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Should We Straighten Up? Exploring the Responsibilities of Actor Training for LGBTQ Students

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Fine Arts at Virginia Commonwealth University.

Matthew B. Ferrell

Director: Noreen C. Barnes, PhD
Director of Graduate Studies
Department of Theatre

Virginia Commonwealth University
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Table of contents

Preface	1
Chapter One	3
Chapter Two	11
Chapter Three	17
Chapter Four	30
Chapter Five	61
Bibliography	66
Vita	69

*Abstract*SHOULD WE STRAIGHTEN UP? EXPLORING THE RESPONSIBILITIES OF
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Gay actors have a long history with the notion of “straightening up” to remain castable and economically feasible in today’s market. Searching to find answers for young acting students while strengthening their own self worth, I will explore the history of gay actors in film, television and theatre and in society to understand this notion more fully. By interviewing working actors and managers in the business I will explore how I can address this question of “straightening up” to the future generation of actors and analyze how we can face the future with integrity and self-respect.

PREFACE: Gay Today
An Introduction

Did you see that story in the news today? I get that question a lot. Issues affecting the LGBTQ community (acronym that stands for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans and Queer, and is used to designate a community of people whose sexual or gender identities can create shared political and social concerns) make the headlines daily. Whether celebrating our communities successes, such as a same-sex *Oklahoma!* being performed at the Oregon Shakespeare festival this summer, or our losses, LGBTQ status being taken off the 2020 census, or gay concentration camps in Chechnya; being gay today is a never ending winding road of obstacles and victories. Things have certainly changed since I was an under-graduate entering college back in 1987. Back then, the gay community was primarily concerned with the onslaught of the AIDS virus and “coming out” was a risky thing to do. And then there was finding my place in acting school which, at the time, seemed almost as frightening.

When other grad students would ask me what “my thesis” would be about, I would jokingly respond, “something gay,” and leave it at that. I knew I wanted to explore my own journey as an actor and as a gay man; a journey that started, in many ways, during my undergrad experience with acting. Finding myself as an adjunct faculty member teaching a group of Freshman actors, I found myself looking in a proverbial mirror; how would I treat and shape these young student actors so they could find the best versions of themselves? How might I shape them or create a pedagogy to facilitate this?

I'll borrow a line from the movie musical YENTL to explain my research on sexuality, homosexuality and the history of homosexuals; "The more I learn, the more I realize, the less I know"(LeGrande).

I have been overwhelmed with the amazing amount of information and knowledge about my gay community, theatre, gay history and every combination of those things. I wanted to cover such a wider berth in my research and investigation, and I hope to continue with this as a lifelong project, but for this moment, for now my focus is primarily on my own experience and physical struggles with the question of "straightening" up and if and when I should do this.

Most importantly this exploration is for my students, my former and future students within the LGBTQ community, and in particular, those effeminate young men, gay or otherwise, who dream of a career in the arts. Those young actors with Broadway and Hollywood dreams, how do I guide them and what language do I use to expand their physical awareness while simultaneously enforcing positive self-confidence and success. There is a staggering amount of research on the subjects of any type of sexuality and performance but my focus here will be predominantly the gay male actor with a tendency towards an effeminate physicality. This has been my own personal journey and I hope that with sharing my own stories, others can choose the path correct for themselves and their own career.

Chapter One

I want you to pick up that piece of toast like a man!
Think of this as
Masculine toast and Masculine butter,
Ready for spreading by a Masculine hand.
Pick up that knife and make believe it's a machete.
It'll take all your strength and steady nerves
For hacking your way through the cherry preserves.
La Cage Aux Folles

I started doing theatre when I was thirteen. I mean, really getting serious. When your mother directs all the choirs at the churches you attend, you participate in any pageant, musical, skit or performance no questions asked. But when I was a 12 year old seventh grader living, at the time, in Goldsboro, NC, I attended an audition for *The King and I*, mostly because Heather Benda and her brother Jerry were going and they were my current best friends. Jerry and I were on the swim team together and Heather liked to do skits and would let me direct her in shows I would lavishly produce. Fairly early on in the audition process for *The King and I*, I was separated from the other children and asked to read for the role of *Louis*, Anna's son, the role I would eventually be cast in. I had no concept or idea about this show or this role, but I loved being separated from the other children and receiving what felt like special attention. This was my first taste of theatre outside of church and I immediately got bit by the bug, hard. There was so much that I loved about the theatre, especially being around like-minded folk and the opportunity to be treated as an equal with many of the adults in the cast. I enjoyed the structure of rehearsals and appreciated working on music and learning choreography. And I was good. I had talent and it came naturally. I

had responsibilities and duties just like the adults. These cast members were my tribe and I quickly formed bonds with this newly formed second family. I felt alive and comfortable in my skin, unlike when I was around other kids my age, especially when in physical ed class where I felt unathletic and uninspired. The boys always had to play flag football and I wanted to jump rope or just sit like the girls. I never said anything though. From the moment of being cast in *The King and I*, I was involved in some sort of community theatre non-stop, until I graduated from high school. I auditioned for every play and musical I could and the majority of the time I was cast. There was this one summer when my dad wouldn't let me audition for *Annie*, but otherwise I was pounding the pavement of whichever community theatre we happened to live near at the time. Having hit the height of six feet by the time I was thirteen, I would almost always be cast as an adult character, and rarely had the opportunity to play someone my own age. I began studying ballet again at the age of fifteen (my mother had put me in class when I was five and six) and I learned to appreciate the art of dance from a male perspective. My incredible teacher, Don Steffy, had previously danced with American Ballet Theatre and on Broadway. He was a strong, masculine dancer and helped shape me and develop similar habits. Don was always using dance terms and would challenge me to use more force, stay grounded, and dance with a stronger power. I remember his instruction to always stay grounded and to use the space fully. At this point I was living in Montgomery, AL and I was the rare boy in a class and kept my activities hidden from those outside dance class who didn't need to know. I was already being called "sissy" because I didn't excel in

sports that dealt with a ball and I baby sat from time to time. I became to be known as “artsy”. Being “artsy” got me a free pass from being a possible homosexual. I was just a teenager, so no one was really thinking of me in those terms, but it was clear I was “different.” My mother didn’t discourage my flashy fashion choices or flamboyance; in fact she practically encouraged it. She herself is an artist, so surely I was following in her footsteps. I was made fun of at school, called a fairy in the boy’s room, but it wasn’t anything I ever shared with anyone. I wasn’t exposed to anything that was overtly gay, other than musical theatre. Theatre people seemed to love my antics and I was regularly cast in shows. I studied voice, I built sets, I worked on costumes and around the age of sixteen I decided that theatre would become my life’s work. I don’t remember really being ashamed of myself as a high schooler or concerned with my body language or how I was perceived. Other than the usual teen angst, I was generally happy. I had girlfriends in high school and from my religious upbringing felt a deep shame for any homosexual thoughts.

This all changed when I showed up to the North Carolina School of the Arts in the fall of 1987, and a boy flirted with me. I soon found out that there were many gay students at the school who lived their lives without shame and even with a sense of pride. Homosexuality certainly wasn’t as it is today in 2017, there were no role models on film or television and gay marriage and equality were merely a day dream, but in the bubble of the University I was free to explore this new side of myself although I kept this a secret to most outside of school, including my family and friends prior to coming to college.

I was beyond excited to begin my professional training and very early on in my University experience was told I was doing everything wrong, more or less.

I was breathing wrong, pronouncing things incorrectly, producing the sound wrong, moving in a manner that wasn't quite right and my acting was fake. But not to worry! I would be trained as a classical actor and my weaknesses would soon become strengths. From my voice teacher, Leslie Hunt, I was told of several diction issues and regionalisms I had and was informed that I would need to get rid of these as soon as possible or get out of the business. Leslie told me not to think of my regionalisms as bad, just another way of speaking or pronouncing something. In learning these new ways to speak she would say, "If you can do it, you can do without it. But if you can't do it, you simply can't do it." Leslie provided me with list upon list of words to drill and practice and own. I appreciated Leslie's philosophy of adding a skill that was mine to use when ever I needed in my career. She wasn't trying to "change" me or how I was, but she was simply giving me options, more tools to carry around in my actor tool box. Another one of my "problems" was my overall demeanor, for lack of a better term. I was told to find my "masculine center". I remember hearing this phrase ad nauseum and being terrified, because I didn't know where to find it. In my eighteen-year-old mind, this had everything to do with my sexuality. Surely, this was a result of me exploring my newfound sexuality and the openness that I felt. I was ashamed and embarrassed to ask "what" to do to rectify my lack of a "masculine center", as it *had* to be connected to homosexuality, in my mind. No teacher gave me specific advice, like Leslie had or assured me that it was about

learning new physicalities, but I could tell my lack of this quality was hindering my actor training. I came out as gay (although not to my family and friends outside of school) almost immediately once I left home and my feelings of guilt and shame led me to feel that my homosexuality had everything to do with my failings as an actor. My teachers certainly didn't steer me away from this notion. The search for my "masculine center" continued to haunt me and continued to make me feel inadequate and unable. My flamboyance and carefree physicality, which I used to think was one of my unique attributes, now kept me locked up in a prison of self-doubt and self-hatred. I particularly felt closed off with my male teachers, whom I felt had given up on me. I finished up my freshman year performing a "masculinity" cabaret as a final assignment for a choral class. By shedding light on my "affliction" I hoped that I could bring awareness and hopefully some understanding to the situation. Unfortunately, my cabaret performance only seemed to cement my inability to produce their desired masculine behaviour and my "masculine center" remained well hidden.

The summer of 1988, after my freshman year, I landed a job at Busch Gardens, The Old Country in Williamsburg, VA performing in a one-man show, *The Enchanted Laboratory*. I loved performing in this one-man show and being celebrated once again for what I loved to do. Away from the pressures of school I found myself for the first time, working professionally and being part of a working community. The character I played, *Northrup* was an energetic and boyish magician's assistant and acting and singing in this show I once again rekindled my love for performance and feeling respected as a actor. The

character's sexuality wasn't at issue in this little wonder of a show and with a grueling five show a day schedule I finished each day in an exhausted state of bliss. I remembered why I wanted to be an actor in the first place.

This feeling was short lived once I returned to NCSA in the fall of 1988. School continued to be a struggle for me and at every turn I felt challenged by certain faculty members to show that I was serious about finding my masculinity. My one success that year was playing the role of Cecil in *Lady Windermere's Fan*. I was a hit with audience and students but was told by several faculty members that this wasn't the sort of role I *should* be doing, veiled commentary that was neither specific nor helpful which left me even more confused. As a young, student actor I so desperately wanted someone, anyone, just to tell me what to *do*.

