Matt Bapty

Written into Nonbeing:

Queer Self-Effacement in the Work of Kester Berwick

Writing Nonbeing

On the surface, the premise of Robert Dessaix's 2001 novel *Corfu* is simple – an Australian actor is on his way home to Adelaide from London, disappointed in love and lost in life. Much like Odysseus before him, however, the narrator instead ends up on the island of Corfu, where he rents out the home of a writer and, in turn, develops a fascination. He tries to piece together the writer's life through a collection of his diaries, manuscripts, and photographs, and interactions with a quirky collection of the writer's friends and neighbours. In doing so, he stages an affective encounter with documented history to construct an emotional, intimate portrait of this man, whomever he may be, using the ephemera left behind. The novel is, of course, a work of fiction, but this mystic writer is not. His name is Kester Berwick. Berwick is mysterious, curious, frequently isolated, and has a great many unfinished projects laying about. Between the actor and Berwick are many parallels, too – they are actors and writers, unsettled and restless, removed from their homeland, gay in the most poetic sense, and have a curious attachment to cocky fellow actor, William.

Dessaix and his protagonist both engage here in what José Esteban Muñoz might call a queer, ephemeral engagement with the archive – as Muñoz writes, "[q]ueerness is often transmitted covertly. [...] Instead of being clearly available as visible evidence, queerness has instead existed as innuendo, gossip, fleeting moments and performances that are meant to be interacted with by those within its epistemological sphere" (1996, 6). Queer acts, queer objects, and queer performances, stand themselves as evidence of queerness' presence even when that queerness is not made explicit in hetero-normative terms. As Ann Cvetkovich explains, cultural texts are repositories of feeling and emotion. Gay and lesbian cultures have struggled to preserve their histories, thus "[i]n the absence of institutionalised documentation or in opposition to official histories, memory becomes a valuable historical resource, and ephemeral and personal collections of objects stand alongside the documents of the dominant culture in order to offer alternative modes of knowledge" (2003, 8). Queer *feeling* is held within objects and cultural texts, and the traditional method of archiving is limited, for queer stories, by

histories of shame, fear and secrecy. Creative texts by queer writers find a further limitation in the distance between the fixed identity of the artist and subjective interpretations of their work. In many cases, such as those I will argue in this paper, the ambiguity of gendered and sexualised cues does not permit an explicit queer presence but a queer potential.

Queer artistic identity has historically occupied a liminal or in-between space, bound by both external and self-imposed forms of censorship, and pushed into what Sara Ahmed (and perhaps, in a separate context, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick before her), might describe as a state of 'non-being.' Ahmed uses the term to recognise the affective experience of queerness, writing that:

> [t]here are feelings involved in the self-perception of 'queerness,' a self-perception that is bodily, as well as bound up with 'taking on' a name. But these feelings are mediated and they are attached to the category 'queer' in ways that are complex and contingent, precisely because the category is produced in relation to histories that render it a sign of failed being or 'non-being.' (2014, 146)

Ahmed argues that the affective experience of inhabiting a body which does not reproduce heteropatriarchal ideals is one of discomfort, which in turn "is a feeling of disorientation: one's body feels out of place, awkward, unsettled" (2014, 148). The queer subject, *especially* the historical queer subject who was not permitted complete selfhood, is positioned at odds with the world around them. The historical queer artist cannot realise complete selfhood through their work, since their 'category' keeps them perpetually once-removed from the dominant culture. Their non-being is an incompleteness, thus something must always remain ambiguous; gestured towards but never explicitly signified, then interpreted by a reader or spectator as a feeling.

Elizabeth Freeman proposes erotohistoriography as a method by which to read queer history as a process of erotic transmission and reception, as experienced within the body. It "does not write the lost object into the present so much as encounter it already in the present, by treating the present itself as hybrid. And it uses the body as a tool to effect, figure, or perform that encounter" (2010, 94). Repressed queer narratives in a text are here interpreted by, and felt within, the body in the present – a spectral encounter in which the past continues to exist within the present through processes of personal recognition. The erotohistoriographic readings I perform here consider how affective responses and identifications are generated by the reader or viewer through engagement with the text.

My concern in this paper, then, is similar to that enacted by Dessaix and his protagonist. I am interested by the historical Kester Berwick and his early written work, and my readings of his work are influenced both by direct engagement with the playscripts themselves, as well as by the embodied experience of engaging with his personal records, held at the State Library of South Australia. My own subjective interpretation of textual signs and silences is informed by the archival image of Berwick created within

his personal papers; an ephemeral reading "linked to alternate modes of textuality and narrativity like memory and performance: it is all of those things that remain after a performance, a kind of evidence of what has transpired but certainly not the thing itself" (Muñoz 1996, 10).

I went to the archives with the intention of finding Berwick's original manuscripts and the corresponding prefaces. Alongside these materials, however, are the various ephemera that made up his later life on Corfu – personal diaries, bank books, photographs, handwritten letters, and a collection of almost every published piece of journalistic writing he ever did. A few of these items stuck with me and seemed to speak to one another, including but not limited to:

- A feature article published in *The Tailor and Mercer*, 28 February 1927, under the name Franko Perkins, titled "Aestheticism and Effeminacy: Plea for Dainty Attire." He makes a case for diversifying male fashion and defends the taste and culture promoted by 'effeminate' dress.
- A romantic poem, published in the *Bulletin*, 13 January 1932, titled *Canzonet*, likening a genderless lover to all the natural beauties of Autumn.
- A fifteen-page essay, undated (though likely written in the 1950s), titled 'Clubs,' detailing the clubs frequented by homosexual men in London and the sense of community they fostered.
- An undated letter from 'Michael,' received while Berwick was on Corfu, who thinks of Berwick often and wishes to see him soon.

