

Performing Beyond Postmodernity: Taylor Mac and the Queer Metamodern

Abstract

Since the advent of academic performance studies in the latter decades of the twentieth century, criticism pertaining to queer performance practice has predominantly employed postmodern analytical strategies. Departing from (but still in dialogue with) this trend, this essay explores critical strategies beyond the postmodern – i.e. the metamodern – in its assessment of queer theatre/performance artist Taylor Mac. A theoretical basis for the transition from postmodern to metamodern, concurrent with the development of queer discourse, is both outlined and then employed to demonstrate metamodern discursive strategies within specific performance events presented by Mac. The author argues that the assertion of emotional sincerity, beyond postmodern irony, in Mac's performance practice allows audience members a level of emotional engagement that is simultaneously aware of Mac's performative employment of camp or queer theatricality. This assessment is further developed to suggest that Mac's work is therefore metamodern, insofar as it oscillates between irony and sincerity; the knowing and the naïve; camp and earnest emotional affect.

Keywords

Metamodern; Queer; Performance; Sincerity; Taylor Mac

Introduction

The latter decades of the twentieth century have borne witness to a significant proliferation of queer theatrical and performance practices in the West, alongside the rise of Gay Liberation and the academic eminence of Queer Theory, exemplified by writers such as Judith Butler, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, Michel Foucault et al. In terms of contemporary theatre and performance, the work of New York based drag-cabaret/theatre artist Taylor Mac is particularly significant and, for almost two decades, has come to define, and indeed redefine, the parameters of queer performance praxis. For the purposes of this essay, therefore, I will be discussing Mac's performance output, in an effort to elucidate certain "post-postmodern" – or "metamodern" – discursive strategies, which can thus be aligned Mac's employment of camp or queer theatricality. In order to illustrate this thesis, I will be restricting my discussion to certain, specific performance events, with particular emphasis on queer permutations of, what Gavin Butt has called, a "*queer* kind of sincerity"¹ (emphasis original).

¹ Butt, "How I Died for Kiki and Herb," 94.

“Queer” as socio-political and academic discourse

Before discussing the specific praxis of queer performance makers, however, it is necessary to tender some definition of the term “queer” itself, as per its particular scholarly and/or socio-political usage. The academic discourse of Queer Theory first emerged in the early 1990s and, while evidently retaining its own particular discursive strategies, was partially aligned with concurrent postmodern criticism in the West. According to Donald E. Hall,

(the) first high-profile use of the term (queer) [...] was in a special issue of the feminist journal *differences* from the summer of 1991 [...] edited by Teresa de Lauretis and entitled “Queer Theory: Lesbian and Gay Sexualities,” the issue contained essays on a diverse array of cultural representations and manifestations of same-sex desire.²

The socio-political origins of the term “queer,” however, have furthermore been linked to the formation of activist organisations such as ACT UP (the AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power) and Queer Nation, almost half a decade precedent to its academic usage. These collectives were established “to demand public recognition of the severity of the AIDS crisis and challenge directly homophobic governmental policies and social attitudes.”³ This dynamic reclamation of the term, an erstwhile pejorative for gay men in particular, by both

² Hall, “A Brief, Slanted History,” 55.

³ *Ibid.*, 52.

activists and later theorists therefore signified an effective interrogation of so-called “normativity” or what was deemed an oppressively hetero-centric status quo. Moreover, as Hall has further described, “(women) and men of various races, sexualities, and belief systems put aside other agendas, identity allegiances, and disagreements to form coalitions to raise money and awareness, and secure greater public funding for [...] AIDS research and prevention.”⁴

Queer Theory thus emerged from this multifarious climate, as a distinct corollary of earlier political activism. In *Saint Foucault: Towards a Gay Hagiography*, David M. Halperin offers one definition of the term “queer,” as per its specific theoretical usage: “Queer is [...] whatever is at odds with the normal, the legitimate, the dominant. There is nothing in particular to which it necessarily refers. It is an identity without an essence. ‘Queer’ then, demarcates not a positivity but a positionality vis-à-vis the normative.”⁵ Halperin’s definition offers a comprehensive point of departure by facilitating a vast array of cultural permutations, amongst which the work of Taylor Mas is particularly noteworthy, as a significant purveyor of queer theatrical and performance practice.

