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HIS VOICE:
THE PORTRAYALS OF LGBTQ+ ISSUES IN MUSICAL THEATRE
SEEN THROUGH TERRENCE MCNALLY'S
A MAN OF NO IMPORTANCE

by

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B.M. Florida State University, 2016

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of Master of Arts
in the Department of Theatre
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Major Professor: Earl Weaver

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ABSTRACT

As a young theatre educator and director, I have found myself to be most impacted by LGBTQ+ works that provide perspectives on controversial topics that exist in today's society. It has dawned on me that representation through theatre is impactful for audiences who are able to relate to the characters in the story that is being told, and through this, can find their own voice in a world where they may feel silenced. In an ever-changing educational world, we as educators are always pushed to innovate and create strategies that can elevate how stories are told through theatre. Through conversations with my students, an idea to bring awareness and introduce LGBTQ+ issues in our high school through the form of a show was presented to help tell the stories of the disenfranchised and to encourage love throughout our school community.

This thesis explores and analyzes the portrayals of LGBTQ+ issues portrayed in the musical *A Man of No Importance*, written by Terrence McNally, specifically geared towards homosexuality and the act of "coming out." The topic of coming out continues to carry a negative stigma in today's society, and for that I produced art that speaks about love and acceptance, all themes seen in *A Man of No Importance*. As a gay male with a conservative Catholic upbringing, it is important for me also to explore the role religion plays within this musical and the characters whom are facing the repercussions in the story. Through this thesis, my goal is to introduce an educated perspective on how LGBTQ+ issues have been portrayed in this musical and to highlight how this and other LGBTQ+ themed shows are needed in our society to spread the message of inclusivity and love. In addition to researching, I discuss my directorial process for my production of *A Man of No Importance* at University High School and how its message can spark conversations about love and acceptance.

To all who have a story to tell or a *box* to climb out of, this thesis is for you.

Matthew 5:10

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Throughout this thesis experience, I had the humbling experience of being surrounded by so many supportive entities in my life.

I first want to dedicate my admiration to my parents for their devotion to my education, support in anything and everything that I set my mind to, and their acceptance of me. This story and message has always been for you.

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To my students, both past and present, for your undoubted allegiance to my creative vision and for helping to shape me into the teacher I am today.

Lastly, I want to extend my deepest recognition to my advisor, chair, and mentor, Earl Weaver. Without your acceptance into this program and your belief in me, I would not be where I am today. Thank you for helping me climb out of my own *box* and find the strength to allow the world to really *see me*.

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INTRODUCTION

Beginning year three at a prestigious performing arts magnet high school means I have been able to teach, direct, and be influenced by many theatre students and partake in theatre productions that present many challenges along the way. In the past two years of being a theatre educator, I have been tasked with various duties that include directing, music directing, marketing, advertising, and many more tasks that fall on the shoulders of a high school theatre teacher. Through these tasks, I have witnessed what it is to work alongside production teams that don't always see eye-to-eye, and through various challenges, I have been able to learn and grow from situation to situation because of discussions on design, staging experiences, and even conflict resolution.

In my first year of teaching, I was tasked with taking over a Musical Theatre class which came from an idea to have a class where students could learn audition prep, work more closely on musical theatre repertoire, study dance technique, and eventually produce a show from the class. All these tasks seemed daunting at the time, since I had very little experience in the theatre education field, and because I did not have the dance skill to teach some of the desired curriculum. Prior to me taking over, this class existed for a short three months before I was tasked with teaching it, meaning that not many resources were handed to me to begin with. This is both a positive and negative kind of situation, because it allowed me to explore just what I wanted for the class to become. However, it was a heavy load to tackle while also navigating year one of teaching and having to maintain the quality of the after-school theatre program. It is a good thing I was not the only teacher in charge of this class, as I was able to collaborate with the chorus teacher and hire a dance instructor to teach the student dance technique I was not well-

versed in. After completing my first year of teaching, I knew the things I needed to fix and made a game plan for the following year to come.

Over the summer of 2018, I had the privilege of beginning my Master's degree coursework at the University of Central Florida to pursue a Master of Arts in Theatre with a Concentration in Musical Theatre to better my knowledge on theatre education and to enhance my skill sets to take back to my students. The first summer forced me immediately to understand what I was getting myself into and allowed me to take in so much depth of knowledge from various educators, including how to handle different situations, how-to scenarios, and focus on literature, perspectives I had not thought about until then.

At the start of the next school year (Fall of 2018), my musical theatre class size and interest grew tremendously. The school was able to hire a full-time dance teacher who collaborated and began teaching dance technique regularly to the students in the class and after school. It was a goal to put on the first show from the class that year, and we were able to do so with the efforts of a collaborative team which involved myself, the chorus director, and the dance teacher, for the majority of the work. I directed the first in-class production of *You're A Good Man Charlie Brown*, my first experience in the role of a director. I learned first-hand the stresses this kind of task can present and immediately felt the number of tasks a director faces through a whole new lens. The show, which was presented in January of 2019, was a successful experience for the students, myself and my colleagues.

As this class has continued to grow in both size and in skill level, I have been inspired to direct a show that presents its own challenges, specifically in theme/subject material. In May of 2019, a conversation was sparked through the topic of what the next show would be for this class

(topics included social justice and awareness). Students are extremely passionate about these topics because of what is happening in our world today and through what they see on social media. I presented an idea to do a show that covers LGBTQ+ awareness, a topic close to my heart for various reasons. I was very hesitant to introduce this agenda at first, wanting to make sure the students would feel comfortable presenting a show about this topic, and it wasn't until a student stood up and said, "I don't think it's about whether or not we're comfortable; it's about admitting that this is what we need to talk about right now" that I knew this path was the right one to take. This conversation inspired me beyond measure about the type of subject matter in theatre my students are eager to explore. Knowing that my personal passions could unite with my students' interests was enough for me to begin the search for the right show to do with them. Through this moment, I have been led to believe that sharing this material with the new generation is the key to creating further change in this world.

Choosing a show for a class project has presented extreme difficulties for many reasons: the unknown factor of who will be enrolling in the class, making sure the show highlights content that can challenge the students and audiences, as well as ensuring the show will fit in the overall season for the program. The process of finding a show took time, including reading scripts, listening to cast albums, and keeping the LGBTQ+ agenda in mind. The first show I heavily researched was *Quilt: A Musical Celebration* by Jim Morgan, John Schak, and Merle Hubbard. "The structure of the musical, *Quilt: A Musical Celebration*, mirrors the structure of the actual NAMES Project Quilt by incorporating many individual stories into a tapestry that tells the whole story." ("Quilt"). This show highlights the acquired immunodeficiency syndrome (AIDS) agenda, which is something I am inclined to speak about because it is a part of queer

history that should not go unnoticed. However, after much contemplation, I decided that *Quilt* wasn't the right fit for the class as the resources for the students were very limited. Not having a musical score, cast album to reference, or any sort of prior productions to view proved a hindrance for me because I wasn't able to visualize or interpret the role music played through the story with just a script. Although Music Theatre International (MTI) does provide perusals, the perusal is just a libretto that contains the script and vocal lines for the songs. I found this to be extremely limiting as there are many transitions that incorporate music and unless we had a full-time accompanist to play through the songs and transitions, it would be extremely difficult to properly understand how these musical moments fit into the piece. Staying with the subject of AIDS, I considered the idea of directing *RENT* by Jonathan Larson, again to educate students on a topic that seems to be going unnoticed in recent years. As mentioned, the art I am most influenced by is that of which represents LGBTQ+ issues seen in visual art, television and in film. Ryan Murphy, a devout LGBTQ+ director and activist who I admire, does many things well in the arts industry, but what he is exceptional at is raising awareness on true stories about the gay agenda, including the human immunodeficiency viruses (HIV) and AIDS. It's a shame that bringing this issue to a high school stage becomes a challenge because of sensitivity to the subject matter and the explicitness of its content, which is the reason *RENT* was not approved by my colleagues and administration. For this reason, I had to dig deeper, search harder, and find a story that explored all the feelings of oppression I felt when feeling unable to produce the show I thought was best for my students. That is what led me to Terrence McNally's *A Man of No Importance*. How did I stumble upon this show? Well, I went to an iTunes playlist and started listening to the Broadway revival cast recording of *Once on This Island*, a show about culture

and family. The musical underscoring in this show is captivating to my ear for its beauty and motivic patterns used throughout. Knowing that Lynn Ahrens' lyrics and Stephen Flaherty's music have such an impact on me, I thought it would be nice to research some of their other projects on which they've collaborated, which is how I found this musical. *A Man of No Importance* is scored so beautifully with lyrics that speak to the nature of this thesis topic.

Eager to get my hands on the material, I immediately ordered the script for *A Man of No Importance* from MTI and read the show while I listened to the entire cast album. I was captivated, hooked, and enamored at the beauty and storytelling this piece presents. *A Man of No Importance* follows the journey of a bus conductor named Alfie Byrne in 1964 Dublin, Ireland, who is also a theatre director at the local Catholic Church. What society fails to realize is Alfie's struggle with finding his identity and being unable to share his heart's desires with anyone other than his idolized playwright, Oscar Wilde. It isn't until he tries to produce Oscar Wilde's *Salome* that "he confronts the forces of bigotry and shame over a love 'that dare not speak its name.'" ("A Man of No Importance"). I relate wholeheartedly to Alfie in many ways, one being that we are both filled with a passion to portray art that is true to the world around us. Another is when *Salome* (the play he tries to direct) gets shut down by church officials in *A Man of No Importance*. I felt that moment directly correlated to my life when shows I have wanted to direct have been negated. There are too many things happening in my daily life that relate to Alfie's story, which was how I knew this show landed in my lap for a reason. Therefore, I took the production idea to my students by doing one simple thing: I played the song "Love Who You Love" from the show. The students were speechless. This is how I knew I had acquired a text that matched the sentiments of how I felt and the message my students want to portray on stage.

TERRENCE MCNALLY'S *A MAN OF NO IMPORTANCE*

Introduction

A Man of No Importance is one of the more recent LGBTQ+ themed shows in the history of queer musicals. Other contemporary musicals include: *Falsettos*, *Rent*, *Quilt*, *Bare: A Pop Opera*, *Fun Home*, and *Kinky Boots*. The centralized theme of sexuality and the act of coming out is explored in these shows, each in a unique way, and is an evident theme seen in *A Man of No Importance*. Queer theatre, of course, stems back decades, featuring minor roles in theatrical plays and it isn't until the 1970s, during the Gay Rights Movement, where we see "the first major Broadway book musical to let gay characters discuss (in both dialogue and song) the sexual aspects of their lives" (*Gays & Musicals* 7) seen in *A Chorus Line*, through the character Paul. This milestone led to the featuring of homosexual principal characters in musical theatre and opened the door for coming out stories to be portrayed in musicals. These portrayals serve a great purpose in representing the LGBTQ+ community and allowing actors and patrons to connect and experience the hardships that come with the issue of coming out. One of these principal characters includes Alfie Byrne, in *A Man of No Importance*, who lives life in fear because of his struggles with sexuality in a conservative society.

