

The Queer Future That Dared Not Be Imagined: Ageing in 'Post-AIDS' Theatre

Dirk Gindt, Ph.D.

Associate Professor, Department of Culture and Aesthetics, Stockholm University

dirk.gindt@teater.su.se

'I'm still after queer theory. This might mean: even while queer theory has been pronounced over (can I get a refund?), *I'm* embarrassingly here.'¹ It is with this provocative statement that Elizabeth Freeman introduces the seminal issue of *South Atlantic Quarterly* on temporalities, published in 2007. Freeman's passionate defense of the relevance of queer theory in the twenty-first century resonates strongly with me. Like many of us working in the field of queer studies or, more precisely, queer theatre studies, I often wonder: What are queer scholars, artists and activists to do in a world that seems to be over queer as if it were a cast-off, a victim of a fashion trend, and proclaims itself to be post-feminist, post-queer, post-sex, post-closet and, yes, even post-AIDS? Now that politics and law have granted us same-sex marriage legislation in limited parts of the world, television offers us increased, if narrow, cultural representations of gay men (and, to a significantly lesser extent, lesbians and trans* people) and protease inhibitors keep the once lethal HIV virus in check, are we to abandon queer cultural and political criticism? And what about community politics, activism and performance? The gradual disappearance of queer villages as a result of gentrification and corporatization, coupled with internet dating and geo-social networking apps might make it seem that the notion of community has become a fossil of the twentieth century that has surrendered and given way to the presumably liberated, individualised and often gay male-identified subject and consumer. Such views, however, are culturally short-sighted and ignore the all too frequent news about bullied queer teens who commit suicide, the continued stigmatization of HIV, the skewed immigration policies that queer refugees face in many countries as well as old and new forms of misogyny, homophobia and transphobia.

Theatre, be it as an artistic practice, a social forum or an academic discipline, has always played a significant role in the formation and articulation of queer communities, identities and politics. As performance artist Tim Miller and theatre scholar David Román pointed out in 1995, queer communities are heterogeneous and have different needs. Theatre can provide a safe space, facilitate social contacts, offer comfort and cultural representations

outside of the mainstream as much as it might challenge our assumptions and invite us to broaden our minds.²

My own research focuses on the myriad intersections of HIV/AIDS, shame and stigma, and queer identities and sexualities in theatre and performance, taking into consideration both historical perspectives and contemporary challenges, including the criminalization of HIV non-disclosure, cultures of consensual unprotected sex and deliberate HIV transmission, the financial interests of both the pharmaceutical and the cultural industries, to name but a few. One of these challenges is posed by the question of ageing in the era of protease inhibitors for a community and a generation of urban gay men that have long been confronted with the brutal reality of dying, often at a young age. How do gay men, who have lived through and survived the AIDS crisis in the 1980s and early to mid-1990s, address their own ageing process and the prospect of death that is not caused by AIDS-related illnesses? To address this question this essay analyses selected examples from three seminal playwrights who have each in their own way left a decisive mark on gay male and queer theatre in Canada: Michel Tremblay, Brad Fraser and Sky Gilbert.³ All three, to varying degrees, have written about the HIV/AIDS crisis. In recent stage works, each addresses the question of ageing, including the death of a parent, cancer, Alzheimer's, fears of abandonment, and, not least, the ongoing insidious mechanisms of homophobia and misogyny that also affect elderly queers.

From the outset I wish to emphasise that I do not pretend to engage in a universalizing discussion or offer definitive answers about queer people and ageing. What I am specifically interested in here is to analyse some recent trends in plays published and staged by a generation of gay male playwrights who address questions of ageing in a 'post-AIDS' era—a prospect that many did not even dare to imagine a couple of decades ago. My premise is based on the underlying assumption that the present moment marks the first time in theatre history that gay playwrights are able to openly write about the process of ageing *as* gay men.

The three plays under review here are: *L'Oratorio de Noël* by Michel Tremblay; *True Love Lies* by Brad Fraser; and *A Few Brittle Leaves* by Sky Gilbert. My methodological approach is influenced by the notion of queer temporalities. As Judith Jack Halberstam argues, '[q]ueer time perhaps emerges most spectacularly, at the end of the twentieth century, from within

those gay communities whose horizons of possibility have been severely diminished by the AIDS epidemic'.⁴ It was in a time of crisis and urgency that new understandings of and relations to time manifested themselves for queers. On the one hand, queer lives were filled with despair and expectations of lacking a future; on the other, queer temporalities also had the potential to offer new forms of hope and the option of 'life unscripted by the conventions of family, inheritance, and child rearing'.⁵ In other words, queer temporalities can propose a non-normative way of organizing not only sexuality, but also the attempt to try and stand outside of re/productive capitalism.

AIDS has not only negatively affected the prospect of a future for queer and gay communities, but also severely disrupted a sense of multi-generational legacy and community.⁶ It is against this particular background that I analyse the three plays in question, all of which capture what some might call a 'post-AIDS' moment—an absurdity that is highlighted by my use of cynical quotation marks. As I argued above, the medical, political and cultural challenges posed by HIV/AIDS are far from resolved, as theatre artists and activists all over the world continue to show.⁷ None of the plays are about HIV/AIDS, but I believe it is vital to contextualise them as capturing a 'post-AIDS' moment to truly understand their importance for contemporary gay and queer theatre in Canada and the ways in which the traumas of the past still exert their influence on the present.