⁴ Hall, “A Brief, Slanted History,” 52.

⁵ Halperin, *Saint Foucault*, 62.

From Postmodern to Metamodern

Before addressing Mac's work directly, however, it is necessary to chart the development of cultural theory from the discursive eminence of postmodern critique, concurrent with emerging queer theories, to the arrival of new forms of "post-postmodern" or "metamodern" cultural discourse. As previously mentioned, the initial academic proliferation of Queer Theory was partially aligned with contemporaneous postmodern critiques and the work of French philosopher and social theorist Michel Foucault offers a useful bridge between the queer and the postmodern, even if, as Lewis Call has observed, "he rejects (the postmodern) as a label for his work."⁶

According to Call:

[...] we must recognize, despite the author's claims to the contrary, that Foucault shares some fundamental philosophical positions with a group of thinkers who are referred to [...] as postmodern [...] Barthes, Baudrillard, Lyotard, Derrida, and Deluze [...]⁷

These positions include an "incredulity toward metanarratives, a hostility toward the colonizing tendencies of the Enlightenment's autonomous subject-position, a powerful critique of rationalist semiotics (etc.) [...]"⁸

Furthermore, Foucault's seminal three-volume text *The History of Sexuality* is considered one of the most influential in the formation of

⁶ Call, "A Thought Outside the State," 65.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid.

Queer Theory.⁹ Indeed Foucault's opus is one whose central premise – the critique of discursive power relations and historically constituted identities – is crucial to Queer Theory's own *modus operandi*. Furthermore, Foucault's thesis is comparable to Jean-François Lyotard's "incredulity towards metanarratives,"¹⁰ extrapolated in his seminal 1984 text *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, as mentioned by Call, insofar as Foucault's *History of Sexuality* is critical of those "polymorphous techniques of power"¹¹ or the highly politicized "metanarratives" of discursively constructed identities. Indeed Lyotard's "incredulity" here, while a gross-oversimplification of the postmodern, can be understood as a useful starting point, in terms of defining its characteristic discursive strategies. Expanding Lyotard's thesis, thus, Steven Seidman sees postmodernism as "a broad cultural and intellectual standpoint that views science, and all claims to knowledge, as moral and social forces and that is suspicious of systematizing, theory-building projects"¹² – a definition which again has much in common with Foucault and those aforementioned aspirations of Queer Theory's critique of "normativity." However, as Seidman also notes:

I view postmodernism as speaking of multiple, local, intersecting struggles whose aim is less "the end [of] domination" or "human liberation" than the creation of social spaces that encourage the proliferation of pleasures, desires,

⁹ Hall, *Queer Theories*, 65-68.

¹⁰ Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition*, xxiv.

¹¹ Foucault, *History of Sexuality*, 11.

¹² Seidman, "Identity and Politics in a 'Postmodern' Gay Culture," 106.

voices, interests, modes of individuation and democratization.¹³

In this way, Seidman's postmodern appears to deviate from those early, politicized understandings of queerness – i.e. the perspective of lesbian feminism and radical gay liberationists in particular – by replacing the struggle for political enfranchisement with the pursuit of pleasure. As Susan Wolfe and Julia Penelope have also mentioned, “In one hundred short years, German sexologists have ‘appeared’ Lesbians in order to pathologize us and French postmodernists have ‘disappeared’ us in order to deconstruct sex and gender categories and to ‘interrogate’ ‘the’ subject”¹⁴ – an assertion which appears to resist this apparent de-politicization. Furthermore, while postmodern theory does take the important step of maintaining identity as a social and historical construct, analogous to Queer Theory, as Viviane Ki Namaste has also noted – with specific reference to transsexual and transgender subjectivity – it still shows very little concern for real-life experience, including the harassment and discrimination faced by many queer-identified people on a day-to-day basis.¹⁵ Indeed it has even been noted that:

[...] perhaps it is no coincidence that postmodern theory, which denies the reality of identity markers like gender, race, and sexuality, should emerge at the historic moment when the voices of previously marginalized groups are beginning to have some impact on the academy. Could postmodernism

¹³ Seidman, “Identity and Politics in a ‘Postmodern’ Gay Culture,” 106.

¹⁴ Wolfe & Penelope, “Sexual Identity/Textual Politics,” 1.

¹⁵ Namaste, “Tragic Misreadings,” 9-23.

simply be the backlash against the rising tide of scholarship by people of color, feminists and LesBiGayTrans people?¹⁶

Following on from these comments, the recent historical decline of academic postmodernism's discursive pervasiveness in the West has furthermore been well noted by recent criticism. Indeed this decline can be aligned with the aforementioned arguments both against and beyond the postmodern, i.e. the metamodern, which I will discuss presently.

In what ways, therefore, can we account for this apparent discursive shift, beyond the postmodern, in western discourse? First of all, according to cultural critics Timotheus Vermeulen and Robin van den Akker, "It has become somewhat of a commonplace to begin a discussion of the postmodern by stressing that there is no one such thing as "the" postmodern."¹⁷ The pitfalls involved in grouping together any such diversified theories or methodologies cannot be ignored and this is one of the crucial, and seemingly undeniable, paradoxes of postmodern critique; while there are certainly thematic comparisons to be drawn between certain postmodernisms, their requisite deviation, and even frequent contradiction of one another, is also evident. Nevertheless, it will be necessary, for the purposes of this discussion, to tender a functional definition of the postmodern or, at least, to

¹⁶ Beemyn & Eliason, "Part II: Queer Theory in Practice," 165.

¹⁷ Vermeulen & van den Akker, "Notes on metamodernism."

acknowledge the analogous methodologies of certain theorists, in an attempt to surmise postmodernism's apparent relationship to the metamodern. It is possible, thus, to observe functional commonalities in the work of so-called postmodern theorists, such as those of the aforementioned Lyotard, Foucault et al. and, moreover, this common *modus operandi* can be characterised as “an opposition to “the” modern – to utopianism, to (linear) progress, to grand narratives, to Reason, to functionalism and formal purism, and so on.”¹⁸ As Vermeulen and van den Akker have also observed, these positions can most appropriately be summarized, perhaps, by Jos de Mul's distinction between postmodern irony (encompassing nihilism, sarcasm, and the distrust and deconstruction of grand narratives, the singular and the truth) and modern enthusiasm (encompassing everything from utopianism to the unconditional belief in Reason).¹⁹ It is not necessarily suggestible, however, that all configurations of the postmodern are now discursively defunct.²⁰ Indeed those subsequent achievements facilitated by Foucault, Lyotard et al; the expansion of identity and gender politics; the emergence of disability studies; postcolonial studies and the ongoing projects of multiculturalism; remain undimmed in their accomplishments. Yet, what can be suggested is that “many of them are taking another shape, and, more importantly, a new *sens*, a new

¹⁸ Vermeulen & van den Akker, “Notes on metamodernism.”

