

AN INTRO.

I wrote the artist statement that follows this introduction a few days before we started rehearsal for the world premiere of *The Gay Heritage Project* in the fall of 2013. At the prompting of my writing collaborators, Paul Dunn and Damien Atkins, I read it aloud at the top of our first day of rehearsal at Buddies In Bad Times Theatre. At that particular moment in our journey – one that had started back in 2008 with Paul asking Damien and me if we were interested in theatrically grappling with “Is there such a thing as Gay Heritage?” – this statement of mine seemed to encapsulate our creative impulse. Reading it now – on the other side of 2013’s full rehearsal process, a world premiere in Toronto, a remount and national tour just this year – I’d say our intent has remained true to these early concepts. I’d also say we’ve broadened our thinking and refined the language around what we’re doing with this work. For instance, the word *brotherhood*, as used, has evolved into the words *togetherness* and *belonging*. Shifts like these are to be expected. Many of the play’s riddles and theatrical gestures have evolved because we have evolved as creator-performer-investigators working in and with community. And of course, heritage evolves too. But embracing heritage as an action as opposed to an entity (heritage as a verb instead of a noun, a drama instead of a declaration) has always been the guiding principle of our practice. I think this statement I wrote in 2013 is an interesting artifact, an insight into some of our early prompts as queer artists dealing with questions of identity, community, personal and communal acts of healing. The statement is now part of my gay heritage, and part of the history of *The Gay Heritage Project*.

So as not to change the original text in any way, I’ve liberally peppered this historic document with endnotes, which may provide some useful context.

-- Andrew Kushnir, June 2016
The Gay Heritage Project

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BROTHERHOOD.

The inciting incident was not Paul reading *Men With The Pink Triangle*. It was him in our dining room.¹

Brotherhood.

Paul came to us. He could have written his own play – he didn’t. He came to his gay friends and said “Let’s do this together”. And the doing is the act of heritage, not anything we discover, uncover, share, value. We supported each other in these journeys. That is brotherhood. We have had heartache together about theories that challenge brotherhood, our shared feeling, our sense of not being alone in the world, through time, through space.² We are not alone. We have a brotherhood. Right at this moment. We can

laugh together, play together, we can be outraged together. We can cry together. We can hope together. We are not alone. We have not been alone all this time.

On a bad day all I can think about is the ways the world conspires to keep me from brotherhood.³ It tells me that only by consuming can I fill a spiritual void, as opposed to turning to other human beings.

On a good day I can see how brotherhood is completely available to me. We just have to reach out. We just have to ask the question. Make an invitation.

With Cleve's lecture⁴ or with *Men With The Pink Triangles*, there's a feeling of a) Fuck that for happening b) Fuck the world for keeping me from knowing about it (whether that's fuck schools for not teaching me, fuck other gay people for not mentioning it, fuck history books) and then c) Fuck me for not finding this out sooner because maybe I'm too comfortable, too complacent, too caught up in my own narrative to open my eyes and ears to what has afforded me the life and comforts I enjoy.

And with all that Fuck You-ing, there's a desire to have company. Paul didn't go and write his own play.⁵ He came to us with his outrage, inner and outer, personal and social outrage, to see if we were outraged too. And if not, could we help him heal. All three of us have been wrestling with our feelings of loss, deprivation, of having been robbed, and with that, the joy and pleasure of discovery, of reclaiming, of queering. And it's all better with company. That journey, in the play, happens between us and the audience in a very personal way. And perhaps, the piece will reveal an opportunity to acknowledge and celebrate that we're all doing this together. That we're meant to.⁶ That's why we didn't write an article or book about gay heritage, that's why we decided to make a piece of theatre. Because heritage is an exchange, a theme-party, a social rite. I've learned more about my friends through this, I have learned more about myself, and have shared that learning with them.

