

ATTENTION MUST BE PAID:  
A CRITICAL STUDY OF THE NON-TRADITIONAL LEADING MAN IN TWENTIETH  
CENTURY DRAMA

by  
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## ABSTRACT

The role of the non-traditional leading man has painted a strong image which mirrors the cultural development of our identities; we turn to these men/characters to understand who, or why, we are. Their contributions require acknowledgement. This thesis is a study of the vital role the non-traditional leading man has played in the evolution of twentieth-century theatre. It will examine, through the use of ten plays, one from every decade of the twentieth century, and twelve male roles, the theory that some of the greatest leading male characters in modern theatre are not epitomized by the qualities identified with the stereotypical, romantic leading man, but instead by characters who serve as a representative of the evolution of man, and his ever-changing role in history.

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## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

According to the 11<sup>th</sup> edition of the Merriam-Webster Dictionary, the term “Leading Man” was first coined in 1827 and is described as, “an actor who plays the leading male role” (Webster 707). If one types the words, “Leading Man definition,” into the internet search engine Google, 5,450,000 results will be displayed. Is there an absolute definition of this term? In the theatre, there has been a succession of debonair, handsome, robust, alluring men, at least 6’ in height, vying for that title. Since the rise of the star-system in the mid-eighteenth century, actors from Thomas Betterton to Edwin Booth (nineteenth century), John Barrymore (twentieth century), and Hugh Jackman (twenty-first century) could all be considered leading men. At the age of forty-two, actor/singer Hugh Jackman’s one man musical *Hugh Jackman: Back on Broadway*, earned \$1,520,929 for the week ending December 4, 2011, and filled The Broadhurst Theatre to 102% capacity (livebroadway.com Screen 2).

Statistics such as these seem to prove that leading men can be a driving force of theatre, but are they the only driving force? Jackman draws large crowds and substantial remuneration when he appears on stage. However, one must examine the material which brings Jackman to the stage. He has portrayed a gay night club singer in a musical based on the life of Australian performer Peter Allen, entitled, *The Boy from Oz*. He has appeared as a guilt ridden police officer alongside another leading man, Daniel Craig, in the play *A Steady Rain*--a two character melodrama, that Ben Brantley of *The New York Times* called, “a small, wobbly pedestal on

which two gods... may stand in order to be worshiped” (Brantley screen 2). Brantley’s use of the word “gods” seems the perfect description of the archetypical leading man. It is obvious these attractive, mega celebrities personify the American ideal of good looks, talent and wealth; they are not mere mortals. To watch them on stage is to dream, to hope, to be blessed by the presence of perfection. Isn’t that what every audience member wants from a play? Perhaps some people, but certainly not all, and certainly not all actors can fulfill these epic expectations.

When people hear “Leading Man,” the stereotypes of the aforementioned actors quickly come to mind, but what about the men and characters that don’t fit into that somewhat restrictive box? And, which plays have launched careers of actors without those above mentioned qualities?

In the following pages, this thesis will examine and analyze ten plays and their leading men, all of whom break the stereotypical molds. Each play will represent one decade of the twentieth century. The plays and characters examined for this thesis are as follows:

<u>Play</u>	<u>Character</u>	<u>Decade</u>
<i>Cyrano de Bergerac</i>	Cyrano	1900s
<i>Pygmalion</i>	Henry Higgins	1910s
<i>They Knew What They Wanted</i>	Tony	1920s
<i>The Man Who Came to Dinner</i>	Sheridan Whiteside	1930s
<i>Death of Salesman</i>	Willie Loman	1940s
<i>Cat on a Hot Tin Roof</i>	Big Daddy/Brick	1950s
<i>Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf?</i>	George/Nick	1960s



<i>Equus</i>	Martin Dysart	1970s
<i>M. Butterfly</i>	Renè Gallimard	1980s
<i>Angels in America</i>	Roy Cohn	1990s

### Statement of the Problem

A leading man brings a character off a page, onto a stage, into our lives, reaching our souls and often revealing a part of us we didn't recognize before and possibly didn't want to. Just the word "leading" suggests the notion that this character is destined to take the audience on a journey of self-discovery and awareness. However, with many leading men stereotyped into the physical description of swashbuckling heroes, the audience is removed from the story and drawn into the physical attributes of the actor. Historically, actors not blessed with a perfect physical appearance will not be considered viable candidates for the roles of Eben in *Desire under the Elms* or Val in *Orpheus Descending*. So, what are the roles that best represent the talents, merits, and perspectives of the general male population of the last century?

### Statement of Purpose

The purpose of this study is to examine the non-stereotypical notions of the leading man in twentieth-century theatre. This author asserts that the most successful, male dominated plays of the last century did not contain characters, or often actors, who were idealized Adonis'. This thesis will argue that a representation of the twentieth-century male is best exemplified in the ten plays chosen. These plays demonstrate the struggle of men to find their individuality in the

vastly changing industrial, technological, sexual, civil, and cultural evolutions that occurred between 1900 and 2000.

With the twentieth-and twenty-first century advents in technology and communication, the roles of men have shifted in society and concomitantly the male characters and the male actors have likewise shifted. Idealized versions of a beautiful face and a perfectly developed physique have tormented men. Beginning with newspaper, magazine and billboard ads in the early part of the twentieth century and transitioning into film and television from the 1920s forward, men have been bombarded with an image of perfection. While the theatre has not been exempt from this obsession with perfection, there has remained an apparent attempt to produce and revive plays which present men, and utilize actors, with less-than perfect physical attributes, but who are still heroic in their lives and actions. In an age when men (and specifically actors) are defined more by their physical appearance than their talent or intellectual contributions, this thesis will serve as a tool of study for future actors, scholars and theatre theorists as documentation that physical beauty and a robust physique are not mandatory tools in the evolution of an actor's career.

The final argument defended in this thesis is that most of the greatest male characters written for the stage in the twentieth century are unremarkable looking men, fighting to make remarkable contributions.

## Methodology

The major portion of this thesis is historical research with heavy use of descriptive methodology and subjective examination. For this study, information was gathered through extensive research and in-depth analysis of the ten plays selected, archives from various Theatre publications including, *The New York Times*, *The London Times*, *New York Post*, *Variety*, *Playbill Magazine*, *Newsweek*, and the now defunct publications, *Theatre Week* and *Theatre Arts*, among many other publications. There is also extensive use of autobiographies, biographies, scholarly journals, and theatre history textbooks.

This thesis is critically based. Using the plays and the aforementioned research tools, this thesis contains analyses and conclusions about the plays, the ten male authors, and actors who have portrayed non-traditional leading-man characters. The “success” of these plays and characters in twentieth-century theatre is measured by utilizing scholastic studies, reviews of the plays, the number of performances, revivals of the plays, and any theatre awards or accolades the plays may have received during a production. I will also include the opinions and experiences written by actors who have portrayed these characters.

## Limitations

This study is designed to encompass a specific aspect of theatre that covers only a small portion of characters, actors, and playwrights in the twentieth century. While the development of male characters, and the actors who portray them, has mutated, and continues to change, this

study is meant to examine the role of the non-stereotypical leading man in the twentieth century. Each play represents a different decade. Therefore, it is mandatory that a brief overview of key historical events be covered. However, these events will be limited to drawing connections between the cultural climate of the world and the influence that could/did have on the playwrights of these plays or the actors portraying these characters.

It must also be noted that this thesis covers only male characters written by men, performed by men, and most frequently directed by men. The female perspectives of scholars, directors and theatre practitioners will be utilized in analysis and description throughout this thesis. I consider myself an actor who falls into the purview of non-traditional leading man. I have already portrayed one of the characters analyzed in this thesis (Martin Dysart in *Equus*) and I chose the other eleven roles carefully as I examine my career and characters who I could/want to portray as I mature in years. Consequently, my viewpoints are destined to shade this thesis with bias.

### Significance

The non-stereotypical leading man/character is one of the most significant and under-analyzed aspects in the advancement of actors and theatre in the twenty-first century. It is important to note that of the ten plays chosen for this study, seven of them have been produced in the commercial theatre of New York, London's West End or both in the last decade: *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* (2003), *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* (2005 and 2012), *Pygmalion* (2007), *Cyrano de Bergerac* (2007), *Equus* (2008), *Angels in America* (2010), and *Death of a Salesman* (2012). One of them has received two revivals in the last five years: *Cyrano De Bergerac* (2007

and 2012). And one of the plays, *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*, has been produced three times in New York and twice in London in the last ten years. Three of the plays have won the Pulitzer Prize for Drama: *They Knew What They Wanted* (1925), *Death of a Salesman* (1949), and *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* (1955). All of the plays have been contenders, at least once (if not numerous times), for The Tony, The Olivier, The Drama Desk or The Outer Critics' Circle Awards. It is apparent that the grip these characters had on twentieth-century audiences is only increasing in the twenty-first century. Audiences return decade after decade to identify with these male characters and what they represent.