In addition to these four, several pieces of personal correspondence are affectionate in tone – whether this denotes a romantic or platonic affection can be hard to ascertain, and that is, essentially, my point. While we know that Berwick lived (quite openly in his later years) as a gay man, the traces of this identification in his personal materials are fleeting. Details are missing, the words on the page often contain a measured ambiguity, and yet I still sat in this room and felt some sort of understanding across time. It was a queer recognition of queer presence. This recognition extends into the work he wrote for the stage.

The indeterminacy of gendered and sexualised cues in Berwick's playscripts, given the archival image of a gay theatre-maker with a penchant for experimentation and innovation, *feels* similarly queer. This resonance provokes, as Ahmed puts it, a feeling of disorientation. These bodies are out of place, and by combining a traditional analysis of the playscripts with the affective experience that the reading provokes, we might read these disorientated characters as queer, or queered, bodies within a social matrix. In this article I first provide a brief biography of Berwick, his collaborator Alan Harkness, and their work together at Ab-Intra Studio Theatre. Then, I analyse three of Berwick's short plays – *Judgement Day* from 1933, *Ladder Game* from 1934, and *Archway Motif* from 1935 – to argue that queer resonance can be read into previously overlooked archival texts through attention to language, symbol, and code. In so doing, I position Berwick and Ab-Intra within the wider context of innovations in Australian drama of the period

and suggest a methodology by which to read latent queer social practices within a dramatic text.

Kester Berwick, Alan Harkness, and Ab-Intra Studio Theatre

Frank Perkins was born in 1903 in Adelaide. He exhibited an interest in writing, and in the study of English and French, and would eventually move to Sydney in the mid-1920s to pursue journalism (Djubal 2017). Perkins, dark-haired and of stocky build, and with a calm disposition, then changed his name to Kester Baruch "in an attempt to find a less plebian persona for articles such as 'Mass Art and Individualism'" (Afford 1988, 167). He would later change his surname from 'Baruch' to 'Berwick' in 1938 while living in Austria, given the Jewish connotations of 'Baruch' and the recent German invasion of that country (Afford 1988, 174). He returned to Adelaide from Sydney in 1929, which would end up being formative for his career. At a Sunday evening meeting of the Theosophical Society in 1930, Baruch met the actor and designer Alan Harkness, "fair-headed, slender, aesthetic, with a certain vibrant transcendental yet elusive personality" (Afford 1988, 174). The two connected over a mutual appreciation for theatre, particularly their shared belief that a new approach to theatre was necessary. The following year, amidst the financial depression, Baruch wrote to Harkness suggesting they start an experimental theatre in Adelaide, with Harkness focussing on production, acting and visual presentation, and Berwick managing literary and technical elements. They rented a building on North Terrace, began rehearsing and discussing overseas experimental theatre with young Adelaide creatives, and named the venture 'Ab-Intra' – Latin for 'from within' (Afford 1988, 168).

As friend and collaborator Thelma Afford recalls, Ab-Intra was

> probably the most individual and sincerely creative of all Adelaide's little theatres [...] and perhaps throughout Australia during that time, it was characterised by an emphasis on beauty and the visual element, its innovatory means of communicating with an audience and its individual methods of production. (2004, 45)

Berwick and Harkness were influenced by experimental and traditional work from overseas, and Ab-Intra's first production was consequently a Japanese Noh play, *The Demon's Mask*. The text, as Berwick and Harkness perceived it, both presented a new set of beliefs and assumptions to theatre audiences, and lacked the logical structure that Western audiences, and certainly Adelaide audiences, had come to expect. Even outside of the immediate Adelaide audience, the company famously attracted the attention of Dame Sybil Thorndyke on her visit to the city in 1932 – Berwick and Harkness arranged a private performance of *The Demon's Mask*, and Thorndyke rehearsed with the Ab-Intra actors for *The Robe of Yama* (Djubal 2017).

Given the smallness and intimacy of the Ab-Intra stage, any spectacular design choices for their production evenings, which involved multiple short pieces, were rendered near-impossible. In 1932 they moved into new premises at 354 King William Street South,

which had in fact been where the Theosophical Society held their meetings prior to the Depression, and where Berwick and Harkness met. These premises reified Ab-Intra's position as a truly local theatre – Harkness told the *Adelaide Mail* that the group had no desire to revolutionise the theatre but were merely trying to bring something new before the public (Afford 1988, 169). The new space was similarly simple in construction – as Afford describes, "[w]ith the aid of black hessian curtains plus a few wooden structures, it became a small theatre without proscenium, thus with no separation between players and audience" (1988, 169). Given the clear spatial limitations, performances demanded visual innovation. Harkness, trained in the visual arts, was responsible for many of the visual elements of Ab-Intra productions. Set and costume were integral to a show's visual effect, and he also experimented with movement, pattern, colour and light, all in an effort to present *something new*.

The evenings were generally quite complex and thought-provoking affairs, though with such experimentation comes a variety of reactions. An anonymous reviewer summarises the community around the theatre, writing:

> The Ab-Intra people always seem to attract a good crowd of the arty section of Adelaide, although it's never quite certain whether they go there to be seriously entertained or because the subdued lighting is so kind to waning beauties. [...] With their jam-tin reflectors and their rough board stage, these youngsters have done as much for art as many wealthier movements. But the attempt to keep the conversation at highbrow level over the black coffee served in the intervals is the saddest thing of all. ("Display of Bathers" 1934)

The comments suggest an inherent limitation of experimental theatre – repeatedly offering something new *can* alienate certain sections of the audience. This review stands in stark contrast to that offered by, for example, Douglas Loan of *Town Topics* magazine, who commented on *The Robe of Yama* that

