

ENGLISH GAY/QUEER THEATRE IN THE 1990S: KEVIN ELYOT'S *MY NIGHT WITH REG* AND MARK RAVENHILL'S *SHOPPING AND FUCKING**

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ABSTRACT

This article aims to examine the controversial status of the so-called gay and queer theatres in contemporary English dramatic production. In order to effect both a theoretical and a contextual approach, attention is paid to the shift from gay to queer theatre practices which took place in the mid-1990s, with the opening on the London stages of plays such as Kevin Elyot's *My Night with Reg* (1994), Sarah Kane's *Blasted* (1995) or Mark Ravenhill's *Shopping and Fucking* (1996). By focusing on the implications of such a change, the article explores the transition from *My Night with Reg* to *Shopping and Fucking* with the intention of shedding light on the particular circumstances that seem to have contributed to the emergence of queerer, angrier voices in the specific context of the English *fin-de-siècle*.

KEY WORDS: Kevin Elyot, Mark Ravenhill, gay studies, queer theory, gay theatre, queer theatre, contemporary English theatre.

RESUMEN

Este artículo ofrece una aproximación al controvertido estatus de lo que se conoce como teatro gay y *queer* en la producción dramática contemporánea inglesa. Con el objetivo de efectuar un acercamiento a la vez teórico y contextual, se presta especial atención al cambio de una práctica teatral gay por otra *queer* que tuvo lugar a mediados de la década de 1990, con el estreno en escenarios londinenses de obras tales como *My Night with Reg* (1994), de Kevin Elyot, *Blasted* (1995), de Sarah Kane, o *Shopping and Fucking* (1996), de Mark Ravenhill. Concentrándose en las implicaciones de tal evolución, el artículo explora la transición de *My Night with Reg* a *Shopping and Fucking* con la intención de indagar en las circunstancias particulares que parecen haber contribuido a la aparición de voces más airadas, más *queer*, en el contexto específico del fin de siglo inglés.

PALABRAS CLAVE: Kevin Elyot, Mark Ravenhill, estudios gay, teoría *queer*, teatro gay, teatro *queer*, teatro inglés contemporáneo.



INTRODUCTION

The 1990s proved to be a truly controversial period for English theatre. Especially appearing in the middle of the decade, new plays opened on London stages—in venues such as the Royal Court Theatre, The Bush Theatre, The Lyric Theatre, and many others—and left audiences speechless with their energy and aggressiveness. A turning point was the opening, in January 1995, of Sarah Kane's confrontational *Blasted*, which played to astounded audiences and signalled the beginning of an altogether different type of theatre.¹ Kane's play quickly became the emblem of this new trend, and its opening was immediately followed by the work of other playwrights such as Martin Crimp, Harry Gibson, Patrick Marber, Phyllis Nagy, Antony Neilson, Rebecca Prichard, Mark Ravenhill, and many others. These type of plays—which may be related to the theorisations of Antonin Artaud—quickly received, amongst others, the labels of “in-yer-face,” “new brutalism,” “theatre of urban ennui” (Sierz 30), or “new Jacobeanism” (Sierz 37)—even though the label that seems to be more pertinent is the first.² They share a profound dissatisfaction with life in contemporary Western societies, the depiction of a bleak view of the communication between human beings, the utter fragility of the individual in front of institutional forms of oppression and, consequently, a completely nihilistic view of the world. This is shown through quite an extreme use of violence at all levels—physical, psychic, through the use of a “blatant or confrontational language or state images” (Sierz 16), through a very explicit and aggressive use of sexuality, and, in some cases, through a challenging use of form. However, the most subversive power potential of this new trend of drama is, probably, the challenging of the binary oppositions that generate meaning in Western societies. It is for this reason that “in-yer-face” theatre becomes then an “[e]xperiential” theatre practice that makes the reader/spectator's “sense of safety” tumble (Sierz 6).³

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¹ *Blasted*, directed by James Macdonald, opened at the Royal Court Theatre Upstairs on 12 January 1995.

