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*English 112*

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*Inquiry Process; Student's choice of topics. The only requirement was an annotated bibliography.*

### **LGBTQ Characters in Theater**

The inclusion of queer and transgender characters in theater has steadily increased throughout the past four decades of the “contemporary” era. Since the 1970s, as the realm of drama has grown in scope (i.e. larger theaters and marquees), revenue, and publicity, it has adapted to appeal to a constantly changing audience. Since a show’s success (and, therefore, profit) depends on attracting an audience, the modernization of theater has been at the forefront of each Broadway season – that is, as society evolves, theater evolves with it in order to maintain an audience’s attention. When it comes to evolving, though, what of the characters being portrayed? What does it take for their stories to stir an audience as time goes on? As diversity in each part of theater increases with women gaining more main roles, people of color becoming more involved, and color-conscious casting increasing in popularity, it is important to reflect upon shows - both closed and currently running - that marked significant milestones in the journey of inclusion for queer characters. I want to examine the presence of gay and transgender characters in the most significant LGBTQ shows in American contemporary theater—specifically, how this representation has evolved from the ‘70s to today. While many productions have given light to the trials, relationships, and lives of their LGBTQ characters within the last fifty years, the most successful ones are those which push social boundaries and allow for a greater degree of genuine vulnerability onstage; in today’s hugely divided society, those two criteria are more vital to theater than ever. I want to shed a light on the triumphs of the most influential LGBTQ-inclusive shows in Broadway’s history - as well as the necessary factors of LGBTQ-inclusive shows to generate change and contribute to diversity today.

As a transgender and gay actor, shows with queer characters and diversity are immensely important to me. I first discovered my passion for theater by seeing Jonathan Larson’s *RENT*, a show that includes a cast diverse in race, gender, and sexuality. In a moment where I felt immensely hopeless about embracing my identity as a queer teenager, seeing powerful actors who were unafraid to express themselves onstage as drag queens, gay men, and queer women was a monumental ray of hope. As I grew older and became more invested in pursuing theater as a career, I explored many varying types of shows, but felt a special connection to the characters I could relate to in terms of their sexuality and gender identity. This type of connection to queer characters is not only significant for actors, but for audience members as well; I have witnessed audience members become more comfortable with their sexuality, more accepting of the identity of a loved one, or

more supportive of LGBTQ people overall simply from the impact of a show with an LGBTQ character. Especially in a society that is deeply partisan and argumentative, including queer characters in artistic narratives can awaken an entire audience of people to acceptance.

I have grown to understand the importance of presenting queer characters in theater – especially for actors who align with their character’s identity. There is often more connection and proper understanding of a character’s circumstances if queer characters are portrayed by queer actors – leading to a more powerful performance to relay to an audience. While queer actors are more than capable of portraying heterosexual characters, queer actors understand the struggles of coming out, internalized homophobia, and – in the case of transgender characters – possible medical treatment and gender dysphoria to a degree that heterosexual actors cannot. (This also provides more opportunities for transgender actors to receive trans roles over cisgender actors, which has unfortunately been the norm with the emergence of trans characters in the last several years). In today’s society, moreover, the inclusion of queer characters is necessary for art to survive. In a population where LGBT identities are slowly being embraced, the representation in theater should reflect a society that is diverse in sexuality and gender as well.

Shows that were made famous in the 70s, 80s, and 90s just saw revivals on Broadway within the last few seasons – but why now? This issue has a certain degree of necessity today because of America’s political environment. Even though immense strides have been made for LGBTQ rights in the last decade alone, genuine inclusion still falters in politics and pop culture alike. According to a USA Today article written by Susan Miller last year, Americans are less accepting of queer people for the first time in four years, likely influenced by the deeply biased perspectives of President Donald Trump. Multiple political battles have taken place for gay rights in the last five years alone – whether due to a ban on transgender people in the military, refusal to bake a wedding cake, or a recent spike in hate crimes. In television and movies, while inclusion is slowly progressing, LGBTQ narratives are still being overlooked – inclusion simply for the sake of inclusion (and, likely, a profit from queer audience members) is not enough to contribute to diversity. This particularly means that queer characters need to be presented in a manner that is more humanized and personal than decorations, tokens, or “gay best friends.” In the most successful queer-inclusive shows in Broadway’s history, one of the items that made them significant was their deeply flawed, deeply human queer characters. From the 1970s to 2019, theater that marked history was characterized by LGBTQ characters existing for their own sake, by the challenging of social parameters, and by the presentation of queer characters as flawed, personable, powerful, and human.

