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New Faces: Queer Theatre and Social Movements

by

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Sitting in her apartment, Helen, a 42 year-old English teacher recounts the tragic murder of a queer student from her school:

When I first heard the news. Was that four years ago? God! I was angry. More than angry. Deflated and shaking and sucker punched. How could anyone not be? You don't want to see that on the news. You don't want to hear that at all, but you at least want someone to phone you and tell you that your life has changed. And yet it's no different even now. Lives are ruined. They only become moreso. And it was a harmless game, really. Girls play it in the schoolyard all of the time. Kiss and tell. Worse, nowadays. Coloured bracelets that represent all kinds of lewd so-called accomplishments. This was rather innocent by comparison. Even for him. Just a valentine. Just "be my valentine". Nothing big. What's a valentine to a boy? A funny little valentine becomes a domino to something bigger than all of us. And then a child is no more. At least in body, but he has come to exist in so much more—in thoughts and voices in late nights of disrupted sleep, sweat-stained sheets because the body feels the stresses of an atmosphere riddled with vibrations, these tiny ripples that tell us that something's not good, the universe is sending the message, our brains, our tears, our hearts feel it and the message is clear: Something has to change (Deveau, 2012, p. 26).

Abstract

Play, a metaphor for creative exchange, has always been an important social justice tool within the queer social movement, as it can have profound impacts on challenging conventional views. As social acceptance for queers improved, the use of direct forms of activism (*i.e.*, marches, demonstrations, and protests) used by initial social movement organizations (ISMOS) has withered in favour of indirect forms (*i.e.*, parades, celebrations, and performance). At the same time, there has been an increase in the number of active social movement organizations (SMOs) within the movement. As a result of this evolution, new queer arts-based social justice approaches have emerged, such as organizations offering queer theatre festivals. One such organization is Intrepid Theatre, which in 2015 launched the inaugural OUTstages festival—the first queer theatre festival on Vancouver Island. Relying on social movement literature, personal conversations with performers, my experience as an audience member at the 2015 and 2016 OUTstages festivals, and as the Vice-President on the Board of Intrepid Theatre, this article provides insight into the contribution that OUTstages has made to the queer social movement in Victoria. Using OUTstages as a case study, I specifically explore how queer theatre festivals provide a space for new voices and social actors, which facilitates agency; help to foster informal learning and consciousness raising; and complements the work of Pride organizations through community and cultural development. I close with an epilogue that by offers some cautionary anecdotes based on lessons learned from Pride organizations across Canada.

New Faces: Queer Theatre and Social Movements

The queer movement, to which I have belonged for many years, is one of the greatest and most successful social movements of the late 20th century and remains so today. With a goal of eliminating heterosexism, patriarchy, and sex and gender roles, queer social movement organizations (SMOs) were born out of the activist era of the 1960s—1980s and have played an instrumental role in fostering greater equality and social acceptance for queers (Gross, 2003; Mazur, 2002; Smith 1999). The Stonewall Riots of 1969 are considered the catalyst of the queer liberation movement for civil rights in North America (Smith, 1999). The riots between queers (*e.g.*, drag queens, gay men, lesbian, bisexuals, transgender people, and homeless youth) and the New York Police Department, in the wake of a police raid of the Christopher Street bar in Manhattan's West Village, lasted six days (Franke-Ruta, 2013). The Toronto bathhouse raids in 1981, that resulted in 304 gay men being arrested and publicly outed and humiliated, were another milestone in Canadian history that built significant support for the queer movement (Bérubé, 2003; Thomas, 2011). Both of these events brought about an emergence of queer liberation groups in Canada (Knegt, 2011; Smith, 1999).

The queer movement in Canada did not begin with one national unified SMO. Rather, the movement in Canada began as a series of smaller organizations dispersed throughout the country. While many of the initial social movement organizations (ISMOS) began as unstructured organizations that developed out of the heightened activist era, new SMOs have been created in recent years in smaller communities and rural areas across the country that have appropriated a cultural producing focus and organizational structure embraced by ISMOs. As rights for lesbians and gays were achieved,¹ the efforts of queer SMOs have evolved from a focus on political demonstrations, protests, and marches in the streets to an emphasis on cultural celebrations. In a qualitative study examining the evolution of Pride organizations and the meaning of Pride to leaders in Canada, Chaffe (2014) documents the withering of direct forms of activism in favour of indirect forms (*e.g.*, theatre, street performances, parades, festivals, and poetry and other arts events). Play, which Shepard (2010) defines as “a metaphor for a healthy form of creativity and exchange” (p. 22), through parades, performances, poetry readings, and other Pride events has been recognized as a useful social justice tool used within the queer social movement to challenge the hegemony of gender identity and sexuality (Browne, 2008; Johnston, 2005; Lundberg, 2007;

¹ I refrain from using queer here to recognize that rights for other queer communities such as Trans people have yet to be achieved.

