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Unity Through Difference: Social Definition and McNally's Love! Valour! Compassion!

Andrew Murphy '98

Terrence McNally, in his 1995 play Love! Valour! Compassion!, presents an investigation of what it means to be homosexual in contemporary American society. Difference and unity, imaginatively interwoven, create a vivid portrait, not of gay identity, but of human interaction. McNally attacks stereotypes by presenting contrasting characters who depict homosexuals as no more than a group of individuals. At the same time, he illustrates the strong family and community connections that develop as a result of outside oppression.

Difference is prevalent in McNally's play from the very first page. Though the eight characters do share their gayness as a unifying characteristic, they are anything but similar. The opening scene introduces this idea by dealing with how individuals' views of objects differ. Gregory, a forty-something dancer, urges us to appreciate detail (10), as in his old farmhouse and collection of antiques. When a fellow choreographer gives Gregory a sled, he says, "It's flat here... No hills... What am I going to do with a sled?" (10), to which the man replies, "It's not a sled, Gregory... It's an antique." (10). John, on the other hand feels "it's not an antique," but "a piece of junk." (10). This exchange, though subtle, is not unimportant. It establishes, early in the play, the idea that there are many different ways of looking at anything—objects, situations, people, feelings, and so on. Gregory sees the practical value in the sled. The choreographer sees its artistic and aesthetic value, and John sees no value at all. This theme runs throughout the play.

One place this can be seen is in the characters themselves. They represent various occupational groups, nationalities, personalities, moralities, and dispositions, among other things. This implies that gay people come in all shapes and sizes, none of which is saying himself on being introduced to Ramon, "He's Arthur, I'm Perry, Don't listen to him." (37).

Another interesting character is Buzz, who works for Gregory's dance company. A more intense cynic than even Perry, John can be considered sour. From the beginning, John establishes himself as an outsider. He calls himself "that merry wonderer of the night" who is "obsessed with who people really are" and who "must know their secrets." (21). He invades Gregory's space for this purpose, feasting on "words other eyes were never meant to see." (21). John is inconsistent. He treats Ramon rudely on their arrival, embarrassing his boyfriend in front of someone he admires. In front of Gregory, John asks Ramon if they can "go upstairs and fuck." (29). He is also mean-natured. Of his brother with AIDS, John says, "He's not well. He needs me and I don't like him." (46)." Other characters also comment on his disposition. Buzz says, "You still know how to clear a room, John." (29) and Perry asks sarcastically, "Who would willingly spend Memorial Day weekend at a wonderful big house in the country on a gorgeous lake with John Jekyll when they could be substituting in the city all by themselves?" (35). As the play progresses, however, it becomes apparent that John feels terribly alone. He resents his brothers for being well-liked, claiming James "got the good soul. [He] got the bad one." (124).

Another interesting character is Buzz, who works for Gregory's company and volunteers at an AIDS clinic. Buzz is a thirty-something who has been diagnosed with AIDS. This aside, the dominating force in Buzz's life is the Broadway musical. According to Perry, "it isn't about musicals, Buzz has the attention span of a very small moth." (16). A very dramatic, playful, and sometimes childish person, Buzz fits well the role of a stereotypical effeminate gay person. He is inept at sports, asking, "Which end of the racquet do i hold?" (66) before beginning a tennis match, and he constantly makes sexual comments and says things like, "He's gay, you know." (101). Buzz is also very witty, and keeps the other characters laughing at themselves and each other. Facetious as he may appear, Buzz does function at a more adult level. He likes musicals, not purely for their entertainment value, but because it is something he is able to manage; he "can contain the world of the Broadway musical. Get [his] hands around it, so to speak. Be the master of one little universe." (25). This allows a person who has little or no control over much of his life—including his health—to obtain a sense of stability and balance.

Bobby, a young man in his twenties, is another of McNally's characters. Bobby, like his partner Gregory, has, according to Perry, "a remarkably loving nature... never putting himself first." (13). Also a remarkably determined and confident person, he is blind. He deals with his disability well, saying to Ramon, "I've been like this since birth... I get around fine. It'll surprise you." (38). Although Bobby is young, he seems overly immature, perhaps because of his blindness. He sees much of life as a game. "[His] whole life being a children's birthday-party game," (43), in his own words. He often gets into situations where he must rely on others to come to his rescue, especially Gregory, and he even says that "sometimes he gets [t]ired of behaving like a grown-up," (45), even though he is in his twenties. Another strong trait of Bobby's is his faith. He believes in Gregory and is very supportive of his work, even though he has never been able to see him dance. Because he cannot judge appearances, he instead assesses people based on intuition. This allows him to love Gregory because his "heart is beautiful," (31), not for his appearance. Bobby also displays a great faith in God and His "unconditional love." (87). Despite his immaturity, he shows great insight in his belief that it is God, not "lovers, friends, or family" (87) to whom people should turn for their emotional needs.

