picture of a content married couple.

The picture quickly devolves, however, when Jacques accuses Irene of *not* being jealous when he receives letters from another woman, implying that this means she does not love him. This revives the conversation surrounding Mme. D'Aiguines, seemingly for the first time in a long time. Through questioning, Jacques discovers that the madame has been writing to Irene, though she swears she has returned the letters unopened. Later that afternoon, he also finds out that Irene had seen her again, while running errands. Suddenly, Irene seems alive again, filled with emotion—both positive and negative—from seeing Mme. D'Aiguines. Jacques is done. He has finally reached his breaking point in trying to help Irene, grabs his coat, and leaves. When he has left, a maid comes to give Irene violet flowers with no tag, but Irene seems to know who they are from. After a moment of determination, she grabs her hat and rushes out as well, presumably once again towards Madame D'Aiguines.

---

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., 147.

Almost ten years' senior to *The Children's Hour*, *The Captive* certainly shares in stereotypical and negative characterization, and harmful rhetoric. This is apparent even in the title of the play, which seems to stem from Irene's description of herself as a "captive" at the hands of Mme. D'Aiguines and her seductiveness. Furthermore, M. D'Aiguines' speech to Jacques excerpted above is a prime example of the connotations Bourdet wished to convey to his audience in this play. In the warning, D'Aiguines used noticeable othering, with phrasing like "a phantom," "they are not for us," and "they must be shunned." This warning of Mme. D'Aiguines with pronouns like "they" and "them" presents itself in a way that seems to separate the lesbian from heterosexual men and women, and draw a comparison back to the era-appropriate concept of a "third sex" as discussed in Dunn's *Queerly Remembered*. Bourdet's wording, alongside the mysterious lack of appearance by Mme. D'Aiguines, creates an air of intimidation, mystery, and danger in the lesbian figure alluded to throughout *The Captive*. Sherrie A. Inness dives into the lesbian imagery in Bourdet's play in "Who's Afraid of Stephen Gordon?: The Lesbian in the United States Popular Imagination of the 1920s." *The Captive* offers two very different queer women to its audience, first with the feminine, susceptible Irene, whose sexuality is situational to her introduction to Mme. D'Aiguines, quite like the situational homosexuality seen in Martha in *The Children's Hour*. Alternatively, there is the lesbian we never meet in Madame D'Aiguines—a woman whose reputation precedes her, and who can dominate and antagonize the play's characters without ever stepping foot on stage. Both provide a specific image to the viewers. Madame D'Aiguines' danger to a heterosexual audience lays in her inescapable appeal. Even her husband, despite knowing of her true sexuality, cannot bring himself to leave her. As Inness

describes, “her power lies in her resistance to classification.”<sup>27</sup> Irene provides a different, equally classifiably-resistant, fear to heterosexual audiences. Young, feminine, and beautiful, Irene does not fit the image of the manly, intimidating lesbian that straight viewers of the era might know. Instead, they see an “image of the lesbian as a feminine, heterosexually desirable woman... [An image] not familiar to Americans... Both the unfamiliarity of the French image and its foreignness operate to increase Anglo-American, heterosexual fears.”<sup>28</sup> Thus, possibly for the first time, *The Captive* warned straight audiences of a lesbian figure that was not a masculine “other,” but a young, impressionable woman who could be their own sisters, daughters, or wives.

### III. *The God of Vengeance* by Sholem Asch

The earliest written of the three plays investigated in this chapter, *The God of Vengeance* might also be the most benevolent. It is important to note this play in my research and analysis of early-twentieth-century lesbian drama as a reminder that things do not have to be as black and white as history equaling homophobia and modernity equaling acceptance. Originally performed in Yiddish in Berlin in 1907, it began performances in New York by the end of the same year. In 1923, it was translated and moved to Broadway, where it was introduced to an English-speaking audience for the first time.

*The God of Vengeance* tells the story of Yekel, his wife Sarah, and their daughter Rifkele, who all live above the brothel that Yekel and Sarah own and run. Yekel has commissioned a Holy Scroll to be written for his family in hopes of gaining respect in town and marrying off his

---

<sup>27</sup> Sherrie A. Inness, "Who's Afraid Of Stephen Gordon?: The Lesbian In The United States Popular Imagination Of The 1920S", *NWSA Journal* 4, no. 3 (1992): 303-320.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

daughter to a yeshiva student. He reminds Sarah that, to keep Rifkele in good standing, he does not want her mingling with the prostitutes below their home. “Below (*indicating the cellar*) is a brothel, and here lives a pure girl, worthy of marrying the best of men...” he says. “Keep the two places apart!”<sup>29</sup> Still, Rifkele and Manke, one of the girls in the brothel, are very close, and Rifkele calls Manke to her room that night as her mother describes her future husband to her offstage. The curtain falls on the first act as Rifkele “falls into Manke’s arms,” who then “kisses her passionately.”<sup>30</sup> In the second act, Rifkele sneaks downstairs looking for Manke, but is found quickly by Yekel, who pulls her back upstairs in a frenzy. Still, when Manke calls up to her that night to come into the rain with her and the other girls of the brothel, Rifkele only hesitates for a moment before joining her. The following scene is filled with soft, loving dialogue, like Rifkele whispering, “I heard you call me... You called me so softly... And something drew me so irresistibly to you...”<sup>31</sup> Manke speaks to Rifkele “with restrained passion and love,—softly, but with deep resonance:”

“Warm yourself next to me... Now rest your face snugly in my bosom... And let your body touch mine... It’s so cool... as if water were running between us. (*Pause.*) I uncovered your breasts and washed them with the rainwater that trickled down my arms... Your breasts are so white and soft... like white snow,—like frozen water... and their fragrance is like the grass on the meadows... You’ll be the bride... I am your sweetheart... your bridegroom... Then we come closer to one another, for we are bride and bridegroom, you and I. We embrace. Ever so tightly. And kiss, very softly... And then we go to sleep together. Nobody sees, nobody hears. Only you and I. Like this.”<sup>32</sup>

---

<sup>29</sup> Sholem Asch, *The God Of Vengeance*, trans. Isaac Goldberg (repr., Columbia, SC: Forgotten Books, 2012), 16-17.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 35.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 59.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 61-63.

Manke, still holding Rifkele in her arms, pleads with her to run away and start a new life together, along with a couple other brothel girls. Rifkele agrees, and when act three opens on Yekel, he is sitting in his daughter's empty bedroom. In a panic, Yekel and Sarah search for Rifkele, who has gone missing the very day her bridegroom was to arrive and wed her, receiving the Holy Scroll which Yekel has commissioned. When she is found, Yekel is determined to find out one thing: "Are you still as pure as when you left this house?... Are you still a chaste Jewish daughter?"<sup>33</sup> Rifkele, most likely confused about where a relationship with a woman falls under his accusation, can only answer frantically that she is not sure. Yekel is furious and embarrassed, and condemns his daughter to work in the brothel. In a fit of rage, he takes the expensive Holy Scroll and throws it down the staircase after her.

For several reasons, *The God of Vengeance* arrived on Broadway with a history of scandal, and created even more judgmental buzz once opened, when an English-American audience viewed firsthand what had been running for European and Yiddish audiences for a decade. This play and its unusually positive representation of lesbians was regarded, in 1922, as "one of the most terrible plays ever presented in New York," according to the *Evening Telegram*.<sup>34</sup> This, largely supported by the subsequent obscenity trial and related criticism, is due mostly to the lesbian love scene. Ironically, it was the very aspect of the play that brings its notability today which caused an uproar in the 1920's, with "contemporary critics and modern theatre historians alike agree[ing] that this scene is remarkable, if not controversial," while

---

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., 93-94.