My final test, it seemed, came in the form of the role of *Valere* in Moliere's *The Miser*. Throughout rehearsals I was watched and inspected at every turn and as an actor I never felt comfortable in either the body of the character or my own. I was focused on the fact that I had to be masculine, I had to show that I could realistically be in love with a girl; I had to do something (although I didn't know what) with my hands, with my posture, with my voice. I was so blocked mentally and it manifested in my performance. I always felt a sort of whispered, head shaking disappointment from the faculty as if I had failed at being a man. The faculty "suggested" I find a musical theatre program somewhere to continue my study. I longed for the days of feeling successful in performance and continued to equate my inability to perform in their desired way to my

homosexuality. My wish came true when I booked a tour of the musical *Carnival* playing the role of one of the 'Roustabouts'.

The tour rehearsed in Athens, Greece for five weeks before a bus and truck of mainland Greece and surrounding areas. Ah, Greece. Where men openly kiss and hold hands and embrace and groom as part of everyday life. I was thrilled to see this other side of my sex that so naturally were themselves and didn't seem bound up by the American standards of masculinity. They were men simply because they were men! My actor soul once again delighted in performance and I enjoyed playing the rugged and athletic role of a 'Roustabout'.

Blessed with a wonderful choreographer who understood the male body and its physicality, I understood how to be strong and controlled yet sensitive and expressive. I began to learn that a masculine center could be based in more than just one idea, or one person's idea of what masculinity was. I continued touring with a production of *The Threepenny Opera* where I continued to explore the limitations and threshold of my physicality. Now outside of the actor training I had received at NCSA I once again found my stride and my self confidence grew, although deep down inside of me the doubt of my ability to be masculine continued. Underneath it all, I felt inadequate and sure that people could tell I was only just "faking it."

Flash forward to May of 1992, me with a BFA in Theatre Performance from Emerson College and hired for the European tour of *HAIR*, a show that would change my life and readjust my feelings of inadequacy and self-doubt. This show, and performing in it all over the world renewed my ideas of masculinity and

inspired me to perform in an environment of sexual fluidity and gender performance that shifted my perspective. In the world of this show, I explored and celebrated all parts of myself, emotionally, sexually, and physically. It was here I found a place to relax within my being.

This exploration continued throughout tours of *The Rocky Horror Show* where I learned to embrace and investigate the extremes of masculinity and femininity and go beyond my preconceived notions of what the limits of these ideals were. After an exhilarating eight years of performance and travel I found a new confidence that didn't live within any definition of who I was, but seemed to just exist from the knowledge of all that I had taken in and all that I had been able to let go of. As the poet e.e. cummings is quoted as saying, "It takes courage to grow up and become who you are." I had found that courage. I had become my own kind of man, but was confident that I was a man, nonetheless.

Chapter Two

Think of John Wayne and John Paul Belmondo

Think of the Legionaries and Charlemagne's men.

So like a stevedore you grab your cup

And if God forbid that your pinky pops up,

You can climb back up the mountain once again!

La Cage Aux Folles

Season Nine of *RuPaul's Drag Race* started a little over a week ago. The series moved from the *LOGO* network, which until 2012 aired primarily only LGBTQ content, to *VH-1*; this means the show has now doubled its viewership, and broadcast into the homes of over 16 million Americans, not including streaming services or internet channels. Gay men, lesbians and trans women are being beamed into the living rooms of millions and millions of America, and RuPaul won an Emmy last year for hosting this show. What a time to be alive, right? Even under our current administration, the LGBTQ community seems to be thriving and becoming part of the American mainstream. There are more openly gay actors performing in the theatre, on television and commercials and on film. Approval of homosexuals is up! They like us. They really like us. Right? Well, to a point. Many gay actors still struggle to find a balance between who they are in real life and the characters they portray on stage or on film. So how does a gay actor today navigate these often-murky waters? I've shared how I found my own footing as a gay man, but what has this journey been like for other gay actors today? I was curious to find out. To quell my

curiosity and to speak how gays, particularly gay men, pass in performance; how we “straighten up” when the need arises. Finding myself teaching a group of young actors at the University level for the first time many of who identified as either gay, bi or transitioning I was also interested in exploring how I could best guide them in their acting studies. I was determined, as a teacher and role model to find better ways to speak with them about their own issues dealing with masculinity, if they had them and curious about my responsibilities in guiding them. Was it enough to just be a strong role model to them? Did I need to try and “straighten” them up? Was this even necessary for today’s actor? How did we even get into this gay/straight, homo/hetero ideology in the first place? I was surprised to find out that it all started not too long ago.

The “terms heterosexual and homosexual apparently came into common use only in the first quarter of this [twentieth] century and before that time, if words are clues to concepts, people did not conceive of a social universe polarized into heteros and homos,” (Katz 10).

The notion of a sexual identity was new to American culture in the nineteenth century, when people understood themselves through a gender principle of social organization, primarily arranged through the institutions of marriage and family. A sexual *identity* was a new form of selfhood, where erotic life became a defining part of one’s self and a new form of difference distinguishing one from others (Katz 12).

The birth of the heterosexual/homosexual binary in Western culture overlapped with other key categories of modern Western culture, such as disclosure/secretcy, public/private, masculine/feminine, majority/minority, and natural/artificial.

In *Gay New York: Gender, Urban Culture, and the Making of the Gay Male World, 1890-1940*, George Chauncey provides a careful periodization on

the rise of heterosexuality as an identity category among working-class and middle-class men. From the 1890s to 1930s, working-class cultures of New York socially permitted “normal” men to publicly socialize and have sex with other men who were categorized as “fairies” with this stigmatizing these “normal” men as homosexual or morally deviant. According to Chauncey,

So long as they [normal men] maintained a masculine demeanor and played (or claimed to play) only the ‘masculine’, or insertive, role in the sexual encounter- so long, that is, as they eschewed the style of the fairy and did not allow their bodies to be sexually penetrated - neither they, the fairies, nor the working class public considered them to be queer (66).

Queer men constituted a sizable number of homosexually identified men from 1910 until the 1940s, but since queer men led publicly heterosexual lives, fairies were the ones who took the brunt of antihomosexual prejudice and discrimination. The straight world’s lack of knowledge of the middle-class world of gender-traditional queer men meant that they face less police harassment and hostility than their fairy counterparts. This is not dissimilar to the subculture within the African American community of today comprised of men who appear to have a straight lifestyle in public while having sex with other men on the “down low”. Even within the gay community this prejudice exists.

Discrimination cast a further net across the country through a variety of laws and policies that were put in place from the late 1920s through the 1950s. At the end of Prohibition in 1932, many states made it illegal for bars and restaurants to serve lesbians and gay men (Chauncey 7). In 1934, the Production Code of the Hollywood film industry banned depictions of homosexuality, which stayed in place until 1966. Similarly in 1927, New York

State passed a “padlock” law that prohibited gay male and lesbian characters from being portrayed in Broadway plays.

What this meant for everyday Americans is that a system of sexual identities, homosexual and heterosexual, was being constructed in place of and in relation to the previous era’s gender system of organization. With the rise of heterosexuality as a new paradigm of men and women’s identities, the exclusion of all same-sex contact became the key element in the definition of the heterosexual.

For men, over the course of the 1940s, 1950s and 1960s, the terms “fairy”, “queer” and “trade” started to be replaced by the predominance of “gay”, which like “queer” before it, emphasized a masculine gender self-presentational style among homosexual men. Now, “normal” working-class men, who had previously had sex with homosexuals without being viewed as homosexuals themselves, were viewed as “latent” homosexuals. This system of sexual identities confined homosexuality to a deviant minority and heterosexuality to the normal majority. As it was for their middle-class counterparts, being normal or heterosexual for working-class men now meant the total absence of both homosexual interest and behavior. These gender identities were central to the construction of heterosexual identities and continue to be codes of heterosexual/ homosexual behaviors, interests and styles.

Today, even within the gay community, the appearance and physicality of masculine traits is preferred over effeminate behavior. “Masculine seeking masculine” is a large category of men on gay dating and personal sites. Even

within their own community effeminate men are seen as less desirable. The more one is able to act straight, the more desirable and/or datable one appears. If this is the situation among our own homosexual community, is it any wonder how this is translated to the heterosexual world?

How does a gay actor, and in particular a gay student of acting navigate these times in ways to be true to thine own self, yet still remain marketable and castable in today's industry that is perhaps still "afraid" of us? Should this question even need to be asked? To begin finding out these answers, I hope to investigate several issues: what most people perceive as being "gay" both physically and vocally, why society has such an "us versus them" attitude when it comes to homosexuality and how we got here, what gay actors actually do, physically, vocally and socially when they feel the need to straighten up, and finally, question whether or not we need some sort of "system" in place to help mask the affectations of the young homosexual actor. "Of course not!" one may initially reply; actors need to be themselves, live out their truth, and embrace their sexuality. I would wholeheartedly agree, but the truth remains that in today's market (and today's world), unless a character or play is written as a homosexual, a masculine seeming cisgender straight male is the preference, even if it isn't necessary.

So the question I am exploring here is *should* we straighten up? And when I say "we", I am speaking of predominantly effeminate gay actors in audition situations and in performance on stage, and in television and film.

Originally, I had hoped to explore this idea for the entire LGBTQ community, but

will be focusing on gay male actors who are 'out' socially. Stick to what you know, right? When I say, "straighten up", I am *not* speaking about the house because company is coming and everything is a mess. "Straightening up" in this sense, means attempting to appear and sound masculine, to appear not gay, to appear straight, having the qualities of a cisgender straight male. "But why would anyone do that?" one might ask?

Chapter Three

Grunt like an ape and growl like a tiger
Give us a roaring, snorting masculine laugh
Try to remember that John Wayne was not soprano
Try giving it rough and gruff, and low.
Try more of John Wayne and less Brigitte Bardot.
La Cage Aux Folles

“Calling all male dancers 5'7-6'0! I am looking for men who are interested in dancing in a theme park show that I am directing/choreographing. The contract is May 11-Aug 26. Must be proficient in jazz and theatre dance with great masculinity and a fit appearance. Tap is an added bonus but not necessary for all tracks. Please email headshot, resume, and dance reel with to casting@rwsnyc.com . Must be 18+”

I messaged my friend who posted this recently on Facebook. “What is ‘great masculinity’?” I asked him.

“Oh, you know,” he responded. “The guys need to be masculine.”

I wasn't sure what he meant exactly and after pressing him further, I am not sure he knew either. What exactly do directors, choreographers and others in artistic leadership roles desire when they ask male actors to ‘butch it up’, ‘straighten up’, ‘act more like a man’ or ‘turn the gay off?’” These phrases have sexual connotations about them, although they have nothing to do with sexuality. They are concerned with physicality. So why isn't that said? I am or always try to be particularly aware, about the language I use with my students who identify as LGBTQ and in particular the language and direction I use when addressing the physical manifestations of character and the actor's physicality.

