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Queer Acts of Resistance: Making the Private Public

by Richie Wilcox

“Thank you for coming...I know this seems like a crazy way to go about this kind of thing...a very public way to deal with something so private...but here we are...”

- Jean from *Short Skirt Butch*

Queer Acts is quite new to the festival circuit as it only originated just a short seven years ago in 2009 through a collaboration with the community organization Halifax Pride. Hugo Dann, a local theatre artist who was then president of the Halifax Pride board, had booked the local alternative indie theatre venue The Bus Stop for a week and slotted in a festival called Four-Play (an obvious nod to the predecessor festival which happened in the 1990s that was created by Sky Gilbert and Buddies in Bad Times Theatre in Toronto). But a month before Pride that year Dann stepped down from the board and they were left scrambling to figure out this vaguely planned theatre festival. Adam Reid, who had studied arts administration in Montreal and recently moved to Halifax, joined the Halifax Pride Board at the perfect moment as he stepped in to fill in the blanks for Hugo Dann's absence. Firstly, for numerous reasons, Reid decided to change the name of the festival: logistically he didn't want to be stuck to only four plays in future years so he quickly did away with the name not knowing its queer theatre past and, politically, at that time the word 'queer' was a bit less commonplace in everyday lingo, especially in Halifax, and Reid thought it was more expansive a term rather than being locked into labels like gay and lesbian. The playful theatrical title of *Queer Acts* then came into being. The first year saw two local original shows - one from Zuppa Theatre and one from Mary Ellen MacLean - and two out of town original shows from Buddies in Bad Times Theatre - Nina Arsenault's *I Was Barbie* and the young creator's unit piece *Obaaberima*. The festival also presented a local production of *Hedwig and the Angry Inch*. This was a healthy helping for a first venture that was relatively last minute thrown together and the large turnout of audiences full of

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enthusiastic responses paved the way for Reid to do the festival again and again with the help of Halifax Pride.

Over the past seven years *Queer Acts* has been instrumental in creating and presenting over 30 original Canadian shows featuring queer artists; a range of artists truly encompassing the umbrella term that is the label 'queer'. This list includes Stewart Legere, Evelyn Parry, Bryden MacDonald, Waawaate Fobister, Johnnie Walker, Alistair Newton, Leeanne Poole, Berend McKenzie, Tanya Davis and more. A sampling of the shows give a taste of the variety of work- *nggrfg*, *SPIN*, *Agokwe*, *Redhead Stepchild*, *sissydude*, *Litmus Road*, *Castrati: An Electro Drag Opera*. The relationship between *Queer Acts* and *Buddies in Bad Times* continues to evolve as Reid has established a trend of bringing in at least one show from the *Buddies Young Creators Unit* and pairing it with a piece from *Queer Acts'* own *Emerging Queer Youth* program.

With this brief history as context, I would now like to turn my focus to three shows - *Short Skirt Butch*, *County Song*, *Let's Not Beat Each Other To Death* - that have been presented at *Queer Acts* over a span of three years, from 2012 to 2014, to demonstrate the type of work queer Halifaxians are creating through this avenue but more importantly to showcase how each piece publicly outs personal and private struggles in order to carve out a space for their existence within the greater society. These queer acts resist the pressure to conform or be silenced and instead use their voice and body to give way to a stronger and complex identity.

Short Skirt Butch, penned by Halifax-based queer playwright Lee-Anne Poole, premiered at *Queer Acts* 2012 and is a one-person show featuring Stephanie MacDonald as Jean - a person who doesn't like the labels given by society so Jean creates her own - short skirt butch. The plot can be summarized as such: "One queer person meets another queer person and falls in love. They are now a queer couple. This couple meets a third queer person and falls for them! Our queer couple is now a triad. But the honeymoon is over, they fall out of love, lust and all that goes with it. The queer triad goes back to being a queer couple leaving our third queer broken

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hearten times two” (leeannepoole.com). Jean, the one who gets dumped, spends much of the performance defending herself and her actions to the audience as she becomes slightly obsessed with her ex-couple and breaks into their house and steals a prized dildo in order to get revenge. While the script delivers clever and hilarious writing at points and MacDonald’s performance is endearing, natural and award-worthy, I want to focus on two elements: the placement of the audience as a community Jean knows well and, secondly, the genius way in which the audience is never told the gender of Jean’s ex-couple.