We are a brotherhood. We want to include more people now. We want to let you, you, and her into this brotherhood. And not for you to espouse our liturgy, but to be inspired by the space it creates, to afford you a way to hold the floor with this idea of heritage in whatever way you see fit. In a way, the scenes, the terrain we cover, is irrelevant. There is way too much to cover. Way too much! To pursue through theme or content a comprehensive, inoffensive, all-inclusive, is not possible. We have to heal ourselves. And by doing so, heal our friends.⁷

The wounds of this investigation are myriad. Our history is not apparent to us, we have to seek it out. Many heroes and activists and artists died from AIDS and so there's this historic chasm, this failure of information transfer. Many straight people are not interested in our sensibility beyond its capacity to improve their lives – whether it be through humour, style, aesthetics, reinforcing the sanctity and value and desirability of marriage.⁸ The capitalist machine is interested in us as a niche, as a revenue stream. What are we in and of ourselves? How are we not at all like straight people? How can three young men of AIDS-dying age in the 80s and 90s outlive that fate and look for more?

Did we imagine ourselves dead by this age? Probably not. But how into our gay marrow have we been deprived of positive messaging around sex, aging, history, solidarity, community, struggle? How are we adrift?

Brotherhood. Brotherhood happens in wartime. We are not fighting the war on AIDS or harsh social stigma, certainly not three middle class white guys in monogamous relationships. What is our wartime? Is it the mainstreaming of gay culture and the way that “Born This Way” has hampered if not ostracized the ways we “Choose To Be”? I may have been born with a kind of hard-wired desire, but how that desire manifests, how I express it is the result of a plenty of choices. Take nothing for granted. Don’t be ageist, don’t be racist, don’t be misogynist, don’t be ableist just because that’s what the dominant culture is asking you to be. It’s not worth fitting in if it means narrowing yourself to pre-existing boxes. Who wants to “fit in”? That’s a squeezing of self, a lopping off of spiritual limbs, a denial of full-self.

So the *Gay Heritage Project* is an expansion of the self. It is a blooming. It is an opportunity to publicly – like a wedding – commit to the future, to resolve to be big in the world, full in love, forgiving. It’s a vow to ourselves, to one another. To be more alive to the world. To be excited by its questions, its differences. To not judge the way we were judged. To find new liberties. To share those liberties. To initiate people in free thinking, and free feeling.

Shame isolates us. You come out of the closet alone. You often come out of the closet to escape your loneliness. To escape your shame. How is GHP reflective of that. How is coming out of the closet more than “I’m gay.” What is the closet now? What is the container that we need to bust out of now? And the next container? And the one after that? Coming out of the closet might be a political act, but it’s not ipso facto a political life. You have to keep renewing that revolt, that rebellion against the heteronormative hegemony.⁹ And that revolt is a private renewal, a constant healing of self, a questioning of self, a questioning of loves, a questioning of dreams. And generating new possibilities. How is GHP about creating possibilities?

¹ In preparation for playing a role in Hannah Moscovitch’s *East of Berlin*, Paul Dunn came across *Men With The Pink Triangle: The True Life-and-Death Story of Homosexuals in the Nazi Death Camps* by Heinz Heger. The combination of outrage, guilt, and shame he felt around not knowing this history compelled him to reach out to us. Paul’s feelings around the book and its story are depicted in one of the scenes of *The Gay Heritage Project*, entitled “The Seed.” The dining room being reference here is the one in the apartment shared by me and my partner Damien Atkins who, as mentioned before, is the third creator-performer of the play.

² Our research dramaturge Dr. Paul Halferty initiated us in the Queer Politics of Michel Foucault, John D’Emilio’s *Capitalism and Gay Identity* and David Halperin’s *Is There a History of Sexuality?*, among others. This writing was dispiriting in many ways, severely complicating for us the pride and sense of lineage invoked by things like Ned’s speech in

Larry Kramer's *The Normal Heart*: "I belong to a culture that includes Proust, Henry James, Tchaikovsky, Cole Porter, Plato, Socrates, Aristotle, Alexander The Great, Michelangelo, Leonardo da Vinci, Christopher Marlowe, Walt Whitman, Herman Melville, Tennessee Williams, Byron, E. M. Forester, Lorca, Auden, Francis Bacon, James Baldwin, Harry Stack Sullivan, John Maynard Keynes, Dag Hammarskjöld... These are not invisible men." At that time, certainly on an affective level, we preferred Kramer's version of our shared past to what Dr. Paul Halferty was putting in front of us.