“Where does the gay come from?” That was a question my friend Luther asked during an interview for this thesis and I wasn't quite sure how to answer.

Because, honestly, where *does* it come from? And I don't mean the sexuality in

the homosexual, perhaps I mean the homo- those stereotypical qualities people generally identify as being gay: the limp wrists, light step, Broadway- loving, stylish, well coiffed, sing songy voice effeminate men. Of course people, the world over have their own ideas of how the gay forms; from a 1979 study at Aegean University in Turkey that alleged “that male mice continuously exposed to loud disco music eventually became exclusively homosexual” (Rutledge 49), to smoking marijuana to excessive masturbation to a solitary home economics class, no one really knows. Why do some gay men have stereotypically gay qualities and others not? What makes one man feminine and one masculine? Is it nature or nurture? How is this perceived? Is this a good thing or bad? The answer seems to lie in whom you ask. I have always considered myself a fairly effeminate man, especially when left to my own devices. I prefer to sit with my legs crossed, am not afraid to wear pastels, I love Liza Minnelli (I have a great Liza story!), have fantastic hair and sometimes scream like a girl. As an actor, I have struggled with these qualities at times but have, also been able to successfully mask them in performance. As I have matured, I haven’t worried about them so much. Young gay actors, specifically when those young actors are male and effeminate face a unique challenge. The majority of roles in most genres where acting is involved (i.e. stage, film, television, commercials, print) are for cisgender males. (*Cisgender: denoting or relating to a person whose sense of personal identity and gender corresponds with their birth sex*) So when faced with getting work in the field of acting, most of the time effeminate men have to “straighten up” a bit.

The world appears to be more accepting of homosexuals these days, gays are able to marry, some gays can adopt, even my own family has evolved in their personal views. Over the last third of the twentieth century and beginning decades of the twenty- first century, Americans *have* undoubtedly seen a decline of pernicious stereotypes of lesbian and gay images and the rise of their visibility and more positive descriptions in popular media forms - from Hollywood and art house movies (e.g. *Moonlight's* recent Best Picture win at the 2017 Academy Awards), to television sitcoms and news reports to mainstream newspaper and magazine stories. But then we see the news today (oh boy) and see headlines titled, "Backlash grows over Disney's gay *Beauty and the Beast* character" (Alexander), "Does new *Finding Dory* promote a Lesbian Couple?" (Foust), or *Walking Dead* fans upset over gay kiss" (Whitney), and all that gay growth seems suspicious and stunted.

Somehow, many people, and by many we are talking about millions and millions, continue to view homosexuality in general as threatening and unwelcome, if not downright evil. Whatever the case, some find the inclusion of homosexual characters more troublesome and unnatural than, in the recent *Beauty and the Beast* headlines, a woman having an affair with an anthropomorphic buffalo. But the truth remains, that to many eyes and hearts, homosexuality is wrong, and any concept, sound, movement or appearance should be censored and silenced. The LGBTQ community has been covering up and hiding for decades, attempting to blend in and "act normal", to "straighten up", mostly so they can get on with their lives and not be harassed or better yet

injured or hurt when out in public. Most of the time an LGBTQ individual can just be associated with being homosexual or appear as some homosexual stereotype to be harassed and confronted. Nobody wants this in their own life - straight, bi, gay, Christian, Muslim, Jewish - and yet the confrontations and hate exist on a global level. So “straightening up” in some ways is a survival tool for many in my community as a way to “pass” in social situations; at restaurants, movie theatres, shopping malls, West Virginia, or other parts of the world where homosexuality is less likely to be accepted, for whatever reason.

So how is this relevant to actors and show business? Well, bias and bigotry are alive and well in any money-making industry and the entertainment industry plays right along with these fears. Although, most of the LGBTQ community feels safe within the walls of a theatre or movie set, getting within those walls, particularly at a professional level may take some kind of finagling, so to speak. Money speaks and you need look no further than today’s headlines to see that the appearances of gay characters are still quite controversial and in some cases bad for business.

Actors and celebrities have gone to great lengths for decades to dissuade the general public from even thinking that they might be gay, whether or not the rumors are true, knowing that being ‘outed’ would hurt their own careers, available roles and the most powerfully, the dollar of ticket sales. Perhaps most famously, film actor Rock Hudson repeatedly denied rumors of his homosexuality throughout his career, especially when the rumors became more widespread during the final years of his life. In 1985, even after acknowledging that he was

dying of AIDS complications, his spokesperson initially reported to the press, “He doesn’t have any idea how he contracted it” (Hudson Has AIDS Says Spokesman). Hudson was so anxious about the public’s discovering the truth about his private life that he forbid the press to photograph his gardens or the interior of his home for fear there might be visual clues to his homosexuality (Rutledge 28).

This same pressure to not appear gay even extends beyond the human experience in current society. For example, the Rev. Jerry Falwell accused Tinkie Winkie, one of the Teletubbies for being gay. “On the *Today Show* on NBC on Thursday, Mr. Falwell told Katie Couric that to have 'little boys running around with purses and acting effeminate and leaving the idea that the masculine male, the feminine female is out, and gay is O.K.' is something 'which Christians do not agree with'” (Mifflin). In a similar case in 1993 where a traveling show of *Sesame Street Live* was touring in Mississippi, rumors began circulating that the Muppets Bert and Ernie were not only homosexuals but also actually married, ticket sales swiftly declined and concerned parents swamped the office phone lines of Jim Henson Productions about the claim. *Sesame Street* quickly issued a statement denying the gossip, emphasizing that Bert and Ernie were simply roommates. And puppets. And fictional. Somehow, even in fantasy situations, gay characters incite fear, fury and anger in certain individuals. In an interview with the BBC, out, gay actor Rupert Everett was quoted as saying:

The structure of Hollywood, the whole of Hollywood ...I’m also talking about theatre. The theatre owning community is another fairly right wing organization. Since Reaganism, it becomes possibly worse for an actor to come out.

The mainstream actor has had to become straighter and straighter (Jenkins).

To many gay actors, Sean Hayes' portrayal of Jack in the sitcom *Will and Grace* was and still is the first time a gay role with so many of those stereotypical gay qualities was featured on prime time and this show almost single handedly welcomed a variety of gay characters literally into the homes of the American people. Sean Hayes' 'Jack' certainly wasn't playing straight. But when Hayes did 'play straight' in the 2010 Broadway revival of *Promises, Promises*, he was called out for doing so. In a 2010 *Newsweek* article titled "Straightjacket", author Ramin Setoodeh caused quite a stir. He states that critics of the revival ignored what he thought to be the real problem, "the big pink elephant in the room".

Setoodeh praises Hayes for his lovable charm and openly gay character of "the queeny Jack" in *Will and Grace*, stating that his gayness is a big part of his charm, but then goes on to say that he feels it is "weird" to see Hayes play straight:

He comes off as wooden and insincere, as if he's trying to hide something which of course he is. Even the play's most hilarious scene, when Chuck tries to pick up a drunk woman at a bar, devolves into unintentional camp. Is it funny because of all the 60's-era one-liners, or because the woman is so drunk (and clueless) that she agrees to go home with a guy we all know is gay (Setoodeh)?

The article continues with a short history of gay actors who have played it straight for decades and how things seem appear to be changing, but also questions if we as a society are ready to relinquish these held fast notions, stating, "As viewers, we are molded by a society obsessed with dissecting sexuality". Finally, Setoodeh leaves with this final query, "If an actor of the stature of George

Clooney came out of the closet tomorrow, would we still accept him as a heterosexual leading man? It's hard to say. Or maybe not. Doesn't it mean something that no openly gay actor like that exists?"

The Setoodeh article hit a nerve for many, who defended gay actors and particularly Hayes' portrayal in the revival. Kristin Chenoweth (Hayes' costar in the production) had some pointed words for the author's article. The entire response is terrific but here is a segment of what Chenoweth said in response:

Audiences come to the theater to go on a journey. It's a character and it's called acting, and I'd put Hayes and his brilliance up there with some of the greatest actors period. . . . Lastly, as someone who's been proudly advocating for equal rights and supporting LGBT causes for as long as I can remember, I know how much it means to young people struggling with their sexuality to see out and proud actors like Sean Hayes, Jonathan Groff, Neil Patrick Harris and Cynthia Nixon succeeding in their work without having to keep their sexuality a secret. No one needs to see a bigoted, factually inaccurate article that tells people who deviate from heterosexual norms that they can't be open about who they are still achieve their dreams.

Whether or not we agree with the stance of this article, the truth is that gay actors are being cast in "straight" roles and these moves appear to be a part of a growing conscious attempt on Broadway and Hollywood's part to make an effort to acknowledge and embrace a community that they have either denigrated or ignored for many decades. While in recent years there has been widespread coverage of the gender and racial gap when it comes to quality roles in Hollywood and on stage, many have overlooked the fact that the LGBTQ community has historically fared even worse. Now, surely some disagree, but in terms of confronting diversity, history is repetitive. In 2017, I would think most Americans have surpassed their own intolerances in order to be open to new

things such as people of different backgrounds and sexual orientation. This certainly is not the case. In the 21st century, although Americans have made some great strides, we still oppress those who are different, specifically the LGBTQ community and even within the LGBTQ community, effeminate men.

So how did we arrive here? Under conditions of the closet, same-sex desire was rendered a core, primary social identity of an oppressed minority, while other-sex desire assumed the taken-for-granted normative status of the vast majority of Americans. The rise of the closet as a national formation is often dated to the 1930s and it continued to develop over the 1940s and the 1950s.

During the 1950s, the first homosexual or homophile organizations developed in some major urban centers in America. These organizations sought to “purify” the homosexual self by projecting an emphatic sense as a normal and highly conventional American (Dean 68). Two historical periods stand out in the rise of a post-closeted dynamic as a national formation. First, the Stonewall riots of 1969 signal the rise of the politics of coming out of the closet and the development of large, visible gay and lesbian communities and institutions throughout the country (Armstrong 111). Historians have found a rapid proliferation of gay organizations, such as newspapers, crisis hotlines, and social clubs, which increased from just fifty in 1969 to more than a thousand in 1973 (Dean 64). The mid-1990s represent a period of newfound mass media visibility and significant social and political gains, from the spread of domestic partner benefits and introduction of antidiscrimination laws to significant attitudinal shifts among Americans toward tolerance and acceptance of gays as never before.

Polls confirm that attitudes toward gays and lesbians have become more liberal over the last four decades.

My focus here though is less about sexual behavior and more about the identity practices or the words and deeds that heterosexuals use in social interactions and situations to project themselves as straight. Heterosexual identities are established through social norms that make up our society's social structure and organizations, such as government bureaucracies, economic systems, and legal orders. These social structures along with our social institutions, such as marriage, the family, schools and colleges, political parties and the armed forces, create both individual and institutional privileges that favor straight persons, relations, marriages, and families over non straight ones. This creates what is referred to as heteronormativity (the privileging of the heterosexuality as normal, natural and right over homosexuality) in daily life and social situations.

