

Candidate 3 evidence

ADVANCED HIGHER DRAMA

Do new plays successfully portray LGBT issues?

Dissertation 2017/18

ADVANCED HIGHER DRAMA DISSERTATION

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DO PLAYS SUCCESSFULLY PORTRAY LGBT ISSUES?

WORD COUNT: 3,521

PRIMARY SOURCES

“Pronoun” by Evan Placey

“slope” by Pamela Carter

SECONDARY SOURCES

<http://www.dramaonlinelibrary.com/plays/pronoun-iid-158054>

<https://www.varsity.co.uk/theatre/10382>

http://www.huffingtonpost.co.uk/catherine-mcnamara/being-young-and-trans-pronoun_b_5075890.html

<https://tickets.edfringe.com/whats-on/pronoun>

<http://www.untitledprojects.co.uk/projects/slope-2014>

<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/theatre/what-to-see/five-gay-plays-changed-world/>

<https://highermediastudies.files.wordpress.com/2017/05/2017-pqd-overview.pdf>

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The portrayal of the LGBT community within theatre has always been something that sparked my interest. Though not a part of it myself, within the last 50 years, representation of people who identify with it has changed dramatically for all the right reasons. To discuss my thoughts, opinions, and correspondingly, my research into this topic, I will be showcasing in-depth analysis and knowledge into both plays, *Pronoun* and *Slope*, research into the chosen practitioner, Antonin Artaud, and research into LGBT as a concept, as well as how they benefit the target audience, that being teenagers, and in turn, those over the age of 18. The plays I'll be discussing both have their own take on the LGBT community; *Pronoun* discusses transgender issues, whereas *Slope* is focused on a gay relationship between two men. They both reflect everyday life for most of the population, notably teenagers as the scenarios discuss the confusion of identity, feelings, attraction, and what makes one human. But have these issues been successfully portrayed within the theatre?

The target audience I've identified is teenagers, Evan Placey's *Pronoun* is perfect. It's about a female-to-male teenager, exploring the impact on relationships of someone's decision to undergo gender transition. The play was premiered by youth theatres across the UK, including a performance at the National Theatre in July 2014. The play's protagonist, Dean (née Isabella), is a transgender male. He was born female, but now identifies as male. The focus of the play is Dean's experience of that change and his relations with his friends and family. He's undergoing hormone treatment and using a chest binder, trying to reach his final goal: *chest surgery*. He picked the name "Dean" because of his hero James Dean, who makes a "cameo", takes on physical form in Dean's private fantasy world. However, Dean has asked everyone to treat him as the young man he feels himself to be and refer to him as Dean, and while his friends are mostly supportive, his parents struggle to comprehend his experience. Dean's sister, Dani, finds it difficult to cope with losing a

sister and gaining a brother. Dean's boyfriend, Josh, is stressed; unable to make sense of a disordered jumble of feelings. Discussing this play, Evan Placey writes: "When researching the play, I ran a workshop with a youth theatre... I went in wearing make-up just to see what would happen. Nothing happened... Perhaps contradictorily, they were less open to the idea of one of their friends being transgender. They didn't care if I didn't conform to gender norms because I was some random guy doing a drama workshop..."¹ This is useful, given the circumstances, and how stereotypically make-up is meant for women, and as a man, Evan Placey is breaking that stereotype, just like he is with his characters.

Transgender issues can cause confusion for some people. If a person was to be female and wanted to identify as male, they may be classed – *stereotypically* – as a transvestite or a drag queen, due to stigma surrounding it. Of course, nowadays it's now classed as a social norm, and most countries across the globe recognize that people can be one gender or another, or both, or none at all. *Pronoun* sticks out to me as a brilliant play that challenges the stereotypes as there are elements of comedy within it, and yet, there are parts where an audience, particularly those who are trans, can relate to it. The play itself is very true-to-life. It's centred around a group of friends in high school. However, what isn't so naturalistic is that 2 of these characters are engaged and the group are getting ready for the wedding. The character of Dean isn't played a male, but a female, for authenticity. This is a brilliant decision from Evan Placey, as I think that if a male actor was casted, the transgender message wouldn't be conveyed.