¹⁹ See de Mul, *Romantic Desire in (Post)modern Art & Philosophy*, 18-26

²⁰ This understanding of history, or rather historical periodization, is indebted to Raymond Williams's description of dominants, emergents and residuals. See Williams, *Marxism and Literature*, 121-8.

meaning and direction."²¹ According to Vermeulen and van den Akker, that *sens* is metamodernism, a functional definition of which can be defined thus:

Metamodernism is neither a residual nor an emergent structure of feeling, but the dominant cultural logic of contemporary modernity. It can be grasped as a generational attempt to surpass postmodernism and a general response to our present, crisis-ridden moment. It often is characterized by an oscillation - between a modern desire for *sens* and a postmodern doubt about the sense of it all, between a modern sincerity and a postmodern irony [...]²²

Vermeulen and van de Akker cite various reasons for these theoretical assertions: "Some argue the postmodern has been put to an abrupt end by material events like climate change, financial crises, terror attacks, and digital revolutions. Others find that it has come to a more gradual halt by merit of less tangible developments, such as the appropriation of critique by the market and the integration of *différence* into mass culture."²³ If Lyotard's postmodernism, therefore, is broadly understood as a form of "incredulity," the metamodern can be distinguished as a relational mode of "oscillation." As theorised by Vermeulen and van de Akker, "'Meta,' [...] implies an oscillation between Modernism and Postmodernism and therefore must embrace doubt, as well as hope and melancholy, sincerity and irony, affect and

²¹ Vermeulen & van den Akker, "Notes on metamodernism."

²² Editorial, "What is metamodernism?"

²³ Vermeulen & van den Akker, "Notes on metamodernism."

apathy, the personal and the political [...]”²⁴ Furthermore, many artistic permutations of this theory have also been observed by various commentators; with Jerry Saltz, senior art critic for *New York Magazine*, writing therein:

I'm noticing a new approach to artmaking in recent museum and gallery shows [...] At once knowingly self-conscious about art, unafraid, and unashamed, these young artists not only see the distinction between earnestness and detachment as artificial; they grasp that they can be ironic and sincere at the same time, and they are making art from this compound-complex state of mind.²⁵

Queer performance and the Ridiculous

But what of metamodern theatre and performance? And, more specifically, what of Taylor Mac's supposed relation to this emergent discursive strategy? As I will presently discuss, a distinctly metamodern sensibility can be observed in Mac's artistic output, owing to the complex interrelationship between his employment of camp or queer theatricality and his work's simultaneous presentation of unruly forms of emotional sincerity; in this way, Mac is at once both hopeful and melancholic, naïve and knowing, ironic and sincere. In order to substantiate this assessment, however, Mac's practice must be situated within the context of certain queer-oriented performance traditions,

²⁴ Kim Levin, "How PoMo Can You Go?" Levin's reference to the prefix "meta" here refers to its etymological basis in Plato's *metaxis* (μεταξύ or "between") via Eric Voegelin's understanding of the term. See Plato, *The Symposium*, and Voegelin, "Equivalences of Experience and Symbolization in History," 119-20 respectively.

²⁵ Saltz, "Sincerity and Irony Hug it Out."

which initially emerged in the mid-1960s on Manhattan's Lower East Side, almost two decades precedent to the reclamation of "queer" by political activists and later theorists, as mentioned previously. Indeed Moe Meyer has in fact refuted the aforementioned historiographical situation of queer identity as a socio-political response to the emergence of HIV/AIDS:

Rather than some new kind of subject constitution that emerges as the result of a generation-specific response to the AIDS crisis, queer identity is more accurately identified as the praxical response to the emergence of social constructionist (sex/gender as ideologically interpolated) models of identity and its [...] oppositional stance to essentialist (sexual orientation as innate) models, thus historically situating queer identity in an epistemological rift that predates the advent of AIDS."²⁶

This apparent rift can be identified in certain 1960s, Lower East Side performance traditions, which Bonnie Marranca has thus defined as the aesthetic of the "Ridiculous":

Here's one way to describe it: an anarchic undermining of political, sexual, psychological, and cultural categories [...] A highly self-conscious style, the Ridiculous tends towards camp, kitsch, transvestism, the grotesque, flamboyant visuals, and literary dandyism. [...] Not tragicomedy but meta-physical burlesque, the Ridiculous offers a new version of the "clown."²⁷

The work of theatre artists such as Kenneth Bernard, Ronald Tavel, John Vaccaro and, perhaps most particularly, Charles Ludlam have been

²⁶ Meyer, "Reclaiming the Discourse of Camp," 3.