Living in a heteronormative society, heterosexual individuals are given heterosexual privilege. This privilege is most usually invisible is achieved by the view that heterosexuality is "normal". The institutional legitimation of heterosexual identities is the foundation of its hierarchical dominance over homosexualities. For example, heterosexual couples and families are automatically viewed as better, healthier, and more "normal" than lesbian and gay families or couples. Children are also thought to be best parented by a heterosexual mother and father (Dean 26).

In Wayne Brekhus' *Peacocks, Chameleons, Centaurs: Gay Suburbia and the Grammar of Social Identity*, Brekhus transports the reader into what, in most people's minds, epitomizes middle America, except his focus is on the suburban gay males who reject a core, primary gay identity, and instead views being gay as one of many identities. Brekhus depicts two types of suburban gay men. "Chameleons" view gay identity as a compartmentalized social status that is situationally specific. In their everyday lives, they are assumed to be and pass as straight, but when they travel to gay spaces they experience being gay as their primary, core identity. In contrast, "centaurs" prefer to integrate being gay into their everyday life, but don't allow their gay identity to overshadow their other identities as a corporate employee, masculine man or homeowner, for example. This anomaly of gay suburbanites speaks to the larger trend of gays' integration and normalization into mainstream America.

Historians argue that from the colonial era to the late nineteenth century in America, same-sex sexuality was viewed only as *behavior*, not yet as a subcultural *identity*. From 1600 to the late 1800s, homosexuality was prohibited through sodomy laws, which were aimed not at homosexual individuals but at non-procreative, nonmarital sexual behaviors. It was only during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries that prohibitions against sodomy were regularly enforced, against a subcultural group of people thought to embody homosexual identities.

In his book *The Invention of Heterosexuality*, Jonathan Ned Katz argues that in the early part of the Victorian era, from about 1820 to 1860, neither the

notion of heterosexual behavior nor the notion of identity existed in America.

Rather, the social organization of sexual behaviors and intercourse were based on notions of true manhood, true womanhood, and spiritual love. A major concern was whether sexual relations took place within or outside marriage, and those relations were aimed at procreation. Overall, sex was generally considered to be an instinct aimed at reproduction, not the basis of an identity, and marriage was the container of this behavior and central in establishing Victorian men's and women's gender roles, social honor and respectability.

The theatre community has been a safe haven for gays for decades, but gay characters on stage certainly have their limits. John M Clum writes in *Acting Gay: Male Homosexuality in Modern Drama* that the only sure fire way of knowing characters are gay on stage is a kiss between two men (or women) and that this act alone elicits largest audience response in the form of macho noises (i.e. audible grunts and discomfort from the house.)

Some members of an audience watching a male-male kiss will lose track of characters and actors and see the kiss not the moment in a drama, but a generic homosexual act: "Two men kissing!" A kiss between two men, then, can be used to unleash the force of the audience's gut response to homosexuality . The history of the male-male kissing scenes in American drama shows the playwrights are always aware of their power and either exploit or try to defuse their shock value (13).

Even when the script calls for a homosexual role on stage, Clum notes:

Casting is one of the most important signs in drama, and it has been a tradition to cast what we might call 'openly heterosexual' actors in leading homosexual roles as a way of defusing the threatening aspects of the play for a mainstream audience (9).

Gay roles on television have fared similarly. In the United States, some television shows have been critiqued for deviating from the descriptions of the

typical American family. In the 1970s on *All in the Family* featured one of the first gay characters to appear on mainstream television leading to protests and backlash.

Today, LGBTQ characters are mainstream not because of some imagined 'homosexual agenda' but because the LGBTQ community is a part of the human community and television, and mainstream media is beginning to recognize that fact. On the show *Pretty Little Liars*, one of the main characters, Emily, is a lesbian. She dates girls and lives a normal life with her three best friends, but backlash has also risen against this character. The Florida Family Association requested that advertisers pull ads from the show, claiming the imagery of lesbianism was irresponsible.

Over the past decades, many other TV shows that have incited negative feedback from the public. Still, the roster for LGBTQ characters on many of today's most shows continues to bloom and grow. From the evil, yet broken footman, Thomas Barrow, on PBS' hit *Downton Abbey* to more than over a quarter of the *Glee* cast, LGBTQ characters are popping up more and more. We are assimilating. Is this a good thing? Thankfully, almost every network features gay characters built into their stories, and young people are growing up with more of a notion of the gay community as part of the fabric of society.

Eric Goldman, Executive Editor, IGN TV, thinks some of the difference comes from the age of the audience but, he added, "unfortunately, a lot of it has to do with how extreme reaction can still be from certain straight guys (not just

guys, but a lot of times it is...) when it comes to being “grossed out” or put off by seeing two gay men together compared to two women, since the latter is so fetishized among straight men” (Halterman).

Not unlike theatre, television seems to have its limits as to what gay characters can do. There’s a feeling of being gay is fine as long as one doesn’t have to actually witness anything that appears gay. I was interested in seeing how friends and colleagues were faring in the business and most importantly what advice they could give me from their own stories, experience and education and what advice I could share with my own students facing these challenges. I interviewed several friends, colleagues, and professionals in the business, to guide my exploration.

Chapter Four

Think of De Gaulle and pick up Rasputin
Think like a Daniel marching into the den
While trying to join the burly brutes
If you forget the nylons are under your boots
You can climb back up the mountain once again

La Cage Aux Folles

Mark Wilson, who I met during the national tour of HAIR in 1994, was brought up in a Mormon household and remembers doing anything he could to hide the fact that he was gay. Earning a BFA in Musical Theatre at Brigham Young University, Mark remembers the hypocrisy of the entire program: “We were all pretending to be straight and being questioned on a regular basis by the church if we were gay or knew anyone who might be gay. We were asked if we knew about any of the faculty being gay.” For Mark this constant pressure only solidified his shame and need to hide his sexuality. “The dance teacher was even sleeping with one of the students, a male, and everyone just pretended it wasn’t going on.” The scene and attitudes at BYU were certainly extreme, but it was how Mark trained and set the basis for his attitudes about the business of theatre. He remembers adding touches of masculinity to his performances in shows like *The Unsinkable Molly Brown* or instances where there were groups of men dancing together. “I would do things that I thought made me look straight, like keep a bigger distance between my legs, like I’d just gotten off a horse, or put my thumb in my belt when I didn’t know what to do with my hands.” These

physicalities were things he thought read as masculine. When he was performing the musical *Seven Brides for Seven Brothers* at the Robert Redford Theatre in Sundance he remembers specifically being told in rehearsals to lead with his crotch, “or something like that”, he says. “I just remember that it needed to come from there and I am pretty sure the choreographer used to grab hers, or down there, to remind us during rehearsals.”

Wes Pope was a Broadway dancer who performed in such shows as *On the Town*, *42nd Street*, *Saturday Night Fever*, and *Finian’s Rainbow*, shows that require a certain type of male. I met Wes in 2006 working at Radio City Music Hall. “Well, first thing,” he starts off, “being a dancer, I’ve heard many times, ‘Butch it up!’ or ‘dance more like men!’ but this never really meant anything to me. Once during a rehearsal a very famous choreographer (who shall remain nameless) yelled out, ‘Stop dancing like fags!’ Wes always believed there was a better way to convey the message but unfortunately the message never seemed to change. “I mean,” he says, “instead of screaming, ‘you are dancing like a nelly queen!’ why doesn’t the choreographer encourage a dancer to be more grounded or to cover more space?” Those were the images that Wes says were always helpful to his own way of thinking. He spoke about one specific incident where he was being choreographed for an industrial and the choreographer kept telling the dancers to ‘walk more like men.’ “The problem was,” he states, “that we had been choreographed to walk double time and it was almost impossible to not walk on your toes and hustle to hit your mark. I was so fed up and eventually said, ‘If you want us to walk like men, we need to walk half time so we can add

more weight’.” There was this expectation and then the reality of execution that was almost impossible to give them the look that they wanted.

Wes also remembers a specific incident when he was touring with *Saturday Night Fever* and was covering for the role of Bobby C. “We were playing the Fox in Atlanta and my family was there that night. I am from rural Georgia, so it was a big deal. I thought I had done a great job and felt really proud of myself, but then at the end of the performance the stage manager came up to me and said, ‘You did pretty well. Just butch it up, next time.’ He remembers going from elation to embarrassment and wishing he knew what specifically he could have done. “I had to do a lot of work to find the Brooklyn dialect of Bobby C, coming from metro Atlanta and had thought that I had the physicality down.” When I asked Wes specifically about any memories being told how to act physically in the production he only remembers the choreographer wanting the ‘black characters to be more black’. It’s a similar elephant in the room. Nobody really knows what they want, specifically, they just want something different and you are supposed to magically know what to do.”

Wes spoke about the training he and other dancers received as a young dancer: “You know, as a dancer, especially if you are not training in New York City, you are trained by females and the majority of the class is females. You are literally surrounded by girls. Part of my learning was imitating, so I naturally found a more graceful, feminine line. I do remember sometimes being given an optional arm placement for boys, but it wasn’t until later in my career that I was able to spot the difference. Instead of someone telling me to butch it up, I would

prefer someone to tell me to dance stronger, to dance more grounded, to cover more space when I move, but for whatever reason, it was always about being more like a man. I remember as a young boy a neighbor asking me, 'why do you walk like a girl?' Naturally, I took smaller steps and was lighter on my feet. I asked Wes what words would have been helpful to him to accomplish this 'more of a man' type dancing. He responded, well, probably to take a larger stance, to be more aggressive when I moved, to be bigger, cover more space, heavier on the floor. Arms are always a big thing. I wish I had been told to think stronger and bigger, to reach as far as I can and the concept that the arms originate from the back. Yeah, stronger and bigger would have been great. When you are told to be more like a man, it just shuts you down, there is nothing to aim for and I constantly focused on what I was doing wrong, and I wasn't really even sure what that was. Oh and head pops. I remember watching dance competitions and thinking that boys who did too many head pops looked feminine so I tried to limit those."

I asked Wes specifically about dressing in audition situations when he knew he would be auditioning for a "straight" role. He responded, "When I first got to NY everyone used to dress pretty basically for auditions. Girls would wear a unitard and heels and boys would generally wear a tank and sweats. As time progressed you were expected to dress more specific to the project. He recalls going in for a dance call for the musical *Taboo* (I was also at this call!) and how everyone was all decked out in 1980s looking attire with full makeup and hair and remembers thinking, 'what happened to the creative team?' When he auditioned

for the Broadway production of *42nd Street* choreographed by Randy Skinner he remembers being pulled aside by an assistant and asked if he had ever auditioned for Randy before. Basically, Wes was told if he wanted to be considered he would need to be dressed in khaki pants, collared shirt, no jewelry and his hair done conservatively. 'It was if my dancing had nothing to do with it.' But the next time he was called in, he dressed that way specifically and booked the show. Again he remembers thinking to himself about the lack of imagination of the creative team.

