“Your Asshole is Hanging Outside of Your Body?”: Excess, AIDS, and Shame in the Theatre of Sky Gilbert

Dirk Gindt

My vision of gay culture is that it’s something different and of value. A lot of gay men want to show straight people that we’re as nice and sweet and loving and caring as they are. And I say, forget it. You can be as caring as you want, but you still suck dick, and that’s a problem for them.

Sky Gilbert

When the conservative Canadian newspaper the National Post was calling for nominations to identify the country’s most important cultural personalities in 2005, openly gay critic and author R.M. Vaughan boldly suggested Toronto-based playwright and director Sky Gilbert, offering the following motivation:

Until recently, Canada’s literary establishment (particularly the more cautious, closeted members of its lavender mafia) liked to pretend that Sky Gilbert didn’t exist. When it did speak his name, it was always modified with a ‘too’ – Gilbert was too radical, too open, too confrontational, too sexy, too outrageous. In other words, he was – and still is – everything Can-Lit is not.

These lines concisely summarize the controversial reception of Gilbert and his work over the last three-and-a-half decades. Canada perceives Gilbert (both the man and the artist) as the embodiment of excess who seems to be unable to say or do anything in moderation, much to the distress of his critics and to the joy of his adherents. A co-founder of Buddies in Bad Times Theatre, Gilbert served as the company’s first artistic director between 1979 and 1997 and helped establish what is today North America’s largest professional queer theatre. In addition to staging many of his own plays at Buddies, he has also left his mark on alternative and experimental English-Canadian theatre with the introduction of the annual Rhubarb! Festival that promotes young and upcoming performing artists. Finally, he is a well-known HIV/AIDS activist, a spokesperson for gay rights, and a professor at the University of Guelph.

Surprisingly little interest has been devoted to Gilbert’s rich theatrical output, a lacuna which this chapter seeks to address. Concentrating on two of his full-length plays that deal with the subject of HIV/AIDS (Drag Queens on Trial from 1985 and I Have AIDS! from 2009), my aim is to outline how they allow for the textual, visual, and material manifestation of various forms of excess. I suggest analyzing these plays through the concepts of shame and, more specifically, Gay Shame. AIDS panic, largely though not exclusively fuelled by homophobia, has since the beginning of the epidemic conflated gay sex and excess through the shaming of gay promiscuity and sexual practices.
Shame and excess are thus related, and shaming practices are frequently deployed against people whose bodies, behaviors, desires, or sexualities are deemed to be excessive. Nevertheless, as I intend to show in this essay, *Drag Queens on Trial* and *I Have AIDS!* demonstrate that the staging of excess can be a subversively queer strategy of resistance against shame.\(^5\)

Combining a drama analysis with production analysis, my interest lies in the published versions as well as the original staging of the two plays, that is, their visual, material, and corporeal coming-to-life in the theatre, the context of production, and the process of reception. In order to reconstruct and analyze these ephemeral theatrical events, I draw on various sources such as reviews, Gilbert’s theatre memoirs, interviews, publicity photographs and images from the performances, and, in the case of the second production, a preserved video recording. The dramatic texts themselves are helpful, especially since Gilbert himself stresses that, even when developing a script, his “work is extremely theatrical and visual.”\(^6\) As a rule, Gilbert always directs the first productions of his plays and works closely with the ensemble in the process.

**Act I: Drag Queens on Trial**

First produced in October 1985, *Drag Queens on Trial* remains to this day one of Gilbert’s biggest critical and commercial successes. Subtitled *A Courtroom Melodrama*, the play’s protagonists are three flamboyant drag queens who have adapted their first names from iconic movie stars: Marlene Delorme (played by Doug Millar in the original production), “a tall, dignified blonde;” Judy Goose (the late Leonard Chow to whom the published play is dedicated), “a short, undignified blonde;” and Lana Lust (Kent Staines) who is “a romantic redhead.”\(^7\) They are thrown into a Kafkaesque trial, divided into three parts in which each is called to the stand to defend herself against various accusations concerning her non-normative sexuality and gender performance. In these scenes the other two drag queens impersonate the prosecutor as well as various surprise witnesses. True to the genre of melodrama, the surprise witnesses, all of them acquaintances from the past, are evil conspirators who cause unforeseen complications and uncover a number of dark secrets, including the fact that all three drag queens displayed effeminate traits when growing up in small town Canadian communities. Furthermore, their life stories are revealed to be fictions and lies: Marlene turns out to be a fake blonde who has been coloring her hair since she was a little boy; Judy’s dramatic life story is a rip-off inspired by the Hollywood movie *Madame X* starring Lana Turner; and Lana’s ongoing health problems, which she attempts to deny, are the result of being HIV-positive.

When Gilbert first staged the play, Buddies in Bad Times Theatre did not yet have its current and permanent home on Alexander Street adjacent to the
Toronto gay village. As a result, the performances of *Drag Queens on Trial* took place in a rented space, the semi-pornographic movie theatre Toronto Cinema on Bloor Street West. The colors red and black dominated the relatively simple set, courtesy of Tanuj Kohli, and harmonized with the movie theatre’s unique interior, the highlight of which was a stone fountain in the lobby. A wooden witness stand functioned as the area where each drag queen had to defend herself against the allegations. The male judge was not physically present on stage, but was projected as a video recording onto a large screen. Representing the judge as a puppet master who was visually present, yet ultimately disembodied and out of reach, not only enhanced his patriarchal authority, but also illustrated the drag queens’ social marginalization and the distance between them and the legal apparatus. When the court was in recession, Marlene, Judy, and Lana withdrew to the opposite side of the stage to a dressing room that provided a safe space where they could put on their make-up and, above all, gossip about their sexual encounters and complain about the discrimination they faced in everyday life.

From the very beginning, the play takes the drag queens’ fondness for colorful accessories, over-sized wigs, and luscious beauty products *ad absurdum* when Judy attempts to put on a lipstick that she purchased in a second-hand store in a bohemian part of Toronto. Its “jungle red” color turns out to be the result of radioactive ingredients, which does not worry Judy who simply states: “It must be fantastic lipstick, eh?” Ignorant of the potential consequences for her health, she needs much convincing from her friends before she decides not to use it. In this scene, Gilbert conjures excess through Judy’s desire to be glamorous and radiant no matter what the consequences. A usually innocuous object, the jungle-red lipstick also highlights the theatricality of the show; the drag queens are “back-stage,” putting on make-up and getting ready for their gender performances as well as their “front-stage” performances at the witness stand. Theatre critic and author Robert Wallace states: “Like a drag queen who simultaneously conceals and reveals her artifice by wearing nylons with seams, Gilbert reveals the ‘seams’ of his constructions: he exposes, in other words, the methods by which he makes the ordinary seem extraordinary.” Dispensing with realistic or naturalistic stage aesthetics, Gilbert frequently works with a highly theatrical mode, where both the performance and the characters draw attention to themselves, thereby revealing their own artificiality. In the original production of *Drag Queens on Trial*, voice-overs were used on multiple occasions to inform the audience of the characters’ inner thoughts. Dramatic lighting effects interrupted the narrative flow and on several occasions the characters spoke directly to the audience.

