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Theatre Journal, Vol. 46, No. 4. (Dec., 1994), pp. 477-488.

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"That's Why I Go to the Gym": Sexual Identity and the Body of the Male Performer

Reid Gilbert

It becomes impossible, in Judith Butler's words, "to separate our 'gender' from the political and cultural intersections in which it is invariably produced and maintained."¹ "Gender," suggests Butler, "is the repeated stylization of the body, a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame that congeal over time to produce the appearance of substance, of a natural sort of being."²

Such a definition of gender approaches a definition of theatre itself and suggests that the portrayal of gender on stage is not only mimetic, but, indeed, part of the collective cultural description of sexual identity; if theatre is myth-making (as it has traditionally been held to be) it is also gender-making, and the making occurs first at the level of the body. If theatre is itself an act of desire, then the object of the audience's desire is, at base, the bodies of the actors, which are also the essential sites of gender identity. Jan Kott has called the actor's body "the basic [theatrical] icon,"³ and others have agreed that it is at least the "locus of multiple interconnecting sign-systems."⁴ The actor's body, then, would appear immediately to announce biological gender, especially in theatre performances where the body is seen naked. But if the body is a tool of the actor, its biological configuration may, indeed, be as much a prop for the establishment of one of a set of available sexual identities as are the clothes and mannerisms in which it dresses itself, the vocalizations it produces, and the actions it is assigned.⁵ In such a viewing of the actor's body as sign-vehicle for established or resistant sexualities—or for the construction of the very idea of sexual differentiation—a polarity emerges between the assumption of the body as a mere psychic space upon which an iconography may be written and as a physical being who feels the role and feels it within his or her "skin."

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¹Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1990), 3.

²Butler, 33.

³Jan Kott, "The Icon and the Absurd," *The Drama Review* 14.1 (Fall 1969): 19.

⁴Elaine Aston and George Savona, *Theatre as Sign-System: A Semiotics of Text and Performance* (London: Routledge, 1991), 105.

⁵This assertion is illustrated by performances which feature cross-dressing (of which there are many examples), or the appropriation of gender—as, for example, in Peggy Shaw's body in *Belle Reprivee*, a coproduction of Split Britches Company (New York) and Bloo Lips (London) which reinvents Tennessee Williams's *Streetcar Named Desire*.

Ed Cohen points out that “while Butler assiduously abjures any recourse to an essentializing model of gender that is predicated on the ontological or metaphysical priority of the body,” her analysis does so “precisely by invoking a parallel somatic idealization.”⁶ For Butler, “the body is not a ‘being’ but a variable boundary, a surface whose permeability is politically regulated, a signifying practice within a cultural field of gender hierarchy and compulsory heterosexuality.”⁷ Cohen finds much that is “congenial”⁸ in Butler’s analysis, but worries that her “problematic”—relying, as it does on a Freudian paradigm and on Lacan’s “disso[lution of] the (e)motions of embodied experience in the diaspora of language”—threatens to “evacuate . . . (e)motion from the ‘space’ of its inquiry,” eliding somatic individuation.⁹ Looking for movements for political change, Cohen points out that “idealizing the ‘difference’ that ‘the body’ makes to ‘identify’ politics” imposes a new set of limitations and may erase the collective *feeling* that urges those engaged in resistance to “put their bodies on the line.”¹⁰ If Cohen is right, it is literally the bodies of the actors that must be put on the line. Jill Dolan also points out that identity is a felt experience, arguing that “As much as she might empathize or do visualization exercises to project herself into a lesbian role, a heterosexual woman will never know, in her body, what it feels like to be queer in a homophobic culture. She has not developed the survival instincts that would teach her the signals lesbians use to break the code, to signify and to read what dominant representations suppress.”¹¹

To be able to “get under the skin,” in these terms, does not signify skill in realist performance. Indeed, realism may act against the discovery of sexual identity by substituting a set of available *personae* approved by the dominant and—important in this context—patriarchal culture; the plays I will be discussing consistently offer such *personae*. Rather, to “get under the skin” is to achieve a vital identity with a particular projection of gender object or—more powerfully—a sharing of that object.