> [j]ust as the poet strives for harmony and rhythm in his lyrics, so do the Ab-Intra members strive to express their action in rhythmic movements. Every little gesture is pregnant with symbolism, every movement of the finger is a lyric poem in itself. [...] Whatever be its faults – and there are many – it cannot be fairly accused of being a 'stunt'.... On the delicate wax of the mind will be impressed the thoughts that are begotten by the plays. Appreciation is almost sub-conscious at the time, one claps automatically and goes out into the night rather disturbed... (Afford 1988, 171-2, quoted)

Both reviews imply that the artistic community of Adelaide seemed genuinely fascinated by the work of Ab-Intra and regarded them as genuine artists who offered a new perspective on what theatre can, or should, be. Some of the Ab-Intra studio evenings included Berwick's own written work, which was predicated on his love for the experimental. Historically speaking, however, there were limits to what that

experimentation could look like. In some of Berwick's short plays, we see a repressed queer sensibility and a bending of gender politics that is uncharacteristic of much of the work being produced in Australia at the time.

A useful touchstone to understanding the latent queerness of Berwick's work might be found in his contemporary, Sumner Locke Elliott. Elliott's 1948 documentary-play *Rusty Bugles*, for instance, traps a group of men in limbo on a remote army supply camp in Mataranka, Northern Territory, in 1944. The play was controversial for its language and was subjected to censorship during its production at Sydney's Independent Theatre. Producer Doris Fitton recalls that Elliott warned her: "'I doubt if you will ever get it on because of the language. It is rough, but not nearly as rough as what I heard when I was up at Mataranka.' [...] I said, well, I'd take the risk" (1980, xi). Ellen Smith's reading of *Rusty Bugles* centres the absence of sex from the play altogether. She writes:

> to read the non-sexual queer relationships in Elliott's work we need to think beyond the tropes of the closet and coming out of the closet as models for interpretive practice, as well as the image of an authentic queer subject grasping for expression but restricted by the representational codes of the culture" (2019).

Of course, I concur; while queer interpretation centres on the unspoken and the coded, reading *only* for hidden sexual desire prohibits discovering forms of expression and identity that are not solely oriented around sex. Smith notes that there is a pleasure to the de-sexed male body in the barracks – the men are in close proximity with little privacy, and the stage directions mandate that they are rarely fully clothed. As a result, "spaces without sex in Elliott's writing offer an escape from the necessity of identity altogether and particularly from the burden of homosexual identity in the historical moment before gay liberation" (Smith 2019). Queerness is present in the fact of its absence.

Anne Pender suggests that Elliott's earlier acting work in fact aided his capacity to write for the stage, helping him to understand the workings of the theatre and enabling both creativity and self-expression (2016, 58). His plays *Interval* (1939) and *The Invisible Circus* (1946) carefully observe and satirise the antics and dispositions of creative artists trying to make a living, and are both intimately connected to the network and training ground offered by Independent Theatre (Pender 2016, 71-2). Ab-Intra served a similar purpose in Adelaide to what the Independent Theatre did in Sydney – Fitton dedicated herself to the theatre in a historical period marked by war and the Depression, when the professional theatre was still dominated by imported productions and little attention was afforded to Australian drama (Pender 2016, 58-9). The immediate consequence was a burgeoning network of Australian creatives committed to embodying their own experiences on stage. The secondary consequence, as in Elliott's case, and in many ways Berwick's too, is the ability for a writer to distil elements of their lived experience into their writing. I offer this comparison to suggest that Berwick and Harkness's work at Ab-Intra constructed a similar sort of artistic network, and likewise expanded the

community's conception of what could be achieved through experimentation on the Australian stage.

Judgement Day

The first play I will discuss is *Judgement Day*, written and performed in 1933. It is an absurdist, metatheatrical piece, centring on a company who have no play to present to their audience, and which begins while the actual audience members are still being seated. Initially, authorship of *Judgement Day* was credited to 'Svetloff,' an unknown and mysterious Russian writer. As Thelma Afford recalls, the play caused "discussion and questioning as to its message, and even more speculation as to who the author might be," leading to articles in the *Truth* titled "HAVE YOU READ THE WORKS OF SVETLOFF?" and "IS HE MODERN RUSSIAN OR MIDDLE SOUTH AUSTRALIAN?" (Afford 1988, 174). Afford was sent the original manuscript by Berwick as late as 1981, who revealed that he *had* in fact written the play, but wanted an accurate, unbiased opinion. She notes also that a drama lecturer from Adelaide University wrote in to indicate her appreciation for the play, and that a Russian lecturer from the same university insisted that the play was "undoubtedly" by a Russian writer, though presumed it was likely more fun for the actors to perform than for the somewhat-confused audience to watch (Afford 2004, 65).
The opening stage directions give a few clues to the queer and absurd significations of the piece:

> *The stage is apparently unset. Brightly painted ladders, chairs, screens etc. are lying about. In the usual way, the audience straggles into the auditorium, and among those who have come early are the Woman with the Remarkable Hat, the Woman with the Conspicuous Gown and the Young Man of a rather foppish appearance.*
> *When as many people as can be hoped for have arrived, the Stage Manager—a clownish-looking little man in his late forties and in his shirt-sleeves—comes on the stage and peers about in all directions. Then he returns to the Leading Lady's dressing room to report what he has seen.*
> (Berwick 1933)

Already, several features distance *Judgement Day* from the bulk of local drama being produced at the time – the play is explicitly metatheatrical, and relies on a camp, comic aesthetic both in its visual disarray and in the exaggerated character types being presented: the lavishly feminine, and the unconventionally masculine. Also of note is that the actors wore masks on the back of their heads to signal their true, unseen personas to the audience.

