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THEATRE OF THE UNCANNY: LESBIAN THEATRE AND THE UNCANNY VALLEY RESPONSE

A Thesis

Presented to the

Faculty of

California State University,

San Bernardino

In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Arts

in

English Composition

---

by

Gina Marielynn Hanson

December 2010

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Gina Marielynn Hanson

December 2010

Approved by:

Dr. Jacqueline Rhodes, Chair, English

12/01/10

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ABSTRACT

In 1970, Japanese roboticist Masahiro Mori coined the phrase, "uncanny valley" to describe the dip in positive response to artificial humans that appear too human or lifelike. For Mori, there is a moment in spectatorship in which the border of the familiar and the unfamiliar provokes a negative response in the spectator. This thesis contends that the notion of an uncanny valley can be extended to explain the lack of lesbian presence in the traditional dramatic canon. Because mainstream theatre audiences are unfamiliar with lesbian dramatic representation, lesbian theatre often provokes an uncanny valley response in general audiences and this negative response leads to little commercial success for lesbian plays. Poor commercial success keeps lesbian plays out of the traditional dramatic canon and prevents increased familiarity with lesbian representation which only perpetuates the uncanny valley response.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

My interest in lesbian dramatic representation began after taking a CSUSB playwriting class. Interested in how lesbians were depicted onstage, I sought out lesbian plays and was disheartened to find just how relatively few actually existed. Thanks to a joint effort by Juan Delgado of CSUSB's English Department and Dr. Ronald Argelander of CSUSB's Theatre Arts Department, I was able to complete an independent study course dealing solely with lesbian theatre. It was here that I realized the viability of this research topic. Dr. Bruce Golden was also instrumental in helping me attack the project and graciously offered to read my thesis throughout the draft process. His feedback was phenomenal and greatly appreciated.

I'd also like to thank my incredible thesis readers who are two of the most intelligent and formidable women I've ever met. Dr. Ellen Gil-Gomez, in her Feminist Theory and Queer Theory courses, introduced me to the lenses I would use to examine this topic and helped me understand the complexities associated with using the label 'lesbian' as a category and as an adjective. I am very fortunate to have had her on my committee. Dr. Jacqueline Rhodes, my committee chair, generously allowed me to continue to

explore the topic of lesbian theatre in her Cyborg Rhetoric and Technology and Composition courses which ultimately lead to my discovery of the uncanny valley response. Dr. Rhodes has long served as a mentor and role model for me, and I couldn't have asked for a better first reader.

Finally, I need to thank my wife, Brandy, who suffered through many of my stress-induced bad moods, who endured hours of listening to me read material that made her eyes glaze over, and who worked long hours so that I might be able to fulfill my dream of higher education. I can say with much certainty, none of this would have been possible without her.

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CHAPTER ONE

THE UNCANNY VALLEY AND LESBIAN THEATRE

Lesbian Theatre

In the 2007 Cambridge Guide to American Theatre, under the heading of "Gay and Lesbian Theatre," Don B. Wilmeth catalogues an extensive list of gay plays, several of which are standard inclusions in any anthology of contemporary plays. Nestled in this list are a couple of sentences cataloguing three lesbian plays that were staged between the years of 1980 and 1985. Wilmeth writes that "the lesbian experience has yet to make a breakthrough in mainstream theatre; although it has been domesticated by cable television's The L Word" (284). The lack of lesbian presence in contemporary theatre and, as a result, in the traditional dramatic canon is seriously problematic. What is it about the nature of the theatre that seems incompatible with the representation of the lesbian experience? Why is the performance of the lesbian experience relegated to cable television and to a small niche audience? Why haven't lesbian plays made a breakthrough in mainstream theatre? Theatre depends on establishing a bond with its audience, but because of

cultural constructions surrounding the connections between sexuality and the human psyche, American audiences are generally unable to bond with narrative lesbian plays. This failure creates a gap between lesbian theatre and general audiences. The absence of lesbian theatre in the canon perpetuates this gap as the dramatic representations of lesbians become increasingly unfamiliar to general theatre audiences.

To understand why American audiences are unable to bond with narrative lesbian plays, it is useful to consider one particular phenomenon in how audiences respond to what they see before them. In 1970, Japanese roboticist Masahiro Mori conducted an experiment in which he recorded human emotional responses to anthropomorphic items such as robots, dolls, and puppets. What Mori concluded was that humans generally respond postively to human-like objects as long as the objects are identifiably non-human. But Mori discovered a moment in which there is a dip in positive response to these objects. This dip occurs when the non-human object performs an action that eerily resembles a human act or performance, but the nuances of which reminds the observer of the object's non-human status. Mori writes: "I have noticed that, as robots appear more humanlike, our

sense of their familiarity increases until we come to a valley. I call this relation the 'uncanny valley'" (33).

Central to Mori's theory is the concept of the uncanny. In Das Unheimlich (1919), Freud claimed that "the uncanny is that class of the frightening which leads back to what is known of old and long familiar" ("The Uncanny" 220). He set out to demonstrate how and when something familiar can become uncanny and frightening. Freud focused much of his work on the presence or arousal of the uncanny in fiction. It is in Freud's exploration of the uncanny in fiction and Mori's exploration of the uncanny in audience response that make these combined theories fitting for consideration in a discussion about lesbian narrative theatre. Fiction, for Freud, has a great propensity for producing uncanny feelings because it is an art form that, as Russian critic Victor Shklovsky would later articulate, makes the familiar, unfamiliar. This propensity for fiction (the unreal as real and vice versa) to cause uncanny feelings, coupled with Mori's concept of how spectatorship of "real" and "unreal" human-like beings can also causes uncanny feelings serves as the foundation upon which my project is built.

My project is to consider how mainstream American theatergoers are often confronted with lesbian-themed plays in which the unfamiliar and the familiar aspects of the plays create an uncomfortable positioning for the audience member. I contend that this discomfort results in little commercial success for lesbian plays, and that this failure to perform well commercially excludes lesbian plays from the traditional dramatic canon. Because commercial success is generally the dominant factor in deciding which plays will be included in mainstream anthologies, their lack of commercial success prohibits lesbian plays from appearing in the one place that offers at least some respite from the uncanny valley response: academia. By considering the ways in which increased critical analysis of lesbian plays could contribute to a reworking of cultural sexuality narratives, it might be possible to increase the prevalence of lesbian representations on stage as interest in lesbian drama's transgressive qualities increase among scholars. In other words, it might be necessary to understand the lesbian play on the page before it can survive on the stage.

This project examines how both the reading of lesbian dramatic literature and the performance analysis of lesbian plays can offer insight into those dominant cultural tenets

that not only oppress lesbians in everyday society, but also contribute to their erasure from academic study. To demonstrate just how much lesbian dramatic literature can contribute to the critical studies of performance, gender, and society, I will consider how the uncanny valley response works, and through a rhetorical analysis demonstrate how it is currently perpetuated in discussions surrounding lesbian theatre. I will also argue that the lesbian body on stage is inherently provocative of an uncanny valley response because it is imbued with a number of dichotomous social constructs, and that these constructs burden lesbian plays with the harrowing task of trying to create physical representations that are relatable to both lesbians and non-lesbians alike.

Mori's Uncanny Valley

When Mori conducted his experiments, he used various anthropomorphized objects to measure responses. In a 1970 issue of Energy Magazine, he wrote the following:

> Recently there are many industrial robots . . . [that] bear no resemblance to human beings. If we plot these industrial robots on a graph of familiarity versus appearance, they lie near the origin. So they bear little resemblance to a

> human being, and in general people do not find them to be familiar. But if the designer of a toy robot puts importance on a robot's appearance rather than its function, the robot will have a somewhat humanlike appearance with a face, two arms, two legs, and a torso. This design lets children enjoy a sense of familiarity with the humanoid toy. So the toy robot is approaching the top of the first peak. (33)

For Mori, merely being unfamiliar with something is not enough to provoke an uncanny valley response. Crucial to the definition of uncanny is the sense of familiarity that accompanies the unfamiliar. This can be extended to explain the troublesome responses to lesbian dramatic literature and performance. The mere presence of lesbian is not enough to provoke an uncanny valley response—a spectator can fully accept the unfamiliar—but it is the positioning of lesbian within heteronormative conditions – coupling her with the familiar, in other words – that I believe evokes the response.

It is not surprising that Mori would use the example of a bunraku puppet on stage to illustrate his concept. Familiarity with humanlike objects is, after all, grounded

in how well the object can <u>perform</u> human. But what Mori points out in his example of the bunraku puppet are two things that will prove vital to my discussion of the uncanny valley response in lesbian theatre. He writes:

> I don't think a bunraku puppet is similar to human beings on close observation . . . but when we enjoy a puppet show in the theater, we are seated far from the puppets. Their absolute size is ignored, and their total appearance including eye and hand movements is close to that of human beings. So although the puppets' body is not humanlike, we can feel that they are humanlike owing to their movement. And from this evidence I think their familiarity is very high. (34)

Distance from the performers and the performer's movements are two crucial factors in the reception of performance. For me, this is where lesbian theatre meets its greatest challenge. The bunraku puppet performance relies on its spectator maintaining a certain amount of distance in order to preserve the illusion of realism. But in lesbian theatre — particularly in realistic plays — the playwright tries to overcome distance. He or she draws the spectator into the world of the play, inviting them in close enough so that the spectator is confronted with the unfamiliarity of the

space. This closeness is the reason I argue – an argument to which I will return in depth later in my project – that a lesbian reliance on the camp aesthetic could perpetuate the distance between audience and performer in such a way as to never allow a collective familiarity to develop. In other words, the artifice of both the bunraku puppet and camp performance seeks to conceal unfamiliar aspects instead of highlighting them. If lesbian theatre wants to emerge from its hidden status, it will need to highlight the unfamiliar in order for it to eventually become more familiar.

The second condition of Mori's bunraku puppets – the scientist's attention to the puppets' movement – offers even more insight into the uncanny valley response to lesbian theatre. Following Mori's example, my project explores the idea of movement in the lesbian performance of gender. Often, what we consider gendered movements are socially constructed notions about how a certain biological sex should move. The intersections between gender and sexuality that arise in lesbian plays pull these notions into question. The feminine movements of a butch character, for example, evoke an uncanny valley response because the movements are familiar but they do not match the sex of the

performer. The bunraku puppet must conform to a socially constructed definition of humanlike movement in order to please its audience with its familiarity; a butch lesbian performance, on the other hand, is doing quite the opposite.

One of the reasons Mori conducted his experiment was to offer the producers of technology insight into how they could best manifest their robotic creations. Mori suggests that considering non-anthropomorphic designs for adaptive equipment has the potential to alienate fewer people. He writes: "Glasses do not resemble the real eyeball, but this design is adequate and can make the eyes more charming. So we should follow this principle when we design prosthetic eyes" (34). I believe a similar thing happens within lesbian theatre when scholars suggest lesbian plays should not employ realism in their productions. Although these scholars claim that heteronormative realism damages lesbian representation, I argue that what is really being advocated is a defensive desire to protect lesbian representation from rejection at the hands of heteronormative audiences. But in reality, these non-realistic performances (or "performance pieces" as I will refer to them) actually create a separate identity for lesbian dramatic

representation, <u>but still in relation to heterosexual conditions</u>. In other words, lesbians may not resemble heterosexuals, but their design is adequate and can make heterosexuals more charming as long as they don't resemble the heterosexual too closely. This is, in my opinion, simply not acceptable. More acceptable is the continued realistic representation of lesbians on stage until this representation becomes so familiar it no longer provokes an uncanny valley response. Instead, mainstream theatre develops a "new normal" and lesbian representation becomes yet another form of <u>human</u> representation.

<u>Freud's Fiction and Lesbian Realism</u>

Whether or not lesbian theatre should produce "realistic" plays is a hotly contested subject in the study of lesbian theatre. Many lesbian theatre scholars argue that realism is not an appropriate forum for lesbian representation. In Sue-Ellen Case's "Toward a Butch-Femme Aesthetic," the author argues that realism is steeped in heteronormativity and damaging to the hope of any kind of lesbian aesthetic. Case claims: "as realism makes the spectator see things its way, it represses her own ability to free associate within a situation and reduces the resonances of events to its own limited technical

dimensions. Thus, the seduction of the scene is repressed by the authoritarian claim to realistic representation" ("Toward" 305). In her essay, "'Lesbian' Subjectivity in Realism: Dragging at the Margins of Structure and Ideology," Jill Dolan explores the same issue with realism, which she claims has been "eclipsed by the postmodern performance work in discussions of lesbian representation" (41). Dolan asks: "Is a lesbian performance transported to a heterosexual context readable, or is it illegible because it is inflected with subcultural meanings that require a lesbian viewer to negotiate?" (41). Like other lesbian theatre critics, Dolan questions if hetero-sexuality's hegemonic grip on realism even allows "authentic" lesbian representation to take place. These critics argue that only in performance pieces can lesbian representation break free from the formal constraints of realism and become something unique to the lesbian culture. However, this issue can be better understood by considering how the dichotomy of camp versus realism affects the uncanny valley response.

