

CALIFORNIA STATE UNIVERSITY, NORTHRIDGE

Drag Queens, Mascara, and Family...Oh, My!

Challenging Heteronormativity in the Musical *La Cage aux Folles*

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By

Janice Marie Ventura

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The thesis of Janice Marie Ventura is approved:

Sarah Altman, M.F.A.

Date

Anamarie Dwyer, M.F.A

Date

Ah-Jeong Kim, PhD. Chair

Date

Acknowledgements

This work is dedicated to all individuals who have ever felt dejected in society because of some form of prejudice. Although this thesis focuses specifically on LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender)/queer issues reflected in the musical, *La Cage aux Folles*, I believe this thesis sheds light on a greater issue at hand; while people have progressed in a multitude of ways, the fact that there is still a segmented group in society that experience prejudice only supplements proof that the road to equality still has a long way to go.

I confess I am not a homosexual. I write this thesis from a heterosexual perspective. But, like LGBT, I share the challenges associated with societal acceptance for two reasons. First, I am a female, and as I have addressed in this thesis, being female classifies me as a member of the female minority. Secondly, throughout my life, I have often been ostracized in society, experiencing a sense of cultural/racial dysphoria because I cannot identify with one specific culture or race due to my multi-ethnic background. My ethnic make-up is as follows: Hawaiian, Filipino, Portuguese, Irish, Italian, and Welsh. My allure to the musical *La Cage aux Folles* is thus intensified because, for relatable reasons, I have never been able to identify with one single race. Differences should not require justification, and yet, they do. With each University and job application I have ever been asked to complete – whether the request is optional or not – I am faced with the question of ethnicity/race.

Although the societal issues revolving around my ethnicity are frustrating, the truth is, I have never experienced the degradation or prejudice of being solely judged on the basis of my sexual orientation. I have never been told that loving my husband and the

reciprocation of such emotions is morally unjust. It is through theatrical productions like *La Cage* that I view and feel the pain of such an injustice.

Over the past three years, I have learned about theater from various regions of the world; from Europe to Latin America, from India to Japan. In that time, I have been afforded the opportunity to expand my intellectual horizons and view theater as a tool for human/societal expression. Theater can implore awareness, activate change, and educate a population. Theater can entertain and simultaneously illuminate the humane and the inhumane. *La Cage* exemplifies theater's ability to transcend perlocutionary acts because the musical challenges audiences to consider an alternative perspective. It has been my honor to research and write about the issues presented in this musical, and I am optimistic that one day the issues discussed in this thesis will be no more; an unrepeated time in history that future scholars can look back on and discuss as an unfortunate hurdle that society overcame.

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ABSTRACT

Drag Queens, Mascara, and Family...Oh, My!

Challenging Heteronormativity in the Musical *La Cage aux Folles*

By

Janice Marie Ventura

Master of Arts in Theater

What do we see when we view a musical theater production? Who are these characters we see spontaneously singing upon the stage? What are these melodies and movements we soak in? Is a musical merely an escapist form of innocent theater? Or, is it perhaps, something more? It cannot be denied that most musicals are unadulterated spectacle that entices diverse audiences due to the fusion of various performance elements: acting, singing, dancing, etc. But, many musical productions are endowed with a series of didactic attributes that not only convey deep thematic significance to its viewers, but also reflect a truth society so often tries to conceal. Some musicals yield character diversity and aim to reflect human relations to one another. Though not always apparent, the way in which these characters interface with one another is impactful for a number of reasons. Whether these characters are fictional or non-fictional, they reflect how human beings interact and react to one another within a societal milieu. What then, does this say about us as people and the society we live in?

A musical that yields a fascinating response to these questions is the 1983 musical, *La Cage aux Folles*. Through textual analysis, this thesis demonstrates how the characters in *La Cage* reflect a number of issues revolving around societal discrimination

and forced separatism against individuals identifying as queer (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, transsexual or any individual identifying outside the guise of normative standards). The prejudice experienced by these characters is inflicted solely on the basis of their sexual preference and identification with queer culture. This thesis demonstrates how *La Cage* reflects the consciousness of queer characters as queer human beings in a society dominated by heterosexual hegemony.

The theoretical framework utilized in this thesis derives from Queer theory, Feminist theory, and Feminist theater. It is through this framework that the following postulations about *La Cage* have been formulated and proven: first, *La Cage* is a musical production in which its script is characterized by consciousness of queer characters as queer human beings; second, *La Cage* contains scripted performances that demonstrate sexual differences among characters despite biological sex and thus undermines the dominant thought that heteronormativity is the sole power in society; and, lastly, *La Cage* challenges the recognition of heteronormativity. The combined analysis of these postulations proves that *La Cage* is a musical with political purpose, containing an activist viewpoint that acts as a call for societal evaluation. Ultimately, the musical points out a series of dismal truths in society that were prevalent in the 1980s, and as exemplified, still identifiable in the present.

INTRODUCTION

Since its Broadway opening on August 21, 1983 at the Palace Theater in New York, *La Cage aux Folles* has received accolades for its bold characters, stunning costuming, and glamorous milieu. Additionally, the musical is also acclaimed for its dynamic mix of styles, combining the elements of a classic 1920s comedy with modern content that, at the time it premiered, was quite controversial. Ultimately, the controversial subject matter that set *La Cage* apart from its precursors is also what made the production historical. Despite the production's aesthetic wonders and ingenious comedic wit, *La Cage* is a pungent musical laced with activism, calling to attention the discriminatory treatment of individuals who identify as queer in a society dominated by heterosexual hegemony.

Through in-depth textual analysis, critical reviews, and various interviews/commentaries from the *La Cage aux Folles* creative team (musical director, Arthur Laurents, composer and lyricist, Jerry Herman, and author, Harvey Fierstein), this thesis examines three conceptualized postulations. The theoretical framework utilized throughout this thesis derives from Queer theory, Feminist theory, and Feminist theater. I have also utilized theories that stem from the disciplines of Sociology and Psychology. It is through this framework that the following postulations about *La Cage* have been formulated: first, *La Cage* is a musical production in which its script is characterized by the consciousness of queer characters as queer human beings; second, *La Cage* contains scripted performances that demonstrate sexual differences among characters despite their biological sex and thus aims to undermine the dominant thought that heteronormativity is

the sole power in society; and, lastly, *La Cage* challenges the recognition of heteronormativity. The combined analysis of these postulations intends to prove *La Cage* is a musical with political purpose, containing an activist viewpoint that acts as a call for societal evaluation. Ultimately, the musical points out a series of dismal truths in society that were prevalent in the 1980s, and arguably, still identifiable in the present.

First and foremost, I would like to clarify the terms utilized in this thesis. As a means to encompass the preponderance of individuals identifying as homosexual, I have adopted the acronym, “LGBT,” throughout this thesis, which stands for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transsexual. Currently, the acronym contains an “I”-“LGBTI.” The “I” acknowledges individuals who identify as intersex. Since intersex characters are not reflected, mentioned, or identified in *La Cage*, I have omitted the “I” as a means to remain consistent when discussing the characters presented in this musical. Secondly, the term that I have adopted and utilized throughout this thesis is “queer.” In order to define this term appropriately, I have ascertained its meaning from Queer Theory. This theory assists in understanding the dynamism of this term and why “queer” best suits this thesis.

The term “queer” is quite difficult to describe because it encompasses a vast group of individuals. Annamarie Jagose, queer theorist, feminist, and academic scholar, explains this quandary in her book, *Queer Theory: an Introduction*:

Clearly, there is no generally acceptable definition of queer; indeed, many of the common understandings of the term contradict each other irresolvably. Nevertheless, the inflection of queer that has proved most disruptive to received understandings of identity, community and politics is the one that problematises normative consolidations of sex, gender and

sexuality-and that, consequently, is critical of all those versions of identity, community, and politics that are believed to evolve ‘naturally’ from such consolidations. By refusing to crystallize in any specific form, queer maintains a relation of resistance to whatever constitutes the normal” (Jagose 99).

Jagose points out that “queer” cannot be generally defined because there are various interpretations connotated with the term. Since queer disseminates the notion that identity, community and politics cannot be easily defined, the term is therefore appropriate for the arguments presented in this thesis. For instance, when evaluating the characters in *La Cage*, it is difficult to categorize/label each character’s identity. For instance, the character, Albin, is a homosexual male who also identifies as a drag queen. In contrast, the character, Georges (Albin’s partner), is a homosexual male who presumably identified or experimented with heterosexuality in the past. Therefore, the term “queer” is best suited for this thesis because queer “is not meant to be synonymous with a single label of sexuality, such as gay or lesbian [or bisexual or Transgender]” (Baker 17).

In order to build a proper historical foundation and identify the various controversies that existed during the time *La Cage* premiered on Broadway, Chapter One of this thesis provides an essential background on LGBT activism, beginning in 1969 with the Stonewall Riots and briefly covering Franklin Kameny and the rise of the AIDS epidemic. Following the historical background on LGBT activism, I will briefly examine several musicals that preceded *La Cage*. The musicals touched upon all contained or

insinuated the existence of queer characters. I will then focus on juxtaposing *La Cage* with Mart Crowley's 1968 play, *The Boys in the Band*.

The Second Chapter provides a brief history on the inception of *La Cage*. First I will focus on Jean Poiret. Poiret wrote the original French farce, *La Cage aux Folles*, in 1973. Next I will focus on how the French play became an adapted musical in 1983 and the "unlikely trio" that made the musical possible: Jerry Herman, Arthur Laurents and Harvey Fierstein. Particular focus centers on Fierstein and his struggles as a homosexual playwright. Fierstein's musical adaptation maintained the political undertones tackled in Poiret's play, intensifying the irreverent treatment, as well as society's prejudice, against LGBT.

The Third Chapter examines several concepts pertaining to the arguments presented in this thesis. The first concept discusses the significance of orientation. In view of queer theorist Sarah Ahmed's postulations about orientation, there are several pertinent discoveries made about the presence of queer, androgynous characters in *La Cage*. These characters function as fundamental proof that gender roles/identities are flawed. Before proceeding further, I would like to provide a brief history on the origins of "heteronormativity."

Emerging in 1991, the term heteronormativity was first introduced by Michael Warner, an American social theorist and literary critic. The term "heteronormative" or "heteronormativity" has been utilized by many queer theorists and feminists since its inception. It was conceived as a means to explain the conundrum of heterosexual dominance throughout society. Warner argues that heterosexual hegemony over all other

sexual minorities creates a linear society based on the assumption that heterosexuality is natural and true, necessitated mostly by the means of reproduction.

So much privilege lies in heterosexual culture's exclusive ability to interpret itself as a society. Het culture thinks of itself as the elemental form of human association, as the very model of inter-gender relations, as the indivisible basis of all community, and as the means of reproduction without which society wouldn't exist. Materialist thinking about society has in many cases reinforced these tendencies, inherent in heterosexual ideology, toward a totalized view of the social. (Warner xxi)

Momin Rahman and Stevi Jackson explain in their book, *Gender and Sexuality*, queer theorists seek to "interrogate the binary oppositions of gay/straight or male/female through which identities are discursively constituted" (Jackson and Rahman 127). Additionally, queer theorists argue that heteronormativity should be deconstructed because it is "not simply about sexual practices, but rather about the 'ways in which heterosexual privilege is woven into the fabric of social life, pervasively and insidiously ordering everyday existence'" (Clarke, Ellis, Peel, and Riggs, 120; Cohen, 108).

The second concept discussed in the Third Chapter closely examines the questions: What is male? What is female? In order to address these questions thoroughly, I draw upon various theories - Sociological, Psychological, Feminist, and queer theories - in order to examine the significance of each character's identity. Concepts such as societal assimilation and conventional gender roles become considerable factors when observing the complexities each primary character possesses. For

the purpose of exemplification, I have narrowed my focus on the characters Albin and Georges to prove my postulations.

The Fourth Chapter hones in on how *La Cage* presents a challenge to the recognition of heteronormativity by examining the two families presented in *La Cage*; Georges, Albin, and Jean-Michel are one family and Edouard, Marie, and Anne Dindon are the other. Calling upon Bertolt Brecht's theories about theater and how theater can function as a tool to alienate audiences from normalcy, Chapter Four examines specific perspectives about LGBT by analyzing several scenes where these two families interact with each other. By studying the emotions, responses, and actions of these primary characters, it becomes evident that issues of homophobia and bigotry are prevalent themes tackled throughout this musical.

In the conclusion of my thesis, I examine current reviews and criticisms of the 2010 *La Cage* revival. Based on the postulations addressed throughout this thesis and the current reviews and criticisms I have gathered on *La Cage*, I discuss specific reasons why the musical continues to be revived. While *La Cage* is a "tuneful, touching, tacky and bedazzling" musical, ultimately *La Cage* is a political piece of theater that transcends the satirical and aesthetic attributes that make the production both palatable and popular (Feldman n.p.). Additionally, *La Cage* challenges audiences to ponder and examine power structures that encourage and uphold an existing form of prejudice.

CHAPTER ONE

Stonewall, AIDS, and the Emergence of Queer Characters on Broadway:

Prior to *La Cage*, homosexuals who had been depicted on the Broadway stage were amalgamated stereotypes implemented into storylines for satirical purposes. Although there had been a few musicals in the 1960s and 1970s that aimed to reflect or insinuate the existence of LGBT/ queer characters in a musical, queer characters were most commonly stereotypical reflections that derived from heterosexual perspectives on the LGBT minority. Historically, *La Cage* was the first Broadway musical to openly reflect queer characters in a lead role. In many respects, *La Cage* is the musical execution of Mart Crowley's 1968 play, *The Boys in the Band*. Although not a musical, Crowley's play is fundamental to the existence of *La Cage* because it was the first play to present a storyline dominated by queer characters. Understanding the significance of *The Boys in the Band* and its impact not only on society, but also on Broadway, is vital in understanding how *La Cage* became a transcending descendent of Crowley's efforts.

As theater is so often a reflection of current events, issues, and people in society, I have implemented a brief historical background on LGBT activism of the 1980s. Additionally, since Crowley's play emerged in 1968, I have also provided a brief history on the Stonewall incident of 1969. The historical information provided in the following sections will supplement a necessary foundation when analyzing the issues presented in *The Boys and the Band* and *La Cage* by identifying societal modes that propelled LGBT prejudice.

1.1 The Stonewall Incident of 1969 and the Rise of the AIDS Epidemic:

The Stonewall Incident of 1969 was the ramification of LGBT oppression. In her book, *Sexuality and Socialism: History, Politics, and Theory of LGBT Liberation*, Sherry Wolf accounts the historical maltreatment of homosexuals, pointing out that LGBT prejudice was not only condoned, but it was encouraged during the 1950s – 1960s through political ordinances;

On the heels of the U.S. military's postwar purge of gays, President Eisenhower signed a 1953 executive order that established "sexual perversion" as grounds for being fired from government jobs. And since employment records were shared with private industry, exposure or suspicion of homosexuality could render a person unemployable and destitute. "Loitering in a public toilet" was an offense that could blacklist a man from work and social networks, as lists of arrestees were often printed in newspapers and other public records. Most states had laws barring homosexuals from receiving professional licenses, which could also be revoked upon discovery. Sex between consenting adults of the same sex, even in a private home, could be punished by up to life in prison, confinement in a mental institution, or, in seven states, castration (Wolf 116-117).