Jean rents out a theatre and gathers a community together because as she says, “Okay, I know some of you have already heard the story or versions” of her breakup and she would like to “clear the air” and “say a little bit of [her] side, so [she] can try to move on” (1). From the beginning, this direct address performance situates many of the audience in a queer community which they may or not be a part of in their real life. “I know some of you here — most of you, I think. That’s easy, easy to know a lot of people here — this is a pretty small community” (1). The “pretty small community” is definitively a queer one as she brings up numerous times moments where members of the audience warned Jean, comforted her and judged her throughout the breakup. It is not until five minutes in where Jean finally introduces herself saying, “Oh! My name’s Jean. Fro those of you who don’t know”. (2) This assumed familiarity instantly denies the heteronormativity of daily life and in a genius way flips it on its head assuming audiences lead a queer life. Jean acknowledges new people and strangers with, “I see some of you brought friends. Great. That’s nice...” (1) but, again, strangers/non-queers are set up as a non-majority in this audience through casual staged familiar exchanges. At one point Jean implies she knows the audience in more intimate ways as she exasperatedly declares: “My name is Jean, I’m gay, and I’m running out of queers to fuck in this town”(2)! Any of the so-called provocative content of the piece - sexual awakenings when you are younger, dildos, open relationships, polyamorous triad relationships, etc. - is dealt with and delivered in such a blatant and blasé

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manner that it communicates to the audience their own comfort level with these topics. An expectation of non-surprise and acceptance and experience is placed on the majority of the audience. Again, a queerness has been assumed. And if that expectation is not met it is you who Jean sets up as the outsider; the inversion of the heteronormative becoming the odd one out.

One of the most memorable elements of *Short Skirt Butch* is the mystery of the gender of Jean's ex-lovers. We know the names of Jean's lovers are Sandy and Aaron. Both names are commonly interchangeable with both genders and hearing the name Aaron in performance even makes it more vague as you cannot define a spelling (Erin being the more common female spelling). We also know Jean is queer - loves all people. Jean never uses gender pronouns in the performance and any mention of Aaron and Sandy challenges the audience's (and society's) want, need and desire to fit the two into a gender box. In an overtly metatheatrical passage Poole recognizes her purposeful playwriting as Jean describes a first encounter with Aaron and Sandy highlighting their progressive queerness as "They told [her] stories about so many different people without ever saying 'he' or 'she' it was all 'they' and on occasion 'ze' (6). What does a mention of home improvement and renovation mean? How does a sentence involving gardening hint at a gender? Who uses dildos? The fact is the mystery forces the audience to confront the societal constructs around gender identity and stereotypical gender roles. The noncommittal and non-defining, or should we say non-confining, language guides the audience to question - why the fuck do we NEED to know the gender?!

Country Song, another direct address solo performance penned by Lee-Anne Poole, premiered at Queer Acts in 2013, and featured Poole herself onstage in this autobiographical piece. The compact minimalist script places Poole standing centrestage armed with her guitar and a nervous and timid demeanour. The simple and subtle production includes several country songs created by Poole, a novice songwriter and guitar player, in order to pay some sort of

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tribute to her father who loves country music. Poole, once a hater of everything country, admits “There seems to come a time when you start to love things for no better reason than just cause they remind you of your parents - of your home” (18). The gentle meandering narrative of *Country Song* simply relays anecdotes of Poole’s relationship with her father - “this show is in a lot of ways for him” (6) - and allows an intimate look into their complicated interactions. Poole confesses that they “were never very close” to the point where she doesn’t “remember ever hugging him” (5). The show may be a tribute and very much “for him” but ultimately the show is for Poole and any other person, especially queer persons, who relate to a troubled relationship with their father. It is a show for anyone who, like Poole, has “daddy issues” (13). Poole cleverly affirms this with her deflection - “I do not have daddy issues -my father and I hardly even talk!” (13). But Poole *does* talk to us. She performs her pained relationship with her father in front of us. We see her hurt and heartbreak play out before us. And this is what is important - this act of making the private public. Early on in the play when describing her family Poole says, “The Poole’s are a very private people” (5). The very road they live on - which only has houses of relatives - reads “Pool Drive - Private” (5). The vulnerability within the performance is palpable as Poole tells us, “the thought of performing really terrified me, so I started telling people I was doing it. Can’t take that back! Perceived public pressure seems to really work for me” (12). Poole continues the legacy of privacy in her persona but is obviously forcing herself to break the chain of seclusion with this performance. The climactic moment in the piece comes when Poole tells the story of her coming out:

After I came out my dad said to me:“You know it’s your decision and just cause I don’t think it’s right doesn’t mean it isn’t, it’s just what I think. Your mother likes to think we’re not bigots, well we are. And even though I disagree with a lot of stuff, I’ll be the first to say that I’d be pretty bored if the world only had people that I approved of in it. Then there would be no one to think I was better than.” I thought that was so sweet. (15)

Country Song could be chalked up to yet another queer piece about coming out but the act of making such a personal moment public allows for Poole to feel ownership over who she is by

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telling *her* story. The private autobiographical story gives her agency and a voice and ultimately affirms her existence as a queer person - even if her father doesn't agree with her.

