

BOY MEETS BOY  
ENVISIONING QUEER YOUTH NOVELS FOR TRANSLATION TO THE STAGE

by

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## ABSTRACT

Queer Youth, or young people who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, or questioning, is a demographic with an increasing presence in contemporary society. Along with this increased presence has come an increase in support groups available to these youths that range from Gay-Straight Alliances at their schools, community groups from their local gay and lesbian center to, most recently, theater companies that have begun to offer workshops and performance opportunities within the Queer Youth Theatre genre. Queer Youth Theatre is an emerging form of topical theatre that deals with issues and situations queer youth may face in their daily lives. Few scripts exist that deal with topics related to LGBT youth, and most theatre groups that offer LGBT youth programs, such as the Pride Players from the Omaha Theater Company for Children and Young People in Omaha, Nebraska, rely on devising works for live performance. The Pride Players independently publish a “Best of” anthology for use by other groups wishing to use their devised material (Guehring<sup>2</sup>). Though these opportunities may be beneficial to the youths involved, there is still a need for scripted works to be available for queer youth to explore.

This thesis project looks at two steps necessary to beginning the process of adapting LGBT young adult novels for the stage. First, an adaptation rubric must be created for use as a guide for identifying source material for translation to the stage. Second, the young adult novels *Boy Meets Boy* by David Levithan and *Rainbow Boys* by Alex Sanchez are evaluated for their strength as adaptations by applying the rubric with a directorial lens.

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## **LIST OF ACRONYMS/ABBREVIATIONS**

AATE	American Alliance for Theatre & Education
GSA	Gay-Straight Alliance
LGBTQ	Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgendered, and Queer
TYA	Theatre for Young Audiences
QYT	Queer Youth Theatre

## CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

Often when I was growing up, I would hear stories of how the theatre was where one could go to run away from the realities of life, escape into a world of fantasy and make-believe, and be someone other than yourself. I escaped to this world, with the desire to rid myself of the uncomfortable feeling inside me of being a teenager wrestling with my sexual identity. A few short years later, I acknowledged my own homosexuality to myself, then to my peers, and eventually to my family. I am not certain of how much of this achievement can be attributed to my involvement in the theatre; however, I am certain the members of my drama club family were the first to be told officially. The camaraderie of people working in theatre can create a unique family environment that surpasses the bonds of the flesh and blood family, and allows for the freedom to express oneself in a creative environment of safety without judgment. The theatre as a place to assist the formation or exploration of one's identity gains more credibility as more playwrights explore in their writings the cultures from which they come, and as more of these plays enter into the mainstream of the cultural canon of dramatic works. This diversification of cultural experience on the page paves a path for new and exciting topics to find their way onto the stage for audiences to view and upon which to reflect.

American Theatre for Young Audiences (TYA) has taken the first steps to celebrate and explore the concept of “other” through diversity in its offerings. Contemporary TYA playwrights have begun to write about numerous cultures – their histories and developments – and also include issues and characters native to each culture. For example, José Cruz González, playwright of plays such as *Two Donuts* and *Highest Heaven*, not only includes characters and locations identified with his Hispanic culture, but even incorporates Spanish into his English language plays (González). Subsequently, Steven Dietz makes an attempt at translating the

Squaxin Indian culture to the stage through his work, *The Rememberer*, while not belonging to this cultural group (Dietz). Even when not written with the intent to develop culture-specific plots, these plays contain non-Caucasian characters as the protagonist of their works, allowing for a deeper connection for non-Caucasian audience members to the characters on stage. This may be a result of trying to connect with audiences from underserved demographics of theatre or as a genuine exploration of the culture from which the playwright comes. Whatever the reason, contemporary playwrights are breaking from the mold and are exploring different cultural worlds through different cultural lenses, creating empathy within audiences not of the subject culture.

One world in particular where more exploration can be undertaken is the world of the Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgendered (LGBT) youth of America. Published scripts exist in countries other than the United States with young gay protagonists, such as Stephen Houses' Australian play *Drapes* and Jonathan Harvey's *Beautiful Thing* written and set in the United Kingdom (House; Harvey). Of the two aforementioned works, only *Drapes* is listed as being for "Young Adult, Adult" (Australian) audiences in its publisher's online catalogue. American Musical Theatre has begun to explore adolescent gay characters as primary protagonists, with John Hartmere and Damon Intrabartolos' *Bare* and Tim Acitos' *Zanna, Don't!*; however musicals are not accessible to those without the skills to participate in a production as actors, singers, or dancers. While not written for younger LGBT audiences, the playwrights' inclusion of adolescent characters prompts identification for youths who may be questioning and exploring their own sexual identity, much as I was in my adolescence. I often wonder what my experiences as a gay youth would have been like if there would have been young gay people represented in the media. As I was beginning my coming out journey, *Will and Grace* was just starting to air, but the main LGBT characters in their late twenties and early thirties on the show did not