Production History

A Man of No Importance is written by Terrence McNally, who is known as an out gay playwright, who writes plays based on the credo: "If a play isn't worth dying for, it isn't worth writing" (Whittington) which leads me to believe that he is very intentional about the thematic material incorporated in his plays. *A Man of No Importance* reunites McNally with Stephen

Flaherty and Lynn Ahrens, who collaborated on the award-winning *Ragtime*, and helped pen the music and lyrics for the musical. The Off-Broadway production of *A Man of No Importance* made its debut at the Mitzi E. Newhouse Theatre at Lincoln Center Theater in New York City, and ran from September 12, 2002 to December 29, 2002. The production was directed by Joe Mantello, who previously collaborated with McNally, directing his play, *Love! Valour! Compassion!*, for which he received a Tony Award. *A Man of No Importance* won the 2003 Outer Critics Circle Award for Best Off-Broadway Musical and was also nominated for seven Drama Desk Awards, including, Best Musical, Best Music, and Best Lyrics. While the initial Off-Broadway run of *A Man of No Importance* was short, the musical continues to live on through the cast album, which was released early 2003.

The birth of *A Man of No Importance* comes from the vision of Terrence McNally, who was inspired by the original 1994 film with a screenplay written by Barry Devlin and directed by Suri Krishnamma. On February 20, 2015, Peter Filichia, a theatre critic, moderated a panel after having seen a college production of *A Man of No Importance* at New York University and interviewed McNally, composer Stephen Flaherty, and director John Simpkins for Music Theatre International. Filichia titled the interview, 'A Chat with Men of Great Importance' and began the interview saying: "I asked who called whom to say, 'I just saw this film called *A Man of No Importance* and it has to be our next musical.' McNally immediately raised a hand and said he was the first to notice the 1994 movie." (Filichia). Filichia reveals about McNally in this interview that "what piqued his interest was Albert Finney as the lead and the title that referenced Oscar Wilde's 1893 hit *A Woman of No Importance*." (Filichia). We can infer that McNally was intrigued and inspired by many of the thematic elements presented in the original

film, including the topic of homosexuality. “Over the past half century, Terrence McNally has been one of America’s major dramatists and the most prolific playwright about gay life in New York City” (Clum) as can be seen by McNally’s track record of plays, including his *Corpus Christi*, a religious retelling which “draws upon the biblical narrative of Jesus’ nativity, ministry, and passion to tell the story of a gay teenager’s coming out and subsequent death in a bigoted town...” (Frontain, “McNally” 21). Although many of his plays focus on homosexuality and homophobia, “his plays also focus on his characters’ desire for some form of spiritual renewal. They are also celebrations of various forms of love—of family, friends and lovers.” (Clum). It is important to highlight these elements because, like McNally, I too am inspired by these elements of a play, having personal connection to spirituality and the topic of homosexuality and its role in the church. It is important to see how that very idea is what originated McNally’s passion for this show, and his vision blossoms through *A Man of No Importance* and through Alfie’s exploration of defining *sin*.

So, how did Ahrens and Flaherty get involved? This pair, to whom I refer as the ‘duo,’ began working with McNally years prior, when they were called to work upon their first project, *Ragtime*, in 1996, leading to a Broadway production in 1998. Having earned immense success including Tony, Drama Desk, and Outer Critics Circle awards, *Ragtime* was a defining moment for the collaborative team, who later were asked to re-collaborate on *A Man of No Importance*. Ahrens says about McNally and the beginning steps of this project, “I know he wanted to do an Irish musical. And he wanted to write about a gay character.” (Guare, 6). In an interview conducted by McNally, he highlights the hesitancy from the composer and lyricist team saying:

“‘Lynn wanted to do *Dessa Rose* for ten years before I did,’ Flaherty recalled. ‘I wasn’t mature enough.’ McNally added, ‘I wanted to write *Man of No Importance* before either of you were ready.’” (Horwitz).

This reveals that the start of this project for the duo was not one powered by passion for the material. Flaherty mentioned, “Alfie Byrne is a closeted, pent-up gay, and such men don’t sing.” (Filichia). Although a rocky start, Flaherty revealed that “it wasn’t until Terrence had the idea of having Oscar Wilde join Alfie on stage, talk to him and give advice that I became enthusiastic.” (Filichia). After some further details from McNally, Ahrens also adds “*A Man of No Importance* arrived via Terrence. It was the right thing for us to do next.” (Guare, 6). It is interesting to see what sparks the creative mind of a composer and lyricist. Ahrens’ response to writing lyrics for the show was that she “looks for ‘great stories and characters with high stakes,’ where the emotional intensity is so great that the characters just have to ‘burst into song.’” (Filichia). We see this kind of passion take flight in many of Alfie’s solos including “Welcome to the World,” his anthem at the end of the show as he experiences and admits aloud his sense of belonging in the world when others have chastised him. Ahrens’ eye for lyricism and Flaherty’s skill in music composition are the very reason beautiful musical harmony is created through their writing, as they have crafted many successful musicals for the stage. *Ragtime*, being their biggest hit has won them the most awards and nominations for its original Broadway production in 1987 and the revival in 2014. Having researched each collaborator’s connection to the piece, it was interesting to come across an interview where Flaherty had expressed his connection to the show, as he previously did not feel inspired to write music for the show, saying:

“‘I’ve always wanted to write an Irish piece,’ Flaherty told Playbill On-Line for the Dec. 10-16 Brief Encounter interview. ‘After *Ragtime*, I didn’t want to do a historical drama. I’m not interested in doing the Potato Famine musical. And I *am* Irish Catholic. [Terrence] chewed on it and came back a couple of weeks later and he had rented the

video of ‘Man of No Importance.’ I wasn't sure how the music would come out of such a naturalistic story.’” (Jones).

This interview with the composer reveals much about the eventual passion that went into the piece from Flaherty’s point of view once he found something to connect with, being Oscar Wilde. He says in the Lincoln Centre Review:

“The first scene that Alfie does spend alone in his room is where I first found the tone and sound of the show. Because the characters in the score tend to have a lot of secrets. And they're not necessarily forthcoming to one another. And so whenever Alfie was in his room by himself, exploring his alter ego Oscar Wilde, that's when the music just flowed. For me, the song called “Man in the Mirror” was the key to what the show would sound like.” (Guare, 7).

Flaherty points out how Wilde’s presence sets the tone for the show, and this is further supported through findings on his *importance* and prevalence in literature and in the media. I do not doubt that the trio of collaborators all shared the same passion in unique ways. McNally’s connection to the piece can be seen through his passion for the inclusion of LGBTQ+ issues in plays and musicals and Ahrens’ connection is seen through her reasoning for writing lyrics to begin with, writing for “great stories and characters with high stakes,” (Filichia). Their connection to the themes, characters, and culture allowed for them to collaborate and contribute to the piece in some way.

The road to the Off-Broadway production started in 2001 when the collaborative team reunited to create the script and score for *A Man of No Importance*. A staged reading of the show took place in March of 2001 at the Lincoln Center Theater (LCT). The staged reading for *A Man of No Importance* took place while other works from the authors were still in motion, “all three authors are currently represented on Broadway. Flaherty and Ahrens penned the score for

Seussical, while McNally wrote the book for *The Full Monty*.” (Simonson). Although having numerous projects in motion, it didn’t affect their progress on *A Man of No Importance* as the LCT reading then led to its Off-Broadway casting and premiere that took place on October 10, 2002 and ended in a short two-and-a-half months after. “Although its fall run... *A Man of No Importance*, remains important to the composer, Stephen Flaherty. The Dublin-set show is special to *Ragtime* and *Seussical* composer Flaherty for a lot of reasons, not least of which is his Irish-Catholic roots.” (Jones).

To conclude, it is important to end with Ahrens’ perspective on productions that do not make it big as she “pointed out that many shows that suffered travails of one sort or another on Broadway have nonetheless done very well elsewhere... It’s a wonderful lesson in the way a project can have longevity.” (Horwitz). In looking at the productions of *A Man of No Importance* that have been licensed on the MTI website, it is a show that is being performed widely around the country, and I am glad to be one of the only high schools tackling the material. Hopefully, more high schools and theatre companies will follow through to present the passionate work these collaborators crafted. In a 2013 interview, McNally mentions: “I’ve done three shows with them and loved the work opportunities with all three. *Ragtime*, *A Man of No Importance*, and we’re working on a new show that I shouldn’t be talking about yet I guess. It hasn’t been announced, but I’m excited about it.” (Staff). It’s humbling to see McNally’s views of this collaborative team, because it is evident that the shows they have created have been honest, truthful and fueled by creativity and genuine passion for the material at hand.

Social Issues in 1960's Ireland

In the Fall 2002 issue of the Lincoln Center Theater Review, Frank McGuinness writes about Ireland in the 1960s beginning with, "The best of time, the worst of times - Ireland in the 1960s did not fit either description." (Guare, 19) He makes it clear that there was a dichotomy taking place throughout the entire country, where multiple divides were apparent.

"Was it a revolution? ... The North of the island exploded in civil war. The South began to prosper. The North fiercely examined itself and was found wanting in nearly every respect. The South embraced Europe and thrived, throwing aside the shackles of empire and questioning the nature of religion and the lunacy of hatred. Hatred of our own kind." (Guare, 19).

He discusses this to make the point of the divide in Ireland and then reverses his direction to make a clear point on how regardless of the divide, "the Irish were all united in one respect: 'We all hate the homos.'" (Guare, 19). This negative stigma existing in the air in this time period further makes the point that closeted gays could not speak out loud about their feelings. When discussing the *unnatural love* homosexuals were associated with, research shows they felt the need to *hide* behind doors, walls, and, like Oscar Wilde, carnations. The carnation served as a signal for homosexuals in this time period to identify each other in public without having to say anything out loud. "The claim is often made that the green carnation was fashionable among 'inverts' (as gays were then called) in Paris, with Wilde having simply imported the fashion to London. In addition, early sexologists tell us that green is supposedly the 'invert's' favorite color." ("About Our Symbol, the Green Carnation."). The social fear and stigma of being gay in the Irish landscape is seen throughout *A Man of No Importance*, in scenes that include Alfie and his priest, Father Kenny, as well as in the dark moments with Breton Beret, the antagonist of the show. Alfie's inability to come out during his confession drives forward the argument of his fear

of judgment and his feeling of being confined “in the dark in a little box” (McNally, 61). Breton Beret’s initiative in *A Man of No Importance* is to ‘out’ Alfie as he sees him staring at the bar. Why would a man go so far out of his way to humiliate, harm, and stain the reputation of a man? I can conclude that Breton’s pursuit of Alfie leans into the motion of Guare’s statement of “the Irish were all united in one respect: ‘We all hate the homos.’” (Guare, 19). It is evident that hatred fueled Beret’s actions, and he influenced others to hate Alfie for his homosexuality, calling him a “fecking queer” (McNally, 81) and marking him as less than in the society.

To discuss Catholicism in the late 1950s and early 1960s, I draw from Lawrence McCaffrey’s book where he discusses the role of Catholicism in Ireland across many decades and how views have changed over time and its relationship in similarities and differences to the Irish-American. McCaffrey states, “similarities between the Irish and Irish-American Catholicism remained obvious. Both were distrusted outsiders, were obsessed with sexual ‘impurities,’ supported book and film censorship, and strongly opposed contraception.” (McCaffrey, 14). This point of view is seen in *A Man of No Importance* through characters who are morally conservative, such as William Carney who is a conservative Catholic and member of the sodality group at the church. Although contraception is not mentioned in the show, it can be assumed that the “unmarried mother conceiving a child” character is judged by her peers, for not following the Catholic principles and receiving the holy sacrament of marriage before conception. In *A Man of No Importance*, Adele Rice faces this struggle as she is unmarried but expecting a child. In the show, Alfie does not know how to empathize with Adele’s struggle when she reveals to him that she is going to have a child:

“ADELE. It’s not the part either, Mr. Byrne. I’m not what you think I am. I’m not your virgin princess. I’m going to have a baby, Mr. Byrne
ALFIE. But you’re not married.
ADELE. No I’m not.” (McNally, 73).

