



Theater Companies

by Tina Gianoulis

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Since the earliest days of theatrical production, most of those involved in theater have seen the stage as a mirror held up to life. Through the mirror of theater, playwrights and actors reflect the real world, showing the audience aspects of its own human nature. This reflection usually has multiple purposes, including entertainment, education, and satire, often with an ultimate goal of improving the world that is reflected through theater's mirror.

The world of theater has always attracted large numbers of gay men and lesbians, made expert in the arts of disguise and illusion by the necessity of hiding their identities. However, ironically, just as in other areas of society, pre-liberation glbtq people usually found themselves left out of the mirror that theater held up to society.

Drag Troupes

Probably the earliest gay theater companies were drag troupes.

The Jewel Box Revue, an interracial group that billed itself as "Twenty-five Men and a Girl," was founded in 1939 in a Miami nightclub. It differed from earlier drag acts in that it offered a unified production, not merely a succession of solo acts. Moreover, the show featured dance routines, original music, and comic sketches, but not lip synching.

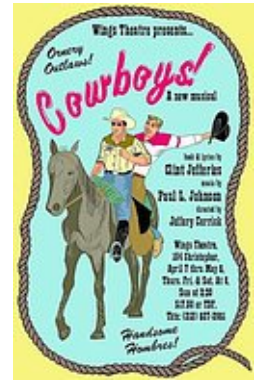
The revue began touring the United States in the 1940s, appearing mostly in gay bars and nightclubs, but in some theaters as well. The extensive circuit of bars and other performing venues is some indication that the glbtq population in the 1940s and 1950s was larger and somewhat more organized than often realized.

The original Jewel Box Revue ceased performing in 1975, but it spawned other traveling troupes of female impersonators.

Perhaps the most important drag theater company is that formed by actor, playwright, director, and producer Charles Ludlam in 1967 in New York. Ludlam's Ridiculous Theater Company combines parody, camp theatricality, popular culture, and drag with serious--often wrenchingly moving--acting to create a unique dramatic experience. The Ridiculous Theater Company survived Ludlam's death in 1987 and is now directed by Ludlam's former lover and colleague, Everett Quinton.

Other notable drag shows include the very influential Hot Peaches, who performed in New York in the early 1970s, and San Francisco's Cockettes, a 1970s-era gender-bending group that added outrageous performance art to the traditional bump and grind of drag performance.

Lesbians and female-to-male transsexual performers began to popularize drag king shows in the late 1990s. Drag king troupes such as Victoria, British Columbia's 5 O'Clock Shadow have joined the drag tradition.



A poster for a Wings Theatre Company production of *Cowboys*. Courtesy Wings Theatre Company.

Pre-Stonewall Gay Theater

Modern non-drag gay theater had its beginnings in the mid-1960s. Indeed, one might date the origins of gay theater quite precisely to the production of Lanford Wilson's one-act play about a drag queen, *The Madness of Lady Bright*, at a Greenwich Village coffeehouse run by an openly gay theater producer, Joe Cino. Caffe Cino produced the early works of Robert Patrick, Jean Claude van Itallie, Doric Wilson, Tom Eyen, and William M. Hoffman, among many others.

The mid-1960s explosion of theater in unlikely venues, such as coffeehouses, churches, and bars, came to be known as the beginnings of off-off-Broadway. What is sometimes not recognized is that much of this theater was gay theater.

Theater in the Aftermath of Stonewall

The Stonewall Rebellion of 1969 gave additional impetus to what became a more self-conscious gay theater movement. Theatrical queers began to create art that illuminated gay life and gay experience, both to validate that experience among glbtq people themselves and to educate straight society about those they had long ignored.

One of the goals of the gay liberation movement was to end the isolation of gays and lesbians. Not surprisingly, community has been one of the most important ideals of queer life. Theater companies attempt both to create their own communities and to foster a sense of the community at large. They are activist organizations that attempt both to educate the larger society and to inculcate a feeling of solidarity among members of the glbtq communities.

During the formative years of gay liberation, grassroots queer organizations sprang up in communities all over the country, and dozens of theater companies were among them. In Seattle, for example, one such grassroots lesbian theater group took its name, Front Room Theater, from its first venue, the front room of the director's house. Such groups created original works and produced works of local playwrights.

TOSOS and The Glines

New York has long been the heart of American theater and several gay theater companies formed there soon after Stonewall. Two of the most important of these were "The Other Side of Silence" (TOSOS) and The Glines.

Begun by Doric Wilson, Peter del Valle, and Bill Blackwell in 1973, "The Other Side of Silence" was the first theater company formed specifically to foster ideals of gay liberation. Although TOSOS was in existence for only four years, it had a number of successes, including Doric Wilson's "The West Street Gang," which was performed at the Spike Bar.

John Glines, Barry Laine, and Jerry Tobin founded The Glines in 1976 as a theater devoted to gay art. It became more successful than the founders could have predicted. The great breakthrough for The Glines was Harvey Fierstein's *Torch Song Trilogy*, which became a surprise hit and moved to Broadway.

On June 5, 1983, John Glines made theatrical and television history by thanking his life-partner Lawrence Lane as he accepted a Tony Award for *Torch Song Trilogy*. Although Glines' simple recognition of his lover itself created a minor firestorm, the real significance of the evening was that a small theater devoted to gay art had suddenly achieved mainstream recognition.