²⁷ Marranca, "Introduction to the 1979 Edition," xiii.

cited as major proponents of the Ridiculous, and as some of the primary instigators of its development from the mid-1960s onwards.²⁸ The Ridiculous was therefore proto-queer in terms of its aesthetic rejection of normative or normalizing categories of sexuality, psychology, culture etc. and has furthermore been aligned, historiographically, with the advent of gay civil rights in the West; "Forming within the gay community at the watershed of gay liberation, (the Ridiculous) was one of the first fully realized queer theatre forms in the United States."²⁹ Sean F. Edgecomb has asserted that Mac's work can thus be seen as the contemporary inheritance of a Ridiculous performance sensibility,³⁰ evidently owing to Mac's employment of "camp, kitsch, transvestism, the grotesque, flamboyant visuals, and literary dandyism," as Marranca has said of this mode. In this way, Mac can be constructed as a kind of postmodern clown – a comic figure who appropriates traditional clowning skills and "fragments, subverts and inverts"³¹ them to create a highly self-reflexive and deconstructive mode of performance. In addition, his work has also precipitated a further sensibility, both beyond and seemingly alongside its apparent postmodernism, which I will presently identify as an emergent form of the queer metamodern.

²⁸ Marranca, "Introduction to the 1979 Edition," xiii.

²⁹ Edgecomb, "The Ridiculous Performance of Taylor Mac," 549.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Robb, *Clowns, Fools and Picaros*, 3.

Camp and “queer affect”

As a means of elucidating Mac's apparent metamodern performance strategies, it will first be necessary to examine the discourse of camp or queer theatricality. Performance strategies of camp, within the popular consciousness of these forms, have frequently been associated with triviality, excessiveness and – most particularly in terms of gay male culture – with effeminacy and sentimentality. As Gavin Butt has observed, “Such expressly performed, theatricalised forms of gender presentation instanced by drag and camp, have been taken by some as a sign of homosexuality's essentially mimetic condition and its lack of an authentic core.”³² For theorists such as Judith Butler, however, queer performance modes, and drag in particular, are potentially subversive insofar as they expose the apparent “performativity” of *all genders*, including normative heterosexuality. For Butler, every gendered enactment is seemingly performative, owing to her theoretical rejection of the notion that “[...] gender differences, with their accompanying presumptions of heterosexuality, have their origin in biological or natural differences.”³³ What she explores in *Gender Trouble* and *Bodies That Matter*, instead, is “how such a ‘naturalising trick’ is pulled off; asking by what means a unity of biological sex, gendered identification, and heterosexuality comes to *appear* natural [...] Femininity and masculinity become,

³² Butt, “How I Died For Kiki and Herb,” 91

³³ Lennon, “Feminist Perspectives on the Body.”

broadly, bodily styles which our bodies incorporate to yield a gendered subjectivity.³⁴ Contextually, Butler's hypothesis constitutes the theoretical extension of John L. Austin's philosophy of linguistics, as detailed in his lecture series "How to do things with words," held at Harvard University in 1955. While Austin had coined the term "performative" based on a specifically linguistic thesis, however, Butler extends this theory from linguistic utterances to gendered acts of embodiment. Furthermore, Butler's premise is crucially located within the analytical framework of Foucault's study of discursive power relations in *The History of Sexuality* – as previously mentioned – and most particularly in *Volume 1: The Will to Knowledge*. In *Bodies that Matter* for example, Butler thus defines her theory of the "performative" as "[...] that reiterative power of discourse to produce the phenomena that it regulates and constrains,"³⁵ in line with Foucault's central thesis in the aforementioned text. Butler's proposal therefore constitutes one of the foundational hypotheses of Queer Theory itself, insofar as her argument comprises an effective interrogation of the discursive naturalization of both sexual identities and gendered behaviour.

