

**Queer Methodology in Theatre for Young Audiences:  
In Theory and Practice**

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### Abstract

There is a paucity of scholarship dealing with LGBTQ issues in theatre for young audiences (TYA). My thesis attempts to rectify this oversight by assessing the small but evolving body of work on this subject. Using methodology provided by queer theorists such as Michel Foucault, Eve Sedgwick, and Alexander Doty, I outline the criteria necessary for a TYA play which productively engages in queer discourses. With the support of neurological advances in the study of mirror-neurons and the psychological field looking at self-development, TYA becomes the foremost art form which allows young people to exercise empathy, emphasizing the importance of the existence of these narratives. I deconstruct “troubled youth” plays such as Laurie Brooks’ *The Wrestling Season* where coming out leads to negative consequences, and move into an analysis of three new plays for young audiences with progressive LGBTQ characters and narratives. These plays are Catherine Wheels’ *White* a play for under-5’s where color invades a completely white world in a metaphor for diversity, Emily Freeman’s *And Then Came Tango* for elementary school audiences about a controversial same-sex penguin couple at The Central Park Zoo, and Gabriel Jason Dean’s *The Transition of Doodle Pequeño* for middle – schoolers about a boy and his imaginary goat who meet Reno, a boy who likes to wear dresses. In the subsequent practical component of my argument, I examine the process behind an on campus production and tour of Dean’s play which I directed, outlining the ways in which these theoretical claims apply to theatrical practice. This thesis serves as a call to action for theatre-makers to influence young peoples’ lives by acknowledging the importance of including queer narratives and characters in theatre for young audiences.

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## Introduction

### **A Personal Journey**

Coming to this thesis has been an intensely personal journey. Before I introduce my argument, I would like to take a few pages to narrate this for you in an effort at transparency concerning my bias on the subject of queer theatre for young audiences. My sophomore year I took Theatre for Young Audiences with Professor Rives Collins. He had us read a new play, *fml: how Carson McCullers saved my life*, by Sarah Gubbins, that was commissioned by Steppenwolf Theatre Company's program for young adults. The play follows Jo, an out-lesbian in high school who copes with homophobic bullying by creating her own comic book superhero who, unlike Jo, faces her oppressors head on. I had never encountered a gay teenage protagonist like Jo, a girl not at all afraid to be herself, even in the face of great adversity. Reading the play, I realized if I had seen *fml* as a teenager, my journey into adulthood would look very different: I might have come out to my family sooner. I might have been a better daughter, sister, student, friend. I might have been brave enough to come out to myself.

As a child I did not have a superhero alter ego like Jo, so I turned to theatre. My most rebellious act as a pre-teen was sneaking \$5 from my mom's wallet to buy Original Broadway Cast Albums. I would close my bedroom door, put on an album, and belt myself hoarse. Alone, I would bask in the simplicity of a song, away from reality's complications. Even though the walls were thin and my parents, stepparents, three sisters, and the rest of New York City could probably hear me, I was safe.

At a pre-college theatre program the summer before my junior year of high school, my world exploded. I learned I no longer had to relegate myself to singing show tunes alone in my room, I could form a community of like-minded people I could feel safe with and learn from. I had never been around peers who also wanted to dedicate their lives to theatre. I gained

perspective and I learned to craft stories. We created an original play based on found objects and testimonials from all over Boston, glimpses of so many different lives woven together as vignettes of human experience. I kissed a girl playing truth or dare, and somehow I fell in love; that was unexpected. In finding my own artistic outlet (like Jo with her comic superheroes) the world opened up to me and I was able to start learning who I really am.

Coming out should have been easier in a stubbornly liberal family from downtown Manhattan; however, when I impulsively told my mom I thought I was bisexual, she had nothing to say other than she believed this would mean I would have a “harder life.” My mom’s reaction made me wary of embracing this aspect of who I am, and the absence of a positive young gay role model didn’t help. I can count on one hand young lesbian characters in today’s pop culture. I had to discover for myself that my life veers off the path of the traditional heterosexual narrative so deeply engrained in the backbone of our culture.

This is where my personal revelation occurred; theatre can change young people’s lives and help them to feel empowered by seeing their stories represented. In my artistic work, I tell stories about boys who wear dresses and gay penguins in the Central Park Zoo. This thesis aims to continue my artistic work in an academic realm, illuminating the cultural and personal importance of this art form.

### **The Argument**

This thesis comes from a place of need, as scholarly literature on LGBTQ (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer) narratives in theatre for young audiences (TYA) is nearly non-existent<sup>1</sup>. Nor are there scholarly attempts to apply Queer Theory methodologies to TYA pieces. In this thesis I not only address the existence of LGBT narratives in TYA, but the existence of

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<sup>1</sup> More on my use of the “LGBTQ” acronym later.

latent queerness in TYA. As a self-identifying queer woman, gender and sexuality studies student, TYA practitioner, and director who frequently works with playwrights on new work, I am coming to this thesis from a place of theory and of direct theatrical practice. I do not attempt to distance myself from the subject matter of this thesis; rather I believe that my close proximity to the argument strengthens my purpose. I argue that queer pieces of theatre aimed at young audiences exercise empathy and can positively influence young people's lives, particularly LGBTQ-identifying young people, giving them the tools to move confidently into adulthood.

Section 1 gives an overview of TYA and related terminology. This section also looks at what has historically been deemed "appropriate" versus "taboo" material for TYA and the detrimental effects of censorship on the natural evolution and progression of the field. Section 2 connects the ideas and terminology of TYA to contemporary psychology, specifically self-development theory, providing a cognitive framework for understanding the child's artistic mind and perception of TYA. Section 3 defines the academic term "queer" and constructs a queer methodology through which we can look at the TYA canon. This section also looks at contemporary trends in TYA plays which deal with LGBT narratives, placing them within the previously constructed queer methodology. I then go on to apply this methodology on three plays for young audiences which have been recently published: Catherine Wheels' *White*, Emily Freeman's *And Then Came Tango*, and Gabriel Jason Dean's *The Transition of Doodle Pequeño*.

Finally, section 4 turns to a discussion of my production of *The Transition of Doodle Pequeño* for Northwestern University's student run TYA company, Purple Crayon Players. My experience directing *Doodle* brings the theoretical components and queer methodologies I propose into a practical realm where I am actually using these ideas to direct a queer TYA play for young audiences, dealing with the practicalities that only a rehearsal process, tech week, and

performances will reveal. This practical discussion aims to apply the scholarly theories, methodologies, and frameworks to the actual process of putting a successful LGBTQ TYA play into production.

### **Conclusion**

This thesis attempts to bring together such disparate fields as Queer Studies, Cognitive Theory, and Theatrical history to raise a call to arms, using this medium of TYA as a serious change-maker. I wish to catalyze a movement where playwrights and theatre-makers must overcome the challenges of previous thought and build these narratives which engage in productive discourses surrounding issues of gender and sexuality. Next, these plays, these stories must be produced. Theaters must allow these stories to fly on their own free from censorship, anxious gatekeepers, and paranoid board members of not-for profit theatre companies. And finally, young people *must* see these plays. For the LGBTQ child, seeing these stories enacted by live human beings before his/her eyes is a monumental experience. For the non-LGBTQ child, the LGBTQ community gains a new ally. Or maybe that child has LGBTQ parents and is alone in growing up in an alternative family structure. Maybe that child will become an upstander. The potential of childhood is infinite. We are doing the work of building a better, more accepting, more peaceful generation. This thesis is a baby-step in that direction.

## TYA 101

### **The Beginning of a Movement**

Theatre for Young Audiences is a relatively young field in the history of American theatre. TYA as we know it has only had a chance to progress since the 1960s. Jed H Davis and Mary Jane Evans provide a massive overview of TYA in its past, present, and future in their text *Theatre, Children and Youth*, still relevant to the field despite its publication in 1982. They look to the landmarks of the emergence of TYA in 1903 in New York City with the Children's Education Theatre's TYA production of Shakespeare's *The Tempest*. Davis and Evans acknowledge that the audience at the time was "all much aware that this is the opening of the first ongoing children's theatre in the United States" (Davis 3). This production is followed by the first-ever American production of JM Barrie's *Peter Pan* in 1905 which debuted the year before in London. It is not until the 1920s that the so-called mother of Creative Dramatics, Winifred Ward, establishes the Children's Theatre of Evanston, IL, partnered with Northwestern University<sup>2</sup>. Another TYA great, Charlotte Chorpening, the playwright and frequent adaptor of fairytales whose contribution to the early TYA canon is indisputable, began her work at Chicago's Goodman Theatre around the same time as Ward.

Since Ward and Chorpening, TYA has continued to evolve in national and international spheres. There are well-established theatres with respected TYA programming in numerous cities in the United States including New York City, Minneapolis, Seattle, Washington D.C., and Chicago. The professional network, the American Alliance for Theatre and Education holds a conference every summer dedicated to ongoing research efforts and excellence in the field. The

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<sup>2</sup> Creative Dramatics refers to the education-focused sect of TYA (Davis 8)

international umbrella organization, Association Internationale du Théâtre de l'Enfance et la Jeunesse (ASSITEJ, translation: the International Association of Theatre for Children and Young People), brings these conversations to the world. TYA-practitioners continue to contribute new stories and research to the field and canon, constantly expanding the definition of TYA.

Before we dive into the ways in which these definitions are expanding, let's define a few terms: TYA refers to "a form of theatre designed for audiences ranging in age from early childhood to early adolescence...in which living actors present a performance which has been especially prepared for a young audience" (Davis 37). This "young audience" generally refers to the pre-adulthood age range, from infant to adolescent. The even broader term "Family Theatre," refers to theatre "for adults with a broad enough appeal to interest children," reaching past the cut off of adolescence to engage adults and parents along with children. An example of family theatre is the musical *Oliver!* adapted from Charles Dickens' *Oliver Twist*. While young audiences may not understand the more adult theme of domestic abuse, they can understand the perspective of the young orphan protagonist, Oliver (Davis 38).

We can breakdown TYA further into terms for specific age groups; Theatre for the Very Young (TVY) is a newer form of TYA which gears its performances to the under-5's age range. These performances tend to be less narratively based, instead focusing on multi-sensory experiences which weave a simple conceptual narrative. These plays tend to have little dialogue or stick to simplistic sentence structures and are rich in opportunities for direct interaction with the young audience members. An apt analogy for TVY would be theatricalizing a picture book such as *Harold and the Purple Crayon*, which uses a limited vocabulary and stimulating images to tell an imaginative story; a theatrical version might engage more senses in the telling,

including touch, smell, etc. This sect of TYA is quite new, particularly in the United States, although it has been developing more significantly in Europe and the United Kingdom.

The term TYA, while functioning as an umbrella term for this field of work, is the primary term used for theatre targeting the age range from five up to adolescence. This is quite a wide age range and most plays are not appropriate for this entire range. The general rule for figuring out a target age range for a play is by looking at the protagonist's age and targeting that grade and younger. This is because, generally speaking, children tend to identify more readily with a protagonist their age or older, but this rule not strict (Collins). For example, in Gabriel Jason Dean's play *The Transition of Doodle Pequeño*, the protagonist Doodle is a 6th grader, so the target age range would be 6th grade and the upper elementary grades. These plays are narratively based and deal with topics relevant to children; the plays become thematically and linguistically more complex and can deal with a wide range of issues centered around the *child's perspective*, from under the doorknob, if you will.

