

Michael Heinze

Love, Sexuality, Identity

The Gay Experience in Contemporary
Canadian Drama

Reflections

Literatures in English
outside Britain and the USA

Albert-Reiner Glaap (Ed.)

Band 17

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 Wissenschaftlicher Verlag Trier

Heinze, Michael: **Love, Sexuality, Identity –
The Gay Experience in Contemporary Canadian Drama /**
Michael Heinze. –

Trier : WVT Wissenschaftlicher Verlag Trier, 2007
(Reflections. Literatures in English
outside Britain and the USA ; Bd. 17)
ISBN 978-3-88476-911-9

D 61

Umschlaggestaltung: Brigitta Disseldorf

© WVT Wissenschaftlicher Verlag Trier, 2007
ISBN 978-3-88476-911-9

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WVT Wissenschaftlicher Verlag Trier
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To Jojo

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I am grateful to the many people who have helped me in this or that way in my work on this dissertation project. First and foremost, I would like to thank my supervisor Albert-Reiner Glaap not only for his good advice and fatherly supervision, but for acquainting me with Canadian theatre in the first place. Through the work with him I got hooked on Canadian drama and eventually couldn't but work on an aspect of it myself. The last six years have supplied me with most thought-provoking work on different projects, and Albert-Reiner Glaap was the strongest influence on my academic coming-of-age.

The playwrights, who have not only contributed statements in the form of answers to the Questionnaire but also through e-mails and answers to the again and again upcoming questions, were of particular help. Especially, I would like to name Christopher Grignard, who, through his own dissertation process, could understand all my quibbles and questions (Munich shall always be with me), and Joan MacLeod, who, after this memorable meeting in Neuss, was a particular source of inspiration. But my gratitude is due to all of them for their patience and support.

My colleagues at Heinrich-Heine-University Düsseldorf always had an open ear and helped with ideas as to structure and concept of the book. Furthermore, the colleagues of the GKS (*Gesellschaft für Kanada-Studien in deutschsprachigen Ländern*) were of great help, when – once again – I had only one thing on my mind during our annual conference in Grainau. I would particularly like to thank Keith Battarbee, who encouraged me at a crucial stage of this endeavour to cut down the number of plays to discuss in order not to lose the overview. Paul Baker from Lancaster University was particularly helpful with reference to the linguistic background.

A lot of people gave me support in my private surroundings. First of all, I owe my parents the biggest 'Thank You' for believing in me and making this long process possible. Stefanie Reynders took a lively interest in my work, and I will never forget the fruitful discussions we had about this or that play, concept or idea. Last, but definitely not least, I would like to thank Joachim (Jojo) Teschler, my partner. Through his love and support this project was finally brought to a successful end. To him, I dedicate this book.

Many more should be named, which – for space reasons – I can't do. But to everyone who helped along the line, please do not think that I have forgotten any of you or your contributions.

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I. What is a gay play? An approach to a controversial term

It might be assumed that this thesis – judging from its title – is concerned with ‘gay plays.’ But what makes a play a gay play? Is it a gay author, a gay topic or gay characters? Does a single gay character in a play with a heterosexual topic make this play a gay play? Before an attempt can be made to answer these questions, the use of the term ‘gay’ has to be discussed. By many people seen as a colloquialism the term would be inappropriate for academic discourse, were it not for the connotations of the term.

As gays are more and more present and open in modern society (not least through the media), politicians and journalists (just like everybody who pronounces on gay matters in public) are increasingly aware that the correct terminology is of the utmost importance. What are the terms under discussion? The three terms that spring to mind are ‘homosexual,’ ‘gay’ and ‘queer.’ There are of course a large number of terms that can be used in a derogatory way or as verbal abuse of gays as will be seen in many of the plays discussed here. But the terms in question are suitable for a discussion of identity. The linguist Paul Baker from Lancaster University (UK) has done research in the field of language that is connected with gays. His most important work is an analysis of the secret language Polari that was used by gay men in Britain during the middle of the 20th century (cf. Baker 2002a). Based on this academic work he has also published a book on gay slang that appeals to a wider audience. In this volume, Baker writes about the history of the word ‘homosexual’:

homosexual noun: a term coined by Karl Maria Kertbeny in the 1860s as a preference to the existing word that was used at the time to describe men who had sex with other men: *pederast*. Kertbeny claimed that many homosexuals were more masculine than other men, being superior to *heterosexuals*. He hoped that the word would help to eliminate the oppressive Paragraph 175 [...] in Germany. However, the word was instead adopted by doctors, including Richard von Krafft-Ebing who concluded that homosexuality was a form of inherited mental illness, resulting in effeminacy. This ‘sickness’ model dominated western opinions about men who had sex with other men for the first half of the twentieth century. By the early 1970s the word *homosexual*, with its medical connotations was superseded by the term *gay*. (Baker 2002b, 147-8).

The term in itself thus came into being out of the wish to create a positive term but also to have a term that could be employed in a medical/academic context without being derogatory. The etymology of the word derives simply from the Greek words ‘homo’ and ‘hetero’ signifying ‘same’ and ‘different,’ a homosexual being a person who chooses a person of the same sex for sexual intercourse. The word homosexual never did find the intended positive connotation, and the fact that it was used in medical contexts to mark the person thus described as a deviant, made the term inappropriate for self-identification.

Gay men have over the centuries found several colloquial words for themselves. In Germany at the beginning of the 20th century, the word ‘Urninge’ was very popular, deriving from the planet Uranus. American gays from the 1960s onwards often called themselves ‘friends of Dorothy’ going back to the role Judy Garland played in the film

The Wizard of Oz, which was and is very popular with gay men. But terms like this are not suitable for a self-identification outside of a gay community and are not appropriate in anything but colloquial language. The term ‘gay,’ according to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, was first used in this connotation in the U.S. in 1971. For Canada the dictionary notes the first usage in 1975 (cf. “Gay,” OED). Paul Baker, however, has stated earlier usage: “By the early twentieth century *gay* was applied to homosexuality, although in 1950’s UK it was mostly only used by ‘upmarket queens.’ By the early 1970s the Gay Liberation Front helped to publicize gay as a word with positive connotations” (Baker 2002b, 128). It is this more political usage that is of interest here.

How has a term (that was used by writers up to the middle of the 20th century) been reconfigured in its connotation in such an absolute way? “The use of the term *gay*, as it relates to homosexuality, arises from an extension of the sexualised connotation of ‘carefree and uninhibited,’ implying a willingness to disregard conventional or respectable sexual mores” (“Gay,” Wikipedia). The word thus stresses the fact of ‘being different,’ but in an attempt to make this difference positive as the breaking free from societal rules. Whereas ‘homosexual’ focuses on the sexual act itself, stressing the point that homosexual men have sexual intercourse with other men, the word ‘gay’ has been seen as describing more, a set of mind, a lifestyle and political ideas and concepts surrounding the identity of the person in question, rather than reducing this person to his sexual preferences.¹ With the term ‘gay pride’ gay has become something of an ‘official’ term for the gay community and is being used by a large number of gay men when publicly expressing their identity. The media have picked this up and are using the word ‘gay’ frequently with a positive connotation and go back to the use of the word ‘homosexual’ when a negative statement is being made. Politicians – for instance the American president George W. Bush – show their opposition to gay rights by insisting on the use of the word ‘homosexual.’

The same intention applies to the word ‘queer,’ but this term is highly ambiguous in its usage and thus not automatically lends itself as a descriptive term. For example, Buddies in Bad Times Theatre in Toronto calls itself a home for ‘queer art,’ but looking at the schedules of the theatre and the programmes one soon notices that, although a large proportion of the shows is by gay and/or lesbian artists, there are also shows with a feminist or ethnic theme. The term queer has thus the connotation of ‘not normal,’ ‘out of the ordinary’ or ‘not holding true to societal rules’ as Cameron and Kulick have stated. ‘Queer’ can thus be applied to heterosexuals (unmarried, with younger partners etc.) as well as homosexuals, transsexuals etc., and

realizing this and trying to understand the ways in which different understandings and uses of ‘queer’ circulate in conversations, political movements or theoretical discussions

1 It should be noted that originally the term included lesbians and gay men but is usually only used to imply ‘homosexual man’ these days. This is true for most English-speaking communities, but definitely for the UK, U.S. and Canada.