Taylor & Rupp, 2005).

As a queer identified activist, I am interested in research related to the queer social movement in Canada and how it has progressed over the years. Despite the recent events (*e.g.*, the Orlando massacre) that have demonstrated that intolerance and hatred towards queers still exists, we have witnessed an increase in social acceptance for queers over time. As a result, new SMOs have emerged within the queer social movement. These new organizations are continuing the pursuit for queer equality while also attempting to build queer social and cultural capital. Intrepid Theatre's queer theatre festival—OUTstages—which works within the context of the queer social movement, is an example of an organization attempting to build queer social and cultural capital in Victoria, British Columbia.

In this article, I seek to provide insight into the potential contribution that OUTstages has made to the queer social movement in Victoria. Using OUTstages as a case study, I specifically explore if queer theatre festivals provide a space for new queer voices and social actors and if this facilitates agency; fosters informal learning and consciousness raising; and if queer theatre festivals can be seen as complementing the work of Pride organizations through community and cultural development. To answer these questions, this article draws on evidence from social movement literature, personal conversations with performers, and my experience as an audience member at the 2015 and 2016 OUTstages festival.

In the section that follows, I set the stage by discussing the queer performance lens that will be incorporated into this article. The remainder of this article is broken down into five different acts. In Act 1, I provide an account of my vantage point to this study. In Act 2, I provide the necessary background information on Intrepid Theatre, queer theatre in Canada, and social movement theory. Following Act 2, are three acts that specifically answer the questions this article seeks to answer. I close with an epilogue that provides a conclusion and a discussion on lessons learned from Pride organizations in Canada that may be relevant for the successful ongoing development of queer theatre festivals.

Setting the Stage: A 'Queer' Performance Lens

Society is obsessed with binary categories; you either are or are not, with little opportunity for anything in between. I am a homosexual, not a heterosexual. I am a boy, not a girl. Because I identify as a boy, I must have a penis and not a vagina. And because I am both a male and a homosexual, I like fucking men and not women. This language may be surprising, but I believe that if this is to be a queer article than it is only appropriate to break beyond the imposed structural

boundaries and binaries that society, and thus institutions, have imposed and deem appropriate. As Browne and Nash (2010) argue, queer research must be “fucked with and used in resistant and transgressive ways, even if those ways are resisting what could, and some would argue already has, become a queer orthodoxy” (p. 9).

This article will use a queer performance lens as its framework. The development of queer theory is rooted in the queer social activists that sought to challenge heterosexism, homophobia, and transphobia and thus focuses on those excluded by the heteronormative (Given, 2008; Jagose, 2005). According to Given (2008), “[q]ueer theory contests, interrogates, and disrupts the systematic and structural relationships of power that are historically caught up in heteronormative attitudes, values, and practices as well as heteronormative ideological, linguistic, existential, and strategic conventions and constructs” (p. 2). Queer theory resists the limited categories brought about by heteronormativity and “assumes a spectrum of fluid sex, sexual, and gender differences that are always in a state of becoming; being is never fixed and belonging is never a certainty” (Given, 2008, p. 4). Seidman (1994) indicated that the aim of queer theory

is to problematize hetero-and-homosexual identities, revealing the ways they are disciplinary and normalizing with the hope of creating psychic and social spaces that are hospitable to multiple, heterogeneous ways of figuring bodies, desires, social relations, and form a of collective life and politics (p. 175)

Finally, according to Hall (2003), queer theory attempts to bring sexuality, which is often considered a private matter confined to the bedrooms of individuals, to the forefront of social life.

The term “queer,” with its ambiguous and unstable meaning, seeks to challenge and break down the strict binary labels associated with sexuality and gender identity that promote exclusion (Butler, 1990; Fuss, 1991; Sedgwick, 1990). The term is unaligned with any specific sexuality or gender identity category such as lesbian, gay, bisexual, and trans (LGBT) (Shlasko, 2006; Warner, 2008) and both Butler (1994) and Halperin (1995) caution against the normalization of the term. According to Given (2008), “[q]ueer and all it encompasses moves and shifts, challenging notions of citizenship and what it means to be, become, and belong” (p. 3).

Fluidity is at the core of sexuality and gender identity. Just as “heterosexual identities, those ontologically consolidated phantasm of ‘man’ and ‘women,’ are theatrically produced effects that posture as grounds, origins, the normative measure of the real” (Butler, 1991, p. 21) so too are sexual identities. Today, we are at a crossroads in LGBT culture in that many non-heterosexuals are refusing to use such firmly defined identities and are instead identifying as identities that fall

outside these categories such as genderqueer and pangender. The term ‘queer’ is more inclusive of these voices, and is why I, like many others, have chosen to reclaim the term and use it in this article, despite the derogatory origins of the term (Pigg, 2000). I also appreciate the term for its intersectionality, which aids in creating and building a wider community for non-heterosexuals. I am cognitive and am empathetic to those individuals who are negatively affected by the use of this term. However, I hope those affected will understand and appreciate its use in this article as a term that places a greater emphasis on fluidity to allow for the self-discovery, self-realization, and self-affirmation, which many non-heterosexuals, such as myself, experience throughout their lives.

