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Remedial Laughter: American Stage Comedy about AIDS

“You’ve had the disease! You’ve been to the demonstration! Now see the musical!”
— Promotional slogan for *AIDS! The Musical!*
(qtd. in Jones xiii)

Can one, may one, really laugh about AIDS? Is it acceptable to make fun of a lethal pandemic that has carried away millions of people in the past three decades? While AIDS (Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome) is a fairly recent phenomenon, the issue at stake—the social (in)acceptability of humor, and in particular of stage comedy as an artistic form of expression, in dealing with serious subjects such as natural disasters, human-caused calamities, or social and religious taboos—is a very old one and will probably never cease to cause controversy. However, this matter would never have come up, if, indeed, people had not been recurring to comic forms of expression to respond to disasters, calamities, and taboos in the first place. In the following essay I will analyze the phenomenon of U.S.-American stage comedies about the AIDS epidemic against the backdrop of the social and psychological functions of the comic as well as the relation between Western stage comedy and controversial subjects.

Stage Comedy and the Controversial Subject

Peter L. Berger has differentiated among several forms and functions of the comic: “The comic as diversion” includes all forms of benign humor that are “intended to evoke pleasure, relaxation, and good will” (99). “The comic as a game of intellect” (135), appearing especially in wit and language games, provides one with the satisfaction of demonstrating one’s cognitive abilities (61-62). “The comic as consolation” most prominently takes the shape of tragicomedy or black humor. It “provokes laughter through tears” (117) and consoles, as it acknowledges the presence of the tragic yet momentarily suspends and thereby symbolically defies it (58, 117). Irony, parody, and satire are the predominant forms of “the comic as weapon” (157). They “deliberately] use ... the comic for purposes of attack” by “belittling, humiliating, or debunking” their targets (157, 51). Commonly directed against ideas, institutions, social groups, and their respective representatives or against individuals of high status, these forms of the comic provide an outlet for anxieties whose expression in other forms may be subject to socio-cultural taboo or political repression (51-53, 157). The various forms of the comic always had a place in society, illuminating a civilization by holding up a mirror to it. While they may either scrutinize a given social order or, contrarily, affirm it, all forms of humor and the comic tend to create social group cohesion and distinction from other groups, as well as to offer (temporary) relief from social constraints (66- 72, 78).

As Mathias Mayer argues, literature provides a particularly fruitful forum for articulating ethical concerns, because works of literature, and especially epic and dramatic fiction, present multiple options of human action and problematize them and their evaluation within a given context (13). Western theater has employed comic forms of expression since antiquity to entertain audiences, voice popular anxieties, or scrutinize prevailing social mores and political power structures (cf. Weitz). Nonetheless, especially owing to the danger—inherent in any form of comic expression—that “laughing along with” the target of ridicule turns into “laughing about” it (Jauß 281-83; my translation), playwrights have time and again been forced to justify their use of comic forms, in particular when addressing (potentially) controversial subjects. In the preface to his comedy *Le Tartuffe* (1669), for instance,

the French playwright Molière prominently defends his artistic right to unmask and thereby criticize religious hypocrisy, as he invokes the support of high-standing members of society, among them the French king, as well as voicing his own respect for true believers who—unlike the titular character of *Le Tartuffe*—do not (ab)use faith to pursue other, non-religious goals. Molière further refers to the widely accepted social function and value of comic theater as an educational tool: By unmasking human flaws and follies in an entertaining and benign manner, he argues, comedy reaches out to people more successfully than conventional moral instruction (33-40).

While *Le Tartuffe* has long become a staple of the Western theatrical repertoire, current dramatic responses to topical controversial issues often remain reluctant to approach their subject matter in a comic format. The most famous case in the West unquestionably includes comedies about the Holocaust. The large scale of the atrocities committed has raised concerns and fueled debates about the possibilities and adequate forms of literary representation that last to this day (Rohr), and it has long rendered comic approaches to the Shoah a particular taboo. Following similar and slightly earlier developments in film and the novel,¹ the first theatrical satires, comedies, and farces addressing the Holocaust found their way to theater stages in the mid-1990s. What distinguishes these from the other, mostly documentary and commemorative dramatic formats is a shift away from the claim to an “authentic” representation of the historical events to focusing on the construction of memory and the role of discourses and representations therein (Rohr 163-68, 173). As the issue has remained controversial, playwrights of Holocaust comedies often feel the need to justify their work. The British playwright Roy Kift, for example, defends his comic take on life in a concentration camp, *Camp Comedy* (1999), by invoking the psychosocial function and educational value of humor:

¹ The early 1940s saw a first wave of screen and stage satires about the Nazi regime, but once the full dimension of the Holocaust became known, comic takes on the subject were considered inappropriate. A revival of the earlier satirical tradition, now with a critical eye to the medialization of history and the developing “Holocaust industry,” has taken place since the 1970s and in particular since the 1990s (Rohr 160-61, 166, 170, 173, 175-76).

