



Hughes, Holly (b. 1955)

by Tina Gianoulis

Encyclopedia Copyright © 2015, glbtq, Inc.
Entry Copyright © 2002, glbtq, Inc.
Reprinted from <http://www.glbtq.com>

A lesbian feminist performance artist and playwright with a flair for telling the outrageous stories of everyday lesbian life, Holly Hughes has grown used to controversy. Although she has won two Obie awards for excellence in off-Broadway theater for her plays (*Dress Suit to Hire* [1988] and *Clit Notes* [1990]), her work has been called pornographic by both right-wing politicians and some members of the queer community.

But Hughes' work is meant to create controversy, to shake audiences out of their complacency, and to provoke movement and thought.

Hughes began her career as a painter of abstract art, and she brings that same sense of abstraction to her work in the theater. Her plays deconstruct common realities and then reorder them to provide a fresh perspective. They combine satire, silliness, and camp to explore serious issues of contemporary life. The result is always exuberant, usually hilarious, and frequently disturbing.

Hughes was born on March 10, 1955 into an upper-middle-class family in Saginaw, Michigan. She has remarked that her parents "taught me how to imagine a life different from theirs. They gave me stories." She graduated from Kalamazoo College in 1977.

Hughes moved to New York in 1979 and began to work with WOW Cafe, a lesbian theater group and storefront that was committed to experimentation. Working with such active lesbian theater artists as Peggy Shaw and Lois Weaver, Hughes infused the sophisticated East coast theater scene with her Midwestern brashness.

Some of Hughes' plays, such as *Well of Horniness* (1983) and *The Lady Dick* (1984), delve into the contradictions within the lesbian community itself. They are ribald satirical romps that deftly explore such deeply lesbian themes as butch/femme relationships and mistrust of bisexual women.

Other of her works tread the heavily mined territory of the family. *World Without End* (1989), for example, is about the death of her mother, while *Clit Notes* deals with her relationship with her father. These works are poignant, describing the isolation of the queer individual within the heterosexual family with heartbreaking and incisive wit.

Hughes' work has often provoked hostility in the lesbian community because of her determination to shatter taboos. In *Clit Notes*, for example, Hughes explores her own developing sexuality by revealing her attractions to her father, to her mother, and to butch lesbians who remind her of her father.

Even queers in her audience have sometimes felt that Hughes pushes the boundaries between eroticism and pornography, and some have called her work oppressive to women.



A publicity portrait of Holly Hughes by Kelly Campbell provided by Outright Speakers and Talent Bureau. Courtesy Outright Speakers and Talent Bureau.

Hughes gained national notoriety in the early 1990s as one of the "NEA Four," artists who received grants from the National Endowment for the Arts in 1990 but whose grants were then cancelled. In a climate of political conservatism and right-wing religious zealotry, the cancellations were justified on the basis of a clause in the organization's charter requiring that funded art be within "general standards of decency and respect for the diverse beliefs and values of the American public."

Hughes and the other artists--Karen Finley, John Fleck and Tim Miller--sued the NEA not only to have their grants reinstated but also to change the wording in the charter. They argued that the vagueness of the clause allowed it to be used politically to limit the artists' freedom of speech. The grants were eventually reinstated, but the "decency clause" remains part of the NEA charter.

Bibliography

Hughes, Holly. *Clit Notes: A Sapphic Sampler*. New York: Grove Press, 1996.

Hornaday, Ann. "Holly Hughes, Playing the Ironies." *Ms.* 1.3 (November-December 1990): 64.

Lassell, Michael. "NEA Four Survive a Year of Uproar." *The Advocate* (December 3, 1991): 76-78.

Scheib, Rebecca. "Holly Hughes, Performance Artist." *Utne Reader* No. 76 (July-August 1996):110.

Stone, Laurie. "Holly Hughes: Her Heart Belongs to Daddy." *Ms.* 5.2 (September-October 1994): 88.

About the Author

Tina Gianoulis is an essayist and free-lance writer who has contributed to a number of encyclopedias and anthologies, as well as to journals such as *Sinister Wisdom*.