‘This is the Word of God’: Acceptance Theatre and the Validation of a Gay Religious Sensibility – An Analysis of Terrence McNally’s *Corpus Christi*

JAMES MARLAND

Theatre as Theology: *Corpus Christi* and the validation of LGBT Religious sensibility

Asking its audiences to consider the spiritual and political ramifications of a gay Christ, Terrence McNally’s *Corpus Christi* has engendered a great deal of controversy. In the play McNally emphasised the struggle for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender (LGBT) spiritual rights through his depiction of a society that would seek to crucify a gay Christ. After situating the play in both theological and theatrical contexts, the discussion below will examine the way in which *Corpus* emphasises a gay religious sensibility by focusing on: the religious structure of the text (based on the Medieval Passion play), the religious narrative of the play and its challenge to heterosexist readings of the Bible and Biblical authority, and the play’s message of religious equality and its direct advocacy for a gay religious sensibility. The discussion will then consider the political nature of the text in view of its Brechtian elements including the immediacy of its polemical social message.

The Rise of a Gay Religious Sensibility

Initially, it is useful to outline the growth of a gay religious sensibility in order to contextualize the discussion of gay rights in McNally’s play. Traditionally, theological heterosexism has been fundamental in establishing the religious segregation of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender (LGBT) people. In many instances openly gay individuals

have been vilified by Christian communities and excluded from participation in their sacraments:

> In their relationships with the Church, gay Christians are subjected to the Church's vocabulary of motives that labels their lifestyle as unacceptable. In response, gay Christians have to develop an alternative vocabulary of moral motives that label their sexuality and lifestyle as compatible with Christianity. Needless to say, that Church's official stance on homosexuality generates a stigmatizing climate under which gay Christians must learn to survive.[1]

While it is an oversimplification to describe all Christian churches as willing collaborators in the denigration of homosexuality, it is true to say that the majority of church leaders and their followers are vocal in their condemnation of gay men and women. Despite rejection from most mainstream religious institutions, LGBT Christian groups have grown in number as theological heterosexism has come under increasing social and academic scrutiny. One factor instrumental in this growth has been the critical authority of queer theology and its exegetical support for the religious legitimacy of gay men and women.

Contemporary scholarship has progressively challenged conservative, literal translations of the Biblical text,[2] providing same-sex Christian groups with a solid theological basis from which to dispute oppressive readings of the Text: 'the texts are clear in terms of what they actually *say*. Yet we must recognize that they are culturally conditioned and cannot be applied uncritically'.[3] Mark Jordan notes that theology has, over the last three decades 'begun to speak about it [gay and lesbian

[1] Andrew Yip, 'Attacking the Attacker: Gay Christians Talk Back', *The British Journal of Sociology* 48, no. 1 (1997): 113-27.

[2] Literal readings of the Text are being challenged for their theological inconsistency by a number of scholars. For example, Kenneth A Locke, highlights the contradiction of Biblical scripture and the impossibility of following all its requirements and teachings, arguing that: 'in practice nobody, not even the most fundamentally Christian, follows and adheres to the teachings of the entire Bible'. 'The Bible on Homosexuality: Exploring Its Meaning and Authority', *Journal of Homosexuality* 48, no. 2 (2004): p. 127.

[3] Choon-Leong Seow, 'A Homosexual Perspective', *Homosexuality and Christian Community* (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox P, 1996), p. 14-27.

sexuality] more freely'[4] and, as a result of this, '[w]e now have notable first essays in lesbian and gay theology'.[5] In fact, Eric Rodriguez and Susan Ouellette claim pro-gay religious groups 'have re-interpreted the Bible in such a way that homosexuality is viewed in a positive, rather than negative, religious light'.[6] Philip Tan concludes: 'Increasingly, spirituality is […] seen as a source of empowerment that positively impacts on the lives of individuals',[7] 'is relevant to gay and lesbian individuals',[8] and as such should be supported and nurtured.

Queer theology is often positioned by the Christian orthodoxy as a hostile and separatist religious praxis. Despite its deconstructive focus, Queer theology does not seek to undermine mainstream theology; on the contrary, it desires a communion of orthodoxy and queer. In her monograph, *The Queer God*, Marcella Althaus-Reid assures that: 'Queer theologies do not disregard church traditions'[9] or seek to destroy religious communities. Rather, queer theology seeks to encourage those communities to welcome difference and theological plurality. As we will see, this aspect of queer theology is echoed in *Corpus* where McNally fosters the unification of religious orthodoxy and queer. Further, McNally's play also establishes the significance of the individual, where human diversity is celebrated. Incorporating the work of Eve Kosofsky-Sedgwick, Althaus-Reid highlights the importance of the individual in queer theology, disrupting traditional theology's focus on conformity: 'Queer theologies are those characterised by an 'I' because the Queer discourse only becomes such when done in the first person'.[10] Althaus-Reid insists that queer theology operates through a modality of celebration, where the *individual* is championed, especially those branded as sexually deviant: 'At the bottom line of Queer theologies, there are