<sup>34</sup> Katie N. Johnson, "When Lesbian Love Came To Broadway", *The Gay & Lesbian Review Worldwide* 14, no. 3 (2007): 17-19.

reviewers of the early half of the century viewed the same scene and remarked upon it as “distinctly uncomfortable,” or “a little sick.”<sup>35</sup>

Once again, through the reception to the Broadway production, one finds an aversion to referring to lesbianism by name, instead using euphemisms like “the perversion of a young girl,” and the play’s “foreignness.”<sup>36</sup> Though there is homophobia within the storyline and dialogue of the characters in Asch’s play, there is a notable difference in its overall depiction of lesbians when compared to *The Children’s Hour* and *The Captive*. Unlike these other early productions, Asch provides a mix of homophobic and accepting language and dialogue, giving the impression that he is not projecting his own homophobic beliefs through the script, but rather fleshing out full characters, both anti- and pro-queer, through the story. This can be seen through the different tone evoked in scenes that exclude Rifkele’s parents. Even in writing, the rain scene excerpted above comes across as quiet and melodic, as if there is nothing else in the play, in that moment, but Rifkele and Manke in the rain together. The language in this scene is unlike what has been presented in *The Children’s Hour* and *The Captive*. What Lillian Hellman wrote to be “dirty,” Sholem Asch refers to as “passion and love.” The tonality of the rain sequence holds no animosity, and ignores judgement towards Manke’s position as a prostitute just as Rifkele ignores it within the world Asch created.

---

<sup>35</sup> Ibid.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid.



#### IV. Obscenity and Legal Action

Despite their varying levels of acceptance or condemnation for queer relationships on stage, all three of these plays saw legal trouble and obscenity trials for their lesbian contents. *The God of Vengeance*, under its Yiddish title *Gott fun Nekoma*, had run in Yiddish in the United States for 17 years. Only when the American translation moved uptown from Greenwich Village did the play encounter legal issues, when producer Harry Weinberger and 12 cast members were taken to court and convicted for “giving immoral performances” in May of 1923.<sup>37</sup> Weinberger and actor Rudolf Schildkraut appealed to the Supreme Court and lost, but charges were reversed in 1925, with the assistant district attorney dropping all charges within a few months.

Interestingly, the script upon which the 1923 obscenity trial was based had removed explicit references to lesbianism, and suggestive dialogue, as the producers had already begun censoring the play for uptown audiences.<sup>38</sup> It appeared that in court the defense held the original English translation against the producers, rather than the censored playbook used at the theatre for performances. Johnson argues that “this version was intentionally used by the D.A. during the trial, even though he knew very well that it was not the version as performed. In doing so, he turned the trial into a kind of tribunal on the morality of lesbianism, which he sought to depict as a perversion.”<sup>39</sup> Still, in a characteristically bright moment for the refreshingly lesbian-positive nature of Asch’s work, Weinberger refused to fall into agreement with the D.A.’s negative descriptions of lesbianism during court:

---

<sup>37</sup> Ibid.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid.

“DISTRICT ATTORNEY WALLACE: Don’t you know that the scene between the two girls and the prostitute in the second act was wrong, it presents the show to the audience as a scene of degeneracy?

WEINBERGER: It certainly was not; that is in your own mind...

WALLACE: Don’t you know that the kisses and caresses by the prostitute towards this young female were such as to give that impression to any person of the wrong mind in the audience?

WEINBERGER: Not of the normal mind; the normal mind would see an older girl caressing the younger girl.”<sup>40</sup>

Unlike *The God of Vengeance*, which faced controversy for its positive portrayal of lesbian love, *The Captive* saw legal trouble for its depiction of an illicit, draining affair. *The Captive* managed to run successfully on Broadway for 160 performances before the New York City district attorney finally closed the play in 1927 and arrested a number of cast members, including those playing Irene and Jacques.<sup>41</sup> The production director, Gilbert Miller, attempted to legally challenge the closure, but was unable to find supportive groups willing to risk the negative exposure. Later the same year, New York State lawmakers passed the Wales Padlock Law, which allowed New York authorities to arrest producers and actors involved in “an immoral drama,” defined as “any play ‘depicting or dealing with the subject of sex degeneracy or sexual perversion.’”<sup>42</sup>

In a less-expected side effect of the play’s controversy, the violet industry suffered greatly, as Irene is presented with violets multiple times by Mme. D’Aiguines, and the violet became a symbol of solidarity for French lesbian groups. “When the New York police shut down the theater for scandalous behavior,” Dawn B. Sova reports, “the often-seen, innocent violets that

---

<sup>40</sup> Ibid.

<sup>41</sup> Dawn B. Sova, *Banned Plays: Censorship Histories Of 125 Stage Dramas*, ebook (repr., New York: Facts On File, 2004), 38.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid.

had been carried by debutantes and various First Ladies, as well as by female celebrities seeking to display their innocence, suddenly lost favor.”<sup>43</sup> Indeed, the fear of being associated with the implications of the play stayed within U.S. culture even after the closing of the production. By reclaiming images presented negatively in *The Captive* for their own camaraderie, contemporary lesbians had already begun the process of recognizing themselves in literature and creating their own influence in reaction.

Similarly, *The Children’s Hour* ran successfully for 64 weeks before being blocked from production when it moved to Boston in 1936, leading its producer, Herman Shumlin, to bring a suit against the city of Boston and Mayor Frederick Mansfield for \$250,000.<sup>44</sup> The aftermath of *The Captive* had not been forgotten, and Lillian Hellman later disclosed that “everybody was very worried, because a play called *The Captive*, a French play, had been played in New York a few years before and had been close up by the police department... We took every precaution.”<sup>45</sup> Despite any caution the producers might have taken, Hellman’s play was contended, and Mansfield said that despite never reading or seeing a performance of the play, “he claimed to understand ‘from hearsay’ that it was ‘about lesbianism,’ and the judge supported Mansfield’s decision that the play was “an ‘unfit’ topic.”<sup>46</sup> The controversial nature of *The Children’s Hour* also halted its production in Chicago, and hampered its chances in winning the Pulitzer Prize, for which it was strongly considered. It was also immediately placed on the banned list for filmmakers after its production when the Production Code Administration stated that “the

---

<sup>43</sup> Ibid.,39.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid., 49.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid.,39.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid., 49.

sanctity of the institution of marriage and home shall be upheld,” and that “sexual perversion or any inference of it is forbidden.”<sup>47</sup>

The first few decades of the twentieth century saw a number of obscenity trials and lawsuits in relation to immorality as presented on stage, including those with homosexual plotlines. It is clear that the United States was at a moment in time that challenged prejudices, and the general population was not yet socially prepared to allow that challenge to occur without repercussion. While all three of these productions managed to run successfully for a while, it was the emergence onto a larger stage, namely Broadway, that saw their closure. Similarly, queer drama of the 1980's and 1990's found its home in small, experimental theatre in New York, where specific crowds enjoyed the productions without the backlash of larger, often more heterosexual, biased audiences. These early productions' inability to transfer successfully to a larger stage without public outrage is important to discuss when determining the historical steps taken in the next few decades so that their playwriting descendants, born equally contentious and out of small local theatres, manage the jump from Village shows to uptown theatre without facing the same public backlash.

---

<sup>47</sup> Ibid., 50.

## CHAPTER FOUR: SPLIT BRITCHES

Just as these early-20<sup>th</sup>-century works influenced the opinions of popular culture, the early works of the Split Britches trio, Peggy Shaw, Lois Weaver, and Deb Margolin influenced queer culture in the 1980s. When considering the play *Split Britches*, it is important to first look into the methodology and influence of the troupe's members. According to Sue-Ellen Case's introduction to the Split Britches anthology, Shaw and Weaver met when their separate performance troupes interacted in Berlin in 1977.<sup>48</sup> Shaw left her troupe and joined Weaver's, called Spiderwoman, where the two began working with the rest of the troupe on the concept for *Split Britches*, premiering it in 1980 at the first Women's One World (WOW) Festival in New York.<sup>49</sup> After a successful run, Shaw and Weaver teamed up with Deb Margolin, first as a script writer, then as a performer in the piece.

