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# **"For People Who Aren't Sure Who They Are, Theatre is a Great Place to Be: Narratives of Actors and their Sexual Identities"**

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**Abstract:** This narrative study of male actors who identify as other-than-heterosexual explores the participants' stories of sexual identity development and the relationship between acting and identity development. Framed in D'Augelli's (1994) lifespan developmental model, the study illustrates themes of acting as safe space, acting as an embodied experience, acting as an influence on relationships, and acting as a politic.

## **Introduction**

While adult education literature documents the propensity for theatre to influence in overt or subtle ways, this discussion has historically focused on the experience of the audience as a consumer of the medium. There is a relative paucity in adult education for literature describing the experience of the actor, and how his or her art influences him or her. Few studies attempt to bridge the gap between identity development as a vehicle for adult education and literature from theatre and theatre education that describes the experiences of actors as artists creating identity.

My conversations with actors and performers, as well as my own experiences of theatre and performance art, suggest that the process of acting holds significant meaning-making power for the actor, particularly in understanding the actors' own belief sets and motivations. The purpose of this study was to examine the development of sexual identity in adult male actors in order to explore the relationship between acting and sexual identity, and the actors' processes of making meaning about that relationship. Through examining the narratives of actors to determine how their experiences have impacted their sexual identity, I shed light on how acting may initiate and perpetuate personal development and provide a space through which the actor may reflect on sexual identity.

## **Review of Relevant Literature**

### **Adult Development**

As this study is grounded in adult development, it is important to present an operational definition of adult development, and explore its implications. For this study, I follow Merriam and Clark's (2006) model of development as a change over time, in which the change is reflected in learning. As they delineate, development can be a biological process (aging), psychological process (cognition), or a sociocultural process (social role performance). In particular, this notion of development is appropriate for this study because Merriam and Clark focus on development as a learning process, whether that learning is oppressive or liberatory. Much of the sexual identity development presented in this study, as it is understood by the participants, speaks of coming to understand the self as a learning process.

In this study, I apply an integrated lens on sexual identity as both the product of psychological change and a response to social mores. From a liberatory perspective, sexual identity as a reflection of development represents the breaking away from preconceived notions and coming to understand new perspectives.

### **A Queer Politic**

Queer theory is a philosophy rooted in the understanding that sexual identity is a political construct, and can therefore be understood as a position of power (Morris, 2005). The underlying tenet of queer theory suggests that sexual minorities have been oppressed by dominant narratives and the social structures that reinforce hegemony. One primary goal of those who embrace queer theory as a politic is to destabilize previously unquestioned positions of power and empower the oppressed. Queer theorists bring to light the external forces of oppression and encourage introspection as to one's own place in the world. In a sense, queer theory is a call to learning, suggesting that by examining one's situation within a context of power and positionality, an individual can derive meaning through understanding (and ultimately confronting) social structures. One of the significant social structures addressed within queer theory is heteronormativity, which is also an underlying assumption of the theoretical lens of this study.

### **Sexual Identity through Performance: Gender and Embodiment**

In describing American musical theatre's influence on identity, Raymond Knapp (2006) asserts that live performance of a role can help to negotiate between the inner self and the outer persona of experience. Specifically, he points to the heightened emotions of public performance and the attention paid to the "performer behind the persona" (p.7) and a stronger connection to the content of the performance. He suggests that American musical theatre creates a space to explore alternate interpretations of social values and attitudes by paralleling social mores, advancing alternatives, or bringing subtle social messages to the forefront through persuasive performance. Gender roles and sexuality are, he states, "above all, *performed* attributes of personal identity and so constitute a central dimension of how people are defined, both onstage and off" (p. 205).

In adult education, this resonates with the work of Butterwick and Selman (2012) in their description of the performance of gender, and how gender performance can guide a meaning-making process around personal identity. Drawing from the work of Judith Butler (1993), Butterwick and Selman use the gendered performance of theatre to illustrate the social construction of gender and attitudes of positionality. As an embodied way of understanding gender, the performance of gender and sexuality in theatre relates as well to the work of Lawrence and Butterwick (2007) and their exploration of embodied oppression in theatre and acting as a way of liberating through the body.

