Lesbianism and Lesbian Theatre

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There is no denying that the more marginalised gender identities such as lesbians continue to show a strong inclination towards theatrical representations, which thus gives rise to a relatively sizable yet thematically diverse and complex lesbian dramaturgy, prompting the writer of this essay to embark on a survey into the history of lesbian theatre. Nevertheless, it should be mentioned that such a survey aims not to provide a chronological narrative recording how lesbian theatre is first closeted, then comes out, then gets avant-garde, and finally looks queer in off-Broadway and off-off-Broadway stages since as Jill Dolan points out, there are “many modes of gay and lesbian and queer theatre production continue to exist side by side”[1]. Instead of developing in a linear fashion, the history of lesbian theatre in fact exists in plurality and multiplicity. This survey, therefore, will try to first discern the connection between lesbianism and theatrical traditions, and then delimitate a range of themes relevant to lesbian culture and represented in theatrical works.
I. Lesbian as a Concept

Before exploring the history of lesbian theatre, a brief detour shall be taken on defining who exactly is lesbian. "Lesbian" as a concept is believed to be a 20th-century construct, deriving from Lesbos, the island where the ancient Greek poet Sappho was born. In her poetry, Sappho celebrates the passion and love of different nature, including same-sex desire between women; her name also serves as the origin of the less common synonym for lesbian: "sapphic". Though the concept "lesbian" only came into being in the late 19th century and became a widely acknowledged term for female versions of sodomites around the 1920s, the same-sex behaviours between women can be found way back in history.

However, to which period in history that lesbianism, or to be more general, homosexuality shall date back? This question causes heated debates in the research and writing of queer-history. There are two dominant sets of approaches to answer this question. The essentialist approach, on the one hand, holds that "there are always within human culture beings whose sexual desires are directed exclusively or predominantly towards members of their own sex, and who might be thought of as homosexual, even if expressions of homosexual identity and desire are so clandestine in much of the historical archive as to make scholarly documentation of them impossible". Therefore, for the essentialists, the history of homosexuality runs alongside with that of humanity. The only reason why it was invisible during the earlier centuries is that ancient humans dare not speak of or name it. On the other hand, according to constructionist approach, "it only makes sense to talk of homosexual identities when there is a cultural understanding of what it means to be homosexual". Cultural understanding, for the constructionists, shall be the prerequisite for any discussion of a queer history and it was not until the 1870s, according to Michel Foucault, that this understanding came into being. In The History of Sexuality: An Introduction, Foucault makes his much-quoted claim that 1870 marked the time when the "psychological, psychiatric, medical category of homosexuality was constituted [...] less by a type of sexual relations than by a certain quality of inverting the masculine and the feminine in oneself [and] the homosexual was now a species". Though later writings might have modified and refined Foucault's claim, none have categorically refute it. Thereby, to avoid further confusion, this essay will also take this as the starting point of lesbian history in a constructionist sense.
Ever since its emergence, the concept “lesbian” has undergone a series of changes and developments, whether as a pathological condition in Freudian psychiatry, a form of sexual deviancy equivalent of female sodomy, or simply a sexual preference and alternative life style in a more liberal sense. In the modern thinking, however, the definition of the term “lesbian” is rather fixed, referring to “a woman who desires and/or wants to be desired by another woman” [6]. Apart from this obvious and exoteric understanding of lesbian, Monique Wittig has also argued that lesbian is someone located outside political categories of “man” and “woman”, whose refusal to become or remain heterosexual always signifying a refusal “to become man or woman, consciously or not”. Thus, a lesbian is “a not-woman, a not-man, a product of society, not a product of nature, for there is no nature in society” [7]. This quality of not being able to be categorised or acknowledged is reflected in the paradoxical social treatment towards lesbianism.

During the late 19th century and the early 20th century, the Western society implemented strict and harsh system of censorship against male sodomy. The prosecution [8] of Oscar Wilde in 1895 is a landmark incident intending to suppress same-sex behaviours. However, not only did it fail to fulfil this goal, it also helped promote and publicise the homosexual subculture. Such is not the case for lesbians. Compared to gay men, the censorship against lesbians was far less visible and somewhat imbalanced:

Authorities in all European societies were concerned about the threat posed by behaviors that crossed gender boundaries and/or the conjugal unit; thus certain female-female erotic acts were met with harsh denunciation, punishment, and considerable publicity. Other behaviours that seem manifestly lesbian to twentieth-century minds, however, did not cause much social concern, and often were compatible with patriarchal marriage and alliance. [9]

From this, it is evident that the illicit female liaisons were actually governed by “a logic of gender imitation”. Generally, it was the woman “who cross-dressed or who used penetrative devices” that would receive harsher punishment than “her ostensibly more ‘feminine’ partner” [10]. Within the heteronormativity, lesbian identity is only visible or it only matters when it transgresses the male authority, whether by disguising in male attire or imitating phallic penetration. Though the definition of lesbian may have changed over time, this male-dominated ideology of
sexuality is still deeply rooted in this patriarchal society, and lesbian identity continues to be treated as either the invisible spectre or the male impersonator.

II. Theatre as the Queerest Art

There has always been a close association between the theatre circle and the queer community. That's not merely to say that in New York, for example, June is both Gay Pride month and Celebrate Broadway month; or even to mention that the Broadway stages are filled with iconic gay playwrights such as Tony Kushner, Tennessee Williams, Terrence McNally, Nicky Silver, Jon Robin Baitz, Paul Rudnick, Lanford Wilson, Craig Lucas and lesbian playwrights such as Paula Vogel. The reason why Alisa Solomon regards theatre as “the queerest art”[11] is that just like the censorship against queer identities, there has also been an anti-theatrical tradition in the Western culture. In Puritan thinking, for example, theatre was denounced as “[sinful], heathenish, lewde, ungodly Spectacles and most pernicious Corruptions”[12]. Through the kind of “mimetic experience” it offers, theatre, by its very own process, can “disrupt conventional patterns of seeing, of knowing”, and especially, “of seeing and knowing bodies”, which thus provokes a (homo)sex panic[13]. The ideas of fixed (gender) identities are constantly challenged in theatre. In theatrical performances, the actor’s skills at changing his very own nature are shamelessly displayed. These skills, as Solomon points out, “[call] into question the notion that anyone actually has a nature”. And therefore, theatre can “[reveal] and [revel] in the very angst the antitheatricalists were frantically trying to quell: the notion of identity as contingent and malleable and the suggestion that categories can be playfully transgressed-queered”[14].

The connection between theatre and the queer community is in fact a two-way street. Not only does theatre continue to manifest its queer nature, the homosexual community has also shown certain tropism towards theatre. This tropism, as many have argued, is deeply rooted in the clandestineness of homosexual identities. Even in today’s society, there is still a strong tendency for gays and lesbians to hide their sexual identities to avoid social discrimination or even violence against them. Therefore, in order to enjoy more productive expression, they turn to theatre, a place which acknowledges and makes space for “gender ambiguities that mainstream society labored vigorously to suppress”[15].

Solomon’s arguments on theatre’s connection with queerness focus mainly on the affinity between performance and performativity that animates contemporary queer
theory, an idea further supported by David Savran, who believes that "the flowering of a queer dramaturgy is a reminder that queer is a performative designation, one that privileges doing over being, action over intention" [16].

Furthermore, Savran points out that in comparison with other literary forms such as fiction and poetry, or popular cultural productions such as film and television, theatre remains strictly marginalised, a condition that is also shared by queer identities as have mentioned above. According to Savran, theatre has long been regarded as "a bastard art—and the epitome of middlebrow culture" [17]. Such a marginal position leaves theatre with a rather paradoxical condition: on the one hand, it possesses a relative autonomy with high level of symbolic forms of capital; but on the other hand, it occupies a dominated position with its low level of economic capital. This very disposition of the field "guarantees that Broadway and regional theaters (unlike mass culture) are constantly in the process of trying both to undermine and reinforce hegemonic social values" at the same time [18]. Such is also the reason why at least in the late 19th century and the early decades of the 20th century, though there appeared the flowering of a queer dramaturgy, most dramatic works (especially in mainstream stages) could not represent homosexuality in a plain, direct and comprehensive way, and those that do, face severe censorship and punishment.

Another factor concerning queer theatre worth mentioning is the discrepancy between gay theatre and lesbian theatre. In his book Out on Stage: Lesbian and Gay Theatre in the Twentieth Century, Alan Sinfield indicates that "theatre was a distinctively male homosexual space and that the roles of lesbians would require separate attention" [19]. This view maintaining that gay men dominate the circle of queer theatre is further explained by Terry Castle, who has noted a danger when gay and lesbian theatre is discussed and researched on together: "As soon as the lesbian is lumped in—for better or for worse—with her male counterpart, the singularity of her experience (sexual and otherwise) tends to become obscure. We ‘forget’ about the lesbian by focusing instead upon gay men" [20]. Such a discrepancy is reflected in the fact that while gay drama flourishes in mainstream stages on Broadway or in regional theatres, most lesbian drama only makes their presence in more modest arenas on off-Broadway and off-off-Broadway stages. However, despite the low funding and publicity on such stages, there is still a silver lining that in this way, lesbian drama possesses more autonomy in producing more edgy and
ground-breaking performances which challenge the canons of realism and bourgeois social values and thus makes it more interesting.

III. History of Lesbian Theatre

It is no small task to define a lesbian theatre. As Bonnie Zimmerman points out, to locate a lesbian text can be quite problematic. For instance, one needs to "consider whether a lesbian text is one written by a lesbian (and if so how do we determine who is a lesbian), one written about lesbians (which might be by a heterosexual woman or man), or one that expresses a lesbian ‘vision’ (which has yet to be satisfactorily outlined)" [21]. In this essay, however, the writer will try not to pay too much attention to the playwrights’ sex or sexual orientation, for according to Sinfield, “there is no correlation between the (reported) sexuality of the writer, director or performer and the way he or she represents homosexuality” [22]. And the writer’s primary concern is not to achieve a clear definition or to exhaust a chronological history of lesbian theatre, but to focus on different “lesbian themes” that can be located in English-language theatre. Therefore, lesbian theatre will be looked at in a broader sense and any dramatic text with a lesbian theme, regardless of the sex, gender and sexuality of its creator(s), is worth mentioning.

According to their target audiences, the lesbian dramatic texts discussed here will be divided into three categories: the first category includes lesbian plays in the mainstream theatre, targeting at a general audience without any gender specification; the second are lesbian plays in the feminist theatre, usually created by feminist playwrights and directing at a predominantly female audience or at least an audience with certain awareness of different feminist issues; the last one are those that count as “genuine” lesbian theatre from the point of view of some lesbian theatre critics such as Lizbeth Goodman, Jill Davis, Nicki Rapi, etc. This form of lesbian theatre is usually called “separatist theatre” which is made by “out” lesbians and "assumes not only an all-female audience, but also an all-lesbian audience” [23].

What lesbian theatre in mainstream stages does is very much “to speak the unspeakable”. Seldom, if ever, can mainstream theatres in Broadway or West End depict lesbian identities or relationships in an explicit and honest way. And it was not until the 1920s that such kind of theatre started to increase in number since “the thought that some women might prefer lesbian relations was not easy to conceive or to announce before the 1920s” [24]. Such theatre includes plays such as Sin of Sins (1926), The Captive (1926), Children in Uniform (1932), The Children’s Hour
(1934), *Wise To-Morrow* (1937), *Trio* (1944), to name but a few. These plays, all debuting in a pre-Stonewall period, have been considerably adventurous in presenting to the world something quite new, quite bizarre, and quite queer, which then caused some of them to be raided by the police. However, it shall be noticed that never has the exact word “lesbian” appeared in any of these plays, which might be too much to ask of a mainstream audience at that time. Moreover, there is also a lack of “normal” and successful lesbian relationships in these plays: Whether the presumed lesbian falls in love with a heterosexual woman (as in *The Children’s Hour*), or one member of the presumed lesbian couple never appears (as in *The Captive*), or the presumed lesbian dies a violent death (as in *Children in Uniform, The Children’s Hour, Wise To-Morrow, Trio*). In order to maintain the hegemonic social values in the mainstream thinking, these pioneer lesbian plays cannot display lesbian relationship in the way that we expect today, and the depicted sexual deviants must be removed (usually by a violent death or suicide) at the end of the play.

It has been argued previously that lesbian drama is far less visible compared to its male counterpart in mainstream stages. Yet such observation may easily cause the seemingly legitimate question: shouldn’t lesbians be represented in feminist theatre? The answer is yes, they should be, but they rarely are. As Mary F. Brewer points out, within the discourse of traditional feminism, the category “woman” is in fact problematic. It “continue[s] to reflect and reinscribe dominant racial and sexual biases”, requiring a person be either a “‘woman’ (white, middle-class and heterosexual), or a female-other (black, working class, poor, and/or lesbian)”.

Therefore, even if the lesbian issue were to appear in the scope of feminism, it would be, as Sue-Ellen Case shrewdly metaphorizes, “a bridesmaid and never the bride”. This metaphor is also suitable for describing the extent to which lesbian identities are represented in feminist theatre. In her anthology of *Lesbian Plays*, Jill Davis points out that “only two plays in [its] ‘sister’ series *Plays By Women* are on lesbian subjects”. However, she continues, that is “not intended as a criticism of the editors of that series; their choice accurately represents the extent of inclusion of lesbians within the mainstream women’s theatre writing”. In the 1970s, feminist plays with lesbian representations like *AID Thy Neighbour* (1978) by Micheline Wandor, *Cloud Nine* (1979) by Caryl Churchill started to appear. Though lesbian identities are represented in both of these plays, they only account for part of the major themes. These feminist playwrights have grander visions like alternative
definitions of family, questioning of gender roles, the link between imperialism and
the oppression of women, etc. For example, in *Cloud Nine*, the lesbian couple, Vic
and Lin, cohabits and has sexual intercourses with another gay man Eric, who is
also Vic's brother. Within this unprecedented family relation, there are also the two
children from Vic's and Lin's former marriages. The two lesbians take the
traditional role of "husband" and provide for the family, while Eric, the gay man,
assumes the role of the domestic "wife" and takes care of the children. However
avant-garde and radical this depiction may sound, it only represents the most
extreme scenarios in lesbian subculture while failing to discuss the major issues that
most lesbians are concerned with. In these plays, the lesbians are exactly the
"bridesmaids", and never the "brides".

With plays made by lesbians, produced by lesbians and assuming a
predominantly lesbian audience, separatist theatre excludes the male gaze. Any
non-lesbian spectator at a separatist performance will be "automatically and
actively cast in the role of the voyeur" [29]. And by excluding the male gaze, it will
also "erase or ignore its perspective as the gaze itself has traditionally erased or
ignored lesbian (and much women's) experience" [30]. Therefore, the very existence
of separatist theatre itself is a deconstructive force against the heterosexist values.
Moreover, the separatist theatre is usually operated in groups or workshops like the
Character Ladies, Gay Sweatshop, Hard Corps, No Boundaries, Outcast, Shameful
Practice and Siren in Britain, as well as Split Britches and the Five Lesbian Brothers
in America. Within the plays produced by these drama troupes as well as other
independent lesbian playwrights such as Holly Hughes, Sarah Daniels, Alison
Lyssa etc., there are two predominant subgenres: the "issue-based" plays and the
"coming-out" plays.

One of the most interesting issues among "issue-based" lesbian plays is "the
representation of the mother role vis-à-vis traditional notions of the nuclear family",
which has been commonly expressed in relation to the phrase "care and control" [31].
The play *Care and Control* (1977), devised by Gay Sweatshop and scripted by
Michelene Wandor, is the primary example. As the first British play about the rights
of lesbian mothers in child custody cases, it depicts how the custody rights of Carol,
a lesbian mother, are denied by the "gender authority" which is embodied in the
legal system. Lesbian mothers are dangerous according to such authority in that
they will firstly "subvert 'family values' by socializing their children to accept,
perhaps even desire, alternative family groupings"; secondly, by "the denial of the
phallus”, lesbian motherhood will lead to the “unmanning of boy children”; and finally, lesbian mother “would encourage her children’s [homo]sexuality”\(^\text {[32]}\). These obviously unjust accusations against lesbian mothers reveal the problematic systems and values to which the functions of mothering are defined and organised, and the lesbian’s fighting for child custody threatens the stability of the traditional nuclear family. Similar themes can also be found in Alison Lyssa’s Pinball (1981), Sarah Daniels’ Neaptide (1986), Maro Green and Caroline Griffin’s The Memorial Gardens (1988).

Another predominant theme in separatist lesbian theatre is “coming-out”. According to Lizbeth Goodman,

The action involved in the act of coming out for lesbians in society can, under some circumstances, be a political act of rebellion against a recognized norm of heterosexuality as well as a personal act of denouncing the patriarchal assumption of the male right of access to women—of reclaiming and naming self.\(^\text {[33]}\)

“Coming out” is the first step for lesbians to pronounce their own existence, to resist the patriarchal and heterosexist oppression against them and to subvert the imbalanced social treatment towards the gay and the lesbian community. Examples of coming-out plays include Jill Posener’s Any Woman Can (1975), Split Britches’ Split Britches (1981), Jill Fleming’s The Rug of Identity (1986), Jackie Kay’s Chiaroscuro (1986) and Twice Over (1988).

There are, of course, more genres and themes to be discovered in the lesbian theatre. No matter what the subject matters are, these lesbian plays share the same ambition: to question and deconstruct the existing social gender norms and thus locate and represent the lesbian identities.

**Conclusion**

Lesbian identity has long been thrown into a position of double alienation—it is marginalised not only by the more conservative feminist discourse, but also by the stereotypical logic of equating the homosexual community firstly and even solely to gay men. This marginal situation is also shared, as this survey has discovered, by the lesbian theatre, which struggles to survive on the blurry verge of mainstream arenas or the more modest yet avant-garde sub-cultural spaces. Lesbian theatre, like the experience of lesbian identities itself, is still in the making. And the ever
growing and ever evolving body of this theatre promises ever-lasting prospects of academic pursuits.

Notes:
[1] Jill Dolan, “Building a Theatrical Vernacular: Responsibility, Community, Ambivalence and Queer Theatre”, in Alisa Solomon and Framji Minwalla, eds., The Queerest Art: Essays on Lesbian and Gay Theater (New York: New York University Press, 2002) 4.
[2] “Lesbian”. Wikipedia. n.d. Web. 24 Mar. 2014.
[3] [4] Hugh Stevens, “Homosexuality and Literature: An Introduction”, in Hugh Stevens, ed., The Cambridge Companion to Gay and Lesbian Writing (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011) 3, 3.
[5] Michel Foucault, The History of Sexuality: An Introduction (London: Allen Lane, 1979) 44.
[6] [7] Nicki Rapi, “Hide and Seek: the Search for a Lesbian Theatre Aesthetic”, New Theatre Quarterly (34:9, 1993): 148,148.
[8] The famous Irish writer and poet Oscar Wilde was thrown into prison with the conviction of committing the crime of “sodomy” in the year of 1895.
[9] [10] Valerie Traub, “Performing Lesbian History”, in Alisa Solomon and Framji Minwalla, eds., The Queerest Art: Essays on Lesbian and Gay Theater (New York: New York University Press, 2002) 60, 68.
[11] [13] [14] [15] Alisa Solomon, “Homophobia and the Antitheatrical Tradition”, in Alisa Solomon and Framji Minwalla, eds., The Queerest Art: Essays on Lesbian and Gay Theater (New York: New York University Press, 2002) 9, 9, 13, 13.
[12] William Prynne, Histrio-Mastix: The Player’s Scourge or Actor’s Tragedy (New York: Johnson Reprint Corporation, 1972) 39.
[16] [17] [18] David Savran, “Queer Theater and the Disarticulation of Identity”, in Alisa Solomon and Framji Minwalla, eds., The Queerest Art: Essays on Lesbian and Gay Theater (New York: New York University Press, 2002) 154, 155, 155.
[19] [22] [24] Alan Sinfield, Out on Stage: Lesbian and Gay Theatre in the Twentieth Century (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999) 4, 3, 136.
[20] Terry Castle, The Apparitional Lesbian (New York: Columbia University Press, 1995) 12.
[21] Bonnie Zimmerman, “What Has Never Been: an Overview of Lesbian Feminist Criticism”, in Robyn R. Warhol, Diane Price Herndl, eds., Feminisms: An Anthology of Literary Theory and Criticism (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2006) 82.
[23] [29] [30] [31] [33] Lizbeth Goodman. Contemporary Feminist Theatres—To Each Her Own. (New York: Routledge, 1993) 118, 118, 118, 118, 122, 114.
[25] Stonewall riots is a series of violent confrontations between gay right activists and the police which took place early on June 28, 1969 outside a bar named Stonewall Inn near New York City. It is often regarded as the key event that led to the gay liberation movement in the U.S.. For more information, refer to “Stonewall riots”. Britannica.com. Vers. 2014. “Encyclopedia Britannica”.
[26] [32] Mary F. Brewer, Race, Sex, and Gender in Contemporary Women’s Theatre: The Construction of “Woman” (Brighton: Sussex Academic Press, 1999) 1, 15.
[27] Sue-Ellen Case, “Toward a Butch-Femme Aesthetic”, in Henry Abelove et al, eds., *The Lesbian and Gay Studies Reader* (New York: Routledge, 1993) 295.

[28] Jill Davis, ed., *Lesbian Plays* (London: Methuen, 1989) 9.

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