Lacan has suggested (in *Seminar I*)¹² that at the centre of the unconscious being is the *je*, devoid of form and object; we seek through fantasy to project onto a *moi* a “fictive object for a fundamentally aobjectal desire.”¹³ At base, we project our own bodily image as what Kaja Silverman calls the “first and most important of all . . . objects. . . . The self, in other words, fills the void at the centre of subjectivity with an illusory plenitude.”¹⁴ Jean Laplanche and J.-B. Pontalis suggest that through this fantasmatic the *je* acts out a script “of organized scenes which are capable of dramatization,

⁶ Ed Cohen, “Who are ‘We’?: Gay ‘Identity’ as Political (E)motion (A Theoretical Ruminant),” in *Inside/Out: Lesbian Theories, Gay Theories*, ed. Diana Fuss (New York: Routledge, 1991), 82.

⁷ Butler, 139.

⁸ Cohen, 82.

⁹ Cohen, 84.

¹⁰ Cohen, 84.

¹¹ Jill Dolan, “Breaking the Code: Musings on Lesbian Sexuality and the Performer,” *Modern Drama* 32 (1989): 158. Dolan has modified this view in later essays; cf. her *Presence & Desire: Essays on Gender, Sexuality, Performance* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1993).

¹² Jacques Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book I: Freud’s Papers on Technique, 1953–1954*, trans. John Forrester (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 141.

¹³ Kaja Silverman, *Male Subjectivity at the Margins* (New York: Routledge, 1992), 4.

¹⁴ Silverman, 5.

generally 'in a visual form' and in which 'the subject is [itself] invariably present.'¹⁵ As Silverman sums up the concept, "it is only in the guise of the ego that the subject can lay claim to a 'presence' . . . ; the *mise-en-scène* of desire can only be staged . . . by drawing upon the images through which the self is constituted."¹⁶ The body of the actor must, then, convey not only biological differentiation but formulations of sexual identity by which the inner subject seeks to objectify itself in order to behold itself. The audience participates with the ego of the character (and, perhaps, of the actor or director) to achieve a sense of "being there," becoming a collective ego engaged in a representation, or a dream, by which it fills the void in each spectator's *je* by substituting a sort of collective *nous* (my term) which parallels the character's *moi*—and is just as illusory. In the process, the body of the actor projects this object into reality so that the spectators can also view "him" or "her." In plays like Robert Lepage's *Polygraph*, Terrance McNally's *Lips Together, Teeth Apart*, and David Drake's *The Night Larry Kramer Kissed Me* this process of psychic projection also functions within a collective psychoanalysis.

The force with which the collective will-to-exist resists or impels the fictionalization of the dramatic *moi* is more keenly felt, and the dramatic *persona* of the *moi* more powerfully drawn, in spectatorial processes at either extreme of experience, when the dramatic *moi* is either less similar to each individual spectator's pre-existing, individual *moi* (as in a heterosexual audience viewing *The Night Larry Kramer Kissed Me*, where the *moi* appears, in fact, *comme eux* [my term]) or when the *moi* is more similar to each spectator's previously established *moi* (as in a male, white, urban homosexual audience viewing the same play, where the *moi* feels like "*nous-mêmes*" [my term]). When the audience is mixed or when the images of the sexual *moi* are various within the production—when the "writings" are "many," as in *Polygraph*—complex processes of projection occur in which the audience is offered a set of objects upon which to gaze and from which to choose and is, in the process, rendered the subject of its own analysis. As Michael J. Sidnell points out, we see in *Polygraph* not only the lie detector machine in operation but "also the relation it helps constitute between its operator and its subject. And the play itself, as its title declares, is another such machine."¹⁷ The apparati of this machine are the bodies of the actors: sinuously entering the psychic field; nakedly exposing their vulnerability and their dispassionate voyeurism; displaying their sexuality, tightly denying their sexuality; dominant, abused, reduced to objects; dressed and undressed: collectively seeking a *moi* to view in the literal and psychological mirrors held up to the audience.

In *Polygraph*¹⁸ notions of guilt and punishment are bound up in notions of sexual desire and identity. By presenting two men, one gay and one straight, the play immediately invites comparison between these two identities, self-images which in

¹⁵ Jean Lapanche and J.-B. Pontalis, *The Language of Psycho-Analysis*, 318, qtd. in Silverman, 5.

¹⁶ Silverman, 5.

¹⁷ Michael J. Sidnell, "Polygraph: Somatic Truth and the Art of Presence," *Canadian Theatre Review* 64 (1990): 47.