resonate with me as a teenager. They showed the lives of queer characters as something normal, but I was not at an age where I could appreciate the challenges the characters on screen were going through. In college, a friend of mine introduced me to the novel *Boy Meets Boy* by David Levithan. After the first read, I fell in love with the potential effect that Paul, Noah, Infinite Darlene and the rest of the characters could have on queer youth in America. Every time I reread the novel, I would begin to envision more and more of it as if it were being presented for me on the stage. As soon as a thesis topic was required of me, the decision to adapt this novel or a novel like it into a theatrical vehicle was the natural choice. Unfortunately, my skills as a playwright lack the substance to create a product substantial enough for me to comfortably offer to any audience for reading. Instead of focusing my energy outside of my skill set, I made the decision to employ my directorial eye on some of my favorite novels written for the queer youth reader. With this change in direction, I aspire to start an ever evolving list of potential adaptations of novels into a new, niche form of TYA focusing on primary characters who are LGBT and dealing with LGBT situations. While this could be called LGBT Youth Theater, I opt to use a term Queer Youth Theatre (QYT), as used by Brian Guehring, one of the leading practitioners of this budding genre, in his *TYA Today* article, “Challenges, Strategies, and Mission: An interview with Leaders of Queer Youth Theatre” (Guehring 18-22).

Some American TYA playwrights have begun exploring LGBT issues. For instance, Ric Averill wrote *Turns*, a play that features a gay father who is trying to connect to his young daughter through her interest in ballet by joining her classes and dancing in the final recital. But should *Turns* be considered QYT? Based on the current use of QYT, scripts such as this fall into another category in which the main youth characters are not gay.



This document looks specifically at the creation of an adaptation rubric and an analysis of two novels written for the young adult reader that feature LGBT characters and situations. While there are many young adult novels that could be adapted for the QYT demographic, I chose to focus on two novels for this project. I originally selected Brent Hartinger's *Geography Club* as a book to review for adaptation, yet upon further research I found it had already been adapted for the stage by Hartinger. *Parrotfish*, by Ellen Wittlinger, deals with teenage transgender issues, which I am not ready to tackle due to the sensitivity of the subject matter – even in situations and conversations with adults. In *Naomi and Ely's No Kiss List*, by Rachel Cohn and David Levithan, the main characters are dealing with issues presented for college aged teens – an age group American TYA does not recognize as being an age group that we present for. *M or F?*, places the gay character of Marcus into the sidekick role as the majority of the book is about his best friend Frannie trying to date a boy named Jeffrey. Finally, while Perry Moore's *Hero* was an enjoyable read, the novel had too many elements, such as superhero powers, and would be better suited for film. Ultimately, *Boy Meets Boy* by David Levithan and *Rainbow Boys* by Alex Sanchez were selected for further exploration.

The first chapter examines David Wood's rules for adapting literature for Children's Theatre and the subsequent adaptation of these rules for an older audience. The following chapters each focus on a novel, *Boy Meets Boy* by David Levithan in Chapter Three and *Rainbow Boys* by Alex Sanchez in Chapter Four, and the application of the newly-created rubric for adaptation into a fully realized theatrical work.

## CHAPTER TWO: DEVELOPING A RUBRIC

I always thought I would explore adapting novels for the stage when I chose the topic for this manuscript. As a director and writer for young audiences, David Wood writes in his book *Theatre for Children*, "... it is not cheating to adapt" (127). I've had an adaptation in mind for David Levithan's *Boy Meets Boy* since my undergraduate days when a friend first introduced me to the idea of youth novels geared toward the LGBT audience. Before moving forward though, I felt the need to explore what other novels existed besides *Boy Meets Boy* that might translate well to the stage. I also needed to create a measurement by which to score the suitability of the novels I read for adaptation to provide a way to compare and contrast for use in this project. This chapter explores the process of translating an adaptation rubric created by Wood for use in adapting for young children to an older, adolescent audience.

### Rubric Creation

One of the commonalities I found in playwriting texts I read during my preparation for this project is they often skim over the process of adapting (if their authors even chose to cover this topic at all). Aristotle developed the first instruction manual on creating drama during the birth of Ancient Greek theatre. Known as *The Poetics*, all contemporary drama refers back to this original list of ingredients – plot, character, theme, diction, music, spectacle. David Wood presents a comprehensive instruction manual for adapting children's books to the stage in *Theatre for Children* that rearranges and renames many of Aristotle's elements. Wood, however, focuses on the youngest members of the TYA audience when developing his adaptation process.

He suggests four steps toward creating a synopsis of the adaptation that begins with using the following checklist as a guide:

1. Story
2. Theme [ . . . ]
3. Characters
4. Life or Death Situations
5. Language and Silence
6. Suddenlies
7. Humour [sic]
8. Audience Participation
9. Scale
10. Puppetry
11. Magic within the Plot
12. Colourful [sic] Look on Stage
13. Lighting
14. Sound
15. Music
16. Climaxes and Cliffhangers
17. Justice and Fairness
18. Taboos (Wood 128)

While a strong starting point for younger audiences, his checklist includes elements such as a required colorful look on stage that my target demographic of adolescents would not necessarily

find appealing in a play written for their age group. I propose an adaptation of Wood's checklist tailored for an adolescent audience.