[4] Mark Jordan, 'The Pope Converts: Imagination, Bureaucracy, Silence', *Theology and Sexuality*. Ed. Eugene F Rogers Jr (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 2002), p. 260.
[5] Ibid., p. 261.
[6] Eric Rodriguez and Suzanne C Ouellette, 'Gay and Lesbian Christians: Homosexual and Religious Identity Integration in the Members and Participants of a Gay-Positive Church', *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 39, no. 3 (2000): p. 335.
[7] Philip Tan, 'The Importance of Spirituality among Gay and Lesbian Individuals', *Journal of Homosexuality* 49, no. 2 (2005): p.142.
[8] Ibid.
[9] Marcella Maria Althaus-Reid, *The Queer God*. (London and New York: Routledge, 2003), p. 8.
[10] Ibid.

biographies of sexual migrants, testimonies of real lives in rebellions made of love, pleasure and suffering'.[11] While McNally has incorporated elements of queer theology, as well as issues associated with the movement for LGBT Christian rights, within *Corpus*, his employment of them is complex. Indeed, the academic discourses surrounding the movement for LGBT Christian recognition, queer theology (and queer theory more broadly) is extensive and dynamic and the nature of these paradigms makes it difficult to ascribe any one of them to the discussion of the play in an holistic way. McNally's agenda is to promote the religious validity of LGBT individuals, and in order to do so, he co-opts particular elements from these various philosophical discussions. The play is not a transparent exemplification or scrutiny of queer theology, but rather an assertion of McNally's own vision of what Christian theology should look like:

> If a divinity does not belong to all people, if He is not created in our image as much as we are created in His, then He is less a true divinity for all men to believe in than He is a particular religion's secular definition of what a divinity should be for the needs of its followers. Such a God is no God at all because He is exclusive to His members. He is a Roman Catholic at best and a very narrow-minded one at that.[12]

Acceptance Theatre

Acceptance Theatre occurs when a playwright maintains a narrative focus on the religious validity of LGBT Christians, employing a celestial or religiously legitimate[13] character to speak out against traditional heterosexist dogma. The political discourse embedded in an Acceptance play is achieved through a divinely sanctioned character [Acceptance

[11] Ibid.
[12] McNally, Op. Cit., p. v.
[13] The words *religiously legitimate*, describe a character such as a priest or any member of the religious clergy who has been authorised to perform that role by a formally constituted church. For example, in Jane Chamber's Acceptance play *My Blue Heaven.* (New York: JH Press), 1981, Dr. John, an ordained minister, marries two lesbians, Josie and Molly 'in the sight of God' p. 70. Contrary to traditional religious dogma, Dr John urges them to 'sanctify that commitment' p. 69, promoting the religious validity of gay women and men.

figure], such as a priest, angel or messianic figure, who agitates positively on behalf of the LGBT community. This radical pro-gay discourse is further underlined by political stage and performance techniques that have been derived from various political theatre traditions, especially Brecht's Epic theatre, to engage audiences critically to persuade them. The presence of Acceptance plays is significant in that they highlight the emergence of a LGBT religious sensibility.

A review of over two hundred LGBT plays, from 1900 onwards, revealed only five texts that may be considered 'Acceptance' including: Jane Chambers' *My Blue Heaven* (1981), Carl Morse's *Annunciation* (1991), Paul Rudnick's *The Most Fabulous Story Ever Told* (1998), Terrence McNally's *Corpus Christi* (1998), and Tony Kushner's *Angels in America* (Part I 1990/ Part II 1991). Importantly, all of these plays were written post-1980, indicating that the movement for a recognised gay religious sensibility is intrinsically modern being, perhaps, only possible in a post-Stonewall, era. It is also reasonable to associate the AIDS crisis with greater LGBT religious searching and the appearance of these plays. In fact, this syndrome is a major focus of Tony Kushner's Acceptance play, *Angles in America*. Almost all literature that deals with gay characters and Christianity prior to the 1980s illustrates one or more of the following: it elides the mention of religion and God, it enforces atheism onto the gay figures of these plays, it leads the gay character(s) to confess their supposedly sinful nature, it necessitates their removal from the Church, or it is unable to remove all obstacles that prevent the expression of a gay and lesbian religious sensibility. Many texts post-1980 also elide or problematise LGBT religious sensibility, making the Acceptance plays noteworthy as part of a small but emerging movement.

Acceptance Theatre seeks a revision of theology, not at the expense of intrinsic religious beliefs, but to make religion accessible to any who may desire membership. In this respect Acceptance Theatre has commonality with Althaus-Reid's definitions for queer theology and its focus on religious plurality. What is significant about the Acceptance plays is their determination to provide a voice for gay Christians when, historically, LGBT literature was more likely to condemn or reject Christianity by identifying the incompatibility of the two communities. Instead, Acceptance plays such as *Corpus* provide a vehicle by which theological heterosexism can be challenged and dismantled. Wendy Weber argues that the endorsement of a gay religious sensibility is an observable growing trend clearly evidenced in literature:

> Although the twentieth century has witnessed a decline in the prominence of institutional religion in the West, the privileged position of Christianity in literary and other cultural explorations of existence and identity remains. Surprisingly, even many literary texts written by gay, lesbian, bisexual, or transgender authors employ the rituals, rhetoric, and models of Christianity as integral to their character development. While in some of these texts, Christian tropes reinscribe heterosexuality as normative others broaden the traditionally narrow identity parameters of Christianity.[14]

McNally's Acceptance play represents a challenge to conservative theology, and is noteworthy because of its mimesis of the changing socio-theological landscape in which the religious acceptance of sexual difference is gaining increased support. Recognising McNally's play for its promotion of LGBT religious rights provides us with an opportunity to historicise the struggle for a gay religious sensibility. Of the five Acceptance plays, *Corpus* is arguably the most radical example of this theatrical paradigm.