The character of the Director is also a campy figure, prone to sudden shifts in his disposition but often with little idea of what he is talking about. He shares Berwick's own professed spirit of experimentation, bemoaning that "why dramatists will not supply us with plays which are short and at the same time unusual is beyond comprehension" (Berwick 1933), which is, of course, what Berwick is doing here. Thinking quickly, it is the Director who implicates the audience in this improvised scene, reaching for a random

amalgam of symbols, frantically running titles by the stage manager, and then making vague allusions to his "research" and "philosophical explorations" (Berwick 1933). He also exhibits a complete diva-worship of the company's leading lady, Hekla, adding to what is ultimately a camp parody of educated, artistic performances of masculinity. He has a fascination with, and an overcommitment to, the Everyman mentality that in fact reads as an appropriation of urban, cultured, and in this theatrical landscape, queered forms of masculinity.

Aside from this evident display of camp, there is coding present in the characters' relationship descriptions. Consider the following interchange between Director and Stage Manager:

> **The Director:** Ah, your wife! Well, that can hardly surprise you. Anyone else?
> **The Stage Manager:** I believe your legal spouse is there, too.
> **The Director:** My legal spouse? Oh, pregnant utterance! Has she still the same gown? Let me look.
> **The Stage Manager:** She is just the same as she always is. No need to look. (Berwick 1933)

The Stage Manager refers here to the director's "legal spouse," (the aforementioned Woman with the Remarkable Hat) immediately after the Director asked about the Stage Manager's "wife" (The Woman with the Conspicuous Gown). These two terms speak supposedly of the same marital relationship, though one implies a much greater degree of intimacy, which comes across as suspicious, or perhaps suggests that the Director's marriage is one of necessity. To add to the case, his prime concern on his wife's arrival is her outfit – the gown, as it were. He is concerned with appearance, and the Stage Manager advises him not to bother looking, let alone approaching.

It is confirmed later in the piece that the marriage in question is loveless. After being implicated in the action and brought to stage, The Woman with the Conspicuous Gown admits that she "loved" the Director, who questions her in front of the room:

> **The Director:** [...] Did you feel that your love for me would give you what you sought in life – happiness, shall we call it?
> **The Woman with the Conspicuous Gown:** Naturally, Albert; and I believed I could make you happy too. And I would have done, if you hadn't – Well, got mixed up with such peculiar people. [...]
> **The Woman with the Conspicuous Gown:** Does that mean nothing to you?
> **The Director:** One cannot reason with feelings [...].
> [...]
> **The Director:** Your love can be reduced to egotism. Do not think I am blaming you; but one might have hoped for something with a prettier name. (Berwick 1933)

While this situation progresses, the Stage Manager's wife comes into the equation too. When called to the stage:

> **The Woman with the Remarkable Hat:** *(Advancing a little further.)* Nothing you say could possibly apply. I am a hand-maid of my Mystic Master, and have consecrated my days to His service. *(Indicating the Stage Manager.)* Ask him.
> **The Stage Manager:** No; don't ask me! I refuse to be asked. It's enough to look at me.
> **The Woman with the Remarkable Hat:** We *are* looking at you, my poor brother.
> **The Director:** I understood he was your husband.
> **The Woman with the Remarkable Hat:** Let us not speak of fleshly ties [...]. (Berwick 1933)

Clear from both of the above is a tendency of these characters to fabricate their romantic ties – the Director's marriage is loveless, as far as the audience knows, and the Stage Manager's is a fabrication created to suit his environment. In either case, audiences are spared crucial details that would clarify the stakes of either relationship. The interactions are also both taking place in a very public forum – a literal staging of their discontent. It suggests a lack of love and/or care, as well as the idea that both men are, at the very least, too consumed by their artistic pursuits to fathom a relationship with a woman.

A further complication arises in relation to the leading lady, Hekla, and an audience member, the aptly named Young Man. By his own admission, the situation is "painful and too private to discuss," though when coaxed to elaborate, the Young Man reveals that he was "more than a friend" to Hekla and had ended their relationship. He admits to detachment, saying that meaningful reciprocation was "not in his nature," but despite further pressures he keeps the exact details of his romantic failings unknown. This is at once a preservation of decorum and, perhaps more strikingly, a suggestion of something fundamentally incompatible between himself and heterosexuality. Again, the Young Man is described as "foppish," which would indicate a performance of refinement or fastidiousness. The 'fop,' closely tied to the 'dandy' or the 'aesthete,' brings with it an incipient sense of gayness derived from urban taste and dramatic flair, as well as a reluctance to follow heterosexual patterns of desire. This character type, which the Director, Stage Manager and Young Man all suit in varying ways, took on a queer, though not an explicitly homosexual, connotation throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries in English-language texts and performances, opposing more 'muscular' or 'authentic' performances of masculinity (Adams 1995, 109).

Shortly after disclosing the details of his relationship with Hekla, the Young Man's argument with the Director turns to the subject of underwear:

> **The Director:** Then, had you been kinder, you would not have lured her on. That was the evil. [...] I may be wrong; but I can take the facts as they

> appear to be and make them support my contentions. You are the kind who wears asbestos underclothing.
> **The Young Man:** *(Shocked.)* Asbestos underclothing?
> [...]
> **The Director:** It is, of course, invisible; but it effectively insulates you from whatever flames you may stir up in others.
> **The Young Man:** *(Indignant.)* You amaze me! My underclothing is of good- quality silk or cambric. Must I endure more of this? (Berwick 1933)

At the risk of writing too seriously about an extremely un-serious play, there is a familiar queer metre to this interaction. Of course, the Director remains quick-witted and biting. One could imagine any number of gay stereotypes being used to embody him. The Young Man, while put off by the talk of underclothing, still has an insistence on the quality of material he wears – while it may be anachronistic to say so, this is *not* something typically associated with straight masculinities. To me, the queer reader, engaging with the work of a queer writer, it feels as though the gayness leaps off the page.