### I. *Split Britches*

*Split Britches* is titled after the pants that women wore when working in the fields, which allowed them to urinate without pausing their work. The piece is a historical retelling of Weaver's family history and the lives of her female ancestors living in Virginia's Blue Ridge Mountains in the late 1930s. The three women whom Weaver, Shaw, and Margolin bring back to life are Emma Gay Gearheart and her nieces, Della Mae and Cora Jane Gearheart. Cora, as the narrator, begins describing the women's history as they pose and then act through imagined

---

<sup>48</sup> Sue-Ellen Case, *Split Britches* (repr., New York, NY: Routledge, 2013), 4.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, 6.

slides from a projector. The women speak in repetitive sentences and drawn out monologues that on the surface may seem like gibberish, but are often telling about their histories and their lives together on the farm, like Emma's speech about a Thanksgiving turkey:

“There was an old blind turkey. I know, because I saw him. I used to know him. Well, it come to Thanksgivin' one time, and the cook come after him with a knife. And he felt it. And he thought it was time for the dancin' to start. But they killed him. And they opened him up. And when they opened him up there was... a place to live in there. With a bed... And there was a table. With bread. And wine. And fifty turkeys. And two hundred country ham... And there was a chair by a window. In the dust. In the light. The dust dancin' in the light. Like a church. The clean dust. Like in church. And there wasn't no bugs. And there were two hundred girls there swattin' the bugs there. Feel my muscle. I built this wall myself. Take a trip to California. Walk on your fingers.”<sup>50</sup>

What might sound like unconnected thoughts is really a lament about the women's poverty and living condition at the farm. Emma dreams of a clean home, with even clean dust, and a bountiful livelihood. To discover this, however, the audience must read a little deeper into her words. In this way throughout the play, the audience must not disregard the ramblings of the *Split Britches* women or they will quickly lose the emotion of the piece. *Split Britches* asks for an audience to give all their attention to Emma, Cora, and Della, and hear them in a way that they probably were not heard during their lifetimes.

Notably, queerness in this play is not broadcast as a main feature, but rather one aspect of the women's existence, specifically through language chosen by Della. Unlike queerness in the other works discussed in this thesis, one must be listening closely to pick up on this facet of Della's identity. Though certainly not hidden, Della's brush with queer identity is no conflict as it is in plays like *The Children's Hour* and *The Captive*. Late in the play, Della mentions

---

<sup>50</sup> Peggy Shaw et al., "Split Britches", in *Split Britches: Lesbian Practice/Feminist Performance*(repr., New York, NY: Routledge, 1996), 49.

experimenting with androgynous dress, describing a masquerade ball she attended. “I got all dressed up,” she says. “I wore my granddaddy’s boots and I wore his pants and I slicked back my hair and I went to the dance and nobody recognized me so I danced with whoever I wanted to dance with and I smoked cigarettes and I drank whiskey...”<sup>51</sup> Della also ends the play with a speech about fire, full of beautiful and tragic subtext:

Fire ain’t just a thing, it’s a person, I mean, it ain’t a person, it’s a livin’ thing. Got a mind of it’s own... I seen fires. I’ve felt them on my skins... Fires think. They got purposes... And I got fire eatin’ inside of me. I can feel it but you can’t see it. And that makes me be a person with a secret. I can feel it in my eyes. I can feel it in my chest. And I can feel it in other places... Once I had fire in my pocket. I put my hand in and pulled it out real quick, and I said, why’d I do that? And I looked in my pocket, and there was the fire, lookin’ up at me just cute and sweet as a pretty girl... But then it starts to hurt. So you got to beat it. You got to put it out...”<sup>52</sup>

Given the identities of the writers, the play’s premise of a queer woman looking to find herself in her family’s history, and Della’s previous references to queer actions, it is likely that the fire haunting Della is her queer identity. Without attention and care, it is burning a hole in her as a secret does, and when she does entertain it momentarily, she is filled with guilt or embarrassment and beats it back down. What is monumental about this fire monologue, however, is that while homosexuality is still dismissed by the character, it is done so poetically and thoughtfully by queer authors. They write Della’s admission seemingly as a lost opportunity, a chance to fuel her personal identity and bring self-satisfaction to her life that she missed, rather than a shameful confession of guilt. This change in tone, brought to life by queer actors and queer authors, helps explain why *Split Britches* was a turning stone for lesbian playwriting and queer viewers and theatre practitioners who took the performance to heart.

---

<sup>51</sup> Ibid., 55.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid., 57.

According to Kate Davy in her book chronicling the history of the WOW Café Theater, Split Britches acted like an “unofficial resident company” for the theater, both because two of its founders, Shaw and Weaver, were also founders of the theater, and because the troupe saw its start at the same time and place as WOW; 1980 in New York City.<sup>53</sup> As the WOW festival slowly morphed into a theatre collective, *Split Britches* saw a number of revival productions. Davy describes the event of watching a performance of *Split Britches* to be “a revelatory moment common to many women from WOW’s early years.”<sup>54</sup>

Though lesbianism at WOW was a given, it was not a requirement. Deb Margolin of Split Britches, for example, identifies as heterosexual, but does not shy from queer themes and characters in her work. Lesbianism, therefore, is an unremarked upon and accepted factor in many WOW-supported works—a piece of the puzzle rather than a theme of the work, which is noticeable in *Split Britches* as well as future discussions on pieces by The Five Lesbian Brothers and Lisa Kron. Split Britches and WOW are perfect companions in that they both prioritize the process of creation over the logistics of repeated performance. As Sue-Ellen Case describes in her introduction to the Split Britches anthology, publishing a written record of the troupe’s work was a difficult task due to the improvisational and evolving nature of their productions. “I realized with both pleasure and sadness,” she writes of her deep dive into their transcripts, “how the delicate, passing show becomes transcribed into the unyielding typeface of print; how the many variations... become reduced to that final choice; how the slight gags disappear behind the

---

<sup>53</sup> Kate Davy, *Lady Dicks And Lesbian Brothers* (repr., Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2011), 7.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid.



page, and the sweat dries into printer's ink.”<sup>55</sup> The humbleness of WOW's residency in a fourth-floor walkup allowed for the blank slate that groups like Split Britches needed for the improvisation and ‘poor-theater’ methodology they applied to their performances. Indeed, many of Split Britches' plays after their premiere piece worked much like the tradition of poor man's theatre, drawing from *commedia dell'arte*, vaudeville, cabarets and even women's miming outside the ancient theatres in Athens. WOW's willingness to adapt to a performance's needs allowed these ideas to flourish, and those at WOW stuck to this ideology despite its difficulty as a business model. As Case remarks, Split Britches “insisted upon its poverty as its style and its politics” well into the 1980s—the Reagan decade—and WOW Café did the same, running “anarchically and out of poverty... to contradict the politics and aesthetics of affluence.”<sup>56</sup> Even while following the influence of a number of age-old theatre techniques, Split Britches brought the unique level of feminism that made them an iconic part of feminist queer theatre in the 1980s and 1990s, by adapting ancient styles that favored the stories of men and objectified women to a modern, feminist style that put (often queer) women at center stage.