Linear narratives are certainly a foundation of realism. They feel more realistic because we experience life through a series of beginnings, middles, and ends. Because of the increase in the feel of the "real" in a

narrative, it is natural that coupling that feeling with anything that is "unreal" will result in an uncanny valley response. Lesbian performance pieces fare better than lesbian narratives in terms of positive audience response because performance pieces essentially combine the unfamiliar with the unreal. No moment of uncanniness occurs. However, when lesbian representation takes place in an everyday slice-of-life narrative, audience members are confronted with the aspects of "real life" that are at once familiar and unfamiliar – real and unreal.

The mimetic nature of the stage produces these uncanny feelings more so than in actual interactions. Freud writes:

> In the main we adopt an unvarying passive attitude towards real experience and are subject to the influence of our physical environment. But the storyteller has a *peculiarly* directive power over us; by means of the moods he can put us into, he is able to guide the current of our emotions, to dam it up in one direction and make it flow in another, and he often obtains a great variety of effects from the same material. ("The Uncanny" 251)

So, while interaction with lesbians in real life may not produce feelings of the uncanny, the manipulation of emotions toward lesbian characters leads to the uncanny valley response. Freud adds: "fiction presents more opportunities for creating uncanny feelings than are possible in real life" ("The Uncanny" 251). Even more so are the uncanny feelings produced by putting the unfamiliar lesbian in relation to the average everyday life.

For many lesbian theatre scholars, this "average everyday life" serves as just another manifestation of compulsory heterosexuality. By presenting lesbian representation in a heterosexual context, that which is unique to lesbian culture is co-opted by the dominant culture. In other words, straight culture consumes lesbian representation, resulting in lesbianism being reduced to nothing more than heterosexual relationships between same-sex bodies: a whitewashing of lesbian performance. In performance art, lesbian representation is free to just be what it is. Dominant cultural forces do not alter the art because the genre requires that the art be disruptive to the traditional ideas surrounding it. For some, performance pieces are lesbian theatre's best chance at emerging as an independent and unique aesthetic adventure.

But as is the problem with most boundaries in our postmodern world, the boundaries surrounding the definitions of lesbian and definitions of what constitutes "performance" pieces make for convoluted conversations. Should the story of an otherwise heterosexual woman who falls in love with a lesbian not be depicted in a realist narrative? Should the mere presence of a lesbian call for a disruption to a traditional theatre presentation? Is it possible to define a lesbian aesthetic when the definition of lesbian is so unstable? The traditional realist narratives of lived lesbian experiences, as compulsorily heterosexual as they may currently be, must find their way to mainstream dramatic literature. Because the presence of most lesbian themes often provokes an uncanny valley response, only when the unfamiliar aspects of lesbian life become so familiar to mainstream audiences will theatergoers no longer avoid these dramatic productions, and therein give lesbian theatre the room it needs to develop and grow in the same ways gay men's theatre has developed. It was a long path from Tennessee Williams's homosexual innuendos to Tony Kushner's blatant treatment of homosexuality before gay men's dramatic literature secured its place in the traditional canon. And the depictions of

gay male relationships were just as unfamiliar in these early productions. Of course, gay men's theatre did enjoy the benefits of being male-centered, a fact that plays a vital role in understanding lesbian theatre's inability to thrive.

The Suppression of Lesbian Theatre

The lack of lesbian presence in theatre does not result simply from a disciplinary erasure of homosexual women. The early twentieth century saw the beginning of legal prohibitions against representing lesbianism on stage. The fin-de-siècle plays performed at that time were filled with explorations of what society deemed "deviant" behavior. Playwrights at the turn of the century were heavily influenced by Naturalism and strove to illuminate the ways in which a hyper-reliance on a supernatural force, such as God, was problematic to the natural ways of man. Morality was questioned; hypocrisy was explored. The classic Platonic/Aristotelian battle waged over whether art reflects social behavior or creates it. The Platonic side, claiming immoral art creates an immoral society, would win this battle. Measures to limit exposure to immoral drama would be taken, ultimately leading to legislation that

would forever change the course of lesbian theatre - the Wales Padlock Law of 1927.

In 1905, Yiddish playwright Sholem Asch penned, The God of Vengeance, a play that depicted the love affair between a young Yiddish girl and a female prostitute. In 1923, Asch's play was performed on New York's Apollo Theatre's stage. Mirroring the fate of other morally questionable plays of the time, the cast and the play's producer, Harry Weinberger, were arrested on indecency charges at the conclusion of the play's opening performance. Weinberger and The God of Vengeance's cast were acquitted of indecency, but the state of New York addressed the increasing number of productions containing objectionable material by passing the Wales Padlock Law. The threat of legal action for merely depicting homo-sexuality on stage was enough to effectively shove homosexual representation back into the dramatic closet. That closet door wouldn't open again for lesbians until the 1980s, almost two decades after the Wales Padlock Law had been rescinded.

While New York City's Broadway closed its doors to lesbian representation, so too did theatres in other large cities. In 1934, Boston and Chicago banned productions of

Lillian Hellman's _Children's Hour_ — the most anthologized play containing lesbian themes — for its veiled references to lesbianism. As lesbian "behavior" continued to reside in the jurisdiction of theatre censorship, lesbian representation became increasing unfamiliar to general theatre audiences. Soon feminism changed the face of representation of women on stage, but with the Lavender Menace movements of the 1970s, that representation tried to distance itself as far from lesbian association as possible. So lesbian representation went non-existent in theatre, and lesbian audiences looked to other venues, such as film, to find crumbs of representation.

Lesbian theatre scholars, like Sue-Ellen Case, often consider Jane Chambers's _Last Summer at Bluefish Cove_ to be the first production in lesbian theatre history. Moving away from the painful portrayals in plays like Hellman's _Children's Hour_ and Frank Marcus's 1964 _Killing of Sister George_, Chambers's play situates lesbian life in the context of the heterosexual as outsider. _Last Summer at Bluefish Cove_ had it problems, of course, most notably the vestigial acceptance of a lesbian demise at the conclusion of the play, but the play did call attention to the lack of lesbian presence on stage. Today, the play continues to

spark interesting questions about the representation of lesbians in theatre.

The Visible Lesbian Body

At the crux of my argument, I claim that an identifiably lesbian body on stage produces the uncanny valley response for two reasons: (1) the identifiable lesbian body disrupts gender performance expectations in a way that male bodies do not, and (2) the spectacle of woman is exalted when juxtaposed with the spectacle of lesbian.

Theatre has a long tradition of staging men dressed as women but very few moments of the opposite: women dressed as men. As a result, a butch lesbian on stage provokes a greater sense of unfamiliarity than say, a drag queen would. This is the reason, I believe, that gay male theatre has been able to experience a rich presence in the traditional canon despite suffering under the same oppressive censorship laws of the early twentieth century. Gay males could, with impunity, engage in a wider range of gender expression than their female counterparts. Axel Madsen, author of Forbidden Lovers writes:

> To act is to assume identities. Since antiquity actors had slipped into women's clothes and painted their faces. They were still doing it in

> Asian theatre. Admittedly, the tradition of women in men's roles was shorter, but it dated back to Cherubin in The Marriage of Figaro. On Broadway, a succession of actresses, from Maude Adams and Eva Le Gallienne to Marilyn Miller, had played Peter Pan. (3)

Interestingly, however, none of the roles Madsen refers to are really "men's roles." Instead, they are the roles of young boys. The disruption to traditional gender roles would have been too great if women had stepped into adult male roles. During the 1920s, during the height of theatre censorship, women with masculine dress and mannerisms signaled homosexuality in a way that a man costumed as Ophelia in a production of Shakespeare's Hamlet would not. Because of this, the dramatic representation of female homosexuality could not be as easily veiled as male homosexuality could, causing the development of this kind of representation to become seriously delayed.

Feminist scholars have long discussed the implications of woman as spectacle, and how this translates to women on stage, but when homosexuality is layered on top of the female spectacle, these warring spectacles force audience observers to favor one over the other. The observer will

favor the spectacle with which he or she is more familiar. In the case of mainstream theatre audiences, this translates to the spectacle of woman becoming favored over the spectacle of lesbian. The lesbian spectacle thereby becomes unwanted at best, vilified at worst. It works against the feminist desire to remove woman as spectacle, and instead exalts it. The identifiable lesbian body produces an uncanny valley response because she is at once both familiar as a woman, but unfamiliar as something in opposition. Marilyn Farwell writes in her book, Heterosexual Plots & Lesbian Narratives:

> The narrativized lesbian is not simply a given — a character whose sexuality is obvious or hinted at or even a coded image of two intensely involved women friends — rather, it is a trope . . . This figure as a single character, as a couple, or as a community, is gendered female, but an excessive or grotesque female because by refusing to position itself in opposition to the male, it exceeds cultural and narrative boundaries. (61)

It is the lesbian character's transgression of cultural and narrative boundaries that makes her such a dangerous

subject. By challenging cultural boundaries, the lesbian character legitimizes her existence. By rearranging narrative boundaries, the lesbian character makes room for herself in a master narrative. But until serious consideration is given to the lesbian dramatic subject, she will remain simply an unfamiliar figure.

In Chapter Two, I will examine these cultural boundaries of gender performance and how the presence of lesbian bodies onstage evokes an uncanny valley response due to the complicated nature of what lesbian bodies signify to an audience that has little to no experience with the aesthetics of lesbian representation. In Chapter Three, I will consider narrative boundaries, particularly Freudian narratives, in order to demonstrate how lesbian theatre can expand our understanding of the limits of critical theories that rely on heteronormative ideologies, and how a collective familiarity with these theories adds to the uncanny valley response. Finally, in Chapter Four, using rhetorical analysis, I will demonstrate how the uncanny valley response can be traced throughout the reviews of lesbian plays and in lesbian theatre scholarship as well.

CHAPTER TWO

THE LESBIAN BODY ON STAGE

Lesbian Embodiment

In Chapter One, I outlined the uncanny valley response as defined by roboticist Masahiro Mori and explained how a dip in positive response to images that are simultaneously familiar and unfamiliar could account for the dearth of lesbian-themed plays in production and in the traditional dramatic canon. I provided a brief history of lesbian theatre and discussed the debate among lesbian theatre critics over whether or not lesbian plays steeped in a realist tradition are conducive to establishing a clear lesbian aesthetic. In this chapter, I will demonstrate how the uncanny valley response is unwittingly evoked in realist lesbian plays, and I will argue that the unintended disruption produced by the uncanny valley response to these plays has a greater potential of leading to a more developed theory of lesbian aesthetics than the intentional disruptions provoked by lesbian performance pieces.

Brechtian Aesthetics and Lesbian Theatre

Before beginning the discussion of how the lesbian body onstage provokes an uncanny valley response, it is

important to first understand how the uncanny valley response relates to the precepts of two foundational dramatic theories: that of Aristotle's and that of Bertolt Brecht's. In his Poetics, Aristotle describes humans as mimetic beings, beings who desire to create art that reflects and imitates life. For Aristotle, an audience must be able to identify with the characters placed before them — see evidence of their own lives in imitation — in order to empathize with the "people" inhabiting the text. But Aristotle also believed that some distance between audience and actor was crucial for the spectator to achieve catharsis. In other words, spectators resolve their heightened emotional response to a play's characters by being able to recognize that the events playing out could not actually happen to the spectators themselves. The events, while realistic and relatable, are distant possibilities for the spectator. Familiarity and distance, for Aristotle, serve as fundamental qualities for achieving the best response from an audience.

In contrast to Aristotle's dramatic conventions, twentieth century playwright Bertolt Brecht outlined his own dramaturgical framework in which human existence is best portrayed when it highlights the social constructions

at work in defining "reality." For Brecht, the audience must be continually made aware that the performance before them – like the audience's reality outside the theatre – is constructed. Brecht believed that the catharsis achieved in Aristotelian theatre created social complacency by allowing spectators to resolve their feelings inside the theatre instead of gaining from those feelings the inspiration to help solve social conditions outside the theatre. In what would become a hallmark of dramatic theory, Brecht described the use of the Verfremdungseffekt, or the "defamiliarization effect," as a way to distance the spectator from the familiar elements of a play. This defamiliarization effect does not allow the audience to passively enjoy a theatre that imitates life, but rather, it provokes them into an active response to a theatre that illuminates social issues. Familiarity and distance, while equally important in both Brechtian and Aristotelian theatre, are used very differently for very different effects.