Several dialogues that unfold in the drag queens’ dressing room blend the fictional world of the play with social life in the gay village by making explicit allusions to concrete locations, to the point that the published text includes a glossary with bars and places that were specific to gay life in Toronto in the
early 1980s such as “Wellesley Fitness: the local gym where all the fags hang out,” “Cornelius: premiere drag club in the city,” and “Queen’s Dairy: greasy spoon where drag queen hookers have breakfast and fags bring their tricks the morning after.” At one point, the drag queens self-referentially refer to Buddies in Bad Times Theatre and its waiter Dirk who is not only “luscious,” but also has “the dick of death.”

Understood as the opposite of realism and its perceived sincerity, naturalness, and objectivity, theatricality designates the artificial, the inauthentic, and the hyperbolic. According to theatre scholars Tracy Davis and Thomas Postlewait, “the polarity between the natural (or the real) and the theatrical (or the artificial) carries a moral as well as an aesthetic judgment.”

This binary opposition is not only value-charged, but also coded in gendered terms, with the masculine representing the “natural” and normative, while the feminine is marked as deceptive, dubious, and ultimately immoral and devoid of content. As one of many designations of excess, theatricality is often perceived as feminine and “too much” vis-à-vis the perceived naturalness of the masculine. It reveals too much, because it is excessive; yet, ostensibly, this excess only serves to mask its inner lack and emptiness: “So, while the theatre reveals an excessive quality that is showy, deceptive, exaggerated, artificial, or affected, it simultaneously conceals or masks an inner emptiness, a deficiency or absence of that to which it refers.”

The artificiality of gender and the theatricality of drag are well-argued for in the scholarly literature, ranging from Joan Riviere’s analysis of femininity as masquerade and Esther Newton’s studies of camp in drag culture to Judith Butler’s theory of gender performativity.

In an article written a few years after the play was first performed, Gilbert firmly situates drag in the context of gay culture and gay bars. He rejects the oft-repeated assumption that drag is an expression of gay men’s hatred for women and argues that it reveals the artifice of gender as well as the compulsory social expectations for men to be masculine and women to be feminine. Moreover, drag parodies straight popular culture and offers the possibility for anyone to be glamorous and feel beautiful with the right dress and the right make-up. Gilbert’s arguments foreshadow Butler’s claims that drag, because of its hyperbolic characteristics, has the potential to unmask the performativity of gender. Well aware of the sometimes murderous social structures that encourage and prescribe normative gendered acts, Butler also points out that “as a strategy of survival within compulsory systems, gender is a performance with clearly punitive consequences.”

Marlene, Judy, and Lana are faced with such consequences when they are summoned to court, charged with being drag queens and found guilty of failing to perform a socially prescribed, heterosexual masculinity. They transgress gendered boundaries and poke fun at them in the process. However, Gilbert’s heroines do more than criticize heteronormative gender structures – they also put forward a critique against a particular type of performance of gay masculinity,
the macho clone who was a dominant force in Toronto’s gay bars in the early
1980s. Gilbert reminisces about how, at the time, “the clone look was in vogue –
inspired by Tom of Finland … . Butch gay guys (or gay guys who wished
they were butch) donned work boots, handlebar mustaches and plaid shirts
in adoring imitation.” The macho clone became a representative of “true”
masculinity and, in the eyes of many clones, the effeminacy of male drag was
offensive.18

The resistance to drag within the gay community became particularly
obvious when the actors, in a cunning publicity move, refused to stay
confined to the spatial limits of the stage and decided to further blur the
boundaries between theatre and reality. One night during rehearsals, the
three performers, in drag and in character, invaded Toronto’s gay village
on Church Street and Wellesley Street. Some of the clubs and bars refused
them entrance, an experience that found its way into the finished play, when
Marlene complained that a doorman of the popular local bar Chaps, long since
out of business, forbade her to enter.19 Immersing themselves in the Toronto
nightlife helped the actors to develop their characters and infuse them with
life, but the experience also served as a reminder of the deep suspicion of
effeminacy felt in some parts of the gay community:

Gay men had spent the ’70s developing their masculine selves, and many were
offended by drag, which they saw as a backward move to effeminacy. And
some lesbians found it politically incorrect – they thought that drag queens
were making fun of women.20

While these nightly stunts were partially designed to provoke, Gilbert and his
ensemble also identified the transphobia and internalized homophobia with
which some members of the community struggled at the time (and continue
to do so today) and questioned the illusion of a homogeneous gay community
by unmasking its mechanisms of exclusion. Moreover, by celebrating the
discursive link between male homosexuality and femininity that is often the
primary target of homophobic (and misogynist) attacks, they constituted a
thorn in the side of a community that was trying to reform itself on the basis
of a “true” masculinity. In the process, they drew attention to the perceived
divisions between theatricality and “authenticity,” between the excessive and
the “natural,” by simply being too much.

Feminist theatre scholar Sue-Ellen Case points to a highly relevant
feature of theatricality and moves beyond defining it as a non-realistic
mode of representation. Referring to the heritage of 1960s performance art
and happenings and the attempts to break down the boundaries between
stage and auditorium, she states: “Theatricality exceeds theater as it exceeds
traditional social boundaries. It marks the restrictions of the theater by
spilling over its boundaries as it spills over the boundaries of ‘good taste’
or ‘proper comportment’ in the social realm.” Theatricality is excessive in
as much as it refuses to stay confined to the stage, which, as we have seen, greatly enhances its political and activist potential. Case further notes: “By spilling the theater out into the streets, theatricality essentially construct[s] a shared space between the stage and the social movement.”

In Gilbert’s stage aesthetics, theatre and activism are merged. Moreover, the questions he explores in his plays are directly related to (and sometimes in opposition to) the gay community, of which he forms a part. In accordance with these activist and artistic strategies, the drag queens made another public appearance in December 1985 in an interview with the morning paper The Globe and Mail, in which they shared their secrets of femininity, which they defined through an over-generous use of accessories, make-up, and large hair. For the stage production, costume designer Laura Divilio successfully created this sense of sartorial excess. She contrasted large wigs and fake furs with ripped nylon panties and conspicuous underwear worn on top of outerwear. During her trial, Lana Lust, for instance, wore a cone bra on top of her dress. Its size would have outshone Madonna’s iconic Jean-Paul Gaultier piece that the singer wore a few years later on her Blond Ambition tour. A photograph taken to document the production illustrates the difference between the spare courtroom and the flamboyant drag queen who proudly wore her thick lipstick, large cone bra, and conspicuously fake jewelry and who defended herself with melodramatic gestures and facial expressions (Figure 11.1).

While Gilbert’s clever use of theatricality is indebted to twentieth-century modernism as well as various vaudeville traditions, Wallace importantly notes that the playwright’s “deployment of the approach … investigates new territory – the slippery terrain of queer sex where not only gender roles but also sexual behaviors are mutable, unfixed, open.” Indeed, Lana, Judy, and Marlene embody Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick’s seminal definition of queer as “the open mesh of possibilities, gaps, overlaps, dissonances and resonances, lapses and excesses of meaning when the constituent elements of anyone’s gender, of anyone’s sexuality aren’t made (or can’t be made) to signify monolithically.”