## II. *Little Women*

In Split Britches' subsequent works, improvised “sides” much in the fashion of *commedia* appear in the script, describing general sequences that the actors themselves must devise per performance. In *Little Women* the stage directions call for a tune to be sung, or for the actors to strike a pose, do a dance, or answer real audience questions as they feel their characters

---

<sup>55</sup> Sue-Ellen Case, *Split Britches* (repr., New York, NY: Routledge, 2013), 3.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, 4.

would. The performance space was redefined as necessary too, bent to fit the needs of the show, even including the house when two characters perform an entire scene on either side of the audience. *Little Women: The Tragedy* incorporates three of Louisa May Alcott's original characters from the classic novel *Little Women*; Amy, Jo, and Meg, whose actors doubly play as Khurve, Louisa, and Hilarious respectively. The play deals with several themes, many mentioned in Louisa's opening monologue:

“Someone said to us, you should do *Little Women*... And then we got interested in Louisa May Alcott and her work and her life, and all the mystery that surrounded that. And then we got interested in censorship, and pornography, and morality as it was represented by set design during the Italian Renaissance. And then we got interested in burlesque as a style. And then we got interested in sex.”<sup>57</sup>

As stated by Louisa the character, Split Britches examines, through Louisa May Alcott's life, work, and characters, the state of censorship as it pertains to sexuality and lesbian desire—an issue not unfamiliar in queer theatre. *Little Women: The Tragedy* was initially performed in 1988, and as a troupe on the forefront of late-century unapologetic women's theatre, one can begin to understand Split Britches' investment in this topic. When discussing this play with Vivian Patraha, Deb Margolin said, “This piece was evolved and created in a very hostile atmosphere in this country, where people were being told what they could and could not talk about, and the NEA was being rerouted through conservative arteries...”<sup>58</sup> The play discusses censorship in part through Louisa May Alcott, and the idea that she repressed her lesbian desire for the sake of her reputation and the success of her writing. The unacceptable content then lives

---

<sup>57</sup> Deb Margolin, Peggy Shaw and Lois Weaver, "Little Women: The Tragedy", in *Split Britches: Lesbian Practice/Feminist Performance* (repr., New York, NY: Routledge, 1996), 120.

<sup>58</sup> Vivian M Patraha, "'LITTLE WOMEN: The Tragedy': Staging Censorship, Nostalgia, And Desire", *The Kenyon Review* 15, no. 2 (2019): 6-13.

on in the play's main setting—Heaven—which allows it to exist freely, as examined through Hilarious, Khurve, and Louisa. In this censorship-free Heaven, burlesque, another promiscuous and often-censored genre of performance, also finds a safe haven. Early in the act, the three women come on stage in robes and carrying binoculars, with which they scrutinize and comment on the audience with observations like, “LOOK AT THAT ONE! SHIT!” and “SOME KNOCKERS! LOOK AT THE TITS ON THAT ONE,” essentially reversing the spectacle of observation onto the audience rather than the actors.<sup>59</sup> They then disrobe and reveal their naked bodies, voicing themselves what might be the comments of audience members and critics:

“KHURVE: Hey wait a minute! Let's take that back, I want to see that again.  
*The lights come back up and go out again. We hear voices in the blackout.*  
KHURVE: Hm... just what I thought. MM hm.  
LOUISA: The show dealt with a subject usually discussed only in medical journals.  
HILARIOUS: The police should forbid on the stage what they forbid on the street.  
KHURVE: Looks like burlesque is going the way of all flesh.”<sup>60</sup>

Visually confronting topics of censorship like nudity, suggestive dancing (as when Hilarious and Khurve perform a burlesque dance where they freeze in different sexual positions), and lesbian desire in writing and performance is what creative freedom in a venue like WOW helps produce. The experimental nature of the WOW company and members allows for troupes like Split Britches to approach a topic however they see fit, taking risks that would have less success on Broadway-adjacent stages. As Lois Weaver discussed in an interview with fellow WOW member Holly Hughes, “a desire for everyone to have a voice” was instrumental to her

---

<sup>59</sup> Deb Margolin, Peggy Shaw and Lois Weaver, "Little Women: The Tragedy", in *Split Britches: Lesbian Practice/Feminist Performance* (repr., New York, NY: Routledge, 1996), 122.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, 122.

interest in creating WOW Café in the first place.<sup>61</sup> To this day, WOW's only requirement for membership is attendance at Tuesday meetings. As Peggy Shaw explained, "the decisions are made by whoever shows up on Tuesday night,' and the power resides in the one who 'knows where the plug is, or can find the extension cord.'"<sup>62</sup> Split Britches and WOW Café's founders prioritize the flexible and inviting nature of their company and venue. Without such a unique, queer-positive partnership, a generation of lesbian playwrights might not have been exposed to the theatrical influences and inspirations that cultivated their own playwrighting in the decades to come.

---

<sup>61</sup> Holly Hughes, "Faith Not Lost: Holly Hughes Interviews Lois Weaver About Split Britches' Lost Lounge (2009)", *Women & Performance: A Journal Of Feminist Theory* 22, no. 1 (2012): 135-140.

<sup>62</sup> Sue-Ellen Case, *Split Britches* (repr., New York, NY: Routledge, 2013), 4.

## **CHAPTER FIVE: THE FIVE LESBIAN BROTHERS**

Following the influence of WOW veterans like Split Britches and Holly Hughes, The Five Lesbian Brothers found their footing in a downtown New York independent theater, too. As is apparent through their techniques and described by Peggy Phelan in an anthology of their work, “The Brothers decided to draw on the rich foundation of work created by artists who had preceded them, rather than to remake that work.”<sup>63</sup> Utilizing camp, parody, and humor, The Brothers present serious feminist and queer issues prevalent in the 1990’s.

### ***I. Brave Smiles... another lesbian tragedy***

The troupe, consisting of Maureen Angelos, Babs Davy, Dominique Dibbell, Peg Healey, and Lisa Kron, often parodied and manipulated mainstream media to represent a lesbian cast of characters. Their 1992 play *Brave Smiles... another lesbian tragedy* is built on the common queer observation that most mainstream media featuring lesbian representation ends in tragedy for the gay characters in that piece. This is not a new concept, and its prevalence, as seen in early works with lesbian characters like the ones discussed in Chapter Three, is what helped lead to the creation and popularity of independent feminist theatres like WOW Café in the first place. As Peg Healey explains in the opening to *Brave Smiles*, “We watched, read, listened to, explored and absorbed every possible lesbian icon we could get our hands on... If the story of the lesbian is that she was always doomed to suffer an unhappy life and then die a tragic death, then we

---

<sup>63</sup> Peggy Phelan, "The Serious Comedy Of Hope: Introducing The Five Lesbian Brothers", in *The Five Lesbian Brothers: Four Plays* (repr., New York, NY: Theatre Communications Group, Inc., 2000), xiii.

really wanted to pile it on.”<sup>64</sup> For *Brave Smiles*, The Brothers’ literary references included *Morocco*, starring 1930’s bisexual starlet Marlene Dietrich, Radclyffe Hall’s *The Well of Loneliness*, the 1980’s lesbian play *Last Summer at Bluefish Cove* by Jane Chambers, and of course Lillian Hellman’s *The Children’s Hour* and *Pentimento*, among others. Following a group of girls at a boarding school in the 1920’s called Tilue-Pussenheimer Academy, the play pages through several lesbian tragedy scenes under the pretext of following the group’s lives as they head towards their ultimate lesbian demises. “For failure to resist their deviant desires,” Kate Davy writes in *Lady Dicks and Lesbian Brothers*, “the fallen angels of Tilue-Pussenheimer are hit by trucks, electrocuted, blown up in airplanes, and felled by alcoholism and brain tumors.”<sup>65</sup> As each death unfolds, “a bead is added to the Necklace of Tears, which the characters pass among them. By the end of the play, the necklace becomes a noose.”<sup>66</sup> Eventually, the only girl left is Damwell, who sits surrounded by the other four dead lesbians as the last to die, Thalia, speaks her final words: “All the little orphan girls have gone to heaven. We’re all little angels in the sky now. Finally happy. Finally free to live and to love. Real life begins now.”<sup>67</sup> It is the well-edited combination of expressiveness and humor that The Brothers infuse into all of their work that keeps a play like *Brave Smiles* from coming across as pessimistic and depressing. Maureen Angelos puts the genuine theme of the show into words best:

---

<sup>64</sup> Maureen Angelos et al., "Brave Smiles... Another Lesbian Tragedy", in *The Five Lesbian Brothers: Four Plays* (repr., New York, NY: Theatre Communications Group, Inc., 2000).

<sup>65</sup> Kate Davy, *Lady Dicks And Lesbian Brothers* (repr., Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2011), 168.