At first sight, the juxtaposition of comedy and concentration camp seems to be not only impossible but also morally indefensible, how much more grotesque must it seem that comedy, songs and laughter in the form of cabaret were almost a daily experience in the Theresienstadt camp. But since the inmates themselves considered laughter to be a perfectly acceptable response to their predicament, there may be valuable lessons here to be learnt for modern writers trying to find an appropriate formal approach to tackling the Holocaust in performance. (147-49)

In a similar vein, U.S.-American and British theater has responded to the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001 in several waves, moving from a theater of testimony and mourning via plays that historically contextualize the attacks or address problems of artistic representation to a new political theater that critically engages with U.S.-American politics at large (Esch-van Kan). According to Anneka Esch-van Kan, it was not until 2006 that the first play with a somewhat ludic approach to 9/11, Kirk Lynn's *Major Bang—Or, How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Dirty Bomb*, emerged (136-37).

American AIDS Theater: From Testimony to Comedy

The path Anglo-American 9/11 plays have taken to date strikingly echoes (with the final steps not yet taken) the development during the 1980s and 90s of U.S.-American theater—and narrative literature in general (Haas 61-63)—about AIDS.² The fact that AIDS was quickly perceived as an epidemic and an STD (sexually transmitted disease) that over-proportionally affects already socially marginal(ized) groups has fundamentally shaped patterns of response and representation. Owing to a set of interconnected circumstances, gay and bisexual men have always made up the largest segment of HIV (the virus that causes AIDS) and AIDS patients in the United States to this day, followed by intravenous drug users and different groups of people of color (Haas 37). The predominant societal discourses about HIV/AIDS in the United

² There are further parallels between the discourses about 9/11 and AIDS in the United States (Haas 294-95). For a detailed analysis of U.S.-American AIDS theater, including the plays mentioned here, cf. Haas.

States tend to frame the syndrome as both consequence and indicator of socio-sexual deviance, whose otherness it renders visible. Building upon the paradox-laden perception of the socio-cultural other as “both abject weakness and powerful threat” (Kruger 41), popular and even some scientific discourses often portray the main “risk groups” for HIV/AIDS not only as being responsible for their own condition but also as a menace to public health and national values. They commonly pit these “guilty AIDS carriers” against the implicitly “innocent victims” of HIV infection such as children, hemophiliacs, and heterosexual partners of bisexuals or drug injectors (Haas 40).

Emerging in particular “out of the already politicized lesbian and gay movement” (Román, *Acts* 69), the first AIDS plays produced in the U.S. were profoundly shaped by and concerned with “educational messages, behavioral models, and social practices designed to ensure and enhance the physical, emotional, spiritual, and political survival of the gay community” (Jones x; also Saal 1-2, 9-10) and that transcended artistic concerns. Plays written and first produced during the 1980s were often explicitly didactic: They testified to individual and collective experiences; provided a public forum to express anger and grief; and educated audiences about available prevention and treatment measures; as well as raising the political consciousness necessary to confront alarmingly reactionary local and national AIDS policies (Haas 69-71).

From the earliest plays onwards, elements of the comic have run through U.S.-American AIDS theater, functioning in particular as a strategy of consolation that could help come to terms with terminal illness and death, on the one hand, and to counter tendencies of either victimizing or vilifying HIV/AIDS patients, on the other (Haas 69-70, 78). For instance, William M. Hoffman’s 1985 play *As Is* (Haas 76-96), the first AIDS play produced on a mainstream stage in the United States, abounds with elements of the comic: humorous depictions of gay life in the time of AIDS; witty, sometimes cynical dialogues; and a set of gay, ethnic, and hospital jokes that circulated in the United States during the mid-1980s characterize the atmosphere of the play (Hoffman 3-7, 12, 19-20, 23-33, 42, 55-56, 77-80, 91-92). Akin to Molière’s and Roy Kift’s defenses of *Le Tartuffe* and *Camp Comedy*, respectively, Hoffman justifies his use of the comedic in a work addressing as serious a subject as AIDS in his foreword: Not only does he claim that the humor had entered *As Is* against his intention; he also invokes his own involvement

in gay AIDS activism as well as the approval he received for his play from his dying father and from different people living with HIV/AIDS as the factors that reconciled him with the comic side of his play.³