Drawing on the model developed by Brooks and Edwards (1997), this exploration of personal and cultural values may mirror the process through which individuals construct sexual identities. Aaron, whose story opens this chapter, by his own admission, did not actively contemplate his sexual identity, and was nonplussed by his sexual identity before playing the role of Matt. Through experiencing Matt's homophobia and playing the role of an aggressor toward someone like himself, Aaron's sense of self was called into question; he was somewhat disoriented in his own self-image as a result of seeing the world through Matt's eyes. Through the language of acting, Aaron also internalized some of the social influences that Matt experienced, and transposed them onto his own sense of self. This experience in many ways laid the foundation for this study by leaving questions unanswered.

### **Theoretical Framework: Lifespan Developmental Model**

Adult education literature has largely overlooked the unique developmental patterns of gay men and lesbian women, except in terms of sexual identity, reinforcing a notion of heteronormativity in adult development (Bettinger, 2007). This reflects the hegemonic notion of

compulsory heterosexuality that is cited throughout the adult education literature on sexual identity (Bettinger, 2007; Hill, 2004). Sexual identity represents one of many facets of identity development, and lies at an intersection of biology, psychology, and social influence (Edwards & Brooks, 1999).

I frame this study using D'Augelli's (1994) lifespan model of sexual identity development, as this model describes sexual identity as fluid and ever-changing, without an ideal outcome or terminus. In this model, identity is not an end-point but a lifelong process (Hill, 2008). As a psychologist, he focuses on psychological events as the determiners for movement between stages; however, the model itself describes peer interactions, biological influences, and the role of social institutions. Moreover, this model is preferential in its privilege of the individual as an active participant in identity development rather than as a passive recipient of biology and environmental influence.

D'Augelli (1994) describes six loosely-bound steps in his Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual (LGB) Identity Development model: (a) exiting heterosexual identity; (b) developing a LGB personal identity status; (c) developing a LGB social identity; (d) becoming a LGB offspring; (e) developing a LGB intimacy status; and (f) entering a LGB community. Although D'Augelli describes the model in steps, progression through the model is not stagewise; this model is distinct from the psychological stagewise models, which require developmental tasks to move between stages (Edwards & Brooks, 1999; Hill, 2008). Rather than identity achievement, the outcome of this model is that the individual finds meaning and direction in his own life through his sexual identity.

### **Research Methodology**

Theatre is enacted storytelling. It integrates character, plot, and setting and brings them to life on the performance stage. Actors are storytellers who embody and portray characters every day. It seems natural to study their experiences by creating a space in which actors can create and share their own stories. This study is informed by a narrative research methodology underscored by the analytic strategies defined by Chase (2005), Clandinin and Connelly (2000), and Clark and Rossiter (2007).

### **Data Collection**

As the actor relies on his or her fellow performers to co-act and react with him or her on stage, the researcher and participant in this study worked together to negotiate their stories. In this study, I collected stories through in-depth, semi-structured interviews with each of the 9 participants, who I selected through a purposeful snowball sampling process. I recruited participants primarily through social media; each of the participants responded either to public postings in theatre message boards or responded to advertisements posted by my colleagues on their own social media pages.

### **Data Analysis**

I reviewed verbatim transcripts of the interviews with the participants in a multi-stage narrative analysis process outlined by Clandinin and Connelly (2000). Through the analytic process, the participants and I collaborated to negotiate and re-story the narrative, highlighting themes that emerged in the interview process.

I began by organizing the text from the transcribed interviews into a continuous story. While the stories are largely sequential, I chose many times not to chronologically present the

stories of the participants' lifespan. Rather, I focused on interactional patterns and the way in which the participant prioritized the facets of his story. Next, I focused on areas of tension within the plotlines of the story to highlight the participants' experiences of coming out, as they illustrated them through their stories of acting. Throughout this phase, participants read their stories; many provided additions and clarifications, while some refocused their stories to highlight areas that I had missed, overlooked, or hadn't gleaned from my interviews. The final product emerged as a restoried narrative, written collaboratively with the participants, sometimes over several conversations, interviews, or email exchanges.