<sup>66</sup> Peggy Phelan, "The Serious Comedy Of Hope: Introducing The Five Lesbian Brothers", in *The Five Lesbian Brothers: Four Plays* (repr., New York, NY: Theatre Communications Group, Inc., 2000), xv.

<sup>67</sup> Maureen Angelos et al., "Brave Smiles... Another Lesbian Tragedy", in *The Five Lesbian Brothers: Four Plays* (repr., New York, NY: Theatre Communications Group, Inc., 2000), 109.

“This play is a reflection of love. They are all labors of love but this one in particular manifests what we love about being Brothers and what we love about being lesbians: the tragedy of it all which can be so biting and relentlessly funny sometimes. This play asks the audience why they are laughing and are they sure they’re not crying.

One of the most poignant, yet comedic, scenes in *Brave Smiles* comes during the second act. After Damwell has grown up into an author and director, we find her at rehearsal in a Broadway theatre in 1956. Opposite her are two actresses, Audrey and Shirley, who are rehearsing their characters Sharon and Bertha (parodies of *The Children’s Hour* characters Karen and Martha, respectively). Much in the style of *The Children’s Hour*, the scene rehearsal begins with Audrey and Shirley’s characters lamenting about their destroyed reputations, with Shirley acting increasingly guilty before she finally exclaims, “Strike me down now! Take me before I can sin anymore! Even while we’ve been talking I can’t stop thinking about how much I love you... Cursed and wretched. An abomination. More filthy and dirty than you could ever imagine.”<sup>68</sup> Unlike Hellman’s play, however, Audrey’s character replies in agreement, “It’s not so horrible. Now that I think about it, it sounds pretty good. Come on, baby. Rub me. Rub on me, baby. Let me be a prostrate worshipper in your grotto of love...”<sup>69</sup> The actresses stop rehearsal at this point to question whether this material was actually given to Damwell by Hellman, accusing her of crossing out the playwright’s material and writing in her own. Damwell admits it, explaining that Hellman “was shit-faced when she wrote this—it’s crap. I’m just perking it up a little.”<sup>70</sup>

---

<sup>68</sup> Ibid., 96.

<sup>69</sup> Ibid.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid., 97.

In this scene, Damwell is rewriting the lesbian trajectory in literature much like The Five Lesbian Brothers are attempting to do with their body of work overall. As Peggy Phelan notes in her introduction, “the play-rehearsal-within-the-play demonstrates the political and aesthetic distance between *The Children’s Hour*, in which lying was the principal dramatic act in a play about lesbian desire, and *Brave Smiles*, when laughing and sexual pleasure are ‘not so horrible,’” in the words of Damwell’s revised script.<sup>71</sup> While the comedic portrayal of this rewritten, classically-homophobic play could come across as surface-level entertainment, a closer look at what is actually happening on stage presents something more serious. When Audrey and Shirley break character out of disgust for the rewritten lines, the audience is viewing two lesbian actresses playing two homophobic actresses who are in turn playing two lesbian characters. This might invite the audience to contemplate a number of things, namely the systemic homophobia lesbians often find within themselves when coming to terms with their identities in a less-than-accepting society. One might also draw comparisons between the decision of The Brothers to portray a performance that ended in censorship and controversy while, during the run of *Brave Smiles*, their inspiration and fellow WOW performer Holly Hughes (along with Tim Miller and John Fleck) faced a legal battle with the NEA over her government-funded queer solo performance.

*Brave Smiles* follows the lives of young lesbians across five decades, encountering similar tales of tragedy and homophobia despite the changing times. This recurring outcome leaves the audience with a similar desire to that of most lesbian theatre artists who cross through

---

<sup>71</sup> Peggy Phelan, "The Serious Comedy Of Hope: Introducing The Five Lesbian Brothers", in *The Five Lesbian Brothers: Four Plays* (repr., New York, NY: Theatre Communications Group, Inc., 2000), xvi.



WOW's performance space and community: a refreshingly positive lesbian storyline where queer women end as victors rather than victims.

## II. *The Secretaries*

Following the concept of lesbian redemption in theatre is The Five Lesbian Brothers' 1994 play *The Secretaries*, an equally comical yet thought provoking piece where, finally, the lesbians have the upper hand. On a retreat to collaborate on a commissioned but yet-unwritten play, The Brothers found themselves focused on the idea of playing lumberjacks. After witnessing the dangerous masculinity and rape culture in the 1954 film *Seven Brides for Seven Brothers*, The Brothers' opinions took a turn. "We wanted to kill these guys," Babs Davy said. "Dominique had just been reading somewhere about motorcycle girl gangs who kill and torture men for sport... Fuck the lumberjacks. We would play the "brides" in the office at the lumber mill."<sup>72</sup>

*The Secretaries* follows three seasoned secretaries, Dawn, Ashely, and Peaches, and a new recruit, Patty, all of whom work for office manager and cult leader Susan in the office of a lumber mill in Big Bone, Oregon. Their dual identities are described cheerfully through song in the prologue with the line, "We are secretaries and we do things secretarial/And once a month we kill a guy and cut him up for burial."<sup>73</sup> Throughout the play, new girl Patty joins the secretaries' camaraderie and slowly becomes aware of the group's true monthly intentions with

---

<sup>72</sup> Maureen Angelos et al., "The Secretaries", in *The Five Lesbian Brothers: Four Plays* (repr., New York, NY: Theatre Communications Group, Inc., 2000), 118.

<sup>73</sup> *Ibid.*, 128.

the local lumberjacks. Though she initially reacts in horror to the true nature of the secretarial cult, by the end of the play she has become their new leader. The play contrasts the violent and nefarious acts of the women with the giggly, feminine characteristics that are often laughed at, like the women's constant talk of dieting, who looks best, facials, typing times, menstruation, etc. As described by Phelan:

“The Brothers stage a horror film in order to expose the deeper horror of how commonplace the killing of women in film and everyday life has become. These secretaries go over the top to show us the apparent bottomlessness of routine cultural misogyny, a hatred that thrives not only on violence against women... but that, perhaps more darkly, also sustains violence between women.”<sup>74</sup>

Certainly, though the secretaries share a common antagonist and opponent in the lumberjacks, they equally attack each other verbally with side comments about each other's weight or work ethic, for example, and physically, such as “office lesbian” Dawn's injury when Susan acts as if she is going to perform oral sex and then bites her instead. In her article “Rage Slaves: The Commodification of Affect in the Five Lesbian Brothers' *The Secretaries*,” author Sara Warner posits that the rage against men seen in this secretarial cult is a nod to the increase on emotional labor for women in the workplace. In her journey from naïve newbie to cult leader, Patty falls victim to the influence of the secretaries and the pressure to act as a secretary is expected to, by joining in the chatter of the office and attending office-related groups if she wishes to progress in her career.

From the beginning, Patty is policed on what she should feel, how she should act, and what she should want by the women around her. As Warner says, “Office banter is the way in

---

<sup>74</sup> Peggy Phelan, “The Serious Comedy Of Hope: Introducing The Five Lesbian Brothers”, in *The Five Lesbian Brothers: Four Plays* (repr., New York, NY: Theatre Communications Group, Inc., 2000), xv.

which occupational structures of feelings... are conveyed.”<sup>75</sup> For example, when Patty brings a salad to the office for lunch, the women gather around and scold her for breaking the company policy against solid foods, recommending she join the SlimFast plan of shakes that they all exclusively consume. She is also sworn to celibacy at her first attendance to B.O.W., the Big Bone Organization for Women, where the women begin by chanting, “We thank you for the opportunity to meet for shakes and fellowship. Please help us to word process without error, to follow the SlimFast plan, and to make it through that time of the month together.”<sup>76</sup>

Relationships and families that could heed the women’s dedication to the Cooney Lumber Mill are also discouraged, meaning homosexual relations are encouraged as a sexual practice safe from the threat of pregnancy and motherhood.