Ageing as gay men

Queer people ageing is a burgeoning field of study whose focus is often directed towards the needs of (and, too frequently, lack of access to) social and health services of elderly persons who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans* or intersex. Areas of this sociologically informed research comprise: diseases including, but not limited to HIV/AIDS; addictions and substance abuse; the psychological consequences of ageing; hate crimes and violence; socio-economic factors; discrimination by health care workers; coming-out processes; and, not least, the intersection of racialised, sexualised and economically marginalised social positions and the consequences of these for senior queer people.⁸

In 2014, the *Journal of Homosexuality* devoted a special issue to the question of ageing within LGBT communities. In their introduction, the guest editors attempt an ambitious survey on available studies on queer people and ageing. They also debate a number of challenges that are particular for queer people growing older, amongst them the lack of

caregiving and support networks, reduced income levels and poorer health in comparison with straight populations, HIV-related illnesses, discrimination based on homo- and transphobia and, not least, a life-long experience of stigmatization. This leads the editors to conclude that '[c]learly, there are physical and psychological conditions that distinguish LGBT aging; many of these circumstances that give rise to these physical conditions may be rooted in the experiences of stigma, sadly common in the lives of LGBT persons'.⁹

Gerontologist Brian de Vries and sexuality studies scholar Gil Herdt note to what extent the available research is often focused on gay men in particular, partially due to an overemphasis on men in the social sciences and partially due to the general overrepresentation of gay men's concerns in queer communities. However, they also draw attention to the fact that, until recently, the very idea of gay men and ageing seemed unintelligible:

Not long ago these two terms [ageing and gay] were thought to be at best incongruous and at worst incompatible. The incongruity derived from ageist notions of homosexual culture; the incompatibility derived from linking AIDS with homosexuality, in which the presence of the disease precluded a future.¹⁰

It is exactly against this background that this paper seeks to make an intervention. In short, I ask: How do gay men age? How do they go through various stages of their life? And, how is this represented on stage? These are questions that previously would have been more or less unthinkable. We live in a period, when for the first time ever, openly gay playwrights can write about the process of ageing.¹¹ Ever since the invention of the homosexual in the second half of the nineteenth century, a number of historical disasters have either prevented queers from ageing or from dealing with the experience of ageing in cultural representation.¹²

Michel Tremblay: *L'Oratorio de Noël*

Whilst being one of the first openly gay authors to address queer issues, not least in his acclaimed play *Hosanna* (1973),¹³ Tremblay hesitated a long time before he addressed HIV and AIDS. In 1993, he published the novel *Le Cœur éclaté*, in which Jean-Marc (a recurring character in Tremblay's *oeuvre*) escapes from Montréal to Key West to come to terms with his long-time partner Luc's death from AIDS. Theatre audiences had to wait until 1996,

when the play *Messe solennelle pour une pleine lune d'été* opened. Amongst its characters was an elderly gay couple trying to cope with one of them dying of AIDS-related causes. Years later, Tremblay explained in an interview with *The Lesbian and Gay Review Worldwide* why he had been initially reluctant to write about the epidemic:

It took until 1992. But I now have the proof that I was right. I didn't want to talk about AIDS until it was clearer. We didn't know enough about it then to be objective. I feel like we need time to reflect on things before writing about them. When you look at a play like *The Normal Heart* today, the first act is okay, but the second act—well, I don't think much of it. When they get married before he dies, I mean, really, that's very bad theatre. Everybody cries, but it's horrible theatre. I was too scared about writing about AIDS. You can't write out of fear.¹⁴

In 2012, Tremblay, who has survived a brain tumour and throat cancer, addressed the topic of Alzheimer's disease, which has become an increasingly urgent health concern for the baby boomer population. Interestingly, he made frequent comparisons between Alzheimer's and AIDS. To the *Montreal Gazette*, he explained: 'It's like AIDS 20 years ago. After 10 years, everybody knew somebody who died. It's the same with Alzheimer's now.'¹⁵ A similar comparison between AIDS in the 1980s and 1990s and Alzheimer in the twenty-first century was repeated in *La Presse*, where Tremblay pointed out the irony that his protagonist Noël is a medical doctor:

Noël est aux prises avec une maladie intraitable, qui peut durer longtemps et dont on connaît peu de choses [...]. Ça rappelle notre impuissance devant le sida au début des années 80, alors qu'on n'avait pas d'information sur la maladie. J'ai choisi exprès un personnage de médecin qui connaît les symptômes de l'alzheimer, qui sait que la maladie va le priver, par à-coups, du contrôle de ses émotions, de son corps.¹⁶

It needs to be highlighted, however, that Tremblay's comparison between Alzheimer's disease and HIV/AIDS is slightly naïve. Alzheimer's is not an infectious disease that can be transmitted via sexual contacts. Furthermore, it does not have the same stigma attached to it that HIV/AIDS continues to have.

The first production of *L'Oratorio de Noël* was directed by Serge Denoncourt, who lost his mother to Alzheimer's, and opened on 5 February 2012 at the Théâtre Jean Duceppe in Montréal. The title of the play is inspired by Johann Sebastian Bach's *Weihnachtsoratorium* (1734), which is also played as the curtain opens. However, while Bach's oratorio celebrates the birth of Christ, the main character in Tremblay's play is a distinguished brain surgeon called Noël who has developed Alzheimer and who is now lying in a private hospital room, waiting to die. Without any delay, he addresses the audience to inform it of his medical condition:

Vous avez compris que chuis atteint de la maudite maladie au nom si laid et qui fait encore plus peur que le cancer parce qu'on sait que ça peut durer longtemps, des années, que ça gruge lentement, qu'on a amplement le temps de s'en rendre compte, parce que même si on perd des grands morceaux, on reste assez conscient pour sentir le mal se développer.¹⁷

L'Oratorio de Noël is thus not simple a play about ageing, it is a play about dying. As a doctor, Noël knows exactly what awaits him, including the loss of memory, the loss of control over bodily functions and the eventual loss of dignity. Tremblay avoids any melodrama, however, and evokes little compassion for his protagonist who, as we learn over the course of the play, was a very selfish man. Noël receives visits from three family members: his estranged former wife Jacqueline, who divorced him twenty years ago because of his indifference to her and because of his multiple extra-marital affairs; his daughter Isabelle, a successful painter whose talent Noël refuses to acknowledge, let alone compliment; and his son Jean-Sébastien, who has followed in his father's footsteps even though Noël, out of sheer envy of his son's skills, questions his professional dedication and qualifications.