Connection with Medieval Religious Theatre: The Passion Play

A bold challenge to conservative Christian orthodoxy, *Corpus Christi* is modelled loosely on the medieval passion play and offers one core message grounded in the belief that '[a]ll men [sic] are divine'.[15] During the Medieval period, structured theatre was devised around Christianity, plays being re-enactments of Biblical stories, the lives of saints, and reconstructions of the life and death of Jesus Christ. Performances even occurred within churches,[16] fundamentally linking religion and theatre at this time. McNally reinvigorates this relationship by insisting that *Corpus* 'is more a religious ritual than a play',[17] and should be 'told in

[14] Wendy Webber, 'Queering the Word: Patricia Nell Warren's Adaptation of Christian Sacraments in *the Fancy Dancer', International Journal of Sexuality and Gender Studies* 6, no.4 (2001): p. 267.
[15] McNally, Op. Cit., p. 20.
[16] Meg Twycross, 'The Theatricality of Medieval English Plays', *The Cambridge Companion to Medieval English Theatre*. Eds. Richard Beadle and Alan J Fletcher. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), 2008, p. 26.
[17] Ibid., p. v.

the theatrical tradition of medieval morality plays'.[18] In terms of its actual compliance with medieval theatre, *Corpus* has a much greater association with the passion play than it does with morality dramas. A morality play does not characterise any 'scriptural or legendary persons, but wholly, or almost wholly, abstractions, and which although still religious in intention, aim rather at ethical cultivation'.[19] In contrast, a passion play can be defined as a 'religious drama presenting the Crucifixion of Christ, usually performed on Good Friday'.[20] Although McNally's play does not conform strictly to the passion play, in that it extends its narrative beyond the 'passion' of Christ to include Joshua's youth and ministry, the latter part of the narrative complies with this medieval genre. Despite these complications it is clear that McNally's intention is to underline the religious focus of his play, ensuring that his narrative, as well as the play's structure, supports his religious polemic. In doing so, McNally is reviving what Tim Miller and David Román argue contemporary performance has often elided, that is the interplay between religion and theatre and its 'roots as sacred storytelling,' where 'the interweaving of ritual space ('church,' if it doesn't make you nervous) and theatre is thousands of years old'.[21]

Religious Narrative: The Challenge to Heterosexist Readings of the Bible and Biblical Authority

Corpus Christi is direct in its advocacy for a gay religious sensibility; we understand that Joshua has come into the world to die for the gay cause and to present a new theological truth:

> Pilate: Art thou a queer then?
> Joshua: Thou sayest I am.
> Pilate: What do you say?
> Joshua: To this end I was born and for this cause I came into the world, that I should bear witness unto the truth.[22]

[18] Ibid., p. iv.
[19] E K Chambers, *The Mediaeval Stage*. (Mineola, New York: Dover Publications, 1996), p. 151.
[20] J A Cuddon, *The Penguin Dictionary of Literary Terms and Literary Theory*. Vol. 4th. (London: Penguin Books, 1999), p. 643.
[21] Tim Miller and David Román, 'Preaching to the Converted', *Theatre Journal* 47 no. 2 (1995): p. 178.
[22] McNally, Op. Cit., p. 75.

Set in the mid to late twentieth century in Corpus Christi, Texas,[23] McNally's play follows the life of the fictitious Joshua from His[24] birth through to His death by crucifixion, being a modern re-telling of the New Testament from a gay perspective. Joshua takes on the role of Christ, sent by God to promote the 'queer' cause[25] in that He is persecuted and later executed for His divine endorsement of homosexuality. The narrative parallels the story of Christ through the virgin birth,[26] His period of exile in the desert where He is tempted by the devil (although it is the ghost of James Dean in this version),[27] His ability to cure the sick,[28] His gathering of disciples – leading to His betrayal by Judas,[29] His denial by Peter,[30] and His crucifixion at the hands of Pontius Pilate.[31] While the majority of the play follows the life of Christ, McNally also deviates from the Biblical narrative to differentiate the modern Joshua from the traditional figure of Jesus. We see Joshua graduate from Pontius Pilate High,[32] attend His school prom,[33] cure a male prostitute from AIDS[34] and, most importantly, die specifically on behalf of the gay cause.[35] Usurping the narratives associated with the life of Christ and recasting Him as gay makes this text highly radical in its promotion of the gay community's religious legitimacy.

The pro-LGBT Christian agenda in the play is supported by the two Acceptance characters, God the Father and God the Son (Joshua), both of whom advocate fiercely for a gay religious sensibility. Through these characters, McNally ventriloquises his own version of God's will on behalf of the LGBT community. While McNally has chosen to call the principal character Joshua rather than Jesus, there can be no mistake as to

[23] Corpus Christi, in the state of Texas, is the hometown of playwright Terrance McNally.
[24] To avoid confusion I have chosen to follow McNally and capitalise Joshua's third-person pronouns.
[25] McNally, Op. Cit., p. 75.
[26] Ibid., p. 14.
[27] Ibid., pp. 43-46.
[28] Ibid., pp. 42; 55.
[29] Ibid., pp. 64-65.
[30] Ibid., p. 77.
[31] Ibid., pp. 74-81.
[32] Ibid., p. 35.
[33] Ibid., pp. 35-40.
[34] Ibid., p. 55.
[35] Ibid., p. 80.

