

Quint, Cordula, “the (cultural) politics of aesthetic failure: Jordan Tannahill’s call for the artistic renewal of English-Language Theatre in Canada.”

If at first you don’t succeed, failure may be your style.
Quentin Crisp, *The Naked Civil Servant*.¹

In her introduction to “Queer Youth Cultures” (2008), Canadian sociologist and ethnographer Sarah Driver argues that “over the past decade, queer youth have become innovative participants in do-it-yourself media projects, popular culture narratives, local drag performances, anti-oppression activism, online communities, and music subcultures...[and yet] their cultural practices are not classifiable as either mainstream or marginal, they are neither inside nor outside dominant cultural institutions; rather, they criss-cross commercial mass media, grassroots subcultural production, and activist realms [and expand] public spaces, corporeal relations, and textual forms.”² Driver “diagnoses” the emergence of such a rich and diverse proliferation of queer youth activities [as] empowering for young people, providing tools for self-expression and social communication, and also presenting opportunities for adult educators and policymakers to approach youth as smart, imaginative, and desiring cultural producers.”(1) Her description not only foregrounds the potential for culture-, history-, and world-making of queer youth in resistance to their persistent marginalization and persecution, but she also captures the artistic and activist agency of Canadian theatre artist Jordan Tannahill (and of the fictional characters that populate his plays and productions) very effectively. Indeed, his work is perhaps especially relevant for a discussion of Queer Theatre in Canada today because queer youth tend so often to be overlooked, and rarely taken seriously or validated. As Canadian sociologist and ethnographer Gloria Filax points out, “sexual minority youth are produced through their absence or as a special area of interest, as the abject Other; that is, as a deviant outsider within the realm of youth studies.”³ Arguably, then, queer youth also tend to be less explored and less visible in the broader context of Canadian queer cultural studies, as well as Canadian theatre, for that matter.

However, the promising, contemporary work of Jordan Tannahill provides answers to this absence. His plays delve deeply into the psyche of (queer) youth and expose the social dynamics that come to

¹ This maxim by gay icon and “provocateur” Quentin Crisp is frequently quoted which attests to its capture of a commonly shared aspect of the individuation process of queer persons on their way to “owning themselves” with pride, involving a necessary transformational shift from an attitude and feeling of internalized shame, abjection, and socio-cultural banishment to defiant acceptance and celebration of their resistant subjectivity. Cf. Halberstam, Judith, *The Queer Art of Failure*, (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2011) 85; Stanley, Sarah Garton, *Failure Theatre: An Artist’s Statement* (MA Thesis – Cultural Studies; Kingston: Queen’s University, 2013) 16; Jordan Tannahill, *Theatre of the Unimpressed* (Toronto: Coach House Books, 2015) 122.

² Driver, Susan (ed), *Queer Youth Cultures* (2008), 1. The term “queer youth” in the context of this discussion “encompasses those who name themselves as gay, lesbian, bisexual, transsexual, transgender, intersexual, queer, and/or questioning (GLBTTIQQ) without necessarily being confined to narrow sets of terms...” “Queer youth” is an always already contradictory and imperfect notion, simultaneously challenging restrictive categorizations while constructing new subjects and sites of regulation and resistance.”(3)

³ Filax, Gloria, *Queer Youth: In the Province of the “Severely Normal.”* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2006) 59. Quoted in Driver 3.

define their emerging sense of self. He examines the psychological pressures that attend queer individuation and foregrounds how queer adolescence is marked -- without exception -- by shame, secrets and hiding, harassment, exclusion, uncertainty, anxiety, confusion, ambivalence, fear, defiance, threats, humiliation, rebellion, rage, yearning, and above all, intense vulnerability. *Coming out* remains a gruelling rite of (psychosexual) passage into the margins of society and a male economy of cultural production and desire. In other words, Tannahill's plays (re)present today's youth and dispel the truisms that "we've come a long way" since Stonewall. Instead his texts throw light on deeply entrenched homophobic violence despite the mainstreaming of Steven-and-Chris queer visibility. *Get yourself Home Skyler James* (2010), *rihannaboi95* (2013), *Late Company* (2013), and *Concord Floral* (2014) depict the social snares and pitfalls that accompany this fraught journey out of denial and secrecy. Indeed, the "coming of age" of queer teenagers is overdetermined by their struggle to become visible and legible in our heteronormative culture.

In *Late Company* (2013) -- a "well-made play" clearly modelled on the commercially successful "God of Carnage"(2006) by Yasmina Reza -- Tannahill investigates the deep, residual alienation that often begins to underpin parent-child relations and family dynamics when queer youth begin to give voice to their experience as sexual and gender minority youth. Moreover, he exposes the profound shame and unease experienced by heterosexual adults/parents when queer desire and queer culture-making articulate themselves. He also throws light on the growing suicide epidemic among queer youth.⁴ In *Concord Floral* (2014), in contrast, he explores "learning to get better" on the threshold of strip-mall consumerism and the Canadian wilderness and reveals hidden queer desires underneath the perfected veneer of affluent and successful, heteronormative family lives. At the same time, he rewrites clichés about the peaceful inertia of our suburbs to disclose hidden echoes of the Holocaust and the raw, merciless cruelties that teenage peer dynamics can shower on their unwitting victims. In a nutshell, as a white, middle-class, suburban and gay playwright, Tannahill's focus has largely been on "writing what he knows." However, he has not shied away from also writing about the vulnerabilities of other minorities. In *Get Yourself Home Skyler James* (2010), he portrays the violent homophobia experienced by working class lesbians in the U.S military before "Don't Ask Don't Tell" was repealed and makes a compelling argument for the rights to asylum of queer refugees. Three years later, in *rihannaboi95* (2013), he focuses on the intercultural and intergenerational complexities that come into play when the ethnic and cultural backgrounds of first generation immigrants clash violently with Canadian contemporaneity and the media cultures their (queer) sons and daughters grow up in and co-produce.⁵

⁴ Cf. Grace, André P., "Camp fYrefly: Linking Research to Advocacy in Community Work with Sexual and Gender Minority Youth," in Pearce, Wes D. and Jean Hillabold, *Out Spoken: Perspectives on Queer Identities*, Regina: University of Regina Press, 2013, 127-142.