² “In-yer-face” plays have been considered (Sierz) as somehow mirroring the revolution that shook British theatre in the 1950s, represented by such playwrights as John Osborne and Arnold Wesker and by plays that became as quintessential as *Look Back in Anger*. In recent times, however, there have emerged voices questioning the extent to which such plays might be labelled revolutionary and vindicating the earlier theatrical production of the twentieth century, embodied in playwrights such as J.B. Priestley or Terence Rattigan, amongst others (Rebellato).

³ And this is perhaps the link with Antonin Artaud's notion of “theatre of cruelty.” Artaud's theorising, which appeared in his seminal book *Le théâtre et son double* (1938), emphasised the

Another circumstance that characterised the British theatrical production of the 1990s was the showing on London stages —and only one year before the première of Kane's *Blasted*— of a number of plays which dealt openly with the issue of homosexuality from different perspectives and which created a definite anxiety in the most conservative London theatre reviewers of the time.⁴ Such theatrical practices originated in earlier forms of gay dramatic expression —the work of such influential companies as Gay Sweatshop, Women's Company, or Siren Theatre Company, amongst others— and in some cases exploited the dissident potential of “in-yer-face” theatre and used it for their own purposes. After the adverse reaction, other gay and queer plays ensued, becoming a seminal part of the theatrical production of the period. The decade of the 1990s thus became —for one reason or another— quite a controversial one to boot.

In this article, I am going to concentrate on the way two of the plays produced in such an energetic and heterogeneous decade exemplify the transition from what we could tentatively call *gay* theatre to what in time would become known as *queer* theatre. In doing so, I purport to demonstrate how such an evolution parallels the current debate between gay and queer theories. The two plays chosen are Kevin Elyot's *My Night with Reg* —an example of gay theatre— and Mark Ravenhill's *Shopping and Fucking*—the quintessential “in-yer-face” play as well as representative of a queer theatrical practice. Both texts exemplify the movement from gay theatre, concerned with the search for definitions of gayness and the creation of a stable gay identity, to queer theatre, more concerned with contesting the established capitalist, patriarchal, sexist and homophobic orders by showing the disappearance of fixed, stable identities, and of the ideologies that support them in specific *fin-de-siècle* societies through the adoption of undoubtedly “in-yer-face” techniques.

FROM GAY THEATRE TO QUEER THEATRE

English culture has always been possessed by a preoccupation with social issues, and the stage could not be an exception. Theatre, according to Sinfield, is “a particular site for the formation of dissident sexual identities” (*Out* 1), and there-

disturbing power of a ‘total theatre’ that, advocating new forms of expression, would modify the audience's perception of reality through the disruption of theatrical conventions concerning space, acting and language, as well as through the creation of powerful stage pictures.

⁴ Indeed, reviewers such as Milton Shulman, from the *Evening Standard* and Charles Spencer, from the *Daily Telegraph* showed their anxiety in two pieces written in September 1994 in the wake of the concurrence in London theatres of plays such as Noël Coward's *Design for Living*, Kevin Elyot's *My Night with Reg*, and Jonathan Harvey's *Babies* and *Beautiful Thing*, to which should be added the impact caused by Tony Kushner's controversial *Angels in America* in the years 1992 and 1993. Charles Spencer's “He Dares to Be Popular” was published on 21 September. Shulman's review, which appeared on 30 September, deserves special attention, since simply its title, “Stop the Plague of Pink Plays,” shows its profound homophobia.



fore “a place for both disclosure and subterfuge” (4). Bearing these words in mind, I would like to map out the recent evolution of theatre as a place where various forms of dissent (sexual, gender, social, political, amongst others) encounter, according to two fields of experience that coexisted in 1990s English theatre: gay and queer theatrical practices. The former has its origins in the “post-Stonewall liberation movement” (Roberts 178), was “created by gay writers, companies and audiences” and aimed at “recover[ing] or reconstruct[ing] [gay] history from a new perspective” (Jongh 5), even though it centres almost exclusively on the “gay bourgeoisie” (Clum266). The latter, on the other hand, is linked with a “post-AIDS consciousness” (Roberts 178), will be “associated with radical, direct-action groups... [and will reject] a perception of “gay” as white, middle-class, affluent, and assimilated, either passing within the dominant culture or reliant on the ghetto of gay subculture” (Roberts 178).