His divinity, which the other characters remark on repeatedly throughout the play:

> Room Service #3: His love for the world will redeem us all.
> Mary: So you're telling me He's a special child?
> Room Service #1: We're telling you this child is the son of God.[36]

In the opening scene, John baptizes Joshua as 'Jesus, son of Mary and Joseph, son of God, son of man [sic]'[37] noting that: 'I've been waiting for You',[38] and later we learn that Mary had wanted to call her son Jesus, but Joseph had forbidden it on the grounds that it 'sounds like a Mexican'.[39] Like the Biblical Jesus, His mother Mary purports to be 'a virgin'[40] and Joseph is not the biological father: 'I'm going to love Him like He's my own, even if He's not'.[41] Having established the religious authority of Joshua, McNally's Acceptance figure is able to present a new gay-positive theology. Speaking his own adaptation of God's will on stage, McNally re-models Christian theology to promote the religious legitimacy of gay men and women and establish his message of theological equality:

> *GOD whispers something in JOSHUA'S ear.*
> Joshua: What? I couldn't hear You.
> God: All men [sic] are divine.
> Joshua: Why are You whispering?
> God: That is the secret You will teach them.
> Joshua: What if I don't want to share this secret with My fellow men?
> God: You won't be able to keep it.[42]

Joshua, whose name is consistently juxtaposed with that of Jesus[43] and conducts a number of successful miracles,[44] ultimately reminds us that

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[36] Ibid., p. 16.
[37] Ibid., p. 7.
[38] Ibid.
[39] Ibid., p. 15.
[40] Ibid., p. 14
[41] Ibid.
[42] Ibid., p. 20.
[43] Ibid., p. 77. 'Judas: And they took Jesus, Joshua, and let Him away'
[44] Ibid., p. 42. One example of a miracle carried out by Joshua: 'Truck Driver #3 Touch me! / *Truck Driver #3 takes Joshua's hands and puts them on his eyes.* /

His divinity is shared with all of humanity in that we are all, in some way, divine. The choice to name his protagonist Joshua rather than Jesus establishes a fundamental difference between McNally's character and the historical Jesus. This enables the *agon* at the heart of McNally's text, as audiences are able to compare and contrast the two figures. While the name Joshua, rather than Christ or Jesus, de-emphasises His divinity, conversely it also helps to establish His religious authority; Jesus is often translated from Aramaic as Yeshua. As we will see, McNally promotes Joshua's divinity at the same time that he represents His humanity and, like queer theology, draws our attention to the divinity intrinsic in each individual. McNally's focus then, is to expose Joshua's divinity and more importantly, to use this divinity to promote religious pluralism and equality, establishing the religious worth of gay men and women.

Central to McNally's narrative is the radical revision of Christ's teachings through a recasting of Biblical scripture. The principal passages employed by conservative theologians to demonize homosexual behaviour can be found in Leviticus 18.22 and 20.13. McNally makes direct reference to the second of these during a scene in which the Christ-like Joshua marries the apostles, James and Bartholomew:

> James: Bartholomew and I had wanted our union blessed for a long time – some acknowledgment of what we were to each other.
> Bartholomew: We asked, Josh. They said it was against the law and the priests said it was forbidden by Scripture.
> James: 'If a man lies with a man as with a woman, both of them have committed an abomination; they shall be put to death, their blood is upon them.'
> Joshua: Why would you memorize such a terrible passage? 'And God saw everything that He had made, and behold it was very good.' I can quote Scripture as well as the next man. God loves us most when we love each other. We accept you and bless you. Who's got a ring?[45]

During the wedding homily in *Corpus*, McNally pushes the boundaries of traditional marriage, appropriating this heterosexual ceremony for the marriage of two men. McNally avoids the complexity

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Thank You, Lord! I can see. My skin is smooth. The air is sweet. I am healed of all affliction. He has given you the greatest gift of all, son of God'.
[45] Ibid., p. 61.

associated with the queer debate surrounding this issue and simply contests the heteronormative tradition of marriage by presenting a homosexual version; arguably a radical act in itself. Paradoxically, it is Joshua's religious endorsement of this same-sex partnership that sees one of the other characters acknowledge His divinity:

> Joshua: It is good when two men love as James and Bartholomew do and we recognize their union. …Love each other in sickness and health. …I bless this marriage in Your name, Father. Amen. Now let's all get very, very drunk.
> Bartholomew: You are truly the Messiah, son of the living God.[46]

McNally makes no attempt to underplay his vehement criticism of the conservative orthodoxy that has traditionally governed Christian theology, as, immediately following the wedding a conservative high priest espouses an officious, hard-line stance that is the opposite to Joshua's message of love:

> Joshua: Have you come to bless this marriage, too, father?
> High Priest: It is one thing to preach your perversions to ignorant and sentimental men and women such as yourselves, but such travesties of God's natural order will never be blessed in the House of the Lord by one of His ordained priests.
> Joshua: This is the House of the Lord. I ordain Myself.
> High Priest: You have broken every commandment.
> Joshua: You are hypocrites. You are liars. You have perverted My father's words to make them serve your ends. I despise you.[47]

McNally not only attempts to challenge the interpretation behind these Biblical passages, but also seeks to confront the authority that society has constructed around the Bible itself. After vociferously attacking the conservative stance of the high priest, Joshua strikes him and it is left to the other apostles to remind Joshua of the 'rule' He instigated about physical retaliation, which Joshua in turn contradicts:

> Thomas: Joshua, You struck a priest.