The performances at OUTstages serve to entertain, create beauty, bring about change, build community, heal, educate, and ritualize (Schechner, 2013). Through a lens of queer performance, I believe we can incorporate all marginalized subjects, those who are anything but heterosexual and better understand and articulate queer actions and the dichotomy between the queer life in the public and private domain. In describing the progression away from lesbian and gay and towards queer, Sky Gilbert’s in his Artistic Director’s Message in 1993 stated:

Let’s talk about Queer, because it doesn’t always mean gay or lesbian. It means sexual, radical, from another culture, non-linear, redefining form as well as content. [...] What has been happening at Buddies in Bad Times Theatre in the last two years has been the definition of an aesthetic, as people learn that one doesn’t have to be gay or lesbian to get involved, when people learn that queer theatre has as its common denominator a unique relationship with the audience—you come into the theatre assured of who you are and what you believe, but you leave the theatre all shook up. We are not into explaining comfortable, politically correct moral lessons here. We are, in contrast, at Buddies, providing a space and more importantly [an] environment where radical, sexual work can be developed (Halferty, 2006, pp. 128-129)

Act 1: My Vantage Point

In this section, I discuss how I am relationally joined to this topic and to queer research in general (Jones & Adams, 2010). My foray into queer theatre research may be surprising considering I do not have a theatre background. However, given my extensive involvement in the queer social movement and my interest in social movement research, I believe I can offer insights into the link between queer theatre and queer social movements. Since coming out in 2005, I have taken an active role in the Pride movement, serving as a board member on a number of Boards of Directors including Capital Pride, the AIDS Committee of Ottawa, the Ottawa Police GLBT

Liaison Committee, Fierté Canada Pride (FCP; Canada's national Pride organization representing Canadian Pride organizations), and the Victoria Pride Society, a position which I currently hold. In addition, I have volunteered with other Pride organizations including the Vancouver Pride Society and the Cape Town Pride Festival in South Africa, and led a Canadian queer leadership mission to Israel in 2014. Currently, I am also the Vice-President on the Board of Directors for Intrepid Theatre.

As a queer activist and researcher, I am concerned with dominant heteronormative attitudes and hegemonies that impose a challenge for queer culture and ways of being. I am thus particularly interested in research that is analytical, self-reflexive, insightful, informative, and seeks to cultivate a more just society. While many rights have been won for queers in Canada, I believe that we must continue to undress, in order to re-dress, the heteronormative attitudes and binary categories of sexuality and gender. We must all follow the emperor and disrobe in order to reformulate our views and to challenge the legitimacy of the binary norms that continue to marginalize and oppress individuals who do not conform to heteronormative and gender ideals. It is thus a goal of this article to present a case study that provides the basis for the application of ideas and methods that creates further dialogue (Yin, 2009).

Act 2: The Backgrounder

In this section, I provide background information on Intrepid Theatre, queer theatre in Canada, and on social movement theories.

Intrepid Theatre and OUTstages

Intrepid Theatre is a local theatre company in Victoria, British Columbia that was founded in 1986 to produce the Victoria Fringe Festival. Over the course of its nearly thirty-year history, the organization has expanded its theatrical offerings and now produces several theatre events during the year including Uno Fest, The You Show, and the New Play Reading Series. In July of 2015, Intrepid Theatre launched a new weeklong festival showcasing queer theatre performances known as OUTstages—Vancouver Island's first queer theatre festival.

The performances of the 2015 OUTstages festival included a *Quiet Sip of Coffee* and *Revenge of Popinjay* from AnimalParts (New York/Toronto), Stewart Legere's *Let's Not Beat Each Other to Death* (Halifax), Catherine Hernandez's *The Femme Playlist* (Toronto), play readings (*i.e.*, *The Bad Touch* by Kathryn Taddei (Victoria) and *My Funny Valentine* written by Dave Deveau (Vancouver)), and a cabaret including a variety of performances from local and festival artists. The 2016 festival also included two play readings (*i.e.*, *The Boy in Chrysalis* by

Liam Monaghan (Toronto) and *sorry god* by Colette Habel (Victoria)), a cabaret, and four theatre performances: *Tomboy Survival Guide* by Ivan Coyote (Vancouver), *Cocktales with Maria* by Gutter Opera Performance Collective (Vancouver), Kyall Rakoz's *Ludwig & Lohengrin* (Calgary), and *Roller Derby Saved My Soul* by Nancy Kenny of Broken Turtle Productions (Ottawa).