This gay/queer split can also be found at a theoretical level. Thus, gay theatre, centred on a humanistic-biased identity politics, would be related to the creation of stable gay identities that could function as affirmative images for (mostly) mainstream, bourgeois gay audiences. On the other hand, queer theatre, obviously from a more radical position and clearly drawing on poststructuralism, will actively work to deconstruct such a fixed identity, arguing that such an existence is impossible in contemporary, fragmented societies and focusing instead on how the subversive potential of elements such as fluidity, instability and performativity create meaning. Thus, queer will be more concerned with “open[ing] up a vista of multiple, shifting, and gloriously polymorphous bodies, pleasures, and resistances” (Savran 153), the outcome of which will be a focusing on “mutability, instability, and polyvalence” (Savran 154). This ties in with Eve Sedgwick’s words: ““queer” can refer to: 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” (8). The aim of the queer theatrical practice will therefore lie in its possibilities for dissidence, “disclosure” and “subterfuge,” always with a view to politicising the gay “subculture” (Sinfield, *cultural* 82).

GAY THEATRE: KEVIN ELYOT’S *MY NIGHT WITH REG* (1994)

My Night with Reg could be defined as post-Stonewall gay play produced in post-AIDS times. It depicts the existence of a group of gay men in their 30s and 40s and their reaction in front of the devastating effects of the AIDS epidemic. Formally a traditional one-act play divided into three scenes, the action spans over a four-year period, and one of its main effects is its skilful articulation of a feeling of loss and bereavement that is conveyed through the gradual demise of some of the characters. All this is achieved through the use of a detached technique which introduces a distance between the reader/audience and the actors/characters and which acts as a contrast with the naturalistic tone of the play. As a result, the tragicomic

elements that pervade the play allow us to laugh at some points, but not without leaving us with a sense of helplessness in front of an ending that leaves no room for hope in the face of the unavoidable confrontation with death the characters are subjected to.

The dramatic shape of the play is structured around three gatherings which will articulate a specific gay identity paradoxically based on deprivation and disappearance. Scene I introduces the reader/audience to the main characters and to the permanent setting of the play: Guy's flat. In the scene, Guy, a copywriter, is to celebrate his flat-warming party and has invited his London friends. We are introduced to Daniel and John, from their university days and belonging, respectively, to a middle and upper-middle class milieu. Daniel, an art dealer, cannot attend the party but pays a quick visit before flying off to Australia on business. John, whose affluent condition allows him to live without working, turns up at the last minute. Through the scene, the audience learns that the other guests are Reg, Daniel's partner—who turns out to be having an affair with John—and Bernie and Benny, slightly older and from a working-class environment. Giving the final touches to the conservatory, there is Eric, an eighteen year-old from Birmingham and the only other example of the proletariat in the play. Scene two, making a shift of two years, shows us another get-together at Guy's only that this time it is after the wake for the death of Reg—the character who gives the play its title and who never appears on stage. In the course of the action, the audience learns about Daniel's suspicions about Reg having a lover in the final months of his life, about John's inability to tell Daniel the truth of his affair with Reg, and about the growing fear in Bernie and Benny as a consequence of having had unprotected sexual relations with Reg after Guy's flatwarming party in scene I. Finally, scene III makes a shift of two more years and places us once again in Guy's flat. This time it is Guy himself who has died of AIDS—the consequence of a single unprotected sexual encounter when he was raped on a holiday in Lanzarote. In his will, he leaves his flat to John—who also sleeps with Eric. After being confronted by Daniel once again, John proves definitely unable to tell him the truth about his relationship with Reg. To make things even worse, he confides to Daniel that he might have started showing signs of the illness himself. The play closes with Eric showing a concern to tend Guy's unkempt garden as some kind of homage to him. However, the fact that he also seems to have slept with Reg, together with the blatant loss of his initial innocence and with Daniel's depiction of the endless promiscuity of a section of the gay community close the play on a bleak note indeed.