Apart from being drag queens (and therefore already a serious provocation and threat to gay macho masculinity as well as to the notion of a stable, heterosexual femininity), Marlene, Judy, and Lana occasionally work as prostitutes, cruise public lavatories in the search of anonymous sexual contacts, and abuse various substances. They are the embodiments of all the “sordid” sides from which the well-dressed and well-behaved gay poster boy representatives and spokespersons of the gay movement try to distance themselves in the name of gay pride and which straight society and the media love to sensationalize or demonize. They are regarded as shameful queers, who should feel badly about their appearances, actions, choices, bodies, and sexual habits.

Gay Shame has been defined by David Halperin and Valerie Traub as an activist movement that unites “queers whose identities or social markings
11.1 Lana Lust (Kent Staines) passionately defends her promiscuity before the ominous judge. © David Rasmus
make them feel out of place in gay pride’s official ceremonies” and “queers that mainstream gay pride is not always proud of, who don’t lend themselves easily to the propagandistic publicity of gay pride or to its identity-affirming functions.”26 These include lesbian butches, drag queens, bondage/discipline/sadism/masochism communities, sex workers, and racialized queers. Importantly, Gay Shame designates a strategy of resistance for queers who are not only targets of mainstream society’s discrimination, but also face rejection from within the gay community that is embarrassed by them and their unapologetic displays of sexuality. For fear of scaring away advertisers and sponsors, these groups are confined to the later parts of pride parades – long after mainstream politicians, lesbian and gay police officers, soldiers, and athletes have received their share of applause and cheering by the onlookers. They are further reduced to almost complete invisibility and silence in popular culture. In Gilbert’s plays, however, these social and sexual outcasts take center-stage and shamelessly revel in their excesses.

A publicity picture taken by artist and photographer David Rasmus, which was used in various advertisements for the play, shows Marlene, Judy, and Lana in a styling salon, reading the latest tabloids that announce the death of actor Rock Hudson on October 2, 1985 (Figure 11.2). The front page of one of

11.2 A publicity shot for Drag Queens on Trial shows Marlene Delorme (Doug Millar), Judy Goose (Leonard Chow), and Lana Lust (Kent Staines) at a beauty salon reading the news about actor Rock Hudson’s death from AIDS-related illnesses. © David Rasmus
the papers displays a picture of Linda Evans, who appeared alongside Rock Hudson in his last role on the prime time soap opera *Dynasty*, which included a notorious on-screen kiss that caused wide speculations that he might have infected Evans with HIV. Drag Queens on Trial opened less than two weeks after Hudson’s death from AIDS-related causes and the visual promotion material directly alluded to one of the major themes of the play, that is, the burgeoning HIV/AIDS epidemic that by the mid-1980s had noticeably affected the Toronto gay community and other segments of the population. A short scene set in the drag queens’ dressing room introduces the subject and offers a testimony to how the gay community was in the defining process of changing its sexual practices with the use of condoms:

Judy:  Ohhhhhh. Condoms I hate them.

Marlene:  But it is the only thing that saves you from AIDS, besides not fucking, and you can forget that.

Lana:  Yes darling. It’s one thing being fashionably self-destructive, but actually killing yourself and other people, well I draw the line there—

Judy:  But don’t you have trouble getting them on?

Marlene:  No, and you can accessorize, see? (pulling out a pack of Fiesta condoms) They come in lovely different vibrant colours to go with your bracelets and lingerie. I am particularly fond of a black bra with black condoms. I think the accents go quite nicely with my new dark lashes—

Noteworthy for its camp humor, this scene marks one of the first occasions that the subject of HIV/AIDS was mentioned on a Canadian theatre stage and reveals much about the emergence of a new queer material, visual, and sexual culture. It illustrates the urgency of the situation, but also emphasizes that AIDS is no reason to give up sex, as long as one uses protection. The object of the condom provides comic entertainment, but Marlene reducing it to a fashion accessory must not be misconstrued as a manifestation of her superficiality. It is a playful attempt to promote a life-saving practice and overcome Judy’s skepticism, a clever move in a time of uncompromising resistance to the visual representation of safer sex practices. In the early years of the epidemic, the use of explicit language and images in pamphlets that promoted safer sex practices was a point of conflict between HIV/AIDS activists on the one hand and official authorities, politicians, and funding bodies on the other hand. In order to sensitize the Toronto gay community to the use of condoms as a protective measure, the AIDS Committee Toronto (ACT) organized workshops on the topic and publications such as *Xtra*
regularly printed “Safer Sex Comix” to illustrate that safer sex could indeed be fun, just like the accessorizing strategies recommended by Marlene. Outside of the community, such non-moralizing visual and linguistic descriptions of gay men’s sex practices were deemed to be too graphic, too explicit — in other words, excessively sexual. In countries such as the U.S. and the UK, for example, HIV prevention material that was deemed to “encourage” and “condone” homosexual behavior was often banned.\textsuperscript{29} Even Canadian HIV/AIDS activists had to fight self-proclaimed moral beacons and, as a result, the gay community largely had to educate itself in order to survive not only the epidemic, but also the institutionalized homophobia enhanced by AIDS panic. In January 1986, activist Michael Lynch published an article in the influential monthly gay magazine \textit{The Body Politic}, in which he defended the use and necessity of obscene language for educating the Canadian gay community on safer sex practices:

When we come back to our obscenity ... we will bring back to our culture a specificity, and thus a safety, that has been lost. If they take away our language, it is easier for them to take away our marginal bars and baths.\textsuperscript{30}

Just before she is due in court, Lana Lust confides in her friends and worries about her declining health. Marlene and Judy urge her to consult a doctor, but she refuses. During her hearing, her doctor, impersonated by Marlene who is dressed in a white lab coat that makes her look like “the Wicked Witch of the West” and thus establishes her evilness before she even speaks,\textsuperscript{31} appears as a surprise witness in order to inform the assembly of the positive results of Lana’s HIV test. The doctor then seizes the opportunity to vent her homophobic prejudices:

You see Miss Lust has always favoured promiscuous sex, in which she has been the passive partner. She has swallowed busloads of male sperm, as well as drugging herself into a semi-conscious state every evening to loosen her so-called inhibitions, though I firmly doubt that she ever had any in the first place. These activities combined with the fact that she has been almost constantly under medication for some venereal disease or other, has caused her to contract this fatal illness ... Like many modern homosexuals, Miss Lust has committed a form of suicide due to her promiscuous habits, and now she must pay the price.\textsuperscript{32}