Furthermore, I can conclude that Alfie’s Catholic principles affect his judgement and his ability to understand Adele’s situation. The issues of Catholicism in this time period is further supported in Jon Alston’s *Attitudes of White Protestants and Catholics toward Nonmarital Sex*. In this study, Alston states his findings on the *degree* to which white American Protestants and Catholics, during 1965, approved of sexual intercourse between adults in the following three categories: those who were presumably unmarried and do not intend to marry, when partners are engaged to be married, and when the partners are married to other persons (Alston, 73). The study also shows the difference in men versus women, both Protestant and Catholic, who indicated their approval versus disapproval across the three categories. The findings from this research study indicate high degrees of judgement across all three categories tested, especially noting the high percentage of women who do not approve of adultery.

“Catholic females are considerably more likely than Catholic males to condemn such behavior. If the four categories of respondents were to be ranked in terms of decreasing tendency to disapprove of any given form of nonmarital sex, Catholic women would take first place. Protestant women would be very close behind, virtually tying for first place with their Catholic sisters. Protestant men would occupy third place, and Catholic men would be fourth.” (Alston, 74).

Although this poll does not measure Irish Catholics specifically, it can be assumed the views were shared among these groups who identified themselves with the Catholic religion in this time period. Alston’s summation of ranking between genders listed above indicates how Catholic women are more prone to judge the acts of adultery versus Catholic men; however, the percentages of both genders are all above 90% for the category of ‘a married woman has an

extramarital affair.’ Using this study, it is important to point out the extramarital affair between Mrs. Patrick and Robbie in *A Man of No Importance*. Mrs. Patrick represents the ‘married woman who has an extramarital affair’ and Alfie walking in on this affair in the middle of act two further proves the accuracy of Alston’s study of judgement when we see Alfie’s judgement on the couple. It can be assumed that his Catholic upbringing and moral principles rooted beneath him lean into his blaming of them committing an immoral act. McNally’s inclusion of this affair in *A Man of No Importance* allows the social and religious issues in the 1960s Dublin, Ireland, to be represented, allowing for audiences of the 20th century to perceive and reflect. It is indicated in this section that Catholic principles and societal pressures influence many of the characters in *A Man of No Importance*, including Alfie himself. However, McNally challenges these societal issues through the ending of his play. This rare concept of acceptance in this time period is seen at the end of the show when Alfie’s friends come back to visit him in the church social hall and offer their sentiments:

“ALFIE. I’m a great sinner.

MISS CROWE. I don’t know what you’ve done, Mr. Byrne, but I know you for a good man.

MRS. GRACE. Life goes on and so must we artists.

ALFIE. I’m so blessed in my friends. Nothing else matters.” (McNally, 91).

I can conclude that McNally wants it to be clear for the 20th century audience that people should not judge other people based on their differences, but for who they are.

Oscar Wilde

Oscar Wilde is arguably one of the most notorious artists in the 19th century with his wit and humor resonating across decades and still being used in the modern day we live in today.

“As we mark the year 2000... we have seen an avalanche of competing representations of Oscar Wilde.” (Stetz, 91). Wilde’s purpose in literature and other media has been used to convey his teachings and ideals about life, men, women, love, and other thematic contents as well as to portray his struggles throughout his life. Teresa Bonaddio, an author commended in Sheridan Morley’s book, *The Quotable Oscar Wilde: A Collection of Wit and Wisdom*, provides a biography for Wilde in which she points out his desire to explore love and a history of his sexual encounters with other men. She states that “Wilde lived in a time in which homosexuality was not only not accepted, but also deemed unlawful. And yet, that didn’t stop Wilde from exploring his thoughts.” (Bonaddio, 32). I take this statement from her biography to highlight how Oscar lived in a time where his creativity was not appreciated or admired because of the social and religious constrictions of the period. She provides readers with a perspective on how he lived his life for himself and how his works presented his views on issues he felt strongly about. She states “In Wilde’s work there were themes of beauty woven with enticement, endangerment, and death, because those were topics close to his heart. It is no secret that he had homosexual longings and that this caused him his turmoil.” (Bonaddio, 31-32). It’s important to realize the things that fuel the mind of a valued playwright and poet such as Wilde and why he was so headstrong about his ideas of art. Bonaddio also writes about Wilde’s sexuality and acts, noting some of his famous male lovers, including a close friend named Robert Ross who denied being Wilde’s lover while others believed the claim to be false. She states, “through Wilde’s imprisonment and up to his death, when even his family seemed to abandon him, Ross remained close and selflessly took care of Wilde’s estate.” (Bonaddio, 33). This indicates how Ross was around to care for Wilde when others did not, and aside from Ross, is the love story between Wilde and Lord Alfred

Douglas. Wilde's acts with Douglas and other men essentially led to his arrest and "charge for gross indecency" (Bonaddio, 35), spearheaded by Douglas' father, The Marquess of Queensbury. This is an important event in history that relates to *A Man of No Importance* as Alfie, much like Wilde, is found accused by Carney of presenting "a document of lust" (McNally, 74) when trying to produce *Salomé* at the church. Alfie experiences hardship while accused for corruption and is tried in front of the sodality. After the trial ends, Alfie realizes that he has been betrayed by Carney:

“CARNEY. I was thinking of your soul, Alfie, nothing else.
In these confusing times I cleave to what I know,
A servant of the sacred lamb. You had one foot in hell.
I only meant you well. Listen, Alfie, you know who I am”
ALFIE. I know who you are: Queensbury!” (McNally, 75).

The connection between Carney and The Marquess Queensbury that Alfie noticeably points out further highlights how Wilde's past and significance in literature has been used to convey his ideals about life and the LGBTQ+ struggles he faced along the way, struggles that Alfie faces for voicing his ideas about art and for pursuing temptation. Bonaddio ends her biography with a brief about Wilde's time after being released from Reading Gaol: "Wilde was released on May 19, 1897. Life after prison was bleak, but had a sense of 'spiritual renewal' for Wilde... Wilde spent time with Robert Ross and reunited with Lord Alfred (even though his friends and family disapproved)." (Bonaddio, 36-37). I use this to elaborate on Wilde's "spiritual renewal" and how he seems to find solace within the two companions he trusted the most. Wilde even penned his famous and final work, *The Ballad of Reading Gaol*, before dying on November 30, 1900 "at the too-young age of forty-six...from meningitis" (Bonaddio, 37). An excerpt from *The Ballad of*

Reading Gaol is what Robbie reads in the final scene of *A Man of No Importance*, which pays homage to Wilde as a final send off.

Oscar Wilde's function in *A Man of No Importance* serves many purposes when it comes to Alfie's navigation of self and faith. I have been hesitant to answer whether or not his function in the musical is as a protagonist or an antagonist. As discussed in my first chapter, Wilde is Alfie's confidant when Alfie isolates himself in his bedroom, far away from his fears in the world. In my journey with this musical and this production, I feel as though Wilde is not defined as either, but that he is just part of Alfie. Wilde is a subconscious figure in Alfie's imagination, so his function in the musical is to navigate Alfie to make the choices he himself wants to be fearless enough to make; the choice to be out and proud.

Dr. Eleanor Dobson, an avid researcher and lecture professor at the University of Birmingham, examines Wilde's function in literature in media in her article, "The Ghost of Oscar Wilde: Fictional Representations." Although Dobson fails to mention McNally's *A Man of No Importance* in her research on the fictional representations of Wilde across a variety of media, she does discuss his representation as a "ghost" saying:

"the Wilde who we wish to invoke in the present day is Wilde as he has been consistently celebrated and glamorised. Yet even in this form, arguably one which, through its enforcement of the Wildean stereotype, is fairly hackneyed and restricted, Wilde's ghost proves his continuing energy and relevance in the modern world. Across a variety of contemporary sources, he is shown to influence and comment upon the fictional universes in which he is resurrected; even if, on the surface, he appears and acts in accordance with our expectations and tastes, his influence from beyond the grave still has the power to surprise." (Dobson, 36).

Wilde's inclusion in *A Man of No Importance* comes to no surprise as McNally uses Wilde's "ghost" to convey these exact sentiments: the power to surprise through his use of wit and

wisdom. Alfie struggles with his navigation of self and faith and draws from Wilde for a sense of ease when reaching a point of fear. Wilde serves to guide Alfie along his journey and to empower him to yield to temptation and to dispense of fear from his life. McNally also uses Wilde's words throughout the show through Alfie, who speaks Wilde's famous quotes aloud to himself and to his fellow players. Having gone through the script and analyzed each of Alfie's references, mostly quoting Wilde, I can assume that McNally wanted audience members to feel the essence to which Alfie admires the work of the great poet and playwright. The plays from which Alfie draws from include *Symphony in Yellow*, *The Harlot's House*, *Her Voice*, *The Importance of Being Earnest*, *A Woman of No Importance*, *Salomé*, *An Ideal Husband*, *Theocritus: A Villanelle*, *De Profundis*, and his ever famous *The Ballad of Reading Gael*. It is no understatement to say that Alfie is a fan of Wilde, knowing a vast majority of his works. "Ultimately, the reappearance of Wilde's ghost in fiction symbolises his continuing importance and relevance in the modern world, rather than a mere banal recycling of Wilde's existing writing and remarks." (Dobson, 36).

I have referenced Wilde's relationship with his Bosie, Lord Alfred Douglas, while he was imprisoned, to point out the connection to the relationship between Alfie and Robbie. "It was during the course of their affair that Wilde wrote *Salomé* and the four great plays which to this day endure as the cornerstones of his legacy." (Popova). It can most accurately be assumed that Wilde's greatest works were fueled through true happiness and passion from his relationship with his Bosie. We see this to be true in *A Man of No Importance* as Alfie's passion is fueled through his wanting to be with Robbie and to have Robbie play John the Baptist, in what he thinks will be his greatest production to date. Commenting about Wilde and Bosie, "their affair

was intense, bustling with dramatic tempestuousness, but underpinning it was a profound and genuine love” (Popova), it is evident that although Alfie and Robbie do not end as lovers, there still seems to be a layer of profound and genuine love between their friendship, as noted between Wilde and Bosie.

About the Play: *A Man of No Importance*

Set in 1964 Dublin, Ireland, *A Man of No Importance* tells the story of Alfie Byrne, an average bus driver “whose heart holds secrets that he can't share with anyone but his imagined confidante, Oscar Wilde.” (“A Man of No Importance). The show centers around Alfie’s exploration of self as he finds himself in his beloved acting space he has recently been barred from, the St. Imelda’s Social Hall, after trying to produce Oscar Wilde’s controversial play, *Salomé*. Alfie is approached by Father Kenny, the church priest, who questions Alfie’s morals saying, “truth be told: You brought this on yourself, Alfie, no one else did. You should have told me this SALOME was a dirty play” while Alfie responds saying, “It’s not. It’s art, father, art!” (McNally, 2). As Alfie stores away his props and costumes from his cancelled production, he sings his goodbye, preparing for what is next on his path; however, the audience is blind to what Alfie has experienced to get to this moment of goodbye. In that moment, Alfie sings,

“Well, I’ll see you, St. Imelda’s. What is there to say?
Pull the door and pack up the cart.
Will you miss us, St. Imelda’s? Miss our little play?
Miss our small pretensions to art?
Ah, but what we had was something. What we had was rare.
No one would deny it was grand once they stood on this stage
With a prop in their hand. . .” (McNally, 3).