⁵ Both plays are part of his collection *Age of Minority* (2013).

In this vein, Tannahill's writing for the stage clearly fulfills an activist purpose. His portrayal of the continuing harassment and discrimination that queer youth suffer is disturbingly accurate. It reflects the research and advocacy of André P. Grace, Director of the Institute for Sexual Minority Studies and Services at the University of Alberta, who throws the entrenchment of homophobic bias and prejudice in Canadian society poignantly into relief,

since July 20, 2005, when the Civil Marriage Age (Bill C-38) extending the definition of marriage to include same-sex couples became law, I can get married. However, I still cannot walk down Whyte Avenue in the heart of my home city of Edmonton without the threat of a homophobe shouting the defamatory epithet "faggot" at me as he drives by in his truck...The current spate of gay-male youth suicides in Canada and the United States, which is a consequence of the cultural havoc that heterosexist/sexist systems and homo/bi/transphobic bullies wreak on these vulnerable youth, indicates emphatically that life can become unbearable for some sexual and gender minority (SGM) youth trying to mediate the rather shaky construction that is our hetero-normative social democracy.

Tannahill's work touches on this paradoxical cultural reality where official legal sanction is met with grassroots homophobic resistance in the street, and at times with tragic consequences. Having said that, in *Queer Youth Cultures*, Susan Driver warns against casting queer youth exclusively as "victims of homophobic violence and heterosexist exclusions in ways that inscribe them within tropes of victimization and risk." She argues that research focused on the "negative effects of subordination" tends to "define [queer youth] reactively against dominant systems and [denies them] the chance to exceed hegemonic discursive influences."⁶ To complement Grace's perspective, Driver's research foregrounds that "energetic communications are forged by youth who refuse to be simplistically characterized according to their wounds and abjections."⁷ Indeed, also the work of Marnina Gonick confirms that they have "refused to be rendered invisible...[and]...have worked to produce positive self-identifications and representations."⁸ As a young, outspoken and gay theatre artist whose work has achieved considerable visibility in recent years, Jordan Tannahill is certainly a case in point, and so are his characters – notably, Sunny, the protagonist of *rihannaboi95* and Joel Shaun-Hastings of *Late Company*.⁹

However, apart from his queer activism, Tannahill's advocacy also extends to Canadian theatre generally. In 2015, he published *Theatre of the Unimpressed: In Search of Vital Drama* to share his

⁶ Driver, Suan (Ed.), *Queer Youth Cultures*, Albany: State University of New York Press, 2008, 3.

⁷ Ibid. 7

⁸ Qtd. in Driver 7 -- Marnina Gonick, *Between Femininities: Ambivalence, Identity, and the Education of Girls* (New York: State University of New York Press, 2003) 137.

⁹ A proviso here: Joel Shaun-Hastings is the most central character in *Late Company* although he is absent in the dramatic action due to his untimely suicide. His choice to end his life, as disturbing as it is, becomes the springboard for the characters' investigation of the dynamics and underlying reasons behind their own and the community's institutionalized homophobia that lead to Joel's harassment by his peers. Importantly, though, Tannahill portrays Joel as a creative teen who, like Sunny in *rihannaboi95*, had begun to "produce positive self-identifications and representations" and was victimized for it. Tannahill's portrayal of Joel appears to be modelled on the life and experience of Jamie Hubley – see André P. Grace, "Camp FYREFLY" 132-4.

frustrations about the limited aesthetic repertoire that defines English-language theatre today. He deplores a state of affairs where audiences, consisting largely of friends and family, go to “see theatre out of obligation,” and where their post-show conversation begins with the phrases, “I *expected* to hate it. Didn’t you? It’s like we’re resigned to be unimpressed.”¹⁰ His polemic articulates an impassioned call for cultural renewal and rails against the economic strictures and dramaturgical tradition that overdetermine the development of new work as well as the production of mainstream theatre generally. Ultimately, however, his reflections attempt to situate and define the agencies that theatre *could/should/would* still exercise in our technology and media-saturated society.¹¹ Central to his book is the concept of the “Theatre of Failure” which exhibits many affinities and convergences with Sarah Garton Stanley’s thoughts about “Failure Theatre.”¹² Tannahill defines it as,

a theatre in which artistic risk and its attendant failures dismantle the status quo of artistic and political thought. [It]...is a joyful and defiant answer to the Theatre of the Unimpressed – the ‘well-made’ dramatic fare that keeps our ecology in a business-as-usual stranglehold. The Theatre of Failure is not only a refusal of the ideal of the well-made, but nothing less than a renunciation of perfection as a tyranny imposed not only upon theatre, but upon society at large by capitalist hegemony.¹³

Above all else, Tannahill points to the overbearing influence of Scribe’s Well-Made Play formula on the culture of play development in Canada, and criticizes a general proclivity among dramaturgs and artistic directors, especially of regional theatres, to “pander safely” to the mainstream tastes of cultural “consumers.” He argues that, the “real challenge for Canadian theatre – for all theatre – is to liberate itself from a binary culture where the Well-Made Play is considered the ‘true’ or ‘real’ and anything else a bizarre, unappealing outlier.”(41) Yet, he does not shy away from self-criticism and admits his own complicities. He warns that his own “well made” play *Late Company* “has helped reify the theatrical status quo” and that plays like it “take up too much space in our theatre ecology.”¹⁴ Ultimately, he argues, the power to introduce change rests with the artistic directors who are inherently responsible for developing the tastes of Canadian spectators as programming will shape audience taste and understanding.¹⁵ Against the prevailing status quo, Tannahill estimates that (Canadian) audiences are not “inherently risk averse” but “hungry for new and transformational experiences,” and their goal should be to break the cycle. He posits that “if the programming of our

¹⁰ Tannahill, J. *Theatre of the Unimpressed*, 9. Tannahill here quotes his friend Amy in the opening pages to his book.