Teenagers and adolescents are the final age range. Theatre targeting this range is generally referred to as Theatre for Youth, or Theatre for Young Adults. Many of these plays deal with issues relating to high school students and the theatrical structure becomes more complex dealing with multi-faceted perspectives on a topic, event, etc. These plays are easily identifiable as most of them take place in or around high school, although that is not a strict guideline. Steppenwolf Theatre Company in Chicago has two shows in its season dedicated to this audience run by its Education Department, Steppenwolf for Young Adults.

These definitions and terms are constantly changing, but the primary goal of TYA stays the same no matter the audience, "to bring every child in our audience to a place of wonder,

where he or she can identify with worthy characters and grow as human beings by sharing, empathically, a voyage of the human spirit" (Goldberg). TYA, no matter the age range, no matter the subject matter, aims to put children and the childlike perspective at the vanguard of the story.

Davis and Evans set the five "hallmarks of excellence" in TYA which remain relevant to contemporary practice:

1. Genuine relevance: "a recognized applicability or pertinence" (Davis 113)
2. Respect for children: "a genuine, positive respect for the intelligence and emotional integrity of young people" (Davis 113)
3. Pleasurable theatre: "to involve young people in an engrossing experience...[which] must be arresting, seizing attention and sustaining interest in a developing sequence of incidents that lead to emotional satisfaction and a sense of fulfillment" (Davis 114)
4. Logical outcomes: "the theatre must not pretend a social harmony or show a misleading picture of the world" (Davis 114)
5. Meaningful involvement: "the children's participation should arise naturally and needfully from the premises of the drama itself" (Davis 115)

These are the five basic building blocks of an excellent piece of theatre for young people.

### **A Gym for Empathy**

In her article "How Theater for Young People Could Save the World," Lauren Gunderson defines TYA as follows:

A gym for empathy...where we can go to build up the muscles of compassion, to practice listening and understanding and engaging with people that are not just like ourselves. We practice sitting down, paying attention and learning from other people's actions. We practice caring. (Gunderson)

For a discussion of TYA's profound influence on children and this gymnasium for empathy, we can, unexpectedly, turn to science.

In his TED Talk given in 2009, neuroscientist Dr. Vilayanur Ramachandra uses the new discovery of mirror-neurons to explain empathy and bridge the gap between the humanities and sciences. His explanation begins with “ordinary motor command neurons in the front of the brain.” (Ramachandra 0:57). These neurons allow us to perform basic acts of motion, i.e. reaching your hand out to grab something. Motor neurons “will fire when a person performs a specific action” (Ramachandra 1:44). Mirror-neurons, discovered by Italian neuroscientists, are a subset of these motor neurons. Mirror-neurons will fire “when I’m looking at somebody else performing the same action...it’s as though this neuron is adopting the other person’s point of view” (Ramachandra 2:20). The brain is literally able to take on and mimic the neurological processes happening in someone else’s brain, taking the common cliché of walking in someone else’s shoes to a whole new level. Ramachandra goes on to use this evidence to explain the rapid evolution of culture, but more importantly for our purposes he uses it to explain empathy.

Just as there are mirror neurons for action, there are mirror neurons for touch...[a neuron] in some cases, will fire when I simply watch another person being touched. So, it’s empathizing with the other person being touched...here again you have neurons which are enrolled in empathy. (Ramachandra 4:50 )

We experience this every day; when we see someone fall down the stairs in front of us we gasp in horror not because we can feel that pain ourselves, but because the signals working in our brains can put us in their position and help us understand what that person is experiencing.

Matt Omasta, in his article “Adolescents’ Affective Engagement with Theatre: Surveying Middle School Students’ Attitudes, Values, and Beliefs,” connects the ideas behind mirror neurons to “*how* children viewing a TYA production might help understand the actions and intentions of characters on stage, and *why* they empathize with those characters and may adopt their values” (Omasta 8). For Omasta, mirror neurons allow,

...people to *understand* things (such as the emotions others are experiencing at any given moment) without engaging higher cognitive processes – that is, we can *know* without “thinking” in the traditional sense, making rapid judgments in a fraction of the time it would take us to think through a situation by applying theory or considering past experience to come to an “informed judgement” about something. Theatrical spectators cannot normally “pause” the action of a performance to stop and process its content: thus, this rapid decision-making is extremely important in the live performing arts. (Omasta 8)

The scientific discovery of mirror-neurons and the ultimate impact theatre can have on those who experience it separates theatre from other mediums of entertainment. Because there is a real live human being enacting a story before you, your mirror-neurons are engaged as they are not when you watch a movie or television show. Theatre actively exercises these mirror neurons and provides a space for children to exercise empathy, bolstering Gunderson's thesis of the theatrical gymnasium for empathy. As TYA practitioners, we must use these active mirror-neurons to our advantage to depict stories which tackle difficult social issues and marginalized individuals. But, this tends to be an uphill battle.

### **The Gatekeepers**

When it comes to TYA and what is deemed "appropriate" for young people, opinions abound. Theatre companies must constantly worry about how they will get kids to come and see their shows because they must market their programming not to the young people themselves, but to the gatekeepers: parents, caregivers, teachers, principals, and school administrators. "The question is: are you going to sell tickets if you scare people by announcing the content?" (Kramer 9). This leads to a kind of caution which inhibits the exploration of new topics in TYA, and enables a culture of self-censorship, not only for TYA-producing theatre companies, but for playwrights and artists creating new works. With these pressures, "playwrights [appear] to be working from a list of restrictions, subjects they must not treat, words they must not use, motivations they must not suggest" (Davis 78). Instead of progressing the field, reflecting in their

plays the topics which are relevant to young people today (and in turn fulfilling one of the aforementioned hallmarks of excellence), playwrights are relegated to the same old topics, the same old fodder. The canon of TYA plays begins to replicate itself, stagnating, and hindering the growth of the field.

What needs to be done is simple; "the best interests of the art form are served by playwrights and creators who dare to push back horizons, assailing ancient restrictions in the light of an intimate knowledge of contemporary children's actual environment and cultural milieu" (Davis 78). Playwrights and storytellers need to be bold and create plays that defy "appropriate." This is how the field will evolve and grow alongside a world that is constantly changing, becoming aware of marginalized groups and subjects and giving them voice. If practitioners do not take up this call to arms, then the field will suffer, lagging behind culture, and therefore not utilizing all that our gymnasium has to offer.

This can be a difficult task when playwrights turn to the subject of romantic love; "while in adult theatre there are few restrictions about what can take place on stage, theatre for children and youth, with few exceptions, remains as pristine as ever" (Davis 112). At the 13th ASSITEJ International Conference in Norway in 1999, a controversial production called *Magic Power* by a Danish theatre company began:

...a gigantic balloon of a nude woman almost [filled] the stage. As music builds, this mother figure gives birth to the characters who will then share a story through movement, sound, and no real words" this production unsurprisingly "prompted intense debate (often between Americans and Europeans) about whether or not sexual content is appropriate for young audiences. (Kramer 8)

If we look to Disney animated movies, many of these stories actually centralize a romantic subject line. This can rarely be said for TYA. The "live" nature of theatre makes these moments far more palpable for the young audience. "Anyone who has watched a show with young

audiences will recall the inevitable reaction to any moment of romance or physicality" (Kramer 8). These "reactions" refer to the fully vocalized "oohs," "ahhs," and "yucks," at staged romanticized moments particularly in performances aimed at younger audiences. Much is left to the discretion of the director in staging these moments "in a way that honors our audience where they are in their own development and yet doesn't shrink from truth-telling" (Kramer 10). So where is the line drawn between the romance depicted in Disney movies and the nude balloon used in *Magic Power*? What constitutes Disney's stories as "appropriate" versus the "inappropriate" sexualizing of the female body in this production from Denmark? And how can we continue to expand romantic storylines from being exclusively heterosexual to including homosexual romance?

This discussion of including romance in TYA is incredibly important in bringing up notions of LGBTQ issues in TYA. The conversations are intertwined because "homosexuality is immediately associated with sex," and sex, in the world of (American) TYA, is taboo, particularly looking at physical contact in a context of romance (Kramer 13). So how do we talk about LGBTQ issues without implicitly talking about sex since those two subjects seem to be culturally entwined? But why are we even asking this question? Is it because we have the best interests of our young audience in mind? We are actually thinking of the gatekeepers. "Perhaps the answer lies in an adult desire to see childhood innocence last longer" (Kramer 13).

## Constructing the Self

In order to further understand how young people process TYA and the actual impact a story can have on a young person outside of the fleeting mirror-neuron reaction, we can turn to psychology and identity development theory.

### Cognitive Development

Before moving into contemporary views of childhood cognitive development, let us look to an older model. Jean Piaget's work appeared in the early 1920s, before there was any conception of cognitive development (Piaget). To this day, Piaget's theories remain intact and a central keystone to contemporary theory on the subject. Piaget's model outlines four stages of cognitive development in children:

- 1) Sensorimotor (Birth to 2 years) – An infant progresses from reflexive, instinctual action at birth to the beginning of symbolic thought. The infant constructs an understanding of the world by coordinating sensory experiences with physical actions.
- 2) Preoperational (2 to 7 years) – The child begins to represent the world with words and images; these words and images reflect increased symbolic thinking and go beyond the connection of sensory information and physical action.
- 3) Concrete operational (7 to 11 years) – The child can now reason logically about concrete events and classify objects into different sets.
- 4) Formal operational (11 to 15 years) – The adolescent reasons in more abstract and logical ways. Thought is more idealistic. (Santock)

We can connect these four stages to TYA terminology. The sensorimotor and preoperational stages of development seem to fulfill the cognitive presumptions of TVY, while the concrete and formal operational stages fulfill the elementary and middle school age ranges of TYA. These stages of cognitive development confirm the kinds of narrative capabilities of these two age groups and their ability to aesthetically process TYA productions and how they can

influence their audiences on a profoundly influential cognitive level. Now, let us turn to contemporary identity development theory.

### **The Construction of Self**

Susan Harter's book *The Construction of Self: Developmental and Sociocultural Foundations* takes a contemporary approach to development, specifically self-development. What is self-development theory? Harter first explains the field's widely accepted argument that "our species has been designed to actively create *theories* about our world, including the construction of a theory of *self* in order to make meaning of our experiences" (Harter 1). In other words, we understand the world through our understanding of ourselves and our positions in the world dictated by identity. She goes on to assert that "the self is both a *cognitive* and a *social* construction" (Harter 1). We construct these identities for ourselves through both cognitive and social influences. The connection between social influences and the development of a child's sense of self, she further asserts, "are more likely to produce *individual differences* in how the self is crafted" (Harter 1). These individual differences are what make each of our identities, and therefore each of us, unique. Now what does all of that mean to us? For our purposes, let us categorize TYA within this idea of the cultural factors which influence the child's construction of self.

These cultural factors have an incredibly important voice in the construction of self as an evaluative influence.