What first seems like a deceptively simple plot soon reveals itself to be driven by a complex dramaturgy. Apart from these actual visits, Noël's brain conjures two additional, younger versions of each family member. Each character is thus tripled—a physical manifestation of the chaos in Noël's deteriorating brain, all of which results in a compelling dramaturgy that continuously merges realistic representation with embodied memories and hallucinations. Eschewing both melodramatic pathos and the linear logics of realistic conventions,

Tremblay conjures a cacophony of voices and characters that result in a temporal dissonance and represent what Freeman calls 'the pull of the past on the present',¹⁸ a concept I will discuss in more detail below.

This elasticity of time is one of the symptoms of Alzheimer's disease as many patients find themselves stuck in a temporal vortex that makes it difficult to separate past events from the present. Noël is, however, painfully aware of how the disease manifests itself and how it progresses. He knows and understands that his visitors are memories turned into flesh, but he can no longer separate these visitors from the past or from the real family members in the present. In some ways, *L'Oratorio de Noël* is reminiscent of the strategy of ghosting that Canadian playwrights frequently used as a means of resistance to grant the queer subject a voice and presence even after their death from AIDS.¹⁹ In Tremblay's play, however, the family members are vengeful ghosts who have come to break down Noël's spirit by confronting him with the bitter reality of his failures. Part *A Christmas Carol* and part *Long Day's Journey into Night*, the triumvirate of characters appear out of nowhere and replay scenes from the past as a way to lay blame on Noël for his failures as a husband, father and human being. In the process, accusations are repeated over and over again—'C'est pas parce que les choses ont été exprimées une fois qu'elles sont réglées!' (64), as the youngest version of Jacqueline snaps.

It remains ambiguous to what extent the nine visitors are the manifestations of the progressing neurodegenerative disease or if they are indeed a product of Noël's guilty conscience. The oldest version of Jean-Sébastien, for example, messes with his father's mind by making him doubt whether he is really present or not:

Et c'est-tu vraiment moi qui te parle, chuis-tu vraiment là, à côté de toi, en train de te faire des reproches, de te répéter les mêmes maudites affaires, de te répéter les mêmes maudites affaires, de te répéter les mêmes maudites affaires, ou, encore une fois, est-ce que c'est des reproches que tu te fais à toi-même avant de perdre complètement la tête, avant que ton esprit, ta conscience te quittent, avant que ton cerveau oublie de t'informer qu'y faudrait que tu respires si tu veux survivre? (73)

Various temporal layers clash and conflate throughout the play. The 15-year old version of Jean-Sébastien volunteers to ask the nurses for a stronger dose of sleeping pills in case the ones that Noël is currently taking are not working, while his 20-year old wife talks about her second husband whom she will not meet for another two decades. The dramatic irony is that, for most of his life, Noël was so busy with his career that he used to block out and ignore his family as soon as anyone tried to talk to him—‘tomber dans la lune’ (52), as his son describes the habit. Now, Noël literally finds himself falling into a black hole every time he has an absence or lapse of memory: ‘Je voudrais bien prétendre que je m’absente, mais c’est faux. Je tombe. Dans un trou’ (11).

There are no queer characters in *L’Oratorio de Noël*. However, I would claim it is a queer play. The queer project, after all, is not just about inserting queers into dominant narratives, but also about critically dissecting heteronormativity. *L’Oratorio de Noël* is a play depicting the dissolution of the heterosexual nuclear family and mercilessly reveals the disappointments, emotional distances, lies, hypocrisies and false expectations attached to it. It also reveals the failure of heterosexual masculinity: the celebrated brain surgeon who claims to live on in the memory of the patients whose lives he saved can no longer control the workings of his own brain; the patriarch who ruthlessly imposed his will on his wife and children can no longer control his family members who now seem to multiply. As the past and present merge, Noël cannot maintain any rational control over temporalities that elude him more and more until there is literally ‘no future’ for the straight family man. On the threshold of dying, Noël is confronted with the collapse of what Freeman identifies as chrononormativity and ‘the use of time to organize individual human bodies toward maximum productivity’.²⁰ For Freeman, chrononormativity is the joint result of the breakthrough of industrial capitalism and the birth of the sexually deviant, both of which emerge in the second half of the nineteenth century. It is an internalised way of organising time that follows the logics and demands of capitalism as well as the narrow path of heteronormativity. Freeman emphasises that chrononormativity and chronobiopolitics ‘extends beyond individual anatomies to encompass the management of entire populations’, as various state apparatuses conspire to implement and naturalise ‘teleological schemes of events or strategies for living such as marriage, accumulation of health and wealth for the future, reproduction, childrearing, and death and its attendant rituals’.²¹

In a cruel twist of fate, the white patriarch sees the very chrononormativity on which he built his entire life fall apart as his neurological functions fail him. In a last attempt to impose some form control over his actions, he swallows a fatal dose of sleeping pills. The other characters, whether real or imagined, withdraw one by one until Noël finds himself all alone in the hospital bed, crying for help while an absent choir sings a long-drawn out 'Amen' (80).