One of the changes I made was dropping Woods' ingredient of a colorful look on stage. Wood sums up this requirement stating that, "The pictures we make on stage should be comparable with the bright illustrations characteristic of children's books" (Wood 52). While colorful pictures appear in the pages of story books written for the youngest reader, once chapter books are introduced to children, the colorful images found in the likes of Dr. Seuss are lost, and negate the need to create this type of look. Teenagers also live on the cusp of adulthood, and plays written for a teenage audience should invite the opportunity to delve into more mature subject matter found in the adult world in the plays presented for them. Another unnecessary element from Wood's list is Audience Participation, as teenagers may not readily accept this convention in a show presented for them.

My checklist for adaptation removes Audience Participation and Colorful Scenery. By combining other categories from Wood's checklist, my checklist for adaptation is:

- Story and Theme and Action – The theatre in its very nature is storytelling. Does the book provide a well-rounded story? Are there strong representations of a theme or themes? What are some of these themes? What is at stake in the play? Will the stakes provide for playable objectives for potential actors?
- Characters, Language, and Silence – Who are the characters? Are they well-written and believable? Would I want to see them on stage? Are there opportunities for the characters to have individual speech patterns? Do the

characters speak in their own “language?” Is dialect involved? Are there ample moments for the characters to communicate without saying a word?

- Sound, Lights and Location – Where does the story take place? Are there multiple locations? What are the locations? What would the lighting requirements be? What would the sound requirements be? Are there opportunities for musical underscoring or the insertion of popular music? How do these elements help enhance location?
- Suddenlies – An element from Wood’s checklist I leave untouched. Suddenlies are “anything that, by shifting gear with a logical jolt, helps to hold the attention of the audience” (Wood 38) and can range from a moment of spectacle to a plot turn or twist that the audience is not expecting. While I don’t advocate for Wood’s desire for a minimum of three Suddenlies per page (Wood 38), are there ample opportunities to introduce “new” moments throughout the play to keep the interest?
- Humor – Are there opportunities for light-hearted moments?
- Theatrical Magic –What moments from the novels provide opportunity for “theatre magic” to exist?

What follows are the analyses of David Levithan’s *Boy Meets Boy*, and Alex Sanchez’s *Rainbow Boys*, two novels written for the teenage audience that have potential for strong stage adaptations utilizing the rubric created above approached as a potential director.

## CHAPTER THREE: ENVISIONING “BOY MEETS BOY”

### Story, Theme, and Action

*Boy Meets Boy* is a variant of the classic “boy meets girl; boy loses girl; boy gets girl back” story, this time told through the eyes and feelings of a young man who is gay, making it “boy meets boy; boy loses boy; boy gets boy back.” The story opens as Paul meets Noah at a bookstore rave while both are picking up books Paul knocked over while dancing. Paul falls instantly for Noah and, discovering that Noah just enrolled in his school, they begin to date. Shortly after their relationship starts, the admission of a brief kiss between Paul and his ex-boyfriend Kyle prompts Noah to end his relationship with Paul and begins Paul’s journey to win Noah back. At the same time, Paul’s best friend Joni begins dating a football player, Chuck, who is not well liked by their group of friends. Joni’s personality abruptly changes as a result of dating Chuck and causes tension between the two best friends and leads to their eventual “break-up”. Tony, Paul and Joni’s friend from another town, struggles with his own emotional journey of trying to live the life of a gay teen in a conservative household where homosexuality is not accepted. After he is outed to his parents, he must find common ground between his parents and himself. Infinite Darlene is one of the school’s drag queens, a boisterous athlete and homecoming queen with an extra flair of the dramatic who is always quick with a quip and busybody advice as comedic relief.

The town in which the story takes place is a fictional setting where it is okay to be who you are, and this philosophy is inclusive of sexual orientation. One of the major themes is finding love and another deals with acceptance and being true to oneself. The story also comprises elements of a fantasy with its pseudo-utopian community and the actions of the characters. For

instance, the school's cheerleading team rides motorcycles as part of its homecoming routine and a school dance is designed around the theme of death which includes a research outing to the local cemetery for décor ideas.

A life or death situation typically indicates a high stakes conflict where the outcome has severe repercussions. To teens, life or death stakes are issues such as popularity, passing a class, getting accepted into college, or finding a boyfriend or girlfriend. Levithan creates multiple conflicts for Paul that intertwine with the secondary characters in the story. Paul's primary goal is to win Noah back after the break up. At the same time, he must repair his relationship with his best friend Joni. Tony is outed as gay to his parents and must find a way to live true to who he is while living with his parents' more conservative views on homosexuality. Ted, Joni's ex-boyfriend, struggles with her dating someone else, and Infinite Darlene focuses on the popularity contest between herself and fellow drag queen Trilby Pope.