Brecht called his non-Aristotelian dramaturgy "epic theatre" and outlined the many differences between epic and

representational or realistic theatre.[1] For the purpose of this project, I am concerned with two of Brecht's distinctions: that in epic theatre, "the spectator stands outside, studies," while in conventional Aristotelian theatre "the spectator is in the thick of it, shares the experience;" and, that "social being determines thought" in epic theatre, while "thought determines being" in dramatic theatre (Brecht 37). I contend that the uncanny valley response resides in the liminal spaces between epic and dramatic theatre. It is the interplay of spectator distance and thought that provides a space in which the spectator is confronted with familiar and unfamiliar moments. Lesbian representation seemingly places the spectator outside the experience of the enacted drama, studying lesbian difference from afar, while the realist aspects of the narrative invite the spectator in to the "thick of it," inviting him or her to share in a familiar collective (and as some would argue, heteronormative) experience of the on-stage drama. These moments combined with other moments in

[1] It is important to note that while traditionally the difference between Brechtian and Aristotelian dramaturgy has been centered on realistic representations vs. avant-garde representations, Brecht didn't believe epic theatre couldn't have realistic representations. More accurately, Brecht was concerned with the empathy provoked in dramatic theatre vs. the action provoked in epic theatre, and my project works from that position.

which lesbian characters whose social being has determined their thoughts and actions — thoughts and actions that are wildly unfamiliar to someone who does not share a similar social being — confront the spectator's own familiar understanding of how social thought has constructed lesbian subjectivity; all of this results in a series of moments that provoke an uncanny valley response.

Because of the social activist underpinnings of Brecht's epic theatre, it is understandable why many lesbian theatre critics see value in the use of avant-garde, non-Aristotelian theatre in representing lesbian existence. Aristotelian narrative theatre requires that an audience can readily identify with a play's characters. Precisely the argument against using realism in lesbian plays is that realism validates dominant culture by putting homosexuality in a binary opposition with heterosexuality (Dolan 44). Jill Dolan writes in "'Lesbian' Subjectivity in Realism: Dragging at the Margins of Structure and Ideology" that "Lesbians disappear under the liberal humanist insistence that they are just like everyone else. Difference is effectively elided by readability . . . The lesbian subject most readable in realism is either dead or aping heterosexual behavior" (44). However, the anti-

realist argument crumbles when the theorist confronts butch lesbian representations in realist plays. Dolan's anti-realist argument – that aping heterosexual behavior replaces the transgressive potential of asserting the radical differences in the lives of lesbians – evokes the Brechtian idea that by replacing the defamiliarizing effects of radical lesbian difference, audiences potentially grow complacent with lesbian social conditions they see as no different from their own. However, Dolan then asserts the following:

> In such a setting, the butch lesbian retains her difference and presents a dangerous threat to heterosexual, gay-assimilationist, and lesbian-feminist ideology. The butch in lesbian realist plays inflected by these ideologies remains ghosted as an anachronism from an unenlightened time . . . Her isolation and the moral judgments launched against her by other characters place the butch in the position once defined for all lesbian subjects by heterosexuality. She becomes the enigma to be purged from the lesbian realist text. (50)

At its crux, Dolan's argument accepts the transgressive potential of the butch lesbian on stage, but it criticizes the heterosexual context in which the butch lesbian is situated within a realist play. Dolan fails to recognize how this perceived heterosexual context — especially if so perceived by heterosexual audiences as well — has the potential to draw an audience in closer to the transgressive butch while simultaneously distancing the audience through aspects like anachronism which Dolan describes above, a technique favored in Brechtian theatre for its distancing effects. And so, in essence, although these anti-realist lesbian theatre critics prefer the Brechtian influences of avant-garde lesbian performance pieces for their disruptive qualities, they fail to see how realist lesbian plays already evoke Brechtian principles that can be equally disruptive simply by virtue of the interplay within the liminal spaces between normative and non-normative sexual identity.

Assigning value to lesbian plays based solely on their use of the avant-garde is problematic in several ways. Even Brecht himself is suspicious of the avant-garde merely for disruption's sake. He writes:

> The avant-garde don't think of changing the apparatus, because they fancy that they have at their disposal an apparatus which will serve up whatever they freely invent, transforming itself spontaneously to match their ideas. But they are not in fact free inventors; the apparatus goes on fulfilling its function with or without them. (34-5)

The few lesbian plays that have garnered high critical reception (particularly those plays written and produced by lesbian theatre companies such as Split Britches and Five Lesbian Brothers) are commonly described as avant-garde. These lesbian performance pieces do relatively well because they pose no threat to the apparatus of avant-garde performance; in fact, they reinforce the defamiliarizing of the already unfamiliar to the point of spectacle, which is what ultimately entertains. Brecht claims:

> We are free to discuss any innovation which doesn't threaten its social function—that of providing an evening's entertainment. We are not free to discuss those which threaten to change its function, possibly by fusing it with the educational system or with organs of mass

communication. Society absorbs via the apparatus whatever it needs in order to reproduce itself. (34)

Instead of relying on the shocking disruptive nature of the avant-garde apparatus which ultimately only serves to reproduce itself, discussing the disruptive effects of lesbian dramatic representation in realist plays could provide an alternate function for lesbian plays, providing the kind of innovation Brecht sees as necessary for change.

In order to discuss the disruptive qualities of realist lesbian plays, we should begin with a close examination of the lesbian body in realist contexts so that we may understand how the uncanny valley response could potentially be mitigated by its innovative functions. In his essay, "Language and the Body," Keir Elam writes: "The 'meaning' of the body onstage is one of the most problematic areas of current criticism, partly because so few people have paid attention to it until quite recently" (173). Elam examines the four "types" of bodies that appear simultaneously onstage: the historical, the performative, the dramatic, and the discursive (173). In lesbian plays, Elam's body types complicate traditional surface readings centered solely on gender and sexuality because they

highlight the complex interplay of social being and individual thought within the physical manifestation of a dramatic character. The gaps between identity, social constructs, and dramatic constraints merge in the lesbian body onstage. In "Sexual Indifference and Lesbian Representation," Teresa de Lauretis describes the struggle with language in rewriting a body to be lesbian as;

> . . . a struggle to transcend both gender and 'sex' and recreate the body otherwise: to see it perhaps as monstrous, or grotesque, or mortal, or violent, and certainly also sexual, but with a material and sensual specificity that will resist phallic idealization and render it accessible to women in another sociosexual economy. In short, if it were not lesbian, this body would make no sense. (29)

Similarly, Elam sees the issue of the relationship between language and the body as troubled but meaningful and views the ways in which "the text can inscribe the body – not only the character's but also the actor's – as an indispensable part of its meaning-making" (177). How lesbian plays embody lesbian subjectivity through the playtext requires a closer look at the meaning of the

lesbian body onstage, beginning with the most readily identifiable body: the dramatic body.

The Dramatic Body - Lesbian as Spectacle

Elam defines the dramatic body as "the product of a trained dramatic actor coming together with the language of the play, the 'part' written for them that unites the stage with the dramatic world" (177). Traditionally, the conventions of dramatic representation are what create the imaginary *personae* (Elam 177). Characterization generally follows a set of rules that the trained actor employs in order to give a "body" to an otherwise abstract creation. Aristotle defined the four desirable qualities for Character in his *Poetics*. First, the character must be good; second, the character must be proper; third, it must be true to life; and finally, it must be consistent (59). Within these descriptions, Aristotle addresses the issue of female characters. He famously claims that "even a woman [character] can be good . . . though the woman can be said to be an inferior being" and that valor in a woman is inappropriate (59). These classical precepts contributed to the development of the female dramatic body and laid the foundation for male-defined spectatorship.

The female dramatic body has long been subject to patriarchally defined modes of representation. The lesbian body on stage is built upon the female dramatic body in interesting ways. The issue of womanness becomes vitally important to lesbian theatre because it complicates female homosexuality in relation to the male influenced gaze of the spectator. As Kate Davy writes in her article, "Reading Past the Heterosexual Imperative," theatre has a history of placing woman in the role of spectacle:

> Because the stage embodies the "to-be-looked-at" dimension of the theatrical apparatus - the site of spectacle, the artificial, the histrionic, the site of deceit, conceit, and disguise - it is sometimes metaphorically linked with 'the feminine.' Of course, ultimately, 'woman' - woman as sign, as the collective essence of femininity - is conflated with spectacle itself, <u>woman as spectacle</u>, woman as object of the spectatorial gaze. (140)

By offering a lesbian characters who refuse socially constructed gender roles, lesbian plays suggest that in turn, these characters refuse to be looked at in the same manner as the traditional heterosexual woman - in essence,

refusing to become a spectacle. Ironically, however, it is her lesbianism that then becomes the spectacle of the play when her failure to conform to gender roles makes her womanness suspect. And consequently, if lesbian sexuality is to be depicted onstage in any meaningful way, the eroticizing of women must take place, meaning the play will unavoidably be crafted by a sexualized gaze. The use of a sexualized gaze situates the depiction of lesbian sexuality in a near alliance with the oft criticized sexualized male gaze. So, despite a lesbian play's attempt to present lesbian characters in realistic romantic relationships free from the constraints of gender conformity, its affinity with the heterosexual male gaze shifts the focus from the character's lesbianism back to her womanness once again.

Many lesbian plays struggle with the issue of lesbian spectacle. The lesbian dramatic body onstage in contemporary lesbian plays often runs the gamut of spectacle: typically moving seamlessly between being "looked-at" for her alternate sexuality and being "gazed-at" for her biological sex. In Shirlene Holmes's A Lady and a Woman (1990), one of the first exchanges between the lead characters of Biddie and Miss Flora (who will later become

lovers) deals with Biddie's apparent defiance of prescribed gender norms:

> MISS FLORA: I never heard of no woman cutting hogs. Where'd you pick that up?
>
> BIDDIE: I was the only girl in a house of ten brothers . . . Every time I tell my daddy that my back was hurting from lifting and picking and carrying three and five times my weight, he'd spit and say, 'Gal, you ain't got no back. All you got is gristle.'
>
> MISS FLORA: [laughing] Well, I done heard it all. A woman cutting hogs. (Holmes 188-189)

At this point, the most interesting thing about Biddie is her masculinity. The spectator assumes Biddie's refusal to adopt traditional female mannerisms is an indication of an alternate sexuality. She does not offer an expression of gender to be "gazed-at." Biddie ceases to be a woman in a social sense, and instead becomes the embodiment of an alternate sexuality. Miss Flora, on the other hand, has never identified herself as anything but a proper heterosexual lady. Their respective expression of gender at this point in the play is what gives the play its title. Biddie says, "You're the lady, Miss Flora. I'm a woman"

(189). The clear distinction between lady and woman is at the core of the lesbian dramatic body, with the "lady" becoming the female spectacle and the lesbian "woman" becoming the lesbian spectacle.

The lesbian dramatic body highlights and separates what heteronormativity has historically conflated. Because the actor must rely on social norms in order to convey unspoken messages from within the fictional world of the play, the lesbian dramatic body must take up issues of gender and sexuality separately, because often, lesbian relationships involve two women who share a similar sexuality but not necessarily similar genders. Lesbian plays often address this issue, arguably for the sake of heteronormative audiences, but ultimately what results is a separation of the lesbian's gendered identity (the female spectacle) from her sexuality (the lesbian spectacle) which never allows the lesbian dramatic body to fully develop. For example, in A Lady and a Woman, Biddie and Miss Flora address the separate issues of gender and sexuality within the fictional world of the play:

> MISS FLORA: They whispering. Talking 'bout you all the time. How you think you're strong as a man.

BIDDIE: I am. Stronger than many I know 'cause I can show my feelings. It's a waste of time measuring a woman to a man, ain't no comparison.

MISS FLORA: They call you a bulldagger woman.

BIDDIE: That's all right. I'd rather they call me a bulldagger than a nigger. Nothing hurts worse than that.

MISS FLORA: I never thought I'd grow up and be no bulldagger.

BIDDIE: Who said you're one? You're what you are; Miss Flora Devine and that's all you got to claim. Send the rest to me. (199)

In this exchange, Biddie initially highlights her biological sex in order to reaffirm by comparison her masculine gender. This non-normative gender expression inevitably leads into a discussion about sexual identity. By keeping the label of "bulldagger" to herself and not sharing it with Miss Flora, Biddie effectively removes Miss Flora from the lesbian spectacle position, and places her back into the position of female spectacle. In addition, this exchange's use of 'bulldagger' adds yet another layer onto the lesbian body: the historical baggage associated with the term lesbian.