According to the doctor’s logic, which is representative and typical of the widespread homophobic public discourse surrounding HIV/AIDS in the 1980s and beyond, the price someone has to pay for deviant and excessive sexual activities is their health and life. Promiscuity became a central concern in the early HIV/AIDS discourse, and a recurring recommendation in prevention pamphlets was to limit the number of sexual encounters in order to diminish the risk of catching the virus. In a special issue of \textit{October} devoted to HIV and
AIDS in 1987, Douglas Crimp referred to the pioneering work of Cindy Patton and warned against the false safeness of monogamous relationships as long as it was not clearly established that both partners were HIV negative. Neither monogamy nor abstinence were viable solutions to deal with this large-scale crisis, and it was this particular realization that led to the spread of safer sex measures and practices in the gay community. Gilbert has been an outspoken opponent of sex-negative recommendations since the 1980s. Refusing to accept a discourse that constructed (and continues to construct) HIV/AIDS as a form of punishment for a promiscuous lifestyle, he has frequently claimed that from the very beginning of the epidemic, HIV/AIDS was deployed by a homophobic establishment as a means to control gay men and scare them into monogamy or sexual abstinence. In an interview promoting *Drag Queens on Trial*, he explained how medical issues became conflated with moral prejudice and declared:

> AIDS has nothing to do with being a bad person ... it’s medicine, not morality. Many gay men do realize there have been excesses in their sexual relations. On the other hand, there’s no way AIDS should be seen as punishment for these excesses.

Since gay sexuality, HIV/AIDS, and promiscuity were discursively linked from the start of the epidemic, it is no coincidence that there is a correlation between excess and (gay) shame produced by homophobic assumptions. In fact, one of the accusations against the drag queens is related to their shameless and self-abandoning promiscuity. The point of the trial is to shame, humiliate, and punish them, to make them feel guilty for their lives and to have them repent their deeds. According to Sedgwick, shame constitutes identity: “The forms taken by shame are not distinct ‘toxic’ parts of a group or individual identity that can be excised; they are instead integral to and residual in the processes by which identity itself is formed.” Sedgwick is careful to stress, however, that shame should not be seen as an essential origin of identity – “it is the place where the question of identity arises most originarily and most relationally.” Shame is relational in that the performative act of shaming comes from someone else. In the play, the legal establishment tries to assign the drag queens the shameful identities of promiscuous and excessive gender-benders. Gilbert, however, importantly grants his characters some scope of resistance against these shaming treatments. Whereas Marlene and Judy are devastated and angry after their respective surprise witnesses have publicized well-kept secrets from the past, Lana Lust decides to address and challenge the judge and the audience after she has received her diagnosis and public humiliation. Defying the court’s shaming practices, *Drag Queens on Trial* does not end with the accusation against Lana that she only has herself to blame for her condition. In true melodramatic fashion (and is there any genre that more willingly embraces its own excesses?), our heroine delivers a passionate
speech in her own defense and proudly asserts that she would do it all over again:

I have vowed to live dangerously and it has not been an easy vow to take. The life of a homosexual is by nature dangerous, we have always been laughed at, derided, persecuted, hounded, arrested, beaten, maimed, killed – and why? Because we dared to be ourselves … I have not been afraid to look inside myself, to live on the edge of morality, society, of the world itself and if I must die for it, so be it. And to all the little boys out there who don’t want to wear their little blue booties but pick out the pink ones, to all the little girls who would rather wear army boots than spike heels, to anyone who has ever challenged authority because they lived by their own lights I say don’t turn back. Don’t give up. It was worth it.37

While Lana proposes a radical alternative to domesticated gay sexuality and assimilated gay identity, there is ultimately a danger of falsely romanticizing this outsider position and the severe health risks to which the character subjects herself. Some critics were indeed unconvinced by this monologue and Lana’s celebration of her position as an outsider. Xtra, for instance, pointed out that Gilbert conflated the oppression that drag queens faced with the discrimination against people living with HIV/AIDS.38 Just how provocative the play was at that time can be illustrated by a quotation from The Sunday Star whose theatre reviewer felt compelled to caution his readers:

Although it does not actively promote homosexuality and chooses instead to advocate tolerance toward society’s fringe elements, Drag Queens on Trial is not for the faint-hearted … Rarely does a minute go by without a four-letter word or some off-color reference to genitalia or sexual deviation,39

an assessment that Gilbert and Buddies in Bad Times Theatre shrewdly and subversively used on an advertisement flyer. A few years later, Gilbert and Buddies were denied funding by the Canada Council for the Arts for their annual Fourplay Festival, which led to a public debate on whether lesbian and gay art should be funded by the state. In 1989, the national revenue minister of the then conservative government was quoted in unmistakable terms about minority groups receiving government grants: “Some of these ridiculous grants [to theatres] are enough to make me bring up.” He explicitly commented on Drag Queens on Trial, for which Buddies had received a $61,000 grant: “That’s homosexuals, I take it.”40 In order to understand the impact and importance of the play, it is crucial to remember that it was staged at a time when Canadian theatre was only just starting to represent (male) homosexuality, not as a closeted issue or as a problem described from the point of view of heterosexuality, but in an unabashedly gay and unapologetic way. Despite some pioneering attempts by playwrights John Herbert (Fortune and Men’s Eyes, 1967), Michel Tremblay (Hosanna, 1973), and Robert Wallace,
who publicly came out in a volume of the *Canadian Theatre Review* devoted to theatre and homosexuality as early as 1976, in the words of *NOW Magazine* ’s theatre critic John Kaplan, “it wasn’t until Sky Gilbert founded Buddies in Bad Times Theatre in the early 80s that Toronto had a company that focused on gay lifestyle – characters, situations and relationships – as one of the alternatives in today’s world.” While one might speculate that the newly established theatre would have attempted to unite the community by offering positive role models in the spirit of gay pride, Gilbert’s anti-assimilation and blatantly queer approach to arts and politics confronted his audience with radical narratives and highly sexualized characters in the spirit of excess and Gay Shame.

**ACT II: I Have AIDS!**

In the following decades, Gilbert went on to establish himself as one of Canada’s most vocal HIV/AIDS activists, with both his plays and novels, but also with his polemical articles published mainly, but not exclusively, in the gay press. Defining himself as an “AIDS radical,” he remains unconvinced by the widely accepted medical position that HIV causes AIDS and locates the causes of immunodeficiency in internalized homophobia and the intense public homophobia in North America as represented by the campaigns staged by Anita Bryant to oppose LGTBQ rights. He has expressed sympathies for the so-called AIDS dissident movement, associated with Peter Duesberg and the organization HEAL Toronto. While many of Gilbert’s statements have caused controversy, at no point has he denied that people have died and continue to die of AIDS-related causes, nor has he encouraged people to have unprotected sex.

HIV/AIDS is also a recurrent theme in Gilbert’s dramatic and literary work: the narrator in the novel *I am Casper Klotz* (2001) acts as the personification of the HIV virus and, while in jail awaiting a murder trial, starts an odd friendship with a religious fundamentalist; *The Bewitching of Max Gunther* (2001) is a stage work that draws a parallel between the Salem witch hunts and the social hysteria caused by the HIV/AIDS epidemic; and the full-length play *Rope Enough* (2005) touches on the theme of HIV transmission through consensual unprotected sex.