### Characters, Language, and Silence

All of the characters are well written with unique voices and personalities. Paul, the protagonist of the story, is a naïve, overachieving high school student whose loyalty to his friends causes him to stumble when he meets Noah, and his focus splits in too many directions. Noah is his love interest, the shy, new artistic student interested in photography whose past history has left him guarded and hurt. Just as he's beginning to open up, Paul's kiss with Kyle causes Noah's walls to go back up. Joni, Paul's best friend, loses her interest in their friendship when she begins dating Chuck, the dimwitted and socially aggressive jock, which causes tension within their friendship. Tony, the thinker and moral compass of the story, is the boy from the other town who struggles with his sexuality and coming out process with his parents. Minor

character Trilby Pope is Infinite Darlene's foil. They are former best friends who have fallen into an ongoing battle to one-up each other; a relationship neither can escape even as they thrive off of their competition. Kyle, Paul's ex-boyfriend, is struggling with his sexual identity. When his aunt begins experiencing health issues and later dies, Kyle seeks out Paul for comfort and mistakes his friendly support as a rekindling of their former romance. Ted is Joni's ex-boyfriend who struggles to accept that Joni is now dating Chuck, which ends their cycle of dating and breaking up.

Levithan writes stereotypes of the typical high-school character types including, but not limited to Jock, Cheerleader, and Overachiever. The characters however never hesitate to blur the lines between stereotypes. For example, Infinite Darlene is not only a drag queen but also the quarterback of the school's football team and reigning homecoming queen. Amber is one of the group of overachieving students known as the "Club Kids." They are known for joining as many school clubs as possible without actively participating just to inflate their college entrance applications. Amber breaks against the Club Kid stereotype and actually participates in the design and running of the school's dance.

The high school students speak with each other in a stereotypically teenage vernacular. Infinite Darlene has a distinct pattern of speech, shared only by Trilby Pope. Their lines are typically sharp, direct, over the top, and, as described when we first meet her, she sounds "like Scarlett O'Hara as played by Clark Gable," (Levithan 15). Tony and Paul have a unique language they have created for themselves, with context delivered mostly through tone and gesture. They use this language when English cannot express what they want to say. This is similar to the convention in musical theatre. When characters reach a height of emotion or discovery, they must sing instead of speak what they want to convey. This may prove useful in



the book to demonstrate how well Paul and Tony truly understand each other as friends; however, may prove difficult to stage for audience comprehension without clear staging and acting choices.

There are also moments of silence that can be translated from the novel to the stage. One instance used for two separate characters occurs when both Joni and Kyle give Paul the silent treatment. For Kyle, this occurs in the beginning of the work as a result of his breakup with Paul prior to the events of the novel. When Joni and Paul “break up” their friendship, she opts not to acknowledge his existence. When Paul has rallied all of his friends together to ask Tony’s parents permission for Tony to attend their dance, the silent exchanges between Tony’s mother and father can convey more than words their struggle to allow their child to go with his friends. I also see the opportunity for silence between the characters during a staged montage of one of Paul’s tactics to win Noah’s trust back. During the week when Paul shows Noah he is sorry through actions and not words, Paul sends him film canisters with one word from an inspirational quote on each canister. A volunteer courier delivers the only spoken line, “Here, my brother wanted me to give you this,” while delivering the canisters (Levithan 165). When the line is spoken as the last canister is passed to Noah, it allows for the entire sequence to be performed in silence.

As a collaborative director, I seek actors who can bring their own ideas to the table to help fully flesh out my idea for their characters. When casting the role of Paul, I’d seek an actor who is able to exhibit naivety through all of his actions even as his character develops. Paul lives in his own little bubble in his utopia and has to face reality with Noah. The actors cast as Tony and Noah need to be able to play their vulnerable moments while maintaining their confidence, as Noah is still wounded from his last dating experience and Tony is confident in everything but his sexuality. The actor cast as Kyle would need to have the ability to wear vulnerability on his

sleeve. The actress playing Joni needs to be able to come across as extremely confident but not aggressive. Physically, the actor playing Infinite Darlene would need a larger build to pull off the football player look, and also needs to be able to show himself as a diva with a sense of flair using his voice and mannerisms. For the other roles, the only requirement that I would have is to engage a multiethnic cast to help mirror the diversity within this community.

### Location, Lights, and Sound

The world of *Boy Meets Boy* is a utopian city in the present day where everyone is accepted for who they are. There are many different locations in the novel that include classrooms, school hallways, Paul's room, Noah's living room, Noah's bedroom, Noah's front yard, the cemetery, and the gymnasium. The challenge when staging this work would be finding a common look for these locations to combine some or all of them to facilitate the required scene changes. If I were directing an adaptation of this novel I would request a set of stationary decks with multiple levels. On those decks, unit pieces would be used to create the multiple locations throughout the play. For instance, on the uppermost level, two easels would be set up to represent Noah's creative space where the boys paint music. The easels would then be replaced with a bench or other raised surface to represent a bed to create Joni's bedroom.

