



The Misrepresentation of Queer Folks in Theatre

This essay uses content analysis to explain the misrepresentation of queer folks in theatre. This topic is important because a lack of proper representation can harm young queer people. I hope readers understand the information presented and advocate for proper representation.¹

Keywords: queer, cisgender, sexuality, gender, misrepresentation

Introduction

Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans, Queer, Intersex, Asexual (LGBTQIA+) pride is something that is meant to be celebrated in all spaces, including the spaces where pride is most cherished. Queer people have brought their community into theatre, where it is mostly celebrated by audiences but not by the industry itself. I want to note that throughout this

¹ I would like to acknowledge that, unfortunately, queer folks are not the only community lacking proper representation within the theatre industry. Many other communities face miscasting and stereotypes, but for this paper, I decided to narrow it down to the queer community.

paper, I will be using the word “queer” as an umbrella term for people who identify within the LBGTQIA+ community.

Theatre has been an enormous part of my life, especially during my tween/teen years. Being a part of the theatre gave me joy and a safe space where I could be who I was, regardless of my sexuality or gender identity. Theatre has given so many more young queer folks the same. Proper queer representation in theatre is essential, especially for queer youth, because a lack of representation could be harmful in many ways.

Stereotypes, stigmatization, miscasting, and harmful critic reviews are examples of the theatre industry actively participating in misrepresenting the queer community. Take, for example, the musical *Hedwig and the Angry Inch* (1998). The main character, Hedwig, is an openly gender-queer person, though they are often played by straight-cis males. The misrepresentation of queer folks in *Hedwig and the Angry Inch* (1998) is a classic example of miscasting, something that many producers and directors in theatre do not tend to care about and happen to do a lot. Not just with queer characters and queer people

but with characters of color and people of color. This is just a tiny problem in a series of bigger problems. What we need is change, acceptance, and an expression of pride.

A Not So Warm ‘Welcome to Falsettoland’

Falsettos (Finn & Lapine, 1992) was ahead of its time. The show features a minimal cast, half identifying as gay or lesbian and the other half presumably straight. The plot follows Marvin in 1979, who left his wife and son to be with his lover, Whizzer. Marvin decides that he wants the best of both worlds and joins all of them together, kid, wife, and lover, under the same roof. The show’s first act ends with Trina (Marvin’s wife) marrying his therapist (named Mendel) and Whizzer leaving Marvin. They all regroup in the second act, which takes place in 1981. Whizzer and Marvin reconnect while Marvin and Trina try to plan their son’s Bar Mitzvah. We are also introduced to two new characters who are only referred to as the “lesbians from next door.” They do have names in the script, Dr. Charlotte and Cordelia, but their names are never stated in the actual content of the musical, something I discuss below.

With them remaining unnamed throughout the content of the musical, this, in turn, can be an erasure of their identity. Cordelia is a caterer, whom Marvin and Trina hire to cater their son's Bar Mitzvah, and Charlotte is an internal medicine doctor. She becomes crucial in the show as Whizzer suddenly becomes sick and dies at the end of the musical. This mystery disease is never named, but in the song "Something Bad is Happening (Reprise)," the lyrics go as follows, "Something bad is happening; something very bad is happening; something that kills; something infectious; something that spreads from one man to another" (Finn & Lapine, 162). Though we never get direct clarification as to what disease this is, we can only assume from the words of this song.

Falsettos premiered on Broadway in 1992 (both acts of the show were written separately and were later combined to perform a full show) and had mixed reviews. The mixed reviews came from critics who needed help understanding the use of labels and taking back one's identity (Smart, 1996). Both acts were written by openly gay writers James Lapine and William Finn, who used the

labels gay and lesbian and other terms associated with the queer community. For example, as I referenced earlier, the characters of Dr. Charlotte and Cordelia in the second act are mostly referred to as the "lesbians from next door" (Finn & Lapine) whenever they appear or are introduced. The use of these words can be taken one of two ways. The first way is the route in which it was intended when this show was written, as a means for these characters in the show, half of which openly identify as gay or lesbian, to take back these words and use them not as derogatory but as a way of stating their identity. In a way, Finn and Lapine wrote it to be empowering. The play's first act occurred in 1979, and the second act in 1981, when queer identities were not as accepted as they are today. Finn and Lapine encourage and empower the queer community through their characters and language, as this show intended.

