

Q2Q Conference - The Queer Playwright
Dave Deveau

As devised, post-dramatic, and interdisciplinary theatricalities become more and more prevalent, where, how and why does the queer playwright function? If what is queer is deconstructive, is "the queer playwright" an oxymoron? And is there a queering that takes place within "traditional" playwriting practices?

I would be remiss if I didn't admit that I've been grappling with whether the act of writing a play, the very thing that I do, has become passé, and with it, too, the bulk of my practice. More and more work that I'm seeing is challenging notions of narrative theatricality and pushing into a post-modern, post-playwright, post-narrative meditation on theme. And though there is definitely audience for it, as our biggest arts festivals prove, this isn't the work that resonates for me. I just returned from the Magnetic North Theatre Festival in Whitehorse where I was able to have one-on-one conversations with some of Europe's finest presenters and when asking them this very question - whether the "playwright" has become passé- they reminded me that Canada is a very young country and that all of these tastes are cyclical. 2016 is not the year of the playwright, but that's not to say that 2020 won't be. This was an important reminder of a broader conversation about how our work is never complete - that we as artists, as queer people, make huge strides forward, only to then be forced to take a few steps back and regroup. The arts are, in fact, a reflection of the world. Of the ever-changing now.

To say that "queer playwright" is an oxymoron is simplistic. But to use those two identifiers as a hybrid is equally problematic. We are queer. We are playwrights. These are both fundamental parts of our identities that greatly inform one another in both direction. But it's dangerous to bind them together: does this mean that all of my work needs to be explicitly queer? Have I failed as "queer playwright" if I write straight voices? I was amazed a couple years ago when queer critics viewed my latest work as being not quite queer enough and yet some of the straight critics felt its queerness to be bit pushy. "Queer" and "playwright" were butting heads.

I am excited to see queer voices (both playwrights identifying as queer and allies writing for queer voices) finding their ways into a mainstream conversation on some of our national stages. And I don't believe that our queerness is something we should be containing on the fringes. Can we be our fuller queer selves on smaller stages? Probably. Does this mean we should be restraining the queerness of the work in order to capitalize on a broader audience? Not necessarily. It depends on the conversation our work is trying to have, and what audience needs to be having that conversation. Queer work asking questions about queerness for queer people can at times feel like performing a talent show for your family in your living room. Are we not striving to bring the conversations we are already having to the mainstream? Is this not how progress is made?

Current notions of playwriting may be shifting, but what hasn't changed is the ever-present need to have performative conversations with audiences - to grapple and challenge and investigate. So let's chat.