Lighting can play an integral part in the staging of the play to help depict the passing of time. It can highlight moods and locations and would play a vital role in my staging of the moment when Noah and Paul paint music. The scene as I envision it begins with general stage lighting. Then, as the painting begins the lights dim and down specials isolate Paul and Noah. Behind them, lights illuminate the cyclorama, a type of scenic drop, to represent what the boys are painting on their easels. As the scene progresses, lighting instruments would "paint" light

across the cyclorama, the scenic units, and across the boys, breaking up in patterns choreographed perfectly with the painting movements of the boys downstage. Stage lighting would spill into the house and over the audience until Noah moves to examine what Paul has painted.

Music plays a large role in the book. Noah and Paul first meet at a rave held in a bookstore. They encounter music again while painting music on their first date. Paul also gives Noah a song during the week where he shows Noah he is sorry. Music also plays a large role in the final scene of the book when all the kids are dancing in an open field. A lush soundscape exists with school sounds, sounds of the town, motorcycles revving, and songs referenced in the novel. These sounds help to set the different locations and moods of the characters. Crowd sounds and energetic marching band music during a pep rally provide the energy and excitement that Paul feels as he seeks out Noah for the first time at school. Quiet sounds, like crickets and rustling trees, help create a nighttime scene as the kids seek out quotes and inspiration in a cemetery for the Dowager's Dance.

### Suddenlies

The fantasy world created by Levithan lends itself to multiple Suddenlies. Multiple character entrances throughout the book keep the reader wondering how a certain character will play into the action. The surprise kiss in the janitor's closet between Kyle and Paul provides for a Suddenly as the relationship between Noah and Paul now has a chance to suffer. Joni dating Chuck provides a new hurdle for the Joni-Paul dynamic, as Chuck pulls Joni further away from Paul. Paul and Tony's innocent hug is observed by a friend of Tony's mother. She tells Tony's parents and the dynamic of the Tony-Paul friendship changes. When Paul is thrown into

architecting (the term used in the book for “planning”) the Dowager Dance, a new complication arises, as Paul now has one more obligation to attend to and distract him from repairing his relationships. Whenever Paul and Tony use their made up language, the audience must now pay even more attention to the action on stage to understand the meaning behind the gibberish. All of the Suddenlies described must be included in a stage adaptation in order to move the plot forward as they do in the novel so that the characters can move beat by beat from stasis to stasis.

### Humor

Humor is present throughout the story, from moments of situational comedy to Paul’s musings on his life that belie his age through his wit. Written humor or the narrative in the book is different from humor that is presented live in the stage version. The difficulty with the humor from Paul’s thoughts, is translating it successfully to the stage without the need of voiceovers or direct address, two devices that are overused in adaptations of youth literature for the stage. Working with a playwright to develop his inner monologue into dialogue between characters provides a solution to that challenge. Situational humor provides some challenges. For instance, one must figure out how to make a pyramid of motorcycle-riding cheerleaders appear on stage during the school pep-rally. The translation of the humorous moments written into the novel would carry onto the stage both as Suddenlies rooted in spectacle as well as moments to break tension.

## Theatrical Magic

A question I have a difficult time answering is, “what makes something theatrical?” My personal stance on the subject holds that something exists as “theatrical” when seeing it live enhances the experience more than seeing it on a screen. *Boy Meets Boy* presents multiple instances where theatrical magic can take place, starting with the scene where Paul and Noah paint music. While each production team would have its own take on “painting music,” there is no way to make this interesting without engaging the audience in some way, and the scene is too vital to the development of the boys’ relationship to be omitted. Infinite Darlene is theatrical as a character that is larger than life. To me, drag queens are theatrical – over-the-top impersonations of a female persona by a male performer. Staging the cheerleaders riding motorcycles at a pep rally is theatrical as well, especially if a production team actually put this on the stage instead of merely referencing it. My vision for this scene is the action on the gym floor takes place as pre-recorded dialogue and the audience views the characters sitting in the gym bleachers. If budget were no option, I would position the bleachers Stage Right and Stage Left and utilize shadow puppets on a screen Up Center to reflect the action taking place on the court.

## CHAPTER FOUR: ENVISIONING “RAINBOW BOYS”

### Story, Theme, and Action

Written in 2001, *Rainbow Boys* by Alex Sanchez was among the first books published for young gay readers. The story follows Nelson, Kyle, and Jason, three teens navigating the first half of their senior year of high school as young gay men. Each of the boys face the year from different perspectives, and their stories intertwine after Jason attends an LGBTQ youth group Kyle and Nelson attend. Jason is just starting to come to terms with his homosexuality and, as a result, breaks up with his girlfriend. His failing math grades lead him to Kyle for tutoring to help save his hopes for a college basketball scholarship and escape from an abusive home life. During their study sessions, a romantic relationship between Kyle and Jason slowly begins to form. Kyle comes out to his parents and deals with the effects of his parent’s reactions as well as bullying at school for being gay. The bullying ties him to Nelson as they both work toward the goal of starting a Gay Straight Alliance (GSA) in their school. Nelson is focused not only on starting the GSA, but also on finding a boyfriend. He first attempts to date Kyle, who returns only friendship. When he realizes Kyle does not want to be more than friends, he begins going on dates with other boys he has met through the community youth group the three main characters attend. All of the boys’ individual stories begin to resolve after the three are involved in a fight. Nelson wins the permission of the school board to form his GSA. Kyle mends his relationship with his father, and Jason’s abusive father leaves his family after Jason comes out to him.