Of the actors who have played these parts, many built careers or established their high-ranking status in theatre by interpreting these hallmark characters. For his portrayal of Cyrano de Bergerac, José Ferrer is one of only eight actors in history to win both a Tony Award and an Academy Award for portraying the same role. However, not all actors who attempt to tackle these titanic characters succeed, and some have occasionally bet their careers on a role they could not fully develop, or audiences and critics could not fully grasp. Why? What are the techniques, or simple physical attributes and/or limitations which prevented an actor from bringing these characters to life? Analysis of the success or failure of particular actors portraying these parts will be included as part of this study.

The relationship between the scholastic and the practical aspects of theatre is, in my opinion, a tenuous one. As a theatre artist who considers himself, both a practitioner and, to some degree, a scholar of my profession, I am often surprised at the lack of knowledge or enthusiasm my colleagues and peers exhibit in understanding the relationship of the artist to both

the page and the stage. Theatre exists both practically and scholastically. To truly understand the evolution of acting, one must also understand the evolution of theatre scholarship. This thesis attempts to provide a much-needed dialogue which should exist between the scholar and the practitioner. It may encourage a new model in which one person possesses aptitude in both areas. It provides both a critical and practical approach to ten of the most renowned plays and twelve of the most renowned roles in the canon of twentieth century drama. Perhaps this work will inspire other acting practitioners/scholars to look to the past in order to understand the present and future.

### Organization

This thesis is organized into five chapters. Following this introduction, Chapter Two spans the decades from the 1900s through the 1920s and examines the plays *Cyrano de Bergerac*, *Pygmalion* and *They Knew What They Wanted*. Concurrently, an overview of key historical events, including the industrial revolution, prohibition and the stock-market crash of 1929 will serve as platforms of study and comparison for the analysis of the plays. Chapter Three covers the 1930s through the 1950s and will examine *The Man Who Came to Dinner*, *Death of a Salesman* and *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*. The financial Depression of the 1930s and World War II will be featured in the description and analysis of the plays in these decades. Chapter Four studies the 1960s through the 1980s and the plays *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf*, *Equus*, and *M. Butterfly*. The Vietnam War, the rise of off-Broadway, theatre of the absurd and the campaign for equal rights will underscore these plays. Because of the depth and length of the

plays, Chapter Five, the 1990s, analyzes only *Angels in America in America Book 1: Millennium Approaches* and *Angels in America Book 2: Perestroika*. This thesis concludes with a cyclical overview that non-traditional leading men/characters, and the actors who have portrayed them, have been an essential contributor to the development and success of acting, and contemporary theatre.

## CHAPTER 2

1900s-1920s

### Cyrano de Bergerac

*“A nose may be an index to a great soul”*

*-Cyrano de Bergerac*

Edmond Rostand’s play, *Cyrano de Bergerac* premiered at the Porte Saint-Martin Theatre in Paris on December 28, 1897. According to the Rostand scholar, Dr. Alba della Fazio Amoia, “Exactly one hour after the curtain had fallen, practically the entire audience was still in the theater applauding” (Amoia 60). It was an immense achievement for a play whose leading actor, Benoît-Constant Coquelin, had only days earlier considered the potential success of the play ‘dark’ (Amoia 61). The play had its first American production at The Garden Theatre in New York, October 3, 1898 starring the famed British/American actor, Richard Mansfield. Between October 1898 and December 1900, the play was produced in New York three times, twice with Mansfield in the lead and once with its original Parisian star, Coquelin, playing opposite the most renowned actress of her time, Sarah Bernhardt.

In the hundred plus years since the play’s initial production, at least fifteen full-scale revivals have been produced in the commercial New York Theatre and sixteen film adaptations generated between 1925 and 2007; it is arguably the most enticing love story written for the stage since *Romeo and Juliet*. The hero of Rostand’s play is based loosely on a seventeenth



century French novelist and swordsman with a grotesque nose. How can a play with a physically deformed principal character qualify as a love story of comparable significance to Shakespeare? To fully understand this comparison, one must understand the evolution of industry and theatre in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

The website History.com describes The Industrial Revolution, which occurred from approximately 1760-1870 as:

...a period during which predominantly agrarian, rural societies in Europe and America became industrial and urban...While industrialization brought about an increased volume and variety of manufactured goods and an improved standard of living for some, it also resulted in often grim employment and living conditions for the poor and working classes. (History.com screen 1)

The poor and working class were rising to be a palpable voice in both Europe and America, and the arts had to adhere to that voice. The ideals which had existed in the Romantic work of French playwright/novelist Victor Hugo no longer seemed viable in the midst of the harsh working conditions and the minimal pay which plagued the poor of two continents.

According to theatre historian, Dr. Oscar G. Brockett:

Dissatisfaction with romanticism stemmed from political and social problems as well as aesthetic taste...The concentration on spiritual perfection tended to distract from the very real political and social problems of the early 19<sup>th</sup> century. (Brockett 370)

Born on April 1, 1868, Edmond Rostand came of age during the immediate post-Industrial Revolution. Rostand's *Cyrano de Bergerac* exemplifies what Amoia calls, "The noble idealist who fights against the reality of ordinary life" (Amoia 67). With *Cyrano*, Rostand created a character who existed between the roguish sex appeal of Hugo's title character, *Hernani*, and the grotesque deformity of Hugo's Quasimodo in *The Hunchback of Notre Dame*. *Cyrano* represents the best and worst of the working class. His grand swashbuckling skills, witty repartee, and foul temper are traits which easily reverberate and excite many audiences. Yet, his impassioned love for his cousin Roxanne presents him as a three dimensional character who is more than heroic. He is not a rich man nor a poor man, but a man with talent and strong devotion to those he loves.

Rostand also places *Cyrano* in direct contradiction to the dashing handsome Christian de Neuvillette, the man who has the physical beauty to win Roxanne's love, but lacks the intelligence and mastery of words held by *Cyrano*. This is exemplified in Act III, "Roxanne's Kiss," when *Cyrano* whispers poetic language to assist Christian in winning Roxanne's heart. The action of the act is centered on and below a balcony, paying obvious homage to *Romeo and Juliet*, but asking the audience to examine the supposed ideals of a perfect love story. Amoia writes,

...the nose is what has immortalized Rostand's character. Famous actors—Constant Coquelin, Ralph Richardson, José Ferrer, Gino Cervi, Jean Piat, Christopher Plummer—their faces disfigured by an enormous false nose, have

been acclaimed and will be remembered for their interpretation of Cyrano de Bergerac (Amoia 62).

However, Amoia does not discuss the commonalities of these famed actors connected to the role. While many of them achieved success in both theatre and film, most of them could not be considered stereotypical leading men. Of all the actors who have portrayed this iconic figure, arguably the most identified with the part in the twentieth century was José Ferrer, a Puerto Rican born actor who stood 5' 9 ¼" and was prematurely bald. He was hailed for his portrayal of the villainous Iago in the 1945 revival of *Othello* opposite Uta Hagen and Paul Robeson, but it was the 1946 revival of *Cyrano* that established this unremarkable looking man as one of the most remarkable actors of his time. Brooks Atkinson of *The New York Times* wrote of Ferrer, "His *Cyrano* has a sardonic wit, a strutting style, a bombastic manner of speech and withal a shyness and modesty" (Atkinson screen 2). When the seemingly diminutive Ferrer was asked why he had chosen to take on this colossal role he said,

The height and the weight don't matter. *Cyrano* wasn't a bruiser. He didn't fight with his fists. He was a dangerous man and a brave man. But he fought with a sword. And you can fight just as dangerously with a sword at five feet five as you can at six or more. (qtd. in Schriftgiesser screen 3)

With his less than idealistic features, but ferocious talent as an actor, Ferrer had connected to the pomposity and vulnerability of the character and in the process earned the first Antoinette Perry (Tony) Award for best actor in a play and the Academy Award, four years later.

*Cyrano de Bergerac* remains one of the most popular plays in the canon of theatre, not because of its idealistic love story, or a happy ending (of the three principal characters, only Roxanne is alive at the end of the play), but because of the combination of Rostand's writing and the consummate actors who continue to bring this flawed, but valiant, hero to life decade after decade.