Bearing in mind the introduction to “in-yer-face” and to gay/queer theatre above-mentioned, it could be said that *My Night with Reg* avoids, on the whole, a confrontational tone and presents us instead with mourning and a resigned acceptance of the effects of AIDS, instead of offering us valid and more energetic alternatives to fight against them. Thus, the gay subjects that the play depicts are shown to be ultimately at a loss as to how to react in front of the menace and, what is more, they seem to negate any possibility of action in the face of AIDS, denying, in this way, the existence of any feasible way of changing society. Other aspects in the play that might suggest the articulation of a more oppositional stance—namely the use



of camp, and the veiled references to Section 28 and to the age of consent—are not developed enough to accomplish a function other than stating a political positioning pervasive in the gay theatre of the post-Stonewall period, but lacking a more radical, subversive element characteristic of contemporary queer practices.

As to the use of camp, it is a device the characters employ to escape and contest the constraints of a patriarchal, homophobic society. Thus, it becomes the way some of them have to show dissidence and to put up a fight. In fact, from the outset of the play the reader/audience soon realises that the men in *My Night with Reg* must have clearly struggled at some moment in their existence, and their leading seemingly open gay lives—which is inferred by the free use of language and by the adoption of a relaxed physical attitude to one another—points in this direction. Thus, the toasts they make are rife with references both to aspects of gay sexuality (“Sodomy!” (Elyot 18)), or to the constrictive laws that regulated homosexual acts in Britain in previous years: “Gross indecency!” (17); “Indecent exposure!” (21), showing, thus, the fact that they have survived such repressive times and have appropriated the legal terminology as a token of dissidence. The best example of the use of camp in language can be seen in the character of Daniel, who calls John “Juanita” and Guy “Gertie” (15, 17), thus contesting patriarchal phallogocentrism:

[DANIEL & JOHN] embrace again. DANIEL mauls JOHN's backside.

DANIEL: Darling, it's dropped!

JOHN. Fuck off!

DANIEL. Dropped, dropped, dropped! At least two inches! It'll be dragging on the floor before the night's out.

JOHN tweaks one of Daniel's nipples. DANIEL shrieks. ERIC looks on.

No, it hasn't! It's perfect! I promise!

JOHN lets go.

The Flying Fuck of the First Fifteen!

They embrace again.

Darling, be gentle! I'm still intacta. (16)

However, Daniel's contestation of the prevailing order through language and gesture proves to be unsuccessful once out of the protection of Guy's living room, when he has to repeatedly confront the harshness of the outside world. Thus, the progressive presence of death in the play will end by silencing him, and, therefore, smothering the disruptive potential of his use of camp.

Together with the use of camp, the veiled references to Section 28 and to the age of consent are also relevant in this enumeration of the oppositional components of the play from a gay political perspective. Section 28 of the Local Government Act was developed by the Conservative Party under Margaret Thatcher. It first appeared as Clause 28 of the Local Government Bill on 7 December 1987, a repressive measure against homosexuality which “makes it illegal for a local authority intentionally to “promote homosexuality.” The clause threaten[ed], among other things, local authority theatres and libraries that present[ed] or stock[ed] works by Marlowe, Tennessee Williams, Forster, Genet, Mann, Ginsberg, Plato. It provoked



strong but unsuccessful resistance from the arts lobby” (Sinfield, *Literature* 299). Clause 28 changed its name into Section 28 when it became law on 24 May 1988. It was never applied in its entirety and was finally repealed by the House of Commons on 10 March 2003 and by the House of Lords on 10 July 2003.⁵ Thus, the fact that Elyot wrote the play in the mid-1990s, in the midst of a heated debate about the existence of such a piece of legislation, remains an act that should not be overlooked and which links it to a more political tradition. On the other hand, the representation the play offers of the gradual disappearance of the helpless homosexual subjects becomes problematic from a queer perspective.