Even though many plays continued to explicitly emerge out of a political consciousness and as a contribution to AIDS activism, a second wave of U.S.-American AIDS literature—including plays—written since the late 1980s, according to Lawrence Howe, was “much better equipped to go beyond the initial shock, disbelief, and grief that distinguishes the first wave’s representations of AIDS as an emerging, mysterious crisis” (404). In drawing upon devices of defamiliarization, including many elements of the comic such as humor, irony, satire, or the grotesque, AIDS plays of the 1990s provide readers with new strategies of dealing with an epidemic not to be soon conquered (Haas 71-72). Nonetheless, even as daring a project as the alternative theatrical project *AIDS! The Musical!* (1991) was consciously placed in an AIDS activist context to legitimize its use of a fierce humor to approach its deadly subject matter. Not only does the above-cited promotional slogan allude to a political demonstration, but the creators of the show, Wendell Jones, David Stanley, and Robert Berg, explicitly characterize their work as “an all-singing, all dancing, all queer voyage into a world of AIDS activism, new age gatherings, sleazy sex clubs, radical faeries, lesbian love, and fags bashing back!” (qtd. in Jones xiii). At the same time, however, the self-confident approach of *AIDS! The Musical!* to address HIV/AIDS in form of a musical comedy points to the new direction U.S.-American AIDS theater has taken during the 1990s, a direction I will now analyze in greater detail, using two of the most prominent AIDS comedies as examples: Paula Vogel’s *The Baltimore Waltz* (1991) and Paul Rudnick’s *Jeffrey* (1992).⁴

³ Hoffman xiv-xv; also Boccardi 129-32. Similar to William M. Hoffman, Roy Kift has dedicated his essay about the historical cabarets in the Theresienstadt concentration camp to a friend and Holocaust survivor (168).

⁴ The most prominent U.S.-American AIDS play that features various comic scenes is, of course, Tony Kushner’s two-part play *Angels in America. A Gay Fantasia on National Themes* (1991/92). However, as this play is more complex in style (cf. Haas 191-98), it will not be discussed here.

Satirical Reverse Transcription: Paula Vogel's *The Baltimore Waltz*

Paula Vogel's 1991 play *The Baltimore Waltz* (cf. Haas 174-90) stands out among U.S.-American AIDS plays for its indirect, highly stylized treatment of its subject that defies an easy formal categorization. According to Tish Dace, "Vogel creates simultaneously a compassionate comedy about death, a bedroom farce, and a satire on American AIDS policy" (597). The play blends together various cultural forms, among them the travel account, the thriller movie, and the public service announcement. With its often illogical plot, use of repetition as a key element of the dialogue, and grotesque characters, it recalls Martin Esslin's conceptualization of the Theatre of the Absurd. *The Baltimore Waltz* deals with a strange European journey the schoolteacher Anna undertakes with her brother Carl after being diagnosed with a lethal illness. Their final destination is Vienna, where Anna is to seek treatment unavailable in the United States. However, the play is interspersed with hints that Anna made up her illness and the journey as a strategy of coping with the AIDS death of her brother, which is revealed at the end of the play.

As Paula Vogel states in a note on her play, the work is based on autobiographical experience: "In 1986, my brother Carl invited me to join him in a joint excursion to Europe. Due to pressures of time and money, I declined, never dreaming that he was HIV-positive.... *The Baltimore Waltz* [is] a journey with Carl to Europe that exists only in the imagination" (2). Presenting her fictional journey as a camp version of the never-made trip with her own brother, the playwright pays tribute to her sibling. The written dedication of *The Baltimore Waltz*, "to the memory of Carl—because I cannot sew" (3), explicitly turns the play into a specific form of public commemoration: a substitute for a panel of the Names Project AIDS Memorial Quilt (Dace 598; Schultz 225-26; on the quilt, cf. Haas 117). In addition to anchoring the play in the experience of personal loss, Anna's mourning and the presence of Carl Vogel in *The Baltimore Waltz* align the play with the acts of testimony and commemoration that characterize especially U.S.-American AIDS plays of the 1980s. Beyond its function of preserving and sharing memory, the claim of the testimonial text to discursive authority and truth-telling endows *The Baltimore Waltz*—like *As Is* earlier—with the

artistic and political license to treat its serious subject satirically (Shepard and Lamb 205).

The humor that runs through *The Baltimore Waltz* is strikingly more ludic and less desperate than the comic elements in *As Is* and other earlier AIDS theater. This becomes particularly manifest in the way Vogel's play satirically displaces AIDS with a fictive disease that ironizes cultural stereotypes (Vogel 12, 19-25, 36-39, 44-55; also Schultz 242-43) alongside criticizing the hegemonic U.S.-American AIDS discourses: Acquired Toilet Disease (ATD)—a pun on both "AIDS" and "STD"—a lethal affliction of single schoolteachers caused by children's urine and transmitted via toilet seats, parodically reworks the biomedical and socio-political framing of HIV/AIDS in the United States (Vogel 10-11, 18; also Schultz 14-15, 225-30). The principle of replacing AIDS with ATD strikingly recalls the biochemical process of reverse transcription. Metaphorically similar to the way retroviruses like HIV "transcribe" their single-stranded RNA template into a double-stranded DNA molecule they can incorporate into the human host DNA (Mahy 279), Anna first "transcribes" her brother, deceased from AIDS, into an ATD-afflicted version of herself in *The Baltimore Waltz*, a transcription process that is once again reversed at the end of the play (Vogel 55-57). This strategy urges audiences, who have followed the sympathetically drawn heterosexual woman with compassion on her journey with an "elementary school illness," to recognize the role of their preconceived notions about HIV/AIDS and those it afflicts (Boccardi 267, 275; Schultz 232-33, 240-41; Watkins 177-78).