¹⁸ Robert Lepage and Marie Brassard, *Polygraph*, trans. Cyllian Raby, *Canadian Theatre Review* 64 (1990): 51–65. Subsequent page references appear in the text. The performance under discussion was a coproduction of Pink Theatre and Theatre la Seizième, Vancouver, October 1992.

post-industrial societies have become less descriptors of sexual preference than categories or “lifestyles” (itself a term which implies the adoption of a fictive self-contained in a series of indeces and postures). In the coproduction by Pink Ink Theatre and Theatre la Seizième in Vancouver, this comparison was exaggerated by indexing the homosexual waiter, François, in 501 jeans, white tee-shirt, and leather jacket (the uniform of the urban, homosexual man and a strong marker of the masculine in mainstream iconography) and the criminologist, David, in jacket, tie, and trench coat (the uniform of the urban, heterosexual man and a sign of the detective, the spy, the dangerous agent of the establishment). That the criminologist speaks with a German accent, attends a conference in East Berlin, and has memories of a lost love in Germany adds another intertext, inscribing him under the signs of the KGB, the Nazi, the torturer—codes essential to the hermeneutic of the police investigation, but, more important, metaphoric of the splitting of personality under stress and the central question of what constitutes a true self, of what is to be found on the other side of “The wall which separates truth from fabrication [and is] sometimes paper-thin” (63).

David’s marked self-control, even when confronted by the admission of his lover, Lucie, that she has also slept with François, underlines the masculine ideal of emotional stability but betrays the emptiness of this pose. Early in their relationship, Lucie urges David to cross over the wall into the theatrical by putting drops in his eyes to make him cry. The chemicals work best when the subject also recalls a sad memory, just as the polygraph works best when the subject believes “the mystique” of its power to disclose (64). David’s memories of Anna’s love letter lead him to tears—or the drops do—but he denies the emotion: “This stuff really burns . . . it’s like getting soap in your eyes” (56). His reading in German while he cries, in counterpoint to the English subtitle, “I can see it in your eyes,” brings about the intersection of a series of signifiers of his character and a series of inscriptions of the male as contained, in denial, fluent in the languages of international power but unable to feel. As his affair with Lucie develops, David is finally able to “understand” her urging, “if you want to cry, cry. If you want to hold me, hold me,” and to “accept” emotion (63). But he is able to do so only after he has measured himself against François and satisfied himself that to feel love is not to picture himself as the despised Other, the homosexual:

- Lucie: Did you hear me? I, I made love with François . . . (*She is both compassionate for and irritated by David’s non-reaction*)
 Say, do something. (*David pretends to have something in his eye; he washes it out in the basin.*)
 Can’t you allow yourself your own emotions?
- David: What do you want me to do? You want me to be jealous of a homosexual?

[63]

David’s incredulity underscores an axiom maintained by many men—that the straight man is superior to the homosexual male, in that the homosexual occupies a position closer to the female, and therefore further from the apex of power. The question bespeaks a deeply held belief—a belief the dominant culture must maintain in order to frame its definitions of sexual identity—that the homosexual lacks, and hence must be an object of scorn rather than envy. As we shall see, this attitude is so deeply structured in a male view of self that it is also exhibited by homosexuals. It is this double viewing of self as object of desire and of scorn that creates much of the confusion in male subjectivity.

In Terrance McNally's *Lips Together, Teeth Apart*,¹⁹ two straight men spar through a weekend spent with their wives at the Fire Island beach house of a gay brother-in-law. Ostensibly a play about AIDS, the piece also exhibits another collective self-analysis as each man reflects on his relationship with his own wife, with the other women (sister or lover) and with the unseen but always felt presence of house parties of gay men offstage on either side of the beach house. The two men prefer to ignore their neighbors, but one of the women repeatedly engages them in conversations of which we hear only her side, and the other woman projects onto them—and onto a solitary swimmer bent on suicide—the love, guilt, and fear prompted by her brother's illness and death. Invisible, the groups of gay men become a very real presence on stage as they offer what each actor rejects and yet, somehow, craves. And it is in the unseen bodies of these men that the psychoanalysis situates itself as the four antagonists seek a reflection of self to clothe each unsatisfied *je*. For the garrulous wife, the healthy, muscled bodies of the men next door suggest an image of male beauty which her own husband does not provide. "Don't straight men think we have eyes?" she asks (32). For the introspective wife, the still healthy body of the swimmer suggests a horrible irony as he swims to his death, perhaps to escape a ravaging illness. For the two men, the bodies represent physical competition, objects to envy, but only if they are regarded; for most of the play the two refuse to look next door. In a central scene, however, one brother-in-law takes a shower on the elaborately naturalistic stage and the other, bringing him a towel, remarks that he didn't know his brother-in-law had a mole, admitting (in a very off-hand manner) that he has viewed the naked body (63). In the same scene (64–65), the sister tells her brother that she hasn't seen him naked since he was a boy and shamelessly insists that he open the shower door to her gaze (playing off the audience's desire or embarrassment that his nakedness might actually be shown). When he finally relents, opening the door outward, across stage, so the audience cannot see him and investing his sister as audience agent, she remarks that he is much better endowed than her husband, complimenting him by attacking the husband who has recently rejected her. The audience does not view his genitals, though it has seen him washing his torso and legs. It has, however, been confirmed that he is an appropriate fantasmatic heterosexual *moi* with which to identify or to desire; indeed, he has been assigned the synecdochal sign without risk that the actor may not live up to it. Culturally imbricated signifiers do not rely on physical reality; in fact, they prefer to avoid it. The audience is, after all, seeking to view itself in a literary and iconic mirror, not a real one.²⁰