¹¹ Cf. Tannahill, *Theatre of the Unimpressed*, 20.

¹² Cf. Stanley, Sarah Garton, “Failure Theatre: An Artist’s Statement (2013) – MA thesis, Queen’s University, Kingston.

¹³ Tannahill, Jordan, *Theatre of the Unimpressed. In Search of Vital Drama*, (Toronto: Coach House Books, 2015) 118.

¹⁴ Ibid 41-2.

¹⁵ Ibid 43.

institutions is governed by tentativeness and trepidation, tentative and trepidatious plays will be created. Those plays will in turn foster a tentative and trepidatious audience.”¹⁶ Indeed, anyone who has looked at the seasonal programming of a good number of Canadian regional theatres will have to agree. Apart from these concerns, Tannahill accurately diagnoses a prevailing neoliberal ethos that governs the decisions and managerial approach of arts administrations and funding bodies alike, and calls for changes to the material conditions of theatre production,

Many of our leading cultural thinkers and administrators have championed notions of creative industries or a creative economy. ‘Creative industry’ is a very big tent, unadvisedly lumping together the performing arts with advertising, marketing and software development... The rise in discourse around ‘packaging,’ ‘delivering,’ ‘marketing,’ and ‘exploiting’ culture as a commodity has a creeping effect. This language will continue to permeate how art is created, funded (both privately and publicly) and experienced by audiences... To start with, theatre needs more time and space in which to experiment and fail... Most plays and most theatre artists never have the time or space to learn from their shortcomings. In lieu of endless dramaturgical tinkering on the page, many plays would benefit from longer periods of gestation with actors, designers and directors.”¹⁷

Needless to say, longer rehearsal periods and marginally more resources that would support a more sustained, exploratory period of creation have been a high priority on the wish lists of many theatre artists in Canada.

Having said this, Tannahill’s reflections are also clearly inflected by a range of queer influences. His perspective on the future of Canadian theatre effectively draws on and incorporates the recent work of queer theorists and cultural critics, fellow theatre artists and performance scholars, among them Sara Jane Bailes, Lee Edelman, Judith/Jack Halberstam as well as Canadian associate artistic director Sarah Garton Stanley (NAC), whose essay “Failure Theatre: An Artist’s Statement” reveals many shared affinities with Tannahill’s work. In fact, the first point of her 13-point Manifesto defines failure as “simply one of the strongest agents for change the universe has to offer”¹⁸ – a perspective that Tannahill’s essay shares and elaborates at length.

This fascination with the regenerative potential of *failure* and the attendant conceptual framework for thinking and theorizing alternative strategies, models and forms has a rich genealogy of development in western culture. In her book *Performance Theatre and the Poetics of Failure*, Sara Jane Bailes argues that “failure opens up a fruitful, tragicomic ground where subversion and resistance can be tried out or

¹⁶ Ibid 43 and 44.

¹⁷ Ibid 75, and 78-9.

¹⁸ Stanley, Sarah Garton, *Failure Theatre: An Artists’ Statement*, 5. Cf. Tannahill 17.

rehearsed.”¹⁹ She conceives the surprisingly catalytic force of failure and situates its potentiality in a wider ideological context as follows,

As a trope or mode of activity, failure is inclusive, permissive even. It can lead to unanticipated effects...A failed occurrence signals an unpredictable outcome of events where a successful instance might, by comparison, be considered exclusive, prohibitive, and militated by mainstream values. A prescriptive definition of success appeals to conservative ideology and the normative ambitions that consolidate its ideals, whilst the altogether messier undisciplined tactics that failure permits contribute to an anti-conformist ideology, one that seeks to redefine and loosen the boundaries that determine the lived experience and representations that chase after it...Failure works. Which is to say that although ostensibly it signals the breakdown of an aspiration or an agreed demand, breakdown indexes an alternative route or way of doing or making...an opening onto several (and often many) other ways of doing that counter the authority of an singular or “correct” outcome...strategies of failure in the realm of performance can be understood as generative, prolific even; failure produces, and does so in the roguish manner.”²⁰

Perhaps not surprisingly, the use/fulness of failure in contemporary art practices is effectively defined in this vein by its catalytic ability “to queer” the social and cultural status quo. The flipside of this affinity entails that failure, as also Jack/Judith Halberstam attests, is deeply enmeshed in/with the experience of queerness. In *The Queer Art of Failure* (2011) Halberstam points out that,

queer studies offer us one method of imagining, not some fantasy of an elsewhere, but existing alternatives to hegemonic systems ...Heteronormative common sense leads to the equation of success with advancement, capital accumulation, family, ethical conduct, and hope. Other subordinate, queer, or counter-hegemonic modes of common sense lead to the association of failure with non-conformity, anticapitalist practices, nonreproductive lifestyles, negativity, and critique.”²¹

What is implicit here is the intersection of ideology and contrasting tropes of (re)presentation which is also a central concern for Tannahill’s project of cultural renewal. Indeed, in the history of western aesthetics, this interplay between the normative and the transgressive has been materialized in a rich genealogy of alternative forms. According to Bailes, “in art practice, across the visual, plastic and performing arts, a deeper engagement with the degeneration and degrading of form and aesthetic principles is prevalent from the late nineteenth into the early twentieth century.”²² Apart from the assorted modernist styles that defined early 20th century culture (Dada and Surrealism, in particular), this counter-

¹⁹ Bailes 3.

²⁰ Bailes 2.

²¹ Halberstam 89; see also 94-5. Moreover, s/he also points in this context to the seminal work of queer theorist José Muñoz whose *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity* (2010) offers “the most elaborate account of queer failure to date and...explains the connection between queers and failure in terms of a utopian “rejection of pragmatism,” on the one hand, and an equally utopian refusal of social norms on the other.”(89) Cf. Tannahill 122.