Personally, even though I am immersed in a bustling professional theater community, I learn new things about the realm of theater every day. I am consistently discovering new shows,

auditioning in different settings, and working with unique stories. Especially as a gay and transgender actor, being immersed in an accepting (and constantly evolving) environment, I was allowed a high degree of curiosity to flow as I explored my topic. In the drama community, where queerness is relatively embraced compared to other social groups, I am more focused on examining how a cast's shameless self-expression affects the audience rather than the actors. Moreover, I am interested in what makes this impact occur; my goal is to identify recurring themes within significant, successful shows that presented queer characters – themes that allow the audience to undergo transformations to acceptance. To explore this phenomenon, I established my research around seven of the most popular Broadway productions from 1968 to 2018 (as well as a few singular moments from other shows), including *A Chorus Line*, *RENT*, *The Boys in the Band*, *Hedwig and the Angry Inch*, *Falsettos*, *Fun Home*, and *Kinky Boots*. Besides these shows, I also looked at specific aspects of other projects, such as the commercial success of the recent production of *Choir Boy*, the astounding artistic creativity behind the revival of *Angels in America*, and the subtextual queer moments of the movie-musical *Dirty Dancing*. In addition, I consulted with several musical theater directors at Columbia, searched for reviews of these productions, and found articles on the significance of queer theater – all of which were vital to my work.

In tackling this topic, I created a sort of outline of what I wanted to accomplish – interviewing several of my theater professors, reading articles I had bookmarked, and rifling through reviews of shows and their revivals from professional sources (such as *The New York Times*). In order to narrow down my subject, I researched only Tony-nominated shows, as Tony award nominations are typically indicative of a Broadway play's commercial popularity and large audience. Staying within the boundaries of mainstream Broadway theater was still a huge task; therefore, I also only focused on shows wherein an LGBTQ storyline was integral to the show. To elaborate, if the shows could be replicated and have a similar amount of success with a heterosexual or cisgender character participating in the narrative, I did not include them in this research. Each production in my work has an immensely important reason for its inclusion, and the entire experience of my research was especially enlightening – I discovered aspects of the productions I am researching that I never knew about before exploring my topic.

I organized my research with a linear agenda, transitioning smoothly so that each individual play gets its own proper amount of attention. Since I am greatly familiar with the seven productions I chose to concentrate on, the easiest portion of my research came from rereading the libretto or script for each – the task of analyzing a show and its characters, setting, and subtext being especially thrilling for any actor. I marked the significant moments and aspects of each show; where the impact of *Hedwig and the Angry Inch* stems simply from having a transgender character in a lead role, the magnitude of *Falsettos* is more complex – it comes from witnessing gay father Marvin

leave his wife and son for another man, watching Marvin's lover die of AIDS, and witnessing tragedy unite a family (and a pair of lesbian godparents) at war. In *Kinky Boots*, *RENT*, *Fun Home*, and last Broadway season's production of *Choir Boy*, the characters in leading roles reflect the kind of queer characters who are not always visible – drag queens, black men, Latinos, and lesbians. The depiction of the “minorities within a minority” ensures that these shows will be memorable simply for their inclusion of characters who will not only challenge the audience to accept them, but who also reflect today's changing society. All these shows in question, however, display their characters in a truthful light – their personalities are flawed, vulnerable, and *human*. The queer people onstage that guarantee a show's success do not exist solely for representation's sake; they cry, fight, fall in love, succeed, and spend the course of the show *fighting for something*. The authenticity held within these roles is what drove me to consider their respective plays for my discussion. I also explored the reviews for each production, ensuring that the criticism came from credible, professional sources within the theater industry, such as *The New York Times* or *Playbill*. One of the challenges of this process was searching through archives of publications to find reputable reviews for these shows – for *A Chorus Line* and *The Boys in the Band*, for instance, it is easier to locate articles written about their revivals than those written about the original productions. I also read excerpts of an essay by D.A. Miller, a literary critic and originator of queer theories in film; explored sections of *Acting Gay*, a book on the theatrical representation of gay men, written by literary critic, queer author, playwright and director, John M. Clum; and found an interview with actor and playwright Harvey Fierstein. Lastly, I consulted with director Justin Brill and music director Jermaine Hill (both faculty at Columbia College Chicago) on what makes a piece of LGBTQ theater significant in their eyes. Justin gave marvelous insight on how *RENT* and *Falsettos* were the first times he had seen gay couples onstage, while Jermaine contemplated the storylines and musical scores that make a show memorable. I discovered what creates a truly powerful and authentic queer show, and I explored the impact that show has on an audience.