Drama Online. (2015). *Pronoun*. Available:
<http://www.dramaonlinelibrary.com/plays/pronoun-iid-158054>. Last accessed 26th Nov 2017

For *The Huffington Post*, Catherine McNamara's review said that *Pronoun* is "a story about a young person who has the right to be respected, valued and cherished... It's a story that can have a seriously powerful impact on societal understandings of gender and gender diversity."² The message and response *Pronoun* was trying to achieve has evidently been established. The audience see that being trans, and complexities associated with it, show that one who identifies as another gender is normal. However, Nick Ash writes for *Varsity Theatre*³ that *Pronoun* was "a solid performance of a well-written play that examines what it means for an individual to transition and the consequent impact on those who love them most... [it] offered... powerful considerations of gender and sexuality through... choice interpretations of Placey's script." Regardless of the play's message or how it impacted teenagers, it's obvious that things like continuation errors have faulted this play, and almost ruined the naturalistic elements of it. Though it's a telling of an experience that affects many people, the aforementioned complications may have ruined the realism, which is almost metaphorical of how society views transgender people. LGBT as a concept is one that, up until recent years, never really discussed or seen as a huge problem. I've never really come across people openly discussing their sexual identity or that they identify as another gender. Now that I've seen *Pronoun*, and how the transgender concept has been portrayed on stage is very realistic, which is relevant since it's the norm. "The play... offers a thought-provoking insight into Dean's mind-set and society's misunderstood views on what it means to be transgender..." says Adam Bruce for *A Younger Theatre*⁴. He clearly states that *Pronoun* was performed in a very likeable way, and that the audience – *teenagers* – have evidently been involved with it, like a fourth-wall break, particularly regarding the technical

² http://www.huffingtonpost.co.uk/catherine-mcnamara/being-young-and-trans-pronoun_b_5075890.html

³ <https://www.varsity.co.uk/theatre/10382>

⁴ <https://www.ayoungentheatre.com/review-pronoun-west-yorkshire-playhouse/>

decisions made; this aids in the fact that being transgender is representational of our current society, and it shouldn't mean one is an outcast just because they are the gender they weren't assigned at in birth. This clearly achieves its aim to show that gender is a decision that any person, but in particular young adults, can make themselves and will be accepted and aided by their friends and family on the route to be the person they want to be. The break of the fourth-wall connects the audience with the situation and problems that trans people face, and the purpose of entertaining is achieved, as well as educating. Iain Sykes for The Reviews Hub⁵ describes it as "a touching one act play with a strong main character supported by a rounded list of others... a challenging play becomes a thoughtful evening of questioning attitudes". It helps show the attitudes and perceptions of LGBT issues. Teenagers over the years will love the play as much as the initial audiences did, young people who watch this play will gain knowledge of being transgender.

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In contrast, *Slope* by Pamela Carter is a unique twist and portrayal of the true-life love affair between the 19th century poets, Arthur Rimbaud and Paul Verlaine. Described as "an intimate and hedonistic examination,"⁶ their association was a private one. Friendly, yet forbidding, and very real. It was originally produced by Untitled Projects in 2006, directed by Stewart Laing. The play itself is rather... unusual. Certain parts of it are *definitely* for a mature audience but parts of it are quite humble and comical. I feel anyone can see elements of their own [love] life within *Slope*. Though some of it is *questionable*, such as the events both Rimbaud and Verlaine get up both on their own and together, it's evident that they both truly do love each other, though the audience can see that it isn't working, that they're making something out of nothing. The intimate side of their relationship is explored

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<http://www.thereviewshub.com/pronoun-lowry-theatre-salford/>

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Nick Hern. (2014). *slope*. Available: <https://www.nickhernbooks.co.uk/slope>. Last accessed 26th Nov 2017.

within *Slope*. In an interview with The List, Laing described Verlaine as an “older, alcoholic man who wants everything; the comforts of his bourgeois marriage and the adventures with a young man just obsessed with chaos.”⁷ The play exemplifies this to its audience and showcases that Verlaine is captivated by the younger Rimbaud. It was sensual, but it was catastrophic. The relationship between them grows increasingly bitter. The play becomes uncomfortable to watch every passing second, as we can identify our own problems in love with the scenario we are seeing on the stage. In a review for The Scotsman⁸, Joyce McMillan says, “In our culture, the kind of “forbidden” love that some find irresistible, the presence of the cameras reminds us that our “tolerance” is often provisional and skin-deep, that our society is still capable of making the most harsh, divisive judgements against those whose stories are only glimpsed on-screen.” This is a vital argument as it shows that people, in particular gay viewers, still to this day feel they should hide and live a lie due to shame or embarrassment. However, Pamela Carter challenges this and makes sure that everyone sees the true, real extent of what this gay relationship is like, even if it’s marginally vicious at times. “The relationship of Verlaine to Rimbaud comes, increasingly, to resemble that of a moth to a flame”, says Mark Brown for The Telegraph⁹. This quote highlights the fact that the relationship showcased on the stage is on very thin ice. Though it is a portrayal of homosexuality, it is definitely a stylized one, however, this may be connected with the stereotype that gay people are dramatic/flamboyant. Both reviews state to some extent that the play had an almost disturbing outcome as well as the distressing undertones throughout. I feel it was a touch-and-go scenario. Pamela Carter knew that there would be backlash