Brad Fraser: *True Love Lies*

In a column written for *Daily Xtra* in 2013, Brad Fraser recalls the many friends and acquaintances he saw die during the worst years of the AIDS crisis, 'a decade of abject fear, crippling paranoia and functional despair', which only came to a temporary halt with the introduction of new treatments. He adds:

Then people I knew started to die of cancer and heart ailments at an alarming rate. It was happening with my queer friends but not at the same levels it seemed to be happening with my straight friends. Both communities were decimated, but it seemed the theatre world, with its mingling of all types, was the hardest hit of all. Now it's rare for a month to go by without some person I'm in some way connected to shuffling off this mortal coil — which I suppose is natural at middle-age.²²

The physiological and psychological trials of middle-age have become a central concern for Fraser in a number of recent plays. *Five @ Fifty* (2011), specifically written for female actors for whom interesting parts become fewer and fewer as they age, is a play about a group of middle-aged women staging an intervention for their alcoholic friend and her co-dependent lesbian lover. With his 2009 play *True Love Lies*, Fraser once again resurrected the character of David McMillan who is a central character in his popular and critical breakthrough *Unidentified Human Remains and the True Nature of Love* (1989). In that play, AIDS only lurks as a dangerous shadow whose danger David does not fully realise yet, but the impact of the epidemic on queer communities is a central concern in the acclaimed *Poor Super Man* (1994) and its follow-up *Martin Yesterday* (1998). Over the years, David has become a 'literary doppelganger' of the playwright:

When I write a David McMillan play it's because something has happened in my life that I want to write about. ... In *Poor Super Man* he's about to turn 30, wanting a partner and to settle down, which totally reflected my feelings as well at the time. Now he's 50, dealing with aging and how hard it is.²³

Directed by Fraser's frequent collaborator Braham Murray, *True Love Lies* opened on 2 February 2009 at the Royal Exchange Theatre in Manchester, where it played for three weeks. Later that year, Fraser directed the Canadian opening at the Factory Theatre in Toronto.²⁴ After having been away for two decades, David returns to Edmonton and opens a restaurant. One of the persons applying for the job as a waiter is a young woman called Madison who, it turns out, is the daughter of David's former boyfriend Kane (who was a character in *Love and Human Remains*). David being back in town brings the past into the present as the various characters find themselves wondering about what might have been and start imagining alternative temporalities. Madison and her brother Royce find out that their father's rich parents disowned their son because he was in a relationship with another man; David sleeps with Madison who reminds him of Kane; Kane's wife Carolyn at first tries to convince everybody that the relationship between her husband and David 'wasn't real' before she eventually succumbs to her jealous suspicions and confronts the restaurateur to find out the truth about his feelings.²⁵

In spite of the distress it causes him, Kane is indeed still attracted to David, but also worries what his children will think of him now that they have found out about his past. Open-minded Madison states that identity labels no longer matter — '[i]t's all just sex' (73) — leading *The Guardian* to state that Fraser's play was 'notable for the depiction of a post-AIDS generation for whom sexuality has become an increasingly fluid concept'.²⁶ This naïve statement is, however, brutally contradicted by Royce's violent homophobia that manifests itself when he found out that his father was 'a fudgepacker' (11).

While Kane and Carolyn are initially jealous of how well David seems to be ageing and state that he 'look[s] awfully good for fifty' (29), David later confesses that he not only follows a strict and boring diet and regular visits to the gym, but he has also had cosmetic surgery including major tooth work, a face lift, liposuction as well as hair implants to hide the fact that he was going bald. 'Because I don't want to be discarded. I don't want to be not sexy. Not viable. Not yet' (109). He also complains about the harsh reality in gay bars: 'Over forty

and you're invisible' (46). For David, his own ageing body in a world and particular social environment that does not allow for ageing causes a problem. In a brief, yet telling comment, he also points out some harsh realities of contemporary urban gay communities and how his social life and friendship networks have affected by the intersecting problems of HIV/AIDS and drug cultures: 'Between substance abuse and AIDS they're all pretty much drunk, crazy or dead' (36).²⁷

Although David's own issues with ageing are briefly addressed, his character remains in the background and acts as a catalyst that sets a number of developments in motion that will lead to the collapse of the already fragile nuclear family. When Kane's wife Carolyn suspects and eventually uncovers that her husband still slept with David while she was pregnant with their first child, she realises that she feels trapped in her marriage and initiates a separation. While there remains a lot of love between the couple, *True Love Lies* is another example of how chrononormativity is disrupted, this time by complex feelings and desires that are at odds with the expectations placed on heterosexual marriage.

Sky Gilbert: *A Few Brittle Leaves*

AIDS has been a leitmotif that runs throughout Sky Gilbert's entire dramatic and literary oeuvre, including plays such as *Drag Queens on Trial* (1985), *The Bewitching of Max Gunter* (unpub., 2001), *I Have AIDS!* (2009), *Hamilton Bus Stop* (unpub., 2010), in addition to the novel *I am Casper Klotz* (2001), to name only a few examples. Like his contemporaries Tremblay and Fraser, Gilbert has, in recent years, increasingly addressed the challenges of his own ageing process. One example includes *The Mommiad*, a monologue that addresses the loss of his mother and was delivered by his drag alter-ego Jane at a special reading organised at Buddies in Bad Times Theatre in Toronto in 2012.²⁸ The following year, Gilbert directed and performed in his meta-theatrical play *To Myself at 28*, an extended dialogue between Gilbert and a younger version of himself. In the play, the artist takes stock of professional and personal failures and explains the physiological changes caused by the ageing process, including the agonizing pain caused by the deterioration of his knees. He also tries to warn his younger self, who has just come out as a gay man, of the various forms of homophobia he will encounter throughout his life.