Coinciding with Wolf, Martin Boyce, a Stonewall veteran, describes the historic event in an AARP television special, *Stonewall 40 Years Later*, as a seemingly unstoppable force that came as a direct result of the injustices that had been endured for decades;

It didn't matter if we were going to get our heads broken. It didn't matter if we were going to go to the hospital. Nothing mattered... We just could not stop it. This time it was instinct and just motivated out of all the problems we were having. Of all this talk of freedom, desiring this freedom and somehow never going to get any of it. ("AARP TV: Stonewall 40 Years Later:" YouTube.com)

The truth remains that the Stonewall riots (an event that lasted for six days) was a consequence of exasperated LGBT worldwide. In their book, *Out for Good: the Struggle to Build a Gay Rights Movement in America*, Dudley Clendinen and Adam Nagourney describe the demographic of the Stonewall incident, which took place at the Stonewall Inn in Greenwich Village New York, as "a population – in New York and elsewhere-that was accustomed to raids and arrests" (12). Over the years, it had become a certain fact that New York City cops raided The Stonewall Inn regularly. The regular raiding of the Stonewall inn led to the highly anticipated LGBT confrontation between queers and New York City authorities.

The Stonewall Inn was a quaint, "dimly lit dance bar that welcomed homosexuals with countercultural life styles" (Marotta 71). The club was Mafia owned and operated beneath the social radar. A red flashing light would indicate police officials were on their way and became a common tactic the club utilized as a means to protect clientele. Despite the corrupt nature of the bar's owners who conducted business that listed the bar as a "private 'bottle club' which meant that the owners weren't supposed to sell the drinks – which of course they did anyway," the club remained one of the few havens queers could go to socialize or be openly intimate (Alsenas, 86). Thomas Lanigan

Schmidt, artist and Stonewall Veteran, explains, “Stonewall was the only place homosexuals could go to “play those Motown songs and hold on to each other.” (“AARP TV: Stonewall 40 Years Later:” YouTube.com)

On the evening of Friday, June 27, 1969, seven police detectives led by Deputy Inspector, Seymour Pine, entered the Stonewall Inn with intentions of arresting the on-sight manager along with employees on warranted charges of operating without a liquor license. The officers allowed customers who were able to produce identification to leave the bar; those who could not provide identification were instructed to stay behind. The customers were made up of mostly homosexual males, but there were a few cross dressers and butch lesbians present as well. In front of the bar, a small crowd gathered to witness the raid. As each customer emerged the crowd cheered and “their applause encouraged brassy individuals passing through the hands of the police to make clever remarks and effeminate gestures” (Marotta 72). Once the police paddy wagons began to appear, the crowd began to funnel their anger in the forms of hurled bottles and trashcans.

The morning after Stonewall, news articles detailing the riot circulated. The New York Times published an article on June 30, 1969, *Police Again Rout ‘Village’ youths: Outbreak by 400 Follows a Near-Riot Over Raid* that briefed readers on the magnitude of the riots. The article described the chaotic scene, reporting “Tactical Patrol Force units [were] assigned to the East Village ... [pouring] into the area about 2:15a.m. after units from the Charles Street station house were unable to control a crowd of about 400 youths, some of whom were throwing bottles and lighting small fires” (New York Times 22).

The magnitude of the Stonewall incident was fueled by years of societal oppression a dawdling strife for basic civil rights. LGBT radicalism came in the form of

anger and rioting, and out of violence emerged unity. David Carter, author of *Stonewall: the Riots That Sparked the Gay Revolution*, describes the impact Stonewall had on LGBT political efforts and several organizations that formed as a consequence;

Gay people had founded a political movement for the rights of gay people prior to Stonewall, although of modest means, and it was the Stonewall Riots that resulted in the birth of the Gay Liberation Front (GLF) and later of the Gay Activist Alliance (GAA). These exemplars of a new kind of gay organization, imbued with the militant spirit of the riots that engendered them, soon inspired thousands of gay men and lesbians across the country-and ultimately around the world-to join the movement for gay civil and human rights. (Carter 6) As one activist in particular, Franklin Kameny, stated in his AARP TV interview that Stonewall was “a transitional event,” and “in terms of a Gay Movement” was long overdue since LBGT efforts were “close to 20 years old.” (“AARP TV: Stonewall 40 Years Later.” YouTube.com)

Kameny, a WWII veteran and a Ph.D. graduate of Harvard University, is recognized as one of the most influential founding fathers of the early gay liberation movement. Kameny is a product of the Homophile Movement. The Homophile Movement encompassed the liberation efforts brought forth during the 1950s by a number of prominent activists. This period is considered the foundation for LGBT activism and supplied enough momentum for greater activism to emerge in the 1960s. In an attempt to expunge the negative connotations associated with the word “homosexual,”

the term homophile was selected as a means to connote homosexuality with the concept of love, rather than sex.

During the 1960s, Kameny's equality efforts, which were fueled by his personal experiences with work ethic degradation and a deep, un-reconciled legal battle with the United States Supreme Court, led to the expansion of the Mattachine Society in 1961. Linas Alsenas describes Kameny's advocacy as "articulate, bold, and unimpressed by the authority of so-called experts...he had a very clear vision of what needed to be done" (Alsenas 79). Kameny is credited with transforming the homophile movement, which led to the movement's advancement and expansion. For instance, during the 1960s Kameny organized extreme picketing rallies, one of the most infamous taking place in front of the White House in 1963.

Kameny was radical and obtrusive, and he had an uncanny ability of drawing the conservative crowd's attention. Mattachine members were concerned by his forward demeanor, but by the mid 1960s Mattachine Societies all over were gleaming with "Kameny-style activists" and the revolution to rebut homosexuality as a sickness took flight (Alsenas 79). In the years to follow, Kameny's activism had led to a number of LGBT advancements. His greatest victory came in 1965 when the United States Supreme Court of Appeals confirmed that individuals could not be rejected for federal employment on the grounds of homosexual conduct.

As the following history has conveyed, activism for civil, human, and homosexual rights created multiple decades of protesting and extreme rioting. As author Martin Duberman describes it when analyzing activism of the 1970s, an era of "cultural revolution" (Duberman 163). Gay student alliances popped up on university campuses

globally and the demand for equality found strength in the next generation of activists. Progressions in the field of psychology felt the impacts of LGBT advocacy as well. By 1973 the American Psychological Association (APA) had officially removed homosexuality from their Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of disorders, a controversial postulation psychologist, Evelyn Hooker, had tried to popularize in the 1950s. In summary, the correlation between psychopathology and homosexuality were non-exclusive. Still, as Janis Bohan indicates in her book, *Psychology and Sexual Orientation: Coming to Terms*, not all psychologists accepted the APA's conclusions;

Some practitioners have remained extremely vocal in their insistence that LGB identities are expressions of psychopathology (e.g. Bieber, et al., 1962; Nicolosi, 1991; Socarides, 1975, 1978), and research indicates that heterosexist bias persists in psychotherapy (e.g., Committee on Lesbian and Gay Concerns, 1991d; DeCrescenzo, 1985; Rudolph, 1988). [...]

Despite evidence of lingering bias, the progression of attitudes reflected in the contemporary summons to LGB-affirmative psychology culminates in a remarkable metamorphosis in perspective over the past few decades.

This change in approach represents a profound shift within the discipline, as in society as a whole, in our understanding of the phenomena we construe as sexual orientation.” (Bohan 21)

LGBT activism of the 1970s paved the way for individuals like Craig Rodwell, Barbara Gettings, Martha Shelley, and Harvey Milk. The riots on Christopher Street grew into an annual Gay Pride event that was eventually adapted globally. The progression was astounding and yet, advancement reached a halt when the Center for

Disease Control (CDC) publically announced in 1981 that a strange illness had affected a small group of homosexual men. The potency of a cultural revolution suddenly lost momentum and with homophobia on the rise, an overwhelming sense of specified anger towards homosexual men began to take place. Another hurdle was presented; the AIDS/HIV scare of 1981.

During the 1980s, the primary agenda for LGBT activists was to tackle the AIDS/HIV epidemic as well as the societal homophobia that resulted from the negative media coverage about the disease. Coining the term “Gay Cancer,” the media’s assumption was surmised from medical reports that had been circulated to the general public, stating that “because it was members of the gay male community who first showed the symptoms of the illness,” they were the sole bearers of the disease (Bego and Jones 107). However, this assumption was recognized as a proven falsehood in 1982 when medical reports resonated throughout the world, stating “that some heterosexual hemophiliacs, drug addicts, and Haitians had been diagnosed with the disease, the name was changed to Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome (AIDS) (Alsenas 111).

Despite official confirmations that AIDS was not an exclusively homosexual disease, societal backlash towards homosexuals produced an overwhelming concern for LGBT activists. Arguably, there were various political factors involved with shaping the perception society had formed about AIDS. One primary political factor was President Ronald Regan’s neglect to publically recognize the imminent danger that AIDS posed to the society. It wasn’t until 1986 that President Reagan acknowledged the severity of the disease. Unfortunately, by 1986 the disease had already been active for five years and millions of people had been infected and/or diseased. Journalist Allen White explains in

his article, *Reagan's AIDS Legacy/Silence Equals Death*, that President Reagan's opinions about AIDS derived from Reverend Jerry Falwell's Christian evangelist belief that AIDS was a punishment from God ultimately resulting in unfortunate consequences;

A significant source of Reagan's support came from the newly identified religious right and the Moral Majority, a political-action group founded by Reverend Jerry Falwell [founded in 1979]. AIDS became the tool, and gay men the target, for the politics of fear, hate and discrimination.

Falwell said 'AIDS is the wrath of God upon homosexuals.' Reagan's communications director Pat Buchanan argued that AIDS is 'nature's revenge on gay men.' [...] By Feb. 1, 1983, 1,025 AIDS cases were reported, and at least 394 had died in the United States. Reagan said

nothing. On April 23, 1984, the Center for Disease Control and Prevention announced 4,177 reported cases in America and 1,807 deaths.

In San Francisco, the health department reported more than 500 cases.

Again, Reagan said nothing. (White n.p.)

In addition to the condemnations of the religious right, several other factors impacted LGBT advancement during the 1980s AIDS scare. For instance, homosexual males were excluded from donating blood even if they were not infected by the virus. Additionally, AIDS patients who reported as not receiving proper medical care were predominantly LGBT. To make matters all the more arduous, the concept of possibly quarantining homosexuals was also contemplated the same year that *La Cage* premiered in 1983. Homosexual quarantine was viewed as a possible solution to the widespread pandemic of contagion. As Clendinen and Nagourney explain, "Gay leaders began to

worry about whether quarantine for men with AIDS, or all homosexuals might be over the horizon” (Clendinen and Nagourney 488). Thankfully, the thought of quarantine was dismissed in 1986 and the possibility of repeating Japanese Manzanar-type camps was avoided.

1.2 The 1980s: Decade of *La Cage aux Folles*:

The 1980s was an imperative era for the progression of LGBT activism. It challenged gay activists to prepare for the worst, to mobilize, and, more importantly, to establish a confident sense of open sexual identity. As Clendinen and Nagourney explain,

It was not obvious at first, but as the years passed, the AIDS epidemic had become a source of political energy in the way that Stonewall was in 1969...it had forced many gay men and lesbians to live their lives openly. If there was one belief shared by all the different gay rights organizations and leaders over the past generation, it was in the need for homosexual men and women to live openly: in political terms, an open life was the ultimate expression of gay liberation... (Clendinen and Nagourney 569).

In their book, *Gay LA: A History of Sexual Outlaws, Power Politics, and Lipstick Lesbians*, Lillian Faderman and Stuart Timmons note that LGBT progression did not become a casualty of AIDS, because “despite the horrors of the plague, gay progress did not cease ...” (Faderman and Timmons 320). Projects and Organizations such as the Gay and Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation (GLAAD), Human Right Campaign (HRC), AIDS project of Los Angeles (APLA) and the San Francisco AIDS Foundation became

the sole purpose of gay activists in the 1980s. They searched for ways to eradicate the degenerate reality of this disease and by doing so, discovered their activism intensified, resulting in several affirmative outcomes. For instance, in 1982 Wisconsin became the first state to legally enforce a law prohibiting the discrimination of homosexuals. And in 1987, the AIDS Memorial Quilt made a magnifying statement of how many lives AIDS had claimed, pleading to the general public the dire importance of unification as opposed to cosigning blame to one specific population;

Originally conceived in 1985 by activist Cleave Jones, participants memorialized loved ones who died of AIDS with a three by six foot quilt panel. In 1987, there were almost two thousand panels spread out on the Washington Mall, a sea of grief. (Alsenas 127)

The issues revolving around LGBT and AIDS impacted musical theater in a number of ways. The AIDS epidemic had claimed the artistic lives of so many, such as *A Chorus Line*'s director, Michael Bennett in 1987. As the controversy over AIDS intensified it became evident that Broadway producers and directors had to examine storylines meticulously due to the politics surrounding homosexuals/queers. Additionally, as Kantor and Maslon point out, financial difficulty and the lack of originality plagued Broadway's ability to thrive. Kantor and Maslon also denote that high-powered producer, David Merrick's debilitating stroke in 1983 had impacted Broadway immensely because he was one of the last founding, inventive producers to come out of the 1950s era. Producers of the 1950s had a reputation of being "better at developing new musicals from scratch" (Kantor and Maslon 376). Moreover, audience attendance was made up predominantly of season ticket holders, which meant that

Broadway was lacking in its ability to entice different demographics to the theater. Low ticket sales also made it difficult to introduce “taboo” or “deviant” storylines and characters to Broadway audiences because the market was already in reputed danger of financial instability. However, difficult does not equate to impossible and the attempt to project queer characters was not truly unpaved territory.

There were several musicals that preceded *La Cage* that attempted to feature queer characters. For instance, the 1971 musical, *A Chorus Line*, contained the insinuated identification of a homosexual character, Paul. Implied through a gut wrenching monologue, Paul, a dancer, describes his past occupation working as a drag queen in a nightclub very similar to that of the Stonewall Inn. Paul’s drag queen persona is kept secretive until his parents discover his counter cultural lifestyle and reject him for his insinuated homosexuality. I use the word “insinuated” in repetition because Paul never candidly admits to being homosexual. In fact, the only clarification delivered in Paul’s monologue is that he is utterly ashamed for disappointing his parents by working (or even associating) as a drag queen in a nightclub. Paul is a character who is deeply conflicted by his sexual orientation, which ultimately deduces the connotation that being openly queer equates to societal rejection. Additionally, because Paul never states he is a homosexual the reflection of a queer character in *A Chorus Line* is ambiguous, undefined, and all together absent from the production.

A similar character of ambiguity can be found in the 1970 musical, *Applause*. The character, Duane, is a feminine hairdresser to character, Margo Channing. Although Margo ventures to Greenwich Village (the birthplace of Stonewall) with Duane to meet a few of his friends, she is brought to an “insinuated” gay bar in New York City. As

Kantor and Maslon point out, Duane's homosexuality only becomes apparent when he declines Margo's invitation to attend a dinner party. Duane explains to Margo that he has a date that same evening and Margo's response is, "Bring him along!" (Maslow and Kantor 384) However, for the remaining duration of the musical, the only indication that Duane is gay stems from his stereotypical mannerisms that exemplify flamboyancy and femininity. Like Paul, Duane never verbalizes his sexual orientation, thus making the presence of a queer character technically absent from the production.