⁷ <https://www.list.co.uk/article/66080-interview-slope-creators-stewart-laing-and-pamela-carter-discuss-2014-revival/>, last accessed 28th Nov 2017

⁸ <https://www.scotsman.com/lifestyle/culture/theatre/theatre-review-slope-glasgow-1-3606806>

⁹ <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/theatre/drama/3654065/Birds-eye-view-of-a-doomed-love-affair.html>

seeing as not everyone in the world is for gay rights. I feel the majority of the world is still homophobic.

The portrayal of homosexuality within it is something I've considered to be dramatic, yet for the most part, normal. It's a play, it'll be dramatic. In some parts, like when Verlaine shoots Rimbaud, that is very extreme, but both men are just loved up. Pamela Carter clearly shows that they're just using each other merely to meet their own desires and needs. I feel she and Laing have made these directorial decisions to make an impact on an audience; to shock them, and to show that even the most creative people have their dark days, but it is a very violent approach to the portrayal of gay people. Both plays – though naturalistic in their own right – do showcase elements of Antonin Artaud/Theatre of Cruelty idea. In Pronoun, Josh and Dean have an argument where Josh expresses Dean should just “be a girl”, that his transition is a waste of money and effort. Dean's reaction is to grab a pair of scissors, threatening to cut off his breasts, which are concealed behind a binder. They have another argument post-break-up, where Josh confronts Dean about him being with another boy, and ends up giving him a black eye. Both scenes are heart-wrenching as the emotions and confusion Dean is experiencing are vividly shown on stage, I found myself looking away just to avoid the visual discomfort. Placey wanted to trigger an emotional response from his audience, but in a theatre, you have to sit and endure the scene in front of you; it wakes you up and now realise the harsh realities of the life of a trans person.

Artaud's theory can be seen as a means in which actors assault the senses and emotions of the audience and make them feel the unspoken feelings of the subconscious. While Artaud was only able to make one play in his lifetime that imitated the views of this theory, the works of many theatre artists reflect his

theories. He points to both "theatre" and "cruelty" that are separate from their idiomatic meanings. For him, theatre doesn't merely refer to a staged performance before submissive spectators, but that theatre is a practice, which "wakes us up, nerves and heart,"¹⁰ that "inspires us with the fiery magnetism of its images." Pronoun is a romantic-comedy, but the harshness surrounding it regarding the violence and threats Dean experiences, and the negative stigma surrounding LGBT. Unlike Rimbaud, Verlaine was an alcoholic, a "dilettante homosexual", and a violent man. Both men were bright, hot-blooded yet extremely loyal to the quest for the new, in art and life. Rimbaud was a poet in his adolescence in search of a supporter, whereas Verlaine was a poet in search of distraction. He didn't seem to mind that Rimbaud rarely washed, and that he put sulphuric acid his drinks, and how he hacked at his wrists with a penknife and stabbed him in the thigh. Their love is clearly expressed all throughout Slope. I found myself smiling at scenes of rare content between the two men. Their characterization is fantastic, and Carter's portrayal of fiction within historical moments really does bring this play to life. Slope is clearly more violent than Pronoun, though both explore LGBT. Slope's target audience wasn't necessarily teenagers due to its violent and sexual throwaways. It has in-depth detail of sex, violence, rape, which again highlights how their relationship was just a fling; Verlaine, being the adult in the relationship, does use the younger Rimbaud to his advantage as he is 17. It portrays Antonin Artaud in the best way possible, but then again, I feel LGBT within it is not accurate, unlike Pronoun.

Society has a huge impact on Slope, you have to consider the theatre's representation of LGBT people. I think that its ideologies and preconceived notions of what homosexuality is, is portrayed well, however, it is performed in an

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https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Antonin_Artaud#Theatre_of_Cruelty

exaggerated style. Homosexuality was illegal in the UK until the late 1960s. Gay people had no choice but to live secret lives or repress their sexuality. They were shunned by society, regarded as freaks. The gay community was under-represented in theatre, but if it was, it was very over the top, usually within musical theatre.