The subject of queer theater is as subjective as the art of drama itself, so tackling such a monumental concept is daunting on its own. Challenges arise in how to condense such a meaningful topic. Even with the considerations I made, I still faced difficulties. For instance, I debated including the immensely successful *La Cage Aux Folles* and *Kiss of the Spider-Woman* and decided to avoid both, simply due to the harsh feminization and heteronormative stereotypes of the gay men portrayed in those shows. Moreover, being a transgender and gay actor, the impact of queer theater is an especially personal subject; I emphasized the balance between observing the work closely and stepping back to see the macro view. Within my work, however, I recognized that the portrayal of LGBTQ characters on stage who are unapologetic, courageous against mainstream bias, and – indeed – “human,” is absolutely vital to the success of contemporary drama, as well as acceptance

by the modern audience. LGBTQ representation onstage in a manner that is truthful and unapologetic is absolutely vital to the success of modern drama – as well as the acceptance of the modern audience.

Though the strides for diversity in theater have been tremendous, representation of gay and transgender characters through the lens of Broadway still has many faults – a result of countless factors that filtered their way into the theater industry. For instance, in the 1980s, the AIDS virus was finally identified, leading to a decades-long crisis as doctors tried to save patients suffering from a disease with no cure – as the Center for Disease Control estimates, 229,205 people died of AIDS between 1981 and 1992 alone. The victims in question predominantly fit the mold of young, seemingly healthy gay men who spent weeks in hospital beds, developed awful diseases as a result of HIV, and eventually passed away. As a result, an inordinate number of gay male characters in mainstream theater suffer some tragic death from AIDS at the end of the show, often with no glimpse of the character’s own feelings toward disease or death (for instance, Angel’s death in *RENT*). Moreover, gay characters in mainstream musicals have usually been viewed through a shroud of inauthenticity in order to make them palatable to a large audience (which allows the show to earn a profit). This causes the show to be viewed as inaccurate, plain, discriminatory, or simply fake.

Gay and transgender characters in popular theater from the last fifty years are quite dodgy, making it difficult to find roles that seem like real people, simply because of the circumstances they exist in. One issue is their portrayal simply for inclusion’s sake, a phenomenon which has increased in recent years. Gay characters are often depicted only for the show to appeal to an audience of LGBTQ viewers, but they lack what straight characters always have – conflicts, drives, *personalities*. For example, take Damian in *Mean Girls: The Musical* – the show opened on Broadway in 2017, and yet Damian is severely understated throughout the course of the two-hour musical, with very few solo moments and even fewer moments of emotional vulnerability. Although he is there to propel the story, he only seems to exist in regard to the other lead, Cady, leaving the audience with very few glimpses of his motivation, personality, hopes, and fears. Another issue with queer representation in modern musicals occurs when LGBTQ couples simply mirror heteronormative standards. In *La Cage Aux Folles* (1983), for example, the show was tremendously successful – in part, because it adhered to the norms of a heterosexual couple; one partner was reserved and more masculine, while the other was a flamboyant drag queen. The same phenomenon is seen in *Kiss of the Spider-Woman* (1993), which opened ten years later; as John M. Clum argues, much of the irony of Manuel Puig’s novel was stripped away in the musical adaptation, leaving the audience with two leading characters that mirrored a more socially acceptable trope. Frankly, what saved *RENT* (1996) from the same negative outcome is the diversity and humanity given to the characters; love

interests Tom Collins and Angel Dumott Schunard both have goals and purposes outside of their respective sexualities and gender expressions. Tom Collins is a black philosophy professor and technological genius, while Angel is a Puerto Rican drag queen, street performer, and altruist. Their personalities and drives are clear for the audience as they navigate poverty and the AIDS crisis of the 80s and 90s – the latter subject of which is a heavily recurring conflict for queer characters. As monumental and devastating as the AIDS crisis was for the gay community, many plays with gay leads often involve that gay lead's tragic death due to the AIDS virus, and the continuance of this trope into the 21<sup>st</sup> century is sometimes unnecessary. While it is important to recognize the magnitude of the AIDS crisis in the 1980s and 1990s, many actors – especially gay actors who are HIV+ today – want to see gay leads represented in a way that does not rely solely on their death to propel the story. It is unfair that theater relies so heavily on heterosexual characters, and the rare occasions where LGBTQ characters have a narrative are often stifled by shallow personalities, harsh gender norms, or an untimely death.