The Five Lesbian Brothers member Lisa Kron describes the play as an examination of “the ways in which women are the enforcers of sexism. The rules that are enforced involve weight, food, sexuality.”<sup>77</sup> Through the secretaries’ interpersonal relationships, The Brothers shine light on women’s inclinations to tear each other down for personal gain in both sexist and feminist societies, despite sharing a common enemy in sexism. Therefore, the secretaries do not know how to create a cult with a common goal of killing lumberjacks without fighting with and judging each other along the way. Though masked under jokes, fun songs about murderous rituals, and conversations focused on who can consume the least calories, *The Secretaries* draws attention to a form of sexism many of us may otherwise ignore.

---

<sup>75</sup> Sara Warner, "Rage Slaves: The Commodification Of Affect In The Five Lesbian Brothers' The Secretaries", *Journal Of Dramatic Theory And Criticism* 23, no. 1 (2008): 21-45.

<sup>76</sup> Maureen Angelos et al., "The Secretaries", in *The Five Lesbian Brothers: Four Plays* (repr., New York, NY: Theatre Communications Group, Inc., 2000), 146.

<sup>77</sup> *Ibid.*, 119.

Both *Brave Smiles... another lesbian tragedy* and *The Secretaries* found enough commercial success to tour the United States, and *The Secretaries* won an OBIE award in 1994, but still saw confusion and misunderstanding from many straight and male audiences.<sup>78</sup> Still born out of the aesthetic of WOW's influence, The Brothers' plays, when toured for a more diverse audience, met with some harsh critics. As Maureen Angelos observed, "It's that old problem of men not seeing a story about women as universal."<sup>79</sup> The Brothers had observed in the opening of *The Secretaries* that women recognized the workplace violence and bullying as generally relatable, while men instead focused on the violence in the lumberjack kill at the end of the musical, either choosing not to recognize, or being oblivious to, the ways women verbally abuse each other to get ahead. Kate Davy shares an anecdote from her attendance to another—overtly sexual, feminist, and lesbian—production by The Five Lesbian Brothers called *Brides of the Moon*, in which the man in front of her turned to his wife after the curtain call and "said without rancor, 'What was *that*?' In the mind's eye of mainstream culture, lesbian sexual practice is different from lesbianism."<sup>80</sup>

While The Five Lesbian Brothers had managed to make the leap from independent theatre to mainstream media and national awards, their content was not yet at a place that could be understood and enjoyed by many mainstream critics and audiences. Where *Split Britches* had given The Brothers the building blocks to further explore lesbian influence in feminist themes, experience with The Brothers mix of sexuality and comedy gave Lisa Kron the proficiency to

---

<sup>78</sup> Peggy Phelan, "The Serious Comedy Of Hope: Introducing The Five Lesbian Brothers", in *The Five Lesbian Brothers: Four Plays* (repr., New York, NY: Theatre Communications Group, Inc., 2000), xiii.

<sup>79</sup> Kate Davy, *Lady Dicks And Lesbian Brothers* (repr., Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2011), 134.

<sup>80</sup> *Ibid.*, 136.

expand the scope of lesbian representation even further—all the way to the commercial and diverse success necessitated by Broadway.

## CHAPTER SIX: LESBIAN REPRESENTATION ON BROADWAY

### I. *Indecent* by Paula Vogel

While a graduate student at Cornell in the 1970's, Paula Vogel was just coming to terms with her sexuality when she discovered Sholem Asch's *The God of Vengeance* in the school library, and like many other readers and viewers, she was shocked by both the beauty in the two girls' romance and the author's identity as a heterosexual Polish man writing at the turn of the century.<sup>81</sup> Despite its white, straight male authorship, Manke and Rifkele's moment in the rain, in particular, struck Vogel as monumental, describing "such joy and uplift reading the rain scene... There was no moralizing, just a matter-of-fact presentation of desire and love."<sup>82</sup> Given the time period and authorship of the play, such a romance was ahead of its time, and the enchantingly positive lesbian representation stuck with Vogel. It was not until decades later, in the 2000's, when another graduate student studying directing at the Yale School of Drama became interested in *The God of Vengeance*, that the collaboration resulting in the 2017 Tony-award-winning *Indecent* truly began.

As discussed in interviews with Vogel, *Indecent* was meant to focus not only on the unique script Asch wrote and produced in 1907, but the circumstances surrounding what it might take from the author and artists involved to generate such a contemporary, controversial play at

---

<sup>81</sup> Frank Rizzo, "Back With 'Vengeance': Sholem Asch's Contested Yiddish Classic Is Grist For Paula Vogel And Rebecca Taichivian's Meditative New Play-Within-A-Play", *American Theatre*, 2016.

<sup>82</sup> Daniel Pollack-Pelzner, "With Her Eerily Timely 'Indecent,' Paula Vogel Unsettles American Theatre Again", *The New Yorker*, 2017, <http://With Her Eerily Timely 'Indecent,' Paula Vogel Unsettles American Theatre Again>.

the turn of the century. It became, as Rizzo summarizes, “the story of a daring and determined playwright... the Yiddish theatre, Jewish immigrants, and the pressure to assimilate...the story of powerful forces of censorship as well as the more insidious ones of self-censorship... the story of a resilient and resolute theatre company that believed in the power of art to affect audiences and to change lives.”<sup>83</sup>

*Indecent* follows the life of *The God of Vengeance* from Asch’s excited presentation of the script to his wife in the early 1900’s through his refusal to let a young, new director produce it in the 1950’s. Strong themes of censorship and identity flow throughout, aided by Vogel’s complex and likeable characters. Asch is integral to the story, of course, but Vogel also shows the equal importance in having a cast and crew that must have the passion and resilience to perform such a play amidst scrutiny of the time. At the play’s beginning, the troupe rises and stretches, sawdust pouring out of their sleeves and pant legs, dusting themselves off to perform much like Vogel dusted off an ignored classic herself. The first to speak is Lemml, the stage manager, who introduces the troupe and reminds the audience that “it all starts with this moment—remember this: [*gesturing*] to two women of the troupe, holding each other,” a moment that will be returned to throughout the play.<sup>84</sup> This reenactment of the first lesbian kiss on an American stage is repeated as the play-within-a-play tours Europe, reaches America, and eventually returns to Europe, performed skeletally in a Jewish ghetto with no staging but the same levels of emotion and sincerity. The repetition serves both as a reminder to the audience of

---

<sup>83</sup> Frank Rizzo, "Back With 'Vengeance': Sholem Asch's Contested Yiddish Classic Is Grist For Paula Vogel And Rebecca Taichivian's Meditative New Play-Within-A-Play", *American Theatre*, 2016.

<sup>84</sup> Paula Vogel, *Indecent* (repr., New York, NY: Theatre Communications Group, 2017), 10.

the importance of the rain scene in Asch's play and legacy, and as a nod to the same lyrical, repetitive structure in the writing of the original rain scene itself.

Vogel does not gloss over the two-fold roadblocks standing in Asch's way; namely, homophobia and anti-Semitism. She recognizes that both prejudices can come from a place of ignorance and unfamiliarity, which is part of the reason why displaying such characteristics on a stage is so impactful. As discussed in earlier analysis of Dr. Williams in *Queerly Remembered*, a fear of the unknown can often be a root cause of intolerance, a phenomenon she staged in the relationships between the troupe and its audiences, as well as relationships between troupe members, who were often receiving the same lessons in rehearsal that they then gave audiences in performance. This is seen in a comedic and casual moment between the two German actresses set to play Manke and Rifkele in 1908:

“FREIDA: How do these women live? How do they dress? What do they do in bed and how do they do it?

ELSA: You mean prostitutes?

FREIDA: Oh good God, no! We all know what prostitutes do!

ELSA: Oh—so you asked him about...about..lesbians?