Sanchez presents the theme of coming out that is prevalent throughout the youth novels written for gay teens. Kyle faces the challenge of coming out to his family as well as increased exposure as an out teen in his high school as the boys start the process of creating their GSA.

Jason struggles to come out to himself prior to telling his girlfriend, his teammates, Kyle, and eventually his family. Coming out to his family results in an explosive reaction from his abusive father. The two engage in a physical altercation and his father leaves the family for good. Nelson appears to be comfortable in his own skin as a flamboyant, out-and-proud teenager; however, he suffers from low self-esteem brought on by unrequited love for Kyle and issues with his estranged father's continued absence.

The theme of dysfunctional families is explored through Jason's alcoholic and abusive father and the impact it has on Jason, his mother, and his sister. Bullying is explored as Nelson and Kyle face harassment from classmates on and off school grounds. Growing up and advancing to college is also a minor theme and plot point explored with Jason and Shea, a lesbian from the community youth group, as Jason struggles academically and Shea struggles with her girlfriend's choice of colleges. Finally, the theme of teenage sex and the ramifications of engaging in unsafe sex is explored primarily through Nelson's encounters with the characters Blake, Brick, and Jeremy.

There are situations that can be deemed "life or death" for the characters in the novel. Jason struggles with his father's homophobia, alcoholism, and physical and emotional abuse. Jason also struggles with the potential loss of his popularity should his sexual orientation be exposed through the school rumor mill. Kyle and Nelson face physical injury toward the end of the book when the primary antagonists, José and Jack, beat them up along the side of the road. The stakes are raised further for Kyle at home as his family struggles to accept his coming out. His father takes the news exceptionally hard once Kyle reveals that he was never truly interested in the father/son bonding experiences that his father planned for them. Kyle also faces bullying at the school when his locker is tagged "queer" after his peers become aware of his orientation.

Nelson's character brings the most life or death situations to the forefront as his story is revealed. Nelson is struggling to compete with Jason for Kyle, and at first cannot accept that his best friend doesn't love him back. He faces opposition from the school principal against forming the GSA. In order to receive permission to form the GSA, Nelson must give a speech in front of the school board despite being uncomfortable with speaking in public to defend the need for the club. Nelson reacts to his estranged father not showing up for an evening to spend time with him with a knee-jerk sexual encounter with the character of Brick. Due to his feelings of abandonment by both Kyle and his father, he uses this encounter to fill the loneliness he feels. Through Brick, Sanchez explores the possible after-effects of unsafe sex, including an HIV scare for Nelson. While Brick's HIV status is never disclosed, the thought alone of possibly contracting the disease scares Nelson into a depression and raises the stakes to the next level for this theme.

### Characters, Language, and Silence

*Rainbow Boys* focuses on the characters of Jason Carillo, Kyle Meeks, and Nelson Glassman, all in their senior year of high school. Jason is the primary protagonist. He is the attractive school athlete with the pretty girlfriend and struggles to find his sexual identity as a young man. Jason's arc focuses on his journey from questioning his sexuality to acceptance of himself with assistance and support from Kyle. Jason also has an abusive home life that affects the way he embraces his homosexuality. His secondary arc focuses on his family dynamic and is completely separate from his being gay. The actor portraying Jason would need to have an athletic build, and I would be looking for someone who could show anger and frustration but not necessarily deliver it in the way their lines are spoken. As part of the audition process, I would



ask those auditioning to convey emotion and subtext through body language and facial expression without any vocalization or through interactions in gibberish.

Kyle's primary arc focuses on his dealing with his feelings for Jason at the same time that Jason is struggling to develop his identity as "gay." Kyle also has a secondary arc that focuses on his relationship with his father – specifically how it mutates after he comes out to his parents. Kyle's attraction to Jason leaves him unaware that his best friend Nelson has romantic feelings for him. Kyle ultimately wins Jason's affection and Nelson and Kyle remain friends. As a reader, I identify with Kyle the most. My connection with him is the plot device that prompts Kyle's coming out to his parents. Early in the novel, Kyle falls asleep while reading a magazine with photos of attractive men. The next morning, Kyle's mother comes into his room to wake him up and discovers the magazine, which sparks conversation between the two where he comes out to his parents that day. My mother discovered a magazine targeted to gay teens which started our own conversations and led to my coming out. When casting Kyle, I would look for a boy-next-door type, and honestly, someone who reminds me of myself. As Kyle is the heart of the trio, he provides comfort and emotional support to both Jason and Nelson. I would look for an actor who is able to portray the comforter role, projecting empathy and strength in the quiet, tender moments.