The play to which I will now direct my attention is the concisely titled *I Have AIDS!*, which premiered at Buddies on Alexander Street on April 23, 2009, directed by Gilbert himself. It was produced by The Cabaret Company, founded by Gilbert in 1997, whose mandate “is dedicated to presenting socially engaging queer themed work, and to the development and support of queer artists.” Written and performed more than a decade after the introduction of protease inhibitors that thwart viral replication, *I Have AIDS!* is a black comedy that revisits the subject of HIV/AIDS and its specific impact on the
gay community in the twenty-first century. Just like *Drag Queens on Trial* captured the specific challenges in early HIV/AIDS activism, so *I Have AIDS!*, both as a drama text and as a staged production, is a statement about the present moment by engaging with the current concerns of the gay community and its relationship to the epidemic.

A preserved video recording of the play’s last performance on May 3, 2009 at Buddies serves as my primary material for describing and analyzing the original production. The set consists of a black couch and a black coffee table placed center-stage, with a red sofa at house right, a lamp and white curtains upstage. Far removed from the wonderfully kitschy performance space of the three drag queens in the previously discussed play, this relatively simple set invites the audience into an upscale downtown apartment of a North American metropolis (possibly Toronto), where stand-up comedian Prodon (played by Gavin Crawford) and his lover, the interior designer Vidor (David Yee), live. Nothing in this minimalist set, designed by Steve Lucas, prepares the audience for the excess about to unfold, when Prodon, in a casual t-shirt and a pair of dark jeans, makes his first entrance and immediately heads for the couch to watch his favorite show, *Beverly Hills, 90210*, on his laptop.

Backstage, Vidor has been busy preparing dinner and now enters the living room, wearing a yellow apron and yellow gloves. The scene suggests a domestic idyll, an illusion that is quickly interrupted when Prodon casually announces that he has AIDS. Refusing to debate the issue further until he has finished his program, he sends his lover back to the kitchen. Once he is alone, he immediately breaks the theatrical illusion of the fourth wall (a shift marked by a change of light), grabs a microphone and addresses the audience directly, just like a stand-up comedian (Figure 11.3). The theatre does not offer a safe harbor, neither for the performers nor for the spectators, as Gilbert (both as playwright and director) once again transgresses realistic aesthetics and undermines the boundaries between stage and auditorium. Like *Drag Queens on Trial*, *I Have AIDS!* is self-consciously theatrical and never attempts to seduce the audience into a conventional frame of representation that encourages identification with the characters. Additionally, Prodon sometimes speaks of himself in the third person, further drawing attention to the act of performing. Thanks to these alienation devices, the audience is not lured into a domestic tragedy that analyzes how Prodon and Vidor learn how to cope with the bad news. Instead, Prodon blatantly reveals the different stages, inspired by popular psychology, through which he intends to go—“first there’s denial, then partying, then loss of control, then religious conversion, then acceptance. Then death. Except that I’m not sure that I want this play to end in death.”

Inspired by Brechtian aesthetics, Gilbert prepares the audience for the events about to unfold and thereby invites them to keep a critical distance. Moreover, this technique also leaves ample room for political commentary
and entertaining scenes. When Prodon explains to the audience that he caught HIV while having sex with a man who pulled off the condom halfway through the act, he does not merely tell the story, but visually illustrates it by lying on his back on the coffee table, with his legs high up in the air, moving his lower back and buttocks frantically, moaning and talking faster and faster, thereby erasing any doubts or misunderstandings as to what exactly happened and creating a highly sexualized and entertaining theatrical image. The visual illustration of the homosexual act provokes laughter from the audience (and most certainly makes any homophobic spectator who has erroneously entered the queer-friendly space of Buddies feel uncomfortable).

A classic Gilbert creation, Prodon does nothing in moderation and, much to the concern of his supportive lover, each of the five stages he initially outlined is characterized by excessive self-indulgence and the determination to take each respective mental and bodily state to its extreme. First, a self-righteous health care visitor (played by Ryan Kelly) becomes the target of his anger when she demands that he contact and trace all the men with whom he has had sex so that they too can get tested for HIV. Showing her how to do the math on a notepad, Prodon claims that this would be impossible because he has had sex with 10,000 men, most of them anonymous encounters, to whom he has never even spoken. The social worker, the representative of official
HIV/AIDS policy, is visibly embarrassed about his sexual habits, chuckles uncomfortably, and even suggests that his large number of sexual partners “must be some sort of record.” Like the three drag queens, Prodon is shamed for his promiscuous sexual life and also threatened with legal punishment even though he assures the social worker that he uses protection. He also gets angry when the social worker comments on the apartment and suggests Prodon and Vidor should have their own interior design show on TV, thereby feeding into a widespread stereotype that domesticates gay men and reduces them to unopinionated and apolitical puppets. He finally asks her to leave, though not without verbally abusing her first.

Embracing his sexual habits, Prodon segues into the hedonistic phase that starts with a visit from his friend Lady Booty (also played by Kelly), a gorgeous drag queen who works at a gay nightclub, where she hosts stage shows that include scenes of sexual simulations between young and attractive men. Wearing a fire red wig, white stockings and a low-cut nurse uniform complete with a stethoscope, Lady Booty is already in costume (Figure 11.4). Sex is the main theme of their conversation, and their friendship and physical closeness is illustrated several times when Prodon spanks Booty’s booty or pretends to penetrate her from behind to the rhythm of the song “Venus.” Finally, Prodon goes backstage to change into his own outfit for his first night on the town as an “AIDS infected faggot,” his new aggressive self-designation on which he and Booty agree while giggling hysterically. When he returns, he wears nothing but a pair of golden hot pants, a golden lamé cape, red loafers, dark sunglasses, and two golden cheerleader pompons, a humorous fashion statement by costume designer Sheree Tams. The actual party materializes as an interlude, when two half-naked young men simulate sex on stage, with Lady Booty acting as dominatrix, offering Gilbert another opportunity to celebrate “the revolutionary concept of the drag queen – the openly sexual, effeminate member of our community.”

Prodon’s hedonistic phase comes to an abrupt end when Vidor finds him crawling in pain into the apartment that same night. Walking in the dark, Vidor steps in a puddle and realizes that it is blood. When Vidor asks about the blood and the bad smell in the air, Prodon recounts how he engaged in sadomasochistic sex that started with some scat play. Increasing the suspense
gradually, he explains that, “in honour of [his] new diagnosis,” he decided to explore something new. This cat-and-mouse game raises expectations until Vidor and the audience learns the truth: Under the influence of a combination of cocaine and crystal meth, Prodon volunteered to be the passive partner in a fist-fucking session that became increasingly violent with the active partner punching his intestines until they literally started falling out of his anus. Almost bleeding to death, he barely managed to find his way home and collapses in the living room, leading the distressed Vidor to exclaim: “Your asshole is hanging outside of your body?”