When asked about any vocal changes he makes to straighten up, Wes mentions lowering his voice like so many of the men I interviewed. "I do that even in normal life," he states. "I have been called 'ma'am' so many times at the drive through or on the phone, so I almost always lower my voice in practically any social situation. Especially if I am around straight men. I was made fun of for being gay so much in my childhood that it has just become a mechanism of protection for me."

When asked about straightening up in day to day social situations Wes laughs. "I used to care more about that, like I would be very aware on the subway how I crossed my legs- I would do the wide man cross and not the lady cross like I would normally do." And going home to Georgia? "Lord, help me," Wes responds. "It's not about me really anymore, but if my grandmother took me out to dinner or something, it would kill me if someone made a remark. So to avoid any confrontation I will wear a baseball cap and a big sweatshirt or something."

As we wrapped up, Wes made some final comments about the subject. “You know,” he says. “It’s called acting. I just wish there was the proper vocabulary and better directors who always related it back to the character. It’s about how does the character move? For me, I don’t mind putting on the masculinity. I have always enjoyed masculinity because I am attracted to masculinity. I do wish more often directors and choreographers would show you what they want, it would just make things so much easier. But I do think it’s a skill. You know, some people can’t play ‘queenie’. I can’t stand when I see a straight person play gay, especially when they are doing things that would never happen. I guess it’s the same type of thing. So I get it, if someone isn’t playing true to that character type. So I say, just always go back to how the character would move.”

Luther Creek another friend I met during the HAIR tour of 1994, is somewhat different from other men I interviewed in that he is self trained and did not attend an undergraduate theatre program before he appeared on Broadway in shows like *Rent*, *Footloose*, *Jesus Christ Superstar*, *Urinetown*, *HAIR*, *Spider-man Turn Off the Dark*, *Shockheaded Peter* and *A Man of No Importance*. A credit that he doesn’t brag about, but that I always loved and admired (and found to be super gay), was a production of *The Wizard of Oz* starring Phyllis Diller as the Wicked Witch of the West. He learned acting from watching people and imitating them or watching other people being taught. Luther believes that the issue isn’t about being gay at all but it’s about being a bad actor. “For me if I saw

someone that didn't seem to fulfill needs of the character, I would say that they didn't seem to appreciate the quality of the character. I understand acting as an entirely physical craft and I approach everything I do as a clown. It's never me up there. So if I see someone who pulls me out of their performance because of a certain physicality or vocal choice, I see them as a lazy actor more than anything else. Honestly, I don't really care what the actor is thinking, I care about what / think the actor is thinking."

As far as his own specifics of "straightening up", Luther had few ideas from his own experience. "Well, first off, I was completely freaked out by my own sexuality so I would do anything to avoid any situation that would bring that aspect up. I do remember thinking that when actors would 'lean in' too much it appeared gay to me, so I would avoid too much leaning in, particularly in scene work. In high school I remember being told something about my hands and I had basically taught myself to deny all my emotions. In reality, there was no environment to be gay in."

Vocally, Luther is very specific and confused about actors who are resistant to altering their own idiolect to suit a role; "We're not teaching elocution for social situations, this isn't conversion therapy. It's giving an actor the tools to translate the language of the playwright. It's not about being gay. It's about dialects. If a guy is playing Scrooge and sounds like Bernie Sanders, there will probably be some work to do vocally. It isn't personal. It's acting. I do remember getting notes from time to time like, 'please stop enunciating so

clearly' but that's a descriptor and not a punitive measure. I think we need to learn to separate the personal from the professional.”

Luther doesn't consider himself completely free from the concept of “straightening up” though. He recalls when he was playing the role of Mark in the Broadway production of *Rent*. “I was playing Mark but really wanted to be playing Roger, the rocker guy who gets the girl. I was afraid to be gay ‘in real life’ because I was worried they wouldn't cast me as Roger. The show was going to Los Angeles and I was promised the role of Roger for the opening there. I had never showed up to any cast functions with a boyfriend, even though many of the producers were gay but after I had been promised the role of Roger I thought all was good and attended a cast function with a boyfriend. Mysteriously, after that, things shifted and I was no longer going on for Roger. I can't say that it was me showing up with a male partner, specifically that lost me the role, but I always felt that was the major thing that had to do with it. (Luther did eventually play Roger on Broadway) Back in those days, it was pretty sketchy to be gay off the stage. I mean, not too long ago, gays were only cast as murderers or child molesters. The only other thing was *Will and Grace* and I think that is partly why people flocked to the show [*Rent*]. We had one of everything, the gay character, the lesbians, everyone was represented, but it was kind of unspoken that you stayed within those roles, so I would never really go to any cast function or press event as me.

I asked Luther about his feelings about casting and if he ever consciously “straightened up” for audition situations. “Well, I feel in casting you are only cast

always as gay or never as gay. Sure there are a handful of out gay stars, whether in movies, TV or stage, but I do find it particularly telling that there is no *major* star who is out that is playing straight very successfully. There has always been that mystery about stars and the feeling that you should never tell too much about your personal life. But the truth is, is that you *can* be masculine and gay. I was recently watching a screen test with a young Brando, who to many is the epitome of masculinity and there is a section where he is just talking in his normal voice and I thought, ‘my God, this is sooo gay. He sounds so gay.’ He goes back to our conversation about *RENT*, “When I was playing *Mark* in *RENT* I don’t remember doing anything specifically Jewish, but I always had people inviting me to Passover. And I think the lesson there is, if the play is working and you are doing your job as an actor, you shouldn’t have to do anything. Just let the script do the work. And you know back to Roger, I just thought he’s the rock guy who gets the girl, I didn’t really think so much about sexuality. I did think about how the character would walk, how he would stand, how he would look. But then again, I think of everything of clowning so it takes a certain level of everything out of it. It’s always physical and if you are genuine in yourself you transcend anything sexual. You know, as an actor, if the instinct isn’t there, you have to find it.”

Chad Luke Schiro whom I met in 2006 has appeared on Broadway in *Gypsy*, *Urban Cowboy* and *The Music Man* has also served as Associate Choreographer for Broadway productions of *CryBaby*, *Spamalot*, *Can-Can*, *Carnival* and *Showboat* among others. “Oh sure, I have my boring wardrobe,”

Chad quips when asked about straightening up, but Chad's responses were quite different than the others I interviewed. "My big question these days," he responds, "is how do I pull myself out of this scenario entirely? You know as a straight man when you perform a role successfully you are considered for bigger roles, where the gay man is asked if he would also be interested in doing hair and make-up. I understood doing characters, so I was always the one who covered roles on Broadway but the next step for me was never going into featured roles. Even as an Associate Choreographer on shows with a gay director and a gay producer I would suggest a well known gay actor for a role and they would respond, 'Oh, he's too fey,' and this was talking about a show from the 1950s or 1960s when sex wasn't really involved in the theatre in those times. For me," Chad states," the voice is what gave me away. I have had so much stress about my voice that it has resulted in medical issues and terrible acid reflux and things of that nature. I remember, like so many gay men, recording and re-recording my outgoing voice message on my phone because it sounded so gay to me and I kept hoping for a take that sounded straighter. I was seven years old the first time I was called a fag and it continued all throughout my years at school. Before I even opened my mouth on the first day of high school, someone there had seen me do a play in middle school and called me fag. But theatre saved my life and because I had some talent it is what got me out of there!" Chad now focuses on telling his story on film and television. "You know, television and film is really changing things. Before if you brought some gay or trans story to the medium of film or tv some non-artistic producers would

come in and make it something else. But I learned to flesh it out, and now we can tell the stories of *Dallas Buyer's Club* or *Brokeback Mountain*. There are too many gay stories to be told, too many original stories to be told. Now I *want* to play gay," Chad states. "Sure there are a handful of gay actors who can pull off playing straight." Chad speaks of a gay/trans writing community that he is part of these days. "You know, Laverne Cox says, 'I'm not a role model, I'm a possibility model' and that is where I want to focus my energies." He applauds the trans community for taking a stand on straight actors playing trans. "You know what? They continually take a stand and say that it is *NOT* okay to put a straight person in a gender fluid role. In the trans community, you are either passable or not passable and even there, when in an audition they are asked to be more 'trans'. It just brings about a different set of opportunities. You know, as gay men, we are always allowed to be funny, always the joke. Just look at Paul Lynde, remember him? He used to drink himself into a depression because he wanted to do more, be more than just the joke that was Paul Lynde. As effeminate men we have to begin learning to love ourselves and find our own power in creating our own stories. A lot of gay casting directors have so much self-hatred. You have to find the people who believe in your talent. At the end of the day, we have to take ownership of our part of it, how we have allowed it to continue and tell our own stories."

Shane Stitely was another dancer I met while working at Radio City and was an effeminate young boy. "That part of my spirit, that feminine spirit just has a very loud voice." Shane remembers always dressing up, putting on shows and

always entertaining anyone who would watch as a young boy. “I do remember having a very effeminate walk and I began working on it around the third or fourth grade. I would obtain a hall pass from my teacher to go to the bathroom and would use that long hallway as a runway and do 2 or 3 “runways’ up and down the hallways when no one was watching. I did this on my own. I had figured it out on my own.” I asked Shane what he did specifically, what he worked on.

“Oh, it was a certain stiffness. No hip wiggle, more carriage in my upper body and no arms flailing. I tried to walk more like a boy. And you know, it has given me a fierce runway walk to this day.” I was amazed that Shane had this awareness at such a young age and asked him if this was because he had been made fun of at that age. “Not from kids in my class. I played sports so it was usually the older kids. I don’t think it was specifically for any real reason. I did the runway walks in the hall because it was just something that I wanted to do. It wasn’t until probably 5th grade that I was being made fun of for being gay. Like I said, I had this really strong feminine spirit or voice as a young boy. As I got older, I became more aware of it and starting to withdraw from it, but not really in a negative way. I had decided to butch it up on my own. Honestly,” he says, “it made me a better actor and dancer. I have always been really good at ‘dumbing down’ my fem side. I had a ‘masculine Shane’ that I would do as a character and I really enjoyed it. I saw it as an extension of me. Look, my hands like to wave and my head likes to cock. That’s just me. But when I would go into auditions I would just always be that masculine Shane. I had perfected it and it had become natural. But I *did* have to work on it, like anything. As I became more confident

and had a number of professional jobs under my belt I changed things up in auditions, I would be the masculine Shane when I danced but then I would go back to the more authentic effeminate Shane when I was just in the room and the work stopped coming. My career began suffering. It's not that I danced more effeminately, I always danced masculine. I looked masculine so it confused people when I wasn't that character all the time. I honestly don't think they knew what to do. I was never specifically called out in auditions, but I have been in auditions where they have told specific men 'don't dance like a lady!' but they don't really tell them what they want instead. When I was younger and starting out in the business I used to be fearful and anxious in any situation where I thought someone might think I was gay, but now I care less and less. Now I tip down that street, and people think I am crazy but I just don't care. I judge a lot of dance competitions and I see a lot of effeminate boys all around the country. I tell them to continue to nurture that spirit, however, if you are performing a specific character, you have to acclimate your physicality to that specific character. If you are auditioning for Tony in *West Side Story* and you are not naturally a Tony then it warrants you to go to a deeper place and find out who Tony is, how Tony moves. I think actors and dancers forget that it isn't about them; it's about the character. Look, I do find it unfortunate that there aren't more gay characters out there, but until that time comes, 'you better butch it up, queen!' You know," Shane continues, "it's like the legendary Bob Fosse said, 'In order to be a great dancer, you must be a phenomenal actor.' And that is just the truth. Sometimes you have to look and act like a boy if you want to get this job."