Critics took that empowerment in the wrong way. Melanie Kirkpatrick (1990), who wrote for the *Wall Street Journal*, said *Falsettos* was "about homosexual life in a big city" (p.180). John Beaufort (1990) from the *Christian Science Monitor* saw the musical as "an instance of the

consequences of homosexual relationships in an age of so-called sexual liberation” (p.176). Critics dumbed the musical down to a simple show about gays living in New York City or saw it as a message about the faults of being gay in relationships. Smart said it best in his article about the show and the reviews, “The critics accept, categorize, and dismiss the characters based on the labels...given to them by Finn and fail to examine, interpret, or appreciate *Falsettoland*” (p.62). Yes, the characters express their identities using queer terminology, but their sexuality is not the only aspect of their identity. Critics could not look past the labeling and only saw queer, not the immense character development seen throughout the show by all characters, but just queer (Smart).

Falsettos is not the only musical that has generated this reaction. In an article titled, “It’s My Party and I’ll Die If I Want to!?: Gay Men, AIDS, and the Circulation of Camp in the U.S. Theatre,” Roman (1992) sums it up best, “American theatres have less successfully expanded their interrogation of how the representations of gay men and AIDS have been perpetuated by such institutions of dominant culture

as the media, biomedical science, and the state” (p.306). Musicals or plays with gay characters or characters who suffer from AIDS are often only referred to as such. The musical *Rent* (1996) is a great example of this. A musical meant to be about a group of friends struggling together through tough times ends up only being regarded as an AIDS musical. The characters’ personalities are completely thrown away because of queer labeling and an AIDS diagnosis. Interpreting musicals like this paved the way for people in the real world to think of being queer as a personality trait and not an identity. Critics and viewers did not allow them any real opportunity to showcase their true personalities, even if the show aims to do so. Sexuality is an identity, but it is not a personality trait. This is a total misrepresentation of the queer community. There is so much more to queer people than their sexualities and gender, but when it is showcased in theatre, the audiences see the label, not the actual person or the lived experiences within and around queer life.

Stereotypes are Misrepresenting

Sexual and gender stereotypes in theatre can lead to major misrepresentations of

the queer community. It can be a mistake and completely harmless, but sometimes stereotypes are used to perpetuate negative connotations of a certain community, especially the queer community. This has been a problem recently with musicals like *Legally Blonde: The Musical* (2007) and *Mean Girls the Musical* (2017) gaining popularity. These two musicals, and many others, perpetuate the negative gay stereotypes we should have left behind. For example, in *Legally Blonde: The Musical* (2007), there is a song in the musical called “There! Right There!” This entire song is about deciphering whether a witness on the stand during a trial is gay or European, and it gives us some problematic stereotypes, “Gay or just exotic? I still can’t crack the code. Yeah, his accent is hypnotic, but his shoes are pointy-toed” (Benjamin & O’Keefe, 2007). In the same song we also get the lyrics, “You are so gay, you big parfait. You flaming one-man cabaret” (Benjamin & O’Keefe). These are not necessarily hateful, but they do communicate stereotypes of gay men that some gay men may not agree with or participate in. This is why stereotypes can be harmful. They generalize and

group people into categories that they might disagree with or that may not be their full identity. Instead of these musicals giving us early 2000s nostalgia, it gives us hate and misrepresentation by normalizing negative stereotypes (Slager, 2018). Shows like these give the queer community a bad rap and make it harder for young queer folks to come out and be honest about who they are.

As I said before, a lack of proper representation of the queer community can be harmful to queer youths. Theatre and the gay community are oftentimes grouped together because of a shared love for theatre throughout the gay community. Perpetuating negative stereotypes like this about a community that happens to be theatre’s number one supporter is almost like a slap in the face. How are we supposed to continue to support such an industry when for years, they have done nothing but mistreat us?

Another problem faced widely in theatre and briefly mentioned above is the constant practice of miscasting. Miscasting is the practice of putting an actor in a role that is not necessarily right for them. This happens a lot, especially in queer roles where straight actors are typically cast. Many argue that this is

done because the straight, cis counterpart may be considered more marketable (Rodrigues, 2019). It could be a situation where the queer performer is more talented and better qualified for the role than the straight cis counterpart, but that does not stop the latter from being cast.

Let us not get miscasting confused with the art of drag performance. We can trace drag all the way back to Shakespearean times when women were not allowed on the stage, so men had to fill the roles. Trends like this continued till the 1920s when vaudeville shows used drag performers. With prohibition being put into place from 1920-1933, along with drinking and partying, drag performers moved to underground venues, which quickly became a safe space for the queer community (Nasr, 2021). Sadly though, with the rise in drag popularity, police started to hunt for these venues and shut them down. This also led to a ban on “female impersonation” in New York. It was not until the 1970s when drag was re-popularized that it was brought back in New York (Nasr). There are certain instances within theatre where drag performance is essential to the show. An

example is from the musical *Hairspray* (1988). Edna Turnblad, the main character’s mother, is always played by a person who identifies as a man, and this is what the creator wanted. He wanted this character to be in drag, so she is meant to be in drag. Instances like this, where this type of casting is intentional, are okay, but instances like *Hedwig and the Angry Inch* (1998), where casting agents are intentionally casting straight cisgender men into a gender-queer role, are not okay.