The Historical Body – Lesbian as Invert

Brecht believed that epic theatre was a mechanism through which spectators can witness how human behavior is alterable. The historical nature of drama – stories depicting past events played out in present time, while affording the ability to assess behavior in hindsight – clearly demonstrates that behavior is socially constructed. Brecht writes:

> The epic theatre is chiefly interested in the attitudes which people adopt towards one another, wherever they are socio-historically significant . . . In short, the spectator is given the chance to criticize human behavior from a social point of view, and the scene is played as a piece of history. The idea is that the spectator should be put in a position where he can make comparisons about everything that influences the way in which human beings behave. (86)

However, the presence of the lesbian body onstage adds heat to the bubbling cauldron of debate over whether or not lesbianism is socially or biologically constructed, whether or not a lesbian character is "behaving" or is "being."

It is perhaps at the site of the historical body onstage where much of the uncanny valley response begins. In Brecht's theory of historicization – preserving the marks of the past while simultaneously acknowledging the audience's present perspective – the actor's body carries the burden of challenging "the presumed ideological neutrality of any historical reflection" (Diamond 81). As Elin Diamond writes in her essay, "Brechtian Theory/Feminist Theory: Towards a Gestic Feminist Criticism":

> Historicization in fact puts on the table the issue of spectatorship and the performer's body. According to Brecht, one way that the actor alienates or distances the audience from the character is to suggest the historicity of the character in contrast to the actor's own present-time self-awareness on stage. The actor must not lose herself in the character but rather *demonstrate* the character as a function of particular socio-historical relations, a conduit of particular choices. (81)

But for lesbian dramatic performance, a long history of erasure makes "preserving the marks of the past" for

mainstream audiences a near impossible endeavor. The lesbian character has very few shared socio-historical marks to preserve, and so the manner in which the play itself treats the lesbian character's historical body can invite an uncanny valley response. When a performance's present-time awareness is not informed by an actual shared history, it is informed by historical stereotypes and assumptions. The performer loses the ability to contrast the historicity of character with present-time performance. No alienating effect or defamiliarization occurs because these performances are defining the historicity of the character through a heteronormatively defined present-time awareness. In these plays, the lesbian subject (via her body) starts and ends in either familiarity or unfamiliarity, but does not juxtapose both qualities which would inspire an uncanny valley response.

The treatment of gender within a lesbian play is often where the play's historical bodies can best be seen. As Teresa de Lauretis writes:

> Ironically, since one way of escaping gender is to so disguise erotic and sexual experience as to suppress any representation of its specificity, another avenue of escape leads the lesbian writer

> fully to embrace gender. . . However, representation is related to experience by codes that change historically and, significantly, reach in both directions: the reader accedes to representation through her own historical and experiential context; each reading is a rewriting of text, each writing a rereading of (one's) experience. (22-3)

For de Lauretis, this contrast in the interpretations between these two positions — reader of a text and writer of a text — creates a paradox that "operates as a semiotic mechanism to produce contradictory meaning effects" (23). Similarly, Kier Elam sees the historical body as a site in which various systems of belief (including religious and superstitious) converge, where the historical body brings "together the historical codes of behavior and ideology . . . that the fictional character expresses" (178). For the lesbian historical body, gender expression as a code of behavior converges with a historical ideology that views lesbianism as moral depravity. In this way, proper gender expression often becomes synonymous with a lesbian character's morality: the more transgressive the gender

expression, the more the character must reaffirm her morality.

In many of the lesbian plays I examined, the more masculine the lesbian character, the more sure that character is of her spiritual identity. In A Lady and a Woman, after the feminine Miss Flora tells Biddie that she is "worried about her spirit," the masculine Biddie responds: "You think we wrong with God, don't you? I used to believe that years ago when I was wasting myself, hopping around like a rabbit. But not with you Miss Flora. It just don't feel the same" (Holmes 198). Later, when Miss Flora worries about the townsfolk calling her a bulldagger, the two women continue their discussion of God:

> MISS FLORA: I can't live without God.
>
> BIDDIE: Don't have to. As long as we live, God'll be in the midst. (Holmes 199)

In both scenes, Biddie reaffirms her morality by re-affirming a spiritual self-worth. This affirmation is provoked by the Judeo-Christian tradition of deeming homosexuality to be an abomination to God. The masculine female body reaffirming the right to faith creates an uncanny valley response because of the seemingly incongruous nature of a historically rejected body speaking

of "God" in culturally familiar ways. The feminine lesbian character often questions her morality and faith because her performance of gender reinforces the same historical traditions that simultaneously reject her on the grounds of her sexuality.

Early lesbian plays used gender discussions as a stand-in for lesbian sexuality, and the lesbian character's disavowal of gender norms was often the only sexual expression the character was offered. In Sholem Asch's The God of Vengeance (1918), the play opens with a discussion of the vestures that its closeted lesbian character Rifkele has to purchase for an upcoming celebration. Rifkele's desire for a "silk waist and a pair of white slippers" has her father telling her, "You certainly deserve them" (43-44). This establishes Rifkele's lesbianism as a deception in two ways: (1) her father is currently unaware that she doesn't really "deserve" them, and (2) her acceptance of socially gendered clothing acts as an attempt at a disguise. A discussion about the appropriateness of Rifkele's embroidering the cover for the Holy Scrolls, a Jewish artifact, explains the distinctly different rules for men and women when it comes to its handling. Rifkele's desire to embroider something (a proper feminine activity)

for a symbol of male-domination in the play, suggests that Rifkele, at least initially, subscribes to society's gender constructions. This acceptance further complicates her position as lesbian, because when it is discovered that she is in a same-sex relationship, the audience feels a sense of betrayal. What appeared initially to be a "normal" young girl is now anything but normal. Rifkele embodied the historical tenets of proper female behavior, but she was ultimately rejected because of her community's Old Testament view of homosexuality and that view's historical association of homosexuality with immorality.

In "Toward a Lesbian Theory of Performance," Hilary Harris considers how the historically separate relationships between lesbian and feminist, sex and gender, affect a lesbian theory of performance:

> . . . while Rubin and others can get excited by the renegade promise of sexuality, sexual performance, sex talk only outside of that bourgeois marriage of institutional respectability, the historically vanilla relationship between (feminist) theorist and gender, I am aroused by the thought of what the tough new baby dyke — (lesbian) sexual theory —

> might learn under the oh, so demanding tutelage of the much older, wiser (I did not say kinder and gentler) dominatrix (and theoretical matrix)—gender. (258)

For Harris, the murky waters of warring theories provide an interesting place from which to see how the lesbian is constructed both in the academy and in society at large. At the core of her discussion is a return to the dichotomy of butch/femme performance, which for Harris is a sexual performance. However, in order to read lesbian sexuality accurately, Harris believes gender must be considered:

> I do not disagree that butch and femme do indeed constitute sexual performances, but I do contend that the sexual semiotics of butch and femme are readable primarily through the lens of gender. The lesbian can perform sexually until the first light of dawn, but it's an autoerotic night if sexuality and gender don't meet up first. That is, lesbian as a <u>socio</u>sexuality cannot be read (even in bed) without the illumination of gender. (270)

As Harris suggests, lesbian performance of sexuality is reliant on the performance of gender and all the historical

sentiment that goes along with a social understanding of gender.

In Edouard Bourdet's The Captive (1926), the play opens with the character of Gisele frantically looking for her sister, Irene (a closeted lesbian) so that Gisele can determine what dress to wear to dinner. Gisele says, "Well, you see we're the only two women at dinner tonight, and we must arrange that our dresses don't clash" (94). Irene replies, "Whichever you prefer; it doesn't matter to me" (98). This exchange immediately juxtaposes the straight Gisele - who is very conscientious about the gendered social behaviors that are expected of her - with her homosexual sister, Irene, who is apathetic (or questionably defiant) about society's expectations of her. Irene's refusal to readily perform the feminine gender serves as a metaphor for her refusal to perform heterosexuality.

For both The Captive and The God of Vengeance, lesbianism changes the historical feminine body onstage and acts as a catalyst for the destruction of long-held social traditions within their fictive worlds. By destroying the foundations of gendered identity, the spectator must look elsewhere for clues as to how to read this "new" body. The

spectator must now rely on the discursive creation of character.

The Discursive Body – Lesbian Difference

The discursive body resides in that space Brecht referred to as the relationship between thought and social being. For lesbian drama, the exchange of meaning between what it means to identify as lesbian in a social context and what it means to identify as lesbian in a personal context is what gives form to lesbian characters. Elam writes: "It is primarily through the words of the play that the character or dramatic persona is established as a 'physical' presence in the fictional world on the stage. Characters become embodied in the drama sometimes through what they say about themselves" (179). In many lesbian-themed plays, a discussion between characters generally occurs early in the play, about what it means to be female and what is required in the "proper" performance of gender. These discussions often take place in a home or other archetypal feminine space. They often occur shortly after a lesbian character has transgressed the boundaries of heteronormative gender performance, and they often foreshadows the difficulty that lies ahead for the lesbian if she refuses to perform gender more appropriately.

Besides demonstrating the nature of gender performance in our society, these discussions of female performativity also serve several other functions:

1) By explicitly acknowledging the lesbian character in relation to socially prescribed notions of womanness, each play underscores the character's inevitable denial of the social constructions pertaining to her sexuality.

2) By situating the lesbian in typically feminine spaces, each play suggests something about the lesbian's apparent disavowal of the hearth and what that means to the drama situated there.

3) By engaging in conversations with others about gender identity, each play creates a situation in which there is a real "discovery" of lesbianism — as the person discussing the lesbian's gender identity is usually unaware of the lesbian character's sexual identity (suggesting that if he or she knew the character was a lesbian, the person might not be discussing womanhood with them, and conversely, if the lesbian hadn't expressed some sort of gender deviance, the person wouldn't be discussing aspects of womanhood with the lesbian to begin with).

In her collection of essays entitled, Redressing the Canon, Alisa Soloman writes:

> The non-illusory stage, then, provides a heightened space for examining what postmodern theorists call the 'discursiveness' of identity formation, the notion that we are produced by and limited to what is said about us . . . if one recognizes that on the non-illusory stage characters have no inner essence — they exist only through what is shown and said to us — the postmodern notion of gender as performative, constituted by citational behavior, becomes a more compelling lens through which to interpret these plays. (40-41)

Because the world of the play discursively produces its characters, it mimics the formation of identity in society at large. As a theatre audience, we are often not aware of how the development of a character parallels the development of identity in "real" life. If done well, this development passes by the audience relatively unnoticed. But because of the dominant societal idea that gender is something that is natural, something not performed, something not discursively produced, when theatre audiences watch the discursive <u>production</u> of a character's gender formation onstage, the theatrical experience can draw them

out of their familiar worlds and spotlight something seemingly unnatural. These disruptive moments when a character's gender discursively alters her performance occur frequently in lesbian plays.

In Shirlene Holmes's A Lady and a Woman, Biddie is described as "a mannish 4 foot 8 inch butcher wearing a leather hat, vest, and pants" (186). When Biddie asks Miss Flora, "If I could give you a baby, what would you have?" Biddie is reaffirming her masculinity by positioning herself as "giver" or father of a child (203). But after Miss Flora tells Biddie that she would want to have a girl because boys scare her, Biddie responds: "A woman done bore every boy and man that's come into the world; they ain't nothing to be afraid of. They got to come through us just to get into the world" (204). By including herself in the phrase "got to come through us," Biddie reaffirms she is female, but the visual of a "mannish" woman who has just discursively reaffirmed her masculinity by suggesting the desire to father a child, produces an uncanny valley moment. Something both familiar and unfamiliar in Biddie's physical body emerges, and unless spectators are acutely aware of the dominant cultural notions they hold, they may respond negatively to that image.

Elam argues:

> . . . the more characteristic way that the body enters discourse involves modes of reference that are less semantically complete than such full-blown descriptions. What creates the main linguistic bridge between the speaking actor and the world of dramatic fiction are words in the text that allude to what the body of the actor must do in performing the character. (180)

Often in lesbian-themed plays, the playwright provides both gendered physical descriptions and descriptions of what she considers the most accurate performance of gender for certain characters in her play. In Terry Baum's Immediate Family (1983), the opening stage directions provide us with a full-blown physical description of the protagonist, Virginia: "in her middle fifties and is wearing a post office uniform. She is a bulldyke. That is, her manner, walk, and haircut are 'masculine' in a stereotypical way" (111). But Virginia's physical performance of gender is not necessarily how she performs gender on an emotional level. Virginia's character says, "all the times I've talked at punching people's lights out, and I've never done it. Not once . . . I'm all bark and no bite. Not too much bark

either" (111). Despite the playwright's insistence that Virginia look masculine in a "stereotypical way," Virginia's dialogue and actions are not stereotypically masculine. By discursively producing Virginia as physically masculine but emotionally feminine, Baum creates a character that could potentially provoke an uncanny valley response in heteronormative spectators, while simultaneously creating a readily identifiable lesbian character for lesbian audiences.