These two musicals exemplify three aspects pertaining to the main argument of this thesis: first, prior to *La Cage* queer characters in a musical were not identified as queer; and secondly, the stereotypical connotations of exaggerated queer mannerisms (such as a gay male exhibiting flamboyancy, or a lesbian female exhibiting the butch persona); and third, the presence of an "insinuated" queer character was always a subplot of the musical. When examining *La Cage* and the three postulations addressed in this thesis, it is important to note that *La Cage* was revolutionary because it defied all of these aspects. In *La Cage*, queer characters are the primary characters and they are candid about their sexual orientation. While some stereotypes are still identifiable, the existence of queer characters is not defined by these stereotypes because the musical highlights the different personalities that make up queer culture.

1.3 Mart Crowley's *The Boys in the Band*:

Although queer characters can be identified in a number of works produced by reputable playwrights including Tennessee Williams, Sholom Asch, and Lillian Hellman, there is one play of particular significance that presented queer characters as "openly

gay,” lead characters. In her TDR article, *Gay Plays, Gay Theater, Gay Performance*, Terry Helbing explains how Mart Crowley’s 1968 play, *The Boys in the Band*, was just as impactful as the Stonewall incident of 1969 in regards to emerging queer content on the Broadway stage;

The premier of Mart Crowley’s *The Boys in the Band* in 1968 and the riots by transvestites and street people in 1969 at Greenwich Village’s Stonewall Inn, now commemorated as the birth of the contemporary gay political movement. After these events, gay characters and gay subject matter appeared onstage with greater frequency and more openly than ever did before in theater history (Helbing 35).

As Helbing points out, Crowley’s play was as revolutionary to theater as Stonewall was to society. In a sense, the play was a preamble to Stonewall, highlighting several issues that plagued the queer community. The play reflected a truth and reality that centered on both consciousness of queer characters as queer human beings and the underlying issues associated with societal homophobia.

Reminiscent of Harold Pinter’s play, *The Birthday Party*, the setting of *The Boys in the Band* is simplistic. All events take place before, after, and during a birthday party. Michael, a thirty-three year old male living in New York City, throws a birthday party for his friend, Harold. The guests that Michael has invited to the party are Donald, Larry, Frank, Bernard, Emory, Cowboy, and Alan. All the characters presented at the birthday party are homosexual males with the exception of Alan. Alan, Michael’s old college roommate, is married and identifies as a heterosexual male.

The eclectic representation of queer characters presented in *The Boys in the Band* is significant because it serves as the first reflection of queer societal existence in a play. The characters in Crowley's play not only openly admitted their homosexuality, but each character exemplified different personalities and mannerisms. The representation of various homosexuals with different personalities and mannerisms was a definite break from the stereotypical depictions of homosexual characters with exaggerated flamboyancy. For instance, there are two openly gay couples identified in the musical. The first couple is Larry and Frank, and the second couple is Michael and Donald. Larry and Frank's relationship is quite different from that of Michael and Donald because Larry has two children and he is currently in the process of divorcing his wife. Ergo, Larry represents the "closeted" homosexual male who is "coming out" of homosexual repression. On the contrary characters like Emory and Michael are complete opposites of Larry. Both men are boisterous with their femininity and make no attempt to conceal their flamboyancy. Emory and Michael's personalities demonstrate proud homosexuality, exuded through speech and physical mannerisms.

The character differentiations reflected in *The Boys in the Band* presented audiences with one of the first concepts discussed in this thesis; consciousness of queer characters as queer human beings. Each of the men, with the exception of Alan, openly identifies himself as homosexual. These "openly gay" characters, radiating with diverse personalities, were innovative because they were not stereotypical reflections, but real characters with distinct and individual traits. Additionally, these characters also demonstrated a sense of unified culture that inherently belonged to LGBT. However, unlike *La Cage*, *The Boys in the Band* still presents queer characters as a segment of

minority and for that reason the play is limited in comparison with *La Cage*. The following section of this chapter will explain the limitations in Crowley's play and how *La Cage* overcomes these limitations.

The first limitation in Crowley's play lies in its inability to depict queer characters as prominent, existing members within society. The characters of the play never transcend the elemental world in which their experiences take place because the entire play is confined to one set location. Although the presented environment of a birthday party aims to demonstrate queer culture within a queer society, by isolating and limiting the queer characters and not allowing them to exist in society as members within the dominant majority, the confinements these characters find themselves in arguably acts as a form of separatism. Thus, the concept of a hidden minority within society is reinforced because these characters are subject to an exclusive setting.

The second limitation in Crowley's play is Alan. The character, Alan, represents heterosexuals in society. The overall purpose of Alan's character is to serve as a reminder of the dominant society and the societal homophobia during the 1960s. Although it is clear that homophobia exists in society as a form of discrimination, Crowley's choice to utilize Alan as the prime reflection of heterosexuals in society limits the political impact of the play for two reasons. First, although Alan's minority status among the group of queer characters does ingeniously depict a world where heterosexuals are the minority and homosexuals are the majority, the imbalance of queer to heterosexual make-up could also be viewed as a fantastical notion. Since the audience never views these characters living and existing as queer human beings within society, these characters could easily be construed as figments of a viewer's imagination. Helene

Keyssar, editor of *Feminist Theater and Theory*, discusses the importance of realism in theater, pointing out that “realism encourages us to forget the border between stage and audience; the world of the play could easily be part of our world – all appears seamless and ‘natural,’ therefore appropriate” (Keyssar 5). Therefore, the intimate world presented in *The Boys in the Band* coupled with one heterosexual depicts an unlikely reality because the concept is not plausible. As Ken Nielsen affirms in his dissertation, *Exporting America: Theater, Gay Male Identity, and Anti-Americanism in Denmark and West Germany*, while the play “creates visibility” of queer characters it “falls between the cracks” because of the “constricting form of realism” (Nielsen 67).

Although the general idea behind the presentation of one heterosexual character is to reverse tactics and make the heterosexual character the outnumbered stereotype, audiences could easily dismiss the severity of Alan’s homophobia by viewing Alan as an overzealous character that requires nothing more than anger management to control his outbursts at parties. More importantly, it also fails to persuade audiences to view societal bigotry and prejudice against LGBT as an eminent threat. Wilfred Sheen, theater, film, book critic and author, describes the heterosexual role in *The Boys in the Band* as the “one serious failure” of the play, “which is muddy and almost unrecognizable.” (Sheen 19)

Clearly, [Alan] has come to visit his old friend out of a repressed curiosity; still, simple pride would keep him from putting up with the badgering he gets here. This seems like a familiar wish-dream; the fags getting even with the square oppressor and the latter obligingly crumpling. It would

not glare so badly if the play were not so fastidiously precise in its other details.” (19)

As demonstrated in *La Cage* (and as I will address in Chapters Three and Four in further detail), a debate of this magnitude requires several perspectives to explain the issue of homophobia as a whole. To support my argument, I offer this brief juxtaposition. Although the characters in *La Cage* live within the comforts of their nightclub, they are also portrayed as a family unit living in a diverse society and interacting with other characters that identify as both LGBT and heterosexual. The queer characters in *La Cage* are thus a part of society and on an equal platform as heterosexuals. Additionally, there is no reduction of heterosexual characters, which ultimately implores a stronger argument for re-evaluating what constitutes as dominant in society. Furthermore, the message also implores audiences to examine the treatment of LGBT and decide if certain actions inflicted upon LGBT are morally justified in accordance with heteronormativity because both perspectives – homosexual and heterosexual – are equally presented.

The second reason Alan is not an effective choice as the representative character for the heterosexual demographic is that Alan is a man. This eliminates the heterosexual, female perspective in society. In *La Cage*, the heterosexual perspectives are more diversely represented by both heterosexual males and females in society. Audiences are exposed to various societal viewpoints reflected in the musical, which ultimately supports the overall political subtext of the production. *La Cage* does not force audiences to digest a stereotypical perspective, but it rather offers a perspective that is diversified. Although Crowley utilizes a queer perspective, he does so without placing his characters in an

environment that projects that of an actual society, inclusive of homosexuals, heterosexuals, and females. Once again, this becomes a limitation to the overall messages being conveyed in *The Boys in the Band*.

As Terry Helbing points out, after Stonewall, *The Boys in the Band* was later criticized for its portrayal of gay characters, and overall devaluing their existence in society by perpetuating already established stereotypes;

Audiences-including gay people-were able to see gay characters portrayed openly onstage, although soon after its premiere and as a result of the Stonewall riots, many gay people would feel that they were being portrayed in too much of a stereotypical, 'politically incorrect' manner. However, the commercial success of the play meant that plays with gay characters or themes began to appear more frequently. Some playwrights cashed in on the 'freak show' aspect of the new subject matter, while others attempted to write sensitive, well written plays with gay people" (Helbing 37).

La Cage not only accomplishes a realistic portrayal of LGBT in society, but it also provides a stronger challenge for the recognition of heteronormativity.

In conclusion, *The Boys in the Band* was a precursor to *La Cage*. *La Cage* amplified the issues and concepts Crowley addressed, whilst strategically utilizing glitz, glamour, and comedy to convey a palatable message regarding LGBT prejudice to heterosexual dominated audiences. It cannot be denied that *The Boys in the Band* blazed a trail for musicals like *La Cage* with its queer, lead characters and commercial success. But, the play does fail in its ability to advance the ideologies behind LGBT activism

because of its predictable characters and sensational content that merely appealed to audience curiosity rather than visibility of a substantial issue.

CHAPTER TWO

The Inception of *La Cage aux Folles*:

2.1 Jean Poiret

Before *La Cage aux Folles* became a two act musical comedy it was a French farce written by actor, director, screenwriter, and playwright, Jean Poiret. Poiret, who is best known for his satirical roles, has often been hailed as “one of France’s most prolific actors and writers” (Associated Press). During the 1950s, Poiret earned artistic merit and rose to prominence in France for his dynamic talents as an actor and a playwright. Unfortunately, since Poiret’s literary works were written and published in French, the majority of his work has not been translated into English. Nevertheless, the facts that are accessible in English about Poiret’s life derive from the most active years of his career, which was 1951-1992.

In 1952, Poiret performed the sketch, *Jerry Scott, International Star*, at the Theater Sarah Bernhardt. While working on *Jerry Scott*, Poiret met actor Michel Serrault. Serrault is often referred to as Poiret’s “enduring professional partner” (Britanica.com). The two actors were infamously considered a “double act” because during 1956-1984 Poiret and Serrault appeared in over 18 films together. As Ronald Bergan describes the duo in Serrault’s 2007 Obituary, “usually, Poiret was the calculating smoothie while Serrault was the bumbling innocent.” (Bergan 38) On February 1, 1973 the “smoothie” and the “bumbling innocent” won French audiences over at the Theatre du Palais-Royal in France with the premier of *La Cage aux Folles*. The play ran for an astounding 1,800 performances and is considered to be one of Poiret’s greatest literary successes.

In 1978, the play was turned into a French film that offered English subtitles. Bergan highlights that Serrault “became internationally renowned as Albin/Zaza, the extremely effeminate, temperamental and middle-aged performer “(38). While Serrault continued to play the “antithesis” to everyman roles, Poiret’s role as the dashing Renato Baldi (also known as Georges in the American musical adaptation) was replaced by Italian film actor, Ugo Tognazzi (Artandpopculture.com). According to the New York Times, the film version of *La Cage* “gained an immense cult following and played in art movie houses for months.” (NYTimes.com) With cult status intact, it comes as no surprise that tycoon producer, Alan Carr, immediately sought to bring the tale of Albin and Renato back to the states as his next musical venture.

Although he had yet to produce a Broadway musical, Allan Carr had already made a name for himself in 1978 with the movie musical, *Grease*. The premier of *Grease* took place in Paris, where Carr had agreed to accompany a friend to Poiret’s play. After leaving Paris, Carr immediately purchased the rights to the play, marking the commencement of his next musical venture. However, even though Carr secured the rights to *La Cage*, the film version placed a temporary constraint on the pre-production process because the film and the original play had specific plot differences that could not overlap each other. Ross Wetzsteon explains in his article, *La Cage aux Folles Comes to Broadway: Harvey Fierstein’s Spectacular \$5-Million Love Story*, that while “no one’s exactly upset that the film came along [...] it did create a tricky legal situation.” (Wetzsteon 32-33) For that matter, Carr was relieved that his adaptation author, Harvey Fierstein, had never seen the film. As Wetzsteon asserts, Carr “made it clear it would be a pretty good idea to keep it that way.” (33)

In his interview on NBC's *Today Show*, Harvey Fierstein explains that the musical's title can be translated in two different ways; *The Birdcage* or *The Cage of Crazy People* ("Harvey Fierstein talks La Cage on NBC's Today Show:" YouTube.com). While the overall premise and thematic significance of Poiret's play remained intact, Fierstein's adaptation of *La Cage* is hardly a line-by-line copycat of its original source. William Randal Beard of the *Minneapolis Star Tribune* explains that Fierstein's musical adaptation of *La Cage* "is qualitatively different from both the original French play and film and the American screen adaptation [...] [because] it takes the relationship of the drag club owner, Georges, and his star/lover, Albin, more seriously." (Beard 2B)

In his book, *Mainly on Directing: Gypsy, West Side Story, and Other Musicals*, Arthur Laurents explains that Poiret's play, as well as the film, "focused on camp elements in the relationship between the two men." (Laurents 122). Rather than emphasize the motherly attributes that Albin depicts in the story, Laurents argues that "what effectively counterbalanced camp in the movie was the presence of the boy's natural mother. A very French woman [...] chic and sexy and a threat." (122) However, the presence of a woman was not going to work in the adapted musical simply because she was not present in Poiret's original play. As Laurents argued, the story required a shift in thematic focus if it was going to generate any kind of response;

Unless we wanted to be sued, the woman couldn't appear in the musical, because she didn't appear in the play. Paradoxically, that limitation led me to what the musical could be about. The story was thin, even for a musical; moreover, it was neither inherently funny nor dramatic. What was needed was something to grab the audience and give it someone or

something to root for. *La Cage aux Folles* the musical was going to be about a boy who comes to accept a man as his mother. [...] The focus on family and off sex. And the story had an unexpected heart. Even a little heart would be a big help in a tale of two queens. (122)

As Wetzsteon discovered in his interview with Fierstein, while the American musical still contains farcical elements of Poiret's original play, the production deviates from the original play because it emphasizes concepts that are closer to the heart; According to Fierstein, 'the biggest change we made – I always say 'we,' not 'I'-was to make the characters more human, not those ridiculous farce characters in the French play. It's still got lots of jokes and sight gags, but we wanted more depth, more dimension, and more heart. There's hardly a line left from the original.' This show may seem like it's coming in on satin and sequins, but the drag-queen tradition also has plenty of room for tears. If Fierstein has his way, 'you'll start crying in the middle of the first act and you won't stop until the show's over. I even cry – one night Arthur had to put his hand in my mouth, I was sobbing so loudly.' (33) In addition, the musical adaptation of *La Cage* also "refocuses the plot so that the villain is the son rather than the girl's father." (33)

Before proceeding on to examine the "unlikely creative trio" who made the musical adaptation of *La Cage* a success, the next section of this chapter is a brief summary of the musical's plot.