Another problem is the lack of queer representation in young adult theatre. You rarely see any queer characters in young adult theatre productions, and if you do, they typically are portrayed as “troubled” or “at risk” (Giannini, 2010). I will use *Rent* (1996) again as an example. The openly queer characters in the show either have a disease that will eventually kill them, or the characters are portrayed as a “bad type.” Maureen Johnson, a character in the show, is an openly bisexual woman. She is often shown to be very promiscuous and flirty with everyone around her. There is even an entire song (called “Tango Maureen”) where it is addressed that, inevitably, she will cheat on her current partner. As the

only openly bisexual character in the show, she is pushed into a negative narrative that people have always seemed to have about bisexual women. This is obviously an example of biphobia and an openly queer character being “a problem” and “troubled.” This quote says it best, “This negative discourse perpetuates the notion that ‘being gay’ puts youth at risk for a plethora of problems by suggesting that lesbian, gay, or queer youth will likely become either victims of self-hatred or victims of social hatred” (Giannini, p. 4). This is a great example of theatre being open and accepting of queer folks but, in the same breath, also misrepresenting what it means to be queer. In a way, this pushes for heteronormativity and could possibly make it harder for queer youths to come out. In biased environments like this, from an industry that preaches acceptance and diversity, many queer actors are starting to step away from the theatre industry and into better places.

We can use theatre to erase the stereotypes written in theatre. We must erase the stigma that some theatre writers have created for us. Even when queer characters are present, heteronormativity still reigns high due to

how the queer characters are written, almost like a taboo, something that should not be openly talked about. Giannini puts it best, “Plays that reinforce heteronormativity support the idea that homosexuality is never desirable but that it is always already an affliction that leads to punishment, psychically and/or psychologically” (p.4). This underscores the argument about the problematic use of labeling, and in queer characters, labels take away from their personality.

The Future

Luckily, there is a future for theatre, and it looks brighter by the minute. Misrepresentation of all communities can be a thing of the past if we let go of our biases and treat everyone with respect and compassion. Sadly though, some people cannot do that, so instead, we must think of other ways to expand the inclusiveness of theatre and how to represent the queer community properly. There are ways this can be done. One is using theatre itself to spread information on queer communities to stop stereotypes and stigmatizations. With the use of theatre, the actors can express their emotions and ideas, which could lead to the

audience changing their perspective, especially regarding social issues (Iverson & Seher, 2014). At Great Lakes University, a community theatre group called Fringe Benefits “facilitated a five-day Theatre for Social Justice Institute to develop a play to educate about homophobia and chilly climate for gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender students on campus” (Iverson & Seher, p.41). At the end of this five-day event, a survey showed significant changes in attitudes toward queer people (Iverson & Seher). The survey proved that audiences better understood queer lives after the show and were more open to the community. If we educate on these topics, people will write about them factually without any assumption.

Though not all misrepresentation is intentional, it does not make it any less harmful. Understanding that this is a problem is the first step to trying to correct it. We need to raise questions like, why is that cis-male actor playing a genderqueer character? Why don't we just cast queer people into queer roles? Why is there a displacement of queer people in theatre when queer people help the industry to thrive and survive?

If questions like these are not asked, no one will think that this is a problem. Things like stereotyping and stigmatization in theatre are harmful to the community, especially when showcased to a massive audience. Seeing a queer character on the stage who might not be portrayed in the best way could be harmful to queer youths and cause them not to want to come out.

In recent years, we have seen progress in the mainstream. The Tony Award is the highest award you can get on Broadway. At the 2022 Tony Awards, they made history by nominating L Morgan Lee for Best Supporting Actress in a Musical. She was the first openly transgender performer to be nominated for a Tony. Though she lost to Patti LuPone for the role of Joanne in *Company*, she became a trailblazer with this landmark nomination. It does make one wonder, though. The 2022 Tony Awards preached diversity and inclusion within the nominations, but if you look at the winners' list, that does not seem to be the case. It is not hard to accidentally misrepresent a community, but it is just as easy to be mindful, considerate, and not hateful.

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