²² Bailes 3.

hegemonic trajectory of avant-garde and experimental art is extended in the work of Beckett and other Absurdist, the Situationists, as well as John Cage's aesthetic emancipation of silence, indeterminacy and chance, following WWII.²³ Later yet, it is elaborated further in the interdisciplinary experiments of fluxus, happenings, environmental theatre, intermedia, installation and performance art during the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s, and more recently in the postmodern interrogation of (re)presentational practices and a subsequent turn to social practice. According to Bailes,

Within the western canon, the postmodern period can also be identified in formal terms as witnessing the emergence of postdramatic theatre...a prevalent shift in the ambition of theatre events that develops later, post-1960s, whereby (mainly experimental) theatre-makers' interests have focused upon redrawing the terms of engagement between performer and spectator, shifting performance beyond the interpretive modes of playwrighting and directing [and redefine] the structural and conceptual underpinnings that both constitute and frame the theatre event; this in turn influences the reception of the work.²⁴

Indeed, given this long genealogy of experimentation and the sheer abundance and diversity of aesthetic sensibilities that depart from and often self-consciously destabilize the representational regime of Realism, Tannahill's fear of the continuing dominance of the "well made" comes somewhat as a surprise. In fact, "we" have been *failing* for a long time. Yet, the material conditions of theatre production, particularly perhaps in the Canadian context, and the associated dependence on sponsorship and funding, tend to cultivate artistic self-censorship and conservative restraints in the majority of theatre professionals whose aim it is to participate in and *survive* as part of the mainstream.²⁵ Tannahill deplores "the pressures placed on theatres to be seen in a state of perpetual growth from season to season: greater attendance, higher box-office figures, increased private sector support, more programming, more community outreach." He argues that this "focus on growth often distracts underfunded and understaffed theatre companies from their core artistic activities" and for him, "it seems almost inevitable that theatres would program proven successes, or shape the new work they're developing into recognizable commodities."²⁶ In other words, the pervasive neoliberal ethos of austerity currently entrenched in Canadian culture has undoubtedly left its imprint on present-day theatre practices and constrains the will and courage for innovation. In this ideological context, the deliberate production of aesthetic failure constitutes an activist act of resistance against the market forces that have come to overdetermine artistic output.

The antidote to this neoliberal hegemony draws on the legacy of early 20th century avant-garde modernisms and their enduring artistic "aftershocks," as delineated above. The aesthetic of failures

²³ Cf. Bailes 5-6

²⁴ Bailes 3. Bailes here draws on the seminal work of Hans-Thies Lehmann of 2006.

²⁵ Cf. Tannahill, *Theatre of the Unimpressed*, 39-40.

²⁶ *Ibid* 76.

Tannahill calls for embrace narrative disintegration and resistance to teleological closure, non-linear or associational dramaturgical structures, verbal and/or spatial collage and simultaneity, self-consciousness, and performance events that abandon traditional theatre venues and seek out alternative locations (site-specific and site-responsive work) or cultivate interactivity. Moreover, Tannahill's "Theatre of Failure" incorporates the unexpected, unreconciled, unwanted, vulnerable and awkward.²⁷ It challenges engrained expectations for aesthetic harmony, balance, structure and resolution, and attempts to redefine deeply rooted hierarchies with the aim of developing a new relationship between artists and audiences, between the performance and its reception. Historically speaking, this repertoire of aesthetic strategies and forms has strongly emerged during the later half of the 20th century and defined postmodern culture by and large.²⁸ For Tannahill, theatre artists in Canada fail to "embrace...risk and failure, at an institutional and individual level, [which] is instrumental in cultivating a vital performance culture,"²⁹ and like Sarah Garton Stanley, he supports the idea that "to fail from a queer perspective, enables freedom."³⁰

Among his own early canon, the aesthetically more innovative texts which represent the most salient antidotes to the dominance of "well-made" dramaturgy are without question *Peter Fechter: 59 Minutes* (2013) which Suburban Beast produced in Berlin, and *Concord Floral* (2014) which has this year been adopted into the programming of flagship institutions like the Magnetic North Theatre Festival, the NAC in Ottawa, and Canadian Stage in Toronto. *Peter Fechter: 59 Minutes* is a powerful memory play based on the real-life story of a German bricklayer by the same name who was among the first to attempt an escape over the Berlin Wall. His death at the age of 18 at the hands of GDR border patrols has become iconic of Cold War totalitarianism for a generation of Germans who experienced the regime changes that defined the post-War era and who witnessed the construction of the Berlin Wall in 1961. Tannahill blends history and fiction very effectively, and the play's style elegantly evokes the character's memories and present experience of dying in the notorious "death strip" as he bleeds to death, abandoned by Helmut and unassisted, during his 59 last minutes. Focused on Fechter's childhood and teenage years growing up in Cold War Berlin, and especially on his family life and friendship with Helmut Kulbeik, the play's exploration of queer love is vaguely implied. Above all, it probes the limits of male friendship and loyalty, and ultimately the betrayal by Helmut during their attempt to escape and make it to the West.

²⁷ Ibid 39.

²⁸ Cf. Lehmann, Hans-Thies, *Postdramatic Theatre*, London: Routledge, 2006; Hutcheon, Linda, *The Politics of Postmodernism*, (London: Routledge, 1989); Innes, Christopher, *Avant Garde Theatre 1892-1992* (London: Routledge, 1993); Counsell, Colin, *Signs of Performance: An introduction to Twentieth-century Theatre*, London: Routledge, 1996).

²⁹ See *Theatre of the Unimpressed* 19-20, and 122.

³⁰ Ibid. 20 and 122.

Aesthetically, the text and its performance are largely defined by the skillful use of minimal theatrical means and a sound design which allows Tannahill to interleave Peter's memories of family life and of his escape with expanded sensory perceptions of the surroundings as he lies dying. The voices of other characters are pre-recorded and played back, and Peter's own voice amplified and thereby "distanced" by means of a microphone. More importantly, the protagonist's experience of time is poignantly heightened by means of a digital clock which is projected onto the stage floor. Arguably, the most powerful visual element, the irrevocable countdown of 59 minutes creates a stark contrast to the whimsical evocation of the character's mental "landscape." As his attention shifts fluidly from past to present, and as his mind sifts through fragments of his life experience, time moves unrelentingly forward toward its final dissolution. Our experience of mortality thus underscores the movements of the protagonist's mind as the play advances irretrievably toward its resolution,

The sound of a passenger plane flying overhead.