Furthermore, the misrepresentation of gay and transgender actors in theater depletes both the audience and the cast members of opportunities for acceptance and education. Theater is, by nature, a transformative experience for an audience; a meaningful production has the ability to instill joy, spark creativity, and – possibly the most important effect – guide the audience to acceptance. One of the other most harmful consequences of minimal amounts of proper representation is that the people onstage do not reflect those in the audience. According to a study by the Williams Institute, a sector of UCLA dedicated to researching sexual orientation and gender law, there are 592,337 LGBTQ people living in New York; the number of LGBTQ people depicted in Broadway shows does not reflect that. Furthermore, the American Theatre Wing reported that only 0.2% of actors in the 2016-2017 Broadway season were non-binary, where 0.3% of the population of New York identifies as transgender or non-binary – a seemingly insignificant difference in representation numerically, but in relation to the whole of New York, that is a remarkable amount of people missing out on opportunities. This misrepresentation also affects the actors – queer actors become accustomed to playing straight roles, which does not provide the actor with the opportunity to play a role that experienced a similar journey as them (though this is not as much of a problem as straight actors playing queer roles, which has unfortunately become common). Simply put, actors are being depleted of playing characters they can connect with on a deep level – an opportunity that has the potential to lead an audience to acceptance.

The vast majority of shows on Broadway feature heterosexual love stories and cisgender characters abiding by their respective gender norms – choices that are purposefully made in order to draw conservative audiences to the theaters. The irony lies in the fact that theater is widely considered to be a “gay” profession or interest by upper-class, conservative socialites (who use

theater to present themselves as cultured, but often need to witness the inclusivity of theater more than anyone else), but the lack of queer representation onstage in modern mainstream Broadway makes it anything but. The lack of attention paid to the LGBTQ community in the realm of popular contemporary theater is inappropriate as our society evolves, and emphasizing queer diversity as theater gradually progresses is necessary to keep intact the inclusive, transformative nature of the art form.

## ANNOTATED BIBLIOGRAPHY

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John M. Clum is a queer theorist, literary critic, and author of multiple articles and books, such as his book *Acting Gay* as well as its sequel, *Still Acting Gay*. In addition, he has been a director and playwright for more than 75 professional plays and operas. Much of his work revolves around queer representation in theater, particularly for gay male characters in addition to the lack of ethnic and queer diversity in modern theater.

"Ethnic Representation on New York City Stages." American Theatre Wing, 2019.

The American Theatre Wing published a study under its Asian American Performers Action Coalition – a volunteer-driven dedicated to increasing the representation for actors in New York Theater – in order to shed a light on the amount of diversity in the 2016-2017 Broadway season. The study examines the number of people of color working for Broadway shows as actors, directors, designers, etc. Gender diversity is also discussed in the report.

"HIV and AIDS --- United States, 1981--2000." *Center for Disease Control and Prevention*, United States Department of Health & Human Services, 1 June 2001, [www.cdc.gov/mmwr/preview/mmwrhtml/mm5021a2.htm](http://www.cdc.gov/mmwr/preview/mmwrhtml/mm5021a2.htm).

The Center for Disease Control is an organization within the United States government that aims to prevent the spread of diseases, both nationally and internationally. This article is part of the Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report (MMWR), a weekly series reporting the magnitude of illnesses – this particular one centered around the spread of the AIDS virus in the United States. The study examines the demographics and geography impacted by the virus, with an emphasis on the effects of the AIDS crisis – the peak of the virus's spread in the 1980s and 1990s.

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The Williams Institute is a division of University of California, Los Angeles that is dedicated to professionally and accurately researching sexuality and gender law and public policy. The organization specializes in legal research, public policy analysis, and judicial training. This study demonstrates the number of LGBTQ people living in the United States, as well as in



specific locations; the information also refines this data by examining the prevalence of LGBTQ people of color, same-sex marriages, and religious practices of queer citizens.

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Susan Miller is a breaking news editor at USA Today, collaborating on national stories for the international, centrist daily newspaper. In this article, she examines how the current political climate of the United States has contributed to increasing homophobia and hate crimes in the last couple of years, as well as the declining level of tolerance for LGBTQ Americans.

Schilling, Oliver, and Justin Brill. "LGBTQ Mainstream Contemporary Theater." 15 Apr. 2019.

Justin Brill is an assistant professor of musical theater at Columbia College Chicago, specializing in acting, musical theater performance, and mindfulness for young actors. Prior to teaching, Brill worked in regional theaters, national tours, and Broadway companies. In this self-conducted interview, Justin spoke about how *Falsettos* was the first show wherein he had seen queer characters, and *RENT* was where he began noticing his family and his peers learning acceptance from the diverse cast.