FREIDA: You'd better learn how to say the word out loud, my girl. Four weeks from today we will be kissing center stage... But on one thing I am completely lost at sea: How do I play a Jew?”<sup>85</sup>

Both women must figure out how to assume identities that are foreign to them; Elsa, a Jewish woman, is preoccupied with portraying a lesbian, while Freida cannot figure out how to perform as a Jewish woman at all. As *Indecent* progresses and new women (played by the same actors) fill the roles of Manke and Rifkele, identity is a continual hurdle to jump. For some, like Elsa, the concept of playing a lesbian is confusing. For Reina, who played Rifkele in Yiddish and

---

<sup>85</sup> Ibid., 23.



was set to join the cast in its first English production, lesbianism was already part of her identity, and it was the Americanized switch to English that lost her the role. Still, Vogel continues to give time to the romance between Reina and Dorothee, the actress playing Manke, after Reina leaves the production, a subplot that reminds the audience that lesbians existed in factual history just as much as they did in theatrical history.

The tableau of the rain scene is used throughout the play in contrast to the conflicts in the piece. Even during intense moments like the Lodz Ghetto performance, where it is clear that the actors are using *The God of Vengeance* as escapism for the horrors of ghetto life, the rain scene is a breath of fresh air. It is the longest excerpt of the rain scene in the show, after much talk about its importance to the cast. Even at the show's height of success, the rain scene is honored by those involved. The cast is appalled when the relationship between Manke and Rifkele is censored by Asch and producers for its move uptown in New York City, effectively changing the storyline altogether. "Did the playwright agree to cuts in the most beautiful love scene he will ever write?" Dorothee asks. "My Manke is no longer a woman in love. She is an evil procuress lusting after a little girl to peddle her ass."<sup>86</sup> Just as the original troupe did, *Indecent's* troupe of performers realize that without the romance, without the rain scene, *The God of Vengeance* is a different play altogether.

*Indecent* surprises audiences by hardly being about the playwright at all, and focusing more on the ensemble that kept it alive after its premiere. This feels similar to the ensemble style of production seen in *The Five Lesbian Brothers* and *Split Britches*. Their work made it difficult to identify the main character, often because there was not one—perhaps an indication of the

---

<sup>86</sup> Ibid., 42-43.

equality among women that the authors both practiced and preached. Within the ensemble cast, as well, Vogel creates diverse individuals, mixing straight and lesbian characters without making it a big deal within the plot of the play. Despite the play-within-a-play remaining heavily focused on a lesbian play and love scene, the lesbian couple within the ensemble, Dorothee and Reina, are treated just as a heterosexual couple would be, with no additional homocentric drama surrounding their relationship. This was a hallmark of WOW Café alumni like *The Brothers*, who incorporated lesbian characters even without a lesbian-focused plot, like in *The Secretaries*.

The ease with which Vogel incorporated queer women into the plotline and cast allowed her to focus her energy more on expanding upon the inclusive techniques made popular by the likes of *Split Britches* and *The Brothers*. Both troupes were experts at folding in multiple topics of discussion, like the melding of censorship, sexuality, and feminism in *Split Britches' Little Women*. Vogel did the same with *Indecent*, using the story of one play to tell the stories of women, lesbians, Jewish people, and immigrants.

The common academic rhetoric surrounding Sholem Asch's *Indecent* is to remark upon the progressiveness of its subjects for 1900's society, and to suggest that it would have found its place in a later culture. With *Indecent*, Paula Vogel recognized the potential Asch's work had to remain relevant in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Following the queer influences available to her in New York City, she created a work that accepted identity in its many forms and challenged its audiences to see queer women center stage and value every minute of it.

## II. *Well* by Lisa Kron

While Vogel ran in the same crowd as successful WOW members and playwrights, Lisa Kron graduated right from WOW's inner circle to the renowned world of Broadway production. The influence Kron's time with WOW Café and The Five Lesbian Brothers has on her body of independent work, especially *Well*, is unmistakable. Kate Davy remarks that, as the first WOW artist to make it to Broadway, Kron presented a format of theatre that may have been common to those who attended WOW-orchestrated performances, but was foreign to many who were more familiar with the type of play and musical that usually made it uptown. Reviews like "It's not everyday—or every year, for that matter—that an avant-garde theater piece opens on Broadway. [I]t certainly isn't conventional or commercial," and "Uproarious, touching and joyously alive" create an image of the experimental, feminist theatre inspiration that fed into Kron's 2004 play.<sup>87</sup>

*Well* is "a solo show with other people in it," as Kron's self-titled character explains to her mother in the first scene.<sup>88</sup> The stage is split in two, with one half representing the theatre and, by association, the additional settings of the play like the neighborhood and the Allergy Unit. The other half appears to be taken right out of Kron's parents' living room, with Ann Kron, Lisa's mother, reclining in a La-Z-Boy at the center of it all. The character of Lisa Kron begins to tell a tale of racial integration in her childhood neighborhood, but her mother's consistent interruptions digress the story into more personal territory. As Lisa begins discussing her past, including her time in the hospital with allergy-related health issues, Ann begins correcting her

---

<sup>87</sup> Kate Davy, *Lady Dicks And Lesbian Brothers* (repr., Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2011), 1-2.

<sup>88</sup> Lisa Kron, *Well* (repr., New York, NY: Theatre Communications Group, Inc., 2006), 16.

version of events, providing a visual reminder that one is never truly able to rewrite and neatly package their own history.

In the preface to *Well*, Lisa Kron describes the show's blend of theatrical styles perfectly:

“The style of *Well* developed out of an aesthetic collision I experienced in my formative years when I arrived in the East Village performance world in the mid-1980's, and my inherent appreciation for traditional theatrical structures was confronted with performances built on structures that ranged from nontraditional to nonexistent. The tension between my notions of how a play was supposed to look and the often electrifying free-for-alls I was witnessing formed in me the preoccupations that have shaped my work since.”<sup>89</sup>

Though *Well* is a more formal play, its improvisational roots are visible throughout the show. Characters are sometimes scripted to adlib lines in hectic moments for more believability, and Kron attributes this less-structured playwriting style to the rule-breaking nature of WOW. Much like The Brothers' performances, lines and scenes are developed through experimentation, and finalized after many different takes. The informality and the appearance of improvisation are what help *Well* feel so personal, and what creates such a strong bond between the audience and the performers. Many shows might include monologues to the viewers, but *Well* involves them in a conversation. Kron believes that this “intense personal connection” is what drove the producers to make the “brave choice” to bring such an experimental play to Broadway at all.<sup>90</sup>

*Well* is intimate even in a Broadway setting, thanks to the personal nature of the content, and the playwright and her mother acting as the main cast. It is difficult to imagine that the show would make such a connection with the audience if the playwright had come from a background of large, theatrical productions built for the Broadway stage. Instead, Kron found her voice in the

---

<sup>89</sup> *Ibid.*, ix.

<sup>90</sup> Wendy Weisman, "The Importance Of Being Lisa Kron", *American Theatre* 23, no. 3 (2006): 34-37.

intimacy of the small, independent WOW Café, where, while with *The Brothers*, the audience was actively engaged in conversation and involved in the story. WOW's encouragement of closeness between performer and audience is a positive side effect of the community-based atmosphere the theatre fostered. By allowing for the growth of queer artists like Lisa Kron, WOW presented the building blocks necessary to adapt a play born out of independent theatre for a more diverse audience, and find success for a lesbian playwright's experimental work on a Broadway stage.

## CONCLUSION

Many talented queer women developed their careers out of collaboration with WOW Café's gifted community of artists in the late-20<sup>th</sup> century. Despite not always being household names to those outside the LGBTQ community, they have had lasting effects on the way lesbians are written and portrayed in theatre, and are largely responsible for the level of inclusivity we have reached on Broadway today. The small, independent nature of WOW gave minority women a chance to create performances without the competition of majority groups who have long held the power and influence in theatre. With the absence of heterosexual and male writing, women at WOW thrived and gained the experience and opportunity necessary to leave the comfortable circle of supportive queer, feminist women and introduce a larger pool of theatre lovers to their unique and experimental styles of playwriting.