There is an obvious parallel here to Sumner Locke Elliott's *Interval*, as well, which relies similarly on repartee and pace to consider the constructed roles that people play in the real lives, and how they may be influenced by a sort of self-delusion (Pender 2016, 64). Both texts are also set in the theatre and lend themselves accordingly to exaggerated characters who are ridiculous but, crucially, vulnerable. Other parallels might be found in Sydney Tomholt's *Leading Lady* (1936) and Oriel Gray's *Sur Le Pont* (1944), or in the radio station of Max Afford's *Mischief in the Air* (1946). Any of these five texts could lend themselves to a queer reading. While queerness is not signalled by an explicit statement of sexuality, the outrageous dispositions of the various arts workers involved present a queer performance of gender. With this, we might consider such archival texts as a repository of queer social practices, within that broader queer archive of feelings and emotions (Cvetkovich 2004, 7). The texts preserve a particular, albeit a familiar, queer performance of gender and localise it within an urban, artistic social class.

So, while explicit detail is not provided in any instance, intentional silences, exposed misinformation, and the particulars of bodily performance in *Judgement Day* lead us to believe that *something remains unspoken*. It is in these silences that a queer reading, and a silent queer presence, exist in what Freeman describes as "an eroticised materiality to the gaps and imperfect structures between past and present" (2010, 111). This is to suggest that rather than attach a fixed meaning to these significations in the play, or to make a definitive claim to Berwick's ambition in writing the characters in this way, the text should be viewed as a space of queer *potentiality*. As Sedgwick might describe, there is here "an open mesh of possibilities, gaps, overlaps, dissonances and resonances, and excesses of meaning when the constituent elements of anyone's gender, of anyone's sexuality, aren't made to signify monolithically" (1993, 8). While I cannot suggest that we *have to* consider the characters in *Judgement Day* to be gay, I do suggest that the refusal to explicitly label any character's sexuality, amidst the sexual chaos of the play, may have been an *intentional choice*. As a result, queer potential exists in the text through this

mystification of the relationships between Berwick's characters, especially given his own expressed sexuality *and* his taste for experimental, boundary-pushing performance.

Ladder Game

Of the three plays I discuss here, *Judgement Day* is the most explicit in its sexual ambivalence, though Berwick's politics around gender and sexuality are refined in the remaining two texts. The next, *Ladder Game*, is another absurd scene, encompassing a short dialogue between a Man and Woman, on a set comprising three ladders – two side by side, with a third laid atop them to form an archway. The text mimics a philosophical dialogue structure in which a man, "possibly a professor," sits atop the ladders looking at the sun when "an elegant woman with a beautiful but determined face" (Berwick 1934) arrives with a large red umbrella. Its focus is the mysteries of mundane life, and the script is characterised by extended philosophising on men and women, umbrellas, and ladders, while moving about the set.

The production history of *Ladder Game* is unclear – per Berwick's own recollection in his Author's Note nearly four decades later, it was presented by Ab-Intra in 1934 and later broadcasted by ABC Radio Adelaide in July 1940, under the name "Philosophies," in which Berwick himself served as both announcer and actor (Berwick 1981a, 1-2). The title itself is similarly contested, though Berwick's Author's Note uses *Ladder Game*. Manuscripts in both the State Library of South Australia *and* the Fryer Library, University of Queensland, list the title as "In My Father's House are Many Ladders," a biblical reference to John 14:2: "In my father's house are many mansions; if it were not so I would have told you." Whether intended as a title or preliminary quotation, the phrase is significant – the play is not strictly religious allegory, but the dynamic between the Man and Woman does follow a lost-soul-meets-saviour structure that could be read as having religious connotations.

The Man is an evasive figure, alone and romanticising his isolation, surprised for the company since he has "sat here in solitude for so long." The Woman warns him that his position is not unique, in fact men before him have elected to claim the high ground and keep it for themselves:

> **The Man:** Forethought? But how could you know the sun would be so bright here? You have been here before?
> **The Woman:** Well, perhaps not here exactly; but this isn't the only ladder one can climb. If you open your eyes wide enough, you'll see ladders everywhere. Look, over there and over there. Oh, I have had my moments of – uplift shall I say? A woman doesn't easily forget such things. There were Peter, Roland, Marcel – and – well – one or two others!
> **The Man:** I see. I begin to understand.
> **The Woman:** Yes; women arrive on the heights so naturally, don't they? It seems that you men have to struggle every bit of the way. At least, that

> was Marcel's opinion. He had read a great deal, you know; but never lived much, and had such fixed ideas. (Berwick 1934)

We can, perhaps anachronistically, see an element of sarcasm in The Woman's expression here. Her reading of The Man, and of his heterosexually-determined masculinity is pessimistic, thus her sarcasm might be reframed as a queer enjoyment, speaking back against heteronormative conventions that would see her as subservient to The Man. Self-consciously adopting a saviour position, she speaks candidly to him:

> **The Man:** *(Reflectively)* I was jealous of my loneliness.
> **The Woman:** No, no; you were jealous of the company it brought you.
> **The Man:** You mean -?
> **The Woman:** Exactly what I said. Those who seek loneliness are weary of the solitude occasioned by a crowd. (Berwick 1934)

Ultimately, when The Woman suggests that the two of them leave, The Man will not go. He does not initially give a reason but seems to suggest an aversion to accepting kindness. The Woman is quick to catch this, "Oh, many greater than you have protested in just that way... You are stranded in your ideas. You are high and dry, and high and dryness at any altitude means stagnation. The truth is, you are up a pole" (Berwick 1934). There is a misery, Berwick seems to suggest, associated with adhering to conventional masculinity. The text contemplates the problems inherent in stoic masculinity by emphasising that the Man and the Woman exist in what we might call a "historically situated dynamic of imbalanced power" (Freeman 2010, 126). Time and space, despite their near-complete ambiguity, are still constructed in such a way that the Man can act freely and linger on his tower for as long as he desires, while the Woman is relegated to the role of saviour.