As it reverses the major risk groups and modes of transmission of AIDS in its depiction of ATD, *The Baltimore Waltz* questions the popular associations between AIDS and socio-sexual "deviance." In not presenting sexual activity but children's urine as a serious health threat (Vogel 9-12, 17), the play signifies upon the popular fears surrounding body fluids and sexual acts in the time of AIDS, and it interrogates the common ascriptions of innocence and guilt, safety and risk, victim and perpetrator, according to a person's socio-sexual status (Román, "*Baltimore Waltz*" 520; Schultz 238, 241-42; Watkins 177-78). The key arguments put forth to counter social ostracism in the play, however, are taken from the verbal strategy real AIDS activists employed to defend the civil liberties of people with HIV/AIDS in the 1980s, the claim "It's not a crime. It's an illness" (Vogel 17; also Shepard and Lamb 205). *The*

Baltimore Waltz particularly foregrounds how closely notions of otherness are tied to questions of political power and representation. In a humorous manner, the play exposes the historical disregard of the U.S.- American political elite and mainstream media to the spread of AIDS unless the health of prominent citizens was at stake (Haas 43-46, 50-54). As Carl argues poignantly in the play: “If Sandra Day O’Connor sat on just one infected potty, the media would be clamoring to do articles on ATD. If just one grandchild of George Bush caught this thing during toilet training, that would be the last we’d hear about the space program” (12; also Schultz 234).

The lack of political commitment to fight ATD/AIDS in the United States manifests itself especially in a scene of *The Baltimore Waltz* that signifies upon the setting of public health priorities. Announcing a campaign called “Operation Squat,” a public health official states:

There is no known cure for ATD right now, and we are acknowledging the urgency of this dread disease by recognizing it as our 82nd national health priority Right now, ATD is the fourth major cause of death of single schoolteachers, ages twenty-four to forty ... If you are in the high-risk category— single elementary schoolteachers, classroom aides, custodians and playground drug pushers— follow these simple guides. (18)

The behavioral rules the fictional “Operation Squat” subsequently advises— washing one’s hands after using the toilet, never sitting on a public toilet seat, or avoiding public restrooms altogether (18-19; also Boccardi 275-76; Schultz 233)—rework the guidelines the United States Health Service issued in 1983 to respond to the speculation of medical researchers that HIV could be transmitted through regular household contacts (Haas 51-52, 54). In evoking this moment in the history of AIDS in the United States, *The Baltimore Waltz* further points out the helplessness of a medico-political establishment in the face of a serious health threat it has not mastered.

Employing the style of public health information campaigns, “Operation Squat” more specifically scrutinizes the political controversies that have repeatedly surrounded public AIDS education and prevention measures in the United States. As a result of the strict federal regulations established for providing information on sexual and drug- using practices, government-sponsored AIDS education programs to this

day are severely limited in their outreach capacities and tend to primarily cater to the needs of the comparatively low-risk populace of the white heterosexual middle class (Haas 43-46). The ATD prevention campaign in *The Baltimore Waltz* signifies upon the limits and faults of such programs by ridiculing the targeting practices of public health initiatives in general and AIDS education guidelines in particular (Schultz 234; Shepard and Lamb 205). “Operation Squat” gains its satirical quality from dressing a matter of low priority and rare occurrence in the warning rhetoric of public health promotion initiatives and from its ridiculous-sounding name that underlines the discrepancy between style and content of the campaign. By including “playground drug pushers” in the list of potential ATD victims—and thus reversing the trajectory of death usually brought forth by the dealers to their juvenile customers—the play undermines the claim of public health education to objectivity and political neutrality and raises the crucial question of whose health is truly endangered.

The Baltimore Waltz further dismantles the deep involvement of medical science in the political power structures that determine the public handling of health matters. Language and discourse signify the gap between the medico-political establishment and society at large. The almost unintelligible, medical jargon-ridden speech of the two doctors in the play especially generates anxieties in face of an inexplicable, incurable illness that neither political nor medical authorities appear to fight efficiently. When asked to elucidate Anna’s medical condition, her Baltimore physician replies with a cascade of medical terms: “There are exudative and proliferative inflammatory alterations of the endocardium, consisting of necrotic debris, fibrinoid material and disintegrating fibroblastic cells” (9; also 10-12, 52, 55; Schultz 230-32). And the same doctor’s explanation of the political implications of ATD tellingly makes no mention of the sick:

Well, first of all, the Center for Disease Control doesn’t wish to inspire an all-out panic in communities. Secondly, we think education on this topic is the responsibility of the NEA, not the government. And if word of this pestilence gets out inappropriately, the PTA is going to be all over the school system demanding mandatory testing of every toilet seat in every lavatory. It’s kindling for a political disaster. (11)