³ Reminder here that the concept of Brotherhood has evolved into words like Togetherness and Belonging. In fact, in my scene from the play entitled "The Boys from Zaporizhia", it is the word *belonging* that the characters of Sasha and Rostyk present to Andrew as a reason for Andrew's wanting to be exactly like them (gay Ukrainians). It is also Sasha that then says, in the final line of the scene, "Perhaps all belonging is just made up", suggesting that belonging is something that is created as opposed to cut and dried. At which point, the character of Andrew's head explodes.

⁴ On January 28, 2011, Cleve Jones, American activist and conceiver of the NAMES Project AIDS Memorial Quilt, was doing a speech at the University of Toronto. I had caught wind of it earlier that day because of a half-torn poster on a Church St. community message board. Paul and I attended. Cleve told his personal story: his friendship with Harvey Milk, Milk's assassination, the early Gay Lib movement, the terror of the AIDS crisis in the 1980s and 90s. He was one of the first men put on the "AIDS cocktail." He joked that after his lecture, he was hoping someone in the room would take him out for a cocktail. Paul looked over at me and said "We're asking him out for a drink." And we did. And after confirming that there would be food, Cleve obliged. Damien joined the three of us at the now defunct Fire On The East Side restaurant on Gloucester St. We spent a few hours talking with him, and before dropping him off at his nearby hotel, told him that he was now officially patron saint of *The Gay Heritage Project*.

⁵ All three of us had written our early-career, multi-character, gay solo show. Damien had much success with *Miss Chatelaine* and then the Dora-Award-winning *Real Live Girl*. Paul's play *BOYS* was much acclaimed, and like Damien's work, employed the same Vocal Masque creation technique that we'd end up using for *The Gay Heritage Project*. My version of a queer solo work, *Captain Princess*, was curated by Buddies In Bad Times for *Spotlight on the Creator/Performer* in 2006.

⁶ This impulse to start the play with a "meet and greet" of the audience came from a desire to make the audience feel seen and to humanize ourselves as performers to them. We used this opportunity to get acquainted with folks, to find out what brought them to the theatre, and to initiate a gesture around being a community in the practice of heritage.

⁷ Re-reading this now, I'm not entirely sure what I meant by this "heal our friends". Perhaps I meant Paul and Damien. I could also interpret it now as my saying that artists – particularly performers – can serve as a proxy for the audience. The "undergoing" for an

actor can be a kind of “undergoing” for us as audience. By witnessing three men grapple with whether or not there’s such a thing as gay heritage, and how historical, geographic, racial, gender lines complicate that grappling, the audience (and community) can undergo the question themselves. The work isn’t done for them. The play demonstrates that the work is possible, and possibly worthwhile.

⁸ Perhaps a bit cynical. But I’d read *How To Be Gay* by David Halperin a few months prior to writing this, and he got me all fired up about what it may mean to be queer. His defining queerness, as articulated by others in the early 90s: “We queers are totally unlike anyone else; we do not resemble you at all. We are completely different from heterosexuals – except for what we do in bed (which is more or less what everyone does in bed, with some minor, insignificant variations.)”

⁹ We owe much here to Larry Kramer’s “The Tragedy of Today’s Gays”, a speech he made at New York City’s Cooper Union on November 7, 2004, five days following the re-election of President George W. Bush. Given the organizations that hosted him, we can imagine it being an audience comprised of queer folks and allies. In his speech, he asks those gathered, “What do you do with yourselves all week long, seven days and nights a week, that amounts to anything really important? I can’t see many of you as doing anything important to give your lives meaning. Oh, I can see lots of frocks on the runway, but I can’t see bodies inside them with brains and concerned with anything but pretty and orgasms. What do you do to make your world, our world, a better place? A world that needs every bit of help it can get, our world, not their world. You don’t seem able to connect with anyone beyond the basest ways. GET OUT THERE! DO SOMETHING FOR EACH OTHER!” Harsh, perhaps. And an invective against young gay men that he has seemingly backed away from in recent years. But it was something that deeply motivated Paul, Damien and me to make something for our community. To get out there and do something for each other.