While queer sexualities or ambiguities are not present here as they are in *Judgement Day*, what *is* apparent is a queer exposition of gender codes. In many ways the characters' resistance to a heteropatriarchal regime, achieved by laying bare its foundations, constitutes a queer act. This exposition of gender codes perhaps more suitably aligns *Ladder Game* with early Australian feminist drama. I would contend, also, that a hypothetical staging might lean into elements of camp, heightening the gendered signifiers written into the script – it is, for instance, the exploitation of her femininity that gives the Woman power over the scene:

> **The Woman:** [...] You must go down first. That is rule No. 1 of the Ladder Game.
> **The Man:** Go down first. Ah well, if I must, let it be so. Only, let's go down together.
> **The Woman:** Naturally! A man and a woman can always go down together.
> **The Man:** Oh hush. Not so loud, I beg you. Somebody might hear.
> **The Woman:** Hear what?
> **The Man:** That one must go down first? How do you know such things?

> **The Woman:** *(Very feminine)* Well, you see, I have an umbrella – an essentially feminine thing. Let me tell you another. A man and a woman can always go up together.
> **The Man:** *(Resigned)* Yes, if you say so.
> **The Woman:** You see! It was only coaxing you needed. Now stop thinking so much, and trust yourself to what there is between us. Hold the umbrella firmly, and let us parachute down. (Berwick 1934)

The stage direction "very feminine" is something of a giveaway here, and we might consider this display of "femininity" to imply flirtatiousness. However intentionally, Berwick seems to suggest that the exaggeration of gendered signifiers can destabilise historically situated power dynamics. At the same time, he queries the rigidity of a singular masculine gender performance. This is made possible, I argue, by Berwick's experimentation with form, structuring the entire play as a dialogue on gender roles and revealing their constructedness in the process.

Ultimately, *Ladder Game* demonstrates a queer re-evaluation of hetero-patriarchal social scripts. This is a complicated argument, however, as it presumes that queer understandings of gender, and queer ways of life more broadly, cannot also reproduce those conditions of heteropatriarchy that Berwick challenges here. As Ahmed writes:

> Queer lives do not suspend the attachments that are crucial to the reproduction of heteronormativity, and this does not diminish 'queerness', but intensifies the work that it can do. Queer lives remain shaped by that which they fail to reproduce. To turn this around, queer lives shape what gets reproduced: in the very failure to reproduce the norms through how they inhabit them, queer lives produce different effects. (2014, 152)

The suggestion in *Ladder Game* is that gender norms are a limiting factor in both the Woman's and the Man's life. This may be true, but it also points to a "negative model of freedom; [...] *freedom from norms*" (Ahmed 2014, 151). It assumes that a queer, or queered, life relies strictly on escaping from conventional gender roles, without necessarily considering *other* limitations placed upon each body, and the differences in how each body can access culture. As with *Judgement Day*, I am aware of the risk of talking too seriously about a text that does not necessarily demand to be taken seriously. However, in the context of Berwick's wider writing on masculinities, dandyism, and the emotive verse poetry I referred to earlier, it is not unreasonable to suggest that deconstructing the limitations of gender conformity is a way of writing queerness (or, at least, writing imagined queer masculinities) into his work. Over the course of this short dialogue, the Woman and the Man move towards a queer way of life, perhaps only slightly, but in such a way that they might feasibly re-shape how gender is culturally reproduced.

Archway Motif

The final play I will discuss is *Archway Motif*, the last production ever staged by Ab-Intra, in a 1935 benefit performance prior to Berwick and Harkness's move to London. The performance was hosted by their benefactor, Mrs J Lavington Bonython (later Lady Bonython) who as Mayoress offered the white ballroom in her home at St Corantyn, East Terrace, Adelaide. The ballroom was "turned into a small theatre, seating some eighty people on tiered seats, and at the opposite end was the improvised stage, with a screen to hide lighting equipment" (Afford 1988, 176). *Archway Motif* was inspired by, and performed under, the central archway in the ballroom, and would bring together almost everyone who had previously worked at Ab-Intra for another metatheatrical experiment (Afford 2004, 70-1). Berwick's preface explains that he took influence from Hans Christian Andersen's "The Snow Queen," since it was "the Studio's assumption that fairytales and folklore were basic and timeless sources of real theatre material" (1981b, 1-2). In Anderson's tale, the young Gerda ventures into the world to seek her lost playmate, Kay, who has been stolen by the Snow Queen and set to work in her frozen palace. Only when Gerda's tears thaw the splinter of ice in his heart does Kay come back to his senses. Berwick, however, sets this piece outside of the pompously-named 'Temple of the Academic Chairs,' where Gerda asks an Old Player for help finding Kay, though she is unable to describe exactly what he looks like.