### **Participant Demographics**

My participants were culturally heterogeneous, aged 25-49, and of diverse socioeconomic backgrounds. Of the 9 participants, 7 were white men, 1 was Latino, and 1 was African-American. Seven of the participants self-identified as gay, while 1 identified as bisexual and 1 as omnisexual.

Each had recently been actively engaged in acting, although their experiences range from community theatre through professional acting. All but one participant were college graduates, and 7 of the participants studied theatre in college. Three identified as activist actors, although none were engaged currently in explicit activism.

### **Findings and Discussion**

Several major themes emerged consistently in the narratives of the 9 participants, with each theme being linked to a relevant discourse in adult education. In this section, I will present each theme with a brief illustration, and relate the participants' stories to the academic discourse in adult education.

#### **Theatre Can Be a Safe Space**

In each of the narratives, theatre emerged as a space in which participants believed that they were able to safely explore their sexual identities as each participant understood them, or as those identities emerged and shifted. Each participant, in his narrative, talked about the heterogeneity of the theatre community, suggesting that there's a place for everyone in the theatre. Participants also believed that theatre allowed them to discover their "otherness" and created a safe space for sexual identity exploration to occur, whether that was a physical process or a socio-emotional exploration through conversation and relationships. Participants stated that the process of acting also created a vulnerability in which they became more acutely aware of emotional experiences and reactions.

#### **The Embodied Experience of Acting**

Participants in this study described the role of the body in acting in several contexts. Many participants believed that acting helped them to understand their bodies and how their bodies move. This became relevant to sexual identity in understanding gendered movement and gendered stereotypes of body type, size, and shape. One participant similarly described the role of the voice in a similar way.

Embodied gender performance was perhaps the most pervasive theme of embodiment within the narratives. Participants described cross-gender exploration, the role of drag, and learning how to perform masculinity and femininity through character. As well, identity

misclassification, or the audience's perception of the actors' sexual identities based on character performance, was a common theme in several narratives.

### **Acting as a Relationship Influence**

All of the participants described acting as an influence on their relationships. Many talked about positive relationships developing with mentors who were formative in their coming of age. Most participants described the community of actors in familial language, and stated that their primary support networks are found in acting. Others described the ways in which theatre informed their relationships with their families of origin. Participants spoke in both positive and negative ways about the role of theatre in their romantic and sexual relationships, particularly about the implication of "showmanes" and dating other actors.

### **Acting as a Politic**

Although only one third of the participants identified as activist in their practice, many of them described ways in which acting became a political expression. Three of the participants expressed a belief that acting facilitates social change and can be a means of communicating social messages. Others related ways in which acting helped them to understand both the overt and the subtle structures of power and oppression in mainstream culture through the performance of those power structures.

## **Conclusions and Implications**

This study simultaneously supported earlier research in adult education, theatre and arts education, and the study of adult development, while supplementing those areas of study with new insights into the role of acting in understanding and making meaning of sexual identity.

### **Embodied Knowing and Performance of Gender**

The themes of gender and embodiment are ubiquitous in the narratives of the participants. Each participant describes the role of the body in his art; in particular, the role of the body in the performance of gender. This provides support for the existing discussion of the role of the body as a way of knowing. In a sense, the actors' narratives echo Butterwick and Selman's (2012, p. 64) statement describing theatre in adult education: "Through participating in theatre experiences, the muted mind becomes embodied and sometimes the body finds voice, or perhaps the separate mind finally becomes the audience to embodied intelligence". This study helps to bridge the link between theatre in adult education with the experience of mainstream actors, while deepening the connection between the embodied knowing and the experiences of performance artists.

### **Adult Development**

Considering the D'Augelli model as an illustration of development, this study provides a lens to understand sexual identity development within a broader context of adult education. To date, there are limited practical applications of sexual identity models within the discourse of adult education. This study provides a foundational perspective on the role of acting and participation in theatre as they may inform adult development. Within this study, the narratives illustrate transferrable themes that can enhance an understanding of adult development for actors.

Further, this study bridges several disparate areas of discussion and demonstrates their interconnectedness within a lens of adult development. From this study, further research can

create foundations in understanding the role of embodiment, gender performance, and sexual identity on the overall developmental process. These areas of discussion have not been linked in the context of adult development in earlier research; this study provides a foundational link between these areas of practice as they intersect within adult development.

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