

Homosexual drama and its disguises

Autor(en): **Kauffmann, Stanley**

Objektyp: **Article**

Zeitschrift: **Der Kreis : eine Monatsschrift = Le Cercle : revue mensuelle**

Band (Jahr): **34 (1966)**

Heft 3

PDF erstellt am: **22.07.2024**

Persistenter Link: <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-568193>

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BOOK-REVIEW

WILD STRAWBERRY PATCH by James Ramp
(Fanfare Publications PO Box 2312, San Francisco, Calif.) \$2.—

Here is, at long last, a collection of short stories wholly to be recommended, a book full of genuine sentiment, yet evading the pitfalls of sentimentality. Miles removed from the world of hustlers, and equally far removed from the darkness of the big cities, the author creates a world of his own. He is to be congratulated for the beauty of his writing, the tenderness of his emotions, and for his ability to draw a picture of a rural world in which true happiness can still be achieved. Even if one were tempted to classify these stories as fables, the obvious sincerity of the author makes them—even looked at as fables—wholly convincing and their homespun flavor and deeply felt love for the countryside shines through.

In the recountings of the coming together of lonesome farm boys, aided and abetted occasionally by understanding fathers or grandmothers, one feels a tenderness and warmth for *people* and accepts the fact that they are 'doing what comes nacherally'. 'Ah, Wilderness were Paradise enow!'
Diego de Angelis

Homosexual Drama And Its Disguises

By Stanley Kauffmann

A recent Broadway production raises again the subject of the homosexual dramatist. It is a subject that nobody is comfortable about. All of us admirably «normal» people are a bit irritated by it and wish it could disappear. However, it promises to be a matter of continuing, perhaps increasing, significance.

The principal complaint against homosexual dramatists is well-known. Because three of the most successful American playwrights of the last twenty years are (reputed) homosexuals and because their plays often treat of women and marriage, therefore, it is said, postwar American drama presents a badly distorted picture of American women, marriage, and society in general. Certainly there is substance in the charge; but is it rightly directed?

The first, obvious point is that there is no law against heterosexual dramatists, and there is no demonstrable cabal against their being produced. If there are heterosexuals, who have talent equivalent with those three men, why aren't these «normal» people writing? Why don't they counterbalance or correct the distorted picture?

But, to talk of what is and not of what might be, the fact is that the homosexual dramatist is not to blame in this matter. If he writes of marriage and of other relationships about which he knows or cares little, it is because he has no choice but to masquerade. Both convention and the law demand it. In society the homosexual's life must be discreetly concealed. As material for drama, that must be even more intensely concealed. If he is to write of his experience, he must invent a two-sex version of the one-sex experience that he really knows. It is we who insist on it, not he.

There would seem to be only two alternative ways to end this masquerading. First, the Dramatists' Guild can pass a law forbidding membership to those who do not pass a medico-psychological test for heterosexuality. Or, second, social and theatrical convention can be widened so that homosexual life may be as freely dramatized as heterosexual life, may be as frankly treated in our drama as it is in contemporary fiction.

If we object to the distortion that homosexual disguises entail and if, as civilized people, we do not want to gag these artists, then there seems only one conclusion. The conditions that force the dissembling must change. The homosexual dramatist must be free to write truthfully of what he knows, rather than try to transform it to a life he does not know, to the detriment of his truth and curs.

The cries go up, perhaps of decadence, corruption, encouragement of emotional-psychological illness. But is there consistency in these cries? Are there similar objections to «The Country Wife,» «Inadmissible Evidence,» «The Right Honourable Gentleman» on the ground that they propagandize for the sexually unconventional or «corruptive» matters that are germane to them? Alcoholism, greed, ruthless competitiveness are equally neurotic, equally undesirable socially; would any of us wish to bar them arbitrarily from the stage?

Only this one neurosis homosexuality, is taboo in the main traffic of our stage. The reasons for this I leave to psychologists and to self-candor, but they do not make the discrimination any more just.

I do not argue for increased homosexual influence in our theater. It is precisely because I, like many others, am weary of *disguised* homosexual influence that I raise the matter. We have all had very much more than enough of the materials so often presented by the three writers in question: the viciousness toward women, the lurid violence that seems a sublimation of social hatreds, the transvestite sexual exhibitionism that has the same sneering exploitation of its audience that every club stripper has behind her smile. But I suggest that, fundamentally, what we are objecting to in all these plays is largely the result of conditions that we ourselves have imposed. The dissimulations and role-playings are there because we have made them inevitable.

Homosexuals with writing ability are likely to go on being drawn to the theater. It is the quite logical consequence of the defiant and/or protective histrionism they must employ in their daily lives. So there is every reason to expect more plays by talented homosexuals.

Homosexual artists, male and female, tend to convert their exclusion into a philosophy of art that glorifies their exclusion. They exalt style, manner, surface. They decry artistic concern with the traditional matters of theme and subject because they are prevented from using fully the themes of their own experience. They emphasize manner and style because these elements of art, at which they are often adept, are legal tender in their transactions with the world. These elements are, or can be, esthetically divorced from such other considerations as character and idea.

But how can one blame these people? Conventions and puritanisms in the Western world have forced them to wear masks for generations, to hate themselves, and thus to hate those who make them hate themselves. Now that they have a certain relative freedom, they vent their feelings in camouflaged form.

Doubtless, if the theater comes to approximate the publishing world's liberality, we shall re-trace in plays—as we are doing in novels—the history of heterosexual romantic love with an altered cast of characters. But that situation would be self-amending in time; the present situation is self-perpetuating and is culturally risky.

A serious public, seriously interested in the theater, must sooner or later consider that, when it complains of homosexual influences and distortions, it is complaining, at one remove, about its own attitudes. I note further that one of the few contemporary dramatists whose works are candidates for greatness—Jean Genet—is a homosexual who has never had to disguise his nature.

From The New York Times, International Edition, Jan. 24th, 1966

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