Immediate Family is about the circumstances surrounding a hospital's refusal to allow Virginia to visit her lover who lies in a coma. The playwright, Baum, presents a non-traditional couple denied the rights afforded to traditional couples. Because Immediate Family is performed entirely by one character (Virginia), Baum's decision to have Virginia perform butch allows the playwright to continually remind her audience that this character is a lesbian. When Virginia tells her partner, Rose, how much she loves her, Virginia's butch performance acts as a constant reminder that she is professing her love for another woman. Rose, although not physically present, serves as another discursive body in the play. Elam claims:

> . . . [a] body in question may be present . . . or may be invoked _in absentia_. . . Indeed, the most vivid examples of the body being realized through words, or discourse, normally take place at a spatial or temporal distance, in a rhetorical strategy called _hypotosis_, or 'counterfait' representation. (179)

The audience is denied the ability to replace the unseen Rose with some imaginary male character because a heterosexual coupling for the butch Virginia wouldn't feel "natural," due to her very masculine performance. As Virginia retells stories of her and Rose's life together, we learn that Rose, despite her feminine exterior, is quite aggressive. Again, Baum creates another uncanny moment provoked by a body that is never even seen on stage, a body that performs a function, rather than an actual performance.

The Performative Body - The Holistic Lesbian

Elam writes: "It is the actor on stage — no longer 'in a fiction' but working physically in front of us — who . . . brings the bodies dramatic, historical, and discursive together in a multi-dimensional illusion of presence" (182). At the moment the physical body of an actor merges

together the historical, dramatic and discursive body into a performance, the performative body emerges fully formed but not easily understood. To understand the performative body, we must consider what happens when the layers described above fuse into a complex performance that is at once fictional and also a representation of a social reality.

To return to the argument that the mere presence of the lesbian body in narrative theatre has the power to disrupt, considering the lesbian performative body can provide the strongest support to this argument. As Marilyn Farwell writes in her book, Heterosexual Plots and Lesbian Narratives: "In any definition of a lesbian narrative, the first problem is to explain the various meanings attached to the term 'lesbian' and then to construe the resulting possibilities for the lesbian subject in narrative" (61). Elam's distinction of the historical, discursive, and dramatic body can be used to begin the process Farwell describes of attempting to explain the various meanings attached to the lesbian body while construing resulting possibilities for her in the narrative play. But it is in the performative body that the lesbian onstage becomes a "figure" or trope. Farwell continues, claiming that the

narrativized lesbian "is a trope, developed in the twentieth century and especially in the last twenty-five years, that functions in a variety of literal and non-literal ways" (61). These literal and non-literal ways are the essence of the performative body.

Ultimately, Farwell argues that the lesbian figure "is gendered female, but an excessive or grotesque female because by refusing to position itself in opposition to the male, it exceeds cultural and narrative boundaries" (61). Farwell's argument that the lesbian figure offends because it resides outside the realm of normative boundaries is the condition at the heart of the lesbian performative body. The multi-layered performance of a lesbian's narrativized body may result in a sort of grotesque figure as Farwell suggests, but more importantly, the lesbian performative body puts the spotlight on aspects of social narratives that we have long clung to without question. It's only when we see how sexism and homophobia affect the lesbian performative body that we understand the complexity of these social constructions within our traditional western narratives. In this way, the lesbian performative body acts as a dissenter of long-held "truths" within etiological myths, revolutionizing how we understand sexuality and

gender and redefining foundational concepts regarding human experience such as the theories underpinning Freudian familial sexual taboo narratives.

CHAPTER THREE

DISRUPTING FREUDIAN NARRATIVES

Psychoanalytical Theory and Lesbian Theatre

In her essay, "Frame Up: Feminism, Psychoanalysis, Theatre," Barbara Freedman writes: "Whereas cinema is associated with the pre-Oedipal look, and the desire to see oneself seeing, theatre replaces the desiring eye with the blinded eye g(l)azed over. Theatre is an Oedipal affair, the scene of the cut or wound, of the crown that burns the wearer" (58). Psychoanalytical theories and Freudian thought, specifically, find rich soil in the landscape of dramatic studies. Freedman's quote above captures a prevalent notion among psychoanalytical theatre critics that the very site of dramatic action – the stage – provides a site full of potential for examining the human psyche. Not surprisingly, Freud himself used several classic pieces of dramatic literature to explain his theories of human psychological development. But the theatre is a heteronormative site, fundamentally viewed by spectators with "straight minds" and interpreted by scholars steeped in compulsory heterosexuality. Lesbian theatre does much to disrupt these conditions, both

intentionally and unintentionally. And these disruptions often reconfigure our heteronormative understanding of psychoanalytical theory.

The uncanny valley response does not reside solely in the minds of the audiences attending a performance of a lesbian play, it can also occur in the minds of the readers of the play's text. The uncanny valley response in the reader stems from collective heteronormative interpretations of the playtexts themselves. Any critical interpretation of lesbian playtexts must consider the potential for an uncanny valley response when the lens through which the playtext is read is staunchly heteronormative. Laura A. Harris writes in her essay, "Femme/Butch Family Romances: A Queer Dyke Spin on Compulsory Heterosexuality," that "within the erotics of the femme/butch dynamic, there are significant familial gender role identifications and erotic re-inventions of familial sexual taboo narratives" (75). Many literary critical lenses that consider the psychological, sociological, historical, or cultural underpinnings of a piece of literature are grounded in how the dominant culture understands the world, and so we become enculturated with specific ideas about what "normal"

behavior is. An uncanny valley response occurs when we are familiar with the lens, but unfamiliar with what we see through that lens. For example, the presence of an oedipal relationship in which the lesbian daughter desires to be rid of her father in order to bond with her mother in an erotic way is at once identifiable as oedipal, but highly unusual to many mainstream audiences. This oedipal construction is not uncommon in lesbian plays. And while the oedipal mother/son relationship has become so familiar that it warrants little shock anymore, when the same relationship occurs between a mother and a daughter, it is simply too uncanny for many mainstream audiences.

The bonds between mothers and daughters receive comparatively less attention in dramatic representation than any other parent-child relationship. In her book, Feminist Theories for Dramatic Criticism, feminist drama critic Gayle Austin writes:

> Stories of mothers and daughters told from women's points of view are extremely rare in drama. This absence needs to be examined along with the few plays that do exist. There are, of course, fewer female than male playwrights, but this fact alone does not account for the

> proportionately fewer plays about the mother-daughter relationship than about the father-son. (66)

While there is little argument that female playwrights as a group are not writing plays focused on mother-daughter relationships, Austin's claim demonstrates the tendency in academia to conflate lesbian playwrights into categories that erase their particular contributions. When compared to work of heterosexual female playwrights, lesbian playwrights actually write disproportionately *more* about mother-daughter bonds than their heterosexual counterparts. And though Austin outlines how psychoanalytical theorists like Nancy Chodorow re-examine oedipal relationships in terms of mothers and daughters, and despite advocating "examining the differences between representations of mothers by male and female writers," Austin fails to consider the influence a female playwright's sexuality might have on these traditional psychoanalytical sexual narratives (66).

Of all of Freud's theories regarding human sexual development, arguably the one most familiar to mainstream audiences is Freud's Oedipal Complex theory. Mainstream audiences have grown familiar, comfortable even, with the

idea that a young boy develops sexual feelings toward his mother at some point in his early childhood. But, the oedipal construction is familiar to heteronormative audiences only when the construction includes a parent and child of opposite sexes. When a mother and daughter's relationship suggests an oedipal construction, the close proximity of something both familiar (the oedipal construction itself) and something unfamiliar (the lesbian nature of the relationship) produces a moment of the uncanny. Interestingly, the mother-daughter relationships in lesbian dramatic literature illuminate two noteworthy conditions: 1) mainstream audiences' understanding of the oedipal complex demonstrates a deep-seated heteronormativity by ignoring the basic Freudian precept that young girls also experience an oedipal stage in which their mothers are love-objects; and 2) heteronormative theories of female homosexuality as a sexual aberration brought on by a young girl's inability to overcome her preoedipal stages can lead some lesbian playwrights to manifest these explanations in their play's parent-child relationships. Understanding these two conditions highlights the unique contribution lesbian dramatic literature offers in terms of understanding foundational

heteronormative discourses influencing fictional narratives.

The Female Oedipal Stage

The popular explanation of Freud's term "oedipal" entails a sort of love triangle between mother, son, and father. Freud, of course, coined the term based on the ancient Greek dramatic character, Oedipus, who unwittingly kills his father and marries a woman who turns out to be his mother. The heterosexual nature of Oedipus's story results in Freud's theory of an oedipal complex to also be read as strictly heterosexual. Many scholars perpetuate this myopic understanding of Freud's theory. For example, theatre scholar Barbara Freedman, in her essay, "Frame Up: Feminism, Psychoanalysis, Theatre," perpetuates this misunderstanding when she defines the oedipal period as a time in which, "the male child's fantasies of being with his mother sexually are accompanied by fears of castration for such desires" (59). But Freud wrote that both boys and girls have a sexual fixation with their mothers that must

be overcome in order for the child to attain a "healthy" sexual identity.[2]

Because Freud saw infantile sexuality develop as a result of an infant's early sexual excitement at the hands of its mother, Freud had to accept that women must experience an "original bisexuality." Freud believed that in order for a young girl to overcome her oedipal phase, she had to overcome the sexual excitement caused by the physical touch provided by her mother in caretaking (Basic Writings 576-581). Mainstream theatergoers throughout history have often watched as male characters have worked through their oedipal phases, but rarely are the same phases experienced by females on stage. Lesbian theatre changes this long-standing tradition and often attempts to create a new understanding of a woman's psychosexual development in heretofore unfamiliar ways, as I will soon demonstrate.

The complicated nature of relationships between mothers and daughters often provide fodder for many woman-

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[2] In an attempt to address Freud's "feminine Oedipal complex" more precisely, Carl Jung coined the term Electra complex to describe the desire of a girl to kill her mother in order to have her father to herself. But because Jung's treatment of the Electra complex removes Freud's notion of a woman's original bisexuality, I believe it is not a suitable replacement for Freud's female oedipal theories and therefore I have chosen not to explore it in this project.

centered narratives, and lesbian narratives are no different. In lesbian narratives, however, the sexual identity of the women involved in the mother/daughter relationship often sexualizes an otherwise traditionally asexual pairing. Lesbian themed plays that explore the mother/daughter relationship often focus on either the lesbian daughter in relation to her straight mother, or the lesbian mother in relation to her straight child. Either way, at least one member of this mother/daughter dyad is forced to see the other through a sexualized lens. Not surprisingly, this sexualization results in scenarios that have traditionally been left unspoken and are thereby highly unfamiliar to mainstream audiences who have managed to keep mother/daughter relationships comfortably desexualized.

Because a lesbian is defined by her non-normative sexuality, she is often unavoidably sexualized even if she is a maternal figure who would otherwise be desexualized in a heterosexual context — the desexualized maternal figure itself is a problem for many feminist critics.[3] By

[3] In fact, Sue-Ellen Case criticizes Bertolt Brecht in her essay, "Brecht and Women: Homosexuality and the Mother," in which she charges that in Brecht's plays: "the mothers are defined by their mothering roles and have no sexual definition" (as qtd in Herrmann 307).

sexualizing a maternal figure, whenever lesbianism collides with parenting in dramatic literature, the lesbian mother's relationship with her child is often represented in a slightly skewed oedipal construction. In Susan Miller's Obie award winning Nasty Rumors and Final Remarks (1990), the relationship between Raleigh, the bisexual protagonist and her heterosexual teenage son, T.K., becomes oedipal-like with a slight variance. As Raleigh lies in a coma after suffering a cerebral hemorrhage, T.K. visits his mother in a sort of surreal flashback scene:

> T.K.: I call you. The machine answers. I write you letters—
>
> RALEIGH: Love letters, T.K., for god sakes, they're love letters!
>
> T.K.: I want to be a part of your life.
>
> RALEIGH: You want to play in it. Roll around in what you think is the exotic dirt of it. Listen to me, T.K., I'd love to have your affection, but we are not going to be lovers . . . this romance you have with me on paper does not make up for the war that goes on whenever we actually come together.