2.2 The Summary of *La Cage aux Folles*:

Georges, the master of ceremonies and owner of the cabaret style nightclub, La Cage aux Folles, is dedicated to his partner, Albin. Albin, known throughout the St. Topaz community as the glamorous Zaza, is the most requested drag queen performer at La Cage aux Folles. Albin and Georges have been romantically involved for 20 years. In that time, Albin has helped Georges raise his son, Jean-Michel. Upon his return home from college, Jean-Michel (now 24 years old) informs his father that he is engaged to be married to Anne Dindon. Anne's father, Edouard Dindon, is the head of the Tradition, Family and Morality Party. Not only is Edouard homophobic, but his main goal as a public authority is to shut down all local drag nightclubs. The conflict is thus indicated immediately at the beginning of Act One.

In an attempt to win Anne's approval, as well as her parents, Jean-Michel conceals his upbringing from Anne and tells his fiancée that Georges is a retired French Foreign diplomat. Determined to win over the Dindon family and convince them that he originates from a perfectly normal, morally righteous household, Jean-Michel pleads with his father to carry out three specific alterations. First, he requests that Albin is absent from the dinner. As Jean-Michel makes very clear, Albin is completely incapable of concealing who and what he is and therefore must be absent from the dinner. Secondly, Jean-Michel requests that Georges and Jacob (Jacob is the butler to Georges and drag queen maid to Albin) "ditch a few of the more obvious ironies in the décor" and make the house correlate with his families morally correct lifestyle (Fierstein and Herman 38). Lastly, Jean-Michel's third request (the most shocking of all the alterations) is for Georges to contact Sybil, his biological mother who has been absent from his entire life,

and invite her to play “Mommy” at dinner. In a Shakespearian fashion, this charade becomes a comedy of errors. When Albin discovers Jean-Michel’s plans, he is outraged and pained by the surprising fact that his lover, Georges, would concede to such a plot, and that his own step-son would think of casting him out so readily. Act One ends with Albin’s response to Georges and Jean-Michel, declaratively exclaiming, “It’s my world that I want to have a little pride in, my world and it’s not a place I have to hide in...I am what I am!” (65-66).

In Act Two, Georges tries to mend his relationship with Albin, coming to the compromise that Albin should dress up and play Uncle Al. Reluctantly, Albin agrees to appease Georges and Jean-Michel and try to be a heterosexual for one evening. Jean-Michel is not at all convinced that Albin can successfully act like a heterosexual. However, after Georges scolds him for not acknowledging all that Albin has done in raising him (“The vacations and holidays. The hours spent on your homework. The nights he sat up in your sick room. Have you ever wanted for anything?”), Jean-Michel begrudgingly gives in to the idea. Prior to the Dindon’s arrival, Georges receives a telegram informing him that Sybil is not coming. Immediately, Albin’s initial reaction is to come to Jean-Michel’s aide and play a conservative-type mother. Surprisingly enough, Edouard and Marie are quite fond of Albin. The plan appears flawless until Jacob, who was entrusted with preparing dinner (wildly comedic because Jacob does not cook) burns the meal. Albin then suggests that the dinner be moved to one of the most popular restaurants in France, Chez Jacqueline.

Chez Jacqueline is owned and operated by Albin and Georges friend, Jacqueline. Unaware of the charade, Jacqueline announces to the entire restaurant that there is a

celebrity in the house, known for “a unique place in the world and from there brings happiness to us all” (Fierstein, 94). Jacqueline begs for Albin to grace the restaurant with a song, which the Dindon’s find intriguing. Singing “The Best of Times,” Albin generates a wild response, which then propels the entire restaurant to take part in a sing-a-long. Forgetting the charade, Albin ends the number, as he always does in at La Cage aux Folles, by taking off his wig to reveal he is a man. As the Director’s notes indicate, the celebration comes to a sudden halt as Albin and Dindon “freeze in horror” (Fierstein and Herman 99).

Returning to the apartment, Edouard demands that Anne break the engagement from Jean-Michel because of his homosexual parents. When Anne refuses to leave Jean-Michel, he realizes his maltreatment of Albin and formally apologizes to both of his parents. Edouard Dindon, infuriated at Jean-Michel, Anne, Albin, Georges, and the entire La Cage aux Folles establishment, prepares to leave the apartment. As luck would have it, Jacqueline informs the press that Edouard Dindon is socializing in the company of homosexuals. Jacqueline and the paparazzi block the exits to the apartment making it impossible for Edouard and Marie to leave the apartment without being photographed. Georges and Albin, the only two capable of helping the Dindon’s escape the scene unrecognized, give Edouard several ultimatums. First, they must concede to Anne and Jean-Michel’s marriage. Secondly, the Dindons must promise not to interfere with Albin and Georges relationship with Anne and Jean-Michel. Agreeing to both proposals, Georges and Albin dress the Dindons in drag in order to fool the paparazzi as they exit the club through the main entrance of La Cage aux Folles. The musical ends with the

entire company fleeing the stage, leaving Georges and Albin alone, dancing and singing their lover's tune, "Song and Sand."

2.3 The "Unlikely Trio:"

The original team of creative counterparts Alan Carr had initially assembled for *La Cage* contained a few renowned artists; Jay Presson Allen, Maury Yeston, Jack Hofsiss, Tommy Tune, and Mike Nichols. However, rumors of a "shaky" team surfaced before pre-production began, and a number of alterations were executed when executive producers Fritz Holt and Barry Brown came on board. Wetzsteon states that one observer claimed the musical "'had writers, several composers, several directors, [...]. It was one of those several everything shows.'" (33)

Needless to say, the inception of *La Cage* was as political as the productions content. By 1981, Carr had already made Tune the show's choreographer, and Yeston (who had just completed working on the 1982 musical, *Nine*) the composer and lyricists. Under Tune and Yeston, the production's original title was *The Queen of Basin Street*, and the musical's original setting, St. Tropez, was relocated to New Orleans. With a new production title and setting, the musical premiered for two months. Due to "a number of false starts," Holt and Brown had no choice but to reevaluate the creative team in order to salvage the production. (Kantor and Maslon 384) While "Carr wasn't exactly desperate" with the outcome of the production's first run, he also realized action must be taken in order to avoid having "a flop on his hands." (Wetzsteon 33) As a result, the original creative team was terminated and the following individuals were assembled: director, Arthur Laurents; composer and lyricist, Jerry Herman; and playwright and author, Harvey

Fierstein. Many critics considered Laurents, Herman, and Fierstein to be an unlikely trio. But, it was the unlikelihood of these artists that resulted in the success of *La Cage*.

2.4 Jerry “Happy Man” Herman

Of the trio selected to save *The Queen of Basin Street*, Jerry Herman was somewhat of a gamble. Although Herman was revered in the Broadway world for his 1960s smash hits, *Hello Dolly!* and *Mame*, the productions prior to *La Cage* such as *Dear World*, *Mack and Mabel*, and *The Grand Tour* were considered three of his most disappointing pieces. The opportunity for Herman to redeem himself came after he viewed the film version of *La Cage* in 1978. It has been rumored that Herman desperately wanted to turn the movie into a musical before Carr bought the rights to the play. However, when Herman heard the news that Carr had already begun working on the musical with Yeston, it broke his heart (Maslow and Kantor 384). Herman admits to Wetzsteon that he believed he was the perfect composer for the project the second he heard about the production, but unfortunately “no one asked.” (33) Of course, once Holt and Brown reorganized the creative team, Herman was immediately contacted.

Reorganizing the creative team also led to reverting back to a few originalities in Poiret’s play. For instance, the musical’s original title was reinstated as well as the original setting, St. Tropez. With several basics back in place, the only question that remained was (as Herman put it), the success of such an “unusual collaboration” of theater practitioners;

The unusual collaboration between Arthur Laurents, Harvey Fierstein, and myself was really one of the wonders of putting this show together

because I questioned it. Also, I thought, ‘we really come from different worlds.’ Arthur is from the world of Lenard Bernstein and Stephen Sondheim. And me from the very commercial-*Hello Dolly/ Mame*-world. And then, Harvey Fierstein who had never done a musical, you know, who was a child of the 80s...I thought (giggle) ‘what kind of chemistry would we have?’ (1984 OBC Special, “The Making of La Cage aux Folles:” YouTube.com)

In a *GLBTQ* (an Encyclopedia of Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, Transgender, and Queer Culture) article about Jerry Herman, Raymond-Jean Frontain explains that Herman’s musicals always include three signature staples; a statement song, the diva’s dramatic soliloquy, and the staircase number (Frontain 1-3). All of these signature staples can be identified in *La Cage*. For instance, the first staple, the statement song, is the musical number “in which the heroine delivers her philosophy of life.” (Frontain 1) As Frontain points out, when Zaza sings, “The Best of Times” at Chez Jacqueline’s towards the end of the second act, her philosophy on life is dramatically voiced, baring a striking similarity to the infamous aphorism, “Carpe Diem;”

So hold this moment fast
And live and love as hard as you know how
And make this moment last
Because the best of times is now
Is now
Is now!
(Fierstein and Herman 98)

As Frontain explains, “Herman’s heroines do not hesitate to interfere – always generously, always joyously – in other character’s lives, in particular teaching the younger generation how to live more freely and with greater satisfaction.” (1)

The second staple, the diva’s dramatic soliloquy, is “the song [that] marks a moment of self-doubt in which she rallies her spirits, even while allowing the audience to see the price that the diva pays for her optimism.” (2) Once again, this staple is identifiable in *La Cage* towards the end of the first act when Albin finally learns that Jean-Michel has requested Albin’s absence from his conservative dinner charade. As Frontain explains, the climactic number, “I Am What I Am,” is the moment that “Albin refuses to hide who he is, insisting that ‘Life’s not worth a damn/ till you can say/ ‘Hey, world, / I am what I am!’” (2)

Finally, the third staple is the staircase number. This number “in which the assembled company, in a pull-out-all-the-stops fashion, celebrates its transformation by praising the woman who raises the energy level of everyone around her by her mere presence.” (3) In *La Cage*, this moment takes place in the number “Mascara.” Once Albin has successfully transformed into the glamorous Zaza, a stairway appears and Zaza descends the stairs surrounded by Cagelles, “forming a sequined constellation” (3). As the number concludes, the director notes indicate that “Mascara” is a showstopper; “On applause, ALBIN takes two bows, milking the “ovation,” then pulls off his wig – this gesture being his famous trademark – and exists, S.R.” (Fierstein and Herman 33)

As illustrated, Herman’s staples were strategically integrated as a stylized identification for each character’s personality. By matching the music with a character’s personality and gestures, Herman remained perfectly in sync with the thematic

significance of the production. The musical numbers in *La Cage* convey vital messages that delicately inform audiences that this musical is about love, acceptance, forgiveness, and eradicating prejudice. These messages equate to the thematic significance of the production. For instance, one of the arguments presented in the first act of the musical concludes that same sex couples can fall and remain in love exactly as heterosexuals do. This argument is made evident in the musical numbers “With Anne On My Arm” and “With You On My Arm.”

In the number, “With Anne On My Arm,” Jean-Michel eloquently belts his love struck emotions for Anne Dindon to his father, Georges. At the conclusion of the song, Albin enters the scene shocked that his son is getting married. When Jean-Michel leaves the scene, Albin fusses anxiously about Jean-Michel’s sudden marital plans. In order to relieve Albin’s worries, Georges suggests that the two of them take a quick stroll before their next show. Albin refuses to forget his troubles, but Georges echoes his sons sentiments about love in the reprise, “With You on My Arm,” and Albin’s worries fade away.

(The following lyrics are sung by Jean- Michel in the musical number
“With Anne On My Arm”):

Jean-Michel:

Somehow you’ve put a permanent

Star in my eye

Even the dead of winter

Can feel like July

[...]

I found a combination
That works like a charm
I'm simply a man
Who Walks on the stars
Whenever it's Anne on my arm.
(Fierstein and Herman 41)

(The following lyrics are sung by Albin and Georges in the reprise musical number "With You on My Arm"):

Albin and Georges:

Somehow you've put a permanent

Star in my eye

Even the dead of winter

Can feel like July

I found a combination

That works like a charm

Georges:

It's suddenly...

(blows a kiss to Albin)

Albin:

It's suddenly...

(sighs)

[...]

Whenever it's you...

On...

My...

Arm...!

(45)

The message conveyed in these two numbers is both simple, yet complex. The simplicity lies in the fact that the two numbers showcase both couples as irrevocably in love. The complexity, however, derives from Albin and Georges' reprise. As Wetzsteon indicates, Fierstein firmly believes that the love between Albin and Georges must convince the audience that 'these two men have been a married couple for twenty years. If [the audience doesn't] feel that, we've blown it.'" (34) Through Herman's musical compositions, this message is not only conveyed, it is solidified in a musical juxtaposition that exemplifies the universality that love can be experienced and shared by all sexual orientations. Therefore, the reprise, which is delivered by two homosexual characters, offers a disruption to heteronormativity because their songs present the perspective that homosexual love is just as valid as heterosexual love because no matter what sexual orientation you choose, love is love. This is an example of how Herman's music remains perfectly in sync with the thematic significance of the production.

Over the years many critics have misconstrued Herman's style by labeling his compositions as "old fashioned" and "escapist entertainment." As Frontain asserts, these judgments are particularly unfair because the themes presented in each of the productions are contingent upon Herman's musical numbers.

Criticism of Herman's optimism as escapist is unfair. There is a strong satiric impulse in such songs as "Masculinity," "It Takes a Woman," and "The Spring Next Year" that is every bit as socially engaged as Burton Lane's much lauded challenge to American racism in *Finian's Rainbow*.[...] *La Cage aux Folles* made homosexuality the undisguised subject of a popular musical, challenged the hypocrisy of the self-proclaimed moral majority empowered by the presidency of Ronald Reagan, and provided gays with a national anthem ("I Am What I Am")...(3)

In the book, *Broadway Musicals: The 101 Greatest Broadway Shows of All Time*, Ken Bloom and Frank Vlastnik describe how Herman's musical contributions bestowed balance between content and entertainment in *La Cage*;

With a book by *Torch Song Trilogy* author and gay activist Harvey Fierstein, and direction by the outspoken and highly politicized Arthur Laurents, *La Cage* might have easily become a polemic diatribe on gay rights. Herman's presence undoubtedly helped off-set the other creators, balancing the scales between "issue" and "entertainment" and telling a universal story of individuality and freedom of self-expression (Bloom and Vlastnik 177).

As Bloom and Vlastnik indicate, Herman was the eloquent mediator of the creative trio. The other members, however, were not mediators. Although the two were similar in their ability to take a stance and present topics that deviated from convention, Laurents and Fierstein differed vastly in method and perspective.

2.5 The Renowned Arthur Laurents:

As a senior director on Broadway, Arthur Laurents was no amateur when it came to dishing up content Broadway audiences were not used to digesting. The didactic reputation that preceded Laurents as a stage director, playwright, and screen writer suited his blunt ways of musical adeptness and character perfection. In comparison to Herman, Laurents “has a somewhat less euphoric style.” (Wetzsteon 33)

During the 1950s, Laurents had directed three megahit musicals that arguably defined the end of The Golden Age Era on Broadway. In 1957 he directed *West Side Story*, which showcased a modern *Romeo and Juliet* caught in the midst of violence and racism. Though some critics have recognized the 1959 production of *Gypsy* as his greatest work, *West Side Story* is often the most notable musical associated with Laurents’ name. The musical ventured past the light hearted productions that had dominated the 1940s. The storylines of musicals such as *On the Town*, *Pal Joey*, and *Kiss Me Kate* were halted when Laurents presented two young lovers separated by ethnicity, culture, and class. *West Side Story* contained issues of gang violence, economical separatism, and rape. This musical, as well as countless other productions, validated Laurents’ expertise in presenting audiences with critical - deviant of the sugar - subject matter.