At this moment in the text, the audience is introduced to each character who plays a role in Alfie’s story, each having a narrated line sung by Alfie that recalls a specific memory from a

role his friends played in one of the productions mounted at St. Imelda's and directed by himself. The titular opening song, "A Man of No Importance," uses the other characters as a Greek Chorus to narrate the story of Alfie Byrne; poetry is read aloud, about how he reached an absolute dark low point in his life. Throughout the opening sequence, we are introduced to Lily Byrne, Alfie's socially and conservative sister, who cares deeply for him but finds him odd, and her fiancé, William Carney, who is the local butcher and a devout Catholic. Lily and William sing melodic lines narrating their name and their current actions. This includes preparing the table for breakfast and cutting up meat at the shop, while Robbie Faye, a handsome young chap who is the driver of the bus, walks down and establishes his role as Alfie's coworker and friend, not connected to the St. Imelda's Players. The characters embark on a bus ride that showcases one of the most loving moments witnessed in McNally's text, Alfie's love for poetry and his retelling of poems throughout their daily bus ride. "Everyone freezes. Time is suspended. Now Alfie sings to these friends of his imagination, but also to us. We are inside his mind" (McNally, 8). He reads aloud excerpts from Oscar Wilde's *The Harlot's House* and breaks up the text throughout the bus ride to give them a piece of poetry for them to take along their day, hoping to influence their lives with his admired playwright's text. McNally writes in his stage directions when Alfie takes out his book of poems, "He opens a small book of poetry and begins to read. The others listen intently. This is their favorite part of their day" (McNally, 9). In an intimate moment, Alfie reads Robbie a different excerpt from Oscar Wilde's *Symphony in Yellow* during a lunch break to describe the beautiful view of London and the beauty that is the world outside of their daily routine. Robbie, not understanding much about poetry, jokes about midge (an insect), saying "'Midge!' 'Midge' is good, I like midge. You don't have to know what it means to know

what it means, you know what I mean, Alf?” (McNally, 11). It can be inferred that Robbie doesn't actually understand the word 'midge,' but rather jokes about it because he believes 'midge' to be a funny sounding word. Through this shared moment, we see Alfie's admiration for Robbie grow, indicating the first revelation of Alfie's inclination for men.

As the opening number resolves, we see Alfie transition to his house, where he is found in a moment of pure joy with his sister Lily after having met Adele. Adele, who addresses herself as Ms. Rice, is a young ingénue who is introduced boarding the bus midway through the day in the first number. Adele sings about herself narrating: “a blue coated girl no one's noticed before, enters the bus, takes a seat by the door,” (McNally, 12) depicting her character's plain fashion but also foreshadowing her character's emotional arc through the use of the words “no one's noticed before.” Adele's story comes to fruition as she is later revealed to be pregnant while also being unmarried, a sin in the eyes of this conservative society. Unbeknownst to him, Alfie expresses his innovative idea to produce and direct Oscar Wilde's *Salomé* at the church starring Adele as Salomé. Ignoring his idea, Lily sings “The Burden of Life,” focusing on her main concern for her brother, which is to find him a woman so that she may retire taking care of him. Throughout the scene, Alfie continues to push the topic about directing *Salomé* on his sister which leads Lily to question Alfie and his crazy notions for wanting to direct such a “vile” play. As is seen throughout the entirety of the show, Alfie experiences the pressures of finding a woman to love in a world where his true passion is the theatre, Oscar Wilde, and his friends. Alfie shrugs away these suggestive ideas from his sister and focuses on what matters to him, mounting the production.

A Man of No Importance is a true ensemble piece allowing for much diversity in the makeup of the cast as it features many character type roles. As Alfie rounds up his theatrical troupe of St. Imelda's Players, we learn more about their legacy in the community theatre, including some supporting standouts like Mr. William Carney, the local butcher known for always playing the lead for his boastful personality. Others include Miss Crowe, the elderly costume designer; Mrs. Grace the diva; Mrs. Curtin, the tap dancer with nine children; and Rasher Flynn, serving as the company's set designer. Alfie faces a tremendous feat when trying to juggle the responsibilities of directing the show while also keeping the players content and at peace, since they are having to venture out of their comfort zones and playing roles they haven't played before. McNally makes quite a few references to the St. Imelda's Players always mounting *The Importance of Being Earnest* with Mr. Carney in the leading role of Algernon. This play is hinted to have been a hit at the theater and material that was accepted by the church and sodality. The obvious distinction between *Salomé* and *The Importance of Being Earnest* are its classifications as a Tragedy versus a Comedy. *The Importance of Being Earnest* is accepted in this society for its use of satire to deliver interpretations of themes on marriage, morality, social expectations, and the lifestyles of the English upper class.

“More important, the greatest single mistake one can make with this play is to fail to see how little Algernon is like Jack. Just to hear their names should be enough, but most of what gets written about the play is solemn, and so tends to ignore the important surface matters of name, appearance, and manner, and to point instead to the trivial moral matter of their both being deceivers.” (Sale, 477).

What this Irish society fails to understand, however, is the deceit that is seen through the characters of Algernon and Jack who disguise themselves to be a different man and the lack of

earnestness they represent. Why doesn't that count as sin? Because society does not dwell on these matters when they are told through a comedic lens.

Alfie's desire to mount *Salomé* introduces this society to tragedy, and one that uses biblical figures committing immoral actions such as the losing of one's virginity. This desire comes with a price when he is not fully open and honest about the contents contained in the script, which do not align with the beliefs of the Catholic Church. *Salomé* is based on the bible retelling of "Salomé daughter of Herodias Antipas, who requests the head of Jokanaan (John the Baptist) on a silver platter as a reward for dancing the dance of the seven veils." ("Salome (Play)"). Although biblical, "*Salomé* has become an erotic symbol in art, and it is likely that it is her provocative 'Dance of the Seven Veils'" and the mentioning of losing one's virginity. (The Editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica). The inclusion of Wilde's *Salomé* offers both comedic and serious ties with the reality that takes place in Dublin. For example, Carney's minute role as King Herod highlights his true acting capabilities compared with past roles, having previously played the titular roles in previous productions.

In an effort to get his mate Robbie to play the leading role of Jokanaan in the show, Alfie is met with Robbie's distaste for theatre as he says, "I don't want to stand on a stage with a sword. I went to a pantomime once, I was bored." (McNally, 37). Although Robbie does not fancy poetry, Ahrens' uses lyricism that paints a picture of Dublin for his solo "The Streets of Dublin." He sings about the people who live and work in Dublin and the smell of the streets throughout the song. The imagery allows for us to see Robbie's artistic traits comes to life in this number, midway through Act 1. Robbie concludes the number stepping in to the local Pub where he and his mates spend most of their free time away from work. In this moment, Alfie is seen out

of his comfort zone, surrounded by men and women who are usually deemed as “sinners” for just wanting to have some fun, as one of Robbie’s mates says: “We’re Irish, we’re drunk, what else are we supposed to do?” (McNally, 40). Alfie is asked at the pub to sing a tune for Robbie and his mates, as they have heard much about his love for the theatre. Alfie sings Ahrens and Flaherty’s “Love’s Never Lost,” a song composed with just a melodic line meant to be sung a cappella. It pays homage to the sound of traditional Irish folk song, with words about love and tenderness, seen in Wilde’s poem *Her Voice*. This kind of song being sung in this environment makes Alfie stand out even more as “out of place” and makes him a target to the antagonist of this show, Breton Beret. As Alfie struggles to make conversation and even order an alcoholic beverage, we see Breton Beret approach Alfie, complimenting his singing abilities and then making the remark, “I saw you looking at me” while he was singing his tune. (McNally, 42). This, of course, is the moment in the play where we see Alfie face the question of his sexuality for the first time in a confrontational setting. He retreats to his house and locks himself in his bedroom to hide from his demons that face him in the real world.

In the next scene, Alfie sings aloud the song “Man in the Mirror” as he stares in a mirror and questions his importance in the world. The song builds to a climactic moment where McNally introduces the ghost of Alfie’s confidant, Oscar Wilde. Oscar’s significance in the show serves to guide Alfie along his journey to find the truth he seeks, and to find closure in what love means to him. Oscar states aloud, “There is no hell but this, Alfie Byrne.” (McNally, 48). This line speaks of the true nature in being closeted as Alfie only spends time in enclosed spaces -- his bedroom, St. Imelda’s social hall, and his bus. Oscar continues to push as he states, “Sins of the flesh are nothing. Sins of the soul alone are shameful,” (McNally, 49) forcing Alfie

to realize how his feelings for men, even if he does not act on it, are indeed shameful. Alfie concludes the song singing the last verse about himself:

“Man in the mirror staring back,
you’re afraid of your own reflection.
All that you want and dream... and lack
and there’s no one but you to blame.
Afraid of the world, afraid of myself
and the love that dare not speak its name...” (McNally, 49).

Alfie reflects on this unnatural feeling of love and Wilde pushes him to admit aloud the name of who he has fallen for saying: “And that name is...” (McNally, 49). Alfie ultimately admits his love for his bus mate, saying aloud in his bedroom, “Robbie.” (McNally, 49). Are there different levels to sin? This dichotomy we experience between Oscar and Alfie forces the audience to wonder, is Alfie a bad human for having these feelings, just as Oscar was sentenced to jail for these same (but amplified and acted upon) feelings? There is no answer, just merely a question seeded for the audience to ponder as Oscar exclaims his lines from his *De Profundis*, a love letter to the world about his actions: “Sins of the flesh are nothing. Sins of the soul alone are shameful,” (McNally, 49).

The show continues with scenes featuring the company’s second rehearsal for *Salomé* and the stresses they experience through the rehearsal process. The company tries to run lines with the absence of a vital performer, Carney, who earlier expressed his distaste for Wilde’s *Salomé* because of its explicitness and thematic material, something Carney cannot swallow because of his moral principles. The rehearsal concludes and Alfie’s sister enters the space with the intent to set up Alfie on a date with Adele, and she does so. Alfie, flustered and awkward, offers to walk Adele home and, in doing so, gets to know more about her past life, including her

admittance of having a lover named John, which Alfie jokes about the connection to Jokanaan from the play. Adele does not seem pleased about the conversation, leading the audience to believe there is more to the story and he is absent in her life, but, nonetheless, Alfie sings to her with no judgement, "Love Who You Love." This delicate ending to the first act reveals Alfie's selflessness and how he wishes to see the world - a world of no judgement. As he leaves Adele at her doorstep, Alfie walks home in the dark and is met again by Breton Beret, who is pursuing him and asking him to sing him another tune. Alfie denies his request and Breton says, "you know where to find me," (McNally, 58) as Alfie rushes away to a corner and is met again by the ghost of Oscar Wilde, who forces him to think as he says to Alfie, "The only way to get rid of temptation is to yield to it." (McNally, 58). This infamous aphorism that ends act one leaves the audience with the question we as humans will constantly have to answer, "What happens if we yield to temptation?" To yield to temptation consistently is a sign of infantilism. Maturity demands that we have the ability to discern right from wrong and that we can delay gratification and tolerate uncomfortable/negative emotions if necessary. However, this is false, for temptation is the id in our lives, branching to the birth of it in the story of Adam and Eve and the Apple Tree. So are we to judge Alfie if he yields to his temptation to pursue someone of the same sex? This is the question McNally scripts for us to answer.