> T.K.: You are so cold . . . I'd like to take a razor blade and cut you. [. . .] Dear Raleigh . . . now that you're someone else, I can tell you. How it makes me hard. How it makes me bonehard. Your men and your women and what you do with them . . . Listen, I dedicated my first real, recognizable erection to you . . . I always think of you whenever it comes up again . . . (Turning back to his mother again, he screams:) You dyke! (Beat) I just want to be in your life. (297)

In this exchange, we see the son exhibit traditional oedipal notions about his mother, but because of Raleigh's nontraditional sexuality and gender expression, we see T.K. conflate the position of the father with Raleigh's sexualized mother role. T.K., at once, wants to sleep with and murder his own mother. T.K. has no one onto whom he can express his paternal oedipal anger. When in the hospital room with his comatose mother and her friends, T.K. declares: "You all fucked her. I'm in a room with my mother's fuckers. We had only a hugging relationship, Raleigh and I. Did you ever meet my father? I'm supposed to look like him" (Miller 287).

In "Three Contributions to the Theory of Sex," Freud traces a human's psychosocial sexual development from infancy to adulthood. Freud claims that the interaction between a child and its mother is:

> . . . an inexhaustible source of sexual excitation and gratification of erogenous zones, especially since the parents — as a rule, the mother —supplies the child with feelings which originate from her own sexual life; she pats him, kisses him, and rocks him, plainly taking him as a substitute for a perfectly valid sexual object. (Basic Writings 583)

But through T.K. and Raleigh's relationship, lesbian playwright, Susan Miller, seems to intentionally disrupt Freudian narratives. T.K.'s declaration that he "had only a hugging relationship" with his mother could suggest initially that Raleigh never truly took her infant son as a valid sexual object and therein T.K. grew obsessed with gratifying an unfulfilled sexual instinct as a result. However, for Freud, excessive maternal tenderness corrupts, leaving a child to want more: "One of the surest premonitions of later nervousness is when a child shows itself insatiable in its demands for parental tenderness"

(Basic Writings 583). Complicating how we are supposed to read Raleigh is the fact that she also has a daughter who is so estranged from her mother she never makes an appearance in the play, leaving only the reader to determine how Raleigh's bisexuality has played some role in the starkly different responses her son and daughter have towards her. Evidence that the reader is supposed to consider the mother/child relationships in this psychoanalytical vein comes from Raleigh's own comment to her best friend Fran: "And your daughter could easily become a psychoanalyst. She'll diagnose our city sleep and chew her fingernails the way her mother does;" nail-biting, in this instance, serves as a stand-in for the oral-fixation that arises from the exact maladaptive conditions described in Freud's "nursing period" described above (Basic Writings 293).

The relationships between lesbian daughters and their straight mothers provide lesbian plays with an interesting twist on the traditional oedipal narrative as well. In several lesbian plays, a transgressive oedipal narrative emerges in which the lesbian daughter battles a resistant mother while her father is noticeably absent, creating a reconfigured oedipal narrative in which the female child

successfully removes her father and engages in a close physical (often violent) relationship with her mother. Gayle Austin writes:

> While plays in which fathers and sons fight and are then in some way reconciled or separated by death serve to ease oedipal tensions the son (playwright and audience member) may feel, the dramatizing of unresolved (and possibly unresolvable) preoedipal tensions between daughter and mother may be too painful, or too profoundly repressed, to be shown by the daughter. (67)

However, in the hands of lesbian playwrights, these preoedipal tensions take center stage in the relationships between lesbian daughters and heterosexual mothers.

In Jane Chambers's Quintessential Image (1985), talk show host, Margaret Voy, attributes the lesbian Lacey Lanier's successful career in photography to being rejected by her mother: "The fantasy of the rejected child. I find it interesting that the seed of creativity is so often planted in the soil of rejection" (Quintessential 12). Indeed, throughout the play, Lacey repeats how much of a disappointment she has been to her own mother. We even hear

of violence between Lacey and her mother when she says: "When I told Mama it was my ambition to marry Belinda Adams, she knocked me clear across the room . . . I told my Mama the truth and she hit me. It was the last time I did that, I can tell you" (Quintessential 13). Because Lacey's mother left her father when Lacey was just a baby, Lacey's oedipal anger towards her father never manifests itself and Lacey instead, subjects herself to a life-long "intimate" relationship with her mother. At 60 years of age, Lacey claims, "I stayed some other places most my life, but I always lived with Mama" (Quintessential 10). And so, although the intimacy shared between Lacey and her mother is not sexual, nor even necessarily deeply emotional, their unhealthy dependence on one another acts as a substitute for a love-object type relationship seen in oedipal constructions.

When the lesbian Bronwen comes home for Christmas with her new girlfriend in Sarah Dreher's Ruby Christmas (1982), Bronwen's mother Harriet does not approve. Bronwen's father remains off-stage for the entire play watching his betamax. Although he is a living character in the world of the play, he never physically appears onstage, and we learn that he's always been emotionally absent from Bronwen's life. After a

particularly brutal argument, Bronwen leaves the house and Harriet tells her friends: "Frank won't miss her. I'll tell him she's queer and he'll write her off. Sibleys don't give birth to queers" (Dreher Ruby 189). Figuratively, Bronwen's lesbianism has the power to effectively sever ties with her father. And as Bronwen continues to live her life openly, we know it is only a matter of time before the revelation of her sexuality kills this father/daughter relationship.

In addition to a "dead" paternal relationship, Bronwen has historically been very close to her mother. Bronwen tells us early in the play her brother Tom "was my father's son. I was my mother's daughter" (Dreher Ruby 160). In the final moments of the play, Harriet looks back at her decision to marry Frank and claims: "All it cost me was Bronwen. I did love her, you know. I still do" (Dreher Ruby 189). Despite Harriet's anger over Bronwen's sexuality and the fight that leaves her alone at the end of the play, there is a strong sense that Bronwen and Harriet will resolve their differences. In other words, their relationship doesn't die under the pressure of their conflict. The strength of their relationship is due to a reworking of the oedipal construction, in which both women

must balance their love for each other with the looming presence/absence of a strong father figure.

Female Homosexuality

In the first part of Freud's "Contributions to the Theory of Sex," entitled, "The Sexual Aberrations," Freud outlines the classifications and causes for sexual "inversion" or homosexuality. He grapples with the question of whether inversion is congenital or acquired. He provides three "facts" that support his opinion that homosexuality is acquired: 1) homosexuals experience an "early affective sexual impression" that led to their homosexuality; 2) external events that inhibit natural interactions with the opposite sex such as detention in prison, companionship in war, etc., can lead to inversion; and 3) hypnosis has been shown to remove homosexuality (Basic Writings 524-5). Freud explains how inversion happens:

> Although psychoanalysis has not yet given us a full explanation for the origin of inversion, it has revealed the psychic mechanism of its genesis and has essentially enriched the problems in question. In all cases examined we have ascertained that the later inverts go through in their childhood a phase of very intense but

> short-lived fixation on the woman (usually the mother) and after overcoming it, they identify themselves with the woman and take themselves as the sexual object. (Basic Writings 528)

For Freud, taking oneself as a sexual object means the invert seeks their own resemblance in persons whom they wish to love as their mother has loved them (Basic Writings 528). And while this explanation for homosexuality may seem far-fetched to modern sensibilities and more recent psychoanalytical theories, heterosexuality's hegemonic myth echoes this sentiment by romanticizing the sacrifice of narcissistic quests for personal attraction in order to pursue the selfless duty of creating a family and contributing to society at large – the homosexual is ruled entirely by emotional and physical desires as a result of some narcissistic event. On the other hand, heteronormative misunderstandings of how human sexuality develop often believe heterosexuals are selfless in their pursuit of their sexual objects because they overcame their own selfish needs and now in their love selections will

contribute to society through the formations of new families.[4]

Although lesbian playwrights may completely reject this characterization of homosexuality, Freudian sentiment seems to be so deeply entrenched in collective understanding of sexual development that the relationships between mothers and daughters that appear in lesbian plays often seem to depict the exact conditions described above. Many times, lesbian plays depict clear "early affective sexual impressions" that could easily be read as the cause of homosexuality for the play's lesbian characters. Certainly, throughout many lesbian plays, an undercurrent of odd mother-daughter relationships defy our heteronormative images of a typical mother-daughter relationship, inevitably provoking an uncanny valley response and more often than not, drawing attention to the uncanny moment.

In Jane Chambers's Quintessential Image, lesbian character Lacey Lanier's relationship with her mother is never depicted on-stage, but we see the full effects of the

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[4] Evidence of this enculturated idea of selfishness and narcissism on the part of the homosexual can be traced throughout the many anti-gay political organizations that use the word "family" in their organizations. The implication is clear. Homosexuals never moved past their narcissistic need for love and that particular dysfunction is a threat to the social institution of the family.

relationship on Lacey. Quintessential Image is the story of Lacey, an eccentric, 60-year-old renowned photographer, as she is interviewed on the fictional 'Margaret Foy Show.' This is Lacey's first interview because she worried about what an interview would do to her relationship with her mother. Margaret asks, "You mean you never granted an interview in your whole career because you were protecting your mother's privacy?" (10). Lacey responds, "No, I was protecting me from Mama. I learned early the last thing any mama wants from you is honesty" (10). This exchange establishes the controlling, domineering mother who causes Lacey to claim: "I never did a thing in my life that pleased Mama. I was born too big for one thing. She was looking for a baby doll . . . I never was exactly what my mother had in mind" (10).

Lacey's feelings of inadequacy seem to contradict Freud's notion that inversion results from seeking a person like oneself because "oneself" is who the mother loved so much. But when Lacey explains how her interest in photography developed out of an obsessive need to photograph a female classmate named Belinda, she claims: "Mama was always saying how Belinda was just the perfect little girl, tried to finger curl my hair to look like her.

I couldn't be like Belinda no matter how Mama wished it, so instead I took to the idea of marrying Belinda, instead" (12). In this passage, we see the Freudian early affective sexual impression in Lacey's attraction to Belinda, the girl whom she wishes to love as her mother has loved. From this very early moment in the play — occurring around the two to three minute mark — we read all of Lacey's relationships as a stand-in for her mother's love, provoking an uncanny valley response because we traditionally accept that a mother has an influence on her son's mate selection, but we "blame" Lacey's lesbianism on her mother, so now her mother's influence on her mate selection is considered problematic.

In addition to his belief that a narcissistic event involving the mother results in inversion, Freud also believed that "the disappearance of a strong father in childhood not infrequently favors inversion" (Basic Writings 529). Throughout my research, I had great difficulty finding lesbian plays in which strong father figures made an appearance onstage — with the noted exception of plays written by heterosexual males early in the twentieth century. For the large majority of lesbian plays I studied, if a father was evoked at all, he was

notably in absentia. In Chambers's Quintessential Image, Lacey tells us, "Mama doesn't have too much use for men. My daddy drank too much, I guess. Mama ran him off when I waddn't but a baby" (13).

In A Lady and a Woman, Miss Flora tells Biddie, "Not many people know I'm a childless mother. I keeps my body hid; I had that child when I was eleven. Midwife says the cord rang his neck 'cause I was young and the moon was over full" (Holmes 191). Biddie asks who fathered the child:

> MISS FLORA: My father.
>
> BIDDIE: Your father or your mother's husband?
>
> MISS FLORA: My mother's third husband. They locked me away in my auntie's house for almost a year . . . I never know to this day why momma believe him over me; I was telling the truth . . . I was talking the truth, but she beat me and sent me away That baby boy was cursed with his daddy's face, they buried him out back at my auntie's . . . I don't want to hold no more dead babies. (Holmes 191)

In this passage, we see the victimization of Miss Flora as two-fold: as an explanation as to why she doesn't want to marry and have children, and as an explanation for her

troubled relationship with her femininity. In this instance, Miss Flora's mother favored her third husband over her daughter which, in Freudian terms, could account for why Miss Flora is attracted to the female masculinity evident in Biddie, who Miss Flora tells, "You ain't no man inside . . . Don't live beneath your privilege trying to be no man" (Holmes 190). Miss Flora seeks a figure like the one her mother has loved, but having been ultimately rejected by her mother, Miss Flora in turn rejects the archetypal mother role.

Ultimately, lesbian theatre holds no monopoly on reinventing Freudian narratives. The unstable nature of Freud's work makes adaptation of his theories almost inevitable. Barbara Freedman attributes the popularity of rereading Freud to the multiple contradictions that weave themselves throughout his work:

> We now acknowledge, for example, a Freud who represses the idea of repression, who wishes away threats to his theories of wish fulfillment, who refuses to give up the search for primal scenes which he elsewhere acknowledges exist only at the level of fantasized reconstruction, and who

> denies the bisexuality and gender instability he elsewhere theorizes with conviction. (63)

These contradictions create unique spaces in which the representation of lived lesbian experiences become impossible to theorize singularly, but instead, require a rich, nuanced understanding of the intersections between biology and social constructionism.