As I have argued elsewhere, Gilbert often works against two of the dominant and irreconcilable modes of representing gay male existence in popular culture: on the one

hand, the well-adapted homonormative couple or, on the other, the hedonistic person who indulges in drug culture and unprotected sex. To oppose these two arguably real, but ultimately very limited ways of representing gay men, Gilbert creates dramatic characters that revel in and celebrate their own excessive performances of gender and sexuality.²⁹

In a letter to the editor published in the *Globe and Mail* in 2009, Gilbert bemoans the gentrification of previously gay neighbourhoods, the increased representation of desexualised and bourgeois gay couples in popular culture, the various forms of homophobia manifested in both mainstream society and gay communities and the rise of unsafe sex practices and hard-core drugs like crystal meth. At the end of the letter, he vows to leave gay culture behind:

Here's my own personal solution. I reject the gay world. I have a new identity: I'm an ESP (pronounced ESPIE). That means effeminate sexual person. I'm committed to things that are no longer gay: alternative sexual and romantic relationships (promiscuity) and gender play (I prefer my women to act like men and my men to act like women). Don't worry, you can be a butch woman and still be an ESPIE—all you have to do is commit to gender-inappropriate behaviour of any kind and enjoy sex for pleasure alone (please don't do it—yawn—just to beget children).³⁰

The ESP, as suggested by Gilbert, represents a clever update of Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's seminal definition of queer as 'the open mesh of possibilities, gaps, overlaps, dissonances and resonances, lapses and excesses of meaning when the constituent elements of anyone's gender, of anyone's sexuality aren't made (or can't be made) to signify monolithically'.³¹ The ESP constitutes an unintelligible gender that not only falls outside the narrow binary of heteronormative femininity and masculinity, but also rejects the logics of re/productive capitalism and refuses to become a 'good' and assimilated citizen. Equally important, the ESP is a sexually active person and opposes the increasingly desexualizing mechanisms of some parts of gay and culture (and queer theory, according to Leo Bersani).³²

While there is no shortage of gender deviant characters in Gilbert's oeuvre, the ESP made their first appearance in the (unpublished) play *A Few Brittle Leaves*, which ran at Buddies in Bad Times Theatre from 24 April to 5 May 2013, directed by the playwright himself. *A Few Brittle Leaves* is heavily influenced by British comedy and not only are there traces of

Noël Coward, Oscar Wilde and Joe Orton—all of whom have significantly influenced Gilbert's theatre—but also the social comedies by British novelist Barbara Pym and, as Gilbert explains, her “excellent women” – the kind of women who go to church, have tea, frequent jumble sales and never get married’.³³ The two main characters are a pair of unmarried sisters who live in a small village called Upsydownshire, a name seemingly taken straight out of *Alice in Wonderland*. Viola Pie is trying to gracefully settle into middle-age by having little expectations on real life, instead preferring the imaginative landscapes of her favourite literature and poetry.³⁴ Significantly less complacent and more outrageous is her sister Penelope aka Penny, who refuses to be called a ‘spinster’ and has not yet given up hope of one day finding a suitable husband.³⁵ Whereas Tremblay and Fraser direct their attention to the dynamics and eventual falling apart of the heterosexual nuclear family in the plays discussed in the previous sections, Gilbert's builds on a non-normative premise from the start.

The quiet and regular life of the sisters is interrupted by the almost simultaneous visit of their niece Nora, an aspiring writer, and the arrival of the new town vicar, Mr Gupta. Penny immediately develops an interest in the handsome vicar (who is half her age), while Viola tries to encourage Nora (who is not interested) to flirt with him. Reverend Gupta, it turns out, is gay, but this revelation comes too late for Penny who makes an utter fool of herself when her sister invites the vicar for dinner. Not only has she, as soon as she heard rumours about a new and handsome vicar, coloured her hair orange and plucked and reshaped her eyebrows in a way that make her look like a clown, she now also tries to impress Reverend Gupta by wearing a sari and performing her own bizarre version of an Indian dance. Her tongue loosened by a few drinks and her temper fuelled by jealousy of her younger niece, she blatantly exoticises and insults the vicar. During their first meeting, she had already expressed her concerns that he would ask his Anglican parish to ‘be partaking in any rituals involving the worship of the bovine’ (29). At the unfortunate dinner party, she spells her concerns out in an unmistakable way and accuses him of planning ‘TO COMMIT ATROCITIES WITH A COW ON THE SACRED ALTAR OF OUR CHURCH’ (45, caps in original).

A Few Brittle Leaves shows to what extent queer persons of colour are subjected to both heterosexism and racism, often in a shockingly casual way and on a daily basis. Rather than wooing the audience and asking for their approval, Penny is palpably ignorant and hideously racist as becomes apparent in her interactions with the vicar. Through this

character, Gilbert lays bare false assumptions that a queer identity would be incompatible with racism. Moreover, it is also worth pointing out almost every Gilbert play has a jaw-dropping moment that has the potential to make audiences feel extreme discomfort (and confrontation with their own prejudices), while also posing a significant challenge for actors by encouraging them to take creative risks.³⁶