Queer Theatre in Canada

While there is a dearth of queer theatre scholarship in Canada, it is not proportionate with the amount of queer theatre in the country (Kerr, 2007). Founded by Sky Gilbert in 1979, Buddies in Bad Times in Toronto is the longest-running and largest queer theatre company in the world (Nestruck, 2015). Several other queer theatre companies exist in Canada including Third Street in Calgary, Zee Zee and the Frank Theatre in Vancouver, Toto Too in Ottawa, and Theatre Outré in Lethbridge (Halferty, 2014).

The queer activist era that began in the 1960s, and particularly with the Stonewall Riots in New York in 1969, disrupted the spectrum of theatre forms and the meaning of queer theatre (Bartlett, 2002). Queer theatre companies sprang up across the country following the queer activist era and these performances were created and performed by queer artists for queer audiences (Bartlett, 2002; Niles, 2010). This is not to suggest, however, that queer theatre did not exist prior to this. As Bartlett (2002) noted:

The most continuous and the richest theatrical tradition built upon these early works has been that of the drag artists—though their work has been the least honoured and the least documented, because it is a popular (*i.e.*, working-class) tradition, and is rarely dependent on scripts or playwrights (p. 305)

No movement is distinct and self-contained, rather they grow from other movements and give birth to new ones (Meyer & Whittier, 1994). Thus, before separating queer theatre into 'before' and 'after' the activist era beginning in the 1960s, it is important to recognize that earlier queer theatre survived and has been further developed (Bartlett, 2002).²

While queer plays have been produced for many decades, the landscape has changed in recent times, resulting in the creation of queer theatre festivals. In addition to OUTstages, other queer theatre festivals in Canada include Queer Acts in Halifax that started in 2009; the Queer Theatre Festival in St. John's that debuted as a pop-up show in 2012; and the Pretty, Witty, and Gay Festival in Lethbridge that began in 2004. These theatrical productions are primarily

² Bartlett (2002) offers a summary of the earlier queer theatre works that have influenced the movement.

conceived and performed by queers for queer audiences. Two other multi-disciplinary queer arts festivals that exist in Canada are the Queer Arts Festival in Vancouver that was launched in 2008, and the Queer Arts and Cultural Festival in Toronto that began in 2001.

Social Movements

Social movements generally begin by questioning and challenging the existing structural and political landscape in an attempt to move society towards new views, opinions, values, behaviours, and beliefs. In the past several years, there has been persistent growth in social movements and collaboration amongst grassroots groups in Canada (*e.g.*, the Slut Walk, Occupy Movement, G20 Summit protests, Idle No More, Black Lives Matter, etc.), including the continual growth of Pride organizations. At the core of every social movement is a collective group of people attempting to bring about solutions to complex societal issues.

While there exists extensive theoretical and empirical works on social movement theory, it is difficult to develop a scholarly consensus of a definition for social movements (Christiansen, 2009; Freeman & Johnson, 1999; McCarthy & Zald, 1977; Morris & Herring, 1987). Turner and Killian (1987) define a social movement as a collective group of individuals

acting with some continuity to promote or resist change in the society or organisation [*sic*] of which it is part [of]. As a collectivity[,] a movement is a group with indefinite and shifting membership and with leadership whose position is determined more by informal responses of adherents than by formal procedures for legitimising [*sic*] authority (p. 223)

Diani and Bison (2004), who have synthesized an enormous variety of social movement literature, viewed social movements as a social process consisting of actors engaged in collective action who are involved in the “presence or absence of conflictual orientations to clearly identified opponents,” are linked by “dense or sparse informal networks with individuals or organizations engaged in collective projects,” and share a “strong or weak collective identity between members of those networks” (pp. 282-283).

The queer social movement has quintessentially been categorized as an identity-based movement (Adam, Duyvendak, & Krouwel, 1998; Armstrong, 2002; Bernstein, 1997; Bernstein, 2002; Bernstein & Taylor, 2013; Chesters & Welsh, 2011; Engel, 2001; Gamson, 1995; Rimmerman, 2002). While collective identity has been challenged in the queer social movement, the movement has been successful as a result of allowing identity to remain fluid. As a result, a multitude of identities among queer groups and collectives has occurred (Melucci, 1989; Porta & Diani 2006). In describing collective identity, Diani and Bison (2004) stated:

Collective identity is a process strongly associated with recognition and the creation of connectedness. It brings with it a sense of common purpose and shared commitment to a cause, which enables single activists and organizations to regard themselves as inextricably linked to other actors, not necessarily identical but surely compatible, in a broader collective mobilization (p. 284)

Once known as the gay and lesbian movement, the movement has ebbed and flowed over time to be more inclusive and now incorporates multiple intersections of identities (*e.g.*, lesbians, gays, bisexual, trans, two-spirited, etc.). In fact, most of the ISMOs simply use terms like ‘Pride Community’ or the ‘Rainbow Community’ to incorporate those who are anything but heterosexuals and to establish a collective identity. Given that identity is fluid and that the queer social movements consists of diverse and heterogeneous individuals, the construction of collective identity has become an endlessly evolving task (Buechler, 1993; Gerlach & Hine, 1970).