¹⁹ Terrance McNally, *Lips Together, Teeth Apart* (New York: Plume, 1992). Subsequent page references appear in the text. The production under discussion was at Vancouver Playhouse, January 1993. Dir. John Cooper.

²⁰ Cf. the necessary erection on stage of a male actor in Theatre Passe Muraille's *I Love You, Baby Blue* (Erin, Ontario: Press Porcepic, 1977) Here, the male actor must demonstrate what Keir Elam calls "iconic identity" (see *The Semiotics of Theatre and Drama* [London: Methuen, 1980], 22) rather than simply invoking the phallic icon and cannot rely on what Silverman calls "collective make-believe," a notion to which I will later refer. Even though the show presented the "Human Levitation Scene" ironically, it was always risky theatre: it changed the position of the actor as fantasmatic male to that of real man, which threatened to deny his superiority. When the effect was successful it overlapped the fantasmatic with the real, "proving" that the power of the erect male is truism rather than artifice, and then it was very powerful theatre.

Now, a complex quadrangle is set up: the wife who finds the gay men beautiful has indexed her brother as more “male” than her husband, who himself has admitted looking at the brother, but who immediately attacks the neighbors verbally. Gradations of male power present themselves in the forms of these potential bodies: the naked brother who emerges at the top of the pyramid is, as a result, freed to be tender (for a moment)—just as David is freed to cry when he apologizes for his defamation of François. Clearly marked as clean, male, and potent,²¹ he now attempts a reconciliation with the brother-in-law with whom he has been fighting all day. More important, he also narrates, with considerable surprise at his own lack of revulsion, a scene of male lovemaking offstage. He remarks that he hears sexual murmurings, but no statement of emotion and then, as a number of strands come together in simultaneous dialogue on stage, he “hears” and repeats the climax of the sexual encounter offstage: “I love you” (86). In one of the few understated moments in this rather heavy-handed play, this heterosexual man actually views other men, allows their bodies to be sexual actors and admits that their physical actions express love. But his brother-in-law, who has opened the door for such a revelation by first peeking at his brother’s nudity, is revealed to be dying of cancer. Like the gay man in the water, like the brother who has died, like the toned bodies next door which may all carry the virus which will emaciate and destroy them, this heterosexual is punished for having broken the taboo, for having viewed another male body. Once again, the warning is clear to the heterosexual male spectator: if the *je* admits the possibility of its own body as sexual object, the *moi* it conjures will be stained and it will be punished. Once again, the warning is clear to the homosexual male spectator: As the *je* has accepted its own body as sexual object, the *moi* created, no matter how well formed, is doomed and must destroy itself before it can pollute the essential *je*—just as the dead brother has polluted the swimming pool on stage into which the heterosexuals will not step lest it infect them with HIV. Significantly, it is this brother-in-law who finally leaps into the pool and floats face down in a ‘dead man’s float’ (85).²²

Although the play has been well received by some gay critics, it seems another negative statement of denial; the characters do come to some self-understanding and some fairness in their dealings with each other and the other residents of Fire Island, but nothing changes at the heart of self-identification. The iconography of the body as presented only perpetuates the prevalent mythology. The heterosexual is still presented as the norm against which all is to be measured, though this norm is shown to be distorted. While the women’s *personae* are, to some extent, read as culturally induced (and the nervous sister is clothed and re clothed to index this putting on and taking off of identity), the men are read as biologically entire, though needing to explore a wider range of expression. Had it grasped the potential the beach setting offered, the play might have moved away from realist portraiture to work directly with the series of male bodies discussed but never presented and, in the interaction of these bodies, have offered a set of mirror images of value to the spectator’s own self-

²¹ Cf. Richard Meyer, “Rock Hudson’s Body,” in *Inside/Out*, 259–90.