Act One serves to deliver classic exposition while Act Two begins with the heavy-hitting production number of "Our Father." The number begins in the Pub where Robbie and his mates spend their time drinking, singing, and dancing to enjoy a good time. The song continues to introduce Mrs. Patrick, whom we haven't seen much of except for a flirtatious moment between her and Robbie on the bus early in Act One. The number serves to highlight the two different

groups in this Irish society: the sinners (portrayed by the characters in the pub) and the holy ones (portrayed by the conservative characters who are attending mass that Sunday). Mrs. Patrick's sung interpretation of the Lord's Prayer is used to foreshadow the dichotomy she feels for the choices she makes to commit adultery with Robbie later on in the show.

The song ends with a direct musical transition into "Confession," where Alfie appears before a confessional with Father Kenny. Peter Filichia's interview with Terrence McNally discusses reactions to this song:

"Alfie goes into the small booth and tells the priest 'It's been a week since my last confession.' McNally's line had received a good chuckle from the crowd that wasn't able to imagine someone's going that often. "But that was the culture then in Ireland," said McNally, who had the priest immediately say to Alfie: "A good sinner can get into a lot of trouble in a week." The crowd had laughed over "good," which one doesn't usually associate with sinning – even if the priest meant "good" in the sense of "thorough" rather than "admirable." More laughs still came at confession's end when the priest baldly called the confessor "Alfie Byrne." The process is supposed to be anonymous." (Filichia).

McNally's response sums up how citizens felt the need to confess weekly and how their sins confessed weren't always anonymous. This heightens the conflict Alfie feels when trying to tell this priest, anonymously, his feelings for someone of the same gender. Alfie confesses sins of varying degrees and then hears Robbie's voice who appears in Alfie's conscience saying: "He thinks about Robbie all the time and there's nobody he can tell." (McNally, 60). Alfie struggles to focus on this thought, and Robbie cuts through singing:

But you're here in the dark in a little box
with a fella who might know less than you.
Then you'll hurry home and you'll lock the locks.
Another box to climb into...
For God's sake man, tell him. And then we'll have a pint. (McNally, 61).

Alfie struggles to find the right words when the Father asks him if he has any final sins. The music builds to an unresolved cadence just as Alfie works up the courage to admit his *sinful*

feelings singing: “There’s one other thing you ought to know. I’ve been trying to find the words. I... Well I... No. That’s all I have to say.” (McNally, 61). This scene is heartbreaking as it proves Robbie’s message of feeling trapped in a box in the dark, and it is one of the many moments in this play where one can feel empathy for Alfie. Whether or not they have experienced this exact situation in their life, it is a true moment of struggle for Alfie.

The succeeding scene shows the characters exiting mass and greeting Father Kenny for a final blessing before carrying on with their days. Carney approaches Father Kenny and hints about an upcoming meeting with the Sodality, which is a group of church members, including the Archbishop, who meet to decide on rulings of current issues within the church, referring to Alfie’s production of *Salomé*. Alfie overhears some of this conversation and focuses on Carney, who does not plan on attending another one of Alfie’s rehearsals. Alfie shakes this thought away and begins walking to the cemetery to pay respects to his late mother and father where he finds Baldy (the St. Imelda’s stage manager). This scene serves as a moment of advice between Alfie and Baldy, who grieves the loss of his late wife, Mary, and sings about “The Cuddles Mary Gave,” saying that he just needs to find a woman to cuddle him and all will be okay. Alfie listens to this point and again faces an internal struggle when realizing a woman to cuddle is not what he wants in life.

After these two emotionally driven scenes, McNally offers the audience one final production number before the plot takes a dark turn. The song “Art” is filled with liveliness and heart, paying homage to the chaos involved in mounting a production, including the challenges of the set, lights, sound, stage management stresses, placing the finishing touches on props, organizing publicity, choreographing last minute routines and sewing on last minutes pieces to

costumes. Each of the players sings a solo which identifies these aspects of mounting the production of *Salomé*. The song is a reminding statement that regardless of how things end up, it “will be Art!” After the song concludes, we see the final rehearsal take place where Adele delivers her monologue as the princess of Judea reciting: “I was a princess... (She starts to sob)...and thou didst scorn me. I was a virgin and thou didst take my virginity away from me.” (McNally, 72). She flees the rehearsal unable to hold her secret any longer, the secret that she is carrying a child, a revelation Alfie was not prepared to hear. He is not able to wrap his head around the fact that she is carrying a child and is an unmarried woman, a sin that goes against Catholic principles. This scene transitions to the sodality meeting, where Alfie is accused of mal actions for producing Wilde’s *Salomé* in the church. Alfie tries to justify his intent for choosing the material, but Carney cuts him off saying, “To a heathen atheist your play may be some kind of masterpiece. To a devout Catholic it is an affront to everything our Lord Jesus Christ stretched out his arms and died for.” (McNally, 74). This admittance reveals Carney’s moralistic values of what it means to be a true Catholic. At this moment, Alfie is told his play is cancelled, and he retreats to his room to hide, just as he did in Act One.

Just after hearing this news, he sets off to go to the garage depot where he works but shockingly enters to find his mate Robbie having an affair with Mrs. Patrick. Robbie and Mrs. Patrick get dressed as Alfie questions the situation and proclaims, “she’s a married woman.” (McNally, 76). Robbie aggressively minimizes Alfie by pointing out that he lives with his sister, he doesn’t get out of the house, and how his poems won’t teach him about what life is really all about. He ends by saying, “Love someone yourself before you judge me” and exits. Just as he leaves, Alfie says “I do” wanting to make Robbie realize that it is him who he likes. (McNally,

77). Just as this scene concludes, we are taken to Alfie's bedroom, where he is funneling so many feelings of guilt, anger, and oppression that he chooses to do the thing he has been most terrified to do: he sets off to follow his temptation.

His friends appear as voices in his head to lend a helping hand and admit aloud his next step to finding happiness, yielding to his temptation. Robbie, whom he calls Bosie (just as Oscar Wilde's own boy Lord Alfred Douglas was nicknamed Bosie), appears through the crowd and hands Alfie a green carnation, which is meant to be a signal for homosexuals as it is mentioned: "It's how they know one another. It's their signal." (McNally, 78). Through this scene, we see Alfie get dressed as Oscar Wilde, having listened to the voices of his friends, and then is met by Wilde who appears from the crowd and hands him his missing articles: a hat, a cane, and a cape. Oscar takes Alfie on a walk to the pub to fulfill his mission, joking with him about his own poetry, and Alfie says to him: "We have lived our lives in a land of dreams. How sad it seems" from Wilde's poem *Her Voice* about how "love is never lost," making this a full circle moment because it is the very title of the song he sang in the pub earlier in the show. (McNally, 80). McNally connects these two moments from the play show how Alfie has been living life with a secret and how sad it makes him "You don't have to know what it means to know what it means, you know what I mean, Alf?" (McNally, 11).. Wilde returns with the same message, "The only way to get rid of temptation..." but this time Alfie concludes the quote saying: "is to yield to it." (McNally, 80). This moment shows that Alfie is taking full ownership for his actions to come and is admitting he is ready to experience the feelings he has been suppressing for years. This scene concludes with Alfie using the words of advice he learned from Baldy, asking Breton Beret to *cuddle*. Beret jokes out loud about it and makes everyone laugh at Alfie, but then takes

him outside to walk him somewhere unknown. The stage directions then take over and creates the brutality that is to commence:

“(BRETON BERET leads ALFIE on. They stop, facing each other. BRETON BERET removes ALFIE’S hat, loosens his scarf, then runs his finger through his hair. We are aware of other FIGURES in the shadows. ALFIE isn’t. BRETON BERET pulls away a little and punches ALFIE in the face. ALFIE goes down at once, soundlessly. The other FIGURES surge forward and begin to kick and pummel him. BRETON BERET has already taken ALFIE’S wallet)” (McNally, 81).

The fight ends with Breton spitting on Alfie and calling him a “fecking queer.” (McNally, 81).

This profound moment stuns with its vicious and cruel tones and how it is supposed to be staged.

Alfie calls out for his “Bosie,” when the police come over to help him. A bystander mentions that the mates are always beating up the queers in the dark alleyway where they stand. Lily,

Carney and some of the players happen to be wandering the streets when they come across Alfie beat up and bruised as he says aloud:

“ALFIE: I did it to myself
CARNEY: Who were the perpetrators?
POLICEMAN: He’s not gonna be pressing any charges. It’s the usual thing. They never do.
CARNEY: What do you mean?
POLICEMAN: Look at him, man! He’s a poofter!
(CARNEY is thunderstruck at this revelation. He watches, dumbstruck, as LILY leads ALFIE home)
CARNEY: Am I the only one who didn’t know? How could I have been so stupid?”
(McNally, 83).

This interaction is the reason Alfie gets outed to the entire community, everyone slowly putting the pieces together in their minds about his attraction for men.

The following scene of the show takes place in the kitchen, the place where we first saw Alfie and Lily share exciting and inspiring thoughts about what is to come in life. Lily, who has just endured grisly news about her brother’s actions, cannot fathom eating dinner. She sits in

silence until she sings her tour de force solo, “Tell Me Why,” asking Alfie over and over “why?” In this song, Lily admits out loud that she feels her life is a waste, for she has put her own happiness to the side in every situation, including her own engagement to Carney, waiting for the day her brother would marry a *woman*, now knowing this would never be the case. This song ends with Alfie running out of the house before she could say: “You must have known I’d love you. All the same.” (McNally, 85). The words every queer person wants to ever hear from their loved ones.

The penultimate scene is an average day on the bus, much like the first bus scene where Alfie goes in for his morning shift, except it is gloomy; everyone knows his secret, and his mate Robbie is no longer his bus driver. The tune they once sung at the beginning about picturing the bus moving has changed from a major sounding tune to a minor sounding tune to show the change in tone from gleeful to sorrowful. Alfie bids farewell to Adele in this scene as she chooses to move to London to pursue a better life on her own with her baby knowing that there is more out there for her than what ex-lover John has to offer her. Seeing that he is low and having heard the rumors, Adele sits Alfie down and sings to him the song he once sung to her, reminding him to take his own advice in *loving who you love*.

The final scene of the show takes place in St. Imelda’s social hall with Alfie packing up his stuff, the story being told exactly as the show began. His players step down one by one and say the following:

“BALDY: Curtain.

MRS. CURTIN: Your little dove has flown, Mr. Byrne.

MISS CROWE: And so have we.

ALFIE: Your play has a sad ending.

MRS. GRACE: Those who attempt tragedy must be prepared for an unhappy ending. Something like that.

ERNIE: Goodbye, Mr. Byrne.” (McNally, 89).