Socialization experiences, initially within the crucible of interpersonal relationships with family, will dictate the *content* and *valence* of the self, resulting in a balance of positive and negative self-evaluations...the evaluative-content self is largely defined by the valence of the reflected appraisals of how significant others treat the self. These appraisals become internalized as children come to appreciate the perspective of other toward the self. (Harter 2)

Here the cultural influence of family is called into play. The family becomes an outside perspective on the self and has the ability to attach both negative and positive connotations to attributes of the developing self. For example, if a young boy wants to wear a dress to school and his parent says no because only “it is *bad* for a boy to wear a dress,” then the child will not only attribute a negative connotation to boys wearing dresses, he will also internalize this evaluation and come to the conclusion that his internal desire to wear a dress is inherently a negative trait of his self; “paramount is the role of the opinions of others in shaping the self-concept, through social interaction” (Harter 11). These cultural influences, including the influences of family, also encompass, school, social media, advertising, entertainment (films, television, music, etc), and TYA, among many other daily cultural encounters. For the young boy who wants to wear a dress, how do all of these collective cultural influences impact his self-development? This impact is most likely a pervading negative influence.

The next question is, what are these *individual differences* which cultural influences (and therefore TYA) have the ability to influence, and how are they able to influence? In other words, how might the negative impact the boy feels from cultural influences actually affect his self-development? What long term *individual* consequences are there on young people who are constantly exposed to negative associations to their concept of self?

Not only do the evaluation of significant others result in representations of self, but they provoke powerful self-affects in the form of *pride* and *shame*. Thus, the child who receives praise and support for his/her efforts will develop a sense of *pride* in his/her accomplishments. However, the child who is criticized for his/her performance will develop a sense of *shame* that can be psychologically crippling. The ability to be proud or ashamed of the self is also defined by a developmental acquisition sequence and emerges during early to midchildhood...the most common affective correlation of negative self-perceptions is *depression*. In the extreme, depressive reactions associated with negative self-perceptions can result in suicidal thoughts and behaviors. (Emphasis mine, Harter 12)

From my vantage point, Harter is speaking directly to the crisis of LGBTQ suicides that has erupted in the last decade. These cultural evaluative influences can reverberate into that child's adulthood. If the negative evaluations are traumatic, this can lead to an overall negative perception of self which in turn moves into realms of depression and possibly suicide. The bullied LGBTQ young person is indeed experiencing trauma and could very likely become depressive. Because, for the young person, "in addition to the incorporation of the opinions of significant others, children come to internalize the *standards* and *values* of those who are important to them, *including the values of the larger society*" (Harter 12). For the LGBTQ young person, these "values of the larger society" describe the countless stories parading heterosexual romance as the culturally positive "norm" as opposed to the rarely seen LGBTQ story which is ostracized as a negative "other." Not to mention pervading homophobia in every-day discourse, notably in young people hurling "gay" as an insult. Dominant cultural discourses continue to keep the heterosexual relationship on a pedestal; advertisements reinforce gender stereotypes and the heterosexual nuclear family model, music barely does any better.

Looking at the pressures of heteronormative cultural discourse combined with unsafe school environments it is no wonder statistics on LGBTQ suicides have been off the charts for the past decade. A study conducted in 2009 by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention for "7,000 LGBT middle and high school students aged 13-21 years found that in the past year, because of their sexual orientation, eight out of ten students had been verbally harassed at school; four out of ten had been physically harassed at school; six out of ten felt unsafe at school; and one of five had been the victim of a physical assault at school" ("Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender Health: Youth").

But what does (queer) TYA have to do with any of this? These *living* queer narratives specifically aimed at young people provide that sorely needed positive self-evaluation. The internalization process talked about in this literature on development theory is akin to our mirror neurons and gymnasium for empathy. This kind of positive influence on a child's self development could be the tipping point which leads a child away from the negative internalizations that turn into depression and suicidal thoughts later in life. Queer narratives in TYA could actually change a young person's life. A saved life is anything but inconsequential.

## Queering TYA

### What is “queer”?

In the last decade, the acronym “LGBT” (also “GLBT”) has become more familiar and widely accepted as a short hand in referencing sexual minorities. LGBT, standing for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender (or to use the accepted umbrella term: “trans\*”), is merely an abbreviation of a far longer acronym which has only elongated with the years. The full acronym is LGBTQQIAA, standing for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, Questioning, Intersex, Asexual, and Ally. For the purposes of this paper, I will be using the shortened version of LGBTQ. These are my primary topics of interest and further, Intersex and Asexual themes are rarely even seen in adult discourses in theatre and entertainment, let alone theatre for young audiences.<sup>3</sup> Although I will discuss storylines which include Questioning characters, this identity is less concrete than LGBTQ and thus I will speak to those storylines separately.

Before we move on to a larger discussion of LGBT, let us look at the elusive Q. “Queer,” in its current usage, is a relatively new term with a fascinating history. According to the Oxford English Dictionary, its exact etymological origin is uncertain<sup>4</sup>. Although it was “originally chiefly derogatory, since the late 1980s it has been used as a neutral positive term, originally by some homosexuals” (“queer”). The term arguably entered the popular lexicon and became widely accepted with *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy*, a reality TV show of the early ‘00s where

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<sup>3</sup> It is worthwhile to note that in looking at sexuality in TYA, Asexual tends to be the normative assumption as children are perceived as non-erotic figures. It is only their adult sexual potential, the future, which is susceptible to heteronormative assumptions.

<sup>4</sup> For a complete overview of theories surrounding “queer”’s etymology visit: Cara, “More Than Words: Queer Part 1 (The Early Years).” *Autostraddle*. The Excitant Group. 9 January 2013. Web. 27 April 2014.

a group of gay men gave a helpless straight man a usually much-needed makeover. In the past few decades, the term has been resignified in academia. Queer studies has emerged as a serious theoretical framework rooted in Foucault's *History of Sexuality Vol. 1*, published in 1976. Foucault's most important revelation is that of the emergence of a sexual discourse and its relationship to cultural power structures. He establishes and defines a discourse as the rhetoric by which the world we know is organized and how those infrastructures abuse power to oppress Marx's proletariat;

Hence, too, my main concern will be to locate the forms of power, the channels it takes, and the discourses it permeates in order to reach the most tenuous and individual modes of behavior, the paths that give it access to the rare or scarcely perceivable forms of desire, how it penetrates and controls everyday pleasure—all this entailing effects that may be those of refusal, blockage, and invalidation, but also incitement and intensification: in short, the "polymorphous techniques of power." (Foucault 11)

Foucault debunks the popular Freudian theory of sexual repression. He asserts that we are not repressed because in simply talking about sexual repression we are inherently talking about sex. The *discourse* surrounding sex qualifies it as repressed. Sex is still something we talk about even if the way in which we talk about it is as "repressed". Foucault argues that Britain's upper classes utilize a repressive discourse to police cultural norms.

Foucault's work deconstructing discourse and its role in condemning queerness is continued by modern scholars. Gayle Rubin published her essay "Thinking Sex: Notes for a Radical Theory of the Politics of Sexuality" in 1984 extrapolating on Foucault's revelations and pronouncing a call to arms for radical theories of sexuality. Judith Butler's seminal work, *Gender Trouble*, a cornerstone of queer theory, began to formulate these theories of gender and performativity by establishing gender as a social construct, beginning with gender assignment at

birth. And Eve Sedgwick's books *Epistemology of the Closet* and *Tendencies* expound upon Foucault, debunking the homosexual "closet." Thus, Queer Theory and Queer Studies are born.

Sedgwick outlines meanings of the term "queer" in her article, "Queer and Now."

"Queer" can refer to: the open mesh of possibilities, gaps, overlaps, dissonances and resonances, lapses and excesses of meaning when the constituent elements of anyone's gender, of anyone's sexuality aren't made (or *can't* be made) to signify monolithically. (Sedgwick 8)

This definition assigns queerness to anyone whose *identities* resists simplification and must be expressed in a plurality outside of normative definitions. Sedgwick, at the same time, acknowledges that the term can be used "outward along dimensions that can't be subsumed under gender and sexuality at all: the ways that race, ethnicity, postcolonial nationality criss-cross with these *and other* identity-constituting, identity-fracturing discourses" (Sedgwick 8). "Queer," to Sedgwick, occupies the liminal space among normative identifying structures. For example, someone who is queer might not conform to the gender binary (the construct of female versus male) which excludes those who fall outside those two distinct categories. Her definition expands queerness not only to those who deviate from the gender binary, but also to those who deviate from the normative concerning their class, race, ability status, etc; their situational intersections with these multiple aspects of society in turn define their roles and interactions with normative culture. While someone who identifies as LGBT might already identify as queer, someone who is not LGBT but who is female, working class, and a person of color would also be encompassed as queer under these definitions even if she might not identify herself as such.

As these definitions of queer can be attached to living, breathing individuals, they can also be attached to stories and characters. What I am particularly interested in is the question Alexander Doty poses in his book *Flaming Classics*, "how [stories] are, or might be *understood* as, queer" (added emphasis is mine, Doty 2). And what does that mean in a story meant for

children? Doty outlines six ways “queer/queerness has been used” in relation to reading films as queer texts:

1. As a synonym for either gay, or lesbian, or bisexual.
2. In various ways as an umbrella term
  - a) to pull together lesbian, and/or gay and/or bisexual with little or no attention to differences (similar to certain uses of “gay” to mean lesbians, gay men, and, sometimes, bisexuals, transsexuals, and transgendered people).
  - b) to describe a range of distinct non-straight positions being juxtaposed with each other.
  - c) to suggest those overlapping areas between and among lesbian, and/or gay, and/or bisexual, and/or other non-straight positions
3. To describe the non-straight work, positions, pleasures, and readings of people who don’t share the same “sexual orientation” as the text they are producing or responding to...
4. To describe any non-normative expression of gender, including those connected with straightness.
5. To describe non-straight things that are not clearly marked as gay, lesbian, bisexual, transsexual or transgendered, but that seem to suggest or allude to one or more of these categories, often in a vague, confusing, or incoherent manner...
6. To describe those aspects of spectatorship, cultural readership, production, and textual coding that seem to establish spaces not described by, or contained within, straight, gay, lesbian, transsexual, or transgendered understandings of queer, as queerness here is something apart from established gender and sexuality categories, not the result of vague or confused coding or positioning (Doty 6-7)

Doty’s definitions of queer help us bring this radical idea of queerness out of the theoretical rhetoric to that of art and entertainment and what queerness means to storytelling. Doty is less interested in the umbrella usage of the word than where “deployments of ‘queer/queerness’ are related to the word’s ability to describe those complex circumstances in texts, spectators, and production that resist easy categorization, but that definitely escape or defy the heteronormative” (Doty 7). For example, in Doty’s essay “‘My Beautiful Wickedness’: *The Wizard of Oz* as Lesbian Fantasy,” he develops a precise reading of “the Oz sequences in *The Wizard of Oz* as a fantasy of a teenage girl on the road to dykedom” (Doty 54). He reads *The*

*Wizard of Oz* in a new queer way by reading both The Wicked Witch of The West and The Good Witch Glinda as butch and femme lesbian representations where “the power represented by both the slippers and the broomstick is dyke power” (Doty 54). Following Doty’s lead, we can look to theatre for young audiences of decades past and mine for queer narratives.

What criteria can we use to determine if a play, particularly for young audiences, can be considered a queer text. Using Doty’s queer methodology for reading films queerly, let us also look to feminism’s Bechdel Test where a film is considered to align with feminist ideology when it has “1) at least two (named) women in it, 2) who talk to each other, 3) about something besides a man” (Bechdel). The criteria I will be using to examine the queerness of a play for young audiences, particularly in a play where non-normative sexualities are not explicit, was adapted from a handout by Clare Hammor and Gus Weltsek given to me at a seminar entitled *Queer in the Process* at the 2013 AATE conference (See Appendix A for full handout). To be considered queer, the play must...