The opening stage direction gives a few clues as to how the scene will play out:

> *The scene is dominated by the Archway, and the Archway Voices are nude or semi-nude, well-built males, arranged in frieze positions, so as to give the impression of being part of the Archway itself. On the steps leading up to the Archway sits the Old Player in contemplation, his cloak sweeping away from him. His costume is typical of him, rather than being typical of any period. This applies to the other costumes as well; but all are related by a similarity of treatment [...].* (Berwick 1935)

The central feature here is the Archway Voices, a Greek chorus who are present on stage for the duration of the play, but who do not move nor speak until the final moments. There is an immediate gay signification here – the male body is eroticised and made the explicit focus of both the audience's and writer's gaze. Positioned around the archway, they are also a literal frame for the action and implicate the audience as voyeurs. Similar to *Ladder Game*, the play is contemplative and philosophical. When the Voices do finally speak, it is a collective chant explaining the governing metaphor behind the play:

> **Some Voices:** There is a state beyond joy and sorrow.
> **Other Voices:** There is a state beyond tears and laughter.
> **All:** There is a state beyond the opposites.
> [...]
> **Some Voices:** Just as opposites form an archway,
> **Other Voices:** so they resolve – all of them –
> **All:** into some greater thing,

Some Voices: comprising them, yet surpassing them. (Berwick 1935)

The archway, as Berwick understood it, represented two opposing sides in conflict: good and evil; wisdom and folly; riches and poverty. This is paired with several allusions to antiquity, which historically has been a device by which queer writers invoke queer sexualities without being explicit in their aim.
Despite this, the play is removed entirely from normative time and space – as evidenced again in the opening stage directions wherein costumes are determined not by a time period or location, but by character. The appropriation of an aesthetic that is blind to both time and space, within a self-consciously modernist, experimental performance, renders *Archway Motif* what Freeman would call a "queerly hybrid" piece, composed of multiple signifiers that collapse and interchange different temporal readings (2010, 97). The historical and temporal disjunction of the text defines and enables a queer mode of sociability, in which characters can act and signify outside of a classed and heteropatriarchal model because they are removed from time-specific and location-specific context.

The character in whom this disjunction is most evident is the Old Player – acted in performance by Berwick – a mysterious figure who talks often of the theatre and lingers outside of the Temple, watching crowds come and go. Gerda approaches him when looking for Kay, and he relishes in his descriptions of the young men around the place – none of whom seem to be Kay. First, he describes a man who "walked very lithely, and his throat grew from his chest like a column," with "dark, waving hair [blowing] over his forehead." He details another, "with hair like honey. [He] moved lithely too – but lightly, as one treads among flowers," carrying a satchel bulging with books and papers (Berwick 1935). Such descriptions are never afforded to the female presenting bodies in the text, only the male. There is no evidence to suggest whether or not these images were interpreted as queer by the audience amongst the formal and aesthetic excess of the piece. This poetic attention to detail in the male body, however, delivered by a male character and performed by a gay actor, has obviously gay significations. *Archway Motif* in this way anticipates the voyeurism afforded to the male body in texts of the 1950s, particularly the queer bodies of the "gender misfits" in Barry Pree's *The Fox in the Night* and John Hepworth's *The Beast in View* (2005, 20).

Queer sexualities here give way to a general queering of time and space. *Archway Motif* takes place entirely in a liminal, fictional world, without a defined historical anchor. Removed from space and time in this way, Berwick creates the agency to bend sexual politics for his own ambition. What becomes clear across each of the three texts I discuss here is that queerness can become visible to us, as readers or spectators, in hindsight. Affective identifications with a text in retrospect is often all we have in the way of *tangible* evidence of queer presence. To return to Dessaix, the eleventh chapter of *Corfu* takes place in Adelaide, right after the historical performance of *Archway Motif* in the St Corantyn ballroom. Taking cues from a review preserved in Berwick's personal papers, Dessaix draws out the affective qualities of the post-performance atmosphere. The reviewer comments that

> A dozen lads had to dress the stage clad in loin cloths and bronze dust, and after the show they flung themselves down on the lawn with a handle of beer apiece or shandy or claret cup, or what have you. Anyway, it was something in the region of 98 degrees in the moonlight. But with the moon rays glinting on the lithe young bodies and with the eager trickle of voices from the background, it looked surprisingly like a Roman orgy. ("Ab-Intra Farewell" 1935)

This anecdote of the community experience itself, rather than the performance, is quite fitting. The same reviewer writes that "half the audience was frankly puzzled as to the meaning of it all, and the other half looked desperately anxious to appear au fait with something they couldn't grasp" ("Ab-Intra Farewell" 1935). Berwick himself was equally aware of confusion around the actual plot and meaning – while what the audience "saw and heard at least held them," he could "only answer that I myself could not say exactly, adding that the important thing was not what it meant to me; but to them, for whom it was written" (Berwick 1981b, 2).

Dessaix, piecing together the evening from this and several other reviews, anchors on this cathartic affect, writing:

> it wasn't the play they remembered, nor the flamboyant floral display, nor Mrs Lavington Bonython's sensationally strapless black gown, but the sight of a dozen lithe young actors in nothing but loin cloths and a dusting of bronze glitter, cavorting in the moonlight. [...] Nobody had understood what the play was about, but the party afterwards was a Roman orgy on a scale not seen before in polite society in Adelaide. (2017, 78)

Evidently, the experience outside the room relied on a similar visibly queer aesthetic – the glorified male body, combined with the atmosphere of a Roman orgy, advances a gay signification. This signification, consequently, generates a queer affect, a sense of something new, or perhaps "potentials for reali[s]ing a world that subsists within and exceeds the horizons and boundaries of the norm" (Seigworth and Gregg 2010, 7). It is, again, a queer reworking of social scripts – the presence of a pseudo-queer aesthetic allows for a pseudo-queer community to form, reworking the heteronormative so that the queer body might "sink into" the space (Ahmed 2014, 152). We cannot know with complete accuracy what it was like to be in the space that night, but somehow these fragments of information create an image that is extremely familiar, and with that, a feeling of comfort.