### Pygmalion

*"Here I am a shy different sort of man. I've never been able to feel really grown up and tremendous like other chaps. And yet she's firmly persuaded that I am an arbitrary overbearing bossing kind of person. I cant account for it."*

*-Henry Higgins*

Henry Higgins' false sense of humility is not a broad differentiation from the personality of the playwright who created him. George Bernard Shaw was born at his family home, 3 Upper Synge Street, in Dublin, Ireland on July 26, 1856. Arguably the most renowned European playwright since Shakespeare, Shaw was first and foremost a scholar of theatre who had strict ideas and ideals on every topic from art to politics, religion to philosophy. Never one to shy away from opinion, Shaw once wrote of his contemporary, fellow Irishman and close friend, Oscar Wilde,

...I was in no way predisposed to like him. He was my fellow-townsmen, and a very prime specimen of the sort of fellow-townsmen I most loathed: to wit, the Dublin snob. His Irish charm, potent with Englishmen, did not exist for me; and

on the whole it may be claimed for him that he got no regard from me that he did not earn. (qtd. in Wilde 10)

On the work of Shakespeare Shaw wrote, ““with the single exception of Homer, there is no eminent writer, not even Sir Walter Scott, whom I can despise so entirely as I despise Shakespeare when I measure my mind against his”” (qtd. in Wilson 338). However, Shavian scholar A.M. Gibbs writes that Shakespeare’s work, “had been such a potent influence in Shaw’s writing from beginning to end” (Gibbs 437). Shaw’s ability to eviscerate, in words, those he admired the most is at the center of his contradictory personality and the characters who dominate his plays. Shaw was considered a playwright of ideas and had no time for writers who did not exemplify his or her understanding of societal issues in relationship to the plays and characters they were writing. In his essay, “The Problem Play,” Shaw wrote, “We may take it that the ordinary dramatist only neglects social questions because he knows nothing about them, and that he loses in popularity, standing and money by his ignorance (qtd. in Dukore 633).

This highly intellectual approach to playwriting and character development is exemplified in a canon of sixty plays, in addition to thousands of essays and letters composed by Shaw in his nine decades of life. In a writing career that prolific, there is one play which stands out as Shaw’s masterpiece: *Pygmalion*, written in 1912. The title of the play is borrowed from the Greek myth of Pygmalion, a misogynistic sculptor who falls deeply in love with his sculpture, Galatea. Pygmalion believes he has created the perfect woman, but because she is a sculpture, she cannot return his love. Aphrodite, the goddess of love, takes pity on Pygmalion and brings the statue to life, giving Pygmalion happiness. Shaw’s *Pygmalion* follows a similar

metaphor, only taking place in the second decade of the twentieth century. Eliza Doolittle is an ignorant flower girl and Henry Higgins is the irascible arrogant phonetics professor who, on a bet, agrees to educate the young woman by teaching her to speak like a lady of English high society.

While the plot of the play lacks the romantic magnetism of Oscar Wilde's *Comedy of Manners*, Henry Higgins, the principal male character in the play, represents the advancement and aspiration for education in the post industrial revolution of the early twentieth century. The character is a commentary on the evolution of education and the dichotomy that can exist in human relationships between the educated and the ignorant.

The stereotypical presentation of romance, love and sex does not exist in this play. While one may hastily call *Pygmalion* "A Love Story," one must also examine the lack of sexual relationships, physical interaction and even the use of the word love in connection to these characters, particularly Higgins. Yet, Higgins has remained Shaw's most enduring male character. Why? In the preface of *Pygmalion* Shaw wrote,

I well know how hard it is for a man of genius with a seriously underrated subject to maintain serene and kindly relations with the men who underrate it, and who keep all the best places for less important subjects which they profess without originality and sometimes without much capacity for them, still, if he overwhelms them with wrath and disdain, he cannot expect them to heap honors on him.

(Shaw 9)

Shaw was aware of his intellectual superiority and expressed it in the personage of Higgins. Unlike the seemingly ruthless, yet poetic, Cyrano, Higgins understands love only in the ferocity of his devotion to education and knowledge. Ignorant flower girl, Eliza Doolittle, initially exists only as an experiment for Higgins, a chance to further his love and devotion to words and education. As Eliza's education increases, so does Higgins' affection for her. She is a representation of his academic training, yet a strong-willed, intelligent woman who develops standards of her own. Eliza's ability to utilize language against Higgins only increases his affection for her. Higgins' poor attempt at vulnerability and love is professed in Act V of the play when he states, "I have learnt something from your idiotic notions. I confess that humbly and gratefully. And I have grown accustomed to your voice and appearance. I like them, rather" (Shaw 749).

But Higgins' inability to make an emotional connection prevents him from ever developing a romantic relationship with Eliza. In the lengthy Afterword of the play, Shaw writes of Higgins' and Eliza's relationship:

It is astonishing how much Eliza still manages to meddle in the housekeeping at Wimpole Street in spite of the shop and her own family. And it is notable that though she never nags her husband, and frankly loves the Colonel as if she were his favorite daughter, she has never got out of the habit of nagging Higgins that was established on the fatal night when she won his bet for him. She snaps his head off on the faintest provocation, or on none. He no longer dares to tease her by assuming an abysmal inferiority of Freddy's mind to his own (Shaw 757).

Not dissimilar from Shaw's statement about himself in the preface of the play, Higgins develops the skill to hide his intelligence.

Shaw wrote that art should be "didactic" (Shaw 716), and certainly *Pygmalion* exemplifies this technique. This play is a mechanism for educating audiences on love and relationships through the lens of intellectualism. In Higgins, Shaw typifies a male character heavily representational of himself and the intellectually, educationally advanced male of the early twentieth century. This is a character not deformed in physical features, but lacking in emotional communication. Higgins is a professor of phonetics. It is not coincidental that this character's profession, based in the sounds of words, has no natural concept of how his irascible words affect and wound Eliza.

As the twentieth century progresses, education will be a key factor in acting, playwriting and the development of the modern theatre. However, at no other time in history has a playwright equaled Shaw's technique for developing a non-stereotypical leading man impeded by an extraordinary intelligence; an intelligence that obstructs his ability to make an emotional human connection.

Since *Pygmalion's* American premiere on October 12, 1914, the play has received only six revivals in the commercial New York Theatre. However, the greatest legacy of *Pygmalion* is the 1956 musical adaptation of the play, *My Fair Lady*, by Alan Jay Lerner and Fredrick Loewe. Arguably the finest constructed musical of the twentieth century. Lerner and Loewe cultivated the language of Shaw, further developing the pompous Higgins into a sympathetic character who connects to the audience on a profoundly deeper level. While Higgins is obviously an



ostentatious academic with poor emotional skills, the songs of Lerner and Loewe provide Higgins with a new avenue of communication. For Higgins to say “I have grown accustomed to your voice and appearance” is Shaw’s attempt to create sympathy in the character. When Higgins sings “I’ve grown accustomed to her face,” the audience shares the plight of a socially inept intellectual discovering what it means to be in love.

This is one of many examples which demonstrate how essential musical theatre has been in establishing the non-stereotypical leading man. Of the ten plays examined in this thesis, four of them (*Cyrano de Bergerac*, *Pygmalion*, *They Knew What They Wanted*, and *The Man Who Came to Dinner*.) have been adapted to the musical stage. While *My Fair Lady* is the finest example of these adaptations, one must note that non-stereotypical leading men are fixtures of both plays and musical theatre in the twentieth century.

### They Knew What They Wanted

*“W’at I care w’at evrabody say? We tellin’ everabody he’s Tony’s baby.  
Den evrabody say Tony is so goddamn young an’ strong he’s break both his  
leg’ an’ havin’ a baby just da same.”*

*-Tony Patucci*

The 1925 play, *They Knew What They Wanted*, could be easily identified as a pedestrian love story between an older Italian man, Tony, and a young American woman, Amy. But if one examines Sydney Howard’s introduction to his Pulitzer Prize winning play, a different perspective may evolve. Howard wrote,

I don’t myself, I insist, think that the age and service stripes of a play have anything much to do with its eligibility for present purpose...No story is any older than its applicability to life. No story is any younger than the motives of its characters, and human motives have a singularly enduring and permanent quality (Howard xiii).

Howard admits that the initial idea for his most successful play spawned from an affection for the twelfth century French poem, “Tristan and Iseult,” about a Cornish Knight and an Irish Princess who fall in love. While Howard heavily changed the scope of the poem from France in the Middle Ages to Southern California in the 1920s, he maintained the “human motives” of storytelling. He also built on his notion of “applicability to life” and introduced in

theatre, age, race and the American class-system operating against the backdrop of the sexually charged, prohibition era of the time.

In his book, *The Lawless Decade: A Pictorial History of The Roaring Twenties*, author Paul Sann writes,

There was nothing dry about the Twenties... But the bootlegger was not alone; he dealt only in the happy juice. His errands made Prohibition a sopping-wet farce but there were many other laws ground into the dust during the vibrant and tumultuous years from the Armistice to Repeal. Criminal laws, moral laws, civil laws, social laws, political laws, religious laws--name them. (Sann 1)

In the midst of this sexual, legal, and social revolution, Sidney Howard pursued realism in playwriting. Howard learned the techniques of his craft in the Harvard classroom of famed academician, George Pierce Baker. Along with his contemporary (and fellow Baker student), Eugene O'Neill, Howard sought to create plays that celebrated the culturally diverse America of the early twentieth century. This was an America where immigrants and first-generation Americans were forming a powerful voice in the evolution of art, music, science and mathematics. Howard wanted to establish these voices on stage. As a decorated pilot of World War I, Howard had spent extensive time in Europe. The character of Tony Patucchi, the principal role in *They Knew What They Wanted*, is a combination of Howard's playwriting talents/training coupled with a keen understanding of the cultural evolution he had witnessed both in America and Europe.

