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TELLING QUEER STORIES QUEERLY

MARTIN JULIEN'S *THE MAN THAT GOT AWAY*, produced by Buddies in Bad Times Theatre in December 2022, is a decidedly queer show.

In the first place, it is queer insofar as it tells the story of gay and lesbian people. Specifically, it tells the story of Julien's experience of growing up as the only child to a gay father and a lesbian mother during the second half of the twentieth century. As a child of queer parents—a term Julien recognizes his parents would never use for themselves, considering how it was understood as an epithet before it was reclaimed as an identity category in the late 1990s—he tells the story of how his family navigated the closet, the Stonewall Riots, the gay liberation movement, gay community, and the HIV/AIDS epidemic. Tragically, Julien's father died from AIDS in 1988, and he was only the second person to do so at Casey House, the HIV/AIDS hospice in Toronto. As Julien explains in his list of "Playwright Notes," *The Man That Got Away* "express[es] what AIDS 'did' to [his] family."

The show is also queer in the way it defies generic categories. What began before the pandemic as a one-person cabaret—a well-established form of performance that involves personal anecdotes connected by songs—has since turned into a three-person play. Julien performs monologues as himself or his father, and he lip-syncs to recorded interviews with his mother. In addition to this conventional performance format, he also speaks with the ghost of Judy Garland, who performs cabaret songs from the musical theatre canon and the Garland songbook, which is a necessary element of the cabaret form. The piano player who accompanies Garland also sings, speaks, and actively participates in the storytelling as well—and not just as a faceless musician playing beyond the footlights.

Perhaps the show is queer in the most non-normative and category-defying way because it explores what it means for Julien—a man who has led a mostly heteronormative life—to understand himself as queer. For example, he tells us that he, as the son of a gay father and a lesbian mother, had a

“gay growing up,” which he distinguishes from “growing up gay.” His childhood was culturally, not sexually, gay insofar as it involved learning cabaret songs, attending performances by the great entertainers of the twentieth century (like Peggy Lee, Debbie Reynolds, and Liberace, whom he met backstage), and performing self-authored musicals as a child in the back alley of his Montreal home. Despite being heterosexual, he identifies with what D. A. Miller referred to in his book on gay men’s affinity for musical theatre, *A Place for Us* (1998), which is also used as a prop in the show, as a “homosexuality of one.”

Julien’s queer/non-queer identity is not the only identity that is challenged in the show, as Garland is played by black cis female performer Tat Aubrie. As the audience is told at one point, Garland as an entertainer belongs to everyone, and therefore the ghost of the iconic star can be *played* by anyone. To quote Madonna, another gay icon,

It makes no difference if you’re black or white
 If you’re a boy or a girl
 If the music’s pumping it will give you new life
 You’re a superstar
 Yes, that’s what you are

This interrogation of identity—a core investment of the academic field of queer theory—further establishes *The Man That Got Away* as queer.

The show is engaged not only in queer theory—a domain of contemporary scholarship that examines identity as socially constructed and performative—but also in theories of performance. Academic theories of performance often employ ghost metaphors to understand how theatre appears before an audience but is also constantly disappearing. In other words, theatre, like a ghost, is always both present and not present. Julien tells the audience early on in the show that he was inspired to tell the story of his family when he began teaching musical theatre performance at Sheridan College. During classes and performances by his students, he felt the presence of his father alive and thriving in the younger generation’s love for musical theatre and cabaret. And it was the ghost of his father that inspired him and director Peter Hinton-Davis to bring other ghosts, such as the ghosts of his youth, his mother, and Judy Garland herself, to the stage.

The ghosts of this show appear via various forms of media. At one point

in the show, for example, he brings a tape recorder from the floorboard to play interviews with his mother recorded before she died of lung cancer in 2012. He lip-syncs to his mother's voice while Aubrie, at times, takes on the part of lip-syncing to the voice of Julien as it is heard in the interview. At another point, he brings out an old camcorder while his own home videos from his childhood play on the screen behind him. Just as the musical theatre canon evokes the memory of his gay father, these media provide other ways of capturing memories to make the apparitions of the past reappear for the audience in the present.

These recordings are seamlessly integrated into the overall production design. The play opens with the title of the show projected onto a screen and an empty chair in the centre of the stage, which is lit from above and enclosed on either side by a wall of stage lights. An electric piano is positioned on the floor, abutting the stage, and several stools—another nod to a common set piece of cabaret performance—flank the stage space. This simple, pared-down set allows for the focus to be on the performers, who execute the genre-defying script and song competently.

The Man That Got Away provides plenty of challenges for the performers. Julien is required to deliver the bulk of the text, which is no small feat considering that the show runs two hours and fifteen minutes. He manages to perform the show without much struggle, never letting on that the sheer amount of text to memorize could be challenging. Aubrie has the hardest task a young performer can face so early in their career, as she must play one of the best entertainers the world has ever seen. And the pianist, Ben Page, must take on the role not just of an accompanist but also of an actor, playing as a scene partner to both Julien and Aubrie.

The Man That Got Away tackles a lot: family secrets, identity politics, theories of performance, memory, cabaret and musical theatre, and solo performance confessional. In its own queer way, it leaves a lot of these themes and topics undefined and elusive. The show is best when it explores the relationships between the members of his queer family. Julien's father's death is both personally significant and historically important, making it doubly meaningful, and his mother's decision to stay in the family and present a heterosexual front so she and her husband can keep their jobs as social workers is also dramatically compelling. That being said, Julien at times deviates from this compelling source material to address other themes that seem tangential.

In any case, *The Man That Got Away* is important *and* entertaining, and the queer telling of Julien's queer story only makes it more unusual and original. Not only does it come from his personal experience, but it is a piece of social and cultural history that, because so many gay men died from HIV/AIDs during the 1980s and 1990s, has been at risk of being forgotten. Overall, the stories, the characters, the genre-defying style, and the outstanding performances make *The Man That Got Away* required viewing as both a show and a historical document that explores the secrets kept in the closet of many men and women of the second half of the twentieth century.