Within the 2000s, the LGBT community started to become more active and prominent within theatre. An article by The Telegraph¹¹ lists 5 theatre plays that took the world by surprise. One of those was *Bent* by Martin Sherman¹² (1979). Writer Holly Williams says it's "credited with massively raising awareness of the persecution of gay men... which previously had been little-discussed in the public sphere... [It] has triple resonance, allowing audiences to reflect on the era the play is set in, the time it was written, and our present moment," It is set in a past time setting like Slope The attitude on homosexuality was not as diverse as it is in our modern era. In a way, it's prosperous as it shows there has been a change in attitudes, and it's now clearly portray in theatre. Another play listed in this article is *Neptune*¹³ by Sarah Daniels (1986). "Both the casual, off-the-cuff homophobia and the systemic, institutional prejudice against lesbian women within it may shock audiences today, reminding us how far we've come..." This example similarly shows that being part of LGBT is a normal thing, but society seems to pull it apart and find problems with it. It seems that as a whole, LGBT portrayal almost needs to be shocking or outrageous for an audience to accept it/watch it, and it was almost seen as "brave" for straight actors/actresses to take on gay roles. These plays opened the gates for people to speak out about homophobia and stand up for those being discriminated against, and for plays to be accepted, not disregarded, for their characterization or themes. Regardless if it's on stage or not, it's just someone who is attracted to someone of

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changed-world/

<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/theatre/what-to-see/five-gay-plays-changed-world/>

¹²

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bent_\(play\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bent_(play))

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<http://www.dramaonlinelibrary.com/plays/neptune-iid-115851>

the same sex. The audience will have gained an insight on a rather dramatic portrayal of a gay relationship but be informed and educated of the stigma surrounding that.

Pronoun tackles the stigma surrounding transgender right from Scene One, where we're introduced to Dean's character and his parents, who are portrayed by the opposite gender. This directorial decision really expresses the inner conflicts and confusions that any individual who is going through a transition or identifies as another gender can relate to. Placey's play portrays Dean's character in an extremely realistic way by casting him to be played by a female actor, which works as Dean is a female-to-male trans person. The use of his parents being opposite genders entices the confusion surrounding it; it will make an audience look twice, but also think twice about the subject. I feel the use of James Dean helps with this play as it adds an element of comedy that Evan Placey wants. The audience will most likely recognise the famous face, and also understand that he is, in a way, Dean's mentor.

Upon reading through the play's script and watching it via YouTube¹⁴, I found myself having emotional reactions such as laughter/sadness throughout its realism. To me, this play is someone's experiences condensed into an hour long performance. Its purpose is to entertain, but it is also to inform and to educate, which it does so epically. Evan Placey has taken the stigma surrounding LGBT and turned it into a relatable piece of theatre that can be watched by anyone, and still have the same result; to educate and tell the world that transgender people do exist, but they're just like me and you. They are people with feelings, thoughts, opinions, and interests, and we shouldn't treat them any differently just because they're a boy

¹⁴ TheLittleBlackwood. (2015). *Pronoun*. Available: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MIBS8GF7TBs>. Last accessed 10th Dec 2017.

born a girl, just like Dean is in *Pronoun*. Dean is just an ordinary teenager with this burden over him. Placey made his main character as relatable as possible for his target audience; teenagers, especially those confused about their own identity/sexuality. Not only is Dean identifying as a guy, he's also identifying as gay, regarding his relationship with Josh. However, on the other end of the spectrum, Pamela Carter showcases the reality of any relationship. Considering it was very raw, Carter's take on it was rather realistic, and it didn't shy away from the violence and threat, both mentally and sexually. Her characterization just shows the two as normal guys, of which argued like an old married couple.

In conclusion, it's evident that Evan Placey's *Pronoun* portrays LGBT issues more accurately and more realistically than *Slope*. *Pronoun* does convey elements of Artaud, but all in all, it is very relatable for an audience. You can see the emotional/realistic side of what it is like to be/identify transgender, and this is what the portrayal of LGBT should be. However, the LGBT portrayal within *Slope* is next-to-none. It is very harsh, and graphic, and in its own right, rather discouraging. Evan Placey took a naturalistic approach regarding his decisions for dialogue and relationships, and the National Theatre have made it a generally warm play to watch. Pamela Carter has really enforced Artaud's theory and ideas, and for the most part, I really did not enjoy seeing it, as it has genuinely disturbed me, but I feel that's the response Carter wanted from her audience. LGBT is one issue that should be taken and shown to anyone, especially within theatre, at face value, and not exemplified with chaos.

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