As a middle-aged, unattractive, slightly overweight, immigrant, Tony has established himself as a successful vineyard owner in Southern California's Napa Valley. Despite his financial accomplishments, against a poor background, Tony has never achieved his greatest dream, finding a wife. When Tony meets a beautiful young woman named Amy at a restaurant in San Francisco, he leaves a letter, hoping to begin a correspondence with her. She replies. Because Amy has seen Tony only once, she does not recall his face and requests a picture. Out of fear that his physical presence will disgust her, Tony sends a photograph of his young, itinerant hired-hand, Joe. This story is revealed through exposition. As the curtain rises, Tony eagerly awaits the arrival of Amy, to whom he has proposed via letter, and she has accepted.

In the play's progression, Amy discovers Tony's true identity; she sleeps with Joe to spite Tony, and becomes pregnant. In the play's climactic conclusion, Joe attempts to take Amy with him, but his nomadic life will never provide for a child. Tony pleads with Amy, saying,

W'at's good for me havin' dees fine house? W'ats good for me havin' all dis money w'at I got? I got nobody for give my house an' my money w'en I die. Ees for dat I want dis baby, Amy. Joe don' want him. Ees Tony want him. Amy, ...Amy,...for God's sake don' go away an leave Tony! (Howard 178)

Realizing how deeply Tony loves her, Amy runs to Tony's embrace, and the curtain falls.

Unlike the two previous plays examined in this chapter, *They Knew What They Wanted* provides a reasonably happy ending. Tony finally achieves his dream of finding a wife. But, with the story of infidelity, Howard illustrates, it is still far from an idealistic ending. Tony was obviously never a love interest for Amy. In the end, the audience must decide if she chose Tony

out of love, love for her unborn child, or narrow-minded self-interest. In *They Knew What They Wanted*, Sidney Howard inaugurated a new form of non-stereotypical leading man. It is not accidental that Howard wrote the character of Tony with a strong dialect (this technique is also common in the early work of American born playwright Eugene O'Neill). It identifies him as a cross between two cultures. Tony demonstrates that the values of family hold no differentiation between the American and the Italian cultures. Howard made arguably the greatest statement any American playwright had made up to that point. By creating a non-traditional leading man for the central role, he exhibited that even in the discordant decade of the 1920s, the universal theme of devotion to one's family is paramount. These ideas and personal values will continue to be a focal point in the non-stereotypical leading man as he evolves in the remaining seven decades of the twentieth century.

## CHAPTER 3

1930s-1950s

### The Man Who Came to Dinner

*“God Damn it, June, when will you learn that I am always kind and courteous! Bring this idiot  
in!”*

*-Sheridan Whiteside*

Moss Hart and George S. Kaufman met for the first time on January 17, 1930 at the Music Box Theatre in New York. At the time of their introduction by producer Sam H. Harris, Kaufman was one of the most revered playwrights in the American Theatre. Hart was a twenty-five year old newcomer with one previous playwriting credit, *The Beloved Bandit*. *Bandit* had closed in its out-of-town tryout at a cost of nearly \$60,000. But Hart showed great promise as a playwright. Harris agreed to produce his new play, *Once in a Lifetime*, if Hart would collaborate with the experienced Kaufman on changes and rewrites in the script. In his 1959 autobiography *Act One*, Hart wrote of Kaufman:

It was easy to understand why he had been caricatured so often. It was not a handsome face in the way the word handsome is generally used to describe men’s looks, but it was an immensely attractive one. He had the kind of good looks that men as well as women find attractive. (Hart 272)

These two playwrights, one just beginning, and one well established, were thrust reluctantly into a collaborative relationship. However, they became one of the most successful playwriting teams of the twentieth-century. They won the 1936 Pulitzer Prize in drama for their play, *You Can't Take It with You*, and in a decade-long collaboration, wrote a total of eight plays: *Once in a Lifetime* (1930), *Merrily We Roll Along* (1934), *You Can't Take It with You* (1936), *I'd Rather Be Right* (1937), *The Fabulous Invalid* (1938), *The American Way* (1939), *The Man Who Came to Dinner* (1939), and *George Washington Slept Here* (1940). Both men would achieve significant success in the years subsequent to their collaboration, but they are forever associated with each other for the masterpieces in comedy they wrote together. Moss Hart's biographer, Stephen Bach, wrote of the collaboration:

Their best work together was more than the sum of their parts; it was a whole in which wit joined feeling...They were not personally close...But as writers, Kaufman and Hart were better with each other because of each other (Bach 208).

Though Kaufman and Hart earned the Pulitzer Prize for *You Can't Take It with You*, it is not the most enduring play in their body of work. The play has developed a reputation as an American classic because it demonstrates a strong bond in an eccentric family at a time when most American families were being tested beyond human expectations.

The Great Depression, followed by World War II, left Americans crushed, as the seemingly apocalyptic existence of poverty, homelessness and war loomed in every state in the nation. The website, pbs.org describes the 1930s as “one of history’s most tumultuous decades” (pbs.org screen 1). The plays of Kaufman and Hart gave audiences the chance to hope, and

escape the traumas of a devastated America, and reminded audiences that love of one's family can endure any adversity. Even the title *You Can't Take It with You* is designed to immediately "take" audiences away from an attachment to the materialistic. Martin Vanderhof, the principal male character in the play, is a one dimensional representation of American ethics and virtue. While charming with his anecdotal philosophies of life and love, he lacks the depth of characterization needed to properly embody the financial, political and social strife of America in the 1930s. Despite the popularity of Vanderhof in Kaufman and Hart's body of work, it is the character of Sheridan Whiteside in, *The Man Who Came to Dinner*, who represents the progression of the American male as an educated, intelligent, writer and orator, capable of both pretention and sincerity. Kaufman's daughter, Anne Kaufmann Schneider, said of the play, "I think that *The Man Who Came to Dinner* is probably the most humorous and the sharpest and the most sophisticated of any of the plays that they [Kaufman and Hart] wrote" (qtd in *Man Who Came to Dinner* DVD).

The play unfolds in the fictitious small town of Mesaia, Ohio. Famed writer/radio personality, Sheridan Whiteside, is in town for a brief speaking engagement, but injures his leg on the Stanley family's front porch. When the injury is only minor, Whiteside fakes a broken leg to prevent his loyal secretary of ten years, Maggie Cutler, from marrying the small town journalist, Bert Jefferson, who aspires to be a successful playwright. In the DVD commentary of the 2000 Broadway revival of the play, Director Jerry Zaks says:

I believe once an audience starts laughing, they begin falling in love with the characters, and once they start falling in the love the characters, they care what's



going to happen to the characters. They care very much...I believe from day one this is a love story. And it's not so much a love story between Maggie and Bert Jefferson...as it is between Whiteside and his secretary...it's not a romantic love story. It's not a sexual love story, but it's a story about a man who has a very difficult time with close relationships (qtd. in *Man Who Came to Dinner* DVD).

Not unlike the emotionally distant Henry Higgins George Bernard Shaw developed in *Pygmalion* nearly thirty years earlier, Sheridan Whiteside is Kaufmann and Hart's answer to the emotionally distant, pompous yet loving male character. So, what is the differentiation between Shaw's approach to this archetypical character and Kaufman and Hart's, humor and cultural familiarity!

When *The Man Who Came to Dinner* opened at Music Box Theatre on October 16, 1939, *Life Magazine* published an article calling the play, "The most successful comedy ever written about a group of well-known people with no attempt to conceal their identity" (qtd. in *Man Who Came to Dinner* DVD). The characters of Sheridan Whiteside, Lorraine Sheldon, Beverly Carlton and Banjo are thinly veiled adaptations of famed theatre critic/radio personality, Alexander Woollcott, actress, Gertrude Laurence, comedian, Harpo Marx and actor/playwright, Noel Coward, respectively. The play is also peppered with numerous references to many other living legends, two examples are: actress, Katherine Cornell, and Indian Nationalist, Mahatma Gandhi. But it is in the character of Sheridan Whiteside that the writers embolden the non-stereotypical leading man. Whiteside's gruff, yet tender demeanor demonstrates the perfect representation of the American male in the 1930s-- a male who was concomitantly trying to feed

his family in the wake of the Great Depression, while also preparing to go to war. It is the play's amalgamation of the familiar and the humorous that makes this play remarkable.