²² In the Vancouver Playhouse production, Norman Browning exploited the effect brilliantly by holding his breath just longer than the audience expected, raising noticeable jitters in the audience that the actor was actually at risk of drowning and intensifying the symbol of the pool as a place of death, and as an intersection of the theatrical and “real.”

analysis. But to do so would, of course, have been to allow the exposure of the male body which is not available for view, too essential is it to the deepest vision of the collective *moi* and too holy within the culture. As Silverman points out, "our 'dominant fiction' or ideological 'reality' solicits our faith . . ."; "'exemplary' male subjectivity cannot be thought apart from [this] ideology, not only because ideology holds out the mirror within which that subjectivity is constructed, but because the latter depends upon a kind of collective make-believe in the commensurability of penis and phallus."²³

When it is put on view as sexual object, the male body is invariably punished. In the 1990s, this point requires precision: today, the male body can be displayed as icon of power and of the sexuality of power—advertising and male pornography often render the body in this way. In these cases, the body is read as desirable but in control, not only returning the spectator's gaze but overwhelming it with a more arrogant, or uncaring, or sexually potent gaze. In these cases, the viewer becomes, her- or himself, the secondary object of the gaze of the primary object; in Lacanian terms, the *je* locates itself as subservient to the fiction it projects onto its own *moi*. Women have been told this constitutes for them a double submission, as the *moi* returns to them the falseness of the fiction by saying "you are not as strong as me and you cannot ever resemble me, since you lack." But just as this is nonsense for women, it is equally distorting for men. The message of the *moi* to its fellow man is complicated: "You could be like me if you become as strong as me, but you cannot really *be* me if you are looking *at* me, and you must, therefore, inevitably fail; I remain the desired Other you either must love or from whom you must hide." Trapped by a belief that the fiction of the culturally induced *moi* is true and that it holds some biological *a priori*, men of all sexual persuasions view the male body with deep fear (and covert or overt longing).

If, on the other hand, the male body is displayed not as icon of power and completeness *qua* subject but as pure object incapable of staring down the spectator, it takes on the signification previously assigned to the female, but it also adds to this scorn a sense of culpability: while the female cannot be held responsible for failing to be male (though she is to be despised for her failure), the male can be held responsible and can, and must, be punished. Much current advertising plays with these notions by showing a male body with averted eyes or acquiescent to the viewer, but as Norbert Ruebsaat points out, this object is probably just "another man in sheep's clothing."²⁴ Certainly in drama—even gay drama—the myth continues and the objectified male body is routinely punished.

²³Silverman, 15. Cf. the treatment of the naked male body in Jane Campion's film, *The Piano*. Here, a female writer and director exposes her male subjects' bodies repeatedly, even alone on screen as the only object of the gaze. It is interesting to note the treatment by this writer of the male body as object of touch, including her exposure of the buttocks as field for touch. The antagonist, not surprisingly, is unable to allow his body to be used in this manner; he twice reacts against the caressing of his buttocks, pulling up his (indexing) long underwear and attempting to become "active"—to touch the woman and to employ his penis. Work by women playwrights is beginning to subvert the "collective make-believe" of "exemplary" male subjectivity.

²⁴Norbert Ruebsaat, "New Males: It's the same game in a different guise," *Vancouver Sun*, 13 February 1993: Saturday Review, C4.