The doctor's unintelligible statement creates a sense of a medical establishment, itself lacking knowledge of ATD, alienated from the powerless and confused population, whose needs the doctor considers an annoyance at best (the Parent-Teacher Association, PTA) and irrelevant at worst (the infected persons). In its comical exaggeration of mass testing, this statement scrutinizes the public debates in the United States during the mid-1980s about mandatory mass screenings of AIDS risk groups (Boccardi 271-72; on this debate cf. Haas 44). Referring to ATD as a "pestilence," the physician in *The Baltimore Waltz* further evokes long-standing societal fears of almost inevitable, large-scale painful suffering associated with bubonic plague and similar epidemics in Western history (Haas 22, 42-43). Not the disease in question but public discourses about it and the political interventions they inform are what appears to be the "real" danger to the medical authorities in the play.

The motif of medical disregard for the patient also informs the character of Dr. Todesrocheln in *The Baltimore Waltz*, a mysterious Viennese urologist whose urine therapy Anna seeks in desperate hope of a cure. His telling name ("death rattle"), paired with his strange looks; solitary status as someone who is "somewhat unorthodox, outside the medical community" (Vogel 12); uncommon methods; and dubious medical credentials (cf. Vogel 12, 15, 52-55; also Schultz 235-36) make him a picture-book embodiment of the mad-scientist stereotype. Since the early nineteenth century, the unscrupulous researcher whose Promethean drive often leads to conducting ethically illicit experiments has been a typological figure in Western culture that powerfully captures popular anxieties about the growing distance between scientific and general knowledge as well as the rising popular fears of the consequences of uncontrolled scientific development (Haynes 3-5, 187- 210). Wearing "one sinister black glove" (52) and engaging in a struggle of his hands for a urine flask (52-53), Dr. Todesrocheln explicitly evokes Dr. Strangelove, the titular scientist and government military advisor in Stanley Kubrick's 1964 screen satire on United States Cold War paranoia, *Dr. Strangelove— Or, How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Bomb* (Kubrick). As a quack sibling of apparently similarly sinister political persuasion to Dr. Strangelove, Dr. Todesrocheln blends the mad-scientist cliché with the equally popular image of the foolish investigator obsessed with trivial yet strange research projects, a figure that signifies both upon the popular cult of

science and its inability to tackle many pressing problems (Haynes 3, 35-49, 66-73).

As a foolish and mad scientist, Dr. Todesrocheln articulates societal uneasiness about a medical establishment that has shown little will or ability to fight AIDS (Vogel 12, 15, 52-53). The threatening aspect of this establishment becomes visible in Dr. Todesroeheln's apparent endorsement of the medical experiments that were performed on concentration camp inmates in Nazi Germany, as he boasts that "thanks to the advancement of medical science, there are no limits to our thirst for knowledge. ... So much data has been needlessly, carelessly destroyed in the past—the medical collections of Ravensbruck senselessly annihilated" (53). Carefully avoiding an untenable one-to-one analogy between the AIDS-era United States and Nazi Germany, *The Baltimore Waltz* nonetheless employs these references to scrutinize U.S.-American AIDS anxieties and policies as being part of a larger history of political atrocities in which medical science has been complicit time and again (Shepard and Lamb 205,212-13).

While it is Anna's brother Carl who is revealed to have died from AIDS at the end of the play, by displacing Carl's AIDS with Anna's ATD for most of the narrative, *The Baltimore Waltz* addresses women as patients of a serious illness. In its parodic health education campaign, the play scrutinizes the low priority both AIDS and health threats to women are given in U.S.-American health politics. Anna, whom her doctor reproaches for having used a classroom toilet, forces audiences to confront a woman's affliction with HIV/AIDS beyond the two major modes of framing female patients in mainstream U.S.-American societal discourse, the vilification of the socio-sexually "deviant" and the victimization of "mainstream" (white middle-class) women (Haas 41- 42, 54-55). As Anna is a single woman without children, *The Baltimore Waltz* precludes a reductive reading of the affliction of its female protagonist in light of how she might threaten the health of a husband or child (Vogel 18-19; also Boccardi 273-76).

Anna's attempt to come to terms with her own mortality scrutinizes the schematization of people's response to terminal illness. In a parodic scene, *The Baltimore Waltz* shows her pass through the six archetypal stages of human confrontation with terminal illness identified by Elisabeth Kübler-Ross (Haas 82) within a single, sleepless night. The play even allows Anna to talk back to the classification scheme: "What

does she know about what it feels like to die?! Kübler-Ross can sit on my face!” (29; also 26-29; Schultz 236; Watkins 178). The play further claims that “unbeknownst to Elizabeth Kübler-Ross, there is a Seventh Stage ... : Lust” (29). In adding this final stage to the standard model, and in having the previously sexually “tame” Anna embark on her journey in search of casual sex as well as medical treatment, *The Baltimore Waltz* refutes the popular assumption that a serious illness, especially among women, commands celibacy and puts an end to sexual desire (Vogel 26, 31-33, 40-41, 44-46; also Boccardi 277; Schultz 236; Watkins 178-79).