[46] Ibid., p. 62
[47] Ibid.

> Joshua: And I'll do it again. All who do not love all men are against Me!
> Thomas: But You said we must always turn the other cheek.
> Joshua: I must have been in a very good mood. Do not take everything I say so seriously.[48]

Throughout *Corpus*, McNally attempts to dispute the way in which society has come to accept religious traditions and teachings by questioning their authority. Early in the play Joshua converses with God the Father, who reveals that He does not have omniscient powers:

> God: No more questions. I'm gone Joshua.
> Joshua: What do You mean, You're gone? You can't be gone. You're supposed to be everywhere all the time.
> God: That is a very big misunderstanding.[49]

This dialogue challenges the traditional view that God is omnipresent, demonstrating McNally's desire to deconstruct historical understandings of God. Further, the relationship between Joshua and God the Father is complicated by McNally, as Joshua criticises the actions and will of God the Father. In one scene, Joshua, known for His miracles, is approached by a Centurion who asks Him to cure his dying wife:

> Centurion: Sir, we are not worthy to have You in our home. You have only to say the word and she will be cured.
> Joshua: Go home. Your wife is waiting for you. As you believe, so let it be. / *Centurion goes*. / Truly, I tell you, nowhere in Israel have I found such faith, not even among My own disciples.[50]

Later, Joshua learns that the Centurion's wife did not survive and reacts angrily, incensed that His will is less than that of God the Father's:

> Joshua: There's our friend. How is she?
> Centurion: I was too late. She was dead.
> Joshua: I'm sorry.

[48] Ibid., p. 63.
[49] Ibid., p. 20.
[50] Ibid., p. 60.

> Peter: It was God's will, Josh. You said so Yourself.
> Joshua: Well, it wasn't mine![51]

McNally's inclusion of this scene not only contests traditional understandings of Joshua's divinity, but also highlights His humanity. Having angrily opposed the will of God, Joshua immediately acknowledges His hubris, stating: 'I'm so ashamed. Forgive Me, all of you'.[52] There are other moments in the text that similarly confront Joshua's divine power. At the outset of the play the disciple Bartholomew, a medical doctor, questions Joshua's ability to heal the sick:

> We have to heal men's bodies before we can heal their souls. Joshua didn't always understand that. 'Believe,' He'd say, 'believe and be well.' I'd be right behind Him saying 'believe and take two of these and call me in the morning'.[53]

McNally complicates Joshua's divinity and His power to perform miracles. For example, Joshua manages to raise Lazarus from the dead,[54] cure Phillip from AIDS[55] and Andrew of Touretts,[56] however, as we have seen, certain miracles do not eventuate. This allows McNally to disrupt Biblical authority and also reduces Joshua's divinity to promote His humanity.

The promotion of Joshua's humanity and McNally's quarrel with theological heterosexism is also evidenced in Joshua's same-sex desire. On His prom night, Joshua attempts unsuccessfully to grope His date Patricia: [t]hose aren't my tits, Josh. These are my tits. Are You sure you've [sic] done this before?'.[57] Having witnessed Judas kissing Joshua a moment before, Patricia resigns herself to the fact that her date is more interested in men: 'I don't think Your heart is really in it. I saw what You were doing with that guy, Josh'.[58] Patricia is quickly chased off by Judas who kisses Joshua again, but this time the stage directions tell us that

[51] Ibid., pp. 60-61.
[52] Ibid., p. 61.
[53] Ibid., p. 3.
[54] Ibid., p. 38.
[55] Ibid., p. 55.
[56] Ibid., p. 51.
[57] Ibid., p. 36.
[58] Ibid.

'*JOSHUA responds*'.[59] What is unclear in the text is whether or not the relationship between Joshua and Judas extends physically beyond kissing. As Judas pulls Joshua toward him, Joshua states: 'You can come no closer to Me than My body. Everything else you will never touch. Everything important is hidden from you'.[60] McNally does not clarify what is meant by Joshua's statement of 'coming close' to another body and whether this implies anything other than kissing. Later in the text, the apostle Simon recounts a more clear-cut moment of potential sexual intimacy with Joshua:

> One night we were around the fire. Just the two of us. He'd just performed the miracle of the loaves and fishes. Five loaves and two fish fed five thousand men, not counting the women and children. Amazing! And twelve baskets were left over. I remember an owl hooting and thinking I'd never seen so many starts, so much stuff up there to wonder about. And for what seemed like an eternity, the two of us were one.[61]

Afterwards, Joshua repeats to Simon the same mantra that he had uttered to Judas on their prom night. If it is possible to read the relationship between Joshua and Simon as sexually intimate, then it is also legitimate to assume that Joshua's actions are intended to promote a relaxation of tradition theology's focus on sexual restriction. In the 2001 Melbourne production debate raged amongst the cast as to the actual nature of Joshua's relationships with Judas and Simon.[62] Some members of the company believed that these lines proved Joshua's sexual experience, while others were reticent to accept these couplings without a more explicit line from McNally. The ambiguity of these moments delimits the LGBT religious polemic of this text as if Joshua is meant to be chaste then McNally is simply re-emphasising Christianity's traditional disapproval of sexuality. In contrast, however, if Joshua is sexually active, having had at least two sexual partners, then McNally is radical in his approach to Christian theology. While it is possible that McNally intends these moments to be ambiguous, the same-sex kissing and especially the comments from Simon, underline Joshua's same-sex

[59] Ibid. p. 38.
[60] Ibid. p. 37.
[61] Ibid. p. 64.
[62] I worked on this production as the dramaturge as well as taking the role of James.

attraction and promote his humanity by moving him away from the Christ figure.