My interest in Mac's particular style of queer performance and theatricality, however – in line with Gavin Butt's extensive scholarship on these subjects – is not "merely to reiterate this now prevalent

³⁴ Lennon, "Feminist Perspectives on the Body."

³⁵ Butler, *Bodies That Matter*, 2.

understanding within contemporary cultural studies"³⁶ – i.e. Butler's notion of gender performativity. In one way, Butler's performative can be seen as a theoretical corollary of Susan Sontag's writings on camp in the 1960s: "Camp sees everything in quotation marks. It's not a lamp but a 'lamp'; not a woman but a 'woman'. To perceive Camp in objects and persons is to understand Being-as-Playing-a-Role. It is the farthest extension, in sensibility, of the metaphor of life as theatre."³⁷ My own interest in camp, however, is perhaps more closely aligned with Steven Cohan's dialectical understanding of this queer performance mode 'with its sights set not-so-squarely on incongruity.'³⁸ Citing Esther Newton, author of *Mother Camp: Female Impersonators in America*, he outlines the ways in which camp manages to embrace seemingly antithetical values or aesthetic principles. For Newton, this form of theatricality provides for 'an engaged irony which (as the best definition of camp puts it) allows one a strong feeling of involvement with a situation or object while simultaneously providing one with a comic appreciation of its contradictions.'³⁹ In addition, as Cohan further explains, 'because [this] irony affords a position of engagement, not alienation, camp also needs to be understood as the formation of a queer affect: of taking queer pleasure in perceiving if not causing category dissonance.'⁴⁰ What I will attempt to explore, therefore, are

³⁶ Butt, "How I Died For Kiki and Herb," 91

³⁷ Sontag, "Notes on Camp," 280.

³⁸ Cohan, quoted in Butt "How I Died For Kiki and Herb," 91.

³⁹ Esther Newton, *Mother Camp*, 106

⁴⁰ Cohan, quoted in Butt, "How I Died for Kiki and Herb," 91

the ways in which this “queer affect” is evidently manifest in the performance practice of Taylor Mac, in terms of his unconventional presentation of unexpected moments of emotional sincerity. Furthermore, in line with the apparent “incongruity” and “category dissonance” of this artist’s employment of theatrical camp, the presence of sincerity in Mac’s work is also distinctively metamodern, since it is evidently oscillates to an ironically “comic appreciation of its contradictions.”

Taylor Mac and the performance of metamodern sincerity

According to his artist’s website, taylormac.net, Mac is a self-professed “playwright, actor, singer-songwriter, and sometime director and producer.”⁴¹ His plays include “The Walk Across America For Mother Earth” (2010), “The Lily’s Revenge” (2009), “The Young Ladies Of” (2007), “The Be(A)st of Taylor Mac” (2006), “Red Tide Blooming” (2006), and “The Hot Month” (2002), among various other concerts and ensemble performance pieces. Adam Feldman, writing in *TimeOut: New York*, has aptly said of Mac’s theatrical and performance work: “With his unique blend of bleak humor, personal revelation, political engagement, folk-inflected music and astonishingly elaborate, gender-twisting, gorgeous-grotesque costumes, Mac has emerged as an

⁴¹ Taylor Mac, “Bio.”