What gives the play an additional dimension is that the two sisters are performed by male actors. At *Buddies in Bad Times* Theatre, Gavin Crawford played the part of Viola and Ed Roy that of Penny. Crawford and Roy were instructed by Gilbert to approach the task neither as drag queens nor as female impersonators, but as two gay men playing two middle-aged women. In an interview to promote the play, Gilbert explained to *Daily Xtra*: 'I call it Chekhov in drag. ... But the actors are playing women. ... I have cast this play with fine actors, and they will be playing women, with real emotions, that I hope will move the audience.'³⁷ In the same article, Crawford, who later won a Dora Mavor Moore Award for best male performance for his portrayal, elaborated on his approach to the character: 'It isn't a send-up or a parody of these women ... I approach characters the same way, male or female: what's the core of this person?'³⁸ Roy added: 'The consumer society has us all by the short [sic] and curlies, creating the illusion that we'll all be young forever. It's a distorted view of life that causes a lot of unhappiness for people.'³⁹

In a society that continues to discriminate against women on a daily basis, ageism and body-shaming undoubtedly hits women harder than men. There are fewer roles for ageing women in theatre or popular culture, a concern also voiced by Fraser in the foreword to his play *Five @ Fifty*.⁴⁰ However, as David in Fraser's *True Love Lies* makes painfully clear, large segments of gay communities are equally obsessed with youth culture. Gilbert articulates a similar concern, when he says: 'How do you dress when you are older? How do you act? What if you want to show some flesh or wear trendy clothes? Is that over? What if you want to go dancing, get drunk and dance up a storm—should you do that if you are old?'⁴¹ This very conflict is expressed in *A Few Brittle Leaves*. Viola's entire wardrobe consists of various shades of pastel colours which she believes are suitable for a woman of her age, whereas Penny remains defiant and proudly declares: '[Y]ou're jealous of me because I dare to die my hair in a bold colour. I dare, in fact, to try and put a little colour in my life' (17).

A Few Brittle Leaves is a study of what happens when age and gender dissidence collide and intersect. Gilbert grants a voice and presence to the culturally unintelligible figure of the effeminate ageing gay man, thereby opening up a new direction in queer drama. Male effeminacy, David Halperin argues, must not be conflated with male homosexuality, but needs to be understood as a particular gender: '[E]ffeminacy deserves to be treated independently because it was for a long time defined as a symptom of an excess of what we would call *heterosexual* as well as homosexual desire. It is therefore a category unto itself'.⁴² While it has often been culturally and historically conflated with homosexuality, male effeminacy designates a gender performance that deviates from heteronormative or hegemonic masculinity. Halperin further notes the stigmatization of male femininity, equally motivated by misogyny and (internalised) homophobia, and the concrete risks of abuse and discrimination that effeminate gays risk:

Any gay man who forsakes the ranks of the privileged gender and the desired gender style, who lowers himself to the undignified, abject status of the effeminate, the fairy, the poof, the bitch, the sissy, the flaming queen, incurs the easy ridicule and cheap contempt of both the straight world and the gay world [...].⁴³

Considering the misogynist traditions omnipresent in western theatre history and historiography, men playing women on stage is not unproblematic.⁴⁴ When Fraser wrote *Five @ Fifty*, he reached out to female friends and acquaintances and even started a Facebook account to hear about women's experiences of middle-age. In the foreword to the published play, he expresses some concerns: 'Being a gay man has given me a rapport with many women that allows for a sometimes shocking honesty, but that rapport also brings the danger of creating characters who are female but just gay-influenced enough to become slightly more convincing drag queens.'⁴⁵ The claim that gay authors can only write female characters as drag queens that are thinly disguised homosexual men goes back to the post-WWII era when playwrights like Tennessee Williams and Edward Albee found themselves accused by critics and scholars of doing so. In an infamous review entitled 'Homosexual Drama and Its Disguises' (1966), *New York Times* critic Stanley Kauffman once claimed that Williams and his colleagues disguised decadent homosexuals as heterosexual characters and thereby gave heterosexuality (including the sacred institution of marriage) a bad name. Moreover, he attacked them for what he perceived as 'viciousness towards women, the lurid violence . . . [and] the transvestite sexual exhibitionism' they displayed in their plays.⁴⁶

Although such claims have since been successfully deconstructed, male drag continues to be perceived as an expression of misogyny by some scholars and critics.⁴⁷ Keeping these concerns in mind, it is important however to note that Gilbert is not a gender-essentialist and has declared himself a feminist.⁴⁸ The complexity and appeal of *A Few Brittle Leaves* lies in the fact that it presents an intersectional analysis of multiple forms of marginalisation that stretch over age, race, gender and sexuality.

Throughout the play, Penny alludes to a dark secret that Viola holds, which is eventually revealed in a melodramatic fashion, not unlike the seminal *Drag Queens on Trial*. After Reverend Gupta's dramatic exit, Viola has a couple of drinks herself and reveals that she was not always a spinster. As a young woman, she was stuck in a loveless marriage with a soldier who eventually left her. Now, for the first time, she confesses that she 'was just a little bit...happy' (49) when her husband left. The reason that Viola has always been afraid to admit this feeling of relief to anyone is '[b]ecause [...] women aren't supposed to like being alone' (50). In a gender order that defines women in relation to men, the spinster, like the ESP, falls outside of the confines of heteronormativity and becomes culturally and sexually unintelligible. When Viola keeps emphasising that 'we have no way to think about women who want to be alone' (51), even her previously supportive niece Nora is getting uncomfortable and makes up an excuse to go to bed.

The two spinster ESPs in the play are a queer mixture of Virginia Woolf's early feminist demands as represented by Viola's desire to have a space of her own to read her beloved literature, lesbian feminism inspired by Adrienne Rich and Monique Wittig's observations of women's enforced heterosexuality and Butlerian queer performativity. Moreover, as previously mentioned, time seems to stand still in Upsydownshire, stuck between the country life captured in a George Eliot novel, introducing the ageing belle of a Tennessee Williams play and the turns and twists of the BBC sitcom *Keeping up Appearances*.