Consisting entirely of lovingly mocked cultural stereotypes and Hollywood images of the continent, Carl and Anna’s journey satirizes the European grand tour popular among travelers from the United States. Anna’s numerous sexual adventures with male service personnel on her trip in *The Baltimore Waltz* explore the erotic potential of women in defiance of traditional codes of female decency. The drama’s playful signifying upon traditional gendered connections of travel and sex subverts the notion of the educational value of the grand tour (Stowe). While Anna’s promiscuity poses no health threat within the epidemiology of ATD, it generates anxieties with regard to her standing in for her AIDS-afflicted brother, especially as the actor who is to play all of Anna’s male sex partners also embodies a mysterious male stranger who pursues Carl throughout the journey. Thus, the way *The Baltimore Waltz* validates sexuality challenges societal notions of gender and sexual conduct in the context of AIDS (Boccardi 277-78, 283; Schultz 237, 240; Watkins 178-79).

Romantic Comedy of Serodiscordance: Paul Rudnick’s *Jeffrey*

Alberto Sandoval points out that, “AIDS theatre entered a new phase when *Jeffrey* opened off-Broadway. The message now is that AIDS has become a part of life and all that can be done is accept it, move on and laugh about it” (52). Called by the playwright himself “a blend of the highest farce and the most devastating tragedy, laced with the gay style that has allowed a ravaged community to survive with its wisecracks and wardrobes intact” (qtd. in Eads 248), Paul Rudnick’s 1992 play *Jeffrey* chronicles the struggle of the gay actor and waiter Jeffrey Calloway with

his fear of AIDS and complications in life in a series of short, comic vignettes (Haas 237-51). To avoid the compromises of safer sex, Jeffrey vows sexual abstinence, a decision that is not only scrutinized by his friends but also challenged when he falls in love with the HIV-positive Steve. After an erroneous journey through the gay scene of New York, he finally comes to embrace a relationship with Steve.

Following a strategy already employed in *The Baltimore Waltz*, *Jeffrey* employs elements of the comic to critique the homophobic societal framing of gay men as threats to society in mainstream U.S.- American discourses and validates gay men's multiple struggles against the AIDS epidemic. Rudnick argues accordingly that he considered the time ready for a comic exploration of AIDS. Nonetheless, echoing William M. Hoffman and Paula Vogel, he underlines the legitimacy of a humorous take on the serious matter of AIDS by anchoring his fictional work in personal testimony to the epidemic: In several interviews, he cites the approval he received from both his terminally ill father and several HIV-positive friends (Baker 206), and he has dedicated his play to his father (Rudnick 3). In his introduction, Rudnick moreover invokes the comic as a strategy to cope with the presence of AIDS and death: "Audiences often imagine that a comedy about AIDS is impossible; *Jeffrey* is a tribute to people who battle disease and fear with passion, humor and style" (5).

Jeffrey blends together and reworks a number of literary and cinematographic styles and genres to create a panorama of AIDS-era gay Manhattan that is both socially assertive and politically critical. A strong element of parody mingles with the self-referentiality and flamboyance of gay camp performance in the play's portrayal of the New York gay community, as the protagonist Jeffrey passes through a host of (stereo)typical places and situations. The witty dialogue and fast pace of the play, its featuring a number of burlesque scenes, and the fact that as few as eight actors are to embody the 42 roles draw upon the U.S.-American screwball comedy, with its typological characters, slapstick elements, and sexual themes (Baker 206; on the screwball comedy, cf. Sennett 54-73, 110-29). Presenting a lovingly mocking look at gay life in New York in the early 1990s, *Jeffrey* shows how profoundly the AIDS epidemic informs gay sexuality and culture. Through the parodies of a lecherous gay priest who promotes safer sex measures and of a New Age self-help guru (27-30, 47-52), the play

scrutinizes the failure of both organized religion and alternative spiritual movements in dealing with AIDS, namely the homophobic sexual principles of the Catholic Church and the conservative societal agenda of a New Age movement that explicitly blames diseases on non-committed relationships (Haas 44-45).