1. introduce a queer characteristic of the story,
2. in juxtaposition to a pervading cultural norm<sup>5</sup>,
3. and question these queer and normative positions.

Taking these criteria and applying them to the classic and contemporary TYA canon exposes hither-to-unknown queer narratives we have been ignoring for years. This is most apparent in the narrative of the “other.” But these criteria are most important when we talk about stories and plays which are explicit in their use of LGBT characters. Not all LGBT plays are LGBTQ plays (more on this later).

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<sup>5</sup> These “norms” generally align with straight, white, male, middle class, educated, english-speaking, able perspectives.

## The “Other”

Joanna Halpert Kraus’s TYA play *The Ice Wolf*, originally published in 1963, is not an explicit story of queerness but of otherness. The play’s female protagonist, a young Eskimo girl named Anatou, faces adversity from the moment of her birth. She is “the fair one.” Born with pale skin and blond hair, the villagers fear her, declaiming, “She cannot be an Eskimo,” “She cannot be one of us,” and “No Eskimo child was ever born as pale as that” (Kraus 290). The villagers want to “put her out in the snow, before she turns the gods against us” (Kraus 290). From birth, Anatou is classified as different because of a quality she is born with, that she cannot change, and for which her peers shame her. She is othered because of her appearance, moreover; her parents’ deaths not long into the play force Anatou to exile herself to the forest, “a place where Eskimos never go” (Kraus 296). An implicit queer narrative surfaces when Anatou’s only friend, Tarto asks the unanswerable question:

TARTO:…Anatou, why is your hair so light?

ANATOU: Tarto, why is the sky gray in the winter? I don’t know. All I want is to be like the others, to play with you and sing with you, and I want to see my mother and father again. I love them. Do you believe me? (*He nods.*) I want to be friends with the villagers, but they won’t let me. You’re the only one who tries to understand. I used to wake up and say, “Today will be different.” My mother says, “Anatou, every day is the beginning of some new wonderful thing.” But it wasn’t true! Each day ended the same way, and each dawn I was frightened again. And then today…today was the worst of all. (Kraus 295)

In the first act alone, *The Ice Wolf* fulfills the queer criteria: it explicitly defines Anatou’s differences with her pale skin and hair, it places her difference in opposition to the normative where Eskimos’ hair and skin are “dark like the raven’s wing” (Kraus 290), and questions these positionings when a hunter’s arrow kills her after she saves Tarto’s life and the villagers realize, “we are all to blame” (Kraus 307). Anatou’s story, although it is not explicitly queer in terms of a definition inside discourses of sexuality, is queer in its positioning of normative versus non-

normative narratives; this liminal space is a queer space. *The Ice Wolf*'s occupation of this queer narrative space denotes its categorization as a queer story much like Doty's reading of *The Wizard of Oz* as an examination of the classical canon and identifying latent queer narratives within entertainment and cultural history.

### **On Troubled Youth**

We begin to move outside of the queer definition that exists without explicit "LGBT-identification" and into a realm of plays which are unafraid to identify characters as LGBT. But even if a play includes and deals with conflicts of LGBT characters, not all of these plays are LGBTQ.

The one article entitled "Gay and Lesbian Theatre for Young People or the Representation of 'Troubled Youth'" co-authored by Manon van de Water and Annie Giannini, which has been republished multiple times, in multiple editions, in multiple sources, illuminates a particular trend in the emerging TYA plays which deal with LGBT issues and characters; a focus on 'troubled youth' in plays for young adults. Van de Water and Giannini first point to the ways in which "adult" LGBT theatre exploded in the 90s with Tony Kushner's *Angels in America*, Larry Kramer's *The Normal Heart*, and Moisés Kaufman's *The Laramie Project*, among others. They go on to explain the emergence of what they have coined "the troubled youth narrative" in theatre for young audiences:

Plays for young people with gay and lesbian characters or any mention of homosexuality are rare, reflecting the degree to which heteronormativity dominates the field. When homosexuality is represented in theatre for young audiences, it is treated as a calamity, discretely packaged in plays intended to teach lessons about tolerance. In the last decade, a small body of drama for young people has emerged that includes gay and lesbian characters. By and large, however these characters are contained by a discourse of 'troubled gay youth,' which limits representation to those who are victimized because of their sexuality. (Giannini 103)

This discourse of the “troubled gay youth” is highly problematic. These plays “perpetuate the notion that ‘being gay’ puts you inherently at risk” (Giannini 106). And, more importantly, it portrays homosexuality from the perspective of a heteronormative discourse. Van de Water and Gianinni deconstruct Laurie Brooks’ *The Wrestling Season* as an example of this troubling trend. *The Wrestling Season* follows eight high schoolers and their preparations for their high school’s highly competitive wrestling season. A rivalry between two pairs of boys, Luke and Matt and Willy and Jolt, erupts into a display of homophobia when rumors abound that Luke and Matt are gay. The “gayness” present in the play never becomes anything but rumor. There is no revelatory monologue where one of the boys discovers his sexuality and claims it for himself<sup>6</sup>. Luke questions his heterosexuality, but it never becomes more than a question. Van de Water and Gianinni rightfully claim that the play, instead of bringing to light the conflicts a gay teenage boy on his school wrestling team might face, “recognizably perpetuates discourses of ‘homophobia,’ ‘outing/coming out,’ and ‘troubled gay youth’” and that, the play “does little more than reinscribe heteronormativity” (Giannini 108-110).

Looking back to our criteria established previously from Doty and the Bechdel test for looking at a *queer* play, *The Wrestling Season* does not hold its own. The first criteria is not fulfilled despite the inclusion of a possibly gay character in Luke. The reason the play is unsuccessful at this first check point is subtle. The established narrative is that of the gay rumor where “gay” and “fag” are flung by heterosexual males as slurs. Instead of engaging a queer discourse, the play participates in a fag discourse (Pascoe). The fag discourse is not a queer discourse because the “fag” exists as a mechanism of policing masculinity in a heterocentric discourse, or normative discourse. Luke, even in his questioning contributes to this discourse

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<sup>6</sup> An example of the Questioning narratives mentioned previously.

because "Luke's inability to articulate the specifics of his inner confusion indicates that he finds the possibility of same-sex attraction too abhorrent to utter, aligning him, ideologically at least, with his homophobic peers" (Giannini 109). Although Brooks may have attempted to queer Luke's story, he still functions within the heteronormative discourse of the world of the play. We cannot move on to the second criterion because the inability to fulfill the first does not allow for any opposition of a normative discourse since it already occupies that normative space.

Van de Water and Giannini discuss ways in which theatre for young adult audiences can begin to veer from this un-queer 'troubled youth' narrative: Brent Hartinger's adaptation of his young adult novel *The Geography Club* which "openly challenges dominant heteronormativity" (Giannini 115). The play follows Russell Middlebrook, a closeted 16-year-old who has a crush on Kevin, a boy on his basketball team. Russell guides us through their budding romance and the formation of The Geography Club, a moniker for their Gay-Straight Alliance, so-named to ward off potential infiltrators because it just sounds so boring. Members include a straight ally, a bisexual girl, a lesbian, and Russell.

Although the characters in *The Geography Club* attend what is presented as a homophobic school, "the play breaks away from the restrictive modes of representation in the other plays by presenting both gay and lesbian relationships, and showing young people coping healthfully and collectively with the hostile aspects of their environment, thus presenting a world that allows for the possibility of finding enjoyment rather than misery in homosexuality" (Giannini 116). This play is not just LGBT; it is LGBTQ. It makes difference visible in establishing Russell as gay from the first scene, and it positions his difference in juxtaposition with the normative by placing that initial scene in a boys locker room, one of the most heteronormative spaces imaginable. The characters complicate these positions continually

throughout the play, most notably when Kevin, a popular basketball player and Russell's crush, turns out to be gay defying the heteronormative male athlete stereotype.

It is unfortunate, but not entirely unsurprising that *The Geography Club* "has not been produced to date by any professional theatre company," (Giannini 117). It has been released as a film, although it was not widely publicized and the less than praising criticism bemoans the film's poor execution. Plays for young adults with LGBT characters are few and far between, and many of them remain within this troubled youth narrative. Van de Water and Giannini call for a "queering, that is, an understanding of [theatre for young audience's] limitations and a deliberate subversion of those limitations...young people are eager for a public space in which to acknowledge the diversity of their sexualities" (Giannini 119). Their "queering" falls in line with Doty's queer line of inquiry and our criteria for evaluation, pushing TYA-practitioners to fulfill the needs of their audiences, and thereby adhering to the hallmarks of excellence.

There are far more plays which include LGBTQ narratives targeting young adults. Steppenwolf for Young Adults commissioned and produced a new play by Sarah Gubbins, *fml: How Carson McCullers Saved My Life*. This play follows Jo, an out lesbian at her homophobic high school who draws comics of her superhero alter-ego to get her through the school day. There is an incident which involves gay-bashing, which would categorize this play within the troubled youth narrative, but unlike Luke in *The Wrestling Season*, Jo is not ashamed of who she is despite facing adversity, and she maintains a queer position outside of heteronormative discourse. Qui Nguyen's *She Kills Monsters* also follows a queer story as the protagonist, Agnes, journeys through the world of Dungeons and Dragons to reconnect with her recently deceased younger sister, Tilly, who we later find out was gay. As Agnes discovers Tilly's sexuality, we see where Tilly struggled with catty cheerleaders and had to navigate her first crush, but because

the play takes place in a world of roleplay, Tilly constructs a *homo-normative* narrative<sup>7</sup>. Here, Agnes must confront her own heterosexual assumptions. The queerness of this play puts heteronormative and homonormative perspectives directly at odds. Tilly's "troubled youth" takes a back seat, merely as a small part of her exploration of sexuality rather than as the defining force in that journey.

### **Toward a Younger Audience**

While these plays for young adults are beginning to come around to a queer telling of LGBTQ stories, the same cannot be said for theatre for young audiences targeting elementary and middle school age groups. The problem with plays for young audiences and portraits of LGBTQ characters is not that they subscribe to a heteronormative discourse, or that they play into the 'troubled youth narrative.' The problem is that they barely exist, or that they are not widely known, nor produced. There are three plays (that I know of), which are slowly gaining recognition and will hopefully blaze the trail for a new queer narrative for young people. These are: a TVY piece from Scotland entitled *White*, Emily Freeman's unpublished play for elementary school audiences *And Then Came Tango*, and Gabriel Jason Dean's recently published *The Transition of Doodle Pequeño* for elementary and middle school audiences.

*White* is an original play for ages 2-4 created by the Scottish children's theatre company Catherine Wheels and later produced in New York City at the New Victory Theatre in 2011. This highly visual story uses clowning and physical storytelling to introduce its young audiences

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<sup>7</sup> Homonormativity defined as, "a politics that does not contest dominant heteronormative assumptions and institutions, but upholds and sustains them, while promising the possibility of a demobilized gay constituency and a privatized, depoliticized gay culture anchored in domesticity and consumption" (Duggan).

to Cotton and Wrinkle, Andy Manley and Ian Cameron, two friends who live together taking care of their birdhouses in their completely white world, "but high up in the trees, all is not white. Colour appears. First red...then yellow...then blue" (Catherine Wheels). At first, Wrinkle and Cotton are wary of the emergence of color in their formerly monochromatic world, but they eventually become fond of the new colors and embrace the full color wheel into their simple lives.