Another young character is Ramon. A "bonny Puerto Rican modern dancer" (65), also in his early twenties, he is, in Arthur's words, "hot." (18). Ramon's dominating characteristic is his sexualitatibility. In addition to being rude during a considerable portion of the play, Ramon is obsessed with himself and his body. After swimming in the cold lake, he comments to the group that "he [has] no nuts." (26). "I had enormous nuts. I was famous for my nuts. Where are my fabulous nuts?" (26), he asks subsequently. Clearly he is out for attention. Later, after claiming to have had a sexual encounter with the Obsession man, he says, "Fuck you, all of you. I don't care."
But the next time you see his picture or you're tossing in your bed thinking about him, just remember: somebody had him and it wasn't you. I know how that must burn your ass" (92). Like Bobby, Ramon is young. Unlike Bobby, however, he is extremely cocky and believes he knows it all at his young age.

McNally's eighth character is James, John's twin brother who, like Buzz, has AIDS. As different from one another as Arthur and Perry, James is his brother's antithesis. Gregory, in his journal, appropriately cites them "James the Fair and John the Fou" (65). James is many of the things John is not: pleasant, easy going, and well-liked. Aware of this drastic contrast, he humorously tells the others, "It's not who you think. I'm the other one. When John stops playing the piano, you can start getting nervous again" (69). James also possesses another quality John does not, the capacity for forgiveness. When John confronts his dying brother about the hate and resentment he feel for him, James is willing to love his brother anyway. As John describes it, "My brother was forgiving me... He had already forgiven me. I could not love, nor could I hate him" (115). One scene, in particular, well illustrates the diversity of the characters. Ramon and Gregory are speaking about dance companies and financial difficulties. Ramon says of his company, "Right now we're all just hoping there will be a next season. We're broke," to which Gregory replies, "Every company is, Ramon" (28). Then Buzz chimers in and suggests they need a Daaghed, "a rich older man who in return for certain favors funds an entire ballet company" (28). The ways in which these four men respond to this idea shows the different aspects of their personalities.

But the time comes to play, John is returning to his sexuality. Perry refers to his partner as "[his] button-down, plodding Arthur" (135). Arthur, however, embraces his sexuality and appears to be very accepting of that aspect of himself. He says to Perry, "You're really lucky I'm a big queen" (100). At one point in the play he tries to convince his friends to go skinny-dipping, saying "No one is wearing swimsuits... What are we? Men or wimps" (40). In convincing them he challenges their masculinity. The end result, however, is eight naked men. Clearly, even though he is an accountant and very conservative looking, he is not attempting to hide any of his identity. He even agrees to participate in Gregory's Swan Lake benefit dance, in women's clothing, and tries to convince his lover to do the same and "[help] his best friends out by putting on a tutu for five minutes in front of three thousand people in Carnegie Hall" (103).

While Arthur is at ease with his sexuality, Perry is uncomfortable with his own. Though he accepts who he is and does not attempt to hide anything, he is not in favor of displaying it as Arthur does. When asked to be part of the benefit Perry declines, saying that Gregory "[is] not going to find one man" to participate and that "men in drag turn [his] stomach" (47-8). He feels that being a homosexual relates only to whom one loves or has sex with, not to the way one acts. When Buzz tells James to "Play something gay... gay music written by a gay composer." Perry says "there's no such thing as gay music" (57). Similarly, when Buzz starts talking gay politics, Perry says, "It's the Fourth of July, Buzz, no gay rights stuff, please" (106). As the play progresses, Perry shows that he is not as comfortable with his sexuality, does not define himself in those terms. Perry feels that dancing in a tutu would be humiliating. Bobby, who does not take this view, asks, "How would they be making fools of themselves?" (68). He is perfectly comfortable with the idea of playing that role. However, when Buzz says to him, "You are the only fairy in America who still wears white pants on the first holiday of summer," he responds with, "I was hoping I was the only person in America who still wears white pants on the first holiday of summer" (44). He does not want to be labeled in that way. He sees his gayness as irrelevant, or at least secondary to other aspects of his identity. Bobby's blindness is far more relevant to his character than gayness. He tells Arthur that "people think blindness is the most awful thing that can happen to a person." "I've got news for everybody," he says, "it's not" (33). A strong person, he deals well with adversity. Whatever comes his way, whether it be a virtual challenge or homophobia, he accepts and moves on.