We conclude with Alfie finding the strength within himself to be who he is as he sings his ending ballad, “Welcome to the World,” telling the audience that he owns his decisions and will not hide who he is from the world any longer. As he finishes his final statement, Robbie appears in the social hall wearing a wig, agreeing to be part of the production. He states to Alfie that he did not ask to be changed from his job; his boss just moved him out of spite. Robbie and Alfie share a true moment of friendship and don’t dwell on the details but just that friendship is what matters. Alfie, overwhelmed, mentions the details about how his production has been shut down, and his friends enter the social hall with a new idea, to mount the production elsewhere. Amidst the chaos, his friends come by to say that they do not judge him for who he likes, but that they believe in his vision and in *art*. Alfie sees Lily walk in also to show her willingness to be part of his life and agrees to have a short rehearsal. He mentions:

“I’ve been wrong about something. I used to think the most thrilling words in the English language were ‘At Rise’ as we began a new project and opened our books to the first page of the playwright’s text... The future of our little troupe is uncertain but one thing is for sure: we have a new star in our little theatrical firmament. I think you all know him. Shall we form our little circle? Perhaps for the last time.” (McNally, 92).

Alfie finally gets satisfaction by urging Robbie to read from his book of poems saying, “We have a tradition at St. Imelda’s. The newcomer reads us a little something at his first appearance. It’s not an audition, it’s more like a rite of passage.” (McNally, 92). This moment of friendship is how the play resolves with everyone circled up around as Robbie reads a passage from Oscar Wilde’s *The Ballad of Reading Gaol*:

“Like two doomed ships that pass in storm
We had crossed each other's way:

But we made no sign, we said no word,
We had no word to say;
For we did not meet in the holy night,
But in the shameful day.
A prison wall was round us both,
Two outcast men were we:
The world had thrust us from its heart,
And God from out His care” (McNally, 93).

The show concludes with the cast narrating the defining melody “A Man of No Importance.”

Summary

A Man of No Importance uses the themes of religion, queer identity, and love to speak to audiences and dive deeper into the issues seen in conservative 1964 Ireland. Moreover, the play also uses Wilde’s *Salomé* as a main point in the story’s arc to relate to several characters and themes within the show. The connection between Wilde’s *Salomé* and McNally’s *A Man of No Importance* is seen through the themes of religion and desire. Wilde’s representations of the biblical characters in *Salomé* sets a negative tone in how religion cannot be portrayed in such a vile fashion within the confinements of the St. Imelda’s Social Hall. Princess Salomé has the desire to be fulfilled, much like Alfie in McNally’s play, and is driven by lust and goes to extremes to fulfill her desires, having the head of Jokanaan delivered to her on a silver platter. An important takeaway from *Salomé* is the meaning of Princess Salomé’s line, “If thou hadst seen me thou hadst loved me. I saw thee, and I loved thee.” (McNally, 71). Wilde writes this line to suggest that Jokanaan avoided exchanging direct eye contact with her, denying her desire for lust. His head on the platter is shown with his eyelids closed to suggest that even though he is dead, she will not achieve her desire to be seen. McNally uses this same line from *Salomé* in his play to address Adele’s struggle with her guilt and how no one will see her for the woman she

really is. I also use this example from *Salomé* to connect the theme of desire and identity with Alfie's desire to be seen for who he *truly* is in *A Man of No Importance*. The biggest element to this musical is its portrayal of a man struggling to come out in a conservative or premodern society. This played a big part in me choosing this show for my project and for my students, to inform others how yes, times have changed for Ireland since the 1960s, but we must be aware of how things were in that time for people, which is shown through the stories of these characters. I highlighted many of the social issues that existed in a conservative Ireland, pointing out the stigmas and social judgments that were rooted deeply in the mind of their people. It is evident, however, that time has allowed for a more progressive Republic of Ireland to form through the years, having reached full marriage equality:

“The position in Northern Ireland stands in stark contrast to that of the Republic of Ireland, which in May of 2015 became the first country to legalize same-sex marriage through a popular referendum. Sixty-two percent of Irish voters supported amending the Constitution of Ireland to provide for full marriage equality.” (Stewart and Lloyd, 1-2).

In my plot analysis I explored the particular relationship between Alfie and Oscar Wilde and then went further to explore Wilde's significance in literature and media today:

“The proliferation of historical representations of Oscar Wilde that ushered in the 1960s opened up a safe space for discussion and debate in England of the criminal status of acts of ‘gross indecency’ between men. In 1967, the laws were finally repealed. As Wilde himself might have noted with satisfaction, Life followed the lead of its master, Art, just as it always should.” (Stetz).

This quote from Stetz' research allows us to see how Oscar Wilde was ahead of his time, living life through the lens of an artist, unafraid of yielding to his temptations. The use of the green carnation in *A Man of No Importance* symbolizes a great reference to Wilde, who introduced the

fashion statement in the 19th century. As seen in the musical, Alfie uses the green carnation to identify himself and signal to other people of his *kind* just as Wilde used a green carnation. Where did this symbol come from? Why the green carnation? Not enough research has been conducted in order to present a justified response; however, assumptions can be made that Wilde was sly in his use of the carnation. A small hint of research on the significance of the green carnation is found through an interview with Wilde himself, posted from a company entitled *Oscar Wilde Tours*. They mention his response to the question about the green carnation saying, “The short answer is that it’s a symbol of Oscar himself. In 1892, Wilde had one of the actors in *Lady Windermere’s Fan* wear a green carnation on opening night and told a dozen of his young followers to wear them too.” (“About Our Symbol, the Green Carnation.”). Did Oscar start a movement through this action? I can only assume he did. The company quotes Wilde’s definition of the green carnation: “Nothing whatever, but that is just what nobody will guess.” (“About Our Symbol, the Green Carnation.”). I can conclude that this quote refers to the carnation serving a deeper meaning, one heterosexual people would not understand unless directly involved with the carnation or in the know of Wilde’s intent for its use in fashion. They continue with a longer response to the same question:

“As anyone who knew the Decadent Movement would see, Wilde was playing with one of his favorite ideas: that nature should imitate art, and not the reverse. In that sense, then, the green carnation was symbolic. A flower of an unnatural color embodied the decadent and the unnatural. Did it, however, embody something more—namely ‘unnatural’ love?” (“About Our Symbol, the Green Carnation.”)

As mentioned, due to a lack of research, it can only be assumed that there was a direct connection between the flower and sexuality. Of course, I believe Wilde started a movement too

early to be appreciated in its time, which is why we continue to see his portrayals in literature and in the media today.

“Gays in Wilde’s time could not be open in the way we are today. That is why we have to hunt for clues about their lives—in art, in literature and in symbols that made up a kind of private language. In choosing the green carnation as our symbol, we are acknowledging that past and those languages.” (“About Our Symbol, the Green Carnation.”)

I conclude knowing that this show is one that provides an avenue to tell the stories of the disenfranchised and to see sexuality through a postmodern lens, not pushing any agenda but rather presenting the issues that were at hand and that still exist in many situations today. “Every great man nowadays has disciples, but it is always Judas who writes the biography” (Wilde, 134).

DIRECTORIAL PROCESS

Introduction

The personal attachments I have with *A Man of No Importance*, its text, and musicality are what inspired me to direct this show. It was a search to find the right show for the class that covered LGBTQ+ issues and I knew that I wanted to handle the material with grace. My directorial process for this show came with a lot of successes and hardships based on time, energy, and overall elements that go into producing a play, including directing, collaborating with other educators who serve a role on the collaborative team, and incorporating technical aspects. Early on in the show process, roles were established among the creative team who teaches the class, including myself, my colleague, Jay Dunn, who is the music director for the show, and our dance instructor, Amanda Cox, who assisted with choreography. This was my first show in my short three years at UHS that I did not music direct, and for that I faced some interesting challenges when going through the musical process because I have a need to control everything, especially when looking through the lens of a director. As a director, I found myself being the glue that held many aspects of the show together, more so with *A Man of No Importance* than with *You're A Good Man, Charlie Brown*, because of the difference in what each show calls for. This included learning Irish dialect, the abundance of props, music, and the need for specific costumes due to the period in which the piece is set in.

Goals

There was a lot of sentiment that went into the planning of this show as there are so many factors that contribute to the reason this show was even produced. A goal that has stuck with me

since directing my first show in January of 2019 was to be a better director for my second show at University High School and not to repeat any of the same mistakes I made the previous time I directed. Many of these mistakes related to time management with the cast and crew, planning adequately for upcoming rehearsals, set building timeline, and overall polishing that needed to happen. Many of these mistakes came from a lack of communication with colleagues and the creative team involved. Another major goal I had for my second production, being as it directly contributes to this thesis project, was to do a production I could feel inspired writing about. For example, I knew that for my thesis I wanted to direct a show I could personally connect with because, after all, having a connection with material fuels my creative mind. So, I chose to explore LGBTQ+ issues highlighted in musicals. I came to this idea after having read *Quilt: A Musical Celebration* by John Schak, which spoke to me in ways I could not describe for its biographical moments and explanations on the AIDS crisis in the 80s. I first came across *Quilt*, however, while I was in high school, having seen a one-act version of the show at the District V Thespian Festival in 2009. This show changed me for many reasons, some being the idea of bringing people together and its message of spreading love and acceptance. One of the songs in that musical entitled “A Victim of AIDS” tells the story of Thomas Patrick Anthony Deangelo III who was a victim of a hate crime and beat up in the streets and called a ‘fag’ just because he was walking down a street holding his partner’s hand. There are many musical vignettes that tell the true stories of people who went through the AIDS crisis. MTI describes the show as: “A thoughtful and moving collage of stories and songs for, from and about the NAMES Project AIDS Memorial Quilt.” (“Quilt”). *Quilt*, is a show that represents LGBTQ+ issues and inspired me to tell the stories of the disenfranchised in my own school community. I even reached out to

performer and director, Faisal Al-Juburi after having seen a documentary he was in, acting in the role of Wes from a benefit concert of *Quilt* held in New York City (Hetrick). The production also involved the only surviving playwright, John Schak, who helped make edit for the production. Faisal responded to my initial email inquiring about his experience and he gave me great insight into the piece:

“Dear Alex –

Thank you so much for your email and phone call last week regarding QUILT.

I am thrilled to hear of your interest in this piece from both a production and academic research perspective.

I've taken the liberty of copying John Schak on this email. He is the last surviving creative behind this poignant piece.

Attached, you will also find a copy of a *revised* script that we developed with John's oversight and permission back in 2011. Please note that it reflects a staged concert presentation that actually didn't ultimately materialize but that I now must admit was quite compellingly cast when I look at the list!

The ability to use such revisions (including cuts, rearrangement of scenes, and changes to monologues such as the (“Mr. Leonce”) are subject to John's approval and, of course, rights to perform the piece as secured by MTI.

John: Alex called last week about the piece, having seen the video edit that we created of the smaller reading with Julia Murney et. al. The passion for the work and the chance to use it as part of a dissertation and for a student performance in Florida was palpable. And it was a nice full circle moment — and nudge that the work we did to revisit the material can have an impact in a community.

I encourage you two to speak, as there will be much to gain.

Sending all best wishes your way –

Faisal.”

Faisal really went above and beyond to get me in contact with one of the show's original playwrights. Although having formed this connection, I chose not to pursue *Quilt* as the musical

for this year's class because of many reasons. However, I have been in contact with John Schak and Faisal about potentially doing the production in the future as it is on my bucket list, and Faisal mentioned: "Happy to be of service and support and excited to roll up my sleeves to help you share these stories with and through your students." (Al-Juburi).