I asked Shane specifically if he ever consciously “straightens up” depending on where he is geographically when judging dance competitions. “Of course,” he responds. “You know if I am in Kansas City or somewhere small in the South, or St. Louis, well, I might get a little snazzy in St. Louis, otherwise I will stay pretty corporate in my dress. You know, if I’m in San Diego or somewhere like that I will pull out a printed pant and jazz it up. But I do my best to blend in. Whenever I go home, just outside of Gettysburg, PA, I put no bright colors in my suitcase. I am very aware of my appearance when I go home. It’s that power of familiarity. I immediately feel less than and more ‘other’. I don’t style my hair, I wear jeans, a tee shirt and a hoodie. I just don’t want any of that negative attention. But then when I get back to New York the glitter comes back out! Look,” Shane says, “I have a lot of feminine qualities as a male, a lot of fem flourishes that come naturally, so I have to focus on the character’s qualities. That’s the focus.”

“This is something I have struggled with and something I continue to struggle with, especially being gay and black,’ **John Cameron Barnett**, who I met in 1994 is currently performing the role of Lem in Eugene O’Neill’s *The Emperor Jones* Off- Broadway at the Irish Repertory Theatre, stated. “For example,” he continued, “yesterday I was at a commercial audition. When I read the sides, they seemed urban to me. How I am wearing my hair, and how I am dressed I decided to sound a little bit urban when I auditioned, but you know, I don’t know where I fit. Usually it’s either too this or too that and I tend to read the

sides in a way that is what I *think* they want. But I have to tell myself to ‘be you, but be something else.’ At the end of the day you have to be you.”

I asked John or “Cam” as I usually call him about his awareness of being gay growing up in Arkansas. “As a kid, I didn’t mask anything. I was just doing me. I was just living. Living in the moment. I mean, on occasion people might say something like, ‘don’t do that, people will think you are a girl’ when I played with dolls or danced around but I didn’t really care. My mother was very protective of me and I generally wasn’t allowed to play any sports. I did things in the arts and you don’t think about it at the time, but the arts is an escape from reality. And church. I was always doing something at church. I was occasionally called queer or sissy or something like that but it wasn’t something that occurred all that much. After school I was cast in the European tour of HAIR (which is where Cam and I met) and in that show you were encouraged to just be you, you didn’t have to be gay or straight or anything. There was that freedom to just do you, so when I got back to New York and started auditioning I was all like, ‘I have to act like *this* now?’” I never knew what anybody wanted, what type of black, what kind of gay. I just wanted to do me, but I certainly didn’t think I could play straight roles. They just seemed so far off. But that switched when I did a production of *All the Way* at St. Louis Rep. I was so in my head about the sexuality of everything and again I was so concerned with how much of myself to put into a role. But when I booked and performed *All the Way* something clicked because I realized that it didn’t have anything to do with sexuality at all. I had never thought like that before because I was just so hung up on me and where I

was in the role. I think,” Cam continues,” that as gay men we are afraid of our power, our power of expressing and allowing ourselves to be expressive, but I realized this is my truth. It was a very eye opening experience for me.

But I still have those hang-ups. I recently had an audition as a series regular on a new Netflix series and my agent told me it was for a lawyer. I started thinking of all the ways I could be a lawyer and I thought, okay, a lawyer is classy, I can be classy. Or sophisticated. But then I got the sides and they said the lawyer was ‘macho’ and I thought, I can’t be macho. I can’t be what I think of as macho. I got in the way of myself and got caught up in my head. And then I started thinking about what was macho for African American men and I got even more caught up. But then I eventually asked myself, ‘What’s *my* macho?’ And I’ve realized that I have to take each role on a case by case basis.”

Cam continued with another example, “Just yesterday I had an audition to be a nurse on the show *Gotham* and I figured out who this nurse was for me and I read the sides in the audition and the casting director said, ‘Oh, this nurse has a little bit of sass!’ and I said, ‘yes this nurse does.’ Because I have learned you have to do you. At the end of the day you have to do you. You know what?,” Cam asks, “some of the gayest people I know are straight! Isn’t that funny. It’s really not about the sexuality at all and that’s the thing I realized; I was booking work that has nothing to do with my sexuality.”

I asked Cam if he thought this new approach had to do with maturity and just figuring out how the business worked. He responded, “I used to have these qualities that didn’t serve me. I came off more affected because I gave them

what I thought they wanted rather than playing what I thought the idea of the character was. I was just always too timid to put myself out there and there was so much figuring out that had to be done. I am not going to lie,” he continues,” I do find power or, I’m not sure what it is, satisfaction, maybe in being perceived as straight. I was down home in Arkansas at this bar and this woman came up to me telling me how I reminded her of this guy she used to be in love with and I felt all kinds of Billy Dee cool, and I don’t know what that is but I do find some kind of satisfaction in the fact that I was just being me and there was this sort of acceptance. At another audition the other day for a new Hulu series I went in for a junkie, and when I got a callback my agent was surprised because she said she didn’t know I could play a junkie. And I thought, ‘I’m an actor!’ I can do more than how society chooses to categorize me.”

I remarked on the amount of auditions Cam had. “You seem to be really busy these days with auditions, that’s great!”

“It is,” Cam replied. “I’m finally looking at myself as an actor, not as a gay actor.”

I met **James Anderson** the fall of 1987 as a freshman at NCSA. James was the first out gay friend I ever had. He was in a long-term relationship with someone and he seemed stable and confident. He was kind and made me laugh. I was eager to hear what James remember about our training at NCSA. He had gone to the school two years earlier as part of a Theatre Arts Program and had returned now as a freshman to begin the regular undergraduate program.

“Well, I remember Bob Francesconi talking to me at the end of my first year. Only two people got asked back to return from my class and nobody could believe the two students that the faculty had chosen to continue. It was a conversation before I went in to face the faculty and find out I had been “cut.” He asked me if I was gay. I don’t remember what I said at the time, because I don’t really know how comfortable I was with my sexuality at the time. I probably used my go to answer which was something about falling in love with a person who ever that may be. But then he did speak to me about my physicality and told me I needed to have a great sense of gravity and take up more space physically, something like that. Even though this came after him asking specifically about my sexuality, I didn’t take it that way. To me, I took it as a way to build my craft as an actor. It helped me, ultimately, to understand just how important crafting the physicality of the actor is. To me, it has always been the most important thing. I understand what Stanislavski was hoping to achieve with creating something from the inside out, shedding light on that inner darkness, but for me, the physicality really is necessary to fully bring that about. For my own acting education I always worked well when rolling on the ground and exploring what animal I was or what color. I think that type of training is vital for an actor. I mean I do remember hearing specific things like ‘don’t lock your knees’ because, I guess that fluidity in the knees identifies more as masculine, you aren’t bouncing up and down, but otherwise, the direction was something like, ‘tone down the campiness’ and I am not sure I would know exactly how to tell someone to do just that.”

James recalls a time when he felt he did receive great choreographic advice. "I was in a production of Lucy Prebble's *ENRON* at Burning Coal Theatre Co. and there was a chorus of us playing stockbrokers. The look the choreographer was going for was unified, but also there was certainly a masculine vibe going on. I remember being told specifically to keep the feet pointing forward, to not relax into one hip and not to break the line of the wrist. These were simple instructions but they really seemed to do the trick of portraying a unified style of masculinity and they were helpful in creating the look the choreographer was going for. I don't believe the final result would have been as successful had we been told to 'butch it up' or 'be more masculine.' If the choreographer has done their job and the actor has done theirs, it shouldn't be an issue. But it does seem that just telling someone to do something differently and then not telling them what you mean doesn't ultimately solve the problem at hand."

James continued to speak on actor training. "I think it's very important for an actor to be grounded in their sound. It's more of that exploring but you can't just jump into something and expect to have good results. I think young actors don't realize that sometimes. They want to jump into a character without having done the work. What they don't realize is that all those layers come from working on the craft, the final product is a by-product of all the work."

I asked James some of the things he has done or still does socially that he does consciously or perhaps unconsciously to "straighten up." He responded, "I rarely cross my legs at the knee. I do that ankle at the knee type of leg cross."

It's something I was aware of when I was younger and I have carried that one with me through life. Also, do you remember that 'look at your fingernails' thing as a kid?" Until that moment I had completely forgotten about that 'fingernail thing' but at James' suggestion it all came flooding back. As I recall I was on the middle school bus on the way home from school when I was asked by a girl I didn't really know to 'Look at your fingernails.' I remember being weary of how I did this and obviously looked at my nails in an odd way because the girl and what seemed like the entire rest of the bus broke out in laughter. "You look at your fingernails like a girl!" I was horrified and embarrassed, obviously not knowing the 'boy' way to look at my nails. James continues, "When you look at your nails, curling them into your palm is considered the masculine way, while flipping your palm downwards with the back of your hand facing upwards while you inspect them is considered feminine. It's the same with looking at the bottom of your shoe. How do you look at the bottom of your shoe?" he asks. The funny thing (or maybe the sad thing) is, is that I got a little nervous wondering if I would look at the bottom of my shoe the correct/masculine way for myself. I thought a bit how I would respond to this query and finally announced, "well, I kind of do that ankle to knee cross, turning my foot under to look."

"That's the masculine way." James responded and I felt a surge of pride. "Looking back over your shoulder to your upturned foot is considered the feminine way."

The memory of the fingernail flipping on the bus and the shoe- sole- looking got me to thinking again about the origin of placing things (i.e

mannerisms, colors, toys) in those “boy/girl”, ‘masculine/feminine” boxes and how I can’t wait for a future where these ideas are history.