Religion and Equality

Much of the play is devoted to espousing a message of equality as McNally encourages the view that all members of the human race are significant in the eyes of God. Joshua promotes this message as part of His missionary work, asking us to recognise the divinity present in all of humankind: 'God is our leader. I'm just this guy like you. No better, no worse. …We're each special. We're each ordinary. We're each divine'.[63] The incidental character, Mrs McElroy, Joshua's high school English teacher from Pontius Pilate High, echoes this ideal: 'I loved all my students. I can't pretend I had a favorite [sic]. I just wanted each of them to be true to himself (or herself) and reach his (or her) potential as a creative human being'.[64] Mrs McElroy clearly speaks on behalf of McNally's agenda when she cannot identify Joshua as more important than any of the other students that she has taught throughout her career: 'I was a high school English teacher. He was my student. One of many, many hundreds. I know how you would have liked me to say something else. I'm sorry'.[65] Judas reiterates the play's focus on *human* divinity, during the scene that sees him paid 30 pieces of silver for the betrayal of Joshua:

> High Priest: But this one, [Joshua] He's a dangerous man.
> Judas: What is His crime?
> High Priest: Blasphemy.
> Judas: Because He says he's the son of God?
> High Priest: No, because He says you're the son of God as well.
> Judas: We're all the son of God.
> High Priest: Unless you're looking for trouble, I would keep that to myself. The son of God is a cocksucker? I don't think so.[66]

In a direct reference to the Biblical story, Joshua denies His own family during the last supper, forging an inclusive version of the notion of family:

[63] Ibid., p. 50.
[64] Ibid., p. 30.
[65] Ibid.
[66] Ibid., p. 65.

> Thomas: Josh, there's a woman outside who says she is Your mother.
>
> Joshua: Tell her I have no mother. You are My mother and father and brothers and sisters. You are My family now. We are all mother, father, brothers, and sisters, each to the other.[67]

McNally's promotion of human divinity and LGBT religious acceptance has been noted by a number of the play's reviewers. Fiona Scott-Norman, commenting on the 2001 Australian premiere of *Corpus* in Melbourne, reflects personally in her review entitled 'The night I gave my heart to a gay Jesus'. Although an atheist, she notes that '[a]s I watched 'Joshua' preach the gospel, I was illuminated by a sudden understanding of what Christianity is about. I got it. It's about love'.[68] At the Melbourne production of *Corpus*, as with the American and UK premieres, protesters lined the street outside the theatre. *The Australian* reported that, for the 1998 New York premiere, 'religious groups threatened to bomb the Manhattan Theatre Club where it was playing and pour acid on the audience'.[69] Christian and Muslim groups led an aggressive charge against the play in Melbourne, condemning the morals central to the message of the performance. Melbourne's leading religious figures, including the Greek Orthodox Archbishop Stylianos and the then Most Reverend George Pell, Catholic Archbishop of Melbourne,[70] condemned the play in a letter to *The Age*, stating it 'is blasphemous and perverted, another assault on the traditions and restraints that hold decent and pluralist societies together'.[71] Scott-Norman depicts the paradox between the play's central message of acceptance and the religious protesters' condemnation when she recalls 'that the people who profess to worship God were loathing us outside the theatre, implacably cursing us in God's name, compressing their vinegar-lips ever tighter, and passing judgment on something they refuse to witness or read'.[72] Jacqueline Tomlins wrote a letter to *The Age* in which she pin-points McNally's

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[67] Ibid., p. 68.
[68] Fiona Scott Norman, 'The Night I Gave My Heart to a Gay Jesus.' *The Age*, Jan. 2001.
[69] Georgina Safe. 'Churchmen Denounce Gay Christ Play as Blasphemous.' *The Australian* 17th January 2001.
[70] Pell was promoted to the position of Cardinal in 2003 and now resides in Sydney.
[71] Archbishop Stylianos et al. 'Perverted Blasphemy at Taxpayers' Expense' *The Age* 16th January 2001.
[72] Op. Cit., Norman.

intention to promote inclusivity: 'I can see how for Christian lesbians and gay men struggling with the contradictions of their faith the play would be extremely affirming, and carry a powerful message. In fact, it carries a powerful message for us all'.[73]

Paul Vout, the Executive Director of Polemic Productions Pty Ltd, the theatre company that produced *Corpus* in Melbourne, identified the way McNally uses his play to promote religious pluralism: 'The point I try and make with this play is that Christ and the Apostles could be (portrayed as) women, they could be black, they could be disabled, they could be sick, they could be cast within any section of society, which has, at one time or another, been vilified, persecuted, discriminated against, by the church'.[74] C.W.E. Bigsby asserts that McNally's plays, especially *Corpus*, promote acceptance and plurality, positing: 'He [McNally] writes of people who ask for respect, who evidence a common humanity, who suffer from the same debilitating fears as one another, who seek the same comfort, who need the same redemption.'[75] McNally's text then, challenges traditional heterosexist theology promoting human divinity and theological plurality.