Sheridan Whiteside is often played by a respected comedic actor, with a stocky build and a well-manicured beard. The beard might be a standard aspect of Whiteside's appearance because the heavily bearded Monty Woolley originated the role on stage and again in the 1942 film adaptation. In 2000, actor Nathan Lane said of portraying the character, "There's a danger in playing Whiteside...In the movie...Monty Woolley's portrayal at times came across as mean for mean's sake. It's when it gets nasty or bitchy that it goes off in the wrong direction" (qtd. in Batistick screen 8). Lane's opinion of Woolley's performance is the subjective perspective of one actor. No two actors will ever see a part with identical perception, nor should they. Perhaps Brooks Atkinson of *The New York Times* said it best in his review of the original production, "No one would say this is a portrait done in the oil of affection. Neither is it etched in acid" (Atkinson screen 3). But it is the combination of authoritarian love, linked with American cultural humor, portrayed by actors with average physical appearances, which categorizes Sheridan Whiteside as one the premier examples of the type of characters analyzed in this thesis.

## Death of a Salesman

*"I'm fat. I'm very—foolish to look at, Linda."*

*-Willy Loman*

Perhaps no play -- or character-- in the canon of American twentieth-century drama can equal Arthur Miller's achievement in writing Willy Loman and *Death of a Salesman*. In the introduction to a collection of critical essays titled "Willy Loman," Yale professor and literary scholar, Harold Bloom writes:

Willy Loman certainly is a major *dramatic* character, and so he necessarily needs to be considered when we estimate who merits inclusion in the vital company of major American literary characters. If there is a legitimate tragic drama by an American author, then it must be *Death of a Salesman*. (Bloom 1)

With the iconic status the play and the character have developed, so too have their playwright, Arthur Miller. In his book, *The Temptation of Innocence in the Dramas of Arthur Miller*, Terry Otten writes of Miller:

For more than fifty years, Arthur Miller has been more than a dramatist. He has been a chronicler of American culture...*Death of a Salesman* probably more than any other dramatic play, still provokes critical wars about the viability of tragedy in the modern age and particularity in American culture. (Otten ix, 27)

Taking place in New York City and Boston in 1949, *Death of Salesman* is the story of Willy Loman, a proud, smart, strong-willed, egotistical, but well-intended man, who ultimately

sacrifices his life to provide insurance money and hope to his wife and two sons. He is on some level a representation of nearly every middle-class, American male of the last six decades. In his 1987 autobiography, *Timebends*, Miller writes of his masterpiece:

In later years I found it discouraging to observe the confidence with which some commentators on *Death of a Salesman* smirked at the heavy-handed symbolism of ‘Low-Man.’ What the name really meant to me was a terror-stricken man calling into the void for help that will never come. (Miller 179)

This search for hope in a world of terror has made *Salesman* one of the most recognized, often produced, and commercially successful plays in the American Theatre canon. Since its premier on February 10, 1949, the play has been revived on Broadway six times. The 1960s was the only decade since the play’s initial production that it did not receive a commercial New York revival. In addition to the 1949 Pulitzer Prize, the play has been awarded The Tony Award for Best Play or Best Revival of a play three times and earned a total of twenty Tony nominations, among countless other accolades. So why are *Salesman* and Loman among the most successful (and arguably most recognized) American plays and characters of the twentieth century? The answer lies in the text of the play itself. In the final scene entitled “Requiem,” Willy Loman’s friend, Charlie, says:

Nobody dast blame this man. You don’t understand: Willie was a salesman. And for a salesman, there is no rock bottom to the life. He don’t put a bolt to a nut, he don’t tell you the law or give you medicine. He’s a man way out there in the blue, riding on a smile and a shoeshine. And when they start not smiling back – that’s an earthquake. And

then you get yourself a couple of spots on your hat, and you're finished. Nobody dares blame this man. A salesman is got to dream, boy. It comes with the territory (Miller 138).

These lines typify the American male. While lifestyles have changed and perhaps the quality of life improved in the last sixty plus years, the aforementioned quote is a compelling example of the challenges men faced, and continue to face, regardless of race, religion, ethnicity or sexuality. In *Salesman*, Loman represents the "everyman" in working-class America. Miller describes him as "past sixty-years of age, dressed quietly" (Miller 11). He is not flashy, and identifies himself in the play as "fat" and "very foolish to look at" (Miller 37). Not unlike Cyrano de Bergerac, Henry Higgins, Tony Patucci or Sheridan Whiteside, he is arrogant and suffers from strong male pride. This pride prevents him from seeking help, financial or emotional. He is a realistic human being, attempting to maintain a middle-class lifestyle for his family and himself. He is the the ultimate example of the non-traditional leading man.

Portraying the role of Willy Loman is an Everest few actors have dared to climb. The role has become uniformly identified with the American male, and some actors have tapped into the universality of the character, while others have fallen short of the epic role's demands. It could be argued that an actor must be a certain age and experience level to even attempt the role, which shifts back in time from a character in his sixties to a character in his forties. Is there validity in that perspective? Lee J. Cobb was 39 when he created the role of Willy Loman. Subsequent actors who portrayed Loman varied in age. George C. Scott and Dustin Hoffman were 48 when they tackled the part. Brian Dennehy was 61 when he starred in the fiftieth anniversary production in Chicago, New York and London. Philip Seymour Hoffman was 44 in

the 2012 revival of the play. When, Mike Nichols, director of the 2012 revival of *Salesman*, was asked by *The New York Times*'s, Chip McGrath, about Seymour Hoffman's age appropriateness for the part, he responded:

Not old enough to do which part of this part? ...One is 43, the other one is 63. So which one are you casting? Either way you have to play the other half by acting...This is an imaginary problem...Let's not forget it's not a literal play...It's a metaphoric play. I don't think matching one of the two ages of a character is that important. I think, can he play it or not? (qtd. in McGrath screen 2)

There is validity in Nichols' comments. Brooks Atkinson called Lee J. Cobb's performance "first rank" (Atkinson screen 171). But Ben Brantley wrote of Philip Seymour Hoffman, "as a complete flesh-and-blood being, this Willy seems to emerge only fitfully...And yes, at 44, Mr. Hoffman never seems a credible 62" (Brantley screen 79).

Despite the collage of different reviews different actors brought to this part, it is crucial to note that this iconic character has always been portrayed by an actor not necessarily handsome or athletic in physique. While there is something unquestionably alluring about Willy Loman, it does not lie in his looks. Instead, it exists in his unyielding love and devotion to his family, to the point of his own demise. This characteristic of uncompromising devotion to one's family is a benchmark of the non-traditional leading man. It is not specific to any decade; or influenced by one historical event, it is a loyalty often exemplified in the American male that never goes out of fashion.

Cat on a Hot Tin Roof

*Brick: You know what I like to hear most?*

*Big Daddy: What?*

*Brick: Solid quiet.*

*Big Daddy: Why?*

*Brick: Because it's more peaceful.*

*Big Daddy: Man, you'll hear a lot of that in the grave.*

If Kaufman, Hart and Miller defined the non-stereotypical leading man by presenting the universal themes of arrogance, love, fear, devotion and emotional distance, Tennessee Williams presented it by contrasting the stereotypical leading man with the non-stereotypical leading man in the masculine driven south.

Tennessee Williams was born Thomas Lainer Williams in Columbus Mississippi on March 26, 1911. He spent his formative years in Mississippi and Missouri. When his first success on the Broadway stage, *The Glass Menagerie*, opened in New York on March 31, 1945, a virtually unknown, 33 year-old writer became, overnight, the greatest playwriting sensation of his generation. He reflected on that success three years later in an essay for *The New York Times* entitled "A Streetcar Named Success" in which he wrote:

...my experience was not exceptional, but neither was it quite ordinary...The sort of life I had had previous to this popular success was one that required endurance...I was not aware of how much vital energy had gone into this struggle

until the struggle was removed. I was out on a level plateau with my arms still thrashing and my lungs still grabbing at air that no longer existed (Williams 99).

Over the next four decades, Tennessee Williams established himself as one of the greatest American playwrights of the twentieth century. His plays and his characters were the first to give recognition to the cultural traditions and people of the American South. His characters are often at odds with their strict moral and religious upbringing. Homosexuality is omnipresent in a large portion of Williams' plays. Williams himself battled with sexual identity his entire life. Williams' male characters are often examples of formulaic virile men in the Deep South at odds with their environment. These are men expected to be masculine, misogynistic caregivers with deep religious values and carnal lust for women. Often these characters find themselves at conflict with their moral fiber because of love or financial standing. Both aspects are key ingredients in his 1955 Pulitzer Prize winning play, *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*. Written against the backdrop of America in the economic boom which followed World War II, *Cat* demonstrates that secrets can be deeply hidden behind a façade of wealth and privilege.