In addition to identity, the focus on cultural development is also an important contributor to the success of the queer social movement. When focused on cultural production, the work of a social movement is never finished, as cultural creation is on ongoing phenomena that will ebb and flow to the demands and changes within society. It is thus by “examining the social processes by which people do culture [that we] can deepen our understanding of how social movements operate” (Roy, 2010, p. 95). Juris (2014) indicated, “it is through cultural performance that alternative meanings, values, and identities are produced, embodied, and publicly communicated within social movements” (p. 227). Cultural performances help to bridge the mind/body divide within social movements and elicit emotions in people, which helps form collective identities and brings people together to foster a sense of community (Juris, 2014). Swidler (1995) argued that culture can have significant influence “if it shapes not individuals’ beliefs and aspirations, but their knowledge of how others will interpret their actions” (p. 39). In addition, culture can positively impact a social movement even if individuals or groups within that movement are divided in their beliefs (Swidler, 1995).

The success of the queer movement is also due to the social capital manifested through a networked-leadership approach that has enabled ties with other like-minded SMOs, business, politicians, and institutions (Chaffe, 2014). SMOs with a greater stock of ties in their community are more likely to survive (Edwards & McCarthy, 2004). In highlighting the importance of “movement networking,” Diani and Bison (2004) indicated that network boundaries of social movements would necessarily be drawn and re-drawn over time. Social movement organizations

with more socially diverse memberships will have greater access to social networks, enabling them to develop broad social contact that facilitates greater networked access to resources (Edwards & McCarthy, 2004; Gould, 1991; Knoke & Wisely, 1990).

Society consists of a complex web of social relationships that are constantly shifting (Touraine, 1981). However, remaining connected with the community at large and especially other organizations that queers associate with facilitates a greater collective identity and sense of belonging to the queer social movement, contributing to the movement's success. Fuchs (2006) views social movements as open, complex, and dynamic systems that self-organize over time in relation to the environment that they operate in. He argued that "the notion of social self-organization allows describing social movements as dynamic systems that permanently react to society phenomena and problems by proactively producing and reproducing" themselves (p. 123). The notion of self-organization is relevant for understanding the changes in network ties that the queer social movement has experienced over time. While Pride organizations still hold a centralized role in the queer social movement, they have become more decentralized through time as new SMOs have joined the movement (Chaffe, 2014).

Act 3: Voice—Space—Agency: A Triad

In this section, I discuss the complicated notions of voice, space, and agency—all of which are necessary for members of a social movement to have when trying to establish a common cultural identity within a movement like the queer social movement. In fact, due to the multiple intersections of the queer community, Pride organizations have struggled to provide a satisfactory space and voice for certain sub-groups. As a result, there has been a number of anti-Pride events held across the country, including Alt-Pride in Victoria.

Before proceeding, I offer definitions of what is meant by voice, space, and agency. Dugan and Reger (2006) refer to voice as "a group's ability to articulate a united sense of purpose and direction" (p. 469). Extending on the work of Dugan and Reger (2006), I understand voice to be a sense of an individual or groups' belonging that is achieved through a sufficient level of representation and the ability to openly communicate their beliefs, goals, and concerns. My understanding of space is both metaphorical and physical. Not only does it imply a designated location where social movement members can congregate and be heard (Tilly, 2000), but also an environment that is transformative and invites people to be their authentic selves (Bhattacharya & Jairath, 2012). Agency is inherently linked to our embodied experience and perceptions of ourselves (Breel, 2015). In this article, I refer to agency as a level of critical consciousness

(“consciousness raising”) that individuals and/or groups possess and their sense of empowerment, whether collective or not, to act upon their consciousness (Chaffe, 2014).

Unlike most theatre performances, OUTstages provides a unique opportunity for queer artists and queer theatregoers, as it offers a space where queers are the majority rather than the minority. One performer at OUTstages indicated that they felt more true to their work and honest to their gay identity when performing. The same performer, however, also noted that because of this they are always a bit more nervous about performing to a queer audience, but indicated that it became easier with each experience. The OUTstages festivals have provided a voice to those who are typically absent in Pride organizations. That is, voices of activism, queers of colour, trans, and lesbians, all of which are not as present in other queer social movement organizations and particularly Pride organizations (Chaffe, 2014).

