

DAVID BATEMAN, ed.

Compulsive Acts: Essays, Interviews, Reflections on the Works of Sky Gilbert.

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Playwright, director, novelist, actor, university professor, and queer rights activist Sky Gilbert is arguably one of Canada's most influential, yet curiously underappreciated, theatre artists. Attempting to rectify this situation, David Bateman's edited collection *Compulsive Acts* pays tribute to the founder and former artistic director of Buddies in Bad Times Theatre, North America's largest professional queer playhouse. The book first and foremost addresses a general audience interested in Gilbert's achievements in the field of queer theatre, his working methods, and his sexual politics. Divided into four sections, it includes a general overview of Gilbert and his works, articles on specific plays, interviews with some of his fellow actors and directors, and a concluding reflection.

Apart from Paul Halferty's scholarly essay, which forms part of the book's first section and contextualizes Gilbert's seminal 1985 play *Drag Queens on Trial* in relation to the unfolding HIV/AIDS crisis and the Toronto gay community, most chapters are of a personal nature and written in a more informal style. What unites all of the entries, other than an infectious enthusiasm for their subject matter, is a profound respect for and deep sense of loyalty to Gilbert as a friend, colleague, and mentor. A particular highlight is Ann Holloway's insightful essay about the marginalization of feminist and lesbian feminist drama during Buddies in Bad Times's early years. Holloway praises both Gilbert and his friend and former board president Sue Golding for their "inclusion of women's voices of resistance on stage and behind the scenes at Buddies" (218-19) and for creating a safe space for women to explore their creativity and "experiment without patriarchal restrictions" (219). Inspired by Mikhail Bakhtin's theories of the carnivalesque, Holloway devotes particular attention to the subversive power of laughter and dark comedy as she discusses some of the Gilbert characters she has played over the years.

In the book's second part, Gilbert's long-time partner, documentary filmmaker Ian Jarvis, humorously details how he became one of the main inspirations for the title character in *Heliogabalus* (2002), the Roman emperor whose sexual escapades, blasphemous politics, and ruthless violence in the third century CE have forever marked him as one of Western history's most depraved figures. Jarvis's entertaining confessions not only provide a glimpse of the couple's domestic division of labour (Jarvis makes the mess and Gilbert cleans it up), but they also shed light on the playwright's writing practices. Once inspiration hits, Gilbert remains stuck in front of a laptop with "shrill opera music blaring through headphones" (142), unwilling to communicate or reveal anything about his current project until it is finished.

The authenticity of this initial burst of inspiration is further elaborated in the book's third section in an interview with director and installation artist Hillar Liitoja,

who comments on Gilbert's consistent refusal to do any rewrites of his scripts, keeping every line as close to the "primary expression" as possible and maintaining its "truth, purity and validity" (260). Liitoja also contributes a reflection on his own performance installation *Wit In Love* (2009), based on Gilbert's novella inspired by the European philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein. This essay, which details Liitoja and co-creator Magdalena Vasko's painstakingly detail-oriented creative process, should be compulsory reading for any aspiring set designer or performance artist. Liitoja, himself no stranger to depicting daring and complex representations of sexuality on stage, argues for the centrality of sexuality in Gilbert's artistic output—" [t]here is no such thing as taboo for Sky" (265)—but also reminds us that his characters' preoccupation with sex goes beyond shock value. Instead, their sexual curiosity, devoid of moral judgment or condemnation, is a testimony to the "greatness in [Gilbert's] humanity that allows him to be able to accept all kinds of possibilities, whether they are sexual or artistic" (266).

Indeed, every Gilbert play contains at least one scene that makes audiences move uncomfortably in their seats, drop their jaws in disbelief, and/or laugh out hysterically, daring them to overcome their own internalized bourgeois morality and develop a greater understanding of sexual marginalization. In a fascinating conversation with Moynan King, Ellen-Ray Hennessy reflects on the challenging experience of playing the incestuous mother of the aforementioned Heliogabalus. Both actors also explain how Gilbert's trust in his performers' professional instincts gives them the necessary freedom to take risks and thereby, in King's words, "brings out the genius in others" (249).

Admirers of Gilbert's work will be delighted to find that the concluding section of *Compulsive Acts* reproduces the heretofore unpublished script of *To Myself at 28*, a metatheatrical dialogue between the playwright and his younger alter ego. Oscillating between brutal confessions and public self-flagellation, Gilbert divulges professional and amorous failures, explains the excruciating physical effects caused by the aging process, and reminds his hopelessly romantic younger self, who has just come out of the closet and is desperately looking for love, that "[n]o one escapes life... unharmed" (309), not least because the one constant companion on his path will be homophobia.

Gilbert's theatre reminds us time and again that, while we may live in an age of political correctness, legal progress, and increased representations of queers in popular culture, the downside of these developments is the increasing attempt to normalize "deviant" desires and identities. Furthermore, homophobia, transphobia, and the resulting consequences for those subjected to them, are not a thing of the past, which is why Gilbert's voice continuously celebrates, encourages, and comforts the ones that fellow playwright Tennessee Williams once lovingly called "the strange, the crazed, the queer" (150).

As Bateman states in his introduction, Gilbert is an admirably productive writer with "a prolific career that cannot be fully served in a single collection of essays" (5). As a result, it is hard not to wish for a couple of essays that would dive into Gilbert's artistic inspirations such as Williams, Joe Orton, or Noël Coward, or his thoughts on the relationship between art, activism, and pedagogy. Despite this minor shortcoming, Bateman and his contributors must be congratulated for their work on this important

publication, which will hopefully increase scholarly interest in Gilbert's oeuvre and inspire theatre artists to (re)discover and produce long-overdue revivals of his gems.

Work Cited

Williams, Tennessee. "I Think the Strange, the Crazy, the Queer." *The Collected Poems of Tennessee Williams*. Ed. David Roessel and Nicholas Moschovakis. New York: New Directions, 2002. 150. Print.