Conclusion

In the case of a gay dramatic writer like Berwick, writing in the first half of the twentieth century, censorship of creative work can quickly become a censorship of self. While, of course, I do not suggest that queer writers necessarily *have* to write about queer themes, I argue that these clues throughout Berwick's work suggest he probably would have liked to. I conclude, then, by emphasising the latent queerness of Berwick's stage work,

manifest in his readings of gender codes and their absurdity; the use of gay iconography; and repeated hints towards sexual transgression through ambiguity. Queer identifications in *Judgement Day*, *Ladder Game*, and *Archway Motif* occupy this space of the unspoken, or otherwise of nonbeing. By using symbol and code as opposed to explicit signifiers, Berwick practices a queer self-effacement in his early stage work. In a way, this is glaringly inconsistent with his expressed desire for freedom of experimentation in the form and content of theatre works, and advances a clear case for the role of self-censorship in the erasure of the queer voice.

It is entirely possible that the queer coding I identify in this paper was apparent to audiences at the time who were 'in the know.' I must speculate, however, for the simple fact that they did not write down their affective responses. Even to the 'casual' viewer of these works, however, gender and sexual constructs are quietly subverted without Berwick needing to be explicit in his aim. Such responses to experimental theatre are by no way unique to the Ab-Intra circle. As is the case with organisations like the Independent Theatre or even the New Theatre, the formation of artistic networks bred innovation, broadening the reach and legitimacy of a burgeoning, multifaceted Australian drama. The Australian plays of this period that *do* invite a queer resonance are, as I have shown with reference to Berwick's work, often protected by ambiguity, absurdity, and philosophical explorations (as well as false authorship, in the case of *Judgement Day*). This is often the way of historical queer presence – it becomes visible to us in historical texts when we have a method by which to look for it. By approaching the archive with a view to how queer writers negotiated censorship restrictions, and how they used dramatic conventions and deceptions to hint at gender and sexual subversion, we can unlock within the nonbeing, new spaces of queer potentiality.

Works Cited

Online sources cited in this article were checked shortly before this article was published in March 2025 and all links were current at that time.

"Ab-Intra Farewell." March 9, 1935. State Library of South Australia, PRG 1359/24.

Adams, James Eli. 1995. *Dandies and Desert Saints: Styles of Victorian Masculinity*. Cornell University Press.

Afford, Thelma. 1988. "Ab-Intra Studio Theatre in Adelaide 1931-35." *Australasian Drama Studies* (12): 167-180. https://www.proquest.com/scholarly-journals/ab-intra-studio-theatre-adelaide-1931-35/docview/1300400474/se-2

Afford, Thelma. 2004. *Dreamers and Visionaries: Adelaide's Little Theatres from the 1920s to the Early 1940s*. Currency Press.

Ahmed, Sara. 2014. *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*. 2nd ed. University of Edinburgh Press.

Berwick, Kester. 1933. "Judgement Day." *AustLit*. Accessed November 20, 2024. https://www-austlit-edu-au.ap1.proxy.openathens.net/austlit/page/12540042.

Berwick, Kester. 1934. "Ladder Game." *AustLit*. Accessed November 20, 2024. https://www-austlit-edu-au.ap1.proxy.openathens.net/austlit/page/12819219.

Berwick, Kester. 1935. "Archway Motif." *AustLit*. Accessed November 20, 2024. https://www-austlit-edu-au.ap1.proxy.openathens.net/austlit/page/12881382.

Berwick, Kester. 1981a. "Author's Note." In *Judgement Day*. State Library of South Australia, PRG 1359/2.
Berwick, Kester. 1981b. "Author's Note." In *Archway Motif*. State Library of South Australia, PRG 1359/2.
Cvetkovich, Ann. 2003. *An Archive of Feelings: Trauma, Sexuality, and Lesbian Public Cultures*. Duke University Press.
Dessaix, Robert. 2017. *Corfu*. Brio Books.
"Display of Bathers." July 15, 1934. State Library of South Australia, PRG 1359/24.
Djubal, Clay. 2017. "Kester Berwick: Biography." *AustLit*. Accessed November 20, 2024. https://www-austlit-edu-au.ap1.proxy.openathens.net/austlit/page/A6604.
Freeman, Elizabeth. 2010. *Time Binds: Queer Temporalities, Queer Histories*. Duke University Press.
Muñoz, José Esteban. 1996. "Ephemera as Evidence: Introductory Notes to Queer Acts." *Women & Performance: A Journal of Feminist Theory* 8 (2): 5–16. doi:10.1080/07407709608571228.
Parr, Bruce. 2004. "The Misfit Male Body in Adelaide Theatre, 1959." *Australasian Drama Studies* (46): 20-37. https://www.proquest.com/scholarly-journals/misfit-male-body-adelaide-theatre-1959/docview/195145184/se-2.
Pender, Anne. 2016. "Theatre Animals: Sumner Locke Elliott's Invisible Circus." *Australasian Drama Studies* (68): 54-74. https://www.proquest.com/scholarly-journals/theatre-animals-sumner-locke-elliotts-invisible/docview/1807707153/se-2.
Sedgwick, Eve Kosofsky. 1993. *Tendencies*. Duke University Press.
Seigworth, Gregory J., and Melissa Gregg. 2010. "An Inventory of Shimmers." In *The Affect Theory Reader*, edited by Gregory J. Seigworth and Melissa Gregg. Duke University Press.
Smith, Ellen. 2019. "On Not Having Sex: Sumner Locke Elliott and Queer History." *Australian Literary Studies* 34 (2). https://www.doi.org/10.20314/als.e772f55c21.

MATT BAPTY *is a PhD candidate at the University of Queensland, researching the genesis and development of queer drama in Australia throughout the twentieth century. He is a producer with the Meanjin/Brisbane-based collective, Flaming Carnations, and has also had work produced by La Boite, QPAC, Brisbane Fringe, and Anywhere Festival. His work has been published in* Australasian Drama Studies*, Jacaranda, and the PlayLab Indie collection.*