I hear two hundred and thirty-six passengers in a flight from Stuttgart a half vertical mile overhead flying away from or toward love.

The sound of the airplane's interior: passengers talking quietly amongst themselves.

I hear the voices of the people on the plane. Talking about the trip ahead, the weather, a bit of gossip. Someone laughs. Someone is reading a book. There is a dog in a cage in the cargo hold who is afraid and alone.

...

The sound of a watch ticking.

Fifty-eight minutes and twelve seconds. The gold watch on the bedside table is ticking.

The ants burrow deep, the crickets scream.

"These fragments I have shored against my ruins"³¹

Here, a last allusion to Elliot's *The Waste Land* creeps into Peter Fechter's dying consciousness before his mind reaches the fulcrum point on which the meaning and purpose of the text itself, of his life and of his decision to escape with Helmut, are balanced precariously between hope and despairing oblivion,

A pair of boots

I see boots walking toward me.

The murmur of guards, the static blips of their walkie-talkies.

Helmut. You came back.

His shadow moves over me.

I feel him lift me. He has the face of the young guard. He is crying.

He carries me in his arms.

He carries me over.

³¹ Tannahill, *Age of Minority*, 118-9.

He carries me.

*The sound of the watch ticking stops just as the time on the digital readout runs out: 00:00
Blackout.*³²

In light of Helmut's selfish betrayal, Peter's hallucinating mind amalgamates reality and fantasy to sidestep the unbearable answer to the question that has haunted the text from its opening lines, "My mother always told me: never fall asleep with an unanswered question, lest it haunt your dreams."³³ The intense emotional pain of betrayed friendship and loyalty is embedded in Peter's last recognitions and bespeaks a hint of his unspoken and deeply buried, queer love. The pathos of the protagonist's death is undoubtedly heightened through Tannahill's minimalist style as the immateriality of sound throws mortality and the threat of final dissolution powerfully into relief. The play's anti-realistic style thus touches on the existential urgency of human solidarity and love as its central thematic concerns, "I hear two hundred and thirty-six passengers in a flight from Stuttgart a half vertical mile overhead flying away from or toward love."

In *Concord Floral* (2014), Tannahill explores a more daring and eclectic repertoire of anti-realist theatrical means which allow him to transcend the discursive "straight-jacket" of well-made dramaturgy and theatrical realism with ease. The play's dramaturgy rarely consists of conventional dialogue but rather of a collage of scenes performed by ten "numbered characters" who are barely individuated. This aesthetics ensures that the fragments of text, which circulate among them, come together to call up the collective experience of suburban youth. The scenes are vaguely tied together as a narrative about the mysterious disappearance of one of the classmates after her excruciating harassment and shaming by two of the popular girls in the group ("This is a play we created for you/About something that happened not long ago/In our neighborhood/A neighborhood not unlike your own"³⁴). The play's aim, however, is ultimately to cast a "wider view" than can be grasped by a narrative approach. As a memory play of youth, the dramaturgy deliberately "sacrifices" linear plot, individuated characterization, or the coherence of their emotional lives, in favor of a deep burrowing into the teenage experience itself, to touch the psychic undercurrents of unspoken feelings and intuitions that accompany them across the threshold to independence ("All parents are a little stupid/They need to make themselves that way or they'll go insane worrying about all the things they secretly know to be true"³⁵). The dramaturgy thus engenders a horizon of timelessness which bounds the undefined arc of their teenage perspective on life. This is reflected skillfully in the loose assembly of the scenes.

³² Ibid. 119-120.

³³ Ibid 65.

³⁴ Tannahill, Jordan, *Concord Floral* (unpublished manuscript) 16.

³⁵ Ibid 19.

Concord Floral, itself, is an abandoned and derelict greenhouse on the threshold of the suburb and the wilderness. Littered with the detritus of industrial horticulture, it offers the teenagers sanctuary from the pressure of their lives (“where no one’s making you buy shit or quiet down”³⁶), a place to retreat from six hours of Facebooking, to “chill” and to test their bonds and kinship as peers, outside the influence of parents and institutional forces of socialization. It is pervaded by an atmosphere of disquiet and sadness and holds the secrets and “the memory of a thousand teenagers’ bodies.”³⁷ However, the play’s text is recited by the Teen Chorus in an undefined, unreal no man’s land which morphs fluidly from scene to scene. While it makes references to the events that take/took place in Concord Floral, the anti-mimetic dramaturgy of Tannahill’s collective memory play avoids concrete dramatic action along with a clear and material grounding in “real” places and social locations. However, it plays creatively and in a quasi-Brechtian style with the audience’s ability and willingness to make transient imaginary investments in a sense of time and place (“Let’s pretend for a second that you are Toronto and that this line of light is the 407 at night/Let’s pretend that this stage is our suburb to the North/And our neighborhood is right about...here. *A white little square of light appears.*”)³⁸

The text’s “mystery” lies buried among the shards of the clique’s memory and concerns one member of the group in particular -- Bobbie James. As their collective recitation “pieces together” the story behind her sudden disappearance, the interpersonal dynamics of the teenagers is gradually revealed. Their sociality as a group is shaped and controlled by a cruel underbelly of negative emotions and neediness as two of the more popular girls unleash their envy and acute sense of rivalry against Bobbie as a punishment for having bought and worn a “red sweater.” Bobbie’s unwitting “breach” deeply disturbs the group’s hidden social hierarchy, and deceitfulness, manipulation, status games, narcissism and a lethal will to power empower the two girls to take advantage of Bobbie’s vulnerability. The rest of the teenagers allow themselves to be relegated to the sidelines and become passive witnesses of her shaming, harassment and eventual ostracization (“I walked naked all the way through the field/An airplane passed over like thunder/I erased/Barefoot down the long twisting street/I erased”³⁹). The spectre of Bobbie’s disappearance comes back to haunt the group years later when the remains of her body are believed to have been found in the abandoned greenhouse.