In the DVD-recording of the performance, this scene takes over ten minutes and is staged with clever lighting design and blocking of the characters. The frightened Prodon does not allow Vidor to turn on the light and either hides behind the curtains or in the shadows cast by a pillar. Large parts of the dialogue are in fact staged in complete darkness. In this pivotal scene, Gilbert’s strategic use of excess culminates in its most vivid expression: Prodon’s escapades have become so extreme, so excessive, that they become unrepresentable. His physical state has reached such an outrageous level that it can no longer be shown, but only suggested through dialogue. While it would arguably be very difficult to faithfully stage the image of Prodon’s intestines dangling outside of his body, setting the scene in the dark draws our attention to the limits of the representation of excess and leads to a shift in sensory perception and experience. Paradoxically, while we as the audience cannot see this excessive body, we feel its visceral presence and tangible materiality, which is accentuated by Prodon’s painful moaning throughout the scene. During Prodon’s graphic account of the punch-fucking session, there is complete silence in the auditorium. When he tells Vidor how violently the active partner punched his ass and Vidor (with impeccable comic timing by Yee) asks, “Why would anyone want to punch you in the asshole?,” the audience burst out into loud and liberating laughter, characterized by a curious mixture of relief and amusement. It is Vidor’s shocked reaction that releases the tension (and amused disbelief) caused by the invisible, yet palpable materiality of Prodon’s excessive body.

The scene cleverly expresses homophobic anxieties through the use of hyperbole. In his seminal article “Is the Rectum a Grave?,” Leo Bersani dissects the similarities in public discourse between female prostitution and male homosexuality as pathological and self-destructive behaviors. Bersani argues that AIDS “reinforced the heterosexual association of anal sex with a self-annihilation originally and primarily identified with the fantasmatic mystery of an insatiable, unstoppable female sexuality.” Influenced by Mary Douglas, Simon Watney, and Julia Kristeva, Butler argues that the male homosexual body has unstable boundaries and is therefore constructed as polluted and dangerous. Gay sexual practices disrupt the compulsory stability
and impermeability of normative masculinity, and anal sex in particular is constructed as a site of abjection and pollution:

The boundary between the inner and outer is confounded by those excremental passages in which the inner effectively becomes outer, and this excreting function becomes, as it were, the model by which other forms of identity-differentiation are accomplished. In effect, this is the mode by which Others become shit.57

While Gilbert sets out to deliberately provoke and shock his audiences with this scene (just as he did in 1985 when he sent the drag queens to Toronto gay bars), he also once again deploys excess to make a political point. Reacting against the domesticated and desexualized representation of gay men in the mass media, already alluded to by the social worker’s suggestion of an interior design program, Prodon’s excessive sexuality is a way to compensate for one-dimensional and limited representations governed by heteronormative regulations. On the one hand, the scene expresses many of the homophobic anxieties circulating around gay sexuality and the rectum. At the same time, it also manifests the unrepresentability of Gay Shame and the unintelligibility of shameful queers in popular culture. I Have AIDS! illustrates the multiple contradictions of contemporary gay identity and asks what it means to be a gay man or a gay man living with HIV/AIDS in the twenty-first century, under pressure from the rhetoric of gay pride, consumer capitalism, and neoconservative values that increasingly regulate, keep under surveillance and, if necessary, censor every possible aspect of human life including sexuality and sexual politics. Prodon having his intestines punched out of his anus is a powerful manifestation of those discursive and material limitations. The result is not only excessive, but also potentially lethal, which is why the first act ends with the sounds and blue lights of an ambulance.

After this near fatal experience, Prodon completely switches gears, only to reach yet another extreme. At the beginning of the second act, he religiously follows doctor’s orders and takes his antiretroviral drugs on a regular basis. His new friend Ron (Kelly in his third appearance), who is HIV-positive and Prodon has met at a counseling group for HIV-positive men, is the embodiment of the docile patient whose whole life revolves around pills and medications. Even though Ron shows no symptoms, he has been on early retirement for 15 years and willingly consumes any new drug on the market, despite their potentially severe side effects, and without actually needing most of them. Instead of defining himself as an active person living with HIV, he settles for being a passive patient and a consumer victim of the pharmaceutical industry. Gilbert has repeatedly declared his skepticism of gay men putting their health in the hands of a medical community that has long pathologized homosexuality: “The way of looking at AIDS is corporate now, because all these pharmaceutical companies are involved. That’s big
money and that’s big power.”58 By contrasting Prodon’s previous hedonistic behavior and Ron’s compliant attitude, he outlines two extreme positions that are both equally destructive. In an interview, Gilbert elaborates on his intentions with the play and explains the almost schizophrenic attitude of the main character Prodon:

[It]’s one thing to have strong views, but it’s another to be a crank or to be complicit. For me, that’s the pressure that some gay men face now. On one hand they have to be these models of health, and on the other hand they are partying and having unsafe sex. Some are on two drugs – those that are prescribed, and those that aren’t. So they are constantly stretching the boundaries of what they can do.59

Prodon certainly stretches all kinds of boundaries and oscillates between various extremes, which makes for entertaining comedy and offers Gilbert the opportunity to ask burning questions about what it means to be a gay man in the twenty-first century and which role models there may be. In accordance with this chapter’s epigraph, I Have AIDS! demonstrates that being gay in contemporary Canadian culture is far from easy and that homophobia has not disappeared, despite a number of progressive anti-discrimination laws. Things are further complicated if one is HIV-positive.60 Added to, and in conspiracy with, limited cultural representations are the growing pressures to fit into and be assimilated by a neoliberal economy with its unholy trinity of individualism, depoliticization, and consumption at the expense of community activism and solidarity. The twenty-first century has seen the rise of the assimilated and neoliberal gay man, a development that is summarized by Lisa Duggan’s term homonormativity, “a politics that does not contest dominant heteronormative assumptions and institutions, but upholds and sustains them, while promising the possibility of a demobilized gay constituency and a privatized, depoliticized gay culture.”61 Various calling them “middle-class fags,” “neocons,” or “sweater fags” (referring to suburban gay couples wearing matching sweaters), these men have become the new target for Gilbert’s sexual politics. This is why Vidor is shocked when Prodon, the usually outspoken activist, suddenly starts wearing a knitted rainbow sweater, the visual and material signifier of gay pride. The sweater is the diametrical opposite of Lana Lust’s atomic lipstick. In the context of the play, it expresses complacency as opposed to outspokenness, pride as opposed to shame, and moderation as opposed to excess. It further stands for the commercialization, commodification, and stabilization of gay identity.