However, it cannot go without saying that Laurents was well aware of the societal issues that plagued *La Cage*. As Bloom and Vlastnik point out, Laurents was not particularly fond of campy musicals or the idea of having drag queens upon the stage (Bloom and Vlastnik 176). In fact, Laurents admits that the only reason he agreed to direct *La Cage* was because he never thought the production would ever happen

(Laurents 118). The director who relished in controversial content, candidly confessed that *La Cage* presented him with an entirely different set of challenges;

It was tempting to sign on (and make Fritz happy as well), but something else weighed in more heavily. That something had always been there, but I had let my distaste for drag and camp get in the way. / Two homosexuals at the center of a musical. Two gay men. Two gay men happy at the final curtain. Of a big Broadway expense-account musical. Was that possible?
(120)

In addition to content, Laurents was also skeptical of Holt and Brown's ability to gather investors that might be interested in financing a gay-themed project with homophobia on the rise as a result of the AIDS epidemic. However, the factors that initially concerned Laurent's about the success of the production conversely became the primary reasons he took the project on;

The material [in *La Cage*] is very dangerous. It walks a fine line. I was determined not to have any camp, not to have any stereotypes... Actually, I think it's a very political piece. And I think, patting us all on the back, it's so entertaining that people don't realize it's that political." (1984 OBC Special, "The Making of *La Cage aux Folles*:" YouTube.com)

Perhaps it was his literary counterpart, Harvey Fierstein, who described Laurents theatrical dualism best. In his television interview on *Theater Talk* with Michael Riedel and Susan Haskins, Fierstein described his professional relationship with Laurents as both "rough" and "educational." And yet, despite the "grump" exterior (as Fierstein

describes it), Laurents and Fierstein both agreed *La Cage* should emphasize the values of “family” and “love.” (Wetzsteon 33)

Fierstein: Arthur wasn’t particularly nice to me a lot of the time (chuckling).

Riedel: Why?

Fierstein: A lot of the time... (laughing)...because he’s Arthur (smile)

Riedel: Was he on top of you for the book? Because he wrote, you know, *Gypsy*, arguably, the greatest book of all time. Was he fiddling around with your book?

Fierstein: Sure, sure...but we wrote it together. We all did this together. That didn’t bother me much...um, he can be rough. He just had his...Arthur has his ways (smile). And I love him. And I owe a debt of gratitude to that man. You know, I mean he literally taught me. I mean I had written musicals *La MaMa* and all, the man taught me structure, and sense, and how to go from one scene to the other, and how to build a song. Because if a song doesn’t land in the musical, it’s usually the books fault...he showed me all of that....

Riedel: How to set up a song?

Fierstein: Yeah, how to set up a song, how to set up a character, you don’t have a lot of time to set up characters. You know, just watching, just handing him a scene and watching him edit it down was an education that you can’t get at any college. So I owe him, as much fun as I like to have at Arthur’s behalf, I owe him a ton of gratitude and I love him, I mean, we

are family. (“Harvey Fierstein on La MaMa and Arthur Laurents:”
YouTube.com)

2.6 “It’s Fierstein, pronounced Fire-Stein:”

In various interviews, Harvey Fierstein has never claimed that he was the sole author behind the musical adaptation of Poiret’s *La Cage*. In fact, in his note/preface of the book, Fierstein explains that the entire process of bringing *La Cage* to life was made possible by the shared, equal efforts of the “Collaborationists;” which was Herman, Laurents and himself.

From the moment that Jerry Herman, Arthur Laurents and I began work, in the summer of ’82, ours has been a marriage of love, respect, and trust. We (the “Collaborationists,” as we call ourselves) worked hand in hand in hand, almost single-mindedly, adapting the long-running French play for the musical stage (Fierstein 11).

Even in current interviews on *The Today Show* and *Theater Talk*, Fierstein attributes the story of *La Cage* to the collaboration efforts achieved almost three decades ago. Still, no matter how humble Fierstein remains about the creative process his personal contributions as an author are uncontestable for several reasons. For instance, as Laurents explains, “a literal adaptation wasn’t desirable,” especially since the original material rendered more satire than it did compassion for the issue at hand. Ergo, it was Fierstein’s authorship that proved necessary in accentuating and re-focusing the musical’s plot;

Literal adaptations start a musical off in trouble. No form is comfortable in another form, and the addition of music brings a change that demands change in attitudes. The adapters must be clear why they're attempting this work. What's their purpose? What's their viewpoint? To achieve the purpose, material from the original will be kept or discarded or embellished, and always as seen from a special viewpoint. We took what we could from the Jean Poiret play and began cobbling a show. I structured; Harvey wrote scenes in a loose-leaf notebook; Jerry wrote songs on his melodic baby grand. [...] My concentration was on testing the story as we developed it and inventing what we hadn't gotten to.”
(Laurents 122)

As Laurent's proposes, the adapters must be clear on why they're attempting to adapt the work they select. As a homosexual male living in the 1980s, Fierstein had already clarified his attempts long before the *La Cage* project was proposed to him. Despite his tender age, Fierstein was no stranger to LGBT scrutiny, and his artistic work was proof of incident.

Wetzsteon states that by the time Harvey Fierstein was 18, he was already considered an “Off-Off Broadway legend – but only as an actor.” (36) Hence, when Fierstein began writing the musical adaptation of *La Cage* at only 28 years old, his theatrical merits did not hold the same level of seniority as his creative counterparts. Nevertheless, despite his rookie-theater status, the young actor, playwright, and painter proved to be a profound voice for the maltreatment of LGBT. He appreciated theater because it gave him the chance to tell the world what it was like to be queer. After all, as

Wetzsteon put it, Fierstein had already “been a drag queen himself; he’d been mocked, mugged, arrested. Even a couple of Tonies don’t make you forget that.” (32)

In 1982, Fierstein exerted himself in all ways theatrically possible. The writing process for the musical adaptation of *La Cage* occurred while Fierstein was still performing in his play, *Torch Song Trilogy*. As Wetzsteon explains, Fierstein’s role in *Torch Song* was so grueling (“three and a half hours a night, six times a week”) that “doctors in the audience were giving his voice another week at most” (33). Still, it was a production very close to Fierstein’s heart. As Fierstein states in the Author Notes of the *Torch Song* book, the hopes expressed in his plays do not attempt to offer answers or solutions to the issues at hand. Rather, Fierstein’s plays evoke logic and reason, “like an old familiar half heard song playing on a jukebox, you might just catch a line that reaches out and touches something going on inside of you.” (Fierstein 8)

Torch Song premiered off-Broadway on January 15, 1982 at the Actor’s Playhouse in New York City. After eight previews, the play opened the same year on Broadway on June 10th at the Little Theater. The show ran for 1,222 performances. The production was an amalgamation of three plays Fierstein had written over the span of five years, 1978 – 1982. The three plays presented in *Torch Song* were *Stud*, *Fugue in a Nursery*, and *Widows and Children First!* The entire production concentrates on the fictional character, Arnold Beckoff. Throughout the four hour play, audiences are exposed to the life of a drag queen and the hurdles he experiences in regards to family and the search for love. As Fierstein explained to Wetzsteon, the way in which he presented drag in *Torch Song* varied from *La Cage* because in *Torch Song* drag is a method of “self-protection,” while in *La Cage* drag is utilized as “self-expression.” (37)

Before its premier, the media had already begun criticizing *Torch Song* due to the presentation of openly queer content. For instance, in a 1983 interview on WNYC's television show, *Our Time*, Fierstein clarified the hardships he faced when *Torch Song* first premiered. In his interview, he details the difficulties the production experienced due to the play's content and how he and the producers overcame public skepticism about the likelihood of a gay themed trilogy;

There were a lot of people who wanted to move *Torch Song* to Broadway. They all wanted the back room scene taken out. They wanted the play softened somewhat. Of course, I wasn't going to do that. And, they told our producers...they were crazy. They said, "We've seen it before. We've seen gay plays on Broadway. We've seen ones that made strong statements and you cannot do that to a Broadway audience. And, a Broadway audience is not going to sit for this, let alone the length of the play, the subject matter...nothing did they like...I'd say some even wanted to put a star in my roll and all that. Well here we are a year later and I just got a letter from the Shubert Organization saying, 'I've just seen the play again and I can't stop crying having seen it.' Those people who told us, "don't move to Broadway" have come up to us and congratulated us and said how happy they are for us (1984 OBC Special, "The Making of La Cage aux Folles:" YouTube.com).

At the time this interview was conducted, Fierstein had just completed writing the adaptation of *La Cage* with Laurents and Herman. Although he experienced harsh criticisms regarding the content of his own gay-themed production, it was perhaps those

very criticisms that propelled him to see *La Cage* reach acclamation. Fierstein's courage of conviction, along with his ability to remain grounded when faced with public scrutiny and doubt, only fueled his desires to expose the maltreatment of LGBT through the presentation of queer characters that compelled empathy. While the characters and contentions found in the original *La Cage* highlighted the everyday prejudices that LGBT encounter through satire and gratuitous stereotypes, Fierstein and his creative counterparts shifted the satire and built a story upon humanity and the inherent ability to love without prejudice by focusing the story on Albin, Georges, and Jean-Michel. Considering the subject matter of *Torch Song*, Fierstein was not afraid to depict the life of a queer and challenge heteronormativity with love.

Between the interlacing efforts shared between Fierstein's bold authorship and Herman's delicate musical staples, the adapted story and music in *La Cage* maintained equilibrium between originality and a palatable truth. As Fierstein admits, it was Herman that softened each symbolic blow he managed to conjure up;

Jerry Herman, as you know of *Mame* and *Hello Dolly!*, is one of those celebratory writers. I mean, I would write up to a scene where it build this big dramatic song of hate...and how you've hurt me and all that. And he'd write a celebration instead. I mean he just...everything he twists! The man is so happy. But what we ended up with and what we might have in *La Cage aux Folles* is a gay anthem. I think it's going to become the gay anthem...there's a song called, "I am what I am." (1984 OBC Special, "The Making of La Cage aux Folles:" YouTube.com)

Over the years, Fierstein has often had to remind people that *La Cage* is adopted from Poiret's play and not the 1978 film. In his *Our Time* interview, Fierstein corrects the interviewer who asks him how the musical *La Cage* was different from the film.

Fierstein responded;

La Cage aux Folles, which I wrote with Jerry Herman, is not based on the movie. It's based on the original French play, which the movie was based on, but it is based on the play not the movie, I've never seen the movie.

(1984 OBC Special, "The Making of *La Cage aux Folles*:"

YouTube.com).

While Fierstein was never afraid to clarify the origin of *La Cage*, the truth is Fierstein, Laurents and Herman re-focused Poiret's play, which changed the tone, direction, and overall theme of the production. If we were to juxtapose Poiret's *La Cage* with Fierstein's *La Cage*, I infer there might be several striking differences in audience reaction. Whereas Poiret's play might placate audience reaction to queer content by encouraging them to laugh at the queer characters presented, Fierstein's musical might persuade audiences to construe the urgency of the issues presented. Furthermore, as opposed to laughing at the queer characters presented, Fierstein's audience would laugh with them.

The interviewer of *Our Time* described Fierstein as "opinionated, political, talented, funny, and impossible to shut up." (1984 OBC Special, "The Making of *La Cage aux Folles*:" YouTube.com). Most audiences who have seen Fierstein's work would probably agree that he is boisterous, candid, and intrepid no matter what the subject matter is, but he is even more so when the subject involves prejudice. Fierstein

has never denied his passion for exposing the truth. As Wetzsteon extracted, Fierstein has always been an advocate for equality, which is a prominent message found in all of his works.

As Fierstein himself puts it, ‘the single most important thing I’m saying is that we have to get the concept out of our minds that love and commitment and family are heterosexual rights. They’re not. They’re people’s rights. Heterosexuals can adopt or reject them, gays can adopt or reject them, but everyone has the right to choose.’ He almost blushes at his sudden outburst. ‘Gee, I got worked up there, didn’t I? But it’s cause that’s one of the things that gets to me.’ He pauses and grins slyly. ‘I mean, the way I look at it, I’m a human being first and gorgeous second.’ (Wetzsteon 37)

Fierstein’s adaptation of *La Cage* re-focused the original text and called for society’s awareness through three specific elements: humanity, family, and love. Although these elements might be touched upon in Poiret’s original play, they are less prominent than the elements presented in Fierstein’s adapted musical.

CHAPTER THREE

Ambiguity and Gender Roles/Identities:

3.1 Ambiguous Chorus line:

The first act of *La Cage* opens with subtle intrigue. Georges, owner and Master of Ceremonies, welcomes the audience to St. Tropez and implores all viewers to "...open your eyes. You have arrived at La Cage aux Folles!!!" (Fierstein and Herman 17) As the words "La Cage aux Folles" are spoken, the sheer cabaret curtain behind Georges is illuminated. A bright tempo begins and twelve female silhouettes are suddenly visible. As the curtain rises each figure becomes more apparent and male voices softly begin to sing,

We are what we are

And what we are

Is an illusion

We love how it feels

Putting on heels

Causing confusion

We face life

Tho it's sometimes sweet and sometimes bitter

Face life

With a little guts and lots of glitter

Look under our frocks

Girdles and jocks

Proving we are what we are

(Fierstein and Herman 19)

As each figure turns to face the audience, it becomes clear that only a few of the performers are women. The majority of the chorus line performers are men; beautiful, gleaming, androgynous men. The male voices build in volume and tempo. A burst of warmth breathes life onto the stage, while vibrant hues of red and violet define the setting. The environment is bursting with exuberance and an overwhelming sense of pride and vitality. It is a dangerous combination of sex, humor, and taboo, and yet, there is a strange sense of comfort emanating from each body. The audience is welcomed. The androgynous characters charm and vanquish the meaning of being “different” or “queer” with each administered wink and smile.

Arthur Laurents describes the opening act of *La Cage* as “theater truth.” The theater truth found in *La Cage* plays with the guards of a heterosexual reality and what is left is “the elegance of an ambiguous gender;”

There is truth and there is theater truth. Waiting in the wings of the Colonial Theater in Boston were men in women’s robes; drag. That was the truth. What appeared on stage, however, because of the fantasy design of the robes, weren’t men or boys or women or girls. What were they then? Nothing identifiable. The theater truth was that they were elegance of an ambiguous gender. (Laurents 129)

Each performer (also referred to as Cagelles) presents a truth that the 1980s society had been attempting to understand since the 1950s. From countless medical postulations, to the right wing belief that being gay is a sin, society had constantly plagued the

homosexual community with the same question, “What are you?” The theater truth that *La Cage* supplies makes no attempt to explain or justify what it means to be a homosexual or a drag queen. Rather, the reflection of these characters supplies an unfaltering fact that homosexuals exist and will not be suppressed into the corners of society as a non-existing minority.