In this vein, the quasi-ritualized, collective recitation of Tannahill’s elusive and fragmented text is ultimately revealed as a process of commemoration. It alleviates the collective guilt that haunts the teenagers’ memories. Indeed, within the social microcosm of the clique, we come face to face with a

³⁶ *Concord Floral* 21.

³⁷ *Concord Floral* 23.

³⁸ *Concord Floral* 16.

³⁹ *Concord Floral* 88.

social dynamic which is historically all too familiar. It will not come as a surprise that *Concord Floral*, the greenhouse, was built in 1951 by two German Jews, Esther and David Rosenberg, who live *ex patria* in Canada and have settled down to grow roses “because a life without beauty is unbearable.”⁴⁰ It is only the end of the play which contextualizes this allusion to the Holocaust and ties it to the merciless shaming and brutal victimization of Bobbie James. However, the play does not end on a note of profound disillusion. The conclusion of *Concord Floral* powerfully widens the play’s historical horizons to capture the salient question at the heart of the teenagers’ experience. Without false optimism or sentimentality, the epilogue grasps at the potentiality for salvation that may lie in wait, deeply embedded, in the social psychology of genocide,

I once heard someone say
10 percent of any population is cruel, no matter what
and 10 percent is merciful, no matter what
and the remaining 80 percent can be moved in either direction
Well I have a lot of hope for the future
I think, by and large, people want to be moved toward mercy
And I think they will
I think we’re moving towards mercy.⁴¹

What comes to light, then, in the creative risks and “aesthetic failures” of Jordan Tannahill’s plays is the fact that they enable innovative articulation of content. His texts give evidence of a discerning sensibility for aesthetic form and reveal how “failed dramaturgy”, when it succeeds, is tied closely to the themes, feelings, the collective and individual psychology, and human experiences that lie embedded in the dramatic work. *Peter Fechter: 59 Minutes* and *Concord Floral* are certainly two cases in point.

Rihannaboi95 – queer failure and the potency of queer culture-making

Here, then, Tannahill’s solo play *rihannaboi95* (2013) is of final interest because its queer youth protagonist throws light on so many of the key questions I have touched on here, among them the sociocultural and materialist conditions of queer culture-making, the psychosexual roots of camp sensibility and “failed” style, the parodic use of heteronormative intertexts to allow the queer subject to achieve legibility and expression, and queer aesthetics generally. *Queer “failure” works*.

Having said that, it is important to acknowledge at the outset that the play’s dramaturgical form does not as such participate in the radical, avant-garde “aesthetics of failure” that have inspired Tannahill’s

⁴⁰ Ibid 23.

⁴¹ Ibid 91.

theoretical reflections as well as the ‘writerly’ risks he takes in such works as *Peter Fechter: 59 Minutes* and *Concord Floral*. Nor does its dramaturgy remotely resemble the nonlinear, often radically disjunctive, collage-inspired, and/or nonsensical texts of diverse modernist and (post)modernist European and American playwrights and directors that have inspired him -- among them Gertrude Stein, Robert Wilson, Eugene Ionesco, and more recently, Sarah Kane.⁴² Instead, it presents the more or less chronologically organized recollections of his protagonist’s *coming out/ becoming/ becoming known as queer* as a result of his *online* drag performances.

In *Theatre of the Unimpressed*, Tannahill offers us insights into his reasons for writing the play. The playwright describes an event curated by Jon Davie for Videofag which was entitled “Sissy Boy YouTube Night.” The program consisted of “a dozen videos shot by preteen and teenage boys dancing and lip-synching to the pop songs of female divas.”⁴³ What impressed the playwright the most was the *attitude* of their drag performances. Unlike adult drag, which is often inflected by irony (at times, even mockery) and which embraces its performativity with self-awareness to amplify the artifice of embodied gender, the videos shown at Videofag “were supremely uncensored and unselfconscious expressions of persona, gender and inner desire.”⁴⁴

One of the most innovative features of the text is the fact that it “was performed nightly in a bedroom and live-streamed over the Internet for audiences to watch from their computers.”⁴⁵ As a solo play performed in front of a computer monitor, Tannahill’s text emphatically resists the audience’s expectations of the visual pleasures of “successful” theatre in a conventional sense, and it cleverly teases the threshold of liveness/Live Art and mediatization. Arguably, live-streaming provokes an intriguing hybridity of theatrical and cinematic experience and challenges the audience to re-think simplistic definitions of “liveness” which precede the arrival of online *live* communications. Moreover, as I will argue below, it allows Tannahill’s character to claim and exercise queer agency as a powerful antidote to the homophobic “neighborhood uprising” his YouTube videos provoke. Reminiscent of the way Spalding Gray’s autobiographical monologues resisted the process of commodification which is typical of New York’s commercial theatre, Tannahill’s “simple” aesthetics in *rihannaboi95* presents the “story as a YouTube video fusing the confessional and sissy-boy dance-video genres.”⁴⁶ Despite the limitations of its “talking head” format, the play reveals how the “confessions” of its sixteen-year-old protagonist and his “culture-making” exercise queer agency to exceed hegemonic discursive influences.

⁴² Cf. Tannahill, *Theatre of the Unimpressed*, 39.

⁴³ Tannahill, *Theater of the Unimpressed* 106.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Tannahill, *Age of Minority* (Toronto: Playwrights Canada Press, 2013) 35.

⁴⁶ Tannahill, *Theatre of the Unimpressed*, 106.

Sunny lives with his family of indeterminate ethno-cultural origin in a small, cramped apartment in Lawrence Heights, one of Toronto's first large public housing projects. Known colloquially as the "Jungle," it is an urban area marked by population density and pervasive income inequality. Immersed in his milieu, Sunny's budding queer desire and sexual awareness find clandestine expression in the drag videos he begins to produce, dancing and lip-synching to a handful of Rihanna song. Tannahills foregrounds the clandestine nature of his protagonist's cultural agency to foreground his internalized shame and the residual homophobia which prohibits a free display of his proclivities.