Wrinkle and Cotton speak to each other in simple sentences: "Good morning, Wrinkle," and the like (*White*). They go about their routine in their white world, dusting and cleaning their birdhouses. If they find anything colorful, they must "put it in the bin," a trash bin close to the audience. They clean their birdhouses until white eggs begin to fall from the sky. It is clear that it is Wrinkle and Cotton's job to take care of these eggs. The eggs fall and one by one Wrinkle and Cotton catch them and they are deemed either "boy," or "girl," except for the one pair of "twins." But a surprise egg falls, this egg is red. They have never encountered a colored egg before; it is important to note that they do not assign a gender to this particular egg. Wrinkle forces Cotton to "put it in the bin," along with the rest of the colorful objects they've encountered. But overnight Cotton sneaks out of their white tent, takes the red egg out of the bin, and places it in a birdhouse. The next morning, Cotton finds that the red egg has made the inside of that birdhouse completely red. They begin to find more colors around their white world: their comb turns yellow, their duster turns green, and the bobble on Wrinkle's hat turns pink. They slowly find that the other birdhouses have turned to different colors. They finally open the bin which explodes with colorful confetti, and they end the play with the simple phrase, "Welcome color!"

While the child audience may not grasp the full extent of the theatrical metaphor, the subtle and implicit reference to an LGBTQ narrative still does its work. The audience might not

make the connection from the colors which are introduced, to the rainbow, and in turn to the rainbow flag as a symbol for the LGBT movement, but they might understand the metaphor for diversity and change as color is introduced to a monochromatic world<sup>8</sup>. The play explores queerness explicitly when Wrinkle and Cotton first catch the white eggs falling from the sky, they immediately assign the eggs gender, but when the red egg falls they do not. This allows us to read the colorful egg as defying the gender binary in its unassigned ambiguous nature; this is a *queer* red egg. This simple use of gender assignment might clue parents explicitly into the LGBTQ connotation and allow them to facilitate discussions with their children about the LGBTQ connections to the themes of the play. This play proves that an LGBTQ narrative can resonate with even very young audiences, introducing tough topics through simple metaphor.

The play follows the criteria of a queer story; it establishes a queer discourse with the vibrant colors in the normative white world while the characters question these positions through the presence of a colorful egg which Cotton cannot bear to put in the bin. While the themes of diversity and acceptance are implicit rather than explicit as the mode of storytelling for TVY necessitates, children interact with the otherwise complex adult themes through a simple gesture of color, boiling down a complex issue to a physical metaphor that children can understand and grasp.

Emily Freeman's unpublished play *And Then Came Tango* aimed at elementary school audiences (6-11 years old) based on the true story of two male penguins at the Central Park Zoo

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<sup>8</sup> Think back to Piaget's cognitive stages: TVY audience members are in the "sensorimotor" and "preoperational" stages where the infant begins to "reflect increased symbolic thinking and go beyond the connection of sensory information and physical action" (Santock). This leads me to believe that children of this age would be able to connect the color metaphor to a message of diversity.

who formed a same-sex pair bond and together cared for a rock, hoping it would hatch. The play's young protagonist, Lily, with the zoo keeper Walter, give Roy and Silo an incubated egg which hatches, birthing their chick, Tango. As the media whips into a frenzy and protesters crowd the small exhibit, Lily learns what it means to stand up for others. The play is a marriage of movement and language. The actors who portray the penguin pairs we meet in the exhibit never speak; instead they express their penguins' personas through movement. Their personalities and quirks bring us into a penguin-centric world, as Roy and Silo remain unfazed by the controversy surrounding their pairing. Only through Lily's eyes do we see the unfairness of those trying to separate Roy and Silo for simply following their most basic animal instincts toward childrearing, a natural impulse despite their homosexuality.

A scene toward the beginning of the play depicts the penguins' mating practices, all of the penguins pair off, as the male penguins vie for their female counterparts' attention through their own penguin movement vocabulary. Focus shifts to Roy and Silo who pair off into their mating dance. Silo brings Roy out in the open, a formerly quiet, shy penguin, and they seem to make each other happy, to which Lily calls attention. Lily is the one to point out Roy and Silo's pair bond behavior. Soon, the penguin pairs all have their own eggs to take care of, but Roy and Silo are left out. When she points this out to Walter, he claims, "You're seeing what you want to see" (Freeman). This adult perspective positions Roy and Silo against heteronormative discourse. Here our first two queer criteria are fulfilled, in Walter's reaction and in visually establishing the heterosexual pair bond penguins before Roy and Silo establish their same sex pair bond. The difference literally becomes visible as it opposes the other penguin pair bonds.

This juxtaposition comes into question most viscerally when Walter makes the later, controversial decision to give Roy and Silo an orphan egg. Roy and Silo had been taking turns

sitting on a rock, hoping against hope that it would magically hatch into their own chick. When their rock fails to hatch along with the other eggs, Lily and Walter can see Roy and Silo's heavy hearts. Walter makes a bold choice and decides to give Roy and Silo an orphaned egg he kept in an incubator. This conscious decision by an adult with the full knowledge of the kind of opposition he might face begins to question the positionings of these differences with the heteronormative culture.

Not only is this play queer in Roy and Silo's homosexual pairing, it is queer in its subversion of other normative discourses. A particularly poignant scene between Lily and her mother opens the play up to discussions not just about homosexual family structure, but of all alternative family structures as opposed to the normative discourse of the nuclear family – in this case, a single mother raising her daughter. When Lily asks her mother, "What makes a family?" she replies, "Me and you. That's our family" (Freeman). This play, in addition to tackling LGBTQ issues, queers normative notions of family structures. Lily's queerness in her experience of an alternative family structure sets the audience up to root for Lily in her protection of Roy and Silo against their protestors. Plays like this one are successful in queer storytelling not just because they expose young audiences to LGBTQ characters, but in doing so, they realize the potential that differences allow and in doing so, they are inclusive of many marginalized populations, not just an LGBTQ narrative.

Freeman writes in her masters dissertation about the rocky journey and controversy *Tango* met when a production attempted to tour to local Austin elementary schools.

After we performed *And Then Came Tango* for our first public school audience on October 16, 2012, circumstances rapidly changed. The principal of the school expressed concerns about the content of play. She contacted the other schools and principals in the

tour schedule to share her reaction. The next day, principals started to contact UT Austin to cancel the performances of *And Then Came Tango* at their schools. (Freeman 30)

Freeman and UT-Austin were able to schedule a few performances, but ultimately the tour was unsuccessful in bringing the play to schools. Freeman expresses her frustration and confusion surrounding the controversy and the fact that “a play about same-sex parents required such careful contextualization,” and that she “didn’t want to apologize for the content of [her] play” (Freeman 30). So, while the play itself is successful as a progressive queer narrative, it was not, in this instance, successful in winning over cautious gatekeepers.

Gabriel Jason Dean's play *The Transition of Doodle Pequeño*, also developed at University of Texas – Austin, is similarly successful in depicting intersectional queer characters. In the following section I will read this play through a queer lens. In addition, I will reflect on the process of directing this play on Northwestern University's campus for Purple Crayon Players, and the proceeding workshop and tour to local Evanston elementary and middle schools. Through this personal account, I will detail how to bring these queer analyses into the practice of directing and touring an LGBTQ play for young people.

*The Transition of Doodle Pequeño by Gabriel Jason Dean*

**A Note on Casting**

Before we dive into the story and process behind bringing it to life, the first step for me as a director was in casting the play's ensemble with six talented undergraduate actors. This play presents a number of problems, particularly when casting from a predominantly white 20somethings pool of actors. The play includes two Spanish-speaking Mexican characters in the protagonist Doodle and his imaginary goat Valencia. The four other characters are a middle school tomboy, Marjoram, her younger brother, Toph, the boy who likes to wear dresses, Reno, and Reno's botanist grandfather, Baumgartner. Doodle and Valencia turned out to be quite straight forward. I needed actors who could speak convincing Spanish and were either Hispanic or who are somewhere in the land of ethnic ambiguity. For Valencia, I found Isabella Gerasole, a freshman, part-Mexican, part-Italian, a genius comic, and experienced (although not fluent) Spanish speaker<sup>9</sup>. For Doodle, I found Weston Jacoby, another freshman, ethnically ambiguous with thick eyebrows, boundless youthful energy, and an experienced Spanish speaker. While it was difficult to find these actors and make sure they could play Doodle and Valencia believably, the script is explicit about aspects of the characters, whereas it is not so explicit for the others.

Reno was particularly difficult to cast. The debate for me was what I wanted out of that character and whether Reno needed to be portrayed by an actor who might make character choices which would indicate a legibly gay flamboyancy, or lean the other way toward an actor who might not position Reno as explicitly gay. I cast Treyvon Thomas, another freshman, a Black actor, with an honesty I found captivating. He brought a racial diversity to a

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<sup>9</sup> The names of my actors are used here with full permission.

predominantly white cast and rehearsal room. Casting Thomas also brought up an interesting interpretation of family structure with the white actor I cast to play his grandfather. I also rarely ever see this kind of intersectionality present in TYA in depicting a young gay Black character. I think it further complicated the queer discourse already present in the script.

For Baumgartner, I could not cast an older actor so I brought in Quinn Rattan, a junior, white, a big guy with a solid beard who could portray a believable bumbling older man. And finally for Marjoram and Toph; I cast Courtney Doyle and Clayton Shuttleworth. Marj was interesting to cast because I needed someone who could portray a complex young female bully. Courtney is again a freshman, a petite blonde white girl. Something that was unconscious for me in this choice was in casting an actor who could easily fall into the ingenue typecast. By taking the trope of the innocent blond white girl and turning her into a bully furthers my production's queer work. (For select production photographs, see Appendix B).

### **Queering Doodle and Reno**

The play brings us Halloween in Southern California: our protagonist, the titular Doodle, an eleven year-old boy, has just moved to a quadruplex with his Mamá after Papá was deported back to Mexico. We meet Doodle's imaginary trilingual goat, Valencia (English, Spanish, and Goat!), who bleats to her heart's content and chomps on packing peanuts. Soon, a hungry trick-or-treater comes knocking and we meet Reno, "like the city in Nevada;" a boy who likes to wear dresses (Dean). Together they face the neighborhood bullies, Marjoram and Toph, avoid the troll who grows blood pumpkins in the courtyard, and battle the ever-present Santa Ana winds. Ultimately, this is a story of two boys who put aside their differences and form an unlikely friendship.