As to the third aspect, the age of consent, it is indirectly introduced into the play through the character of Eric. This could be seen as another veiled way Elyot employs to present the play as a locus of “disclosure” and “subterfuge.” Eric, who at the beginning of the play has just come of age for gay sex, works in a gay pub, is related to the older male characters and is actually depicted as having sexual intercourse with the landlord at the pub, possibly with Reg himself—as we learn in scene two—and—as has been mentioned earlier—with John in scene three. This was barely legal at the time the play was written, and hence Elyot’s attitude becomes more oppositional here, reflecting the struggle that took place in Britain in connection with the lowering of the age of consent for homosexual practices to 16, and which was finally accomplished in January 2001 in England, Wales and Scotland.⁶ However, once again it becomes too veiled a move, as if trying to avoid a too committed positioning that would unashamedly question the established sexual morality.

My Night with Reg, thus, contains elements that make it a clear example of a gay theatre practice. As has been seen, such features as the use of camp, the references to Section 28, and those to the age of consent are all pertinent in this connection. These are political aspects in their own right, but on the whole, the absence of a stronger confrontational element more in accordance with the reality of its time makes it miss a fuller queerness. Ultimately, the play becomes assimilationist in terms of bourgeois values, simply focusing on a “ghetto gay subculture” (Roberts 177) which recent queer positionings seek to escape from. Furthermore, the fact that characters gradually *disappear* in a literal sense—since, one by one, they die of AIDS—makes their ordeal a metaphor for the erasure of a gay subjectivity that had been strenuously hard to construct in the first place. The result is that the gay subject I mentioned earlier becomes ultimately unidentifiable by its very disappearance—what Leo Bersani has called “de-gaying” (71). And this is quite a perverse paradox in what I have just defined as a gay play, which should be particularly concerned with the creation of gay subjectivities instead of focusing on their disappearance.

⁵ In fact, the Local Government Bill received the Royal Assent in September 2003.

⁶ Within the scope of the United Kingdom, Northern Ireland established its own age of consent at 17.



QUEER THEATRE: MARK RAVENHILL'S
SHOPPING AND FUCKING (1996)

Mark Ravenhill's *Shopping and Fucking* is an excellent example of both “in-ner-face” theatre and of what could be labelled queer theatre, as has been seen, a theatre practice that distances itself from the bourgeois values inherent to the latest developments of post-Stonewall gay dramatic production. The playwright makes his position clear when he asserts that he does not see himself neither as a “gay playwright” nor as a “gay man,” preferring “being queer, a sexual outlaw,” or even being “post-gay,” to “being gay, in the sense of assimilationist” (Ravenhill qtd. Sierz 151). The term “post-gay” has been expounded by Sinfield, who qualifies it as indicating “a period when it will not seem so necessary to define, and hence to limit, our sexualities” (*Gay* 14). If we applied this idea to queer theatre in general, the conclusion we could reach is that we find ourselves in a time when strict definitions of sexuality and, consequently, of identity, are no longer valid. This ties in with the poststructuralist —and therefore queer— notion of subjectivity as inherently unstable and fragmented, and with Sedgwick's words mentioned earlier.⁷

In *Shopping and Fucking*, Ravenhill expands this notion and relates it to the meaninglessness of present-day societies. The play depicts the lives of a group of young people at the fin-de-siècle and shows how they are “interpellated” by ruthless capitalism and the postmodern. The resulting world is one characterised by the reign of market values and by the inevitable ruling of a buying-and-selling routine. The period is also plagued by a recurrent loss of meaning and by the reification of pastiche. Faced with this, the characters desperately try to create meaningful relationships based on mutual caring and comforting, but, ultimately, the play shows that there is no escape from the capitalism's devouring.