I will refrain from generalizing and classifying the performers as activists, even though several including Ivan Coyote and Catherine Hernandez self-describe as activists. One performer indicated that they see themselves as an actor first and that activism as secondary. However, most of the performances conveyed societal conflicts and provided messages for change. In this sense, the theatre shows served as indirect forms of activism through playful means, as other scholars have observed (Browne, 2008; Johnson, 2005; Lunberg, 2007; Shepard, 2009; Taylor & Rupp, 2005). Activism in the queer performances, whether intentional or not, stemmed from the performers’ ability to provoke people to see, think, and act differently (McCaughan, 2012).

The majority of the performances at OUTstages were autobiographical, autoethnographic, or based on real life events. Through telling their personal stories, the performers make sense of their lives and even audiences (Snyder-Young, 2011). Agency is thus gained through the act of the performers telling their stories. Autoethnographic and autobiographical performances offer performers “the power to reclaim and rename” their “voice and body privately in rehearsal and then publicly in performance” (Spry, 2003, p. 169). By offering them the space, OUTstages promotes growth of confidence and self-esteem and empowers queer artists. Further, by offering queer artists a voice and space, OUTstages provides artists with an experience that allows them to gain agency to be more authentic to their queer selves. While many of the performers likely have a substantial level of agency going into their performance, people are always constantly gaining agency. This is particularly true for the Cabaret performers, many of whom do not have the extensive experience that other theatre artists have. Prior to the start of their act at the OUTstages cabaret, a performer expressed their appreciation to Intrepid Theatre for providing them with a

space for their authentic queer voice. The same performer noted that OUTstages provided them with the platform to become more involved in the queer movement.

While no theatre performance will ever have the impact that the Stonewall riots or Toronto bathhouse raids had, they seek to empower and provide agency not only to the performer but also to the audience. It is difficult to ascertain the impact that the OUTstages performances have on the audiences' agency without surveying or interviewing them. However, it was evident that the performances offered moving experiences. During Ivan Coyote's *Tomboy Survival Guide*, audience members could be seen wiping tears away as Ivan told their autoethnographic story as a trans person. At times, I squirmed in my chair at the realization of how I have been complicit in the discrimination that trans people face. While Ivan did not outright make political demands on how society should change, they left the audience feeling responsible to forge a new future.³ Stewart Legere's *Let's Not Beat Each Other to Death*, which is about the murder of a Halifax gay rights activist Raymond Taavel who I had personally known, had a similar impact. As soon as you entered the fog-induced theatre space, death stood centre stage and it became a reminder of the violence that queers face daily and distilled in me a reminder of why us queers must continue to act up. Hopefully, these performances instilled in other audience members a similar desire, however, more research is required to confirm this.

Act 4: Informal Learning and Consciousness Raising

At the core of any successful social movement is learning. Social movement learning occurs typically in informal or incidental ways by people both inside and outside of the social movement (Hall & Clover, 2005; Foley, 1999). The learning that occurs within social movements facilitates shared meaning and a greater collective identity (Kilgore, 1999). In addition to learning, it is sometimes necessary to re-learn or remember. Learning or re-learning is a catalyst for dialogue and consciousness raising (Vieyra, 2015). Through the sharing of stories, whether based purely on real life events, containing only hints of truths or based on irony, the performances at OUTstages provided learning opportunities about queer life in general, ourselves and others, and challenged societal views. As Leonard and Kilkelly (2006) stated: "Sometimes the plays speak what everybody knows; sometimes they speak what nobody says [or knows]. Sometimes they open paths or unveil truths; sometimes they challenge the way things are done or understood" (p. 27). Below, I provide some examples of learning experiences that I encountered at OUTstages.

³ Note that I refrain from using pronouns and use the preferred terms of the performer.

Catherine Hernandez (*The Femme Playlist*) describes herself as an activist and is direct in her goal of using her stories to educate. She began her performance stating, “I live my life telling stories and a big part of my process is public incubation. The goal is to ensure that my work is accountable, that it doesn’t smell of bullshit and it doesn’t become public masturbation” (Hernandez, 2015). Hernandez used comic relief interrupted by emotional bits to tell serious stories about body shame, motherhood, masturbation, and her realities of living as a femme queer person of colour. In her final monologue she played her younger daughter who gives a speech at school on what it is like to be the offspring of a queer family. While the final monologue exhibited comic relief, it offered a glimpse at the difficulty children with queer parents face in today’s society.

While I am still haunted by the killing of the baby and the blood, and confused about the octopus, *Revenge of the Popinjay* was an uncomfortable, confrontational, yet abstractly beautiful performance that used irony to remind us of the social injustice and danger that queers have faced and to some extent continue to. The show began with a warning to take precautions because a serial killer was on the loose. However, the serial killer is targeting straights and so the actor encourages queers to be affectionate in public and straights to look and act as queer as possible so they are not killed. The irony reminds queer audience members and educates straight audience members of the lack of social acceptance that queers face when being affectionate in public.