essential figure in the downtown performance scene."⁴² In terms of Mac's situation within Western performance praxis, his particular version of camp is firmly grounded in the characteristic clowning practice of Charles Ludlam – that great theatrical *auteur* of the Ridiculous. According to Edgecomb, "Ludlam was notorious for channelling his comic stage personae through a distinctive clown character pastiched from the grand tradition of clown types, including Greek mimes, the *auguste*, *Arlecchino* (Harlequin), the scapegoat, and the medieval court jester [...]"⁴³ Ludlam further constructed this distinctive clown by employing the strategies of "gender-fuck" drag, whereby both gestural and aesthetic expressions of artificiality are magnified to "fuck" with the spectator's perception of gender. A highly distinctive characteristic of Ludlam's amplified stage presence, this form of theatricality distinguished his innovative performances of both *Maria Magdalena Galas* (an homage to Maria Callas; *Galas*, 1983) and *Lady Enid* (*The Mystery of Irma Vep*, 1984), as well as his 1973 adaptation of *La Dame aux Camélias* by Alexandre Dumas *fils*. In Ludlam's *Camille*, the ill-fated romance between the courtesan Marguerite and her lover Armand Duval, although self-evidently portrayed by two gay men, was treated with complete sincerity, in terms of performance, as a means of facilitating Ludlam's self-proclaimed "(belief) in the character

⁴² Feldman, "Makeup Artist: Berglam performance beast Taylor Mac asks, Who's my daddy?"

⁴³ Edgecomb, "The Ridiculous Performance of Taylor Mac," 552.

beyond the gender of the actor."⁴⁴ Despite the fact that Ludlam's hairy chest and arms were on show in his low-cut, nineteenth-century costume, "he drew the audience into the story enough to forget the intentional artificiality, camp, and anarchic disregard for verisimilitude in the production."⁴⁵ In this way, therefore, Ludlam's particular brand of camp performance is identifiable as a major influence on Mac's later deployment of this theatrical mode, and could even be identified as metamodern *avant la lettre*. In both Ludlam and Mac, thus, there is an apparent oscillation between the hyperbolic and the subtle; ostensible artificiality that is somehow, at the same time, bracingly sincere.

On January 10th, 2013, Mac performed a public declamation of his theatre manifesto "I Believe" at The Under The Radar Festival, "From Where I Stand," Symposium in New York City, the text of which was subsequently published on his artist's website. In the opening statements, he wholeheartedly proclaims that: "irony is useful and fun at the beginning of a performance but tedious if held on to."⁴⁶

Furthermore, Mac maintains that:

truth in the theater, is often confused with a clearing away of theatricality. I believe the clearing away of theatricality is as much of a glorious lie as the theatrical. I believe homophobia, racism, and sexism—in the theater—often manifests itself through the championing of "Realism" and or "Quiet" plays.⁴⁷

⁴⁴ Dasgupta, "A Conversation with Charles Ludlam," 78.

⁴⁵ Edgecomb, "The Ridiculous Performance of Taylor Mac," 552.

⁴⁶ Mac, "I Believe: A Theater Manifesto by Taylor Mac."

⁴⁷ Ibid.

On this basis, Mac's work can therefore be seen to eschew the employment of an entirely self-referential or ironic performance practice, but also to embrace the supposed trappings of performative artifice or "unrealistic" theatricality. While his output often includes the use of ironic pastiche and/or parody, these tropes are simultaneously employed alongside frequent instances of genuine emotional sincerity, which can once again be identified as metamodern. In his 2006 show *The Be(A)st of Taylor Mac*, for example, Mac created a kind of intertextual collage of recycled material from previous shows – with transitional monologues and new songs accompanied on the ukulele – that features surprising moments of sincere emotional engagement, alongside some of the show's more humorously ironic or parodic interludes. In the song "The Palace of the End," which had previously appeared in Mac's 2006 play *Ride Tide Blooming*, he relates the imagined account of an unlikely romance between Lynne Cheney, the wife of former US Vice President Dick Cheney, and the late Iraqi dictator Saddam Hussein. The song begins with an ironic quotation from Cheney's 1981 novel *Sisters*, suggesting an apparent lesbian subtext that humorously undercuts both her own, and her husband's, conservative political agenda. Mac later develops this subtext to construct Cheney as a kind of misunderstood outsider. He similarly depicts Hussein as an empathetic figure, whose maligned political persona and contemptible exploits are the result of childhood abuse and patriarchal/religious dominance:

When Saddam sees Lynne
He too is caught off guard and his eyes tell a story
About how when he was just a wee lad his father died
And his mother she re-married Abraham

Abraham was a shepherd
Shepherd show me how to go
Like Abraham in the Bible
Who you'll remember God told Abraham to kill his son
Or like Abraham in the Qur'an,
Who you'll remember Allah told Abraham to abandon his
family in the desert
Well like those Abrahams this Abraham was very cruel
And he would often beat Saddam black and blue

And Saddam would steal chickens and sheep
To please Abraham, please please Abraham
Please please Abraham!
Please please Abraham!
Please please Abraham!
Please please Abraham!

But Saddam never could please please Abraham
Never could please please please please Abraham
So he got himself into a subconscious vicious cycle
Where he sought accumulation of treasure and power to –

Get Love!

But Saddam never could get love
Cos Saddam never could give love⁴⁸

In the song's original context – the aforementioned *Red Tide* – the character of Hussein appeared in Arabian Nights drag, further accentuating Mac's partially caricatured portrayal of both the Iraqi dictator and indeed the politically conservative Cheney; he recounts how the latter would:

⁴⁸ This song, as it appeared in *The Be(A)st of Taylor Mac* and *Red Tide Blooming* can also be viewed on YouTube. See Taylor Mac, "The Palace of the End."

Go on talk shows, campaigns, speak of family values
Every day she wears a power suit –
Not too flashy, but not feminine, and not manly!
Powerfully suitable
And she works hard, she gives imperatives
Oh she spews anger!⁴⁹

What is significant about this song in particular, however, is the way in which caricature simultaneously oscillates to sincere emotional affect, thus surprising the listener/spectator and, as Mac would have it, reminding them of their humanity: “Surprise (not to be confused with shock) is the way I get audiences to feel. When they feel they’re reminded of their humanity.”⁵⁰ The final moments of the song illustrate a thoroughly surprising moment of human connection between Hussein and Cheney, which is furthermore shared between Mac and his audience:

And when Lynne saw Saddam
And Saddam saw Lynne
As he breathed the poison gas in (poetic license)
Lynne breathed in and out with him
Through the protective glass she breathed in
And out with him⁵¹

Mac's apparent alternation between ironic parody and sincere emotional empathy marks “The Palace of the End” as metamodern, in

⁴⁹ Mac, “The Palace of the End.”

⁵⁰ Mac, “Artist Statement.”

⁵¹ Mac, “The Palace of the End.”

this way. It is a song that is equal parts camp parody and poignant “romance epic;”⁵² both bitingly ironic and affectively sincere.

Conclusion

It has been observed that the apparent pervasiveness of postmodern discourse in the West has witnessed a steady decline since the advent of the twenty-first century. This is not to suggest, however, that western culture is not still in tow to its significant legacy – i.e. the undimmed relevance of various postmodern discursive projects; deconstruction; postcolonialism; gender studies etc. Rather, as various cultural critics have thusly observed, the last decade has borne witness to an effective transposition of the postmodern, which Velmeulen and van den Akker have furthermore identified as the emergence of a metamodern cultural logic. Moreover, in terms of theatre and performance, and specifically queer theatre and performance, a distinctly metamodern sensibility is distinguishable in the work of Taylor Mac, owing to identifiable strategies, within his performance output, of metamodern “oscillation” between an ironic knowingness and, what Butt has identified as, a “queer kind of sincerity.” Furthermore, this apparent “queer affect” (Cohan) allows audience members a level of emotional engagement that is also simultaneously aware of the apparent incongruity therein; they have apparently oscillated

⁵² Mac, “The Palace of the End.”

between finding themselves to be strangely moved by Mac's performances, while also cognizant of their apparent contradictions. In conclusion, therefore, all of these factors point to a distinctively queer form of metamodernism – as this discourse has been defined by Vermeulen, and van den Akker – which can evidently be aligned with the contemporary performance practice of Taylor Mac.

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