In her discussion of performance artist Sharon Hayes, Freeman identifies 'the power of anachronism to unsituate viewers from the present tense they think they know, and to illuminate or even prophetically ignite possible futures in light of powerful historical moments' (61). Viola as the queer person ageing outside of marriage or a relationship and Penny as the queer person ageing while trying to look and act young and appealing are both out of synch with the demands of chrononormativity. With these deliberate anachronisms,

Gilbert asks questions about the state of contemporary sexual politics and queer identities. Freeman's influential notion of "'temporal drag,' with all the associations that the word 'drag' has with retrogression, delay, and the pull of the past on the present' is helpful here.⁴⁹ Penny and Viola constitute a form of 'temporal drag' with all the implications of the present dragging along with it unresolved issues from the past. Their concerns of ageing or more precisely ageing alone show the many unresolved questions for women after decades of feminist scholarship and activism. At the same time, they are neither women nor drag queens, but ESPs. As such, they represent an intriguing form of queer performativity with potential promises for the future. The ESP spinster has nothing in common with the buffed-up poster boys on Pride floats or the suburban gay couple adopting a baby. They stand in opposition to re/productive capitalism, outside of heteronormative family structures and outside of chrononormativity with its clear stations of marriage-procreation-death-inheritance.

Like most of Gilbert's dramatic characters, Penny and Viola represent a promise for a queer future as articulated by Bersani's famous call for '*a massive redefining of relationality*'.⁵⁰ Not only do they, as spinster ESPs, represent a potentially exciting new form of gender performativity, but their emotional bond might also hint at a revived form of solidarity between various queer constituencies (without losing awareness of unresolved racist patterns and feminist concerns). Penny's last line, spoken after Reverend Gupta and Nora have left the two sisters, is not an admission of defeat, but rather a liberating, prophetically and optimistically queer statement: 'When somebody leaves before dinner I suppose that we well—technically speaking, we have been deserted—but in reality, there's simply more dinner for you and for me' (54).

Conclusion

to be saved for discussion at the symposium...

¹ Elizabeth Freeman, 'Still After', *South Atlantic Quarterly* 106.3 (2007): 495-500, at 495; emphasis in original.

² Tim Miller & David Román, "'Preaching to the Converted'", *Theatre Journal* 47.2 (1995): 169-188.

³ Even though I focus on gay male playwrights, I am dealing with dramatic characters and conflicts that are located outside of the narrow confines of heteronormativity, which is why I find it appropriate to use the term queer theatre throughout the essay.

⁴ J. Halberstam, *In a Queer Time and Place: Transgender Bodies, Subcultural Lives*, New York, 2005, p. 2.

⁵ Halberstam, 2005, p. 2.

⁶ Tarryn M. Witten, 'The Aging of Sexual and Gender Minority Persons: An Overview', Tarryn M. Witten & Evan E. Eyler (eds), *Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, and Transgender Aging: Challenges in Research, Practice, and Policy*, Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2011, p. 4.

⁷ Alyson Campbell & Dirk Gindt (eds), *HIV and AIDS in Twenty-First Century Theatre and Performance: An International Collection*, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017 (forthcoming).

⁸ Witten, pp. 1-58. For a particular Canadian perspective, see: S. Brotman et al., 'Coming Out to Care: Caregivers of Gay and Lesbian Seniors in Canada', *Gerontologist* 47 (2007): 490-503; A. Daley, 'Lesbian and Gay Health Issues: OUTside of Canada's Health Policy', *Critical Social Policy* 26 (2006): 794-816.

⁹ Brian de Vries & Catherine F. Croghan, 'LGBT Aging: The Contributions of Community-Based Research', *Journal of Homosexuality* 61:1 (2014): 10-11.

¹⁰ Brian de Vries & Gil Herdt, 'Aging in the Gay Community', Tarryn M. Witten & Evan E. Eyler (eds), *Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, and Transgender Aging: Challenges in Research, Practice, and Policy*, Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2011, pp. 84-129 (at 85).

¹¹ This is not to suggest that playwrights have never written an elderly gay character, or a dying elderly gay character. See for example Peter Eliot Weiss's *Remembering Shanghai* (1996), in which a gay man takes care of his elderly former lover dying from AIDS. Peter Eliot Weiss, *Remembering Shanghai*, in *Plague of the Gorgeous and Other Tales*, Victoria: Scirocco Drama, 1996, pp. 97-123.

¹² Some of the historical disasters include: the criminalization (for example, through § 175 or the Labouchere Amendment); the pathologization (including forced sterilization), the Holocaust and the continued criminalization of homosexuality in the post-war era, the hysteria of the cold war era and, not least, the HIV/AIDS crisis.

¹³ In an interview with *Daily Xtra*, Tremblay recalled his public coming out: 'We were doing a revival of *Hosanna* at [Montreal's] Place des Arts in 1975, and this English CBC reporter

surprised me by asking me, “By the way, are you gay?” So, just to brag, I replied, “Yes, by the way, I am!” It was on TV that night. The next morning I got phone calls saying, “If you said it in English, then you have to say in on French TV tonight!” So I went on live TV.’ Quoted in Richard Burnett, ‘An audience with Quebec literary icon Michel Tremblay’, *Daily Xtra* 3 February 2010, <http://www.dailyxtra.com/news-and-ideas/news/audience-with-quebec-literary-icon-michel-tremblay-50884> (accessed 30 April 2016).