As noted above, *Let’s Not Beat Each Other to Death* provided a history lesson on the tragic murder of a queer community leader in Halifax, Raymond Taavel. The show ended with a dance party, which functioned as an informal talkback and a healing ceremony. It gave others and me the opportunity to educate audience attendees on who Raymond was and the tragedy that occurred. Similarly, Ivan Coyote also held an informal talkback after their show. Talkbacks offer an additional opportunity to understand the context and offering additional learning opportunities. Ivan Coyote’s show, which offers a series of stories about being trans through song and spoken word, informally educates the audience on the issues trans people face. In fact, the show is described as providing the audience with “instructions for the dismantling of the gender stories we tell” (Coyote, 2015). In these ways, the learning and re-learning/remembering of queer historical events and from personal stories during OUTstages helps to nurture a collective queer identity and build solidarity among queers.

Act 5: Culture and Community: Complementing the Work of Pride Organizations

By launching OUTstages, Intrepid Theatre intentionally fused a network with the queer community in Victoria by forming a partnership with Victoria Pride. As noted above, the work of most Pride organizations in Canada today is centred on creating a sense of queer community through cultural celebrations. OUTstages complements the work of Pride by contributing to queer cultural production and through the building of community in ways that Pride organizations do not. OUTstages offers a more unique experience for performers and theatregoers than a typical single queer play can. The festival brings a group of queer performers and queer theatregoers together for an extended period of time. Theatregoers literally followed each other from one show to another on evenings when there was a double bill. Whether it was waiting in a line-up to enter a theatre or between shows, I met and interacted with people I had never met. Overall, the experience facilitated solidarity among the theatregoers and helped to build community by encouraging and supporting social engagement.

The stories told by performers at OUTstages promote queer culture—which is disappearing within the queer movement as it becomes mainstream (Harris, 1997; Roberts, 2000). In 2014, Healy, past artistic director of *Buddies in Bad Times*, indicated, “mainstream culture is a force that appropriates, depoliticizes, homogenizes, and neutralizes counter-culture” (para. 9). However, queer theatre continues to help maintain a queer culture and offers a resistance to the overlooking of the many issues that queers face that has occurred within the queer movement. According to Healy (2014),

Queer theatre is a resistance to [the disappearance of a queer culture]. It affirms that emancipation is not contingent on anyone adapting to the status quo and that a group’s worth should be measured on its own terms. Queer theatre is an empowering space for people to express and represent their own values and to enjoy their sense of worth without compromise. Queer theatre is a space for audiences to encounter the unfettered uniqueness and authenticity of those who might be different from them (para. 10)

OUTstages provides a space where issues within the queer community are expressed in emotional, moving, comical, thought-provoking, and beautiful forms. The continual development and promotion of a queer culture facilitates a collective identity among queers and creates a greater sense of a queer community (Juris, 2014; Swidler 1995).

Epilogue: The Final Bow

The continued success of the queer social movement in Canada largely stems from its cultural building and identity-based focus through celebrations of differences. In this paper, I have argued how Intrepid Theatre's OUTstages festival has contributed to the queer social movement. Particularly, OUTstages has provided a voice and space for queer artists and queer audiences, which facilitates agency. In addition, the festival fosters informal learning and consciousness raising while also calling for social change. Finally, OUTstages helps to build and promote a cultural and collective queer identity that complements the work of Pride organizations.

As each queer performer steps on stage at OUTstages, they are coming out—an act of activism on its own. While intentional or not, activism was inherent in many of the OUTstages performance. The power of the performances lie in their ability to assert pride in their queerness while also drawing attention to the social issues that they face. The shows performed at OUTstages, in one way or another, all challenged the assumptions made by society about rigid sexual and gender identities and the marginalization of non-conforming identities in our contemporary times.

Queer theatre festivals such as OUTstages have risen at a critical juncture within the queer social movement. The movement has witnessed an outcry from marginalized queers who believe that their voices are being silenced (*i.e.*, Trans, people of colour, and youth). This backlash has particularly impacted Pride organizations and has occurred largely as a result of the mainstreaming of Pride. The caution for queer theatres moving forward is that they must continue to avoid the hegemony of neoliberalism and homonormativity that some Pride organizations have succumbed to. While resources are limited, queer theatre festivals must continue to be inclusive of the fringe of the queer community in order to provide a voice for all intersections, otherwise splintering and contention is likely to occur as we have seen recently within the queer movement (e.g., Black Lives Matter and anti-Pride events). Forming partnerships with other queer social movement organizations like Pride organizations can help satisfy resource constraints. Partnerships will help queer theatre festivals achieve more socially diverse participants, which will lead to greater access to social networks and enabling them to develop broad social contacts that facilitates greater networked access to resources (*i.e.*, money, supporters, and new audiences). Ensuring accessibility to queer festivals must also remain a priority in order to ensure diverse participation. This can be accomplished by offering the marginalized members of the queer community free or discounted tickets. For instance, at the 2016 OUTstages festival, Intrepid Theatre partnered with a sponsor to

launch a youth outreach initiative that provided free tickets to shows at OUTstages to queer youth and allies.