First, let us look at our queer criteria regarding Reno. Two of Reno and Doodle's conversations when they first meet at the beginning of the play fulfill these criteria. The first happens just after Reno barges into Doodle's apartment, tutu on and treat-or-treat bag in hand:

DOODLE: < > You're wearing a dress.<sup>10</sup>  
 RENO: Tutu actually.  
 DOODLE: It's still a dress.  
 RENO: So?  
 DOODLE: You're a boy. I think.  
 RENO: I think so too.  
 DOODLE: You *think* so?  
 RENO: Yeah < > But vaudeville vamp, she's definitely a girl. (Dean 25)

This first exchange establishes Reno's difference as Doodle points out the incongruous idea that Reno is a boy wearing a dress. The following interaction continues this line of thought after Doodle and Reno have gotten a bit farther in meeting each other:

DOODLE: Why are you wearing a dress?  
 RENO: Tutu.  
 DOODLE: OK. *Tutu* < > It's not normal.  
 RENO: Neither is an imaginary goat.  
 VALENCIA: Hey hey hey. Be nice.  
 DOODLE: Boys shouldn't dress like girls.  
 RENO: < > I do sometimes.  
 DOODLE: Even when it's not Halloween?  
 RENO: < > Yeah.  
 DOODLE: (*laughs*). Woah. That's...that's weird.  
 RENO: Yeah. It is. Kinda. I guess. So?  
 DOODLE: I bet you get made fun of all the time.  
 RENO: I don't wear dresses at school. Do you take your goat to school? (Dean 30)

This exchange fulfills our next two criteria in juxtaposing a difference with a normative and questioning those positionings. Doodle brings in the words "normal" and "weird." These terms inherently indicate a normative discourse and a divergence from that discourse. And Reno complicates the positionings of these terms in his analogy to Valencia and how Doodle is in 6<sup>th</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> The symbol "< >" comes directly from the published script and it denotes a "beat" or "pause" in the line (Dean).

grade, a little old to still have an imaginary friend. Reno does the work of comparing a normative discourse for having imaginary friends to a normative idea that boys cannot wear dresses. Doodle is in clear opposition to a normative idea about imaginary friends; Reno is not the only queer character in this world.

Doodle also embodies a queer position in his status as an undocumented immigrant. There are two important claims to Doodle's queerness; the first is his residence in a completely bilingual world. This begins at the top of the play when Doodle comes home to find that his Mamá has not come home from work and has instead left him a voice message. Mamá speaks almost entirely in Spanish and Doodle replies almost entirely in English. This serves two purposes in translating the Spanish for non-speaking audience members, and establishing Doodle's Spanish-speaking home. This initial introduction to Spanish as integral to the world of the play starts us off in a world within a queer discourse as opposed to residing in an English-normative world which audience members might assume, particularly for a play set in the United States. This inhabitation of a discourse outside the English-speaking assumption is pointed out in dialogue with the bullies, Marjoram and Toph. Although Reno frequently notes that he does not speak Spanish and frequently needs translations, he does not point it out as a difference; instead he allows the bilingual world to remain the dominant discourse. When Marjoram and Toph come into Doodle's apartment.

MARJORAM: Mamá, huh? Are you an alien?

TOPH: (*alien voice*). My name is Doodle and I am from the planet Ooodle Ooodle Ooodle.

MARJORAM: No, idiot. Like from another country.

DOODLE: Mamá is...no, we were born here.

MARJORAM: You don't sound very American. (Dean 43)

This is the first time that Doodle's difference becomes explicit in dialogue as opposed to the implicit use of Spanish within his speech. While Doodle's ability to queer the play outside of occupying an LGBT space is much more subtle than Reno's, it is equally as important.

This play is not just about a pair of boys who put aside their difference to form a friendship; they recognize their differences and embrace each other for them, recognizing something of themselves in each other, that is where the core queerness lies. So how do we bring this theoretical work to a fully realized production of the play?

### **A Play About Friendship**

The Dramatic Publishing edition of the play includes an "Author's Note" from the playwright Gabriel Jason Dean, in which he talks about some of his first experiences watching and talking to young audiences about *Doodle*. They asked, "What is this play about?" Many eager hands shot up. Friendship was the ubiquitous answer. I couldn't agree more," and neither could I (Dean 12). This play is quite complex in dealing with three incredibly large issues to tackle for young audiences: immigration, gender-nonconformity, and bullying. It is linguistically and thematically difficult as a literary piece, playing with words and definitions that shift and change meaning as the play evolves. Because of all of these things, it is easy to fall into the trap of making this an "issue" play. I took Dean's words to heart and decided to concentrate on the friendship between Doodle and Reno. The ups and downs of the friendship are what bring an audience on the journey of the play, following Doodle as he navigates the murky and confusing waters that come with being the new kid in the quad.

This concentration misses one crucial element of the play: Valencia. This is as much her play as it is Doodle's and Doodle's friendship with Reno is built entirely upon his reliance on Valencia. What I decided to do was empower Valencia. She became far more than Doodle's

imaginary goat; she became everyone's imaginary goat. That is, just because she resides completely in the imagination, she does not have to merely reside in Doodle's imagination.

When we first meet Reno we find out that other people can see Valencia, as long as they have an imagination.

RENO: What's that goat eating then?

DOODLE: ¿PUEDES VER MI CABRA?

RENO: I don't speak—

DOODLE: *YOU CAN SEE MY GOAT?*

RENO: Duh. I have an imagination too.

VALENCIA & DOODLE: ¡Ay, dios mio! (Dean 25)

This way, Valencia can tap into the audience's imaginations. Thus, Valencia becomes the storyteller and the audience's in to the story. It does not hurt that Valencia and the actress playing her are hilarious and completely captivating<sup>11</sup>. This use of Valencia came out in smaller ways as she dives in to sit with the audience during moments of certain scenes, but particularly in the use of transitions. Our set was made entirely of moving boxes of all shapes and sizes. So between scenes which moved from the interior of Doodle's apartment to the exterior of the quadruplex courtyard, Valencia would take five of those boxes and stack them to reveal the tree in the courtyard which was painted on the sides of the boxes facing upstage of (away from) the audience. Her control over the world in these moments allowed the audience time to process the story as it progressed. After the first bullying scene where Doodle betrays Reno and takes off the tutu he agreed to wear, Valencia returns to the stage to bring us from the exterior of the courtyard to the interior of Doodle's apartment. Before she begins the transition, she shares her melancholy with us, having just seen this incident happen among Doodle, Reno, and the bullies. We can see

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<sup>11</sup> While this is of course my subjective opinion, her comedic prowess is evident specifically in her ad libs throughout the play. An example of happened during one performance where she had to climb out of her box hiding place to chase Doodle and she got out so quickly that her box ripped. She quipped, "You made me break my home!" At which the audience laughed heartily.

Valencia's sadness, and we can empathize. Through Valencia, I could invoke the audience's mirror neurons and create that gymnasium for empathy.

Seeing Valencia in this role allowed us to track her friendship with Doodle alongside Doodle's friendship with Reno. When Doodle and Reno become stronger together, Valencia begins to fade. Doodle does not need her guidance anymore. He does not need an imaginary friend because he has a real one. So the play is not just about Doodle and Reno's friendship, it is about Doodle and Valencia's friendship just as much. These pairings work together to tell the full story of a profound beginning with Doodle and Reno. Making these friendships the concentration of the storytelling does not at all detract from the story's queerness. The queerness is already there. All it needs to do is exist in honored moments and the audience will understand. Concentrating solely on these queer issues as the core of the story is a possible trap in the script which can easily make a play into a didactic bore, preaching acceptance and tolerance to a young audience which is already over saturated with school assemblies on the detrimental effects of bullying. In my opinion, these didactic narratives are not conducive to gymnasiums for empathy and they do not allow for the hallmark of excellence, which asks for a "pleasurable experience." This simple lens for the plays does not try to unravel the complex thematic elements, but it allows them to ease their tensions on a sturdy base, which allows the audience to untangle them at their own will, which they can do with the help of their direct connection to the story through Valencia.

### **Tackling Bullying**

There are not a few tricky scenes in this play, but the two I found I had to handle most carefully were the two scenes that deal with bullying. The first is when we meet Marjoram and Toph in the courtyard and Reno introduces them to Doodle.

MARJORAM: So. Doodle. You're Reno's new friend, huh?

DOODLE: Um, we just met, so—

MARJORAM: Didn't Reno tell you? About his problem.

RENO: I don't have a problem, Marjoram! Just go home.

MARJORAM: Renos's gay.

RENO: I am not! Shut *up*, you stupid little idiot! (Dean 39)

Marjoram goes on to call Reno “Pansy. < > Doofus. < > Homo” (Dean 39). In the beginning of our rehearsal process, the tendency with this scene was for Reno to just stand there and take this verbal beating. He lost his agency completely and the scene just became about this abuse which becomes almost painful to see. What we found was a more interesting interpretation of the scene is if Reno is completely unfazed by Marjoram's words. We reasoned that this is old news to Reno. Marjoram is just dredging up old insults that he has heard before and he can take it like water off a duck's back. The real focus of the scene is a competition between Reno and Marjoram over Doodle and his potential for becoming a friend to either of them. Each one wants Doodle on their side. It is not until Doodle betrays Reno, claiming, “He made me. I didn't want to wear [the dress]. (*Takes off dress*)” that Reno breaks down and shows his true vulnerability (Dean 39). This refocusing of the scene gave Reno agency and a backbone in standing up to his bullies. The new choice also activated the actor physically, making for a more visually interesting scene, and puts the audience's focus once again on Reno and Doodle's friendship.

The next bullying moment comes at the very end of the play. I had trouble with this scene in looking at the way the script uses the word “gay” as a derogatory term and does not explicitly redefine the word in its positive connotation. In a phone conversation with Dean, he pointed me to a particular exchange in this scene as Marjoram continues to make fun of Reno and Toph revolts:

TOPH: You're so gay!

(*Marjoram is speechless. She looks to RENO.*)

MARJORAM: Toph, that's not...you shouldn't...*(Looks to BAUMGARTNER. She heads offstage.)*

TOPH: Marj—wait. Marj—I didn't mean it! I don't even know what gay is.

MARJORAM: *(turning back.)* Toph...just don't say that word, OK?

TOPH: Is it a swear word or something?

MARJORAM: It's not a swear. It just hurts like one.

RENO: It doesn't have to hurt, Marj.

MARJORAM: Yeah, well...he shouldn't say it, OK?

TOPH: But you said it.

MARJORAM: That was different.

TOPH: How?

MARJORAM: It just was! <> Come on. Let's go. Halloween's over. *(Almost offstage.)*

Hey Reno! That dress is so...that dress is...that dress...

*(Marjoram and Toph exit.)* (Dean 60)

This final exchange necessitates an honored moment. It is where “gay” as a derogatory slur completely loses its power. It becomes a word that “doesn't have to hurt” (Dean 60). I staged this particular moment in the center aisle between sections of the audience. Marjoram and Toph stood in the aisle while Reno stood at the edge of the theatrical space looking out at the audience in a power position with Doodle and Baumgartner flanking him on either side. This formation takes shape as Marjoram lunges toward Reno in frustration and grabs the neck of his shirt in her hand. This small but powerful movement heightens the stakes of the scene as Marjoram becomes physically aggressive, taking his dress, his object of pride, literally into her hand. Using this strong visual to lift the dialogue and empower Reno in taking the hurt out of “gay” puts a particular weight on this moment and reveals the new strength Reno has found for himself in finally standing his ground in front of Marjoram. These two moments which speak to the bullying issue and how Reno handles both situations allow the audience to explicitly see Reno's journey and newfound confidence in himself both within and outside of his friendship with Doodle.