Williams places the beautifully physiqued, but weak willed Brick against the powerful pomposity of his father, Big Daddy. Set in the Mississippi delta, *Cat* follows the story of a wealthy Southern family. Brick, the youngest son, has always been the favorite of his dying father. However, their relationship is tainted. Big Daddy is emotionally distant and demanding with a carnal lust for women, food and cigars. Brick, a severe alcoholic, is tormented by his marriage and closeted homosexuality. Writing against the stereotype of leading men, Williams describes Brick as:



...still slim and firm as a boy. His liquor hasn't started tearing him down outside. He has the additional charm of that cool air of detachment that people have who have given up the struggle...Perhaps in a stronger light he would show some signs of deliquescence, but the fading, still warm, light from the gallery treats him gently. (Williams 17)

Williams depicts Brick as a crumbling Adonis, who, despite wealth, good looks and talent, never achieved success on a personal or professional level. This cool detached air with little passion and good looks places Brick as the antithesis to Big Daddy, a character Williams describes as: "a tall man with a fierce, anxious look, moving carefully not to betray his weakness even, or especially, to himself" (Williams 48). Similar to Miller's Willy Loman, Williams writes Big Daddy as a pompous, seemingly emotionally detached male character. However, unlike his contemporaries, Williams places the character in stark contrast to the supposed leading man of the play, his son Brick. Why does Williams present these contrasts? Williams is creating a metaphor for the expected role of the American man and particularly the American man in the Deep South. By presenting these contradictions in physical body and emotional maturity, Williams is suggesting that the physically ideal man is merely a romantic illusion. The stereotype of indestructible strength associated with these male characters is a projection placed on the physically beautiful. The male strength of the play lies in Big Daddy. While he is a physically overwhelming, seemingly misogynistic character, he suffers in silence, not just from the cancer that riddles his body, but from the inability to make an honest emotional connection to his children, his wife or his grandchildren. Only through the materialistic possessions he can

provide his family does Big Daddy express love. This ability to provide for one's family, at the cost of personal sacrifice, is another hallmark of the non-traditional leading man.

## CHAPTER 4

1960s-1980s

### Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?

*"I read somewhere that science fiction is really not fiction at all...that you people are rearranging my genes, so that everyone will be like everyone else. Now, I won't have that! It would be a...shame. I mean...look at me! Is it really such a good idea...if everyone was forty something and looked fifty-five?"-George*

The 1960s were debatably the most turbulent decade of twentieth century America. From the assassination of a president, to the Vietnam War, to a man walking on the moon, Americans had not seen this much dissention and change since the Civil War, a century beforehand. Prohibition, musical innovations and sexuality captivated America in the jazz age of the 1920s. However, nothing had prepared the vastly conservative America of the 1950s for the legalization of the first oral contraceptives, or the outcry for civil rights among women, African-Americans and homosexuals. This was the decade when Americans began to search for individuality against the black and white backdrop of television programs where married couples still slept in separate beds. In his book, *The Sixties: Years of Hope, Days of Rage* Todd Giltin wrote:

...in the Sixties it seemed especially true that history with a capital H had come down to earth, either interfering with life or making it possible...endless questions, running debates that took their point from the divine premise that

everything was possible, and therefore it was important to think, because ideas have consequences. (Giltin 7)

This notion of thought and questioning the meaning and/or value of life permeated the mainstream theatre of the time. The Off-Broadway movement in lower Manhattan became a prominent voice when theatre artists like Joseph Papp founded The Public Theatre, and produced free Shakespeare plays to audiences in Central Park. Avant-Garde playwrights, such as Samuel Beckett, Eugène Ionesco and Harold Pinter, who had previously received only moderate recognition in American Theatre, now became prophets of a new era. This era in playwriting was identified by Martin Esslin as, *The Theatre of the Absurd*, in his 1961 book of the same title. Among this group of European theatre stalwarts, Esslin identified the thirty-three year old, American-born playwright Edward Albee as one of the young examples of the new genre. Esslin wrote, “Edward Albee (born 1928) comes into this category of the Theatre of the Absurd precisely because his work attacks the very foundations of American optimism” (Esslin 225).

In the 1960s, the role of the American female, both in life and art, began to shift with the “Women’s Liberation Movement.” While American playwrights had examined the plight of the American male, the relevance of female characters had been somewhat trivialized. Too often their relationships to husbands, boyfriends and parents presented them as weak or subservient. That is often the case in the aforementioned plays examined in this analysis. However, with Edward Albee’s 1962 play, *Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*, a new aspect of the non-traditional leading man was introduced by presenting the equality in the relationship of a husband and wife.

In *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* The characters of Martha and George spar with the ferocity of professional boxers. Set on a fictitious college campus, George, a history professor, and Martha, the University President's daughter, host a young couple new to the campus: Nick, a biology professor and his wife, Honey. As the play progresses, a war of words between Martha and George escalates to violent proportions. The four characters are submerged in a sea of alcohol and self-realization. Both George and Nick, at separate times, attempt to maintain the façade of normality, but as the action of the play spirals towards a climactic and twisted ending, involving a fabricated child, Albee presents one of the most important aspects of the non-traditional leading man-- the relationship of man to woman as a form of self-identity and esteem.

Too often the leading man is presented as isolated and divisible from women. While the aforementioned male characters in this analysis are examples of non-traditional leading men, all of them, up to this point, hold to the standard of presenting men as separated from female influence or burdened by the weight of their female counterparts. Unlike Tennessee Williams in *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*, Albee does not contrast the stereotypical leading man from the supposed non-traditional leading man. Rather, Albee ads the androgynous traits of arrogance, love, hate, fear and confidence to the exclusively male traits of virility and misogyny.

Despite his personal lack of upper-level education, Albee also establishes the rise and relevance of the educated man; as Todd Giltin stated in the 1960s, "It was important to think" (Giltin 11). While neither Nick nor George qualify as physically debonair, they both hold the highest level of education possible in their chosen professions. Still, both characters grapple profoundly with the same demons that tormented the uneducated characters previously examined

in this analysis: identity, the success or failure of familial relationships, self-worth and professional achievement. As college educations became a more common occurrence in the 1960s, Albee inaugurated a convention that became a benchmark of the non-traditional leading man in the second half of the twentieth century-- education.

In the exhausted America of post-political assassinations, war and civil rights, the non-traditional leading man emerged in the 1970s with many of the same issues of the previous six decades, but evolved through new playwriting techniques, which included elements of absurdism, strength in education and the viable voice of women as a societal equal.

## Equus

*“Without worship you shrink, it’s as brutal as that...I shrank my own life.”*

*-Martin Dysart*

The 1970s were an amalgamation of artistic influences from every corner of the world. The word “art” could be considered almost anything, from the paintings of Andy Warhol to the films of Akira Kurosawa. It was a diverse America with a melting pot of social, political and philosophical ideas. As America approached its bicentennial in 1976, theatre was now a secondary form of entertainment, far behind the readily accessible movies and television series of the time. If people were going to the theatre, they wanted to be impressed by plays and musicals that would visually dazzle them, and concurrently make them think. For the first time since the rise of the American playwright in the 1920s, audiences were seeking the perspective of non-American playwrights. In his book, *The American Theatre*, Ethan Mordden wrote:

Until the end of the 1970s, one could not deny that serious and comic theatre have totally disappeared from Broadway for months at a time but for the importation of British works, for they have something that contemporary typical Broadway fair did not have—language. (Mordden 298)

Perhaps no play affected the entertainment/enlightenment seeking audiences of the 1970s more than Peter Shaffer’s *Equus*.

After a highly successful run at the National Theatre in London, *Equus* premiered in America at The Plymouth Theatre in New York on October 24, 1974 and ran for 1,209

performances, earning the Tony Award for best play of the 1975 season. *Equus* focuses on the relationship of a middle-aged psychiatrist, Martin Dysart, with his teenage patient, Alan Strang. Dysart works at the mental institution for children where Strang has been committed for blinding six horses with a metal spike. As the relationship between Dysart and Alan develops, Dysart begins to question whether it is he or Strang who has lost touch with “reality.”

Though Shaffer describes Dysart as “a man in his mid-forties” (Shaffer 7), no other physical description is provided by the playwright. As the play unfolds, Dysart questions his purpose in life and his success in helping young patients, due to his personal and professional sterility. The void created by personal and professional failure in this middle-aged, highly educated doctor is set in stark contrast to the passionate, young, ignorant, Alan Strang. Strang cannot divorce his coming of age sexuality from the strict religious upbringing of his mother and the sexual frustrations of his hypocritical father. Though Dysart attempts to guide Strang through the abstract understanding of sexuality vs. religion, Dysart questions his own mundane existence, saying:

...that boy has known a passion more ferocious than I have felt in any second of my life. And let me tell you something: I envy it...Don't you see that's the accusation! That's what his stare has been saying to me all this time. '*At least I galloped! When did you?*' (Shaffer 73)

Continuing the same technique popularized in America by Edward Albee, Shaffer once again employs the rise of education as a strong quality of the non-traditional leading man in the latter half of the twentieth century. But Shaffer questions the role of educated men and asks



audiences to compare for themselves the value of education against the often ignorant, passion of uneducated faith. This battle of science vs. faith is exemplified in Dysart's Act I, Scene 19 monologue, where he wrestles with the notion of "normal"

The Normal is the good smile in a child's eyes... it is also the dead stare in a million adults. It both sustains and kills—like a god. It is the Ordinary made beautiful: it is also the Average made lethal. The Normal is the indispensable, murderess God of Health, and I am his priest. My tools are very delicate. My compassion is honest. I have honestly assisted children in this room. I have talked away terrors and relieved many agonies. But also---beyond question—I have cut from them parts of individuality repugnant to this god, in both his aspects (Shaffer 56).