Comparing to Bobby, Gregory is also comfortable with, yet quiet about, his gay identity. "I. Urn. I am a flaming fairy. I thought you would know" (93). Though he is very open about his homosexuality, maintaining a masculine image is very important to him.

An interesting contrast with Ramon is Buzz. Buzz is extremely open about his homosexuality, so much so, in fact, that it can be considered his main character trait. In addition, he has no reservation about appearing feminine, or appearing anything else for that matter. Without gayness there would be very little to Buzz. He is constantly making references to gay people, places, and things and he tells Perry, "They're all gay. The entire Olympics" (101). One of his favorite lines is, "[insert name] is gay, you know." Buzz likes to be surrounded by gaysmen. This is apparent when he asks John to "play something gay." He wants "gay music by a gay composer" (57), and this is exactly the way he goes about his life.

In another contrast with Buzz, Bobby, although comfortable with his sexuality, does not define himself in those terms. Perry feels that dancing in a tutu would be humiliating. Bobby, who does not take this view, asks, "How would they be making fools of themselves?" (68). He is perfectly comfortable with the idea of playing that role. However, when Buzz says to him, "You are the only fairy in America who still wears white pants on the first holiday of summer," he responds with, "I was hoping I was the only person in America who still wears white pants on the first holiday of summer" (44). He does not want to be labeled in that way. He sees his gayness as irrelevant, or at least secondary to other aspects of his identity. Bobby's blindness is far more relevant to his character than gayness. He tells Arthur that "people think blindness is the most awful thing that can happen to a person." "I've got news for everybody," he says, "it's not" (33). A strong person, he deals well with adversity. Whatever comes his way, whether it be a virtual challenge or homophobia, he accepts and moves on.
ing homosexual. He is not overly sexual like Ramon, not image-oriented like Perry, or gay-obsessed like Buzz. His reaction to gayness seems instead to be a curious one. He describes "Queing Americans: From A to Z, a book John gave him, to be "the most extraordinary book" (69). "It gives the names of all the gay men and lesbians in this country in alphabetical order...I'm absolutely riv-

eters. He treats homosexuality sheepishly, almost as if he is amused that it exists at all. His English reservation affects his ac-
tions, but not his view of himself. As with Gregory, James's gay identity is overshadowed by something else, his battle with AIDS. It is this, first and foremost, which defines his character.

An example which illustrates the variety of ways the characters react to, and deal with, homosexuality occurs in the second scene. Buzz enters the outdoor scene "wearing an apron, heels, and little else" (80). The reactions of the three others present are quite di-

verse. Perry reacts with, "Jesus Christ, Buzz...Put some clothes on. Nobody wants to look at that...You're not at a nudist colony. There are other people present" (81). James, who is busy reading, says, "You could all be stalkers and I wouldn't bat an eye brow" (81) and, when asked, Arthur says, "It's not bothering me" (81). Perry's reaction is one of shock and disgust, fitting with his own view of homosexuality. Likewise, Arthur doesn't particularly mind and James seems indifferent. At the "Diaghilev" example, there is dissen-

sion among the four men on this issue of exhibiting one's sexuality.

Despite their diversity, the eight men in McNally's play are not separated. To the contrary, they are very much connected—and not just in romantic or sexual ways. Throughout the play, the in-

ner-group relations resemble that of a family unit. Independent of the four main relationships—Perry and Arthur, Gregory and Bobby, Buzz and James, and John and Ramon—characters often interact with one another in pairings of friendship, professional involvement, support, and rivalry. John and Gregory work together, for example. John serves as the accompanist for his dance company. Perry and Gregory have a similar working relationship, as Perry offers his le-
support, and rivalry. John and Gregory work together, for example,

with one another in pairings of friendship, professional involve-

ment, their relationship never develops into anything beneficial. Curiously, the two men—the most ungay gay characters in the play—are also McNally's main narrators. It is through them the audience receives much of their information. Although they do not seem to like each other much, they do team up on several occasions to support each other's views. They are, for example, both unenthusiastic about dressing in tux for Gregory's dance number. "People are bloody sick of benefits, Gregory," John says, with which Perry agrees. "That's the truth" (49). Despite this similarity, their relationship never develops into anything beneficial. When John discovers that Perry was hiding in the closet during his encounter aside, they relate well to each other on the basis of age. Perry's constant references to Broadway personalities elicit recog-
nition from the older characters, but mutual amusement and ques-
tions such as "Who's Gertrude Lawrence?" (49), "Who's Julie Andrews?" (50), and "Who's Judy Garland? Who are any of those people?" (50) from Bobby and Ray. Buzz becomes quite dis-

traught, saying, "I long for the day when people ask "Who's Ma-

donna?" I apologize to the teenagers at the table, but the state of the American musical [metaphorically speaking] has me very up-
set" (51). Perry behaves similarly when he remarks that "the younger generation hasn't put in their two cents" (51). These situations set Ray and Bobby in a group by themselves.