The third show I want to examine briefly, *Let's Not Beat Each Other to Death*, was workshopped as part of Queer Acts 2014 and written by Haligonian Stewart Legere and directed by Christian Barry. The workshop presentation continued on in development at Videofag in Toronto and is also a collaboration between The National Arts Centre and Legere and his producing company, The Accidental Mechanics Group. The show has now been presented at various venues including Summerworks, PUSH, and Festival Transamerique this past June. Promoted as "a genre-defying celebration where theatre, memorial and dance party collide", *Let's Not Beat Each Other To Death* pays tribute to "queer people around the world who have suffered bigotry and violence" (promo). The participatory work has three acts to it: the first act (labeled KA), which is the most theatrical, features Legere surrounded by hanging microphones clothed in a dark cloak on stilts speaking of death as well as Legere taking on the voices of victims of hate crimes; the second act (titled A Eulogy for Everyone) features Legere talking to the audience in direct address sans costume as himself, or as the stage directions state, "He is very nearly Stewart" (11); the third act is the participatory section where a live dj from the local queer community plays tunes as Legere encourages the audience to stay and dance while slides play on a projector in the background. Described as "an invitation to compassion, a poignant commemoration" and "a poetic salvo", *Let's Not Beat Each Other to Death* is a queer act of resistance and assertion that, compared to the previously mentioned pieces, aligns itself with social justice theatre more overtly in its creation, promotional material, and performance.

In this all-too-brief analysis I would like to examine Legere's impetus and catalyst for this particular solo show. In the spring of 2012 in the early morning hours of April 17, Raymond Taavel, a prominent gay rights activist in the Halifax queer community, was beaten to death outside Menz bar, a gay bar in the north end of Halifax on Gottingen Street. The shocking crime

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was overwhelmingly powerful and all-encompassing for the queer community. Whether you were one of the many people who knew and loved Raymond or if he was a stranger to you, the sudden blow to the community was widespread. The day after it happened there was a vigil on the spot where the death had occurred and Legere, a high profile community performer and friend of Taavel's, sang a song at this event. In the second act of *Let's Not Beat Each Other To Death* Legere recalls this moment: "And as I stood there in the street, singing, the crowd joined in - hundreds of people singing along" (13). This led Legere to a beautiful thought that would be the seed of his show: "how comforting would it be if we could come together like that more often, under better circumstances? How good would it feel to have a song sung softly to you for you after you've been hurt" (13)? Legere's performance details numerous hate crimes where queer people were killed or badly beaten but it is all coupled with tender songs, dance songs, poetic melodies and throbbing beats. After all, the optimistic show is "inspired by tragedy and driven by hope" (promo) and Legere wants to do this so "we can walk away with a message of hope and not desperation" (12). The act of grieving over an individual is a very personal and private process in which there is no one proper or single way it is to be done. Legere takes this private act and makes it a communal one. It is natural and easy for us to "curl up and tighten up and close up and confirm [our] solitude" (3). But Legere wants to break the private act of grieving and get you to "roll into the roads; longing to collide" (3).

Legere, like Poole and MacDonald in the previous shows, bring people together in a public performance to deal with private matters. The following is a repeated statement by Legere within his memorial performance but the sentiment is true for all three shows: "On the occasion of opening up. On the occasion of remembering. On the occasion of coming to terms. On the occasion of our continued persistent existence. On the occasion of going into the dark to know the dark" (12).

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I would argue all three shows are strong case studies of queer theatre making sure of “our continued persistent existence” (12). Whether it be the cliché coming out story to your parents, the grieving of a tragic hate crime, or the breakup of a triad over a dildo, these queer public acts claim space and allow the acknowledgement and existence of queer people instead of hiding away or denying ourselves and our voices. The East Coast of Canada has a reputation filled with images of drinking, lighthouses, lobster and fiddles yet there are several thriving countercultures holding their own in Halifax, Nova Scotia, with one of the strongest of them being the queer community. It is festivals like Queer Acts, and the work that is created and presented through that avenue, that help strengthen the queer culture. In 1987 members of ACT UP created the well known and often quoted campaign ‘Silence = Death’ in reaction to the AIDS crisis and the government’s lack of recognition towards it. The campaign referenced the death of gay people in Nazi camps with its pink triangle symbol and declared that “silence about the oppression and annihilation of gay people, then and now, must be broken as a matter of our survival” (ACTUP). This still holds true to this day and it is crucial queer people are speaking out about all issues - from homophobia to transphobia to sex positivity to violence and hate crimes. The stage offers the space for our private lives to become queer acts of resistance.