This declaration of principles on the part of the playwright brings about the issue of the nature of the plays he writes. Going back to Sinfield's words on the queer potential of theatre, Ravenhill is clearly using the play as a locus of “dissidence,” “disclosure” and “subterfuge.” He is going to show ways to challenge the workings of capitalist society, or at least he will underline the importance of shifting towards human relations that escape the meaninglessness of the postmodern world. In doing so, the inevitability of a political positioning becomes manifest but, as has been seen, such a predicament escapes the constraints of a limited gay identity that he identifies as bourgeois. Besides, the playwright's deconstruction of gay identity makes it equivalent to the heterosexual and bisexual identities that also appear in the play. In fact, characters escape sexual definition as the relationships they have to each other are changing and elusive.

The play's confrontational technique is directly related to the context in which it was created. Sierz explains how the playwright saw, “[h]is play... [as] a [sic]

⁷ See also Weedon for an analysis of a poststructuralist approach to gender.

implicit critique of Thatcher's dictum that "There is no such thing as society" (132) and her belief in the sole existence of "individual men and women and... families" (Naismith xxxvii). In this sense, Ravenhill seems to be more than aware of the dismantling of the Welfare State that began in Thatcher's England, which was effected through a systematic curtailing of the main areas upon which it was built, i.e. "social security, medical services, housing, and education" (Marwick 353). This was continued in the seventeen years (1979-1997) that the Conservative Party was in power, which act as context in the conception of the play. In this sense, the fact that Ravenhill was writing at the very end of the 20th century, at a moment characterised by a total uncertainty, becomes more than relevant. The fall of the Berlin Wall that took place in 1989, with the massive political, economic and social consequences it had for the reshaping of Europe, followed by the changes in the structure of the United Kingdom (resulting from the complex relations with Scotland and Wales, not to mention Northern Ireland) plus the proximity of the new millennium introduced a deep anxiety that became a trademark of the 1990s (see, for example, Childs). And it is this relentlessly capitalist, *fin-de-siècle*, postmodern world, marked by uncertainty and radical transformations that is the object of Ravenhill's powerful attack.

Shopping and Fucking introduces us to the lives of three friends who live together in the context of 1990s London. At the outset of the play, a couple, Lulu and Robbie—who are fond of "stories," which give meaning to their lives—share a flat with Mark, a drug addict with whom Robbie is in love. Trying to put an end to his habit, Mark decides to ask for help and get some treatment; however, he cannot accomplish his aims. Mark's inability to commit himself is put to a test when he meets Gary, a fourteen-year-old rentboy who has experienced rape in the hands of his step-father—and through whom Ravenhill introduces the theme of the age of consent in the play, at quite a radical level. Meanwhile, Lulu and Robbie struggle to get on with life. Auditioning for a TV program, for which she recites a soliloquy from Chekhov's *The Three Sisters*—another reference to a *fin-de-siècle*—Lulu is offered a job as a drug dealer by Brian, an older man. However, Robbie ruins the operation by giving out 300 ecstasy tablets to the punters of a gay disco. In order to pay their debt to Brian, who has threatened to kill them, Lulu and Robbie are impelled to work in the sex by phone business. At the same time, Gary, who is ill and whose aim in life is to find a "daddy" to take care of him, asks the three of them—in the enactment of a "story" at the end of the play—to kill him in the most gruesome way. On the other hand, Brian, pleased with the way in which Lulu and Robbie have recovered the money he lent them in the form of drugs, makes the couple and Mark part of his business. Finally, the play closes with the three friends attaining a different, more communal relationship. However, Gary's fate remains a moot point indeed.

One of the most illuminating aspects of the play is its rumination on the workings of contemporary societies, as one of the characters verbalises it:

ROBBIE: ...I think... I think we all need stories, we make up stories so that we can get by. And I think a long time ago there were big stories. Stories so big you could



live your whole life in them. The Powerful Hands of the Gods and Fate. The Journey to Enlightenment. The March of Socialism. But they all died or the world grew up or grew senile or forgot them, so now we're all making up our own stories. Little stories. It comes out in different ways. But we've each got one. (Ravenhill 66)