Among the plays produced at The Glines include such staples of gay and lesbian theater as Jane Chambers' *Last Summer at Bluefish Cove* and *My Blue Heaven*; William M. Hoffman's *As Is*; Robert Patrick's *T-Shirts* and

Untold Decades; and Doric Wilson's *A Perfect Relationship*.

Although The Glines continues in existence, it rarely produces plays these days. It may be that the success of gay plays on and off-Broadway has made the necessity of a gay theater company in New York less pressing. After all, the Broadway success of Kushner's *Angels in America*, McNally's *Love! Valour! Compassion!*, and a host of other gay-themed works means that, in New York at least, gay theater has become mainstream.

New York's Wings Theater Company, founded in 1986, however, maintains a commitment to gay work. Concentrating on original plays, the company attracts a small but diverse audience.

Women's Theater

Women's theater, an outgrowth of the feminist movement of the 1970s, has also had a great influence on gay theater. As in many women's organizations, many of the feminists who founded women's theater troupes were lesbians, who made sure that the content of their companies' performances challenged homophobia and gender roles as well as sexism.

At the Foot of the Mountain in Minneapolis, which is sometimes called the oldest continuous professional women's theater in the United States, has been performing women's theater since 1974, often confronting queer themes.

Another influential feminist theater company, Spiderwoman Theater, is also sometimes called the oldest continuous professional women's theater in the United States. Founded in the mid-1970s by three Native American sisters from New York, Lisa Mayo and Muriel and Gloria Miguel, Spiderwoman in true feminist fashion focuses on a broad range of issues of race, sex, and gender.

One of the most dynamic early queer theater companies was formed out of women's theater and drag show traditions. Peggy Shaw had been working with the Hot Peaches drag show and Lois Weaver and Deb Margolis had been part of Spiderwoman Theater when they joined forces in the late 1970s to form Split Britches, an influential lesbian troupe that toured the world with highly original productions. Their repertoire ranges from works of social commentary (*Upwardly Mobile Home*) to dyke classics (*Patience and Sarah*).

In an example of queer fusion, Split Britches linked with another seminal gay company, London's Bloodlips, which had been formed by British drag performer Bette Bourne in the mid-1970s. Together, the companies called themselves Split Lips and created and toured with such gender-bending productions as *Belle Reprieve*, a drag update of the Tennessee Williams classic, *A Streetcar Named Desire*.

Queer Theater around the Country

Queer theater is active and vibrant and still raising controversial issues in innovative ways. Some early companies still survive, such as San Francisco's Theatre Rhinoceros, the nation's longest-running glbtq theater. Theater Rhinoceros began performing in 1977 and still presents queer-oriented productions in its home on Mission Street.

Another successful company is Chicago's acclaimed About Face Theatre, which states that it is, "dedicated to the creation of performances that examine and participate in the development of the gay, lesbian, and bisexual communities."

Like several other educational theater companies, About Face also has a Youth Theatre which focuses on the issues of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgendered, and questioning youth. Keeping the queer theater tradition of activist entertainment, each year the About Face Youth Theatre does an Educational Outreach Tour, performing in schools around Illinois.

Los Angeles's Ivy Theatre is a relative newcomer to glbtq theater, having been established in 1998. Its original goal was to produce lesbian playwrights, but it has recently broadened its focus to plays that relate to the lesbian experience, whether or not written by lesbians.

Glbq theater is by no means limited to the country's largest cities or its gay meccas. For example, the Richmond Triangle Players, founded in 1992, produces four or five shows a year in a Richmond, Virginia gay nightclub. Also founded in 1992, SNAP! Productions of Omaha, Nebraska brings glbtq-themed works to a broad and diverse audience in a notoriously conservative area of the country.

The tradition of gay bars as the venue of gay theater also survives. New Orleans' Cowpokes Bar, for example, has a performing space where traveling and local theater companies present works of interest to glbtq people, and Seattle's Re-Bar offers its stage on a regular basis to companies who produce plays and revues such as "The Fallen Women Follies."

Many queer theater companies are collectives in which actors, directors, and playwrights collaborate on all aspects of a production, often exchanging roles in a flexible creative process.

For example, Buffalo's HAG Theatre, founded in 1994, is described by artistic director Margaret Smith as "a multicultural collective of theater artists," whose purpose is "to bring notice and light to lesbians and women, who remain invisible in our culture, and to provide production opportunities for established lesbian writers desperately looking for them."

Other currently active gay and lesbian theater troupes include the Boston-based Erinys Productions, formed in 1997; Stage-Q in Madison, Wisconsin, founded in 2001; théâtre Anima 21, founded in Quebec in 1996; the Lambda Players in Sacramento, started in 1989; and Theatre OUTlanta, which began as the LGBT Theatre Project in 2001, in Atlanta, Georgia.

Queer Friendly Companies

Some theater companies are not specifically gay but have members who are queer or queer allies. Many of these offer a venue for gay productions. For example, St. Louis's That Uppity Theatre Company, founded in 1988, began a lesbian and gay program called Alternate Currents/Direct Currents in 1992.

Since 1994, San Francisco's New Conservatory Theatre has produced an increasing amount of glbtq-programming. They have not only produced a number of West Coast and world premieres, but have also commissioned new plays based on glbtq subjects.

Chicago's Bailiwick Repertory Theater produces both gay and non-gay work and sponsors what claims to be "the largest festival of GLBT theatre and performance in America." Since the late 1980s, it has offered a Pride Series each summer, featuring a diverse offering of gay and lesbian plays, often produced for the first time.

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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*.