LBGT Theater Is Alive and Well in the Big Apple

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Great storytelling from the stage emboldens NYC queer theater scene

The Lesbian Love Octagon

This weekend I attended two excellent, but very different, plays. And, reporting from the front, I am very happy indeed to report that queer theater is thriving in New York City this fall.

First up was the sold out Lesbian Love Octagon at the Kraine Theater. Who knew lesbians could do great musicals--and a musical about lesbians too boot?

Portraying the warmth and chaos of Third Wave revolutionary feminist sisterhood along with the pain and angst of lesbian breakups, infidelity and the ghost of ex-girlfriends past, Octagon was written, directed, choreographed, and with lyrics and costumes by the uber-talented Kimberlea Kressal. Kressal is the Susan Stroman of downtown lesbian theater (why lesbian theater is *only* downtown is a topic for another time). Music and additional lyrics were by Will Larche.

Since the show is, sadly, over, I don't mind spilling the plot: Sue (Susan O'Dea), a kiki lesbian, has just been dumped by her girlfriend who moved right in with a transman who also happens to be Sue's former girlfriend. The scenes of the play take place in a "wimmins" bookstore, dyke bar, bunch hot-spot and a sex-toy store sprinkled among New York's East Village, Lower East Side and Park Slope, Brooklyn. Sound familiar? So does the octagon, a tentacled miasma of girlfriends, ex-girlfriend, best friends who are also ex-girlfriends, and every other configuration one can think of in the tiny scene that is the New York lesbian community.

Bearing true to the plays opening promise that the Octagon is a story about dyke stereotypes, we follow Sue and a talented ensemble of actors (see lesbianthemuscial.com) through lessons of love and hate, sex and grief, regret and rebirth.

The lyrics were right on, musicalizing the dialogue of the play in an expert fashion using complex and daring harmonies. A sophisticated combination of music, harmony, lyrics and storytelling in all of the songs, especially in the solo songs, made this production different than many a blustery and glitzy big Broadway show where dialogue falls flat between musical numbers. The movement was campy and fun, with each choreographed number telling a story in itself and moving the main plot forward.

For off-off Broadway, the Love Octagon was a little show with huge musical numbers. The few actors who couldn't really sing well didn't try to rather they just hummed a few bars. The funny and ferocious song "Drink to Being Single" was the centerpiece of the show (and the reprise) along with few other numbers, "Pet Tranny, "Clarity" and the ironic "Oh, Pat Califia" being also notable.

The sexy and stylized (circa 1998) costumes, attitude and politics shined through an extremely minimalistic set—the most creative arrangement and rearrangement of milk crates I've ever seen! This crowd-pleaser was a leap-to-your feet standing ovation show filled with fun and funny campy humor served distinctly lezzie-style. I certainly hope The Lesbian Love Octagon gets another shot at lighting up a stage, next time Off—or On—the Great White Way!

MilkMilkLemonade is a play about a distinctly gay male experience. Although the message is universal, the many gay men in

the audience got the in-jokes my companion and I did not, though we could identify with the protagonist and his story. An absurdist script par excellence, Joshua Conkel conjures a coming out tale that is so relevant today it's frightening.

This particular production's set was a crayon-colored masterpiece of Midwestern simplicity, which served to enhance the dialogue and movement on stage rather than, as so often happens, overshadow the performers and hinder the flow of movement and dialogue. The Culture Club and Cyndi Lauper-laced soundtrack grounded the scene on a "farm near Mall Town, USA" circa "whenever."

Emory (Andy Phelan), a fey young man who lives with his chain-smoking Catholic grandmother (Michael Cyril Creighton) on a chicken farm is a free spirit trying to find his place in the world. His only friend is a giant chicken waiting to be processed. Along comes the neighborhood bully, Elliot (Jess Barbagallo), who surprise, surprise, has feelings for Emory. Feelings of self-hatred for what it means to like the faggoty Emory, for the two boys to have illicit sex, and to get in touch with his positive feelings.

MilkMilkLemonade is a poignant tale of coming into one's own against a backdrop of soul-crushing rigid gender enforcement, schoolyard bullying, self-doubt and, ultimately, self-discovery. And, the clever use an onstage emcee/interpreter/narrator is genius as well as a welcome addition to the main story.

Both plays were fantastic performance events. I recommend seeing MilkMilkLemonade before it closes mid-month and looking out for The Lesbian Love Octagon to rise again.

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