In her book, *Queer Phenomenology*, Sara Ahmed addresses the concept of orientation. Through a queer perspective, Ahmed analyzes how humans are oriented both mentally and physically, and how orientations “are about the intimacy of the bodies and their dwelling places (Ahmed 8). Using Merleau-Ponty’s study on the *Phenomenology of Perception*, Ahmed deduces that “the body provides us with perspective: the body is ‘here’ as a point from which we begin, and from which the world unfolds, as being both more and less over there” (8). In view of Ahmed’s postulations about the origins of orientation, the opening act executed by the androgynous chorus line is thus provided as an acclimation to a new perception. The world, which is dominated by heteronormativity, is suddenly transformed through perplexing figures that appear to be “perfect” women. This world, and the characters that exist in it, defy societal normalcy because they cannot be defined or categorized. And yet, it is a world filled with laughter, bewilderment, beauty, and intrigue that beckons an audience’s undivided attention. Ahmed points out, “the skin that seems to contain the body is also where the atmosphere creates an impression[...]. Bodies may become oriented in this responsiveness to the world around them, given the capacity to be affected” (9). In this respect, the opening performance affects the audience with an alternate perspective through disguise.

There are many disguises presented in *La Cage*, but as Laurents observed, the physical disguises are a form of truth because they accentuate the elegance of an ambiguous nature. Ambiguity is delivered through comedy, dance, song, wigs, costumes, and, as Albin belts, “a little more mascara.” (Fierstein and Herman 33) These physical disguises direct audiences to take an alternate path and stray from the familiar. In choosing to venture towards the unfamiliar, a challenge to the recognition of heteronormativity has begun.

If orientation is a matter of how we reside, or how we clear space that is familiar, then orientations also take time and require giving up time. Orientations allow us to take up space insofar as they take time. Even when orientations seem to be about which way we are facing in the present, they also point us toward the future. The hope of changing direction is that we don't always know where some paths may take us: risking departure from the straight and narrow makes new futures possible, which might involve going astray, getting lost, or even becoming queer (Ahmed 21).

In *La Cage*, the comedic and romantic elements fused with androgyny are tools to redirect perception. The Cagelles convey the message that LGBT are members of society, and they are equal human beings endowed with their own forms of expression and beauty. Tying together Laurents' concept of theater truth with Ahmed's concepts on environmental and physical orientations, I infer the introduction of androgyny in the first act of *La Cage* is strategic because it is the first step towards redirecting perspectives.

3.2 What is Female? What is Male?

Many sociologists and psychologists have postulated that the physical mannerisms and emotional differences that separate a man from a woman are culturally impacted rather than biologically innate. The concept of “gender” versus “sex” is defined in various ways. Originally, the term gender was coined by psychologist and sexologist, Jon Money in 1955. After several studies and extensive research, Money “concluded that the future gender role/identity of a child with a defective sexual differentiation is best prognosticated by ‘non-biological’ factors such as the sex of assignment and rearing” (Gooren 9). Although it was never Money’s wish to separate the concept of biological sex and gender roles/identity, the two terms have, overtime, become “subsequently divorced from their bodily aspects” (9).

In his book, *Homosexual Acts, Actors and Identities*, Lon G. Nungesser explores the psychological concepts of identity and the various theories that explain how each individual formulates his or her gender role/identity. Nungesser points out that “neither identification nor social learning are sufficient to explain the part socialization plays in gender role acquisition” (Nungesser 13). Furthermore, Nungesser explains that there are variances between cognitive-developmental theories and both social learning theories and identification theories. While the cognitive approach argues that children gather their own information and thus interpret it, social learning and identification theories argue that children learn to model behavior that is already set in place by an existing standard; In comparison to the social learning approach, the cognitive-developmental view suggests children are actively gathering information rather than passively modeling behavior. Another important difference between the cognitive-developmental theories

and both social learning and identification theories concerns the casual relationships between gender stereotyped identity, cultural stereotypes, and actual attributes. Both social learning theory and identification theory suggest gender stereotyped identity is the product of identification with the stereotypes and actual imitation of gender role attributes. (Nungesser 13)

In analyzing the characters in *La Cage*, the concept of identity remains an underlying theme throughout the musical. The theories discussed in this section attempt to supply a psychological explanation as to how human beings mature cognitively. For the purpose of this thesis, I am inclined to utilize the social learning and identification theories because both theories revolve around the general premise that environmental and societal influence both impact mental development and thus shape personal identity.

In conjunction with identity, human perception is another component that is shaped by environment and society. Arguably, societal assimilation becomes increasingly evident when viewing human beings because assimilation ultimately inclines the “other” (individuals identifying outside of the dominant majority) to be part of the societal norm. One of the earliest and most renowned definitions of assimilation was introduced by Robert E. Park and Ernest W. Burgess in 1921 in their book, the *Introduction of the Science of Sociology*;

Assimilation is a process of interpenetration and fusion in which persons and groups acquire the memories, sentiments, and attitudes of other persons or groups, and by sharing their experience and history, are incorporated with them in a common cultural life (Burgess and Park 735).

While Park and Burgess provide a harmonious definition of unified cultural commonality, the concept of societal assimilation is quite subjective and often viewed as a form of oppression by many queer and feminists theorists. As humans grow, they slowly learn and develop by gathering information on what is acceptable and what is not acceptable in society. Although each person learns to interpret information differently, the information gathered is ultimately influenced by the society from which it is extracted. Ergo, even though personal identity is formed, it is measured and shaped according to the predispositions of the dominant society.

Michael Warner (mentioned in the introduction of this thesis as the academic who coined the term “heteronormativity”) has often voiced his concern regarding the definition of assimilation. Although sociological assimilation was sought after during the Homophile Movement in order to bind and unify heterosexuals and homosexuals, it did not remain prominent with LGBT activists because to assimilate was equivalent to remaining “in the closet.” In *Fear of a Queer Planet: Queer Politics and Social Theory*, Warner presents a collection of several essays that tackle a wide range of LGBT issues. In an essay written by Steven Seidman, “Identity and Politics in a “Postmodern” Gay Culture: Some Historical and Conceptual Notes,” Seidman analyzes postmodernism, viewing it as a way to reevaluate societal identity and politics. On the issue of assimilation, Seidman explains that “although many in the mainstream homophile movement described homosexuals as a minority, this difference was not celebrated” (Seidman 111). In Chapter Four, I will revisit assimilation and societal acceptance when I examine Jean-Michel’s bigotry towards Albin, but I introduce the concept now to supplement a foundation for forthcoming character analysis’s.

3.3 Gender Identity:

Over the years, the concept of gender role/identity has been controversially defined by many individuals that resonate from varying disciplines. Feminists in particular, have fueled most of the debates, questioning the feminine gender roles/identities that have been imposed since childhood. The concept of female gender roles was radically explored in Betty Freidan's 1963 book, *The Feminine Mystique*. Freidan, sociologist and feminist credited for sparking the second wave of the feminist movement in the 1960s, dared to address what she called, "the problem that has no name." (Freidan 13) Freidan argued in her book that "women had been coaxed into selling out their intellect and their ambitions for the paltry price of a new washing machine." (13) Metaphoric for "waxed floors and perfectly applied lipstick," Freidan referred to the feminine mystique as being the primary issue that limited women and reinforced their passivity in society (13-14).

Over the years, there have been numerous individuals to examine the concepts behind gender roles/identities. For instance, Jessie Bernard, a sociologist and feminist renowned for her theories on conceptualizing "the female world," points out in her book, *Female World*, that there is a "a misconception, namely that the male world is the 'real' world, coterminous with society as a whole" (Bernard 20). Similar to the Taoist philosophy of the "*Yin and Yang*," Bernard presents a theory that argues opposites are interconnected and interdependent forces, existent because of their relation to each other. Ergo, a woman's world - often revolving around cooperation, social duty, and love - is interconnected and interdependent of a man's world where competition and strife are of the highest concern.

La Cage takes these theories about the female world and translates them through queer context. For instance, by applying female issues to a drag queen, *La Cage* breaks free from the thought that gender identity standards are exclusively male or female. Defining a female's femininity and a male's masculinity in *La Cage* becomes a challenging endeavor since personas are no longer contingent upon the biological sex of an individual. For instance, Albin is a perfect example of this conundrum. Biologically, Albin is a man. But his gender role/identity according to conventional standards is female. Albin is a drag queen. The presentation of a drag queen as a primary character is poignant since drag reiterates issues of traditional gender roles/identities already existent among the dominant society. As Jagose explains, queer theorist like the renowned Judith Butler (one who "has done the most to unpack the risks and limits of identity") argues that gender is "cultural fiction," and furthermore a "performative effect of reiterative acts." (Jagose 84)

Consequently, there is nothing authentic about gender, no 'core' that produces the reassuring signs of gender. The reason 'there is no gender identity behind the expressions of gender' is 'that identity is performatively constituted by the very 'expressions' that are said to be its results.' (84)

Specifically referencing the drag queen, Jagose explains "Butler does not consider drag to be an essentially subversive parody. Rather, in its literal staginess, it offers an effective cultural model for deconstructing those commonly held assumptions that privilege certain genders and sexualities by attributing 'natural-ness' and 'originality' to them" (86).

In light of Butler's conclusions, Albin serves as an effective cultural model in deconstructing the arguments that gender roles are a part of an innate naturalness. Albin's character serves as an emblematic figure for political debates revolving around the conventional definitions of female and male gender roles/identities because Albin's homosexuality and drag persona offer a dualistic perspective on society. The following section will examine the scene, "Mascara," and demonstrate how Albin's dualism is presented.

3.4 Mascara:

In the musical number "Mascara," Albin laments over the loss of his youth and beauty. He acknowledges that he is "a rare combination of girlish excitement and manly restraint" as he proceeds to cover up his manly imperfections with paint and materials (Fierstein Herman 30). When the song begins, the director's notes suggest that "As [Albin] sings, he puts on make-up, a dazzling dress, his wig, and his jewels, gradually transforming himself into glamorous ZAZA. But first: frumpy, unhappy ALBIN at his dressing table mirror" (30).

The scripted performance of "Mascara" is meant to be satirical. Albin is a showman preparing for his musical number. Through the transformation of costume and make-up, frumpy Albin becomes the glamorous Zaza. However, the satire is imbued with severe societal issues that are often presumed to be exclusively female. For instance, Albin expresses his unhappiness with his image. Mascara is a disguise Albin uses to conceal his physical imperfections.

Once again I'm a little depressed

By the tired old face that I see-
Once again it is time to be someone
Who's anyone other than me-
With a rare combination of girlish excitement and manly restraint-
(check make-ups:)
I position my precious assortment of powders and pencils and paint-
(putting on headband:)
So whenever I feel that my place in the world
Is beginning to crash
I apply one great stroke of mascara to my rather limp lash!
(He does so.)
And I can cope again!
(He does a 2nd lash and looks front.)
Good God, there's hope again!
(He puts down mascara)
(Fierstein Herman 30).

The issue of beauty is thus presented as a factor to Albin's personal perspective of self worth. There are two complexities that prevent Albin from obtaining beauty effortlessly: old age and gender identity. Addressing the first complexity, which deals with Albin's age, it is made clear by Albin's expression, "Once again I'm a little depressed by the tired old face that I see." Throughout the first act of the musical, Albin constantly worries that Georges, his partner, is going to leave him for a younger companion. Age has devalued Albin's beauty. The beauty that Albin acknowledges

derives from conventional standards. According to those standards, Albin as Albin does not constitute as beautiful. Albin is only beautiful when he transforms into Zaza. Zaza is beautiful, but only behind the guise of a stereotypical gender role/identity.

Prior to the beginning of “Mascara,” Albin receives a package from America. Tabarro (a townsman character that delivers the pills) announces, “Albin, your diet pills have arrived from America,” to which Albin replies, “Too late. Too fat.” (Fierstein and Herman 25) The simple act of consuming diet pills denotes Albin has drawn a direct link between feminine beauty and thinness. Once again, Albin acknowledges another facet of beauty perpetuated by conventional standards.

As Betty Friedan explained in the *Feminine Mystique*, the measures that women have taken over the years to obtain/maintain a thin physique have been quite drastic; “[Women] ate a chalk called Metrecal, instead of food to shrink to the size of the thin young models. Department-store buyers reported that American women, since 1939, had become three and four sizes smaller” (Friedan 59-60). Additionally, Helen Malson tackled the issues of society’s fixation on female thinness in the late 90s and the rapidly emerging eating disorder, Anorexia Nervosa, in her book, *The Thin Woman: Feminism, Post-Structuralism, and the Social Psychology of Anorexia Nervosa*. Malson argued that the “construction of fat-as-ugly and thin-as-beauty is so dominant and normalized that it often appears to be an unquestionable prescription of some law of natural aesthetics” (Maslon 104). Ergo, the presentation of Albin’s complexities with old age and weight are shared by many women as a result of social pressures and media. What constitutes as beautiful is not always attainable. This reflects Butler’s argument on performativities in society and how they are reinterpreted through drag. Jagose explains that Butler “focuses

on drag as a practice that reinfects heterosexual norms within a gay context,” while Butler explains that “in imitating gender, drag implicitly reveals the imitative structure of gender itself – as well as its contingency” (Jagose 84-85).

As Butler postulates, drag reveals the structure of gender and how it impacts those who identify as female outside of the biological definition of male. In Albin’s case, old age and weight are factors that force him to feel out of place, physically, in society because he is no longer reflecting the perfect woman. On the other hand, Albin also experiences societal separatism because he is a homosexual, which is another factor that prevents Albin from societal inclusion. What must be contemplated are the messages being addressed through Albin.

Albin is a reflection of the 1980s LGBT because Albin is a character that reflects the binary complexities of both pride in homosexuality and the errors of conventional society. Since Albin identifies as female and shares the same issues that plague the female population, arguably Albin has identified as female. As Money concluded, non-biological factors have determined Albin’s gender role/identity, and the audience has been presented with a demonstration of Albin’s humanity through a pre-existing stereotype of societal convention. Although I concur with the queer theory sentiment that the very identification of gender roles enforces heterosexual standards, *La Cage* utilizes these standards to challenge the definition of male and female. By exemplifying issues that are female specific through a character that is biologically male, audiences are propelled to question the validity of gender specific roles/identities.

In the same respect, Georges accomplishes this as well. As the complete opposite of Albin, Georges is the equivalent to the character Larry in *The Boys in the Band*. Both

characters are non-stereotypical gay males and both have children from a previous heterosexual relationship. However, unlike Larry, but similar to Albin, Georges is more emblematic of the new LGBT identity of the 1980s. Georges defies stereotypes that are often associated with homosexual males because he exemplifies masculinity through his mannerisms. Additionally, if observed through the lense of male gender roles, Georges is the head of household who provides for his family and maintains leadership among his wife and child. He is an upstanding citizen in his community and a savvy corporate entrepreneur. Georges character is thus a perfect example of a heteronormative male, despite his homosexuality.

According to heteronormativity, and with the exception of procreation, Georges and Albin are normal. Georges and Albin celebrate 20 years of monogamous partnership, which over that time they have successfully maintained as a small family unit. Georges, Albin, and Jean-Michel are a functional family. Together, the existence of these three characters presents a challenge to the overall recognition of heteronormativity and will be discussed further in the next chapter.