You know when I'm dancing in my videos I'm not even playing any music 'cause the kitchen's right on the other side of the door. So what I do is listen to a song over and over again at night on earbuds, going through the moves in my head. And then when I make the videos I do all the moves and put the song in afterwards and it synchs up perfect. I just make sure Mom's on the phone or Dad has the TV up high....⁴⁷

Going public by posting these on YouTube as *rihannboi95*, his emerging sense of self and the expression of his queered/queering desire increasingly receive social affirmation from the number of "Views" and "Likes" his productions accumulate (as is typical for today's teens). However, these affirmations by an anonymous online following are contrasted poignantly with Sunny's apprehension of his failures at home. The sibling rivalry between his older brother King and himself manifests itself first and foremost in terms of their respective success and/or failure to embody masculinity. For Sunny, King embodies successful heteronormative masculinity,

'Sunny, you're a girl-boy.' "Don't stand like that, don't talk like that, you embarrass us," "Be a man," "Be more like King" – My brother King runs the Koodo Mobile at Lawrence Square. Girls like his big watch and his Sean Johns and they let him fuck them between shifts and he blows all his money on nice clothes. I'm like a bad smell in the room.⁴⁸

So my friend says I never smile. And that I talk all quiet. Well duh. Back on Replin Road? Shit, gurl, I'm a *bhadwe ki nasal*. Boys in Rocawear sweatshirts shout "Chaaka! Faggot!" And you wonder why I never smile?⁴⁹

Not surprisingly, then when the YouTube videos are discovered by King and shown to the extended family, the profound emotions that are part and parcel of the homosocial bonds among the men of Lawrence Heights, emotions which shape and stabilize the intercultural dynamics of the community surface violently and threaten the delicate and vulnerable equilibrium of Sunny's identity and sense of belonging.

⁴⁷ Tannahill, *Age of Minority* 38-39.

⁴⁸ Tannahill, *Age of Minority* 39.

⁴⁹ Ibid 38.

King grabs me and hauls me into the bedroom and locks the door and just begins to cry...And he sits down on the bed and he's like "Why'd you have to go and do this, Sunny...And he starts to tell me how his friends've been beating on him for it, calling him a fag, and to get them to stop he said he's gonna help them put me in line, put me in my place – "They gonna come for you, man... You don't get it, Sunny: it's the block, Serb, Bengali, Somali, all these guys, we're brothers, it's how the other blocks see us, our family, and you can't go disgracing us like this, dancing like a faggot on YouTube. You don't think about our honour? Didn't you even stop to fucking think, guy? Wallahi, so stupid."⁵⁰

Sunny's uncomfortable *becoming/becoming known* thus engenders the intense semiotic, interactional and performative labor that will be required to sustain the illusion of "realness" of masculinity and its "authentic" relationship to male bodies among the men of his neighborhood.⁵¹ Homophobia and homophobic panic have always already been a battle for the survival of gender myths and binary constructions that are misapprehended as the immutable and "natural" foundation of the given social (and gender) order. King's complicity with the efforts of the neighborhood's men to police the gender binary ultimately serves merely the goal to protect and maintain its underlying conceptual framework intact. Indeed, Marjorie Garber, as Ziysah D. Markson points out, "describes the cross-dresser as "both terrifying and seductive precisely because s/he incarnates and emblemizes the disruptive element that intervenes, signaling not just another category crisis but – much more disquietingly – a crisis of 'category' itself."⁵²

Not surprisingly, King's threats of an imminent explosion of homophobic hatred and violence in the neighborhood result in Sunny's taking flight from the community. His hurried escape ends with his taking refuge in his friend Keira's apartment. He has become a genderqueer fugitive – "So I'm here – fugitive lifestyle. Making this video on her computer...I'm in a fucking rock and a hard space or whatever the saying is...."⁵³ From here, he live-streams his last YouTube appearance – that is, the performance the audience witnesses live like an "internet voyeur."⁵⁴ However, shortly before Tannahill's play and Sunny's account of his *becoming/becoming known* reaches its conclusion a commotion is heard on the other side of the bedroom door. Tannahill thus ensures the audience an opportunity to share in the visceral experience of the threat homophobia poses for the safety of queer subjects.

However, forced for a second time to negotiate the choice between fight and flight, the protagonist now experiences a powerful and cathartic transformation as he negotiates his fear and instinct to take

⁵⁰ Tannahill, *Age of Minority* 54-5.

⁵¹ Cf. McInnes, David, and Christyn Davies, "Articulating Sissy Boy Queerness within and against Discourses of Tolerance and Pride," in Driver, Susan, *Queer Youth Cultures* (Albany, State University of New York, 2008) 107.

⁵² Markson, Ziysah D., "Drag it out," in Driver, Susan, *Queer Youth Cultures* 286. Markson quotes Garber's "Dress Codes or the Theatricality of Difference," *Vested Interests: Cross-Dressing and Cultural Anxiety*. (New York Routledge, 1992) 177-8.

⁵³ Tannahill, *Age of Minority* 57.

⁵⁴ This is the video the theatre audience watches as part of the theatre performance's live-streaming of the video on YouTube.

flight and decides to confront and defy them. His clandestine culture-making for an anonymous online following suddenly erupts in his energetic recognition of his queer agency. Indeed, the text now links Sunny's dancing and drag performance with his activist energy that will reclaim and transform the neighborhood,

It's fucking Chris Brown; he's here for me but I ain't gonna let him touch me. I'm gonna be strong. I'm gonna live tonight. I'm gonna live. And one day I'm gonna go back to Replin Road and I'm gonna walk down the block with no shame, my head held high, shouting "I'm alive, I'm alive, rihannaboi95," and it'd be like a music video with fireworks and a sick beat, and the boys kicking ball against the wall will stop and they'll say, "Shit, look at Sunny."... And all the faces in all the apartments, they'll watch. My mom and dad and King and my uncles, faces pressed to the glass. In the middle of Replin I'll hit each move perfect, the music blasting, tight jeans, big hair, low-cut, own it, serve it – they'll be watching me in every apartment and basketball court and car on Allen Road...every shopper...every quiet house...every lonely teen on the bus at night...watching YouTube under the covers; we're faggots, we're weapons cocked and fully loaded – we're alive, we're alive, rihannaboi95.