Despite the many locations and the fantastical representation of horses, this play is performed on an almost bare stage which Shaffer describes as "a square of wood on a circle of wood" (Shaffer 13), obviously utilizing shades of absurdism to assist in telling the story. The horses are portrayed by actors wearing headpieces that only suggest the shape of a horse's head. With these compound styles of design, absurdism and education vs. faith, it would appear that the role of the non-traditional leading man, thus far examined in this analysis, would cease to exist. That is the antithesis of Shaffer's accomplishments. In *Equus*, Shaffer builds on the notion of the non-traditional leading man at odds with both his physical and mental state of being. Arthur Miller examined this to some degree in the flashback sequences of *Death of a Salesman*. Edward Albee built upon it with the fictitious child in *Who's Afraid of Virginia*

*Wolf*?. Shaffer takes away the constraints of realism, allowing the audience to exist simultaneously in both the world and the psyche of Martin Dysart, virtually at all times.

The human mind does not exist in one train of thought or on one plateau. The assortments of techniques utilized by Shaffer are among the strongest building blocks in playwriting for developing the character of a non-traditional leading man. This approach demonstrates both the mental and physical “realities” of the character, as he seeks to find his identity in a multitude of ideas, perspectives and theories. On the day of the play’s New York opening, Shaffer told *New York Times* columnist Mel Gussow, “As one gets older, one becomes simultaneously more enlightened and more confused” (qtd. in Gussow screen 23).

By the mid-1970s, Men were no longer the only recognized voice in American culture. Texas Congresswoman Barbara Jordan became the first African-American and first woman to deliver the keynote speech at the Democratic National Convention in 1976. Women were establishing a recognized position in business, government and the arts. Perhaps the greatest challenge of middle-aged men in the 1970s was finding their new position in society, a society that revered them, but no longer considered them superior. Martin Dysart exemplifies the transitory nature of men as the resounding voice of the women’s movement laid waste to the long held notion of male superiority

M. Butterfly

*“I’ve played out the events of my life night after night, always searching for a new ending to my story, one where I leave this cell and return forever to my Butterfly’s arms. Tonight I realize my search is over”*

*-René Gallimard*

By the 1980s, America had experienced virtually every sociopolitical stratosphere possible. The century had begun with the innovation of Morse code as a primary form of communication. Less than nine decades later, eighty-three million Americans huddled around their television sets on March 21, 1980 to see “Who shot J.R.?” on the popular primetime soap opera, “Dallas.” Times had changed, and so had the theatre.

In the 1970s, American theatregoers had turned to the British for thought- provoking, minimalist plays. In the 1980s, the British invasion of large scale musicals dominated the New York Theatre scene. British musical theatre held a virtual monopoly on the theatergoing audience of the time: *Cats*, *Les Misérables* and *The Phantom of the Opera* had premiered to enormous success in London before reaching New York. Two of the three plays earned the Tony Award for Best Musical in their American incarnations. American plays and musicals struggled to find a voice amid the colossal success of these British imports. If an American playwright had something to say, it would need to be profound and captivating enough to entice audiences (even if briefly) away from the flying bridges and crashing chandeliers of British

Musical Theatre. David Henry Hwang, A thirty-one year old Asian-American playwright, accomplished this in 1988 with the premier of his play, *M. Butterfly*.

*M Butterfly* is based, in part, on the true story of Bernard Boursicot and Shi Pei Pu. Taking place between 1960 and 1986, the play revolves around the relationship of a French Diplomat, René Gallimard, and a Chinese opera singer, Song Liling. After a nearly thirty-year romance, Gallimard discovers that Liling is a spy who has been leaking Gallimard's knowledge of French Government to the Chinese. But even more astonishing is Gallimard's realization that Liling is actually a man who has been masquerading as a female since the inception of their relationship.

The story seemed too preposterous for reality. But a May 11, 1986 article in *The New York Times* entitled "France jails 2 in Odd Case of Espionage" caught the attention of Hwang, and less than a year later, he had adapted the story into a play. The title is modified from Giacomo Puccini's 1904 Opera *Madame Butterfly*. Song Liling is performing the title role of Cio-Cio San when he/she meets Gallimard for the first time. The opera's plot of love and betrayal frames the setting of Hwang's play.

While professionally successful, the character of René Gallimard has always lacked the social skills to communicate with women on a romantic level. Despite his marriage at the age of thirty-one to a woman named "Helga" he states,

I have become the patron saint of the socially inept...I took a vow renouncing love. No fantasy woman would ever want me, so, yes, I would settle for a quick

leap up the career ladder. Passion, I banish and in its place—practicality. (qtd in Watt/Richardson 994, 998)

But, when a Chinese Opera singer performing *Madame Butterfly* (Gallimard's favorite opera) takes a surprising interest in Gallimard, his passionate love for her becomes almost adolescent. In a 2010 interview, Hwang described the relationship by saying:

When I began to think of the actual story and how to make it into a play, I remember one day the question came into my head, 'What did the diplomat think that he'd found?' And, he probably thought he'd found his version of *Madame Butterfly*. Gallimard fantasizes that he is Pinkerton the American lieutenant from the opera, *Madame Butterfly*. And that by the end of the play Gallimard realizes that is actually he who is *Butterfly* in that it's he who is compromised by love... (Wang, screen 3).

Romantic love is one of the greatest assets in character development for the non-traditional leading man because it can be established by practically any means the playwright chooses. Characters such as Pale in Lanford Wilson's *Burn This* (a play that premiered in New York six months prior to *M. Butterfly*) must follow a certain prerequisite: The rugged sexy outcast who has trouble with self-identity, but no trouble seducing women. In Gallimard, Hwang ascertains that romantic ideals of love can so easily trap a professionally successful man who lacks assurance in romantic relationships. Can this desire to see only what one wants to see be the reason Gallimard accepts the decades of lies that prevent him from knowing Song Liling's gender? According to the play's original director, John Dexter, "A man in pursuit of his

fantasies is capable of anything. If you permit yourself to believe badly enough, you see nothing that you don't want to see. It's all in the mind (qtd. in Molosky, screen 11). It is this devotion to fantasy and his inability to admit, he never earned the love of another person which brings Gallimard in the final moments of the play to take his own life.

As the 1980s drew to a close, the idea of fantasy vs. reality, and the persistent search for love, continued to play a large role in the evolution of the non-traditional leading man. And, the 1990s began by rapidly thrusting the world into a technological phenomenon the likes of which no one had ever experienced. This would plunge the character of the non-traditional leading man into unknown and often life-threatening experiences in the last decade of the twentieth century.

## CHAPTER 5

### 1990s AND CONCLUSION

#### Angels in America: A Gay Fantasia on National Themes

*“This is reality. I have sex with men. But unlike nearly every other man of whom this is true, I bring the guy I am screwing to the White House and President Regan smiles at us and shakes his hand. Because what I am is defined entirely of who I am.”-Roy Cohn*

When Roy Marcus Cohn died on August 2, 1986, Bob Drogin of *The Los Angeles Times* referred to him as “revered and reviled...one of the nation’s best known lawyers” (Drogin Screen 3, 8). Cohn first rose to prominence as chief counsel to Chair Senator Joseph McCarthy of the House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC) in the 1950s.

Preying on the fears of a post-World War II America, the committee (first established in 1938) was designed to search for communist propaganda being utilized to recruit Americans into socialist ideas. The committee achieved its greatest notoriety after Julius and Ethel Rosenberg were found guilty of espionage and sentenced to death by electrocution on June 19, 1953. McCarthy terrorized America with his constant implications that communism was seeking to destroy American freedom. His principal targets were famed actors, directors and playwrights whom he would try to associate with The Communist Party. The dragnet also included Jews, African-Americans and homosexuals of any profession. However, CBS journalist, Edward R.

Murrow, always a strong opponent of McCarthy, began to disassemble the validity of McCarthy's arguments in the fall of 1953. By the late 1950s, the committee was considered an embarrassing blemish on the "supposedly" pristine appearance of America. Most politicians and news commentators who supported McCarthy were destroyed by their association with him, including famed gossip columnist, Walter Winchell. The primary exception was Roy Cohn. As Albert Krebs of *The New York Times* wrote in Cohn's obituary:

...when Mr. Cohn left the Washington scene in 1954, he did not become, as some predicted, a has-been. Instead, he returned to New York to practice law and in the process became a political power broker, a friend of the rich and the fashionable, one of the city's most sought-after legal talents and probably a very wealthy man.