CHAPTER FOUR

Challenging Heteronormativity:

For a moment, I would like to revert back to a few historical facts touched upon in Chapter One. Since the 1950s there has been an overwhelming paradox imposed on LGBT and the meaning of their existence in society. Although LGBT societal existence had been addressed and debated several decades prior to the 1950s, it was Donald Webster Cory who aggressively highlighted LGBT existence at the beginning of the Homophile Movement. Cory, who is often referred to as the founding father of the Homophile Movement, argued that homosexuals were worse off than other minority groups because they were forced to live ““without a spokesman, without a leader, without a publication, without a philosophy of life, without an accepted justification for its own existence”” (Marotta 7). As discussed in his book, *The Homosexual in America: A Subjective Approach* (inspired by Gunnar Myrdal’s book, *The American Dilemma*), Cory examined race relations in the United States. By applying Myrdal’s concepts of civil rights to homosexuals, Cory stressed that society must recognize that homosexuals were a part of a large, unrecognized minority in society.

As I discussed in Chapter Three, Queer theorists like Warner and Seidman have concluded that the identification of LGBT as a minority is potentially a means of assimilation and proposes a potential limitation to the advancement of LGBT acceptance. The juxtaposition between the two opposing thoughts of the Homophile Movement and the 1980s LGBT sentiment, “Gay is Good,” is a prevalent subject that Fierstein, Laurents, and Herman highlighted in the musical adaptation of *La Cage*. While the musical

celebrates LGBT freedom through “openly gay,” queer characters, the musical also reflects the price LGBT pay when they attempt to assimilate and uphold convention.

The last chapter of this thesis discusses how *La Cage* challenges the recognition of heteronormativity. Several of the characters and scenes extracted in this chapter render a concrete reflection, as well as simultaneously presenting a new perspective, on what is recognized as heteronormative and what is not.

In the Third Chapter, an analysis of the characters, Albin and Georges, was conducted. It was discovered that gender roles/identities and personalities differ despite biological sex. This indicates that gender roles/identities are neither facts nor universal truths, but rather standards created by pre-existing notions set in place by heterosexual hegemony. The same conclusions can be deduced when examining heteronormativity. In order to prove my postulation, the next section draws upon Bertolt Brecht’s theories on theater. Brecht’s Alienation theory is particularly beneficial when identifying the ways in which *La Cage* challenges the recognition of heteronormativity.

4.1 What would Bertolt Brecht Say?

Bertolt Brecht is considered one of the most innovative theater practitioners of the 20th century. His theories on theater and its ability to generate societal and political change were revolutionary and are still utilized by many academics and scholars, in various disciplines, in the present. Interestingly, there are many similarities between Brecht, Poiret, and Fierstein.

In the book, *Brecht on Theater: the Development of an Aesthetic*, John Willett translates a series of letters, writings and reviews by or about, Bertolt Brecht. In his writings, Brecht speaks of “a reckoning” in theater. Renowned for his criticisms towards

Stanislavskian theater techniques and naturalism, Brecht believed that “there is nothing to stop one from filling a theater with the exceptions or useless excuses practitioners use to avoid taking a gamble on anything that deviates from the norm.” (Brecht 4)

In his *Our Time* interview (discussed in Chapter Two), Fierstein exemplifies Brechtian sentiments when he addressed the criticisms that plagued him when he first spoke of LGBT issues in *Torch Song*. The critics argued that a production with so much queer content would be too large a risk because no one wanted to pay to see queer characters upon the stage. In a similar fashion, Laurents hesitated to direct *La Cage* because he had no attraction to drag queens and campy musicals. As Brecht indicated, the only factors that can lead to an empty theater are excuses and fear. Poiret was not afraid to write a play about queers and Fierstein, a queer himself, was not afraid to emphasize the humanity in them.

In the book, *Fifty Key Theater Directors*, Shomit Mitter discusses two prominent Brechtian concepts, Epic Theater and Alienation. In particular relevance to this thesis, Alienation is most applicable when viewing queer characters and concepts in *La Cage*. As Mitter explains, “alienation occurs when familiar things are made to appear unfamiliar so that they may be analyzed critically.” (Mitter and Shevtsova 53) Mitter goes on to explain that according to Brecht, “the function of theater in such a scheme was not to coerce the audience into adopting a particular point of view, but to use alienation as a way of encouraging spectators to think in terms of alternative” (55). Ergo, using Brecht’s theory of alienation, I assert that drag is meant to alienate and encourage audiences to ponder male and female gender roles/identities because drag propels the following inquiries: Are male and female gender roles truly exclusive? Is a mother a mother even

if she is a man? Wetzsteon offers insight as to why drag can often make people feel “uneasy” and definitively encourage audiences to “think in terms of alternatives;” One of the reasons drag queens make many women feel uneasy is that they’ve analyzed what goes into being feminine far more carefully than most women have. Similarly, it’s possible that gays like Fierstein have analyzed what goes into such ‘heterosexual institutions’ as marriage and family far more carefully than have heterosexuals. Having rejected the straight values they were brought up to believe in, they can return to them not as cultural givens but as emotional choices. (37)

In addition to drag, Jean-Michel and his parents as a family are also a form of alienation. While Albin, Georges, and Jean-Michell define a conventional family - perfect wife, loving husband, and an astute son – they are abnormal because heteronormativity considers same-sex households to be the greatest polemic factor to the definition of heterosexuality. This propels the audience to question the recognition of heteronormativity because the norm is being presented through the abnormal.

Another form of Alienation is the La Cage aux Folles nightclub. Although a subjective perspective, a nightclub is not generally considered a normal or moral establishment to call a haven. However, as Georges points out, La Cage aux Folles is “the jewel of the Riviera,” and instantaneously the ambiance of this cabaret is connotated as being inclusive and popular, providing a level of distinguished hospitality. (Fierstein and Herman 17) The performers and staff at *La Cage* leave no impression of dejection. No one is ostracized by sexual orientation, race or creed. La Cage aux Folles is the place to be accepted. In a sense, La Cage aux Folles is a positive, brighter version of the Stonewall Inn.

As discussed in chapter one, the Stonewall Inn was a small bar with a dark atmosphere. Since the bar was mafia owned, it was naturally linked to several illegal operations. From a moralistic perspective, the Stonewall Inn could easily be construed as a dismal, sketchy location to socialize. During the 1960s and throughout most of the 1970s, most LGBT locations to gather socially were often viewed as dingy and dark. These hangouts were the products of an oppressive society that forced LGBT to remain “closeted.” Places like Stonewall were the only options LGBT were given to socialize. La Cage aux Folles is the ideal socializing environment for queers. This nightclub refutes the negative perceptions connotated with LGBT social/entertainment establishments because the club is exclusive to all sexes and orientations. Coinciding with Brecht’s theory on Alienation, *La Cage* invites all human beings to “open their eyes” and see queer culture from a different point of view. The La Cage aux Folles nightclub is the Stonewall Inn LGBT sought after, but was never given the permission to create.

The character Edouard Dindon offers contestation to the La Cage aux Folles nightclub. Edouard believes the nightclub is “immoral,” “evil,” and “abnormal.” In the second act, Edouard Dindon expresses his utmost surprise that Albin and Georges have a “simple” and “monk-like” home in a “district notorious for its pleasure places.” (Fierstein and Herman 84) Although Edouard and Marie has never been to La Cage aux Folles, they believe the nightclub is questionable;

Dindon: [...] I hardly expected to find this almost monk-like atmosphere
in a district notorious for its pleasure places.

Georges: It does take some getting used to.

Dindon: Yes, it certainly does.

Marie: Especially with that nightclub next door.

Dindon: Marie, please. (*He rises and takes a step S.R.*) That is a nightclub next door?

Georges: (*taking a step toward DINDON*) Oh, I really wouldn't know. It does appear so.

Dindon: (*another step toward GEORGES*) What sort of club is it?

Georges: (*another step*) Oh, I really wouldn't know. We don't associate with that sort of people.

Dindon: (*another step*) What sort of people might they be?

Georges: (*They are belly to belly*) Oh, I really wouldn't know. We don't go out in the nighttime and they don't come out in the day.

Dindon: (*returning to the bench*) Well, let them frolic while they may.

After my re-election, I'll sweep them clean. (84).

As this scene exemplifies, Edouard is a symbolic reflection of LGBT prejudice.

Although this may seem obvious, as Brecht indicates, "when something seems 'the most obvious thing in the world' it means that any attempt to understand the world has been given up" (Brecht 71).

4.2 The Homosexual Family Unit:

The next section focuses on the two families presented in *La Cage*. The Dindon Family, which contains Edouard, Marie, and Anne, reflects what is considered, the

conservative religious right or the “Moral Majority” in American context. The second family is Albin, Georges, and Jean-Michel.

In his *Our Time* interview, Fierstein describes his experience on the *David Letterman Show*. As gathered from the interview, the 1980s was a time of Moral Majority domination. To make sure that Fierstein did not discuss content that went outside of moral standards, Fierstein was given scripted questions. In understanding the era in which these characters first existed, we see heterosexual hegemony reflected through Edouard Dindon.

Edouard Dindon exemplifies a political serviceman dedicated to upholding the ideologies of the Moral Majority. Dindon is emblematic for several of the individuals discussed in Chapter One; Deputy Seymour Pines, the authority figure who led the raid of the Stonewall Inn, and President Ronald Reagan, who neglected to acknowledge that AIDS infected both heterosexuals and LGBT equally. Similar to Pines and Reagan, Edouard maintains a negative disposition towards homosexuals and drag queens. Identical to the reservations of Reagan, Edouard believes in the preservation of the traditional family unit. Edouard describes LGBT as “filth” and expresses no tolerance of their existence. Consider the following scene:

Dindon: To think – To think that a daughter of mine would get herself involved with filth like this.

Marie: Edouard!

Dindon: It’s all your fault, Marie. (*He crosses to the S.L. and sits*)

Marie: My fault?

Dindon: Yes!

Georges: (*to DINDON:*) What say we forget about this and start fresh in the morning?

Dindon: Homosexual!

Albin: I think we'd better wait out this round.

Marie: Lead on, Edouard. Pack us up and march us out of this house of sin. We'll be right behind you.

Anne: (*crossing down to her father*) Sorry, Mother we are not right behind. I'm staying here with Jean-Michel and I'm going to marry him.

Dindon: (*rising*) Then I'll cut you off without a sou.

Anne: Cut me off. Do you really think I brought you here to get a dowry?

Dindon: You mean you knew about these people?

Anne: No. But now that I do, it doesn't matter. I like them.

Dindon: Homosexuals!

Anne: Father, please don't bellow. They know what they are.

Dindon: Young lady, you march yourself straight out of that front door.

Anne: No. I love you, Father. (*to MARIE*) You, too. (*Back to DINDON*)

You're my family. But I love Jean-Michel. We want to make our own family.

Dindon: Make your own...! What sort of family do you think this son of a pervert could make? Being brought up as he was by two transvestite homosexuals.

Albin: One transvestite.

Georges: One *plain* homosexual. (Fierstein and Herman 100)

The dialogue above, extracted from scene four, takes place towards the end of the second act. After Albin finishes singing “The Best of Times” at Chez Jacqueline’s, he removes his wig and reveals he is a man. In this moment, Jean-Michel’s charade has failed and Edouard and Marie are infuriated. Edouard and Marie’s response to Albin, Georges and Jean-Michel are based solely on homosexual prejudice. Prior to Albin’s revelation, the families are copacetic towards one another, socializing as equals. Edouard and Marie are actually quite taken by Albin and display a genuine liking towards him, respecting him as the mother of Jean-Michel. The reveal that Albin is a man ignites the pre-existing prejudice that Edouard and Marie harbor for LGBT. The positive first impression they gathered from Albin, Georges, and Jean-Michel is solely eradicated by prejudice.

In his book, Nungesser details a research study conducted in 1978. The study procured a group of students and supplied them with a narrative about a fictional character named, Betty K. In the narrative, students learned key things about Betty’s life such as where she was raised and where she went to school. The students were then split into two groups. One group was told that Betty was a lesbian and the other group was told that she was a heterosexual. As Nungesser points out, “the crucial aspect of the study was the type of information students received after reading the narrative” (42). The results of the study revealed the following:

One week later, the students were asked to remember as accurately as possible the details of Betty’s life. Multiple-choice tests like the following were used to probe their memory for the events:

In high school, Betty:

- A. Occasionally dated
- B. Never went out with men
- C. Went steady
- D. No information was provided

Results indicated that students' performance was strongly influenced by the degree to which earlier information was consistent with stereotyped beliefs about lesbian and heterosexual lifestyles. For example, although the original narrative stated that Betty dated occasionally, people who hear Betty is a lesbian were likely to believe they had read that Betty never went out with men (43).

As Nungesser indicates, the findings of this study demonstrate "social stereotypes about homosexuals may influence memory and produce reinterpretations of previous experiences or information" (42). Applying this study to *La Cage*, Edouard and Marie reflect how pre-existing stereotypes demonstrate a negative shift in first impressions of LGBT. Once it is discovered that Albin and Georges are homosexuals, Edouard and Marie immediately rejected them because they are defying heteronormativity.

Consequently, Edouard and Marie's pre-existing prejudice of LGBT also impacts their perspectives on Jean-Michel. Edouard exclaims, "What sort of family do you think this son of a pervert could make? Being brought up as he was by two transvestite homosexuals." Edouard's reaction demonstrates how Edouard and Marie's opinions of Jean-Michel are rooted in the notions that homosexual couples are incapable of

maintaining a family. To the audience, Marie's assumption that Jean-Michel has been raised in "a house of sin," is a difficult claim to support. While the audience has witnessed Albin and Georges' immaculate parenting abilities through actions and intentions, Edouard and Marie have only been given a glimpse. However, the argument that Jean-Michel is incapable of raising a family with Anne because he was raised by homosexual parents is precarious and offers no substantial evidence. Ergo, audiences are compelled to question if the Dindons are morally correct in their harsh judgments of Albin, Georges, and Jean-Michell and if their prejudice might be attributed to the founding ideologies of heteronormativity.

In the two examples below, there is an arduous challenge that questions the recognition of heteronormativity in *La Cage*. This challenge juxtaposes the significance of motherhood by comparing the guardianship of Sybil to Albin. Although Sybil is Jean-Michel's biological mother, it is Albin who has nurtured and raised Jean-Michel into adulthood.

Example #1 (Act One, Scene Four, prior to musical number, *Song on the Sand*):

Albin: What right has that woman to butt into the boy's life now? Where has she been all these years when he was growing up, when he really needed his mother? I'll tell you where: huddled in any corner of the world in any corner of the room with any kind of man she could lay her hands on, that's where she was. When I think of the times he called her, wrote her, begged to see her and always the same reply: "Sorry, darling. I'm too busy." Typically English!"

Georges: Nevertheless, she is his mother. She did carry him for a certain amount of time.

Albin: Well, I'd've delivered him sooner. And not to your doorstep!

(Fierstein and Herman 49)

Example #2: (Act One, Scene Five before the Dindon's arrive to the apartment):

Georges: Just a minute. Come here. I want to make sure you know what you're asking me to do. Look at him. The man who has dedicated the last twenty years to making a home for us. Who has lived almost exclusively for our comfort. Yours and mine. I want you to look at him and consider what it is you're doing; throwing him out of the home he has made for us...