Jeffrey depicts AIDS awareness as transcending, yet prominently including, the gay experience, for instance in scenes set at an AIDS fundraiser ball or a memorial service. With its “Western” theme and camp performances of the gay caterers in their “Cowboy/Indian” attire (18-23), the ball signifies upon the Western’s ideology of rugged white masculinity and its often erotically charged male bonds as well as the gay cultural offspring of the Western hero, the masculine-coded type of the “cowboy” popular in gay sex culture of the 1980s (Haas 240). The ball in *Jeffrey* humorously mocks the normative white masculinity of the Western and the gay assimilationist striving for social privilege without scrutinizing either American heterosexual society or gay culture per se. The fact that the Western ball serves as a fundraiser for an AIDS charity at the same time raises spectatorial consciousness of the ongoing necessity to fight the epidemic. In a similar vein as the ball, the fictive television quiz show “It’s Just Sex” is based on and promotes basic AIDS awareness. The show’s quiz about sex and AIDS alludes to the “Just Say No” campaign of AIDS and drug education headed by Nancy Reagan during the mid-1980s (15-17; cf. Haas 240). As it parodistically reworks the exclusive promotion of sexual abstinence and the rejection of homosexuality that characterized Reagan’s campaign, *Jeffrey* stakes a claim for a pragmatic, gay- and sex-positive approach to AIDS prevention that targets health risks rather than identity categories and informs people instead of policing them.

Jeffrey prominently interrogates popular assumptions about HIV/AIDS through the character of the HIV-positive Steve, especially in a scene depicting a chance meeting of Steve and Jeffrey in a hospital lounge. Here, Steve dons protective medical garb in a camp performance of a fashion show and cynically comments upon the gown’s having been “sterilized over five thousand times” (43) and about the necessity of wearing gloves (44). With this scene, the play follows American AIDS plays of the 1980s, such as *As Is*, signifying upon popular fears in the United States concerning physical contact with AIDS patients to scrutinize the ways U.S.-American culture often limits people with

HIV/AIDS to their medical condition, treats them with fear, and excludes them from social life.

As this defiant gay spirit shown by Steve in the hospital scene manifests itself in *Jeffrey* primarily through the appraisal of safer sex, Jeffrey's vow of abstinence puts his environment into a crisis that triggers the comic plot. His in itself legitimate choice—based on his view that “sex wasn't meant to be safe or negotiated, or fatal” (11)—is considered socially disruptive by the gay community, and the play solves the sexual crisis by having Jeffrey finally renounce abstinence and embrace a relationship and safer sex practices (13-14, 26-27, 45-46, 61-63; also Román, *Acts* 247). The narrative of *Jeffrey* powerfully signifies upon the suspicious attitude of heterosexual U.S.-American society toward the celebration of sex in gay culture in the age of AIDS. Yet, the play only substitutes one oppressive discourse with another. In an environment governed by the ideology of safer sex as primary means of HIV prevention, the play equates abstinence with subjugation to the epidemic and suggests that only a sexually active man can be an asset to the gay world. As it is not people's HIV status that matters here but their ideological conformity, the normative voice of the gay community polices socio-sexual behavior rather than the medical condition it claims to fight (14-15, 24-25, 60, 62-63; also Román, *Acts* 244, 247-48).

The tendency of comedy to privilege “the renewal of community over the triumph of the individual” (Román, “Negative” 205), articulated in the play's dealing with the sexual choice of its protagonist, also characterizes the depiction of gay effeminacy in *Jeffrey*. Widely criticized especially from within the gay community as fostering anti-gay societal bias by confirming the traditional stereotype of gay “unmanliness,” effeminacy is celebrated in the play as a legitimate way of gay life and as clearly superior to the assimilative drive to normative masculinity. As the protagonist puts it: “I hate that gay role models are supposed to be just like straight people. As if straight people were ever like that” (24). The play represents gay effeminacy and flamboyance through the figures of Jeffrey's friends, the interior designer Sterling and his lover Darius, a chorus singer/dancer in the musical *Cats*. Functioning as a gay mirror image of Middle America at the same time—they are even likened to “an advertisement for connubial bliss” (25)—, Sterling and Darius signify upon the exclusion of gay men from the popular understanding of bourgeois U.S.-American society and committed

relationships. *Jeffrey* thus defies gay social pressure to present only images of the gay experience likely to generate mainstream societal sympathy. However, as it carefully balances the stereotypical qualities of Sterling and Darius with their model behavior, the play compromises the political potential of satire and camp performance in favor of a conciliatory tone that affirms the prevailing social order rather than challenging it.

Underlined by evocative George Gershwin tunes and slide projections of picture-book New York scenes (7, 38, 60, 63), *Jeffrey* frames the story of Jeffrey and Steve's relationship in the mold of (heterosexual) romantic comedy in which the intervention of antagonistic forces temporarily thwarts the love of the protagonists. While AIDS takes the place of the obstacle to romantic happiness in *Jeffrey*, it is Jeffrey's unwillingness to accept sexual compromises and personal loss, rather than the epidemic itself, that the play invokes as the actual source of his trouble. By shifting the cause of the dramatic tension from the all-too-real socio-medical threat of AIDS to the exaggerated anxieties of the individual protagonist, the play addresses the serious issue in a light manner familiar to audiences in the United States, educating spectators by means of an entertaining narrative and affirming the U.S.-American ideology of liberal individualism.