(Krebs Screen 33)

For the next three decades, Cohn established himself as one of America's most recognized lawyers, and a staple of the New York party scene. His homosexuality was an open secret among New York's elite. In the 1970s he was one of the most revered guests of the famed disco club, Studio 54. However, in the mid-1980s, Cohn became one of the first high-profile figures, after actor Rock Hudson, to die from AIDS. Even Krebs was timid in stating Cohn's cause of death, writing:

...the immediate cause of death was "cardio-pulmonary arrest...the death certificate also listed two secondary causes of death: 'dementia' and 'underlying HTLV-3 infections.' Most scientists believe the HTLV-3 virus is the cause of AIDS... (Krebs 4)



In the years following his death, much was written about the role Cohn had played in American culture. He was a man who had risen to success on the suffering of others. He was a close friend of President Ronald Reagan, and among his protégé's was the young real-estate broker, Donald Trump. He was a hero to American conservatives. However, he was also a homosexual man who never announced nor denounced his life. Why does a human-being so complicated deserve recognition in this study of the non-traditional leading man? Because his life served as one of the storylines to the finest plays written in the last decade of the twentieth century.

*Angels in America: A Gay Fantasia on National Themes* is a two part play by Tony Kushner; part I entitled, *Millennium Approaches*, Part II, *Perestroika*. Each part, approximately three and a quarter hours in length tells the story of New York City in the late 1980s as the AIDS epidemic reached what theatre critic Frank Rich called, "...a time of unspeakable wholesale casualties in the theater" (Rich 304). Beginning in 1985 and concluding in 1990, Kushner's epic plays utilize eight actors, portraying approximately thirty roles. The plays argue the relevance and challenges of sexual identity, religious oppression, life, death, Heaven and faith against the backdrop of the AIDS epidemic sweeping New York City. Prior to the May 4, 1993 opening of *Millennium Approaches* in New York, Bruce Weber wrote in *The New York Times*:

At a time when Broadway, dominated by ostentatious British musicals and American revivals, seems to have virtually abdicated its role as the prime showcase of new plays, "Angels in America: A Gay Fantasia on National

Themes" is the most eagerly awaited production of the last several seasons.

(Weber screen 23)

When the plays premiered in New York after productions in Los Angeles and London, both parts were either collectively, or individually, awarded the Drama Desk, The Tony Award and The Pulitzer Prize for Drama. In 2003, both parts were adapted for television by Kushner and directed by Mike Nichols for HBO. The mini-series earned eleven Emmy Awards, and broke the record for any made-for-television film up to that point. Some two decades after the play's New York premier, one might ask, "What were they about, these plays that so captured America?" The answer lies in Kushner's stylistic choices as a playwright, coupled with a portrayal of one of America's most complicated villains.

Of the twelve characters analyzed in this thesis, Roy Cohn is one of only two based on a historic figure and utilizing the person's actual name (the other is Cyrano de Bergerac) -- a person, dead since the 1980s remained a vivid figure for many Americans in the 1990s. Cohn, the man, was perhaps the best example of a living contradiction in his lifetime. He was an outspoken conservative, who also lived a promiscuous but tacitly homosexual life. As a character in Tony Kushner's play, he demonstrates the apotheosis of the non-traditional leading man. Because as Roy Bohem of *The Los Angeles Times* wrote, "Roy is that rarity of rarities, a scintillating stage villain who's both utterly unspeakable and completely irresistible (Bohem Screen 20).

By the 1990s, America had begun to accept the idea that heroes and villains come in many different shapes and sizes. The notion of a dashing handsome, moral leading man often

holds a special place in the mythic ideals of American theatregoers. However, this was a decade when the rise of technology would be spearheaded by a college dropout named Bill Gates and American President would be impeached for perjury and obstruction of justice for an extramarital affair with a White House intern. As Tony Kushner wrote on November 15, 1993, “Americans pay a high price for maintaining the myth of the Individual...” (Kushner 283).

*Angels in America* tackles the ideals so closely held by generations of Americans and added new dimension to the role of the non-traditional leading man. In the character of Roy Cohn, Kushner asks the audience to question the ideas and ideals of good vs. evil. For Americans, Cohn was the man who had appeared on the cover of *Esquire Magazine* in February 1968 with a Halo over his head. Could this be the same man who Kushner portrays as a maniacal villain, responsible in the very earliest years of his career for the death of Ethel Rosenberg? Yes! However, he is also an empathetic character. This is a character who, in his final days, is forced to face the ghost of Ethel Rosenberg, and also lives to see a unanimous vote removing him from the New York State Bar Association.

In his last scene in the play Kushner describes Cohn as, “...in Heaven, or Hell or Purgatory—standing waist-deep in a smoldering pit, facing a great flaming Aleph, which bathes him and the whole theatre in a volcanic, pulsating red light” (Kushner 274). In a short monologue, Cohn argues for his own talent in family court saying:

...Yes I will represent you, King of the Universe, yes I will sing and eviscerate, I will bully and seduce, I will win for you and make the plaintiffs, those traitors, wish they had never heard the name of... (*Huge Thunderclap*)

It is a done deal, are we on? Good, then I gotta start by telling you you ain't got a case here, you're guilty as hell, no question, you have nothing to plead but not to worry, darling, I will make something up. (Kushner 274)

Through this non-traditional leading man, Kushner asks the audience the most demanding of questions. What is good and evil? What is Heaven and Hell? Where do you go when you die? How do you atone for your sins, and, for that matter, what are sins? It is through this type of character, neither all evil, nor all good, neither handsome, nor robust that playwrights in the twentieth century asked audiences to question the most important aspects of life, death and all those moments in between.

### Conclusion

On December 2, 2012, actor Dustin Hoffman received The Kennedy Center Honor, one of the highest awards granted to performing artists in America. The award was presented to him by fellow actor and friend Robert DeNiro. DeNiro said of Hoffman:

He made it okay to be a character actor and a movie star. He broke the mold of the movie star as the handsome leading man...The actor with the everyman's face who embodied the heartbreakingly human...Stardom was never his destination. It's what he did with it that changed us and what we call a leading man. (DeNiro Screen 18)

There is little doubt that Dustin Hoffman falls easily into the category of non-traditional leading man. As this analysis acknowledges, he portrayed Willy Loman on both stage and

television in the 1980s. However, it would be challenging to identify him as the man who “broke the mold.” Long before the work of Hoffman lit up stages and screens, the powerful talents of Lionel Barrymore, Charles Laughton, George C. Scott and Jack Lemmon, to name only a few, redefined the idea of the heroic leading man. In the theatre of the twenty-first century, that legacy continues in talented stage and film actors diverse in physical appearance, but vast in talent through John Lithgow and Kevin Spacey, to mention only two.

It is important to note that this analysis was not written with the intent to undermine the heroes of theatre or film who have captivated audiences for centuries with their beauty and talent. Laurence Olivier’s *Hamlet* or Clark Gable in *Gone with the Wind*, are just two examples of leading men that established a remarkable legacy with handsome faces and slender figures. We are as dependent on their existence as we are on the characters examined in the previous pages. What must be noted is that our culture, both within the borders of America and beyond, has often been hypnotized by the allure of physical beauty. Even in supposed “reality television,” only the most beautifully and ruggedly sexy are chosen for the shows “The Bachelor” and “Jersey Shore.” People who fall out of the “physical ideal” are relegated to TV series like “The Biggest Loser-” a show which succeeds off the notion that overweight people are somehow a lesser group of humans who should be verbally abused and exercised like animals until they reach a level of attractiveness and health deemed appropriate in our “body obsessed” culture. The public’s obsessions with perfection in height, weight and face will never diminish. If anything, the media of our time helps to perpetuate those ideals. One cannot read

*Newsweek* without a make-up ad appearing on the same page as an article about our national debt.

The non-traditional leading man is not a character who is developed or easily portrayed by an actor early in his life or by virtue of his training. These young students may have abundant talent, and, with guidance, may mature into the role of the non-traditional leading man, if provided with the training and the self-confidence to find their purpose as actors. It is the aspect of age (or lack thereof) that has figured most prominently into my journey of writing this thesis. While I set forth to create an argument reflecting my abilities as an actor, the one element I cannot and did not bring to this process was the experience of wisdom—the wisdom of mature years. I believe my arguments are validated through research and educated theory. However, I am certain I lack the experience which comes only with time. In two decades, I may discover as an actor and an educator what aspects of my original arguments were valid, and what time will reveal that my young mind does not, at this moment, grasp.

Actors and characters who fall into this category of “beautiful” often are the *ne plus ultra* in the evolution of theatre. However, the role the non-traditional leading man has painted a strong image who mirrors our ever-changing cultural identities; we turn to them to understand the evolution of our cultural identity. Their contributions require acknowledgement, and therefore, to them, “... Attention must be paid” (Miller 39).

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