Nelson is suffering from unrequited love for his best friend, Kyle, and fails every time he attempts to win his affection. As soon as he starts to accept that a Kyle/Jason pairing could happen, Nelson engages in risky sexual behaviors to try and get over Kyle. Through Nelson, the reader experiences the fears in the aftermath of losing one's virginity in an unsafe situation. Nelson is the least successful of the three main characters when looking at translating him into a stage version without making him into the flamboyant gay man stereotype. While I feel this

works in a more comedic piece like *Boy Meets Boy* where stereotypes can be explored in a heightened reality, I'm not sure it is a positive addition to a more dramatic work. Bringing Nelson to life on the stage would also be a challenge due to the majority of his lines being internal monologue. Due to this, the ability to convey detailed subtext would be a skill I look for in an actor to portray Nelson. The ability to play overdramatic moments without comedic effect is a secondary skill I would be looking for to keep Nelson's over the top actions from becoming camp.

While at times it is difficult to tell the three characters apart, there are distinct differences in the way the characters communicate. Kyle speaks very logically, except when Jason has him flustered. He rarely exhibits excitement and is even described as being shy. Jason speaks succinctly to the other two at first, and the majority of his lines of dialogue come across flustered or angered, and reflect his conflicted state as he struggles with who he is. Nelson is very excitable in his lines. Everything is high stakes for him when he communicates to the others. Despite the verbal communication the three share, there are moments for a director to play with silence in staging an adaptation, mostly through Jason and Kyle's interactions. One specific scene is a moment when the two boys first hold hands in the movie theatre. There are no words shared between the two as they slowly go from not touching to fingers intertwined on the armrest between their seats.

### Location, Lighting, and Sound

Setting can play a key role in determining if source material is suitable for adapting into a theatrical script. If there are too many locations, it can become a challenge to faithfully translate the source material to the stage. In this case, there are many different locations where the action

takes place. There are scenes in each of the boys' homes, including a common area and bedroom for each of them. There are multiple school locations including offices, the cafeteria, hallways, and classrooms. There are scenes in cars, on a motorcycle, and at a house party. There are locations in the community as well, such as the room where the youth meetings are held, a movie theatre, and a Burger King. These locations can be delineated utilizing unit sets and other technical elements to suggest where each scene takes place; however, there are numerous changes in location that take place quickly that could make staging a faithful adaptation a challenge as a director. Combining locations into type helps limit the number of actual locations needed, even if not remaining faithful to the book. For example, in the school a scene that takes place in a hallway can be moved into a classroom or vice versa.

Lighting will play a pivotal role in helping the audience follow the action of the story. Sanchez writes the chapters to read quickly, and, as a result, there are moments where time progresses rapidly in the book and will need to be reflected in any stage adaptation. Subtle lighting changes and use of gobos to represent the shifting of time as the semester progresses from September to after the Thanksgiving holidays would be an excellent way to incorporate lighting effects into the piece. Due to multiple locations of a similar nature, lighting differences would help inform the audience of where the action is taking place. There is a scene that takes place in a movie theatre that could present a fun design opportunity for Kyle and Jason to be lit with flickering blue lights, representing the reflected light from a movie screen, to indicate where they are while still lighting them enough to see their hand holding. There are also moments when darkness can help mask moments played on stage that could be deemed too risqué to be performed by or for a teenage demographic. There are moments depicted in the book where the boys have sex with their respective partners. While these intimate moments can be referenced in

dialogue after they have happened, presenting these on the stage create a stronger theatrical moment and can provide something akin to an alienation effect on the audience.

There are a handful of opportunities to present sound and music in an adaptation of *Rainbow Boys*. There are location specific sounds that can be incorporated as background noise, such as car engines for the scenes where someone is in a car driving, a motorcycle clip for Brick's motorcycle, and the general din of a crowd in a school hallway. There is a comedic moment when Blake and Nelson are in Blake's car and Nelson accidentally hits the car horn causing a neighborhood dog to begin barking. There are also moments where songs are written into the novel. When Nelson tries to create a romantic mood attempting to get Kyle to kiss him, he plays a Tony Bennett CD (Sanchez 90). When Kyle assists Jason with his math homework for the first time, the boys listen to a tape that Nelson recorded of a group called "The Butthole Surfers" (Sanchez 64-65). After mentioning the group's name, their music can play in the background for the remaining moments of the scene. There are other moments for songs to be played where none is specifically mentioned by name, such as the homecoming dance where I would personally mix contemporary Top 40 Pop of various tempos to simulate a real dance, as well as the scene where Jason's dad breaks his stereo.

### Suddenlies

Sanchez peppers many Suddenlies throughout the novel, sometimes before a plot point can fully develop. Many are building blocks for other plot points however. For example, Kyle accidentally punches Nelson in the jaw in an effort to push him away after an unwanted kiss. Nelson then learns that Blake, another boy from the youth group attended by the boys, has broken up with his boyfriend. This leads to a change in thought and action for Nelson, as he

decides to pursue Blake to lose his virginity with instead of Kyle. After Blake encourages Nelson to wait for the right person, Nelson shifts again when Brick, a guy with whom he has been flirting online, offers to have sex with him. The ultimate Sudden in this sequence occurs when Brick reveals, after they have had unprotected sex, that he has a boyfriend.