Jean-Michel: For one night. Please. (a moment) I'm only doing what's necessary. (57)

As I have pointed out, *La Cage* contends that homosexual partnerships are arguably just as valid as heterosexual partnerships. Examining the first example, Georges' response to Albin is a common rebuttal for heteronormative supporters. While Albin is Jean-Michel's mother, Sybil is the biological mother. Although Sybil has neglected Jean-Michel, heteronormativity provides hierarchy above Albin. As Albin points out, if he could conceive a child as a female does, he would. Once again, the notion that heterosexual parents are better than homosexual parents is discredited by Sybil's absent parenting. The second example is vital because it highlights the humanity

in both Albin and Georges. Georges pleads with his son to consider his actions against Albin, and in that action, Georges offers a voice of reason to an unjustifiable request.

Proceeding forward, the Dindon family is a symbolic group of characters representing heteronormativity. They are stereotypically “moral” and “righteous” and meant to project hegemony among all other characters. In the Dindon household, Edouard is a domineering, authoritative male, while Marie is passive, delicate, and soft spoken. Edouard and Marie are distinct examples of the stereotypical gender roles/identities discussed in Chapter Three when I addressed the Feminist theories of Jessie Bernard and Betty Freidan. Bernard’s theories concentrate on conceptualizing the female world, arguing that women are interconnected and interdependent on men, while men are driven by competition and strife. Similarly, Freidan tackled what she called the Feminine Mystique and argued that “women had been coaxed into selling out their intellect and their ambitions” to play the perfect suburbanite. (Freidan 13) The Dindons reflect both of these issues. For instance, Marie makes several attempts to interject herself socially, and become an inclusive member of all conversations. However, Edouard restrains Marie’s attempts;

Example #1:

Marie: Edouard, she’s going to introduce you.

Dindon: (preening) Marie, please, I have ears.

Example #2:

Marie: [to Albin] Well, I’d love to hear you sing, if anyone wants my vote.

Dindon: No one does.

(Fierstein and Herman 94).

Marie, according to Freidan and Bernard's theories, has demonstrated female oppression and absolute dependence on her antiquated partnership. While Marie and Edouard symbolically represent the ideal heteronormative couple, the two are not without faults.

Quite the opposite of Marie, Anne reflects a modern generation where women break free from oppression and formulate their own options about people based on personal encounter rather than preconceived notions or prejudice. For instance, Anne's impression of Albin and Georges is not effected once she discovers they are homosexuals. As Anne puts it, "I like them." (100) And as Jean-Michel reassures Georges in the first act, "Anne is nothing like her father, so there's nothing to worry about" (38).

As stated in Chapter One, *La Cage* provides both homosexual and heterosexual perspectives on morality and family. As I have demonstrated, these perspectives often derive from stereotypes, preexisting stereotypes, and societal convention. The various oppressions emphasized in *La Cage* – be it queer or female – infer that no ideology, tradition or convention is without a price.

4.3 Developed Bigotry:

When Jean-Michel comes home from college to inform Georges that he is engaged to be married, he immediately begins the charade to conceal his parent's homosexuality. As I have clarified, Jean-Michel does not come from a dysfunctional home. His parents are not neglectful or loveless. Jean-Michel lies about his parents, to conceal a truth that society rejects. Since Anne's father upholds heteronormativity, Jean-Michel is determined to make a positive impression on his future in-laws by any means

necessary. He justifies his dishonesty by attributing the hardships of his childhood to Albin.

Throughout the musical, Jean-Michel exudes particular frustration and bigotry towards Albin. Even in Jean-Michel's charade, Albin is not factored into his scheme. Instead, Jean-Michel requests that Albin leave entirely because Albin draws attention to himself through dress, mannerisms and gestures. For instance, at the top of Act Two Georges comes up with a plan to include Albin into Jean-Michel's charade. Rather than eliminate Albin's presence, he suggests Albin become Uncle Albert. If Albin can act like a heterosexual man for one evening and convince the Dindon family that he is Uncle Albert, Albin can remain a presence in Jean-Michel's heteronormative life. Unfortunately, as the following scene depicts, Albin is unable to complete the task convincingly.

Georges: Now, drop your shoulders and let them go round and beaten.

Stop holding in your stomach. (*Albin tries to cover up his stomach with his scarf.*)

Let it pour over your lap, a testimonial to the nights spent drinking with the boys (*GEORGES pulls away the scarf*). Let it pour over your lap.

Now...spread your legs!

Albin: Excusez-moi!?!

[...]

Georges: Exactly; John Wayne. I want you to pick up that piece of toast like John Wayne.

(ALBIN stands, takes off his hat and hands it to MME. RENAUD. He pretends to take a gun out of a holster, shoots GEORGES and then M. RENAUD. He then sits legs together and picks up the toast as he had before.)

Georges: And what is that supposed to be? I thought I said John Wayne.

Albin: It *is* John Wayne. As a little girl. *(The music pauses)*

Georges: Let's begin again. *(sings)*

(Fierstein and Herman 72).

Albin's inability to conform and act like a heterosexual male is the primary reason Jean-Michel is shameful of Albin. Jean-Michel views Albin as a threat to his chances of assimilating and becoming a part of the dominant society.

Jean-Michel: I should've known better. I ask for one lousy favor from him and look. I should've known better. My whole life I've had to put up with his nonsense. When I think of what I've had to go through because of him. The razzings I took at school. The beatings I got for defending him. People staring at us as we'd walk down the street because he'd insist we stroll arm in arm. I'd ask for a shirt, he'd buy me a blouse *(Fierstein and Herman 80).*

As Jean-Michel expresses, the scrutiny Albin receives is thus inflicted upon him. While Albin may have become immune (or even accustomed) to society's judgments of him, Jean-Michel has not.

There are many phobias that exist in the world, but none so like homophobia. Janis Bohan defines what “phobia” is and explains that homophobia is more than just a trait; it is normalized and propelled by society.

The word phobia refers to a trait of an individual, an internal, irrational fear of some object or event [...] the negative attitudes towards LGB[T] people thoroughly permeate our society and are formalized in and justified by our institutions, norms and language [...] Cultural or institutional homophobia/heterosexism is so pervasive, so taken for granted, as to escape notice. The tacit acceptance of this world view is revealed by a glimpse at the range of privileges according to heterosexuality. (Bohan 38-39)

In light of Bohan’s definition, it becomes evident that Jean-Michel’s bigotry towards Albin is a result of society’s homophobia of LGBT. His bigotry towards Albin is a learned reaction that formulates throughout his childhood, intensifying as he reaches adulthood. By emphasizing the impact homophobia has on Jean-Michel, the musical cathartically presents the audience with a new perspective; prejudice tolerated can impact all of humanity. The scene below exemplifies Jean-Michel’s realization of this perspective and his shame for being callous towards Albin and Georges:

Jean-Michel: Deputy Dindon, I apologize for what happened tonight. I made a terrible mistake, but I’m going to spend the rest of my life trying to make up for it. I hope one day, I’ll receive forgiveness for being stupid and thoughtless.

Dindon: (*turning to him*) I do not accept your apology.

Jean-Michel: It wasn't to you I was apologizing. It was to my parents.

(ALBIN rises, leaving his wig on the chair, and crosses D.S. away from

JEAN-MICHEL)

Dindon: Your parents? What parents? Oh, one of them might possible be your father, but you can't tell me that the other one is your mother.

Jean-Michel: That's precisely who he is (music)

Dindon: I see no mother here. (music)

Jean-Michel: *(turning to ALBIN)* I do.

(Fierstein and Herman 100-101)

As Jerry Herman once said, *La Cage* is “about standing up for yourself and fighting bigotry” (Kantor and Maslon 388).

CHAPTER FIVE

Conclusion

Thirty years ago, Arthur Laurents questioned if the musical adaptation of *La Cage* was possible. Was it possible for a Broadway musical with content such as homosexuals, drag queens, and family to be a lucrative project, let alone successful? Thirty years ago, Jerry Herman wrote three compelling songs that eventually came to define the LGBT outlook on issues of basic civil and human rights: “We Are What We Are,” “I Am What I Am,” and “The Best of Times.” As Fierstein predicted before the musical even premiered, “I Am What I Am” became the anthem for all queers in society. The question of the musical’s probability turned out to be the poignant reason *La Cage* became a success.

Harvey Fierstein has expressed, “we are all connected.” (brainyquote.com) Fierstein is correct, we are all connected. Even heterosexuals face the plights of challenging heteronormativity. In the book, *Language, Gender, and Sexual Identity: Poststructuralists Perspectives*, Heiko Motschenbacher explains that heteronormativity creates a sense of discourse for all genders, not just sexual minorities, because it imposes pressures to conform in accordance to “strict gender binarism.” (Motschenbacher 16)

Heteronormativity is a discursively produced pressure that requires everybody to position oneself in relation to it on a daily basis. For non-heterosexual people, this pressure has far-reaching consequences that have repercussions throughout their lives: from hiding one’s identity to repeated coming outs in diverse contexts, from one’s own personal struggle to the

fight with heteronormativity structured institutions such as family, school, law, church, medicine, and many more. / But heterosexual people also have to suffer under the regime of heteronormativity because it has to be repeatedly displayed throughout a person's life. (16)

Motschenbacher's postulations coincide with the character examinations accomplished in this thesis because each character, homosexual or heterosexual, struggles with heteronormativity in one way or another. Even Edouard and Marie Dindon battle heteronormativity because they are resolutely fixated on upholding moral tradition. They're inability to accept LGBT is a consequence of conventional conditioning. Just as Jean-Michel's bigotry is a product of societal homophobia, Edouard and Marie's perceptions of Albin, Georges, and Jean-Michel are the repercussions of learned prejudice.

In the introduction of Fierstein's *Torch Song Trilogy*, James Leverett postulates that the real battles of the sexual revolution are struggles against "the three greatest enemies of human imagination: hate, fear, ignorance." (Leverett 3) As theater history has proven, *La Cage* continues to be revived because hate, fear, and ignorance are still persistent issues in society.

5.1 Revival, After Revival, After Revival:

Since 1983, *La Cage* has been revived a total of three times. While the 2005 revival never ran past eight months, the 1983 original production and the 2010 revival have basked in critical acclaim. In 2010, *La Cage* made Broadway history as the first show to win the Tony Award for best production three times since its inception. Over the

years, the original *La Cage* and the two revivals have earned multiple Awards; Tony, Oliver, Drama Desk, London Critics Circle, and many more. The musical continues to draw audiences from all over the world. Revivals have occurred not only in the United States, but in London as well. In the present, the production is already touring nationally, playing this December in Boston, Massachusetts at The Shubert Theater (lacage.com). As a professional theater connoisseur, I marvel at the response and continuous allure *La Cage* has generated over the past thirty years. Is it the glamour? Or is it simply intrigue of the queer and the ambiguous that keep audiences coming back for more?

Adam Feldman exclaims in his Time Out New York article, “La Cage aux Folles: Musical Revival of the Year,” “We’ve come a long way, baby, from 1983, when even those outrageous costumes still smelled vaguely of the closet they were kept in.” (Feldman 1) While the *La Cage* journey spans longer than 30 years, the storyline and overall premise remain unscathed. The only difference now comes from the way in which actors are delivering their lines and singing their songs. Actors are exuding apparent emotions of exhaustion and anger. The picturesque chorus line of ambiguous Cagelles is no longer the bright sequined constellation they once were. Frank Scheck of The Hollywood Reporter describes several differences in the 2010 revival such as the Cagelles being portrayed as less feminine and more intimidating.

One notices the differences from the opening minutes of the new Broadway revival of ‘La Cage aux Folles.’ The setting is seedier, more realistically evocative of the sort of decadent seaside nightclub it depicts. The Cagelles are unpolished and decidedly tough looking; glaring during their routines, they seem as likely to accost audience members as entertain

them. The orchestra is smaller, and at the intimate Longacre Theater, one is much closer to the action. (Scheck 1)

As Scheck describes, the charming qualities of the 1983 *La Cage* are slowly beginning to dissipate. Why now? If anything, shouldn't the Cagelles be elated that society has mitigated all forms of prejudice? If we look at the most current revivals of *La Cage*, I infer the "unpolished and decidedly tough looking" Cagelles are tempered and fatigued because LGBT issues are still prominent today. Scott Brown of New York Magazine puts the issue into greater perspective in his article, "The Best of Times: La Cage aux Folles Flies in From London, Rejuvenated." Brown asserts that although "great strides have been made, socially and theatrically, since the show premiered [...] gay life remains comically and politically relevant." (1) Furthermore, Brown concludes that "The best of times is now," but the reality for the situation is the "weary recognition that it's been Now for an awfully long time." (1)

As it stands, the United States federal government does not honor or recognize homosexual marriages as a result of DOMA (the Defense for Marriage Act). DOMA was passed in 1996 and it exempts same sex couples from marital benefits and legal recognition of their unions. While seven states - New Hampshire, Massachusetts, Connecticut, Iowa, Vermont, Washington, D.C., and most recently, New York - have passed state ordinances which allow persons of the same sex to marry and receive state-level benefits, there are still 45 states where DOMA is enforced law. President Obama, who once supported DOMA as a means to "defend existing statutes," has recently acknowledged that section 3 of DOMA is unconstitutional and has advised "the department not to defend the statute in such cases." (Ambinder 1) Additionally, same-

sex marriage remains the primary debate for gay/civil rights activists and continues to produce domestic and global attention. Given the current issues of the present, the *La Cage* we view now is nothing short of accurate.

When describing the performance of the “galvanic London star,” Douglas Hodge, in the 2010 revival, Brown explains that Albin’s number, “I Am What I Am,” is no longer just the divas dramatic soliloquy where Albin “rallies her spirits, even while allowing the audience to see the price that the diva pays for her optimism.” (Frontain 2) This time, the number expresses an exerted ferocity. In the present, there really is “no return and no deposit/ one life/so it’s time to open up your closet.” (Fierstein and Herman 66)

Hodge adds something new: a touch of sputtering rage that's neither heroic nor pathetic. Too agitated to hold stage center, he jerks himself around, looking for release, but finding only an audience. And for once, the performer delivering this fight song doesn't seem to assume his listeners share his feelings or his fight. For all the spittle and vibrato on display, Hodge's number feels strangely like a private moment. This Albin is not articulating a credo; he's simply furious. (1)

On the contrary, while Albin is no longer “articulating a credo,” Ben Brantley of the New York Times still believes that the 2010 revival never lost its ability to charm.

This is not ‘La Cage’ as ‘The Iceman Cometh.’ Even tripping over themselves, the Cagelles exude the raw pleasure of people being exactly who they want to be. That’s showbiz, folks. And when Albin leads the company in a beaming version of “The Best of Times,” a song that usually

gives me hives, you're likely to feel that a cramped, decrepit nightclub has become the coziest sanctuary in the world. (Brantley 2)

5.2 Mirrors:

Theater and history are mirrors of each other. Sometimes the mirrors are dusty making it difficult to see a reflection. It is the responsibility of playwrights, lyricists, directors, and thespians to provide a mirror, shine the facts, and reflect truth. While history and truth are both subjective, we must be mindful that both are contingent upon perspective. Poiret was a bold playwright. Although his farce focused more on satire than developing the humanity in each character, he still created a storyline that sparked interest, resulting in the adapted musical audiences view today. Fierstein, Laurents, and Herman did their best to shine the facts Poiret provided them with. However, as Brown notes, "our profound limitations as a society" are ultimately the factors that prevent us from truly moving forward. (1) In lieu of revivals, perhaps the time has come for another statement to be written.

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