Backstory: Queer Histories, Queer Futures

March 17, 2020

By **Ashley Chang**, Dramaturg

March 17, 2020

As its title makes clear, Jeremy O. Harris's *A Boy's Company Presents: "Tell Me If I'm Hurting You"* ~~*A Jacobean Revenge Tragedy*~~ *A Pageant of My Woes* is both historically and unhistorically inclined. The play's formal and stylistic underpinnings in early-seventeenth century theater, described in Lizzie Stern's essay, are invoked and, in the very moment of invocation, negated by strikethrough. The ambivalence here is something of an eye-roll or an ugh, conveying insouciance and even annoyance – while also conceding that the past can be neither erased nor escaped. Precedents remain at least a little bit helpful for making sense of the present, the title admits. It's mostly just leery of the dramatic canon, white and Western as it is.

Relegating Thomas Kyd and John Ford and William Shakespeare to the peripheries, then, Jeremy brings other histories to the center: the queer histories of queer men. These genealogies don't appear in the title. Instead, Jeremy wreaths every moment of his play with remembrances of the queers who have come before him. Their names he summons at the top of each scene like prayers uttered at the altar:

ACT 1

SCENE 1: IF WILDE HAD WRITTEN QUERELLE WOULD IT LOOK LIKE THIS?

SCENE 2: A SCENE FOR JARMAN & SWINTON

SCENE 3: A SCENE WORTHY OF JAMES BIDGOOD

SCENE 4: ESSEX HEMPHILL DREAMED IN SHADES THIS DARK

SCENE 5: RIMBAUD THE POETESS, SOOTHSAYER, TWINK WAS A FAN OF THIS KIND OF TRAGEDY

Jeremy's play approaches iconography, Oscar Wilde and James Bidgood and Arthur Rimbaud and all the rest elevated to divinities in his queer pantheon. He casts his gaze backwards, feeling around for a flickering past that might light the way into the future. In 1921, six characters went in search of an author, sharpening the avant-garde's distinctions between reality and its representation. Here, an author goes in search of a history, finding expression for queer experience by turning to time and the queerness of its passing.

Statues and Slave (Bobby Kendall) from the film *Pink Narcissus* (1965–71) by James Bidgood; courtesy ClampArt, New York.

Jeremy's play springs from what is, for most of us, a time past: youth. His stage is bestrewn with the yearnings of young queers. The boys stand shivering on the edge of manhood – on the edge, as Jeremy sees it, of heartbreak. For him, the

passage from innocence to experience demands a first love and – fatally! – its loss. Of course, some boys will stay boys, seeming never to suffer refusal, those boys who somehow avoid the bitter tears, who know only that all loves last forever – one thinks of Juliet and her nocturnal vision: "My bounty is as boundless as the sea / My love as deep; the more I give to thee / The more I have, for both are infinite." Other boys are less lucky, less given to romance, perhaps, those boys who understand that forever is a fantasy, that crushes can be crushing. In the play, these are the boys who become men, naive until they're hurt.

For some queers, an education in love and its loss happens after adolescence. Because heterosexuality remains the norm (and, often, the compulsion – even in the United States), those who understand themselves as gay or lesbian or fluid or questioning might come into that understanding not as children but as adults. Sexualities beyond straight have always been around. But models of queer folks, of butches and queens, bears and kings, have long been concealed or killed; archives of queer feelings have long been redacted or unremembered; affirmations of queer ways of being in the world have been far and few between. This becomes less and less true as time goes on, especially for the young queers of today, who might have joined a gay-straight alliance in high school and majored in Queer Studies at college; who grew up under the rainbow flag created by Gilbert Baker in 1978 and might not know about the pink triangle that preceded it. Still, while the boys of Jeremy's play have come of age during an age of unprecedented awareness and acceptance, queers even just half a generation older, Jeremy included, haven't all grown up in the same culture of pride. For them, becoming themselves became possible only in the wake of youth. To be queer, for them, was to bloom lately, to first/finally act upon the trills and tremors of desire not as hormonal tweens but as wearish twenty-somethings. In this sense, childhood – that time of discovery – might happen twice in the life of a queer, once during childhood and again (for real this time) during adulthood. Adolescence is prolonged, development arrested – until love's first kiss.

"To be queer, for them, was to bloom lately, to first/finally act upon the trills and tremors of desire not as hormonal tweens but as wearish twenty-somethings."

The boys in Jeremy's company, then, aren't just actual boys. They're also avatars for those men who have already come into manhood but find themselves stumbling through the tongue-tying, gut-wrenching, head-spinning tumult of meeting someone wonderful and wondering if they feel the same way about you.

With an appetite for restraint, or perhaps indulgence, Jeremy captures the agony of love – and the awkwardness of its timing – in slow motion. For as often as time flies, in the arms of the beloved, it also stands still. In *A Lover's Discourse*, Roland Barthes describes the "enchantment" but also the "torment" of "waiting for the loved being, subject to trivial delays." Jeremy's play renders love serially, in a cascade of sumptuous images that enunciate a visual vocabulary of desire. There is a sculptural quality to the play – a full-bodied stillness of the sort found in painting and photography, with its portraits and tableaux that have long reified the male nude.

"Embodied in the figures of queer youth and adorned in the finery of queer icons, Jeremy's account of queer love strides on to the horizon – but not without glancing back."

Framing the play's sensual compositions, which render the bodies of young boys as objects of contemplation and eroticism alike, are the gilded gods of Jeremy's queer history. He cares only for artists: Oscar Wilde, Jean Genet (inferred by his novel *Querelle de Brest*), Derek Jarman, Tilda Swinton, James Bidgood, Essex Hemphill, Arthur Rimbaud, Tennessee Williams, Yukio Mishima, Truman Capote, Patrick Kelly, Saint Sebastian (tended by Saint Irene), Pedro Almodóvar, James Baldwin (nursed by Lorraine Hansberry), Frank O'Hara, Félix González-Torres, and Christopher Marlowe. Musicians serpentwithfeet, Lorde, and Frank Ocean provide the epigraphs. Photographer Rotimi Fani-Kayode completes Jeremy's vision for the theatrical space, which he calls a "Bountiful Landscape of Faggotry." Altogether, these figures from distant times and distant places adorn the world of Jeremy's play with the worlds they each have inhabited and, in their art, imagined: they are its abundance and its nourishment. An inquiry into the whole range of resonances they bring to Jeremy's Landscape falls far beyond the scope of this essay, in no small part because each artist-god professes a unique – and sometimes uneasy – claim to queerness itself (scholar Leo Bersani remarks in his 1995 book *Homos*, for example, that Genet is perhaps "the least 'gay-affirmative' writer" in all of queer literature). Suffice it to say that the lot of them, promiscuously envisaged as a communion of ancestors and elders, contain multitudes: liberation and pride, failure and shame, self-hatred and self-love. In placing them flatly side-by-side like effigies in a rotunda, Jeremy doesn't just erect a shrine – he also hews his own place in the circle. Here is the tradition to which his talent belongs. Here, too, is the queer utopia towards which his play cruises. In the end, *A Boy's Company…* is a tragedy and a romance and a kind of history play, too. Embodied in the figures of queer youth and adorned in the finery of queer icons, Jeremy's account of queer love strides on to the horizon – but not without glancing back.