I began this article with dialogue from Deveau's (2012) critically acclaimed play *My Funny Valentine*, which attempts to find humanity in the midst of a terrible hate crime. The play tells the devastatingly true story of 15-year-old California student Lawrence King who, after asking his classmate Brandon McInerney to be his valentine, was shot twice in the head by McInerney and died on February 14, 2008—Valentine's Day. Deveau explores how a tragedy such as a gay-bashing murder can infect the lives of people on the fringe of the story (Durras, 2013). Plays such as Deveau's and the other performances at OUTstages challenge the assumptions made by society about rigid sexual and gender identities and the marginalization of non-conforming identities in our contemporary times.

This article raises additional questions and requires a more in-depth analysis of the intention of queer performers and the impact such festivals have on audience members. While it may be the activist voice inside me speaking, I remain optimistic that festivals like OUTstages help advance the queer movement to resist isolation and to achieve a larger social justice community where queer individuals can live and where the next generation will flourish. My hope, as Sandahl (2003) has argued, is that the act of seeing the performances at OUTstages will remind the audience of the crucial social and political work that is still required today.

Given that this is a queer theatre conference, I offer dialogue from a performance of my own in the appendix. The spacing and use of periods serves an important visual. Specifically, the further the text is positioned to the right and the more periods there are, the more harsh and emotional the statement.

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Appendix: A Personal Performance

Amanda and Alan enter stage left and each stand facing a mirror. They change into ‘queer’ clothes and then sit in a chair with their backs to one another. Alan begins by saying “I am gay” and Amanda says, “thank you, who are you?” and the dialogue continues.

Thank you. Who are you?

I am a gay

(Thank you. Who are you?)

I am a homo

(.Thank you.. Who are you?)

I am stupid

(..Thank you... Who are you?)

I am a fruit

(.Thank you.. Who are you?)

I am a queen

(...Thank you.... Who are you?)

I am a big fairy

(....Thank you..... Who are you?)

I am not manly

(...Thank you.... Who are you?)

I am a pansy

(..Thank you... Who are you?)

I am a wimp

(...Thank you.... Who are you?)

I am a fag

(.....Thank you..... Who are you?)

I am a faggot

(.....Thank you..... Who are you?)

I am a cocksucker

(.....Thank you..... Who are you?)

I am going to die of AIDS

(.....Thank you..... Who are you?)

I am a flamer

(.....Thank you..... Who are you?)

I am destroying the institution of marriage

(...Thank you.... Who are you?)

I am dumb

(..Thank you... Who are you?)

I am immoral

(....Thank you..... Who are you?)

I am infected with a mental disease

(.....Thank you..... Who are you?)

I am a pedophile

(.....Thank you..... Who are you?)

I am going to go to hell

(.....Thank you..... Who are you?)

I am the **Other**

Amanda and Alan return to their mirrors and undress and re-dress into their regular clothes. They then stand face-to-face on a riser. Alan begins by saying “I am a brother” and Amanda says, “thank you, who are you?” and the dialogue continues.

Thank you. Who are you?

I am a brother

(Thank you. Who are you?)

I am a son

(Thank you. Who are you?)

I am a teacher

(Thank you. Who are you?)

I am an economist

(Thank you. Who are you?)

I am a student

(Thank you. Who are you?)

I am an activist

(Thank you. Who are you?)

I am passionate about creating thriving communities

(Thank you. Who are you?)

I am a runner

(Thank you. Who are you?)

I am agnostic

(..Thank you.. Who are you?)

I am stubborn

(..Thank you... Who are you?)

I am a bit lost

(...Thank you.... Who are you?)

I am suffering from anxiety

(.....Thank you..... Who are you?)

I am a person who experienced sexual abuse

(.....Thank you..... Who are you?)

I am overly passionate

(Thank you. Who are you?)

I am sexually attracted to men

(Thank you. Who are you?)

I am sometimes impulsive

(Thank you. Who are you?)

I am a good listener

(Thank you. Who are you?)

I am struggling to stay in balance

(...Thank you.... Who are you?)

I am a bit lonely

(....Thank you..... Who are you?)

I am on a journey

(Thank you. Who are you?)

I am **human**