The process of choosing *A Man of No Importance* as our musical was not an easy ride, for there were many factors to be considered and many discussions to be had with a topic that is *sensitive* in the high school setting. It is also difficult to choose a show with the confinements of not knowing who will be in the musical theatre class each year; however, once I chose *A Man of No Importance*, I knew then and there what the remaining goals would be.

As a young director, the one thing I always want to do well is *tell a story*. After all, theatre is all about telling stories, and with this show, the goal is to tell the stories of the disenfranchised. My ultimate goal throughout this process was to tell the story truthfully of Alfie Byrne and to do justice to the playwright's work. Another goal I had throughout this process was to work better as a collaborative team with my colleagues involved in the production. This goal stems from tension that existed in my previous productions, and it all came down to not having well-established roles in the creative process. Establishing these roles allows for everyone to contribute to the success of the production and allows for a better creative process. For example, I co-teach the musical theatre class with the chorus director at my school, which means we share instructional time with the students and divide up the work. His role in this process has always been as a music director. What I have found to be difficult is fighting my urge not to *fix* or *do* everything myself. All my life, I have been independent when it comes to tasks, and therefore I have found it hard to let others do things that contribute to a project I am leading. I assume they

will follow through on their end. Last year with *You're a Good Man, Charlie Brown*, I found myself overstepping my role as director with the musical direction, and tensions rose in areas that should not have. It dawned on me how I must trust more than I do when it comes to a theatrical process, and so with this show I made it a goal not to overstep in areas where I know others will do what they need to do to contribute to the final product.

Some goals I gave to my students were very much character-based and cultural-based. As this show takes place in 1964 Dublin, Ireland, it was important for me to set my expectations of having the students do their homework on the time period and the surroundings their characters experienced on a day-to-day basis. I handed each student a character analysis worksheet that would be turned in after the run of the show, which included marking their scripts and establishing emotions for each of their entrances and exits to every scene and transferring those thoughts to knowing where they are coming from and where they are heading. This helped me in my directing process because I would quite often ask students the question, "Where are you coming from?" and "What is your intention in the scene?" Students would need to look in their scripts at that moment and provide answers, not only for me but for themselves. This helped me as a director because I was able to instill an expectation for the students to make conscious choices while acting, and I didn't have to provide them with all the answers when doing scene work. I also would have students get together with their scene partners, depending on the scene, and have quick 10-minute discussions about the sub-text of the scene taking place. This would help with understanding the dynamics of the scene and where to go emotionally and physically while acting. I was able to see all these thoughts during the process because of these scene work

activities, and after the show concluded, I entered in grades for this character work once the students turned in their packets.

A final personal goal I had for myself in this process was not to get overwhelmed. I did too much for my first show at University, and this year I made a choice not to stay past the scheduled time for which we had after school rehearsals for (unless pre-scheduled) and to take care of my health throughout the process. Theatre teachers work endless hours for no additional compensation and, therefore, it is important for me not to get in the habit of pushing my body past its limits. This also transfers to my students and their personal health throughout a show process. I am happy to say that I stuck to this goal, and I realized that at the end of the day, I was healthier than I would have been had I stayed extra hours each day to *fix* things that could be fixed the next day.

Casting

Casting this show was exciting because of how the students raised the stakes for the audition process. Early in the year students asked direct questions about what material they would be asked to audition with, how callbacks would work, and whether or not I was going to double cast any roles. This sort of questioning made me excited to know they were actively thinking about the show and how to be best prepared for the audition. I made sure early in the school year to inform them of the expectations I was looking to see in the audition, including knowledge of the character backgrounds, knowledge of the show, and their ability to speak in an Irish accent. This threw them for a loop, for many of them have never had to speak in an Irish accent before. To best prepare the students for the expectations I set, I hired a dialect coach for a

class session to introduce the students to the Irish dialect. She provided worksheets for the students to take home and practice with that included vowel charts and practice sentences. This process was very educational and eye opening for many of the students who have never had dialect coaching before. This session aided many of the students on their journey to speaking in an Irish dialect, and what made the days leading up to the auditions exciting was hearing them speak in these accents through their normal daily conversations.

When it came to holding auditions, we had each student audition with a solo selection and a short monologue from the musical. This allowed us to hear their solo voice and their progress on the Irish accent. The class requirements I set are for every student to audition, regardless of wanting or not wanting to be cast in the show. This helps them apply the standards and goals we learn in class about audition prep and apply it to real life situations. I have each student check a box as to whether or not they want to be considered for a role, and from there I know the pool of students I can choose from when casting the roles.

Casting this show was pretty simple, as most students naturally gravitated toward certain roles. In considering the timeline for the production, I knew I did not want to double cast the major roles (Alfie, Lily and Robbie), for each of the actors who would soon be playing those roles needed as much time as possible to grow into those characters . A situation I ran into was how to cast Lily when I had two strong female actors who were both able to play the role. In this dilemma, I was going to double cast the role until I saw the trailer for Sondheim's revival of *Company* opening on Broadway in 2020. This production included many gender bent roles including the titular role of Bobby. When trying to see the options of who could play Baldy (Alfie's friend and the stage manager for St. Imelda's) I did not have a boy who could sing the

song or play the age of someone in their late 60s. This made me think about how I could possibly gender bend this role, and with special permission from MTI, I found a way to reverse the story of Baldy, who lost his wife Mary, and instead do the reverse and have Mary take on her late husband's job of stage managing the production and singing the solo of how she lost her Baldy. This took a lot of development as I needed to rewrite some lyrics to make sense coming from a woman's point of view as a widow. It's troublesome when you have such talented kids who can play the lead, but I knew the student I cast as Mary O'Shea was definitely presented a challenge that made her grow as a young actress, and she originated a role, something not many can say they did in high school.

Challenges

Many of the challenges of this production are associated with the goals I set for myself. Additional challenges dealt with the skill levels of the students in the class, the challenges of rehearsal within a class period, having a lack of resources for the rehearsal process, learning a new dialect, and integrating the technical aspects of the show. Before beginning a discussion on some of the challenges that came with directing this show, it's important to see some of the challenges the original production faced, causing its short-of-three-month run Off Broadway at the Mitzi E. Newhouse Theater. Charles Isherwood from Variety writes in his 2002 review:

“The sour developments of the second act also require some jagged changes of behavior that don't convince. Carney seems to be two different characters: the free-spirited stage ham of act one, and Lily's censorious suitor in act two (he's the one who blows the whistle on Alfie's salacious 'Salome'). Lily herself moves from disapproving disgust to apparent acceptance of Alfie's sexuality in the course of a few bewildering choruses of a song. And Wilde or no Wilde, why must Alfie equate homosexuality with flamboyance, donning makeup and a swish when he finally works up the courage to express his sexuality? Because he must be degraded, so we can cluck sadly at his plight, seems to be the unfortunate answer.” (Isherwood).

In this section of his review, Isherwood points out precisely some of the challenges in the musical's book that made directing difficult. For example, the wide range of internal development within these characters and the short timeline in which their intentions and emotions shift causes problems. The script equates homosexuality with flamboyance for Alfie. I found it challenging getting an 18-year old high school senior to find that truth when he hadn't used makeup before or garnered flamboyant character traits. In the directorial process of finding our version of Alfie, my student asked, "Do I have to act gay?" I struggled in answering this question. Labeling someone as *gay* has created a stigma in our world I wish to defeat. I don't want people to come and see this show and see Alfie as flamboyant and equate that mannerism with sexual identity. Instead, we came to the conclusion that Alfie would be passionate about *art* and his love for theatre. These issues directly challenged my goal of telling a story truthfully, because I questioned making these calls about character choices when I was unaware of McNally's intent for how Alfie is to be portrayed. Aside from the minor details listed in the libretto, most of the development was process-based from my own mind and research.

I was unaware at the time of choosing the show that resources such as show manuals, production history, tracks, and videos of other productions are extremely scarce. The lack of resources was both good and bad. It was good not to be able to rely on any videos to watch, because the entire conception of the piece was originally envisioned in my mind after reading each scene. I very much enjoyed the process of collaborating with my choreographer and being able to communicate the style of dance I wanted and how I envisioned production numbers flowing. I was not able to show her videos of production numbers for inspiration, which was a challenge for her, but we were able to develop a newfound language for creating art which was

exciting. The lack of resources did, however, affect many aspects of the production, including the lack of rehearsal tracks and me having to learn basic accompaniment for some of the songs until we rehearsed with our pianist. This show *has* to have a live pit, and this affected finances I did not budget for had I been able to track the show, but, again, it's a beautiful experience to collaborate with live musicians, and the experience the students get with performing to live accompaniment is priceless, because it is both thrilling and educational.

Pre-existing challenges with producing a show out of a class always has been the timeline of events and rehearsing during a 45-minute class period. The “time seems to fly by when having fun” as many say, and this deemed to be true. A normal rehearsal schedule will include blocks of 2-3 hours for a rehearsal, and I had to divide rehearsals into 45-minute chunks for five days each week beginning late October through early January. Once we arrive back from a three-week Winter break, we go into full force with three- to four-hour rehearsals after school in order to run the entire show and work on transitions. This also includes adding the technical elements for the show, which was its own labor of effort. In all, adapting to this kind of rehearsal process had ups and downs for the students because progress is made very slowly when having to work in short increments of time and revisiting the material each day to polish could get stale. What made challenges like this easier was having students who are workhorses and come in ready to work, making a stressed director extra gratified to be where he is.

An exciting part of our process was learning the Irish dialect appropriate for this time period and region of Ireland. In the show, some characters live in Dublin while others come to visit and, therefore, accents could change depending on regional accord. Ginny Kopf, a well-known dialect coach in Orlando, Florida, was a gem to work with. She provided a wealth of

knowledge when teaching the International Phonetic Alphabet (IPA) to the class and how to pronounce stereotypical vowels the Irish use. Going back to my goal in wanting to tell a story truthfully, I wanted to make it clear to myself and my students that the focus on the accent was crucial. Hiring a dialect coach costs both money and rehearsal time spent on the acting and singing. Although dialect coaching involves working on acting and singing, it's an additional skill added to an already tight rehearsal timeline and process. This challenge presented itself with many ups and downs, but Kopf assisted in providing technological resources through voice memos for the students to practice with, having recorded each of their lines for each character. I don't know if my students would have gotten to such a truthful place had her efforts not been done, and for that I am grateful.

Integrating the technical aspects of the show was the most challenging part of this process. My lack of knowledge when it comes to lights and set building puts me at a disadvantage when wanting to see my creative vision executed on the stage. I made the plan to reuse some set pieces from prior productions which worked really nicely in the long run. The biggest struggle was a lack of communication with my technical director, something I didn't see coming. This lack of communication led to lights being hung and focused late in the tech week process and cues being written days before the show. This caused many dress rehearsals not to feel like full dress rehearsals. Tensions rose pretty high, and it caused my health to suffer having to stay later than I ever wanted to with students who weren't given the proper educational tools to make the technical process go by easier. This show also demands many props, and I found myself taking care of most of those duties since the student who was working props voluntarily (not in the class) quit; the joys of high school theatre. To reflect on these challenges, I found that

in future years, communication is fundamental, and you can never restate enough the production needs and the timeline in which those needs must be fulfilled in.