Another relevant pairing is Gregory and Ramon. Their rela-
tionship progresses from mutual admiration to rivalry, and ultimately to mentor-protégé. In the first act, Ramon's reaction to Gregory is one of respect. When he learns that Gregory was present at one of his performances, Ramon says, "You saw us, Mr. Mitchell...I would have freaked if I'd known you were out there, Mr. Mitchell" (28).

He makes a similar comment to John, saying, "I'm sort of out of my element this weekend. He's Gregory Mitchell, for Christ's sake. Do you know what that means?" (33). Gregory also looks upon Ramon favorably, writing in his journal that "John will also have Ramon Foros, a superb young dancer, in tow" (65). The circumstances change a bit after Ramon's affair with Bobby. Ramon tells Gregory that "If [he] ever get[s] famous like [him]...and they ask [him] when [he] decided [he] wanted to be a dancer—no, a great dancer, like [Gregory was]" (115), he will tell them of his high school talent contest. Sensing his slip, he corrects himself. "I'm goolish. Great dancer you are. 'I didn't mean it, okay?' (116). Not okay, he lets his arrogance take over, exclaiming, "Fuck you then. I'm sorry your work isn't going well. Bobby told me. But don't take it out on me. I'm just having fun!" (116). Having had enough, Gregory grabs Ramon, twists his arm, threatening to break it, and at-
tempts to force him to mutilate his hand in the garbage disposal. Buzz and Perry come to the rescue and the situation ends without another word. Later, when Gregory finishes his current dance piece, exhausted—a forty-three-year-old man whose body had begun to quit in places he'd never dreamed of" (127), according to Perry—he decides that his career as a dancer is over and he will pass his tradi-
tion on to the young Ramon. "You're good Ramon. You're very
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tion on to the young Ramon. "You're good Ramon. You're very

good. You're better than I was at your age...It would be your solo at the premiere" (128), he says. The peace offering is final when Gregory says "[he's] fine" (129) after Ramon's mention of the Bobby situation.

John and James also form a pair. As twin brothers, they are as
different as night and day. John appears not to care much for his twin—in fact harboring a great deal of hatred and resentment to-
ward him—the reason for which comes out in Act Three. "I resent you. I resent everything about you. You had Mum and Dad's un-
conditional love and now you have the world's. How can I not envy that?" (124), John asks James, "So what's your secret? The secret of unconditional love? I'm not going to let you do it with me" (125). The brothers come together when James forgives John for his hatred—"just then a tear started to fall from the corner of one eye. This tear
told me my brother knew something of the pain I felt of never, ever, not once, being loved...We could see each other at last" (125). Finally, John can release all the anguish he has been holding in. He is finally able to relate to his brother.

A final link exists between Bobby and James. Bobby, blind, and James, dying of AIDS, have something in common—they both face more adversity than the average person. Near the end of the play, they have a scene which parallels their two conditions. Every-
one else is down by the lake. James is very sick by this point and out of bed against his best intentions. James says to Bobby, "I have a confession to make. I've never been skinny-dipping in the moon-
light with a blind American." "I thought you were scared of that
twistling turtle," Bobby returns. James replies, "I'm terrified of him. I'm counting on you." Bobby understands, saying, "Let's go then" (139) and the scene fades. This exchange is about confronting fears and, even more so, about people being there for another. James cannot make it without Bobby's support, in much the same way that Bobby cannot make it without James's guidance. It is central to the meaning of the play.

These common bonds allow the eight characters to form a kind of family. Though they may not always like each other, they involve themselves in each other's lives and are a source of support for one another. The men show concern for numerous aspects of their friend's lives. Gregory's problems with his work serve as a first ex-

ample. John includes in his narration at the end of Act One that "it was raining when Gregory sat alone in his studio for six hours lis-

tening to a piece of music and didn't move from his chair" (62). Bobby says that Gregory has "started telling people the new piece

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neither. Whatever the circumstances, this play asserts that one definition is simply neither justifiable nor conceivable.

Buzaczer:


