

Zeitschrift: Der Kreis : eine Monatsschrift = Le Cercle : revue mensuelle
Band: 23 (1955)
Heft: 10

Artikel: New American plays on the homosexual theme : a mosaic of ideas and ideals
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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-570732>

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New American Plays on the Homosexual Theme

A Mosaic of Ideas and Ideals

by James (Barr) Fugaté

Written especially for *Der Kreis* on the eve of the first production anywhere of the author's first play, *Game of Fools*, as a part of the entertainment for the Autumn Festival, 1 October 1955, in Zurich, Switzerland.

That the first performance of my theatre writing should take place in Europe does not surprise me but it does rather sadden me since no prophet relishes the plight of being honorless in his own country. However, I love the theatre and should like to write a great deal for it before I die, wherever it is staged. The medium of the commercial theatre is perhaps the most exacting — and therefore challenging — in the literary field today, and what with the fang and claw marks of Big Business all over the body of it today, its challenge to the dedicated artist who loves a good fight becomes even more provocative.

That I am grateful to *Der Kreis* for the production of the play — that I wish them always the best of fortune, goes without saying. That I wish this premiere performance was being staged in New York or Los Angeles cannot be denied, for I am one of those Americans who, though primarily interested in the arts of the world equally, is still carrying on a shamelessly passionate love affair with my country — brawling, brassy, impractical, unsophisticated, self-contradictory, aging hussy that she may seem to the rest of the world. I know her faults. I also know her sweetnesses and satisfactions. Fascinated from birth by the siren songs of Mark Twain, Melville, Whitman, Sandburg and Wolfe, I know I cannot escape their heritage. If, as some intellectuals believe, Europe — particularly the Mediterranean countries — has become a kind of whore to the Past, certainly America has by circumstance become a kind of domineering, legal spouse of the Present. (God knows who will be mistress to the Future.) Therefore, it seems to me that Americans should be joyfully singing at the top of their lungs from the peak of their Golden Age as Europeans sang yesterday, and someone else will sing tomorrow. This is our turn on the stage; we owe it to the audience of history to give it all we've got, no matter how good, or bad, that may be.

All this was in my mind when I wrote *Game of Fools*, my first play. I wanted to make it as American as a banjo. I wanted it to cover a lot of territory, to bristle with ideas and people, and to be both complex and simple. I wanted a kind of epic poem without the stagnating forms of poetry and I wanted a pattern that actors could bring to life on a stage, a pattern of words that would flow as smoothly as a ballet. And though it was to concern homosexuality, for a society is often best revealed by its taboos, it was not to be for homosexuals exclusively.

Game of Fools, a first play, was to be a kind of overture, a statement of the theme of my work of the future. From this I felt I could progress to more particular dramatic situations in the field. I suppose all young writers dream such grandiose dreams, and for this foolishness, (if it be such,) I think the world should say a heartfelt «Thank God!» whether they succeed or fail.

Thus, in selecting the actual framework of the play I had to find something that would touch the lives of all my people. Eugene O'Neill, in writing such a play as I wanted to write, used Social Position as a vehicle for ideas, particularly in his *Great God Brown*. In *We The People*, Elmer Rice used Political Ideology. Therefore, since it has hovered so menacingly over homosexuality for so many centuries, it was logical for me to choose Religion as the background before which I would set my characters and their problems. Homosexuals, like all men, must live by a faith — or a lack of it. I have observed, perhaps too keenly, in some of my less fortunate friends the almost incurable horrors to be suffered from the accident of believing in a faith that is totally incompatible with their natural inclinations. It seemed well to try to expose this situation, and at the same time the reverse of the medal. The result was not to be an all out attack for the annihilation of the churches as such, but rather a pattern of revolutionary thinking to point up to the individual his strength and his precious right to choose or discard as he wishes. No man should be coerced into going to Heaven, especially via a fallible clergy.

Next, in selecting my major characters, I tried to find those that were the most typical of the most prevalent and powerful schools of religious thought over here. The field narrowed at last to four, embodied in the following characters:

Jasher Pureson, the son of a publisher of evangelical literature, a very lucrative trade and one that is inevitably concerned with earthly fears and death, encompasses at once the Puritanism of both the undisciplined rattlesnake-handlers of the Deep South and the cut-and-dried dogma of Abstinence of the major Protestant sects.

Paddy O'Reilly, the son of Irish Catholic refugees of the Great Potato Famine, cringes by turn before a father who is a typical, American, City-Politican and a mother who is a loud-mouthed, uncouth Coleen-gone-sour, fanatically determined to make a priest of her son in spite of his wishes to the contrary.

Francois English, a member of a conservative banking family of considerable wealth, culture and power to whom the correct religious faith is as necessary to life as the correct clothing, house, food, friends and manners.

Johnnie Babton, Unitarian by affiliation, but rather amoral by inclination, represents an easy going kind of liberal thinking in America that may include examples as various as university professors, doctors, lawyers, or just plain laborers with excellent digestions.

The play was divided into two acts of four scenes each, to best facilitate movement and achieve variety. The necessary crisis to set the action in motion — in this play a police raid on a party of homosexuals in an isolated cabin, and the inevitable accusations of Sodomy — takes place in the first scene of the play. The rest of the play is devoted to telling how each of the four young men adjusts, or fails to adjust to the ensuing calamities and social pressures. The two who represent the most hidebound and dogmatic faiths are doomed from the start. One suicides, the other enters a monastery. The remaining pair, however, do make an adjustment and effect a compromise between their natures and the

demands of society in the last act because they are capable of seeing their religious beliefs in sufficient perspective. The intention was to pull certain ideas out of the realm of Taboo and set the average homosexual, who must find himself in one of the four groups represented on the stage, to thinking of his present situation and how it can be bettered.

I was also determined that the play should have a happy ending. It had to presage hope rather than horror because I believe the ultimate destination of homosexuality in this country, and the rest of the world, is hopeful rather than horrible.

A publication of *Game of Fools* (by ONE Magazine of Los Angeles) was favored over a production on the stage for, since its ideas are still somewhat unique on the American scene, it was felt that they could reach more people and remain within their grasp longer in a book than in a series of performances. Whether the book will be suppressed, as were my first two books, by the Post Office Department, our official censor in this country, remains to be seen. It was examined carefully by an attorney for lewd passages and cleared of such possibilities before printing. Because recently even the most reactionary pressure groups in this country have been pounding the propaganda drums heavily to call the attention of Communist countries to our much-touted Freedoms of Speech and the Press, the play's appearance has a world-wide, political timeliness, for with its suppression, these Freedoms of Speech and Press will be revealed as hollow boasts, and a mask shall have been ripped from a hypocrisy the rest of the world needs desperately to see if it exists. If, on the other hand, the book is allowed to circulate freely through the government mails, then even America's most dedicated enemies will be forced to nod admiringly to such a display of equality and preservation of individual rights, as is claimed in this country today. As to who will be the winner in this particular *Game of Fools*, we can only wait and see.

CAT ON A HOT TIN ROOF

by Tennessee Williams

(New Directions, N. Y.)

At the dead center of a hurricane — and those of us living on the East Coast of the United States have become very hurricane conscious in recent years — all is still. At the dead center of this play by Tennessee Williams there stands a handsome, alcoholic, ex-football-hero for whom life lost all its savor when his best friend and former team-mate died a suicide, died because Brick — the central figure in the play — was unable to face and accept the nature of their love for each other. After the death of his friend Brick withdraws from the world of normal human contacts more and more, insulating himself from that world by means of alcohol, living within himself on the memory of athletic glories and the memory of a friendship which to him was the one great, good, true thing in his life, but with the corrosive knowledge in his soul that all that made