Growing social and economic conservatism poses a new challenge to HIV/AIDS activism and the performing arts. Activist and author Tom Warner traces Canada’s gradual move towards conservatism in recent years and explains how political parties, religious organizations, right-wing think tanks, and anti-abortion groups have been strategically working together to re-establish the
belief that “Judeo-Christian values are ‘Canadian values’ and that the role of the state is to promote and protect such values, including those related to the regulation of morality, to sexuality and relationships.”62 This development, inspired by the Reagan era in the U.S., has happened consistently over the last decade. Once in power (first as a minority government in 2006 and, as of 2011, as a majority government), the Conservative Party’s and Prime Minister Stephen Harper’s political and economic agenda manifested itself not least of all through significant cuts in financial support for organizations with a pro-feminist mission (such as the demand for equal treatment and legal abortion), or a lesbian and gay mandate, as well as by questioning same-sex marriage. Warner also notes how ideologically motivated cuts in the health care system have had a severe effect on HIV/AIDS prevention and education in the province of Ontario. Gay men are amongst those groups most harshly affected, particularly in light of increasing numbers of HIV transmission.63

A concrete illustration of the rise of neoconservatism is the Institute for Canadian Values, which, on its website and in numerous columns published in daily newspapers, spreads its views on the alleged dangers of queer people. The think tank regularly questions the legalization of same-sex marriage, protests against public funding of pride parades and argues against tax payers’ money being channeled into the investigation of health problems experienced by queer people (including, but not limited to, HIV/AIDS and the alarming rate of teenage suicide), stating: “It is unfortunate that homosexuals experience such dramatic health problems. This is the reason why God prohibits promiscuity. God wants us to live abundant healthy lives therefore He commands us to not engage in self-destructive behavior.”64 These comments were published by the institute’s president only days after I Have AIDS! had ended its run at Buddies. While the column is unrelated to and makes no reference to the play, the quotation helps to situate Gilbert’s sexual politics in a cultural and political context that is increasingly gearing towards fear-mongering and resistance against difference.

**Epilogue: Excess and Transformation**

In Gilbert’s theatre, excess, be it sexual or theatrical, becomes the ultimate provocation and a distinctively queer mode of resistance to celebrate dissident sexuality, manifest activist outspokenness, and embrace Gay Shame. Characterized by its disrespect for physical, social, aesthetic, moral, and sexual boundaries, excess is a political tool and strategy that can be used to ask uncomfortable questions about social norms and normative behavior in a neoconservative age. Rather than apologizing for their existence, Gilbert’s characters revel in their excesses, their sexual promiscuity, and their theatrical language. Too flamboyant, too obscene, and too obsessed with sex, Marlene,
Judy, Lana, Prodon, and Lady Booty refuse to repent and plead guilty to being “bad queens” and “bad queers.” They offer a radical alternative not only to complacent gay characters in comedy series or design programs, but also to a new political correctness in the gay community, which manifests itself not only in a tendency to adapt to or get assimilated into heteronormative modes of living, but also by embracing a neoliberal economy, a development which has been summarized by Crimp as “the current homogenizing, normalizing, and desexualizing of gay life,” one of the major challenges for contemporary queer scholarship and cultural production.

Gilbert’s position is even more controversial because he puts forward a critique of the gay community from within the community, which is a very complicated and sensitive venture. Not only can it fuel external homophobia, it also jeopardizes the project of gay pride, which sets out to build a positive identity free from guilt, shame, and internalized homophobia. Given how powerful the demand is for positive role models and affirmative representation in gay culture, including its visual and performing arts, characters like Lana Lust and Prodon seemingly tarnish this endeavor. Engaging in sexual activities that leave one’s bowels hanging out of one’s anus or admitting in public that one has “swallowed busloads of male sperm” are not exactly the kind of media-friendly and sexually tame representations for which gay pride strives and which large corporations and banks like to use in “gay-friendly” ads.

Both Sedgwick and Crimp reflect on the isolating effects of shame on the person who has to witness it. Sedgwick notes the futile wish to simply disappear because witnessing causes a “hemorrhage of painful identification” where shame becomes infectious, while Crimp stresses the pronounced loneliness caused by shame, even if it is someone else’s shame:

I feel alone with my shame, singular in my susceptibility to being shamed for this stigma that has now become mine and mine alone. Thus, my shame is taken on in lieu of the other’s shame. In taking on the shame, I do not share in the other’s identity. I simply adopt the other’s vulnerability to being shamed ... I put myself in the place of the other only insofar as I recognize that I too am prone to shame.

However, shame is not only an imprisoning force; it also carries subversive potential. As Sedgwick concludes, “shame is simply the first, and remains a permanent, structuring fact of identity,” yet it also “has its own powerfully productive and powerfully social metamorphic possibilities.” Shame can be used in a productive way to explore non-normative bodies and pleasures, renegotiate and reformulate identity politics and, in our case, celebrate dissidence, excess, flamboyancy, and theatricality. The stage is a privileged site for the visual and material exploration of shame and excess, because hiding is not an option, as the performing arts by definition build on the live
communication between audiences and actors. As a spectator, I am constantly reminded of the sometimes painful presence of my co-spectators. Moreover, because Gilbert’s characters and theatre aesthetics consistently undermine the traditional boundary between stage and auditorium and thereby destabilize the relationship between the fictitious and the real, I cannot hide in my seat in the comfortable darkness. Therefore I can never be alone with my shame in the theatre. As Wallace puts it:

The primary effect of Sky Gilbert’s work for the theatre is the transformation of the audience from isolated consumers of theatrical entertainment to collective participants in oppositional art … Gilbert’s singular contribution to Canadian culture is his ability to use high theatricality to fashion culturally transgressive art – and to leave the audience amazed (or aghast) at his audacity.69

Performance artist Tim Miller and theatre scholar David Román argue that “[q]ueer theatre, like all theatre, is about conversion and transformation” and, in the spirit of Sedgwick, they claim that “[s]hame’s performative … is metamorphic.”70 Queer theatre is often wrongly accused of “preaching to the converted,” that is, of merely confirming preconceived ideas and values of an audience that is unwilling to be challenged. Queer performance spaces need to function as creative harbors for the exploration of queer themes and aesthetics, free from the pressures of mainstream modes of representation and patterns of consumption. Furthermore, they offer a location for queer people to be amongst friends and safe from the brutal reality of homophobia and transphobia. However, Miller and Román also comment:

And yet, on the other hand, many spectators also attend community-based events in order to defy the politics of sameness. Rather than upholding an uncritical stance towards the notion of queer community, many queer spectators set out to put pressure on this concept. This desire never rests, but rather prefers to unsettle the comforts of identity politics in the very space of its enactment … Queer theatre audiences are dynamic social groups that cannot readily be reduced to a monolithic, static whole.71

Gilbert’s theatre is a site where community is fostered, not in the sense of a stable and homogeneous collective which seeks reaffirmation and confirmation of its values, but which is willing to be challenged. His theatre is a space where queers and sympathizers celebrate Gay Shame in all its excess and theatricality, thereby connecting the artistic with the social. It offers the audience and the performers the possibility to temporarily unite in their shame and validate it as an empowering experience. Excess, I suggest, is a contested site of definition, open for constant renegotiation and the source of productive discomfort, not only for the theatre audience, but also for the scholar writing about it. While Gilbert has stepped on many people’s toes and alienated them in the process, his supporters acknowledge the undeniable
contribution he has made to activism, queer theatre, and Canadian culture. It only seems fitting to round off with another quotation by Vaughan from his article in the *National Post* that introduced this essay: “[A]ll of us who scribble for a living owe thanks to Gilbert for helping to create a more inclusive and far more honest public dialogue around sexuality issues. Gilbert pushed open the door and the rest of us freaks poured in behind him.”