Political Theatre

The pertinence of the political message in *Corpus* was highlighted by the media after the play's premiere in New York, when the execution of the Christ-like protagonist Joshua was likened to the real murder of Matthew Shepard. On 12th October 1998, the day before the play opened, in a remote location outside Laramie, Wyoming, Matthew Shepard, a young gay man, was brutally attacked by two men, strung up in a crucifix-like position, beaten and pistol whipped, then left to endure freezing weather. He died later in hospital from his injuries. The perpetrators of this hate crime admitted to murdering Shepard because of his homosexuality. In the published text's preface, McNally writes provocatively that Shepard 'died as agonizing a death as another young man who had been tortured and nailed to a wooden cross at a desolate spot outside Jerusalem known

[73] Tomlins, Jacqueline. 'Corpus Christi! Shock Horror!' *The Age* 19th January 2001.
[74] Paul Vout in Carolyn Webb, 'Confronting Dogma with a Leap of Faith', *The Age* 9th January, 2001.
[75] C.W.E. Bigsby, *Modern American Drama 1945-2000* (Cambridge: CUP, 2000), p. 372.

as Golgotha some 1,998 years earlier'.[76] Other critics have made the same association themselves and a great deal of media attention was given to Shepard's death at the time, with *Corpus*' social relevance remarked on consistently by reviewers: '[i]t is impossible not to think of Shepard's lonely death when watching the crucifixion scene in Terrence McNally's *Corpus Christi*'.[77] Robert Brustein, writing in *The New Republic*, commented: 'Homosexuals have suffered a great deal in our country. The most recent outrage, where a gay man in Wyoming was lashed to a fence and pistol-whipped to death, bore an uncanny resemblance to a crucifixion'.[78] While the merits of linking the death of Christ with the murder of a young gay man are debatable, McNally's statement demonstrates his desire for audiences to read Joshua as gay and underlines his desire to politicise the LGBT religious agenda.[79]

The nature of the relationship between audience and stage has been theorised by a variety of practitioners and scholars, especially Bertolt Brecht:

> [Brecht's] ideas for a theatre with the power to provide social change, along with his attempts to reactivate stage-audience exchange, have had a widespread and profound effect not only on theatre practice, but also on critical responses to plays and performance.[80]

Brecht asserted that by engaging a spectator critically in a performance, theatre could help to engender social change. As part of his Epic genre, Brecht devised the 'learning-play', which he argued was 'essentially dynamic; its task is to show the world as it changes (and how it might be changed)'.[81] Rejecting the 'sentimental' theatre of Stanislavski, Brecht devised a variety of theatrical devices to 'estrange' his audience [the

[76] Op. Cit., p. vi.
[77] Lyn Gardner, 'Unholy Racket' *The Guardian* 11th August, 1999.
[78] Robert Brustein, 'McNally on the Cross.' *The New Republic* 219 (1998): p. 34.
[79] See Moisés Kaufman's *The Laramie Project* (New York: Dramatists Play Service INC. 2001) for a comprehensive theatrical recounting of the murder of Matthew Shepard as Verbatim theatre.
[80] Susan Bennett, 'Theories of Reading and Viewing.' *Theatre Audiences: A Theory of Production and Reception* (London, Routledge, 2003), p. 21.
[81] Bertolt Brecht, 'The German Drama: pre-Hitler' *Brecht on Theatre* Translated by John Willett (New York, Hill and Wang, 1992), p. 79.

Verfremdungseffeckt] and maintain their critical focus.[82] Walter Benjamin confirmed Brecht's theories that stage techniques could 'encourage the audience to adopt a socially critical attitude'.[83] Although there is much critical literature which debates the actual influence of theatre or art on its viewers, McNally draws upon Brechtian philosophy to establish *Corpus* as a didactic tool: 'Look. Remember. Weep, if you will, but *learn* [my emphasis]. And don't let it happen again'.[84] This sentiment is echoed by the words of the disciple James, who is cast as a history teacher in the play and uses his opening soliloquy to underline the importance of the critical study of history: 'How we learn from it or we don't'.[85] The didactic intention of McNally's text is acknowledged by Frontain who argues that:

> [t]hroughout his canon, McNally is interested in theater's [sic] potential moral agency, but even more importantly, with theater's ability to recreate its audience. McNally's oeuvre, in fact, may be read as a sustained meditation upon the power of art, but most especially theater, to confront prejudice, break down resistance, and effect reconciliation.[86]

In the preface to the play, McNally informs us with Brechtian intent that 'Men play all the roles'[87] [there are a number of female parts which are played by the men]. There is no suspense. There is no scenery'.[88] These remarks can be viewed as distinctly 'Epic' for their capacity to maintain an audience's critical distance. The play opens with an actor admitting the lack of fresh twists to the plot structure: 'We are going to tell you an

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[82] Op. Cit., Bennett, p. 28.
[83] Philip Auslander, 'Walter Benjamin' *Theory for Performance Studies* (London, Routledge, 2008), p. 63.
[84] Op. Cit., McNally, p. vii.
[85] Ibid., p. 2
[86] Raymond-Jean Frontain ''All Men Are Divine': Religious Mystery and Homosexual Identity in Terrence McNally's *Corpus Christi*' *Reclaiming the Sacred: The Bible in Gay and Lesbian Culture*, ed Raymond-Jean Frontain (NewYork: Harrington Park Press, 2003), p. 249.
[87] Op. Cit., p. vi. The 2001 Melbourne production maintained McNally's desire to cast only men in the play, whereas the 2008 Sydney production employed both men and women. To maintain the Brechtian estrangement, the Sydney production used cross-gender casting for a variety of the characters. Both productions, then, were purposefully constructed with this specific element of political theatre.
[88] Ibid., p. vi.