The "pop psychology" understanding of how homo-sexuality manifests itself goes unchallenged by sanitizing complicated familial relationships whenever they offend heteronormative sensibilities. In this way, lesbian plays hold the potential to deepen our understanding of foundational theoretical lenses as well as spotlight just how difficult heteronormativity is to expel from our fundamental understanding of human sexuality. Only when we see how normative sexuality entrenches itself in the minds of people who identify themselves by non-normative sexualities can we begin to understand the role familial taboos play in the process of developing a sexual identity. Additionally, the taboo of incest, a frequent guest star in lesbian plays, can offer insight into how sexual trauma for lesbian characters plays a far more crucial role in understanding the development of their identity as women

than it does in the development of their identity as a lesbian.

Incest

While some lesbian plays manifest outmoded psychoanalytical explanations for female homosexuality, several lesbian plays take parent-child relationships to the extreme of sexual taboos: incest. In describing Gloria Joyce Dickler's play The Postcard (1994), drama therapist, Bobbi Ausubel writes, "Dickler bravely explores sexual molestation by mothers, a topic rarely discussed . . . The mothers of Sheldon and Helen Elaina both seek sexual comfort from their children as a way of managing or escaping terror" (39). The play to which Ausubel refers is a story set in the 1990s of a Jewish lesbian couple, Ruth and Shell, who stumble upon a postcard featuring two children in a 1940s Warsaw ghetto. Through a series of surreal journeys into the lives of the two children, Sheldon and Helen Elaina, the women grow to better understand previously unexamined aspects of their own relationship. Because Ruth is a writer and Shell is a psychotherapist, it is not much of a stretch to read the dreamlike narratives of the children as actual psychic projections emanating from both women, especially

considering Shell and Sheldon, the small boy from the postcard, not only share a similar name, but also share a similar temperament.

Both children in the postcard are sexually abused by their mothers. Ruth and Shell's response to the revelation of molestation is understandably strong. Ruth exclaims:

> The girl is being molested by her mother. I don't know for sure but she sleeps with her, sleeps under her and she doesn't want to. It's so awful, Shelley. She's more and more desperate . . . she hates her and loves her . . . she can't leave and I hate her for not being able to leave. (77)

Ruth's comment that the young girl both hates and loves her mother reflects Freud's idea that "nonsexual love for parents and sexual love are nourished from the same source" (Basic Writings 586). In Ruth's mind, the young girl hates her mother for molesting her, but loves her mother for the nurturing and protection she provides. Shortly after this discovery, Ruth admits: "the girl's mother is my mother" (78). Besides Shell's profession as a psychoanalyst, evidence that a psychoanalytical reading of the plays incestuous relationships is appropriate comes from Ruth detailing Helena Elaina's attempts to "cure" her mother:

> . . . she's studying so she can cure her mother. That afternoon she reads Freud's Civilization and Its Discontents. One sentence stays with her as she walks home. 'Man's judgments of value are an attempt to support his illusions with argument.' . . . That night, the girl lies in bed dreading her mother's coming in. The girl and her mother have slept together always. (Dickler 78)

For both Ruth and Helena Elaina, there is great comfort in knowing judgments are meant to support illusions (we later discover that Ruth has underlined this quote three times in her own copy of the text). Freud's underlying dread of the female subject, the dread of the female invert, and the loving affectionate nature of the mother and daughter relationship presents an illusory reality for Ruth and Helena Elaina — one that up until the moment they converge had been an unnecessary source of shame. Depicting incest as a catalyst for empowerment, the playwright, Dickler, successfully mitigates Freudian-like female dread.

Another great example of incest being explored as a means of mitigating fear comes from Sarah Dreher's play 8X10 Glossy (1984). The butch lesbian Carter returns home on the anniversary of her father's death and in an

emotionally wrought scene, we learn that Carter's father had a long history of physically and emotionally abusing her and her mother. For Carter and her sister Julie, lifelong exposure to violence upon women have produced in them a fear of relationships and a fear of that which goes along with being a woman in a man's world. After an emotionally charged scene, the sister's share a kiss that the stage directions tell us: "It isn't a sisterly kiss" (88). The kiss between the sisters is clearly an attempt to mitigate violent feelings with feelings of tenderness and love. In fact, Carter's response to her sister shame over the kiss is: "Jem, in a world full of hate, don't be ashamed of love" (88). This desire for a mitigating affection echoes Freud's theory that:

> Girls with an excessive need for affection and an equal horror for the real demands of the sexual life experience an uncontrollable temptation, on the other hand, to realize in life the ideal of a sexual love, and, on the other hand, to conceal their libido under an affection which they may manifest without self reproach; this they do by clinging for life to that infantile attraction for their parents or brothers or sisters, which

has been repressed in puberty. (Basic Writings 586)

Carter's relationship with her sister stems from a world in which the demands of a woman's social roles overpower her own personal sexual fulfillment. Through their attraction to each other, they are able to alleviate some of the dread associated with desexualized feminine roles and instead express a sexual desire within the confines of a relationship they both deem safe.

While some instances of incest seem to mitigate female dread, some seem to also perpetuate the Freudian belief that incest can be an early affective sexual impression that turns lesbians away from men. The classic argument that homosexuality is a result of some sort of trauma emerges in these instances. However, in many of these plays, a strong sense of what it means to be woman also emerges, leaving us to witness how women bond together over sexual trauma, regardless of their sexual orientation, because sexual abuse doesn't take into account the sexual orientation of the victim. In Caitlin C. Cain's one act play, "Thru These Glasses We've Seen Ourselves Each Other a Looking Glass" (1990), the main character Annie routinely discusses openly the sexual abuse she's suffered at the

hands of her father. In a pivotal moment, she confronts Tamara with whom she has a burgeoning relationship about her lack of understanding:

> ANNIE: Poems don't talk back . . . characters don't leave and daddy never fucks you in your stories . . . daddy is nice and gentle and comes home from work and mommy and you have dinner . . . and daddy doesn't give you presents all the time . . . tell you to keep secrets . . . call you his favorite girl . . . my stories don't have daddies—
>
> TAMARA: —hey, Annie . . . I know . . .
>
> ANNIE: . . . your mom's a Dyke . . . you never knew your dad—
>
> TAMARA: —but I know all about him . . . all about them . . .
>
> ANNIE: —your father never fucked you—
>
> TAMARA: No he didn't . . . he raped my mother and he raped her mother . . . and they killed him. (63)

Tamara and Annie's relationship benefits from the empathy they are now able to openly share with each other. The trauma of their lives becomes less about victimization and

more about empowerment. It transcends their sexual orientation.

For many lesbian plays with feminist undertones, sexual abuse becomes a marker of female identity. It provokes an uncanny valley response primarily through its taboo nature—we are all familiar with stories that these abuses occur, but the veil of silence that surrounds sexual abuse makes discussions about them feel unfamiliar. As a source of bonding, female sexual abuse transcends gender and sexuality distinctions, but serves as a reminder of deeply entrenched ideologies about the nature of female sexuality. In this way, incest moves beyond its Freudian use and returns us to a Brechtian mode of dramaturgy that aims to incite spectators into social action. But until we are more familiar with the ways in which lesbian plays reinvent familial sexual taboo narratives, we are limited in understanding the potential that lesbian plays offer in terms of a more comprehensive understanding of human sexuality in a diverse modern society.

CHAPTER FOUR

THE RHETORIC OF THE UNCANNY VALLEY

Although productions of lesbian plays are relatively uncommon, when a lesbian play is staged, how audiences respond to its performance can offer insight into the uncanny valley at work. Reviews of lesbian plays by reviewers both gay and straight often reveal moments of spectatorship in which the spectator experiences something uncanny, but, even for lesbian reviewers of lesbian plays, this uncanny valley response is not always readily recognizable. Many times, because lesbian plays are performed within a heteronormative space and crafted in ways meant to transcend solely lesbian spectatorship, a lesbian viewer can also experience an uncanny valley response if she views a representation of lesbianism that is simultaneously familiar and unfamiliar because of the heteronormative changes to otherwise queer aspects within the play. In this chapter, I contend that the uncanny valley response appears in the reviews of lesbian plays by both lesbian and non-lesbian reviewers. By failing to understand how this response works, these reviews of lesbian plays often help perpetuate the distance between

lesbian theatre and mainstream audiences, and suggest why lesbian theatre has not created a popular audience.

One of the most heated debates regarding lesbian dramatic representation occurred when lesbian-feminist critic Sue-Ellen Case criticized the 1989 Split Britches production of Holly Hughes's Dress Suits to Hire performed at the University of Michigan. Following the performance, Case and Hughes exchanged a couple of angry letters in the pages of The Drama Review (TDR). Case accused Hughes's play of being too accessible to a straight audience. Case describes the audience on the night she saw the play:

> I was sitting at the back of the house, quite far from the production . . . looking through a large number of students who were either on dates, or at least appeared to be sitting in gendered pairs . . . Although there seemed to be some lesbians in the audience and some others who, I am certain, responded to the camp irony and other ghetto techniques, I wondered what some young male students saw when Weaver and Shaw came on in feathered boas, high heels, and garter belts. (Case and Hughes 11)

Case is concerned that Dress Suits doesn't grow out a lesbian or feminist tradition of writing and that instead, the play uses Sam Shepard styled elements, making the play more accessible to heterocentric audiences than it would have been if penned in traditional feminist/lesbian writing (Case and Hughes 11). Case asks of the men in the audience that night:

> What was the men's frame of reference . . . That is, if the writing chooses not to mark itself by the lesbian tradition, with lesbian code words and the subculture, doesn't its proximity to the heterosexist tropes of Shepard make it available to the young male within his own frame of reference? (Case and Hughes 12)

Ultimately, Case confesses, "I was dismayed at the glee of the audience, who seemed challenged by nothing and entertained by much" (Case and Hughes 12).

Hughes's response to Case highlights the fundamental problem with defining a singular and "proper" lesbian writing aesthetic: which lesbians get to define this aesthetic? Hughes sees Case's attack on her work as an attack on her identity: "And then the really bad news. I'm not a lesbian, I don't meet the entrance requirements as

established by Sue-Ellen Case. What a shock to my girlfriend. And what a way to get the news—from the highest authority on true Orthodox Lesbianism, Ms. Case" (Case and Hughes 14). Hughes responds with a similar attack on Case's identity: "Ms. Case, you know what it's like to get kicked out of the lesbian clubhouse. Didn't you identify yourself as a butch? But my dear Ms. Case. Ten years ago that was taboo in the clubhouse, remember? Back then it was: 'Knock-knock, who's there? Androgyny!' Remember?" (Case and Hughes 16). Hughes defends her accessibility to heterosexual audiences by writing, "Even if the godless heterosexuals came in accursed gender pairs, like animals loading into the ark, I was compassionate and let them in" (Case and Hughes 16).

The Case/Hughes debate pertains to the discussion of the uncanny valley in a few important ways. First is Case's own uncanny valley response to the performance. As a lesbian feminist critic, Case has studied lesbian theatre within the confines of the academy. In her letter to TDR, she writes that it was "feminist night" at the University of Michigan the night she saw the play but that "no women faculty members were prominent," and that she and Elin Diamond "were escorted and introduced by men, etc." (Case

and Hughes 12). She asks: "how could 'lesbian' appear in this context and what did it mean?" (Case and Hughes 12). Because Case expected a certain type of audience — a lesbian/feminist audience—when confronted with a seemingly mainstream academic audience instead, she feared "institutional cooptation" (Case and Hughes 12). She claims, "I did not really expect to see their [Split Britches'] disruptive strategies in tension with the reception of them. Tardily, I became aware of the contradictions there in my own institutional affiliations, as well as that of the performance" (Case and Hughes 12). Two different contradictions are at play here. First, the contradictions in the performance in which lesbian themes are defined by heterosexual tropes of desire, and second, the contradictions in Case's institutional affiliations—lesbian feminist scholar in a male dominated "feminist" space. This combination created two uncanny moments: the familiar lesbian representation becoming unfamiliar when juxtaposed with heterosexual tropes of desire, at the same time that the familiar academic discourse community was responding "gleefully" to something that, in her opinion, should have been disruptive to them. The result is an uncanny valley response in which Case responds negatively

to the performance, blaming the playwright for not being disruptive enough, in order to increase her own familiarity with the subject matter while decreasing the familiarity for certain others.

The second way this debate pertains to the uncanny valley discussion returns to the argument surrounding lesbian realist narratives and lesbian performance pieces. As stated previously, some lesbian theatre critics reject the practice of depicting lesbian themes in the context of the heteronormatively defined genre of realism. I have argued, however, that in actuality, lesbian performance pieces disrupt heteronormative audiences *less* than realist lesbian narrative plays do. The audience to which Case refers in her letter assimilated the disruptive strategies, leaving the audience entertained and undisturbed. The experimental nature of Dress Suits disrupted so much and provided so little realism that its audience was able to revel in the unfamiliarity without anything too familiar arising to provoke an uncanny valley response. Even though Case refers to the Sam Shepard styled elements as frames of reference for the men in the audience, Shepard's plays have never enjoyed great commercial success. As The Bedford Introduction to Drama says of Shepard: "Shepard, important

as he is, has not found a popular commercial audience for his plays. At root, his work is always experimental" (Jacobus 1240). So while Case is right to think that the Shepard-like elements are partly to blame for the audience's gleeful acceptance of the production, it was not because those elements were inviting to men, but rather because those experimental elements only added more distance between the audience and the threat of lesbian similarity.

Further supporting the claim that lesbian performance pieces may not disrupt as much as some lesbian feminists hope is Case's assertion that "Jane Chambers's plays are lesbian even when awkwardly played by hets and watched by them. Why? Because their language, their issues, their character types, their narratives are drawn from the subculture and refer back to it" (Case and Hughes 13). But, Jane Chambers's plays are undeniably realist narratives, featuring little to no camp elements or overtly subversive elements. So, by revisiting Case's argument against the use

of realism,[5] we can see that it is not always detrimental to a lesbian "aesthetic" to present lesbian themes in realist drama. After all, the seduction of Jane Chambers's scenes, according to Case, actually resides in how well the play preserves lesbian realism.

The Hughes/Case clash demonstrates the futility in attempting to define what is appropriately "lesbian." In response to the Hughes/Case clash, theatre scholar, Lynda Hart, writes in her essay, "Identity and Seduction: Lesbians in the Mainstream:"

> What Eve Sedgwick has called the 'epistemological privilege of unknowing' . . . is bound to be powerfully operative in a performative context that moves outside the subcultural security where groups like Split Britches have hitherto performed. While I agree with Case that some texts, like the plays of Jane Chambers, manage to remain "lesbian" whenever and wherever they are performed, I also find that Chambers's plays are

[5] Case argues "realism makes the spectator see things its way, it represses her own ability to free associate within a situation and reduces the resonances of events to its own limited technical dimensions. Thus, the seduction of the scene is repressed by the authoritarian claim to realistic representation" ("Toward" 305). See Chapter One for further discussion.

> not engaged in deconstructive analysis of gender or sexual identities. (133-4)

It is unclear what Hart means by "remaining 'lesbian.'" At the same time, it is clear that Hart is shortsighted in not seeing how Chambers's plays engage in a deconstructive analysis of gender and sexuality. By tracing the uncanny valley response that runs through the reviews of the performances of Chambers's plays and other realist narrative plays, it seems apparent that the reviewers, at least, must have encountered some deconstructed gender and sexuality analysis, as many of their reviews seem to be obvious attempts to reconstruct normative gender and sexual identities prompted by the performance of Chambers's plays.

In his 2007 review of a local production of Jane Chamber's "Last Summer at Bluefish Cove," Albuquerque Journal writer Barry Gaines seems to reconstruct his normative frame of reference when he concludes his review with: "This is much more than a 'lesbian play.'" Gaines's statement is an uncanny valley response. Gaines perhaps intended the line to be flattering, but he implies that a 'lesbian play' is presumably much less than a non-lesbian play. Gaines tries to convince his readers that they can rest assured that this play will not be too unfamiliar to

them—that there is something normatively familiar about this play. However, the fact that Gaines feels compelled to present his readers with this line suggests that he still read the play as inherently non-normative and unfamiliar.

This kind of re-establishing heteronormativity indicates an uncanny valley response because it demonstrates how a viewer tries to mitigate the unfamiliar by reaffirming the familiar. In a summary for a newly released lesbian play in Los Angeles, Goldstar.com wrote of Diana Son's Stop Kiss: "After Carrie meets Sara, the two unexpectedly fall in love. Their first kiss provokes a violent attack that transforms their lives. Stop Kiss transcends the specifics of gay romance to embrace broad themes of love, commitment, and personal identity" ("An Unexpected Kiss"). Goldstar's editorial staff, the author(s) of this summary, must highlight the familiar heteronormative aspects of the play and downplay the unfamiliar non-normative aspects, presumably to counter their own uncanny valley response. Because the author(s) believe Stop Kiss "transcends" the specifics of gay romance; it can then transcend the unfamiliar specifics of gay romance, and focus on the "broad[er]" themes of heteronormative love, commitment, and personal identity.

By not considering how the uncanny valley response works, these reviews of lesbian plays could potentially be reduced to nothing more than homophobic responses. Lynda Hart makes this suggestion when she discusses Gerald Weales's Commonweal review of Shaw and Weaver's Anniversary Waltz:

> He was only 'mildly interested' in the romance plot of the performance, not because the story was lesbian, he hastens to remind us, but because he simply has little taste for other people's sex lives in general. . . Nonetheless, his reminder that his distaste for the performance has nothing to do with the 'butch-femme relationship' would certainly sound like a gratuitous defense if he were reviewing a play about heterosexual romance. (131)

For Hart, anytime a reviewer highlights the non-heteronormative nature of a play, the reviewer's "rhetoric betrays what can indeed be read as homophobic responses. . . the heterosexualizing rhetoric exceeds itself by evoking precisely that which it desires to erase: same-sex desire" (132). But as Hart describes how reviewers who assume heterosexuality as normative universalize performances and

produce homophobic responses (131), she fails to recognize that some of these responses stem from an uncanny valley response in which the "fear" (in the Freudian sense of frighteningly unfamiliar) of homosexual performance is equally matched with a sense of familiarity or affinity.

Not all reviews of lesbian plays in which the reviewer isolates lesbian difference indicate an uncanny valley response. Some are indeed homophobic. The difference between the two resides in whether the reviewer tries to mitigate the unfamiliar, or whether the reviewer disavows the unfamiliar altogether. Take for example, Jenny Sandman, reviewer for the online theatre review website Curtainip.com. In two reviews for two different lesbian plays, Sandman's responses do not attempt to mitigate the unfamiliar at all; instead they reveal a negative opinion of lesbian subjectivity. In her review of The Beebo Brinker Chronicles, she writes: "Leigh Silverman's direction keeps the action tight, centering the audience's attention on the intricate relationships between the characters rather than on the lesbian shock value" ("The Beebo Brinker"). In this review, Sandman suggests that if there was anything more "lesbian" about the relationships in the play, it would be gratuitously shocking. Because the relationships had no

"lesbian shock value," it is reasonable to assume that the lesbian performances in the play were not non-normative enough to provoke a sense of unfamiliarity. Hence, there is no uncanny valley response, but rather an arguably homophobic one.

Sandman repeats this kind of response in a review of The Penetration Play. She writes: "While watching unrequited lesbian love may not be everyone's cup of tea, there is nothing to offend even conservative viewers. Love, no matter who's involved, is never easy—more so when it never had a chance in the first place" ("The Penetration Play"). Again, it is reasonable to assume that if the lesbian love in the play was unrequited, graphic depictions of lesbian sex were probably not present, and the fact that there was nothing to "offend conservative viewers" can reasonably be read as the play remained fairly heteronormative. And so, because it seems as though there was nothing in the play to produce an uncanny valley response, Sandman's response suggests the desire to universalize the relationship in the play by claiming "Love, no matter who's involved, is never easy." Hart writes: "universalizing, or 'heterosexualizing' lesbian performers is also an act of intimate violence" (129).

Sandman's review differs from Gaines's "much more than a lesbian play" statement because although Gaines brings the play back into a normative heterosexual framework, he doesn't negate lesbian presence altogether. Unlike the reviews in which the reviewer mitigates the unfamiliar by relating it to the familiar, reviews like Sandman's demonstrate the refusal to even recognize the unfamiliar. Ultimately, these reviews suggest that Sandman is grateful that the plays did not evoke any uncanny feelings in her at all.

Interestingly, when Los Angeles theatre critic Harvey Perr reviewed The Beebo Brinker Chronicles, his review was not as flattering as Sandman's and it highlighted the "non-normative" much more, but Perr's review doesn't read as homophobic or as evidence of an uncanny valley response. He writes:

> But what really keeps this play from coming to life is its source material. Ann Bannon may be a cultural icon for lesbians, but it is time to move on, to look for fresh truths about and insights into the powerful, complex, fascinating world of gay women (as well as their relationship

with the rest of us) in today's world. ("Pulp Friction")

In this review, Perr validates lesbian difference without minimizing it. He criticizes the unoriginal rendering of lesbian experience that comes from a 1950's pulp fiction novel adapted for the stage. For Jenny Sandman, The Beebo Brinker Chronicles was good because it didn't "shock" us with any "fresh truths" about the worlds of gay women. For Harvey Perr, Beebo Brinker disappointed precisely because it was *too* familiar. Perr has presumably seen enough lesbian performances to sense when something feels unoriginal, suggesting that his familiarity with the lesbian onstage no longer provokes an uncanny valley response. Instead, it does quite the opposite: it helps him see lesbian difference as unique but not troubling, and thereby celebrates the value of lesbian representation on stage. Perr's familiarity with lesbian representation on stage leads him to hold the depictions of lesbian lives to the same standard he holds the depictions of all human lives: show the audience something they do not already know. A demand for portrayals of lesbian subjectivity that is nuanced and rich, and not just stock depictions for the sake of a common identification is exactly what we stand to

gain from the heightened exposure of lesbian plays to the general mainstream audience.

In the 2007 article, "Trippingly on the Tongue: From 'The Children's Hour' to 'Pulp,' One Critic's Look at Lesbians on Stage," lesbian theatre reviewer Venus Zarris writes:

> Even in theater, one of most liberal of settings, lesbians have been, by in large, OFF LIMITS. For the last five years, I have covered live theater in Chicago. I have seen hundreds of plays, representing a substantial chunk of the work produced here. . . Unfortunately, of those hundreds of productions, only about twenty have depicted lesbians in a way that was worthy of mention. Of those twenty only about ten have presented lesbians as the primary characters in the story. I estimate it to be less than 1%! Even with Ellen, Rosie, Melissa Ethridge [sic], the <u>L Word</u> and films such as <u>Boys Don't Cry</u> and <u>Notes on a Scandal</u>, we are still the most unmentionable of the unmentionables. Our visibility in mainstream culture has never been more pronounced

> and yet we are still a group that primarily exists in the background.

Two years later, in 2009, Zarris added this post-script to the online text of the article:

> Since the writing of this feature I have seen a few hundred more plays and there's only been about ten that have had any lesbian content. It has ranged from being a main theme to a small subplot. The quality of these plays has ranged from ZERO to 4 STARS. Most have depicted lesbians as crazy, unstable or unrequitedly sad and although a few have been more favorable.

The increase in lesbian visibility in theatre productions does not keep pace with the increase in visibility occurring in other forms of popular culture mediums. I have argued throughout this project that it is the close proximity of the audience to the embodied lesbian that is offered through dramatic performance which is partially to blame. As Keir Elam claims:

> . . . the body has now become a focus for discussions about the continuing power of theatre that try to explore why audiences respond strongly to watching actual bodies of human

> beings interacting within a three-dimensional space (conventionally a stage) immediately present to them, rather than on a screen as with television and film. (173)

The fact that lesbian visibility is increasing solely in mediums that prevent the interacting of lesbian bodies in three-dimensional spaces, and that provide audiences with a safe distance from lesbian difference is seriously problematic and warrants a much deeper consideration than it has heretofore been given.

Until lesbian theatre is given a space in which it can be studied for its own merit, it will continue to struggle under the weight of trying to delight despite its unintentional provocation of uncanny valley responses. Lesbian theatre today must wait for a time in which lesbian representation grows more familiar to mainstream audiences in order to overcome difference and establish itself as commercially viable. Because so little effort has been paid towards understanding the reasons why lesbian plays perform so poorly commercially, they continue to flounder in a medium of art that offers them no means of production suitable for representing their difference. Brecht writes of the impact commercialism has on the art of theatre:

> The trouble . . . is that at present the apparati do not work for the general good; the means of production do not belong to the producer; and as a result his work amounts to so much merchandise, and is governed by the normal laws of mercantile trade. Art is merchandise, only to be manufactured by the means of production (apparati). (35)

Lesbian theatre must be examined more for its artistic merits and less for its commercial popularity. My project hopefully serves as a way to begin to separate lesbian dramatic art from its dependency on commercial modes of production and place it instead into a space in which it can be valued for its contribution to the understanding of yet another expression of lived social experience — the experience of the lesbian.

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