Women who jumpstarted their careers at WOW continued past its fourth-floor walkup to find success in academia and performance, and many speak favorably about their time at WOW long past their residency. This common lifelong love for the connections and creativity that bloomed in the theatre is a great gauge for just how influential, however unassuming, WOW Café is to queer theatre. Without the emergence of troupes like Split Britches and The Five Lesbian Brothers, the perception of lesbianism as a characteristic instead of a conflict might not have found its way into the heart of modern audiences so effectively. These groups recognized the importance of integrating diverse characters and serious topics with comedy and entertainment and executed it consistently and memorably. The thought-provoking and side splitting plays produced by these troupes served, to their lesbian viewers, as a message that if

they believe their writing cannot succeed while featuring queer characters, they simply have not yet found the right audience or the right producer.

This message was received by many future lesbian playwrights, and the reputations that troupes like The Brothers and Split Britches had gained by the early 2000's meant there was space for lesbians as protagonists on a Broadway stage that had not been seen before. As the first member of WOW to make the move to Broadway, Lisa Kron introduced an entirely new audience to the unconventional style of theatre that The Brothers used to structure their plays. Though *Well* did not include heavy lesbian themes, it opened a line of communication between theatregoers and producers outside the LGBTQ community with those producing theatre from within. Just as was seen through the gradual transition from homophobic texts like *The Children's Hour* to the commercial success of *The Secretaries*, Lisa Kron's *Well* provided another necessary stepping stone towards lesbian representation on larger stages. Without Kron's partnership with The Brothers or solo work, Paula Vogel's *Indecent* might not have had the platform it needed to find such a positive response on Broadway either.

WOW prides itself on being a community theatre powered by collaboration, just as lesbian performers and playwrights rely on the support and encouragement of their colleagues within the LGBTQ community. The combined talent seen in groups formed at WOW display this, and though many lesbian performers who found their footing in the independent theatre scene of the 1980's and '90s have moved into more mainstream discussion and artistry, their accomplishments allow future queer women in theatre to reach new heights. Without the beating heart that WOW became—and still is—for local lesbian artists, such a renaissance of proud lesbian theatre might never have found its light.

## REFERENCES

- Angelos, Maureen, Babs Davy, Dominique Dibbell, Peg Healey, and Lisa Kron. "Brave Smiles... Another Lesbian Tragedy". In *The Five Lesbian Brothers: Four Plays*. Reprint, New York, NY: Theatre Communications Group, Inc., 2000.
- Angelos, Maureen, Babs Davy, Dominique Dibbell, Peg Healey, and Lisa Kron. "The Secretaries". In *The Five Lesbian Brothers: Four Plays*. Reprint, New York, NY: Theatre Communications Group, Inc., 2000.
- Asch, Sholem, and Isaac Goldberg. *The God Of Vengeance*. Reprint, Columbia, SC: Forgotten Books, 2012.
- Bourdet, Edouard. "The Captive". In *Forbidden Acts: Pioneering Gay & Lesbian Plays Of The Twentieth Century*. Reprint, New York: Applause Theatre & Cinema Books, 2003.
- Case, Sue-Ellen. *Split Britches*. Reprint, New York, NY: Routledge, 2013.
- Davy, Kate. *Lady Dicks And Lesbian Brothers*. Reprint, Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2011.
- Dunn, Thomas R. *Queerly Remembered: Rhetorics For Representing GLBTQ Past*. Reprint, Columbia, South Carolina: University of South Carolina Press, 2016.
- Gage, Carolyn. *Take Stage!: How To Direct And Produce A Lesbian Play*. Reprint, Lanham, Maryland: Scarecrow Press, Inc, 1997.
- Hellman, Lillian. "The Children's Hour". In *Forbidden Acts: Pioneering Gay & Lesbian Plays Of The Twentieth Century*. Reprint, New York: Applause Theatre & Cinema Books, 2003.
- Hughes, Holly. "Faith Not Lost: Holly Hughes Interviews Lois Weaver About Split Britches' Lost Lounge(2009)". *Women & Performance: A Journal Of Feminist Theory* 22, no. 1 (2012): 135-140.
- Inness, Sherrie A. "Who's Afraid Of Stephen Gordon?: The Lesbian In The United States Popular Imagination Of The 1920S". *NWSA Journal* 4, no. 3 (1992): 303-320.
- Isherwood, Charles. "Review: In 'God Of Vengeance,' A Nice Jewish Family Lives Above A Brothel". *Nytimes.Com*, 2016. <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/12/29/theater/god-of-vengeance-review.html>.
- Johnson, Katie N. "When Lesbian Love Came To Broadway". *The Gay & Lesbian Review Worldwide* 14, no. 3 (2007): 17-19.
- Kahan, Benjamin. "The Walk-In Closet: Situational Homosexuality And Homosexual Panic In Hellman's The Children's Hour". *Criticism* 55, no. 2 (2013): 177-201. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/pdf/10.13110/criticism.55.2.0177.pdf?refreqid=excelsior%3Ac99d0d6bc5318254bd42695d9865e6d6>.



- Kron, Lisa. *Well*. Reprint, New York, NY: Theatre Communications Group, Inc., 2006.
- Margolin, Deb, Peggy Shaw, and Lois Weaver. "Little Women: The Tragedy". In *Split Britches: Lesbian Practice/Feminist Performance*. Reprint, New York, NY: Routledge, 1996.
- Patraka, Vivian M. "'LITTLE WOMEN: The Tragedy': Staging Censorship, Nostalgia, And Desire". *The Kenyon Review* 15, no. 2 (2019): 6-13.
- Phelan, Peggy. "The Serious Comedy Of Hope: Introducing The Five Lesbian Brothers". In *The Five Lesbian Brothers: Four Plays*. Reprint, New York, NY: Theatre Communications Group, Inc., 2000.
- Pollack-Pelzner, Daniel. "With Her Eerily Timely 'Indecent,' Paula Vogel Unsettles American Theatre Again". *The New Yorker*, 2017. <http://www.nytimes.com/2017/05/15/theater/paula-vogel-indecent.html>
- "Queers Read This: A Leaflet Distributed At Pride March In NY". Qrd.Org, 1990. <http://www.qrd.org/qrd/misc/text/queers.read.this>.
- Rapi, Nina. "'That's Why You Are So Queer': The Representation Of Lesbian Sexuality In The Theatre". In *Daring To Dissent: Lesbian Culture From Margin To Mainstream*. Reprint, London: Cassell, 1994.
- Rizzo, Frank. "Back With 'Vengeance': Sholem Asch's Contested Yiddish Classic Is Grist For Paula Vogel And Rebecca Taichivian's Meditative New Play-Within-A-Play". *American Theatre*, 2016.
- Shaw, Peggy, Lois Weaver, Deborah Margolin, Naja Bey, Cathy Gollner, and Pam Verge. "Split Britches". In *Split Britches: Lesbian Practice/Feminist Performance*. Reprint, New York, NY: Routledge, 1996.
- Sova, Dawn B. *Banned Plays: Censorship Histories Of 125 Stage Dramas*. Ebook. Reprint, New York: Facts On File, 2004. [https://books.google.com/books?id=ikvxgoS\\_VTAC&pg=PA48#v=onepage&q&f=false](https://books.google.com/books?id=ikvxgoS_VTAC&pg=PA48#v=onepage&q&f=false).
- Vogel, Paula. *Indecent*. Reprint, New York, NY: Theatre Communications Group, 2017.
- Warner, Sara. "Rage Slaves: The Commodification Of Affect In The Five Lesbian Brothers' The Secretaries". *Journal Of Dramatic Theory And Criticism* 23, no. 1 (2008): 21-45.
- Weisman, Wendy. "The Importance Of Being Lisa Kron". *American Theatre* 23, no. 3 (2006): 34-37.