I spoke briefly with another gay classmate of mine from NCSA, **Andrew Corren** about our times there. Andy and I had actually met two summers prior to our arrival at NCSA when we met at the NC Governor’s School in the summer of 1986. We eventually became roommates our freshman year. Andy’s NCSA experience was very different from what I remember. “Oh Matty,” Andy starts, “first of all it was an incredibly homophobic place. I was actually put on artistic probation for being too flamboyant and for my gay mannerisms. In acting class Bob Murray actually forced me to make out with a girl in a scene until he believed I wanted it. There was this idea of a masculine ideal, what a man should be and I felt I was always in trouble for my lack of masculinity. The school was a product of the times, it was structured and institutional.”

Like James and myself, Andy doesn’t remember given anything specific to “do” in creating this masculine vibe we were to emulate. “I just read it all as don’t be gay, but I didn’t know how to do that.” I didn’t either. And why should one?

I wanted to get some current energy about how things were specifically in the film industry so I discussed the current state of the “business” for gay actors with a high profile Hollywood manager (who prefers to remain anonymous) to get the pulse of today’s status. When I asked if “being gay” was still an issue for actors, his answer came quickly. “It is, unfortunately, an issue. Look, on a bigger

macro scale it is all about how something is financed and how something is distributed. Today's market is on a global scale, so it's all based on content and how that content is going to sell in Poland, Russia, China, Switzerland, Arab countries, the Middle East (his list went on and on). So while something may be successful in the United States and Canada, this doesn't necessarily transfer to the rest of the world and that's important when somebody is spending 150 million dollars on something. Take for example Disney's new live action *Beauty and the Beast*, a repressive government like Russia or North Korea might not distribute something that is making news about having a gay character, even if it is minimal and not central to the story.

"The truth is, Disney may be forced to come up with an "alt" ending or an "alt" storyline for this thing. I mean, look at *Moonlight*, this year's Oscar winner for Best Picture. This movie will never be distributed in China, Russia or any Arab countries with the exception of Israel, because of the gay storyline."

"If you are an out gay actor, and you are a good actor you will work, of course you will, but that actor's talent is only about 11% of the entire process. The other 89% is the decision of the director, producers, distribution, the studio and anyone else who has a say. If this known out gay actor is active and out on social media, for example or has been in any type of celebrity gossip about being gay this will certainly factor into the decision. I talk at length with my openly gay clients, I don't mask anything because most of the time it *is* a binary choice, especially once you get to a certain level. Look at Taylor Lautner. There was a huge coordinated effort to hide his homosexuality, from phone photo shoots, to

interviews to crews of people running around making everything appear that he is straight, because the producers of *Twilight* knew that on an international level he could *not* be gay. This has been going on for decades. The producers knew *Twilight* was going to be a huge hit and they put the money into what they needed to do to mask his public life. So it's real. On a micro level," Andy continues, "the industry is still run, owned, and facilitated by straight, white men and they only want to tell their own stories and stories they are comfortable with. They don't know other stories and they don't want to know them. Sure, there are a few gay bigwigs, like the co-president of CAA is gay and there are a few women and a few other gays, but on the whole, it's straight, white dudes and there is nobody to green light these 'other' stories."

"This is going to be tested soon, though," he continues. "Ezra Miller, who is a young gay actor," he changes gears, "well, I think the term he uses is 'queer', is going to be starring in his own Marvel feature film as Barry Allen, aka The Flash out in 2018. This is a big deal. I mean the first queer actor to front a Marvel film is coming out next year. This is really the first time this has been tested. The publicity for this thing is going to be gargantuan! I am sure his team is working and dealing with this now, because he *will* be asked about it. This will be on a global scale and it will be interesting to see how it is spinned in some countries. This guy considers himself an activist and is not shy talking about anything really. So for an actor who publicly and socially identifies as 'queer' to front something this big, especially because he is male, is major. Sarah Paulson, Michelle Rodriguez, Jodi Foster are actresses that have made the jump, but

straight men are not so bothered by lesbians and fetish lesbianism, so the standard is different when it comes to that. Men are held at a different standard in that concern.

But for most gay actors, it's complicated. At a certain level there will be decisions made about having a career or being out socially. I have managed and worked with several hunky and masculine gay actors and those traits are really disadvantageous to have, because physically they fit that ideal 'masculine' image. I've known a *lot* of actors like that."

"The truth is, everything is complicated because you can't really separate queer voices from black voices from Asian voices from women's voices. The dialogue that happens really covers all of it. A black marvel character is just as valuable as an Asian one or a woman. We are just seeing our first successful Asian sitcom in *Fresh off the Boat* and *Blackish* is the first show with black writers and directors and producers and actors. And it's 2017! The stats on women writers and directors is appalling."

"Gay rights has a very powerful lobbying group in Hollywood and on the surface things are making progress, but behind closed doors, at a certain level, not much has changed. And we aren't talking about co-stars here. But when you are up for a major role-playing a husband or father, you have to be perceived as straight. I think Matt Bomer is a great example of that. If Matt Bomer was straight, I guarantee you he'd be a huge movie star."

After all this Hollywood talk, I wanted to get the take of an actor who had transitioned from the theatre world in New York and see if they agreed with my manager's friends musings about gay actors in LA. **James Tabeek** has a long list of Broadway credits to his name including original casts of *Wicked*, *Mary Poppins*, *Taboo* and several seasons dancing in the *Radio City Music Hall Christmas Spectacular* (not as a Rockette, mind you) "I want to start, oh boy," James says, "where do I start. First off, let me say that there is much acceptance of gay people in theatre vs. film and TV. An actor who is obviously gay is more trusted to play straight on stage, and dancers too. Dancers who are in tune with their body, they understand the requirements, they know to be grounded and have a certain aesthetic. But there is still so much discrimination in leading roles in theatre and film. It's such a double standard in the film industry, especially how when a straight man plays a gay role, he is almost always certainly rewarded for it, you know, for their bravery and courage. But on the flip side, as a gay actor playing straight, you better just do it and you are lucky to have gotten the role. I mean, everyone says, 'but there is Neil Patrick Harris, he's accepted as straight,' but Neil Patrick Harris was established as a straight heartthrob as a teenager when no one was thinking about him sexually and this persona carried over into playing straight and being rewarded for it, but it's like a one off. So many gay actors will never be accepted or trusted to play straight. And there is also clearly a difference for women who are allowed to have this sort of sexual fluidity about them versus men who immediately get identified as gay. Women don't seem to get that stigma attached to them in the same way. And, of course,

there are a few actors who can straddle that line, like Matt Damon or Jude Law; but even then, it can go no further than a curiosity. Also, the rules are much freer in certain foreign markets when it comes to someone's sexuality. If you look at Antonio Banderas in Pedro Almodovar's films, he is clearly having sex with men, but that would never happen in an American market. And today in America this neoconservatism has brought about new worries and at the end of the day if you are not comfortable with yourself and if you are incredibly good looking, it is still very much the same as it has always been; if you want to be successful you have to 'conform' and play straight all the time or you have to play full out effeminately gay like Sean Hayes as Jack in *Will and Grace*. The truth is, there *are* masculine men who happen to be gay. A lot of them, but until there is a high profile project with masculine gay men as the lead roles and they just happen to be gay, that stigma isn't going to change."

"For me," James continues, "I have always been very aware of how I read to people. There has always been a straight side to me and it is actually authentic and it has been beneficial for me because I can kind of choose to be sexually fluid. But the men who are, like a 6 on the Kinsey scale (i.e. exclusively homosexual), they will never work in those types of roles. There was such a freedom, when I look back at when I was happiest, when I was playing gender neutral and sexually fluid. Like in the Broadway musical *Taboo*. I would be masculine in one scene and then playing characters that were more sexually fluid in another scene. Or when I was playing the Carpet in *Beauty and the Beast*. There is no sexuality there, you are a carpet, so you have to take that out of the

equation.” Since James had brought up *Beauty and the Beast*, I asked him about the current headlines about the character LeFou. “I actually did LeFou on Broadway, and again, I didn’t really consider the sexuality. He’s a funny, bumbly guy who is absolutely in love with Gaston. And that is just the truth. I just focused on what the truth was in the situation. I don’t like to “put on” anything in a role. I always focus on bringing out the qualities of groundedness and weight. But straight men do, do things differently. They speak from a lower place in their body. They have a confidence and a swagger about them, which I think stems from the result of walking through the world as a straight man. I mean straight men, and straight white men, specifically experience the world in a different way than anyone else. They don’t have to pass through all those barriers like others do, and I think that feeling stems from that. I also feel that there is a similar gay experience, a type of unconscious insecurity from always looking out for themselves or it manifests in being overly secure. There’s just a certain level of ease and confidence that straight men exude. They have a sense of control over their surroundings and of women. That certainly manifests in me when I go into my “straight side.”

I ask James if he could continue speaking about the specific physiological ways that he sees straight men differing from gay men. “Well, gay men have more variety in their gestures, so the straight mode has more of a reserved physical quality about it. I think gay men are freer with their emotions, whereas straight men tend to be less emotional. I had a friend calling me about this exact thing recently. She has a dance student who is incredibly effeminate and just

100% gay even though he's only twelve or so. And she wanted to know what to say to him, how to help him. She wanted to know what I would recommend to say to him. I told her to tell him to have a sense of pride about who he is while at the same time educating him, avoiding the terminology that is associated with masculinity or being a man. I would say things like, take a wider stance when you plie, and drop the weight, keep energy in your arms and don't break the wrist line, keep the energy flowing throughout the arm through the fingers, to dance more aggressively and talk about certain ways to hold his head. We need to foster a sense that they are perfect the way they are, the same way we do for straight men. We don't do this for straight women or any women. But for some reason, straight men are always perfect just the way they are, but everyone else has to change to suit them. For gay actors, we need to tell them that they will be hired to do roles that are just like them, physically and vocally but we also want to give them options so they have the opportunities to work. I want them to expand as an artist, not shut off their authenticity."

Paul Iacono is a former student of mine from my time spent teaching at the Professional Performing Arts School in New York beginning in 2002. He was a fascinating student with a long history of performing professionally by the time he made it to high school. At a young age he had become a darling of Rosie O'Donnell and was featured regularly on her show doing his eight-year-old impersonations of Frank Sinatra and Ethel Merman. She even had his New Jersey middle school production of *Oliver* featured on her show. Paul had an impressive list of theatre credits to his name, performing alongside the likes of

Elaine Stritch, Christine Ebersole, Lili Taylor and Sheri Rene Scott. Although Paul was not out in high school he did have a drag character that he would occasionally perform from time to time, a fast talking, cigarette smoking grandmother. Hoping to explore this character in performance I cast Paul as Granny in a production of *Into the Woods* I was directing at PPAS. This caused somewhat of a pickle for certain faculty members wondering what kind of message I was sending him. In several faculty meetings I had to fight for my casting choice explaining that I was not attempting to pigeonhole him into having one experience, but hopefully allowing him to explore this character as a viable option for performance. Perhaps I was a bit ahead of my time in 2004, but Paul was eager to do it and ultimately stopped the show every night when he emerged from the big bad wolf. Paul's career took off when he booked one of the lead roles in the 2009 Neil Baczynsky remake of *Fame* and his star continued to rise with the title role in the hit MTV series *The Hard Times of RJ Berger*. It was during this time that Paul came out in a *Village Voice* article by Michael Musto. In the article Paul states, "I didn't think I'd be coming out. But why not now? I think it's the right time to say something. It's not about me; it's about change and the work." He was named one of OUT Magazine's 100 most influential gay, lesbian, bisexual, or transgender people for 2013. I was eager to speak with Paul not only about the topics of my thesis but also to get his take on this binary choice that gay men have to make in Hollywood. How was he able to make his sexuality and his personality meld in a way that honored who he was at his core.