old and familiar story. One you've all heard over and over, again and again. One you believe or one you don't. There's no suspense and fewer surprises. You all know how it turns out'.[89] At this point we may ask why McNally offers us a text that makes no substantial revisions to the primary source. If Brechtian theory is right, retelling such a recognisable story, altering only the figures and contexts of the narrative while still adhering strictly to the overall plot structure, will reinforce the revolutionary social and political message at the play's core. McNally knows there is no suspense in a story that we are culturally familiar with, and as audience, we will compare and contrast this narrative with the traditional one. Much like audiences witnessing ancient Greek theatre, the *agon* of the performance is enhanced through the theatrical revision of a traditional narrative. The power of McNally's storytelling is in his appropriation of Christ's narrative and its retelling from a gay perspective. Brecht states, 'Everything depends on 'story'; it is the heart of the theatrical performance'.[90] 'All *Corpus Christi* asks of you,' McNally writes:

> is to 'look what they did to Him. Look what they did to Him.' At the same time it asks you to look at what they did to Joshua, it asks that we look at what they did one cold October night to a young man in Wyoming as well. Jesus Christ died again when Matthew Shepard did.[91]

Further significant Epic features in *Corpus* can be recognised in the staging of the play. In the script's instructions McNally calls for 'a bare raked stage',[92] where 'Members of the company will sit on benches at the rear of the stage when they are not participating in a scene'.[93] In all major Australian productions (Melbourne 2001, Brisbane 2003, and Sydney 2008), to greater or lesser extent, actors were in view of the audience during the majority of the play, even when not involved in a scene. In this way all three productions maintained McNally's Epic intention. Keeping the actors on stage, even when they are not involved with a specific scene, increases the overall Epic nature of the play, as the

[89] Ibid., p. 1.
[90] Bertolt Brecht in John Rouse *Brecht and the West German Theatre: The Practice and Politics of Interpretation*, (Ann Arbor, Michigan: UMI Research Press, 1989), p. 30.
[91] Op. Cit., McNally, p. vii.
[92] Ibid., p. ix.
[93] Ibid.

audience is constantly aware of the theatrical environment they are in; the stage is peopled with *actors* rather than *characters*. McNally emphasises this in other ways too: for example, at the outset of the play he asks actors to enter the stage dressed in their own street clothes. They then change into their costumes on stage after being 'baptized' into their roles by the figure of St. John. In this baptism ritual, John provides us with not only the name of the character but that of the *actor* as well: 'I bless you, (full name of the actor playing ANDREW). I baptize you and recognize your divinity as a human being. I adore you, (first name of the actor playing ANDREW). I christen you Andrew'.[94] Thomas, one of the minor characters in the play, is cast as 'an actor', and while introducing himself to the audience, uses his opening soliloquy to reinforce McNally's Epic agenda through metatheatre: 'I'm an actor. I mean Thomas is an actor. I'm an actor, too, of course, but you know that or you wouldn't be paying good money or even no money to sit there and listen to me tell you I'm someone else'.[95] He reminds the audience that theatre is all about 'the willing suspension of disbelief – or in certain cases the *un*willing suspension of disbelief'.[96] To confuse matters further, in the early stages of the play, the newly baptized actors inform the audience that they will diverge from their main characters and people the scenes with a variety of other figures. These figures, it appears, are selected by the actors at random, pulling out the names of characters from a hat.

> Simon: We need a cast of thousands to tell this story: men, women, children.
> James the Less: None of us knows who he's going to be.
> Philip: It's the luck of the draw.[97]

Once the various roles are divided the actors move on to deal with the props, an assortment of which are showcased in front of the audience before being placed on prop's tables, which McNally states must be '*visible stage right and left*'.[98] The actors utilise these props throughout the performance, selecting them in full sight of the audience. Metatheatrical actors who comment on the action, play a multiplicity of characters (male and female), and choose props from a location that is easily viewed by the audience: these are devices which strongly reflect

[94] Ibid., p. 2.
[95] Ibid., p. 4.
[96] Ibid.
[97] Ibid., p. 9.
[98] Ibid., p. 1.

Epic techniques and have been deliberately integrated into the theatrical structure of the play. McNally, fully aware of the purported didactic strength of Brecht's Epic theatre, has exploited the political potential of the theatre to endorse his gay polemic.

Corpus Christi is an example of Acceptance Theatre as it unifies elements of Brecht's Epic theatre to promote McNally's message of social change and advance a gay religious sensibility—an inconceivable notion not so long ago. The play strikes out at the exclusivity and authority of the religious institutions and traditions that would seek to exile gay individuals from accessing spiritual and religious fulfilment. The controversy surrounding McNally's work reveals the acute social pertinence of its message and the continuing opposition facing gay men and women who seek access to religious institutions. In the final moments of *Corpus Christi* McNally assures us that although '[o]ur play is over…the end is still to come. All these things you have seen and heard are the first birth pangs of the new age'.[99]

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James Marland is a lecturer in Literature and Theatre at the Australian Catholic University. He completed his PhD at the University of Sydney in 2010 on the intersection between theatre, religion and sexuality.

[99] Ibid., p. 80.