In *Polygraph*, François commits suicide, as does the swimmer in *Lips Together, Teeth Apart*. But before he does so, François is shown as masochist, punishing himself at the hands of the desired but silent mystery man he picks up in a bar. The scene is titled “The Flesh”—reminding the audience that this exchange takes place directly at the level of the body. In the Vancouver production, François was displayed at the outset of this scene as iconographically gay male—lounging against the omnipresent wall, drinking a beer, bare-chested in a black biker’s jacket. Although he is surveying the men in the bar, it is important to note the stage direction: “Soon he realizes one of the crowd is assessing him” (54). The object of the audience’s gaze is also the object of the gaze of a fictional subject. What does the sadist see? Clearly the man he views is garbed in the indeces of maleness, yet the true man is able to intuit that François is weaker than himself—or, more important, is prepared to act out a role as weaker. This man, of course, is never seen: he is a projection by François of the man he desires but feels unable to resemble and by whom, therefore, he must be punished. He is a creation of the fantasmatic. A complex treatment of masochism and its role in male homosexuality lies beyond the scope of my discussion: Kaja Silverman’s book treats the subject at length; Jonathan Dollimore argues that masochism functions within the mythological history of homosexuality.²⁵ The point I am raising is that the audience, collectively analyzing identities of the male and female in this play, participates in the creation of this mystery man—indeed, *is* him as he beats François. Regardless of the revulsion any given spectator may feel in watching François “recoil against the wall” with “each sound of the whiplash,” the audience becomes Lacan’s ego-subject, observing François as object “very sensuously dropping to a kneeling position with one eye on [it]” (54). And by constructing the imaginary act in tempo to its sound, the audience becomes the lover François conjures and projects onto stage. But, as the audience also creates the fiction of François (through the agency of the actor), it actually comes, on a collective level, to desire itself and yet to flagellate itself for failing to be the Perfect Male it seeks to view in the psychic mirror.

On an individual level, responses will vary. I set aside female responses, which I am not qualified to assess. Heterosexual male viewers may reject the entire situation, but they are also complicit in the punishment of the body they were forced moments earlier to view lounging seductively within their gaze and toward which they may feel superior. Homosexual male viewers are caught in a complicated semiosis: some will identify with the scene but generally not with its sadomasochism; some, having identified with François, will now distance themselves from his fetish; others will now associate their own desire with François’s pain; some will experience a composite of these responses. Victimized by the projected *moi* of power and yet desirous of him, they are faced with a self-analysis stripped of its fictive guise. As Lucie says later of her audition, “I think I felt a bit—well, silly . . . I found the director quite . . . *aggressive* with his camera . . . And . . . oh . . . I felt more observed by the crew, and the director himself, than by the voyeur in the scenario. I was being watched. Me, not the character. Do you know what I mean?” (58). The gay spectator knows exactly what she means.

²⁵ Jonathan Dollimore, keynote address to the 1993 conference of the Association of Canadian College and University Teachers of English, 30 May 1993 at Carleton University, Ottawa, Canada.

Being observed is the essential *mise-en-scène* of David Drake's *The Night Larry Kramer Kissed Me*, produced at the Perry Street Theatre in New York in the fall of 1992.²⁶ Assuming a largely gay audience, the one-man show makes direct use of the actor's body, of the audience's sexual response to it, and of the complex self-identification/self-rejection which Lepage also employs.

The show is a series of vignettes in which Drake remembers his boyhood—caught playing with his girlfriend's dolls by her brother, a prototype of the brothers-in-law in *Lips Together, Teeth Apart*—his arrival in New York, where he learns how to live within the urban, gay subculture, his afternoons at the gym, and his late nights cruising in bars. Throughout the show, Drake balances, once again, the binary opposites of male identity: the sissy and the muscled hunk. In this show, even more than the others under discussion, the site of his analysis is the body itself.

The two most powerful vignettes—the gym and the bar—vividly portray aspects under discussion: the creation of masculinity in the fiction of a *moi* which is muscled, sexually potent, and well-endowed, and the reflection of that *moi* back onto a *je* which views it as normative and yet unattainable. This reflection is, for the *je*, both itself and the impossible Other, who is at once the object of sexual desire and the punishing Male of cultural definition, simultaneously attractive and yet false. Disturbing in the politics of this play—given that it is a vehicle for Act Up and the Queer Nation approaches to gay rights, and despite the optimistic ending—is the continuing depiction of the protagonist as submissive to the image of the straight man or as determined to fight him but with his own arsenal. In an early childhood memory, the protagonist recalls that Brad, his friend's brother, threw his Barbie doll away, and ridiculed his gift of a *Village People* album, telling the children that the Village People were "Fairies." Seeking an image, an infantile "*je-idéal*,"²⁷ the boy remembers that "they don't look like fairies on the record cover. They look really tough . . . really cool" (29). The child's fear of the bully is coupled with self-hatred. In a wonderfully overlapping image pattern he creates objects in which his subject-child seeks self-identity: as child, as butterfly encased in a paperweight, as sissy chased by tougher boys, as gay icon from the Village People. Always, however, he is viewing himself, if only in projection, as the bully, now pinned inside a paperweight on his desk to whom he can shout, "See . . . See what happens when you mess with me!" Always he is subject and object simultaneously, recognizing the falsity of the iconic projections and yet desperate to locate himself in them. And always, his recognition that the images of the dominant culture are false reminds him that he has no image he can validate, that he can view himself (as the audience views him, whether in empathy or derision) only as lacking; he picks up the paperweight which ostensibly contains his tormentor, but contains his own desired *moi* as well, and screams at it "with deep, primal rage: 'FAIRYYYYYYYYYYYYYYY!'" (30).