### Humor

*Rainbow Boys* attempts to be a lighthearted read. When one analyses the content and context the novel is very much a drama. Despite the content, Sanchez does find moments to lighten the mood and, if not make the reader laugh, at least make one smile. After the fight where Kyle is injured, his father mentions attending the PFLAG meetings that he initially shrugged off when his son came out. Instead of calling the group PFLAG, his father calls it “PFAG” and Kyle quickly corrects him with rapid-fire line delivery between the two and either exasperation or horror underlying Kyle’s line of dialogue to provide the humor (Sanchez 205). However, there are softer moments, such as when Jason teaches Kyle how to shoot baskets using balled up notebook paper during a study session. These moments seem few and far between, but with added material to flesh out the story, more moments could be softened with the same impact within an adaptation. There is also an option of using the character of Nelson as a comic relief character with his over the top reactions, but I feel that could cheapen his more dramatic moments. Even if a director decides to avoid leading the actor portraying Nelson to play his lines for humor, the audience may automatically respond to the character in this way.

## Theatrical Magic

There are numerous opportunities in *Rainbow Boys* for Theatrical Magic to be developed and explored. The majority of these moments stem from moments where stage combat would be needed. The most jarring of these moments is when Jason and his father finally come head-to-head after Jason reveals he is gay and they engage in a physical fight. Shortly before that moment Kyle, Nelson, and Jason find themselves in the midst of a fight with two other boys from the school who use Kyle and Nelson's out-and-proud status as reason to bully them. Jason's father also has a moment where he destroys Jason's stereo in a fit of anger.

Theatrical Magic helps define when a piece should be adapted for the stage instead of for film. One of the factors includes presenting situations where the audience needs to share the same space as the action taking place. Much as watching a riot covered on a news broadcast is different than actually being caught in one, this allows the audience to experience the tension between the characters on stage. A touching moment exists when Jason's little sister asks him what gay means. For me as a director, this moment needs to allow the audience to feel the tension between Jason and his sister as he answers her question. Another moment of theatricality occurs with Kyle's coming out to his parents, specifically his mother as the audience waits for her reaction to finding the magazine mentioned above. While this moment is mild compared to Jason's coming out and the physical violence that results from it, it is still heightened for the audience by being in the same room. Staging Nelson's speech to the school board as direct address allows an opportunity to break the fourth wall and deliver Nelson's words to the audience. In the book, both Kyle and Nelson lose their virginity and, if faithfully adapted, the suggestion of sexual acts on stage can provide tension between the audience and actors. Some

audience members may also experience internal conflict if what they process as happening on stage conflicts with their personal opinions on teenage sex.

## CHAPTER FIVE: CONCLUSION

I originally intended to adapt Levithan's *Boy Meets Boy* into a stage script as the primary focus of this project. As the project evolved and I moved away from creating an adaptation, I began to open to the idea that *Boy Meets Boy* may not be the best novel to adapt to the stage. While all the selections reviewed would make interesting selections for adapting into a play, *Rainbow Boys* provides the most solid foundation for a script that I would like to direct. The genre may be less "Fairy Tale" than *Boy Meets Boy*, but there are higher stakes to be presented on stage. Existing in a more realistic world than in *Boy Meets Boy*, the characters are more relatable to the potential audience base with more character types that allow for easier identification with at least one of the characters on the stage. While I appreciate that *Boy Meets Boy* takes the gay character and brings him front and center and also allows room for everyone else to have their crises around him, I have to remind myself that the primary audience to whom I would be presenting this work for would be the gay teen.

There are still questions left to be answered by artists who are actively researching and creating QYT. Young adult literature has been widely accepted and appreciated by youth and adults alike. There comes a point where the playwright must ask: who is this play being written for – the teenage audience they are about or the adult playwrights and presenters who are nostalgic for a better representation of their experiences as a youth? Researchers and practitioners in QYT must still determine what topics can be explored without alienating their audience base. While the focus of these pieces is mostly devoid of images of sexual intercourse, many adult audience members uncomfortable with the material may directly associate



intercourse with sexuality. Sexuality then becomes a hot topic, especially when applied to those who are considered underage in their community.

Finally, who will present these works? With the potential for the content to be controversial, many professional theatre for young audience companies may shy away from the topic of sexuality for inclusion within their seasons. High school administrators may also feel the subject is too controversial to present to their community, leaving the LGBTQ community and its teen support groups to present any works written for this age group. Theatre companies that are already exploring QYT through devising are also strong candidates for these scripts as the next evolution of their programs.

Ultimately, in my quest to add to the canon of Queer Youth Theatre, I have created an adaptation rubric and began a list of literary work that could be translated to the stage by playwrights interested in adapting young adult novels into QYT. Even though *Boy Meets Boy* didn't present itself as the strongest novel for adapting, it still aligns the most with my personal aesthetic. I hope to one day see this novel adapted for me to bring to life on stage as director for an audience of LGBT youths.

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