¹⁴ Quoted in Matthew Hays, ‘Michel Tremblay, Canada’s Greatest Playwright’, *The Lesbian and Gay Review Worldwide*, vol. 12, no. 3 (May/June 2005): 32.

¹⁵ Quoted in Pat Donnelly, ‘Michel Tremblay’s *L’Oratorio de Noël*: Remembrance via Alzheimer’s’, *Montreal Gazette*, 15 February 2012.

¹⁶ Quoted in Luc Boulanger, ‘Michel Tremblay défie la mort et l’oubli’, *La Presse* 11 February 2012, <http://www.lapresse.ca/la-tribune/arts/201204/02/01-4511741-michel-tremblay-defie-la-mort-et-loubli.php> (accessed 25 October 2014).

¹⁷ Michel Tremblay, *L’Oratorio de Noël*, Montréal: Leméac, 2012, p. 11. Further page references to the play are given in the text.

¹⁸ Elizabeth Freeman, *Time Binds: Queer Temporalities, Queer Histories*, Durham & London: Duke University Press, 2010, p. 62.

¹⁹ Dirk Gindt, ‘Queer Embodied Absence: HIV/AIDS and the Creation of Memory in Gordon Armstrong’s *Blue Dragons* and Daniel MacIvor’s *The Soldier Dreams*’, *Journal of Canadian Studies* 48.2 (2014): 122-145.

²⁰ Freeman, 2010, p. 3.

²¹ Freeman, 2010, p. 4.

²² Fraser, ‘Releasing the Dead’, *Daily Xtra* 18 April 2013, <http://www.dailyxtra.com/toronto/news-and-ideas/opinion/releasing-the-dead-58976> (accessed 25 October 2014).

²³ Quoted in Serafin Lariviere, ‘Secrecy, Violence & Sex’, *Daily Xtra*, 23 September 2009.

²⁴ The *Toronto Star*’s critic found the play entertaining, but also predictable and summarised that ‘this kind of safe drama seems to be against everything Brad Fraser stands for’. Richard Ouzounian, ‘True Love Leaves Us Laughing, but Why?’, *Toronto Star*, 27 December 2012.

²⁵ Brad Fraser, *True Love Lies*, Toronto: Playwrights Canada Press, 2010, p. 40. Further page references to the play are given in the text.

²⁶ Alfred Hickling, ‘True Love Lies’, *The Guardian*, 4 February 2009.

²⁷ David also explains that he did a couple of porn movies to prove '[t]hat AIDS didn't have the power to ruin my sex life' (51).

²⁸ In April 2016, a play about Gilbert parents opened, which is one of his most autobiographical works yet. Intergenerational issues and the question of how ageing gay men are handling their ageing parents are particularly complex questions that deserve their own essay, especially when taking into consideration that, not that long ago, many gay men were either disowned by their parents or expected to be dead by the age of 40.

²⁹ Dirk Gindt, "'Your Asshole is Hanging Outside of Your Body?': Excess, AIDS, and Shame in the Theatre of Sky Gilbert', *The Uses of Excess in Visual and Material Culture, 1600-2010*, ed. Julia Skelly, Burlington & Aldershot: Ashgate, 2014, pp. 249-276.

³⁰ Sky Gilbert, 'If That's What It Means to Be Gay, I Quit', *The Globe and Mail*, 1 December 2009.

³¹ Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Tendencies*, Durham: Duke University Press, 1993, p. 8.

³² Leo Bersani, *Homos*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1995.

³³ Quoted in Johnnie Walker, 'Peaking at 60?', *Daily Xtra*, 23 April 2013. (accessed 25 October 2014).

³⁴ The title of the play is inspired by a line from F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*.

³⁵ Sky Gilbert, *A Few Brittle Leaves*, 2013, unpublished script, p. 7. Further page references to the play are given in the text. My sincere gratitude goes to Sky Gilbert and Ed Roy for sharing the manuscript of the play and a video recording of the production with me.

³⁶ See for example: Moynan King & Ellen-Ray Hennessy, 'The Genius of Sky Gilbert', David Bateman (ed.), *Compulsive Acts: Essays, Interviews, Reflections on the Works of Sky Gilbert*, Toronto: Guernica Editions, 2014, pp.

³⁷ Quoted in Johnnie Walker, 'Peaking at 60?', *Daily Xtra*, 23 April 2013. (accessed 25 October 2014).

³⁸ Quoted in Walker.

³⁹ Quoted in Walker.

⁴⁰ Brad Fraser, 'Introduction', *Five @ Fifty*, Toronto: Playwrights Canada Press, 2012, pp. iii-viii.

⁴¹ Quoted in Walker.

⁴² David M. Halperin, 'How to Do the History of Male Homosexuality', *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 6.1 (2000): 87-123, at 92.

⁴³ Halperin, *How to be Gay*, p. 307.

⁴⁴ See for example: Sue-Ellen Case, 'Classic Drag: The Greek Creation of Female Parts', *Theatre Journal* 37.3 (1985): 317-327.

⁴⁵ Fraser, 2012, p. iv.

⁴⁶ Stanley Kauffman, 'Homosexual Drama and Its Disguises', *New York Times* 23 January 1966, p. 93.

⁴⁷ See for example: Peggy Phelan, *Unmarked: The Politics of Performance*, London & New York: Routledge, 1993, p. 98-102.

⁴⁸ See for example: Sky Gilbert, *Ejaculations from the Charm Factory: A Memoir*, Toronto: ECW Press, 2000.

⁴⁹ Freeman, 2010, p. 62.

⁵⁰ Bersani, 1995, p. 76; emphasis in original.