Reconciling the two lovers on the observation deck of an Empire State Building framed against a nocturnal skyline with a glowing full moon, the final scene of *Jeffrey* (60-63) borrows heavily from the aesthetics of urban romanticism, alluding in particular to the finale of Rob Reiner's 1989 heterosexual romantic film comedy, *When Harry Met Sally*.⁵ As it reworks a genre conventionally asserting the normative ideal of heterosexual romance and marriage to depict a gay love story in the second decade of the AIDS epidemic, *Jeffrey* affirms both gay and straight experiences: The play argues that gay romantic love is worthwhile and possible despite AIDS, and the adherence of gay men to the ideal of romance makes it even more valid. Following the

⁵ Reiner; also Sennett 285. The screen adaptation of *Jeffrey* enforces the parallels to Reiner's movie to a much greater degree than the play, thereby underlining the film's claim to the status of mainstream-compatible romantic comedy represented by *When Harry Met Sally* (Haas 248-50).

convention of romantic comedy, the play provides narrative closure through a happy ending that asserts the mainstream U.S.-American ideology of the couple as a safe haven from personal and societal anxieties. However, as they are two serodiscordant gay men—one being HIV-negative, the other positive—Jeffrey and Steve are at odds with the traditional connotation of the couple as signifiers of health and reproduction who will regenerate society. Even though *Jeffrey* claims a place for the gay couple as integral part of U.S.-American society, the romantic involvement of the lovers can only temporarily deflect the possibility of Jeffrey's seroconversion and the knowledge of Steve's premature death (Román, *Acts* 242,247-48).

Conclusion

Rooted in religious ritual, the theater has since antiquity served as a forum for direct interaction and public debate; for moral, cultural, or political instruction; and for the formation of communities (Haas 3; Saal 1). Likewise, people have recurred to forms of the comic to negotiate individual or collective anxieties and grief as well as voice testimony and political critique. Both traditions merge in stage comedy as a form of artistic expression that understands (and uses) the comic as a more powerful tool for reaching out to and getting its concerns across to society. The cultural specificity of humor turns theatrical comedy about controversial subjects, from religious beliefs to instances of genocide, into a particularly sensitive matter. To justify their comic takes on such topics, playwrights have time and again invoked the societal value of their work, the therapeutic function of humor, and/or their own personal testimony to the serious issue in question.

Theater about the AIDS epidemic in the United States during the 1980s and 90s is a telling case in point. With the initial shock and anger about the epidemic gone, U.S.-American AIDS plays of the 1990s approach their subject in a formally and thematically more diverse manner that prominently includes several plays explicitly written in a comic format. Parodically reworking major popular assumptions about AIDS, Paula Vogel's satirical play *The Baltimore Waltz* exposes the prejudices and power structures implicit in the discursive rendering of the epidemic and those it affects. As it employs a fictional disease, its

discourses and policies, the play defamiliarizes the subjects of AIDS, homophobia, and political disregard for the sick to challenge mainstream audiences' feeling of being personally safe from these "threats." Through its satirical "reverse transcription" of AIDS, the play questions major categories of thought such as the figure of the "innocent victim" or the sexual and gendered connotation of AIDS (also Schultz 241-42). Its avowedly anti-naturalist depiction of the epidemic links *The Baltimore Waltz* to other AIDS plays written and first performed around the same time. As Arnold Aronson observes, Vogel's play

typified an emerging trend in the nineties toward plays of grief and rage that, by functioning on an allegorical or metaphorical level, removed themselves from the specifics of newspaper headlines and allowed audiences to place the tragedy in a larger historical and, importantly, emotional framework. (154)

While *The Baltimore Waltz* represents satire rather than the more benign format of comedy, Alberto Sandoval-Sánchez argues that "with [Paul Rudnick's play] *Jeffrey*, AIDS has entered the realm of comedy, leaving behind its lugubrious phase" (53). To this, Rudnick adds: "This play couldn't have been written earlier... We needed the first generation of AIDS plays ... to get the word out. Now we can put AIDS in other contexts and we can see HIV-positive people as romantic and sexy" (qtd. in Reginato 9; cf. also Baker 206, 209). *Jeffrey's* advocating romance and safe sex subscribes to the heterosexual bourgeois U.S.- American ideology of the couple and thus engages in a discourse of gay sameness of values to straight society beneath a façade of sexual difference. Likewise, in depicting gay Manhattan as a world of its own, quite separate from the larger heteronormative world around it, the play fails to challenge the feeling of personal safety from AIDS and social change that informs the mainstream U.S.-American discursive framing of the epidemic. However, like *The Baltimore Waltz*, *Jeffrey* is carefully grounded in the playwright's personal experience with the epidemic. As a romantic comedy, it transcends the use of humor in earlier AIDS plays as a means to console and provoke laughter to keep from crying. Instead, it makes a strong claim for a self-confident gay life in full recognition of the ongoing struggle against the epidemic.

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