They are in the other room. I can hear them on the other side of the door. Maybe Mom, Dad King. Mr. Bailey. All the riders of the 116....⁵⁵

The play thus climaxes with Sunny's defiant fantasy of outing himself to the entire neighborhood, to the people of his neighborhood community who know him. He dreams his future claiming of public spaces for queer belonging. Here, Tannahill deliberately contrasts his protagonist's earlier descriptions of clandestine and silent dance rehearsals, and lip synching under the covers with the public and unashamed demonstration of social pride which is manifest in his drag performance at the end. In his article "Dance Liberation," David Román maps the long history of gay and lesbian activism and its intersection with community celebrations and dances, as "their dancing [is] a kinesthetic ritual of knowingness that signals the subcultural codes of queer collectivity and belonging."⁵⁶ In this vein, also Tannahill's queer youth "gets up from his desk, turns the lights back on, and begins to blast a Rihanna song – "Where Have You Been." He dances brashly – he gives it his all. The door behind him is flung open...Sunny keeps dancing. He pays no attention to the open door..."⁵⁷ As the play ends with Sunny's "dance liberation," Susan Driver's observations that "queer youth are not discursively containable" is fully validated. Indeed Tannahill's socio-cultural portrait of Sunny, as a whole, clearly demonstrates her insight that "the complexities of their subjectivities and social lives imbricate class, race, ethnic, geographic, and age relations through which queer youth become meaningful to themselves and others."⁵⁸

⁵⁵ Tannahill, *Age of Minority* 58.

⁵⁶ Román, David, "Dance Liberation," *Theatre Journal*, Vol 55, No.3 (Oct 2003)

⁵⁷ Tannahill, *Age of Minority* 58.

⁵⁸ Driver, Susan, *Queer Youth Cultures* 2.

Here, however, it is worthwhile to return to the question of an aesthetics of failure. The hybrid form of *rihannaboi95* “riffs” on the themes of liveness and mediatization and lays bare differences in cultural agency that are deeply embedded in the medium. Tannahill’s text carefully contrasts the intimacy of autobiographical online confession and the anonymous affirmations afforded by online communication which has a diffused, potentially global reach, on the one hand, and the transformational power of live encounters in streets and public spaces which allow for “in yer face” claiming and celebration of marginalized identities. Indeed, he strongly endorses theatre that engages with the internet.⁵⁹ For him, Sunny represents “the amateur as a self-determined and enfranchised participant. It is the amateur who will inherit the twenty-first century.”⁶⁰

In this sense, Tannahill reveals how the agency of queer youth is situated in a wider socio-cultural and media context, and how they resist and have the power to thwart hegemonic discursive influences. Indeed, *rihannaboi95* accurately reflects recent trends in how a new generation of innovative artists harness the accessibility of the internet “because it gives them full control of the production process. They are not waiting to be programmed by a theatre; they can make a work and disseminate it on their own terms. They can also sidestep the real-estate dilemma” and thus overcome the material restraints imposed by neoliberal austerity.⁶¹ As also Sara Jane Bailes observes in *Performance Theatre and the Poetics of Failure*, “The proliferation of independent do-it-yourself/home-made artistic production amongst smaller ad hoc or organized groups, in far thriftier conditions, reflects the intensity of urban living and the countless subversive and often invisible ways individuals and communities are able to undermine the political, cultural and social order propagated by hegemonic ideology and its system of values.”⁶²

As the artistic director of his theatre company *Surburban Beast* and as curator of *VideoFag*,⁶³ Jordan Tannahill, has undoubtedly proven himself a “cultural and political catalyst” in recent years. As a playwright and director, he has “become strongly visible” not only in Toronto’s art and theatre scene but across the country. However, while his “culture-making” has found its Canadian home, his individual sense of “belonging” is clearly marked by ambivalence, restlessness and unease. In *Theatre of the Unimpressed*, Tannahill has proven himself a resistant, precocious and forward thinking artist who cares deeply about Canadian theatre and its future.

⁵⁹ Tannahill, *Theatre of the Unimpressed* 106-113.

⁶⁰ Ibid 113.

⁶¹ Ibid 109.

⁶² Bailes 2.

⁶³ Videofag -- a live art, video/film, new media and performance lab in Toronto’s Kensington Market which he co-founded and ran with his partner William Ellis (October 2012 – June 2016).

In closing these reflections, I'd like to draw on the work of Judith/Jack Halberstam who throws light on the socio-cultural "utility" of the work of re-imagining which the self-conscious agency of *failure* can inaugurate to unfold its potentiality as a progressive politics of critique. In the *Queer Art of Failure*, s/he argues that,

Queer studies offer us a method for imagining, not some fantasy of an elsewhere, but existing alternatives to hegemonic systems. What Gramsci terms "common sense" depends heavily on the production of norms, and so the critique of dominant forms of common sense is also, in some sense, a critique of norms. Heteronormative common sense leads to the equation of success with advancement, capital accumulation, family, ethical conduct, and hope. Other subordinate, queer, or counter-hegemonic modes of common sense lead to the association of failure with nonconformity, anticapitalist practices, nonreproductive life styles, negativity and critique.⁶⁴

In the same vein, Tannahill's cultural perspective, while highly critical, is also marked by utopian thinking. It posits that "only by understanding what theatre truly does best, by emphasizing, promoting and celebrating the very fact of its liveness – the full, messy experience of human connection – can theatre reclaim its relevance and vitality in our mediated age."⁶⁵ For him, an aesthetics of failure makes "a profoundly optimistic and human proposal, one that reconstitutes failure as hopeful iconoclasm."⁶⁶ Theatre ought to be "a radical space of togetherness, where we become other people to unpack the complexity of being ourselves, of being human."⁶⁷

⁶⁴ Halberstam, Judith, *The Queer Art of Failure* (Durham and London, Duke University Press, 2011) 89.

⁶⁵ Tannahill, *Theatre of the Unimpressed* 20.

⁶⁶ Ibid 123.

⁶⁷ Ibid 62.