## Looking at Reno

A point of curiosity for most audience members, particularly adult audience members, is that of Reno's sexuality in relation to both his desire to wear dresses and to him constantly being referred to as "gay." The key to this question is in allowing space for the audience to ponder the answer, even if you or the character are unsure. For me, this question is not asking about the character Reno who lives in this play, it is asking about a future-Reno. I say this because Reno as an 11 year old boy has yet to reach puberty. Reno is pre-sexual and therefore the question of whether he is gay, straight, or even trans\* is asking about a hypothetical future, not about the character at hand. This hypothetical future-Reno may very well be any of those things be it gay, straight, or trans\*. But our Reno, the Reno of our story has no sense of this kind of possibility, he is still evolving, growing, and discovering himself. So while the audience might be asking this question, it was not one with which I or Thomas were particularly preoccupied in our investigation of Reno.

Coming to this conclusion, I looked back to my own childhood and the cliché that I agree with that "I've always known I was gay." This is true. I did know from a young age that something was different, that I did not fit into the normative narrative. But I do not think of that young version of me actually inhabiting that sexuality. A more appropriate term to use might be that "I've always known I was *queer*."<sup>12</sup> I suspect Reno is having a similar experience, particularly in that we have already proven that he is queer in his opposition in conforming to gender norms. Just because Reno is queer does not mean that he is gay. When, in the hypothetical future-world, Reno is an adult, queer might very well mean gay, but knowing about

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<sup>12</sup> "Queer" in this instance as occupying a space which does not adhere to dominant cultural narratives. Queer as a synonym for "different," or "other."

who Reno will be does not help the audience understand who he is, and that is where the play resides.

In discussions with Thomas, we decided that we do not know whether Reno is gay, straight, or trans\*, nor does he know. All he knows is that he likes wearing dresses. When Doodle comments, “You’re a boy. I think.” Reno replies, “I think so too” (Dean 25). In exercises during the first week of our rehearsal process, we explored the characters and fleshed out their daily lives and their backstories through improvisational and generative exercises. For example, I had Toph and Marjoram make up a secret handshake and draw a family portrait, discovering among other things that their family is working class. Looking at Reno’s interests with Thomas, we discovered through conversations about the character that the dresses that Reno wears are actually his deceased mother’s dresses. I had him quickly improvise the moment when he went through his mother’s boxes of old clothes and tries on her favorite dress for the first time. I believe this was important for Thomas in discovering a formative moment in Reno’s life. While this is not something that was legible in the final product, it was incredibly important to me and Thomas. Through this discovery, Reno’s affinity for dress-wearing does not come from a latent homosexuality, but from a child-like form of grief for his mother trying to connect to her by wearing what she used to wear, giving her dresses life, and heightening the emotional stakes behind Reno’s proclivity for wearing dresses. While Reno wearing dresses is inherently queer, it is not apparent to us that his intention is to queer anything. All he wants is to wear his dresses in peace. What I find fascinating about Reno is his lack of a preoccupation with his own queerness. I believe I am correct in answering for Reno, if he were asked the question whether or not he is gay he would probably say, “I don’t know.” Isn’t that all we can ask of an 11 year old?

## **Tour at Washington Elementary**

In the months following the weekend of performances on campus at Northwestern University, we moved forward to begin work on our tour of the show to local Evanston elementary schools. Purple Crayon Players was able to schedule performances at three schools: Washington Elementary, Willard Elementary, and King Arts. In this section of my thesis, I will focus on our tour performance at Washington Elementary which occurred the morning of April 29, 2014<sup>13</sup>. In preparation for the tour, every Tuesday and Thursday morning for the month of April, the cast, tour managers, and I met during a set class period to prepare and develop the workshop that would precede the school performances (for the full workshop script and accompanying talkback questions see Appendix C).

Upon arriving at Washington Elementary that morning, our set up went smoothly and we began to settle into the new space. The principal introduced herself to us, was supportive, and answered our questions. Her only stipulation was that we not include Toph's small water gun in the show as the current educational climate is wary of any representations of weaponry, even a toy water gun. Shortly after we set up, the kids started flooding into the auditorium, filling about half of the available seats. The kids were all from the fourth and fifth grade classrooms (so they were between nine and eleven years old). As we dove into the workshop they were completely responsive, raising their hands to answer our prompts and participate in our activities. When we got to the activating scene where Quinn calls Izzy's lunch "gay," they gave an audible gasp. And when Izzy asked "what does gay mean?" the first answer was word for word how we have been defining it among ourselves as "two people of the same gender who love each other." I was

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<sup>13</sup> Focus on this particular performance is purely for logistical reasons as the other performances had not yet occurred by the due date of this thesis.

impressed by the students' knowledge and enthusiastic responses to the workshop prompts. The only difficulty we encountered was in keeping them quiet for long periods of time as the kids would immediately turn to their neighbors and begin engaging each other in conversations about what was happening. We ended the workshop by prompting them to try "to see things from Doodle's perspective," framing their perception of the play through Doodle's perspective and challenging them to engage in his journey and the trajectory of his transformation (Appendix C).

With that, the show began. We had a bit of a rocky start since the first sound cue (Mamá's voice message) was mostly inaudible. But as soon as Valencia showed up, the kids were hooked, particularly during the flurbling section between Valencia and Doodle<sup>14</sup>. The audience had a loud laughing reaction to Reno's entrance and reveal of his bright pink tutu, as well as the moment when Doodle tries on the tutu. As the first scene progressed to Doodle calling Reno's dress "gay," the audience gave an audible, though small, empathetic gasp. Moving into the first bullying scene with Marjoram and Toph, the audience responded with stillness (which was rare for this audience) as the scene became more intense. When Reno retaliated to Marjoram's hurtful words with, "tomboys don't wear dresses," there was a drawn out "ooooh" from the audience. From these responses to the first half of the show, it was obvious to me and the cast that the audience was completely engaged with the story, the characters, and the issues they are facing.

At this point in the performance, I noticed that an older female teacher had left the auditorium. When she returned, she brought the principal with her. The principal came directly

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<sup>14</sup> These audience evaluations come directly from my field notes where I coded audience reactions to specific moments in the play (i.e. L1, L2, and L3 for levels of laughter, significant silences, empathetic responses such as gasps, "oohs," and "ahhs," as well as any moments of restlessness).

up to me and the two tour managers sitting off to the side of the stage. She took Rachel Leshin, the tour manager who was not currently operating the sound cues, off to the side directly behind the set piece for the door and window of Doodle's apartment. There, in view of the audience and within the active theatrical space, she proceeded to talk to Leshin, asking about the show's content and whether it is appropriate for this age group. I then joined the conversation. She asked, "how much longer is the show," "how much more content is there about being gay and cross dressing," and "what am I going to tell parents when they call me about this?"

I was terrified that she was going to step on stage and stop the show outright which would have sent a detrimental message to the kids who could already see that their principal was talking to us. I do not believe it is unreasonable to think that the students thought we were in trouble as we were being spoken to by their primary authority figure. Leshin and I proceeded to diffuse the conversation by explaining that the show is not about being gay or about sexuality at all; that Reno is not a gay character. He is just a boy who likes to wear dresses and that the word "gay" functions as an example of the misuse of language in bullying situations. I reassured her that there was only one more scene at the end of the play where the word "gay" is used and that we would be happy to speak with her after the performance about how to speak to worried parents. This seemed to assuage her enough that Leshin and I were able to sit back down and observe the rest of the performance.

I returned to my field notes just after the pumpkin thief incident between Doodle, Marjoram, and Toph and moving into the scene with Baumgartner. The audience was extremely fidgety, indicating their need to release built up energy from the previously high energy scenes. During the final scene, there was total wrapped silence in the transition where Valencia and Doodle returned to the courtyard. Reno reentered in his dress to a medium vocal level of

audience reaction. There was chatter from the audience at Marjoram's final exit with her line, "Reno, that dress is so...that dress is so...that dress." There was a long "aww" and laughter when Reno and Doodle hugged, reveling in their victory and Reno's newfound confidence. And Valencia's final exit down the aisle turned everyone's heads. Despite the interruption of the principal's conversation with Leshin and I, there did not seem to be a noticeable effect on the audience, indicating that they were constantly engaging with the story. They actively occupied our gymnasium for empathy.

The talkback was quite enlightening; the most poignant and memorable reactions coming from the question, "what was the play about?" A few of the answers: "loving people for their differences," "friendship," and "standing up for others." Between audience engagement in the workshop, reactions during the show, and feedback gathered from the talkback, I believe this was a successful and appropriate presentation of this play. This impact was proven later that day when I volunteered at a local organization called Have Dreams, an after-school program for children on the Autism Spectrum, when a young boy I was working with recognized me from that morning saying, "I know you! You directed a play!" He told me Valencia was his favorite character, expressing his obvious excitement with emphatic hand gestures, a typical emotive manifestation from a child on the spectrum.

The principal's wariness did not seem to affect this palpable success. After the performance, Leshin and I went into her office and learned that she was an interim principal for the principal who was on maternity leave. As a result, she had been blind-sided by the play's content. This revelation was quite troubling to me as Purple Crayon Players had sent a cover letter to the school which was explicit about the content along with our production study guide which deals with all of the issues in the play, including a definition for "gay." Somewhere along

the way a breakdown occurred in the lines of communication between us and the school, leaving the acting principal woefully unprepared. Going into the tour process, the tour managers and I were adamant about transparency surrounding the play's subject matter. Our interaction with this principal proves just how important transparency is when working with schools, particularly when presenting controversial subject-matter<sup>15</sup>.

Leshin and I proceeded to speak to her about the show, its content, how she might speak to parents about the content of the show, and why we believe this content is appropriate for this audience<sup>16</sup>. Within her concerns about this play being age-appropriate she mentioned, "we do not even teach them about the reproductive system until seventh grade." Her need to call attention to the connection between being gay and sex recalls my previously explicated point that homosexuality is inextricably linked to sex, specifically gay sex, for wary gatekeepers. I can only conclude that the play was unsuccessful in convincing the principal that queer TYA is necessary for this age group. But the young male teacher sitting in the second row with his students, laughing right along with them, gives me hope for the future of the gatekeeper's mentality.

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<sup>15</sup> We are taking extra precautions to make sure that the teachers and principals at Willard Elementary and King Arts are prepared for our play.

<sup>16</sup> All of these talking points have been explored throughout this thesis so I will not repeat them here.

## Conclusion

Including progressive queer narratives in theatre for young audiences provides a platform where young people can exercise their capacity for empathy and expand their abilities to accept and identify with alternative narratives too often ignored by popular culture. Exposing young people to these narratives is vital to their development, particularly their development of self and identity as a way to promote positive mental health status as young people move from childhood into adolescence and adulthood. Having a positive sense of self moving into adolescence is crucial to anyone's success in navigating this world. Because of where young people are in their cognitive development and ability to process and internalize storytelling, this audience is at a particularly formative stage of life. TYA must use these narratives and take advantage of the potential influence it can have on young people's lives. This thesis is only a small step in an effort to stand up for these narratives and those children who align with the narratives presented in these stories.

I hypothesize that if we can expose more young people to these narratives, then we will begin to see lower rates of depression, suicide, bullying, and aggression in young people. With the amount of violence happening in schools today, it is crucial to head off these problems at the source by giving these "troubled youths" narratives and characters to latch on to in an effort to strengthen empathetic abilities. With a fully exercised empathetic sense, could a young person still pull a trigger on a fellow classmate? I believe that it is far less likely if they have encountered our gymnasium for empathy and recognized aspects of themselves in an "other" character in a TYA play.