²⁶ David Drake, *The Night Larry Kramer Kissed Me* (New York: Anchor, 1994). The production under discussion was at the Perry Street Theatre, New York, Fall 1992. Subsequent page references appear in the text.

²⁷ See Jacques Lacan, "The Mirror Stage as Formative of the Function of the I as Revealed in Psychoanalytic Experience," in *Écrits: A Selection*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Norton, 1977).

This same mixing of hate and desire permeates the rest of the play, as the mature boy presents a series of representative moments in single, urban gay life. Repeatedly, the protagonist exposes his desire for and his repudiation of “Them” (37)—straight men whom the culture tells him are the norm and whom he encounters everywhere, including in that sanctuary of the body, the gym. Repeatedly, he creates for himself images of maleness which he compares to “Them.”

The gym scene is a chanted narration and enactment of the ritual of working out. The rap is redolent of maleness: the “whiff of Old Spice Lockers, damp white towels, musk, steam, soap, cream . . . and pubic hairs dried to the strangest places” (32–33). Undercoded in the “back channel”²⁸ are separate signifiers of gay maleness: gray cotton Calvin Klein shorts, a “spandex-spread-dick,” condoms. The scene begins with Drake stripping on stage, exposing a finely toned body which signifies success in the ritual of body building and which presents to the audience an object of desire and a *moi* whom spectators might well emulate. It also presents the male body as highly erotic object, a condition which, we have seen, prefigures punishment.

The reasons for going to the gym are immediately presented in a set of parallel statements accompanied by mimed action: To view the “guys you’ve wanted since the day you first feared the sensations they gave you in the junior high showers. Only now . . . you can ‘do it.’” (33). To enjoy the workout—“Felt that burn. MMMmmmm, yeah. That’s why I go to the gym”;

to-please-the-lov-er-I-don’t-have-so-I-can-get-one/
 to-fuck-one/
 with-a-con-dom/
 to-pro-tect-one/
 from-the-stalk-ing/
 that-is-go-ing/
 down-on-my-street/
 a-ttack-ing-dykes-&-fag-gots-who-are-dy-ing-as-they’re-ly-ing-
 down-on/
 my-street/
 Yeah/
 That’s why I go to the gym;
 [to become strong enough to fight off the gay-bashers]
 who are knoc-king-me-down/
 on-my-street,
 arm-in-arm-in-packs-that-roam-my-street/
 roam-my-street/
 roam-my-street/
 hun-ting-down-my-kind-of-meat/
 . . . /
 That’s why I go to the gym.

[39, 38]

In the movement from narcissism to militancy the dual value of a muscled body is presented, but so is the confusion built into this notion of masculinity. In order for gay men to “have the final laugh” they must have “that membership card that lets you into . . . *The Warrior Room*. Where the men dress like boys. But it’s only an outfit for the

²⁸See Victor H. Yngue, “On Getting a Word in Edgewise,” Papers from the 6th Regional Meeting of the Chicago Linguistic Society (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1970).

transformation: turning the boys . . . into men" (31). But the "men" into whom they are turned still weigh identity in terms of bulk and "blue / veins / sna-king-up-my-fore-arm / to my / bubble- / knot- / bi-cep. Mmmm, yeah. That's why I go to the gym" (35–36). The goal is to overcome fear of the straight men, the "Them" who interrupt his narcissism to cut in on the machines—"Sure. Go ahead" (37)—and over whom Drake stands—"Yeah, I'll spot you" (38)—while he chants his defiance against those who would bash him. The imagery becomes a war cry, but it expresses the same aggression it repudiates, for Drake knows that in our society such terminology carries the audience's measure of the male:

When-we be-gan-the-pumping/
 and-the-pul-ling
 and-the-curl-ing/
 and-the-cut-ting/
 and-the-lunging-and-the-reping-and-the-crunching-
 and-the-pressing-towards-the-day-we-win-the-
 FI-
 NAL-
 WAR-

[42]

And Drake knows—"(*removing pants, noticing audience*) Amongst the other guys snapping snaps, belts, and elastic straps against their naked buttocks"—that the "hushed" and "concentrated effort" of the audience, like that of his fellow athletes (both straight and gay), is "with or without attention paid to the size . . . of your cock" (32). Once again, the final measure of manhood is viewed or pointedly ignored—but it is, once again, a presence on stage defining the *moi*.