This reference to Jean-François Lyotard's notion of "grand narrative" (37) and its "delegitimation" in contemporary societies is illuminating. As Ravenhill explains, "[t]he people in the play are just trying to make sense of a world without religion or ideology" (Sierz 130). This is clear in the "shopping story" (4), a "little story" that Lulu and Robbie depend on for their survival, and which they repeatedly ask Mark to narrate to them. According to this, Mark purchases both of them from "a fat man." The result of the "transaction" is that he ends up by owning them and taking them to a room in his house, a "warm" place with "food" where they live "fat and content and happy" (5). Contrary to Mark, Lulu and Robbie need this "little story" to give meaning to their lives and to make them feel they are being taken care of and protected from the outside world.

The play's ending is important in that it shows a "subterfuge," an alternative way to the workings of the State. In contrast to the opening of the play, which showed us Lulu and Robbie's unsuccessful attempts to feed a Mark addicted to drugs with takeaway food—a nourishment that he refuses by vomiting—the end presents us with a moment of mutual caring, a shift in the relationship that has finally been accomplished:

ROBBIE. Hungry now? I want you to try some. (*Of the ready meal.*)

He feeds Mark with a fork.

Nice?

MARK. Mmmmm.

ROBBIE. Now give him some of yours.

LULU. Do you want some?

She feeds Mark.

Is that good?

MARK. Delicious.

ROBBIE. You've got a bit of blood.

LULU. Bit more?

MARK. Why not?

Lulu feeds him.

ROBBIE. My turn.

Robbie feeds Mark.

Mark, Robbie and Lulu take it in turns to feed each other as the lights fade to black. (90-91)

It is important to signal that such an end is also reinforced by a seminal change in the "shopping story" itself. Thus, Mark, telling the story for the last time, places it in the future and, this time, decides to set free the element of the transaction, the object he has just bought (90), thus pointing towards different, less constraining ways of structuring society.



There are two elements, however, that problematize the seemingly optimistic note on which the play closes. One of them is the fact that at the end of the play the three characters have probably become involved in drug dealing on a steady basis and thus they show themselves to be caught up in the capitalist web. The other unsettling element is the reference to a blood stain on Mark's face, which disturbingly points at the possibility of Gary's death having occurred in the enactment of his "little story," when he asks that Mark put an end to his life by stabbing him in the anus, showing in this way a complete absence of hope.

Shopping and Fucking is then clearly a confrontational play, in the sense that it poses uncomfortable questions. From a queer stance, it is also against the existence of a bourgeois, "ghetto gay subculture" which, according to the playwright, is assimilationist and does nothing but perpetuate the notions that are at the basis of capitalist, patriarchal, sexist and homophobic societies. In this same vein, it clearly avoids the creation of any stable, monolithic gay identity, proposing instead instability and fluidity. Besides, its radical reference to the age of consent and, similar to Elyot's case, its mere existence could be understood as a challenge to Section 28. Finally, it is clearly a political play, as it places us in a very specific fin-de-siècle context, denouncing the workings of institutions and power structures and pointing towards possible ways ahead.

CONCLUSION

In this article I have explored the shift from gay to queer theatrical practices in the context of 1990s England. By concentrating on Kevin Elyot's gay play *My Night with Reg* and showing how it follows the pattern of the late post-Stonewall period in post-AIDS times—thus showing its partial inappropriateness—I have purported to demonstrate how, apart from being a reflection of the devastating effects of AIDS on a sexual minority, it ends up by, paradoxically, effacing the gay identity the play is trying to sustain. The references to more oppositional issues that are encountered in the play—as has been seen, the references to camp and to homophobic legislation such as Section 28 or the age of consent—prove not to be enough to counteract such an erasure. Conversely, analysing some aspects of a quintessential "in-yer-face," "experiential" text such as Mark Ravenhill's *Shopping and Fucking* shows that, by adopting a queer, more confrontational stance, the play proves to be ultimately more successful in creating daring political and sexual identities for the subjects it portrays. Therefore, the experience will be uncomfortable for the reader/audience, but undoubtedly more consciousness-raising.

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