In order for my hypothesis to be proven, there first needs to be more research in these areas; studies looking at LGBTQ youth, audience reactions to plays with this subject matter, and so much more. I am curious to know if there is any direct correlation between young people engaging in violence (even lethal violence) and those schools whose arts funding has been slashed. This kind of investigative research is crucial in moving forward, particularly learning how to expose school groups and classrooms to these stories. In addition to a call for more research, I implore playwrights and theatre companies to write and create more queer stories. We need to see more upstanders like Doodle, more alternative family structures like Lily and her mom in *Tango*, more gay penguins, more monochromatic worlds slowly turning to technicolor, and especially more Renos who defy gender constructs in lieu of their passions. Both Dean and Freeman are straight allies who have courageously explored these important queer stories. But where are the stories from queer playwrights? Why have so few taken up the cause? Where are our stories of growing up gay in a straight world? To the TYA theatre companies, new works programs, and schools, these plays must be produced and marketed and young people *must* see them. And you must persevere in spite of wary and dissenting gatekeepers. Artistic directors and producing companies are the heroes of our mythology who must take up this cause and rally for the rights these stories desperately deserve.

Whenever I become weary in my fight for this theatre, this theatre with immense social importance and cultural potential, I think to my younger tomboy self and that great sense of difference and confusion I felt when the boys would not include me in their games and that pang of curious recognition when I saw a gay couple walking down the street, hand in hand. I think back to all of my frustration and confusion trying to navigate complex emotions when I went into high school. All of the years I spent denying my truth because I could not possibly be *gay*, could

I? All I can hope in looking toward the future is that I can make a difference, I can help someone get through those hard and confusing years with a contemporary character to identify with, who can help them along and make this personal journey that much less difficult. Young people need all the help they can get to persevere. Many do not make it through. I truly believe that this work saves lives. So what are we waiting for? There are kids out there right now who need us. So where are we to answer their call?

Appendix A: AATE Handout, "Queer in the Process"

## Criteria for Critical Theatrical Literacy Plays

by Clare Hammoor and Gus Weltsek

- **They don't make difference invisible, but rather explore what differences make a difference**
- **They enrich our understanding of history and life by giving voice to those who have traditionally been silenced or marginalized.**
- **They show how people can begin to take action on important social issues.**
- **They explore dominant systems of meaning that operate in our society to position people and groups of people.**
- **They help us question why certain groups are positioned as *others*.**
- **They show us that all stories don't have happy endings.**

Appendix B: The Transition of Doodle Pequeño Production Photos



Figure 1: Doodle (Weston Jacoby) in his apartment.



Figure 4: Valencia (Isabella Gerasole) and Reno (Treyvon Thomas) watch Doodle (Weston Jacoby) try on the tutu.



Figure 2: Doodle (Weston Jacoby) and his imaginary goat Valencia (Isabella Gerasole).



Figure 5: Valencia (Isabella Gerasole) builds the tree.



Figure 3: Valencia (Isabella Gerasole) and Doodle (Weston Jacoby) meet Reno (Treyvon Thomas).



Figure 6: Toph (Clayton Shuttleworth). "Gimme your candies!"



Figure 7: Toph (Clayton Shuttleworth) and Doodle (Weston Jacoby) watch Reno (Treyvon Thomas) and Marjoram (Courtney Doyle) exchange insults.



Figure 8: Doodle (Weston Jacoby) hands back Reno's (Treyvon Thomas) tutu under pressure from Marjoram (Courtney Doyle) and Toph (Clayton Shuttleworth).



Figure 9: Valencia (Isabella Gerasole).



Figure 10: "Pumpkin thief! Pumpkin thief!"



Figure 11: Doodle (Weston Jacoby) and Baumgartner (Quinn Rattan).



Figure 12: Doodle (Weston Jacoby) and Reno (Treyvon Thomas) face off against Marjoram (Courtney Doyle) and Toph (Clayton Shuttleworth).



Figure 13: "I'm NOT sorry for wearing my dresses!"



Figure 14: "It doesn't have to hurt, Marj."



Figure 15: Doodle (Weston Jacoby) and Reno (Treyvon Thomas) celebrate their new friendship.



Figure 16: "BAHHHFOOGHEEEEE!"



Figure 17: (Top - left to right) Courtney Doyle, Clayton Shuttleworth, Isabella Gerasole, Weston Jacoby, Treyvon Thomas, Quinn Rattan. (Bottom - left to right) Hannah Carroll (Stage Manager), Khari Shelton (Producer), Lindsay Amer (Director), Maddie Napel (AD).

**Appendix C: The Transition of Doodle Pequeño Workshop and Talkback Questions**

Sally Lindel, Tour Manager (SL): Hola!

Rachel Leshin, Tour Manager (RL): Hello!

Both: We're the Purple Crayon Players!

RL: And we're here to perform *The Transition of Doodle Pequeño* for you!

SL: But before we do that we're gonna play around with some of the themes from the show to get us thinking. First, let's introduce ourselves. Sally will point to one end of the line, and that person will begin introductions.

*Go down the line introducing ourselves*

RL: We're going to start out our workshop today by learning a Latin American children's song that the characters sing during the show and a game that we like to play with it.

*Hold up posters with the lyrics on them.*

SL: We're going to learn this song one verse at a time, so repeat after us!

*Sing one verse of the song and the kids will repeat.*

*"Naranja dulce*

*Limon partido*

*dame un abrazo*

*que yo te pido."*

SL: Great job! Now let's learn the second verse. Sing the second verse of the song and the kids will repeat.

*"Si fueran falsos*

*mis juramentos,*

*en un momento*

*se olvidaran."*

RL: Awesome! Sounds great, guys! Let's sing the whole song together now!

Weston Jacoby, Doodle (WJ): Great! Now that we've learned the song let's learn the game that goes along with it! In this game, actors are going to dance around in a circle while holding hands and singing this song. One person, me for this round, is going to stand in the middle of the circle until the song is over. Once the song is over, everyone, including me, runs to find a partner and

links arms with them. Each round one person will be left standing without a partner because we have an odd number. We're going to play one round so you guys can get the hang of it.

*Now the actors play the game.*

Courtney Doyle, Marjoram (CD): Does anyone from the audience want to play with us?

*Sally and Rachel pick six-eight kids from the audience and bring them up to the stage.*

CD: Before we start, do you guys want to introduce yourselves?

*All kids introduce themselves. The actors and kids play the game again.*

RL: This game is supposed to be fun but also asks us to think about being on the outside. How did you guys feel when you were on the outside?

*Kids/cast members share what the game felt like.*

SL: Thanks for playing, guys! You can go back to your seats. Everyone, let's give them a round of applause.

Treyvon Thomas, Reno (TT): I have a question for you guys! How many of you speak a language other than English? Raise your hand if you do!

Clayton Shuttleworth, Toph (CS): How many of you have a parent or grandparent from another country?

Quinn Rattan, Baumgartner (QR): How many of you have a hobby or interest that your friends don't have?

WJ: How many of you have ever been told that your outfit is "weird"?

Isabella Gerasole, Valencia (IG): How many of you have or had an imaginary friend?

CD: Sometimes when we do things differently or feel different from others, we can feel like outsiders. What does it mean to be an outsider? How does it feel to be an outsider?

Lindsay Amer, Director (LA): Thanks for all of your input. Now, we're going to take a look at what we call an "activating scene," which is a short scene that helps us explore a certain issue or problem. In this scene we're going to explore how people use words incorrectly as a way to bully others and how we can stand up in these instances of bullying. First we're going to perform the scene for you, and then we're going to ask you guys to participate in it.

CS: Hey Izzy, Quinn, and Weston -- you guys ready? Great! 3, 2, 1, GO!

*Izzy, Quinn, and Weston do the activating scene. Clayton jumps in and yells "freeze"! He then facilitates a conversation about the scene.*

CS: Okay, before we ask anything else, we want to know: did you guys think this scene was realistic? Why or why not? (*Clayton accepts responses -- 2 to 3*) What was going on in this scene? What was the main conflict here? (*Clayton accepts responses*). Weston had an important

but difficult choice to make in this scene. What was it? (*Clayton accepts responses*). What could Weston have done when Quinn insulted Izzy's lunch?

*Several kids offer suggestions. After a few we bring a few kids up and in turn they each replace Weston in the scene. When each kid comes up to the stage Clayton asks for their name and introduces them to everyone. They then go sit in Weston's chair and Weston gives them a quick, quiet pep talk. After each kid finishes send them back to their seats and give them a round of applause.*

IG: Another thing we heard in the scene was that Quinn called my lunch the word "gay." Have you guys ever heard that word before? What does that word mean when you've heard people use it? (*Izzy accepts responses*). Okay great, these are all really interesting answers. What did Quinn mean in the scene when he said gay? (*Izzy accepts responses*) Does anyone know what gay actually means? (*Izzy accepts/waits for responses*) Great! A person who is gay is a person who is attracted to people of their same gender. This could be when a man falls in love with another man or a woman falls in love with another woman. There's nothing weird or dumb or stupid or [*insert kids' responses here*] about it; it's just something about a person, just like their hair color or their eye color. Luckily, we live in a state where two people who love each other, regardless of their gender, can get married. So now that we know what gay really means, it's important that we all know that it's a hurtful word when you use it when you don't really mean it. Why? Because that means you're pairing people who are gay with words like stupid, dumb, and weird. And that's not cool. So now we're gonna bring Courtney and Treyvon up to give us some alternatives.

*Treyvon and Courtney will jump up and do short scenes stopping before the word gay.*

TT: In this activity I'm gonna intend to use the word gay and Courtney is going to replace that word with words that actually mean what I want to say.

TT: This teacher is so...

CD: Boring

TT: This roller coaster is so...

CD: Scary

TT: This food is so...

CD: Bland

TT; Now we're going to give you the opportunity to replace these words. Izzy will call on you when you have ideas. Ugh my hair is so...

CD: My sister is acting so...

TT: This test is so...

CD: My shirt is so... *Lindsay interrupts--don't take words from the audience for this one*

LA: (interjecting) You get the picture. Turning to the actors: Thanks, guys! Now go get in your places for the top of the show. I'll see you guys later. *All actors and Lindsay exit*

RL: Great, thanks Lindsay! Now that you guys have some background on what you're going to see in the play, we have one quick challenge for you: as you watch the play, keep thinking about what you would do if you were in Weston's shoes, just like you did a few minutes ago.

SL: Weston's going to play a character named Doodle, and we want you to try your best to see things from Doodle's perspective as the play goes along. Are you up for it? (*audience cheers enthusiastically*) Okay great! We now present you with:

Both: The Transition of Doodle Pequeño! Encourage the kids to applaud as the show starts

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RL: Thanks, guys! Everyone close your eyes and think back through the play from the beginning to the end... Now from the end to the beginning... What was a moment or image that stood out to you?

SL: Going back to the challenge we gave you before the play, what did you guys think to do when you put yourselves in Weston's shoes?

RL: What are all the ways characters are considered different or "outsiders" during this play?

SL: Why is hard to be different?

RL: What do characters in this play do to embrace or make the most of their differences?

SL: Now we want to give you all the chance to ask anyone up here any question that you may have about the play.

*Kids ask the cast/team questions*

RL: Thanks so much, and let's give a round of applause to your elementary school for letting us perform for you today! We had a great time, and we hope to see you guys again soon!

Everyone: Adios!

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