The result of his afternoon in the gym is a body prepared to cruise. And in the following vignette, Drake announces himself now ready to be viewed: "Girth is everything. / Inches count. 6 inches / by 6 inches / equals 12 inches / equal me" (43). He is now defined entirely in terms of image: he is a walking sign-vehicle: "G-W-M; 29; 5'9, 150 lbs, blond-slash-blue. / A 12 inch single, smart, smooth, swimmer seeks . . . you. And you. And you" (44). And he now "seeks" the audience even while he seeks his fantasy lover. The scene echos the bar scene of *Polygraph*. Rejecting body types which do not measure up and repeating his own self-defining talisman—"I'm a 12 inch Single. / Play me once, flip me over, play me twice" (47 *et pass.*)—he seeks a man to:

Fill me
 Take me.
 Hit me.
 Hit me.
 Hit me.
 Hit me.
 Hit me, hit me, hit me, hit me
 HIT
 ON
 ME.

[46–47]

The phrase "hit me" occurs seventeen times in the scene while the protagonist seeks "a man's PUNCH" (50) and at the same time cautions that "Straight-Acting, Straight-

Appearing ONLY need apply" (50) to "Choose me. / Abuse me. / Lose me" (53). The scene is highly ironic; but the deep seated identification with a hard body, violence, and punishment as emblems of the male overwhelms the gay activist writing to reflect onto the audience another set of damaging reflections of the *moi* society tells us we should seek. When a "soldier" in the bar looks away from him, the protagonist attacks in bitter self-vilification: "Hey, don't divert your eyes from me. Hey, look here . . . QUEEEEEEEEEEEEEERRRRRRRR!" followed by a page-long list of pejorative slang terms for *homosexual* (53). The soldier, after all, is a male icon and is not supposed to gaze upon another man; but this soldier is found in a gay bar, where his refusal to do so reinforces the protagonist's self-image as that which must not be seen, while at the same time exploding the myth of the soldier as necessarily heterosexual.²⁹ The scene also admonishes the spectators to continue to gaze upon the hero, and in doing so to see images of themselves. In the end of the scene, the protagonist finds his fantasmatic lover: again, he is sadistic (or certainly aggressive) and silent. While chanting "MMMMMM-you- /sick . . . /yeah" five times (56–57), Drake mimes a seduction of and by the lover who pulls a knife and inscribes on Drake's perfectly fabricated torso a deep imprint of his threatening power and potential violence. The image of the actor tracing a knife line around his own chest, pressing the point of the knife into his own pectoral muscle, displays exactly the composite of desire and self-mutilation which gay men appear in these plays to read into their bodies as the texts upon which a culturally induced masculinity is written.³⁰

If a new society, like the utopia described in the final scene of *The Night Larry Kramer Kissed Me* at "five minutes" to the end of the century (81) is to come to be—a culture in which traditional images of the male no longer frame male or female bodies or senses of self—it will be essential for theatre to present new images, a multiplicity of images, upon which the *je* of its spectators may gaze in search of potential, and perhaps provisional or momentary, identities. If theatre is gender-making, it has a political responsibility to recognize that role and to take action. Much feminist theatre is redescribing the woman; male theatre needs to address the constricting armor it has created to hide the various male bodies beneath.

²⁹ Current controversy about the visibility of homosexuals in the United States military underlines how powerful this set of icons is in the American psyche. Military figures rarely appear in the drama in Canada, where the icon has less currency; interestingly, the Canadian armed forces accepted homosexual military personnel some years ago, with little objection.

³⁰ Cf. René-Daniel Dubois's *Being at Home with Claude* (Montréal: Lémeac, 1986) where a knife falling between two lovers at the culmination of their most honest lovemaking becomes a phallic fetish/phobic object which requires a death (and causes one). A film version of this play (produced by Films du CERF and the National Film Board of Canada, 1991) is available on video.