Acknowledgment

I would like to dedicate this essay to Dr. Sky Gilbert and express my gratitude for his generosity, enthusiasm, and encouragement.

References


**Notes**


3 A note on spelling: While theater with an “er” is commonly recognized as the American spelling of the word, throughout this essay I use the largely accepted “re” spelling, following the examples of most leading North American and international academic journals (such as *Theatre Research International, Theatre Journal*, and *Theatre Survey*) and professional associations in theatre and performance studies (including the International Federation for Theatre Research, the Association for Theatre in Higher Education, and the American Society for Theatre Research). Stylistically, this seems like the most appropriate choice as much of the Canadian material quoted in this chapter uses the “re” spelling.


5 A word on terminology: In my use of the term queer, I follow David Halperin’s claim that queer “is at odds with the normal, the legitimate, the dominant.” While I perceive Gilbert’s theatre to be radically queer in its celebration of non-normative sexualities and critical exploration of gender, my analysis of the plays focuses on how they primarily address the concerns of the gay male community in relation to HIV/AIDS. David M. Halperin, *Saint Foucault: Towards a Gay Hagiography* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), 62.


8 Ibid., 32.


10 Gilbert, *Drag Queens on Trial*, 18.
11 Ibid., 47.
13 Davis and Postlewait, “Theatricality,” 5.
16 Butler, Gender Trouble, 139.
19 At the time, Chaps’s advertisements in the gay press often depicted young, muscular, half-naked clones.
20 Sky Gilbert, Ejaculations from the Charm Factory: A Memoir (Toronto: ECW Press, 2000), 92. This interpretation is, however, a little skewed. As David Halperin argues in his book Saint Foucault, the gender performance of the clone is not necessarily a celebration of masculinity and a degradation of femininity. It is instead “a strategy for valorizing various practices of devirilization under the sign of masculinity, thereby forging a new association between masculinity and sexual receptivity or penetrability, while detaching male homosexuality from its phobic association with ‘femininity.’” Similarly, Richard Dyer points to the sense of irony and subversive potential of the clone’s hypermasculinity: “By taking the signs of masculinity and eroticizing them in a blatantly homosexual context, much mischief is done to the security with which ‘men’ are defined in society, and by which their power is secured. If that bearded, muscular beer-drinker turns out to be a pansy, however are you going to know the ‘real’ men anymore?” Halperin, Saint Foucault, 90; Richard Dyer, Only Entertainment (New York and London: Routledge, 1992), 167.
22 Ibid., 189.
27 At the time, Dynasty was at the height of its popularity, and its infamous catfights, witty one-liners, glamorous costumes, and the introduction of a gay character quickly led to the show being embraced by the gay community in North America and Europe. When Lana is looking for her beauty mark and Marlene reminds her that “[a] beauty mark does not an Alexis Carrington Colby Dexter make,” Lana retorts with a four-letter word and the threat to “induce another miscarriage,” an allusion to one of Alexis’s most vicious deeds in the show (Gilbert, Drag Queens on Trial, 35). For a study of Dynasty’s queer and camp content and reception, see Mark Finch, “Sex and Address in Dynasty,” in Fabio Cleto (ed.), Camp: Queer Aesthetics and the Performing Subject: A Reader (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1999), 143–59.
28 Gilbert, Drag Queens on Trial, 48.

31 Gilbert, *Drag Queens on Trial*, 73.

32 Ibid., 75.


37 Gilbert, *Drag Queens on Trial*, 78–79.


42 J. Paul Halferty has traced the development of Buddies in Bad Times Theatre’s queer aesthetics and politics from the anti-assimilatory stand during Gilbert’s time as creative director to the company’s contemporary mandate that strives towards a more inclusive approach and embraces the idea of community. Whereas Gilbert understands queer as a radical critique of stable identity categories, later boards of directors have interpreted the concept as an umbrella term for lesbians, gays, bisexuals, and transgendered people. Halferty, “Queer and Now.”

43 Anita Bryant was a U.S. pop singer and former beauty pageant winner who became a born-again Christian and started a militant anti-gay campaign in the late 1970s. As a key representative of one of the largest homophobic waves since the McCarthy era, she successfully lobbied for the repeal of anti-discrimination laws in Florida and thereafter attempted to have lesbian and gay teachers banned from their profession.


47 Prodon never differentiates between HIV and AIDS. It is Vidor who at one point makes it clear that, while Prodon has tested HIV positive, he has not developed any symptoms of an AIDS diagnosis.


49 Ibid., 16.

50 In Canada, a person living with HIV is required by law to disclose their HIV status before engaging in any sexual activity that might expose their partner or partners to the virus. For more information on the legal discourse and HIV disclosure see “HIV Stigma,” www.hivstigma.com (accessed December 21, 2011).

51 Gilbert, *I Have AIDS!*, 27.

52 Ibid., 89.

53 Ibid., 39.

54 Ibid., 40.

55 Ibid., 39.
the uses of excess in visual and material culture, 1600–2010

57 Butler, Gender Trouble, 133–4.
59 David King, “We All Have AIDS,” Outlooks, 24 (April 2009): 24. This question is also central in Gilbert’s play Rope Enough (2005), a critical response to Alfred Hitchcock’s film Rope (1948) about a murder committed by two homosexual aesthetes. In Gilbert’s play the radical intellectual character Ichabod (played by Crawford) complains about the toothless and asexual representation of gay men in mainstream media: “We have two choices as homosexual men, we can be unfunny closet cases who live with women and have no personal lives, like Will, on Will and Grace, or we can be funny, effeminate inconsequential designers, decorators, and hairdressers who have an informed opinion on the next lamp or the right wine.” Sky Gilbert, Rope Enough (Toronto: Playwrights Canada Press, 2005), 24.
60 The ending of the play acknowledges that other social groups are affected by HIV/AIDS, many of whom live in the Global South and cannot afford protease inhibitors. Nevertheless, Prodon makes a powerful statement when he claims that “I want you to remember that we died, and nobody cared about us and then you know what … we went ahead and we died some more … and, and then we cared about us, because nobody else would, and finally when we got some other people to care about us then … well that care went away” (Gilbert, I Have AIDS!, 66; original emphasis).
62 Tom Warner, Losing Control: Canada’s Social Conservatives in the Age of Rights (Toronto: Between the Lines, 2010), 13.
63 Ibid., 231.
66 Sedgwick “Shame, Theatricality, and Queer Performativity,” 51.
69 Wallace, “No Turning Back,” 17–18. Wallace illustrates this claim by referring to a production of Gilbert’s play More Divine (1994) at the end of which the audience was invited to join the performers on the stage that had turned into a dance floor. A more recent example would be The Situationists (2011), a play taking the revolutionary Situationist International as a starting point to explore people’s unacknowledged erotic fantasies. At the end of each performance at Buddies, the actors – still in character – encouraged the audience to share their secrets with them. Fooled by an actress in disguise who was strategically placed in the auditorium and who was the first to speak, many audience members volunteered and joined in to talk about their own sexual fantasies.
71 Ibid., 176.
72 Vaughan, “Sky Gilbert.”