Reflection

Reflecting on this experience brings up many feelings, both positive and negative. I discussed the challenges I faced during this process, but what has not been discussed was the utter joy I experienced through directing this show. Looking back at the process not through a director's perspective but as a teacher and human, I am filled with immense gratitude at the product my students were able to attain. This show was very challenging, and my students were able to uphold my expectations beyond what I thought was ever possible from a musical theatre class production. To provide an example, the student who chose to stage manage our class production has always been cast as a performer in prior shows. For this show, she volunteered to take on the role of stage managing, completely putting herself outside of her comfort zone. Her tasks were not easy in any way, and she struggled through this process. I didn't know the effect this would have on her; however, after this process, she came up to me and thanked me for providing her the opportunity to take on this role. I was so humbled to see how this experience was not only gratifying for the performers telling the stories but also saw how impactful this process was for my production stage manager and how it allowed her to mature and grow in her leadership and organizational skills.

I will never forget the green room speeches each of my colleagues gave, always reinforcing the importance of Alfie's story and the stories of others who are slighted in the world every day. I took a page from Alfie's book and read my students and colleagues a piece of poetry

each night before presenting the production to navigate their focus on what these simple modest people experienced each day on Alfie's bus. The most impactful piece of poetry I read was Wilde's *The Ballad of Reading Gael*, with which the show concludes. I sensed that many of my students didn't understand the reason why the show ends with this piece of literature, so I stated my argument that it reflects upon Oscar Wilde's time in prison and the convicts he wrote about. The second part of the poem, which is where this excerpt comes from, describes his condemned inmate's emotional reactions to approaching death. This piece of poetry provides a perspective to life about enjoying the time you have left to the fullest. After having read the poetry and providing my perspective, my students gifted me a set of wind chimes with buses hanging on them. They thanked me for being their "Alfie" and for gifting them with this piece. I was overwhelmed with emotion and saw just how impacted this piece was not only for me but for my students and colleagues. I couldn't be more thankful to know that this was the right story to tell in our place in history today.

COMMUNITY RESPONSE TO A *MAN OF NO IMPORTANCE*

Introduction

In writing this thesis, my main goal has been to introduce an educated perspective on how LGBTQ+ issues have been portrayed in *A Man of No Importance*, and to highlight how this and other LGBTQ+ themed shows are needed in our society to spread the message of inclusivity and love. While thinking about a final chapter, I realized I needed to actually see the results of how this show impacted people. During our four-show run, it was mentioned to me many times how impressive it was that a high school was showcasing this sort of material. This is particularly humbling to me as that is the exact intention I had for this thesis project. The responses I received from students, faculty/staff, parents, and other theatre patrons that came to see the production are very thought-provoking and leads me to believe that I made the right choice in choosing this material for my students.

Reflection on Responses

Many of the responses I received were sent through text message, but I want to include some of the most meaningful responses to the production that were sent to me through email. I was shocked not to have received a negative response to the production, being as I thought at least some people would have an issue with the topic of homosexuality on a high school stage. My principal, Anne Carcara, did support my decision completely, and so it was nice to have such a strong support system backing me up in case I did receive a negative response to our production.

The first response I am sharing was written by a parent of a student in the production and they had no prior knowledge to the show:

“I came to watch the show with no knowledge of it. But as I watched it I came to see that even back then society was still hard on people's feelings and views and doesn't care about who you are beyond what society does and doesn't accept about people. I won't deny I cried and laughed, but it was out of understanding each character. I think the show may help others understand that we all have feelings that maybe a bit different but we all still have them and need to respect them. The ending was surprising because of what we see out there is what is accepted, I had tears of joy. Loved it. Thanks for presenting it to all.”

This response is so truthful in how they point out society, time period, and the issue of acceptance in a conservative world. These are all points I discuss prior in this thesis and it's so humbling to see that this message was being perceived by patrons. My favorite thing to read is how we share the belief in how the show helps you understand the feelings of people different than us can have and how the bare minimum we can do as spectators is to respect and not judge.

The second response I chose comes from a student involved in the production. I had to hold back tears seeing the impact this material had on my student:

“Being a part of *A Man of No Importance* was such an honor, material about same-sex love, struggles, etc. especially material that takes place in the past is so limited and has been presented to the mainstream in usually ways that are unrealistic and do not cater to sexual minorities. From this show I learned a lot more about the treatment of people who are like me in the past, I really related too many of the struggles Alfie went through. Being a part of the show gave me much more depth than if I were to just come and watch the show as an audience member. I think the scene that impacted me the most in *A Man of No Importance* was Lily's song ‘Tell Me Why’ because the song is so real and really impacted me in the sense that I remember one of the most daunting feelings for me regarding my sexual orientation was having to come out to my sister and the fear that I would hurt her or things would change forever. ‘Man in the Mirror’ was also very impactful because of the themes of loneliness one feels when they're rejected by society especially in regards to being a sexual minority, I strongly appreciated this portrayal and I know that in my youth when I was struggling with these things first hand if I saw this show it would really have been a game changer. I'm so glad to have been part of a show that portrays the real struggles and humanity of sexual minorities.”

This response is exactly what a teacher hopes for when thinking about the impact they can have on their students. What stood out most from this student was their vulnerability in sharing similar relationships to that of the characters in the show through their coming out process. As an educator, it's important to realize the issues that students experience each and every day and enlighten our community of these never-ending issues. I am glad to have influenced many of my students with this story and to have provided them a safe space to connect with this material.

The third response I want to share is from my colleague and mentor, Melaney Douglass. She truly assisted in placing the final touches on the piece, guiding me through the polishing process. Her words on the takeaways of this experience made me realize how a show such as this can really bring people together and mend relationships:

“I loved the storytelling aspect of *A Man of No Importance*. We fell in love with Alfie for the beautiful, kind person he is. We forgot to even think about some of the things society might question. The beautiful music and script make an audience react with their heart first. Then, when we start to think about the theme of acceptance and love for all people, we make the right decision guided by our heart, our love for each other. I felt this play was a wonderful way to start the much-needed discussion of tolerance and love (is love is love) for students, and to remind people of all ages ‘Everyone’s heart does exactly the same.’”

Lastly, I was very taken back from a district representative who came to see our show and went out of their way to voice their thoughts on the show. Jason Locker, who is a new Senior Administrator part of the Visual and Performing Arts Team of Orange County Public Schools, sent this email and included my colleagues and principal, saying:

“Good afternoon!

I wanted to reach out and say what a pleasure it was to attend University High School’s production of ‘*A Man of No Importance*’ last week on opening night!

The outstanding acting, singing, choreography, dialect work, and emotional commitment of the performers on stage was impressive to everyone in the audience. The set, lighting, sound, costumes, props, and visual effects were well conceived and executed by the artistic staff and stage crew. I commend you all for the hard work and dedication that went into making this memorable event possible for both your students and audience members! The teamwork displayed by the UHS arts faculty in this putting this production together was exceptional!

Congratulations on a fantastic show! I'm already excited to see what's next!"

It is so special to have received such a sincere compliment on a 'memorable' show and see how the hard work and efforts touched someone in the audience. This effect on our patrons has always been the goal, and it is satisfying to see we reached our goal. This production evidently had an impact on those involved and on those who were patrons in the audience, which is enough reason to say that the purpose of doing this production with its thematic content served well in our school and in our community.

CONCLUSION

Throughout this thesis, I have provided my reasons for why I am most influenced by the portrayals of LGBTQ+ issues in musical theatre. My goal in exploring this thesis project was to bring awareness and introduce LGBTQ+ issues in our high school through the form of a show to help tell the stories of the disenfranchised and encourage love throughout our school community.

I used Terrence McNally's play, *A Man of No Importance*, to portray the themes of religion, queer identity, and love to my students and my school community. While reading an article from *The Truth about the Truth: De-confusing and Re-constructing the Postmodern World* (New Consciousness Reader), I found myself questioning why we, as a society, are unable to define a period of life we currently live in. This article provides perspectives on the "Self-concept" which is further defined as what we the humans construct ourselves to be, defying tradition and shaping ourselves based on cultural influences. (Anderson, 10). This is something I used when discussing the character arc of Alfie with my student actor, making him realize how Alfie, for the majority of the show, is the only character in *A Man of No Importance* who has postmodern views, up until the end of the show. Alfie's philosophy of arts and culture stems far from what the world around him wants to see when he tries to produce an "immoral" play for the world to see, calling it "Art." (McNally, 2). The *postmodern* period of today is outdated, and we as individuals are split into various levels of caring to *stick with the times*, leading to vast differences in our methods of socialization and integration. A contributing factor to this issue is ignorance, as many people choose to avoid topics of change. I find myself trying to define my own role in this world and how my identity fits in to how uniquely diverse this world is. I really

appreciate how this article on postmodernism highlights and explains pre-modern societies and their idea of a single coherent cultural package.

“Premodern societies weren't necessarily simple or primitive, but people in them were relatively free from the ‘culture shock’ experience of coming into contact with other people with entirely different values and beliefs—the kind of experience that in contemporary urban life, you're likely to have a couple of times before lunch.” (Anderson, 5).

Many of the characters in *A Man of No Importance* are a make-up of premodern views, not having ever come into contact with anything that tests their morals. This is seen through St. Imelda's Players and their task of producing *Salomé*, most notably seen through Carney's discomfort with the play's thematic material and how he cannot comply with the decision to move forward in mounting the play.

It is interesting to put into perspective the differences that may come from premodern societies. For example, I was born in Puerto Rico but raised in Florida, and I feel different than someone who was born and raised solely in Puerto Rico and just as different as someone who was born and raised solely in Florida or any other U.S. state. I have attachments to the culture by blood, but culture is also something that is learned. Is this why in our “modern world” we struggle so hard to adapt to new cultures that we may not be used to? As a society, we need to stay actively aware that humanity is forever evolving just as technology, industries, and religion are.

In religion, it's hard enough to understand what or what may not be the *truth* because of how different each church and denomination has come to be defined as. I have, at times, found myself in a state of conflict being raised in the Roman Catholic Church and finding the one

Catholic priest who chooses to welcome minority groups in the house of God while others seem not to be so fond of this. Our Pope is the example of someone who is evolving with culture and the world by encouraging to spread love and welcome any and every child of God regardless of labels or differences perceived. “If someone is gay and he searches for the Lord and has good will, who am I to judge?” (Donadio). This postmodern view is what Alfie longs for in *A Man of No Importance*, when having his own conversations with Father Kenny in confession.

Being able to observe how different societies function in a grand and precise spectrum further leads me to believe how we live in a state of limbo, constantly searching for the answer of “what is right,” but unable to find any whole sense of unity, or so it is perceived. All we can continue to do as artists is evolve, spread love, and use art to tell our forever changing stories. This is why I used *A Man of No Importance*, to convey my postmodern views for a better world.

This show not only challenged my students, but it also challenged me. I grew closer with my colleagues in exploring the truth of the thematic material presented, and I grew closer with my own parents who were able to attend and appreciate the story of Alfie Byrne. As mentioned, I relate very deeply with Alfie’s journey in navigating faith and self, having been raised Catholic and struggling with my own sexuality in a conservative environment. To say that this project has healed me is an understatement, and I cannot be more thankful to know that this show also provided others with a sense of reevaluating what it is to love and accept a bit more in this world.

“To live is the rarest thing in the world. Most people exist, that is all.” – *Oscar Wilde*

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