“Okay, first I have to say,” Paul started out, “that I am obsessed with the topic! But I also have to say, that you were the model for me. You taught me how to have posture, to be gentle and friendly and so many other things that a gay man could be. I grew up traditionally Italian and so there was this expectation for me to be a ‘man’. I had certain ideas from what that was supposed to be, but I also learned things from others about what that was supposed to be. I never felt there was any go between places. I was always a bit of a clown so everyone just always assumed I was acting all the time. I had this idea of what it meant to be masculine and I was always trying to adapt to what I thought was the correct attitude, the demeanor and the cadence. When I was at Marymount Manhattan we had to lead the physical warm-up for the class as part of an assignment and I just remember when it was my turn I found myself being very hyper masculine, very physical and making everyone do pushups and stuff. I laugh looking back at it, but I just thought that’s what I should do. I thought it was what was needed. Thankfully, I adapted and realized, I think, ahead of my time, that there can be fluidity. I believe that gender can become, or at least I hope, less binary and turn into sort of a something like quantum sexuality. You know, in the future everyone will have accessibility to both the masculine and feminine and we can all pick and choose how much or little we want and there isn’t such stigma attached to our choices. You know, *The Celluloid Closet* was big for me when I first saw it. Because I learned about all those coded characters and realized that there had always been gay characters and gay things going on, even in Charlie Chaplin’s silent films. This blew my

mind and opened my eyes to so many things. As we move forward I think it's really important what the media is portraying and the characters that kids are watching. Things are changing, even if slowly and characters and storylines are becoming more sexually fluid and we, as gay and trans people, are getting more and more role models all the time. I mean in shows like *Transparent* there are several actual trans performers performing trans roles and this is so important.

I asked Paul to speak about the binary choice in Hollywood and how he seemed to sidestep that and if he, at some point had to make the choice to be out socially and how he did that. "Yes, I did find my own thing," he says. "And I always tell everyone, it's about finding *you*. Everyone's chemistry is different when comes to how much masculine or feminine we project. I have always been aware of this so I was able to alter what I was projecting. But I can remember a specific moment when my publicist, who actually left me to go work for the Kardashians came up to me and said, 'no one has told me to say anything but I am concerned that if they can't sell you to young girls you may be out of business.' It was all about sponsorships and how much money could be made. But I didn't only want to do those roles and eventually I did a 180-degree shift and came out as queer, because I wanted to be visible like that and I wanted to be tangible for others like me. It may be a little too early to call myself a role model, but I realized that the people I really identified with were queer and it became part of my purpose to shed light. I couldn't do that when I was acting all the time. Some actors can do it, and many do, but I have been luck in that I have been able to be an insider and an outsider at the same time."

Chapter Five

Think Genghis Khan
and think Taras Bulba
Think of Attila's Huns
And Robin Hood's men.
Try not to weaken or collapse
If they discover the petticoat under your chaps
You can climb back up the mountain once again.
La Cage Aux Folles

So the question remains, *should* we straighten up? I can answer with a definitive maybe. The choice is yours, or his or hers or theirs. I think what I have learned is that you have to *want* to straighten up and you if you make that decision, know why. I'll admit that I do straighten up by making specific physical and vocal choices intended to read a certain way by the audience. I make choices concerning the pitch and tone of my voice that come from a healthy and rehearsed place. I straighten up when I go home to the small conservative town to visit my family, especially when going out to eat or walking downtown. I straighten up when auditioning for a straight role in a play, musical, commercial or film. I straighten up when meeting a large group of people for the first time, or when I was working as a Cruise Director. And I do it for me. I do it to feel safe, I do it to feel accepted, I do it to be cast in a 'straight' role. But this is where I've come to and my own conclusion. This is how I cope now, today. Luckily, I have the size and vocal range to make these adjustments. As societal ideas and customs shift more positively toward the LGBTQ community, and as I mature and grow wiser, perhaps I will shift too and let my guard down a bit. So after all my research and t interviews and strolls down memory lane, what would I

recommend to those young actors who may resemble myself some thirty odd years ago?

First, I would tell them that they are perfect just the way they are. If they are gay, great. If they are transitioning, great. If they are bi, or questioning or lesbian until graduation, that's lovely. I would encourage them to start by loving what they've got to work with. I feel that if any of my teachers had the courage to pull me aside and let me know that my sexuality had nothing to do with my perceived performance, I would have taken a huge sigh of relief. I would have relaxed a bit. Maybe it wasn't the time yet for such utterances of self-approval or acceptance, but I do feel that in today's climate it is my duty and responsibility to allow a student to believe they can succeed regardless of sexual or physical differences.

Next, I would encourage my colleagues and teachers of young actors to be aware of the language they are using, realize that sexuality and gender are two different things. Telling a boy with a penis to, "Be a man!" is stupid, lazy, and irrelevant. Understand what you, the teacher, desire from that actor and frame that direction in words that deal with things outside of sex or gender. Do you desire the actor to be more grounded? Take up more space? Be more aggressive? Have a stronger physicality? Use a lower or different vocal register? Then say those things! Perhaps it is time for some instructors and persons in leadership positions to take sensitivity training or engage in learning and exploring new ways to engage with students who identify as LGBTQ. I would also encourage instructors to expand their knowledge of new plays and

musicals that deal with gay and transgendered youth. There is a wealth of great drama and comedy that is perhaps better suited for our students who do not identify as straight. But if you must have students who identify as gay play “straight” then take some of the burden of how to make this happen. The student, however they identify, is there to learn. Not to be mocked or told they are less than because you don’t have the skills or language to accommodate them. As leaders of today’s youth, we must take our roles seriously and realize that the seeds we plant will grow in some form. As times and attitudes change, as humans evolve and expand, we must learn to expand as well.

But all the responsibility can not and should not fall on the teachers alone, so I say to those young actors and students who decide they do want to tackle playing straight, who do want to have it all as an actor shifting between all types of sexualities and physicalities or at least have those dreams, I will tell you this; it is going to take some work on your part. Think of learning these new physical traits with the type of attitude that my voice teacher Leslie Hunt encouraged and remember that, “If you can can do it (straighten up) you can do without it (the straightening up) but if you can’t do it (straighten up) then you simply can’t do it.”

I would recommend a background in some sort of dance or movement study so that you can be aware of all your body is capable of doing. You must understand how you move and why you move, and you must be willing to do the research and rehearsal to find out why this is for a character. Gleaned from my research and interviews I can offer you this:

- Stay grounded. Consider wearing heavy boots in rehearsal. Be aware of how and why you are standing or moving the way you are.
- Keep your feet parallel and avoid standing in second position. When walking forward think of keeping your knees moving straight ahead and forward, aligned with your feet and continuing up to your hips.
- Keep hips aligned and do not pop out to one side.
- Keep torso taut and pulled in with a strength. Let there always be some tension.
- Allow the energy for the movement of your hands and arms come from you back and be originated in the scapula. Think of energy flowing through your fingers and hands and move them with purpose.
- Do not break the arm line at the wrist.
- Think of your head connected to the natural line of your spine and keep it going upwards, avoiding cocking it from side to side.
- When focusing on an object or looking for someone or something, physically move the head first and then follow with the eyes.

This, of course, is not a concise list, but could be considered starting guidelines to work with and specific movements and isolations that I have found to be effective in my own career. They must be rehearsed until they come across and natural and not forced. Like any physical art, you must put in the work and physical effort. If you feel these are masking you or confining your movement in any way, these ideas may not be for you. I am not attempting to say that these things should in any way replace your natural inclinations, personality or habits,

but they could be used as guidance for an actor wanted to reach a desired effect.

I realize that to many, these ideas of physical restriction or adjustment seem like the wrong way to approach this entire idea, but hopefully you can also see that men, like myself, have employed them for decades for whatever personal reason.

Most importantly, I would encourage young actors who feel they must alter their physicality in any way to do so with a sense of self-love and respect. Treat these ideas and concepts as another tool to use at will, like a certain style of dance, a specific dialect, a chosen emotional response, a deeper commitment to character. But know that none of these alterations ever need to replace who you are as a person. Keep the character just as that. Bring that character to life with appropriate physical and vocal choices that serve the world of the play. Realize that your job as an actor requires more than just learning the lines and relying on talent. Do the work. Be yourself, your brave, daring and beautiful self. And if some director or teacher or anyone asks you to “Butch it up”, or “Act like a Man” or to “Straighten Up”, realize that the choice is all yours and you can choose to do it or do without it. And maybe ask them to tell you what they really want in language that represents the life and physicality of the character.

And remember perhaps the best advice of all, in the words of Oscar Wilde who said, “Be yourself. Everyone else is taken.”

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Vita

Matt Ferrell was born on Langley Air Force Base, VA on March 22, 1969. He is a graduate of Emerson College with a BFA in Theater Performance (May 1992) and obtained his MFA in Theatre Pedagogy from Virginia Commonwealth University (expected May 2017). In the fall of 2017 he will be joining the faculty at Winthrop University as an Assistant Professor of Theatre. Matt is a published author, a member of Actor's Equity and Local 764 IATSE. Matt performed nationally and internationally in tours of *HAIR*, *The Rocky Horror Show*, *Carnival*, *JFK: The Rock Opera* and *The Threepenny Opera*. He has completed two contracts with Disney Cruise Line and performed multiple shows at both Universal Studios, Hollywood and Busch Gardens, Williamsburg as well as shows and readings Off-Broadway and regionally. As an educator, Matt spent several years teaching and directing at the Professional Performing Arts School in mid-town Manhattan and at the Greater Hartford Academy of the Arts in Hartford, CT where he helped to develop new musicals and created a summer program in musical theatre. He has directed shows at Theatre 315 and The Secret Theatre in NYC and spent several years directing, choreographing and teaching at Stagedoor Manor. He has taught acting classes at TVI Studios in NYC and guest taught at high schools throughout the US. When not performing or teaching, Matt can sometimes be found backstage at Radio City Music Hall where he has worked with the Rockettes, Barry Manilow, Cirque du Soleil, America's Got Talent, and the cast of SNL, among others.