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/SINGLE MEN -- DOUBLE LIVES

OR

BRIDE'S BED REVISITED/

A romantic comedy in two acts.

By

SCOTT K. RAZAK

B. S., Kansas State University, 1977

A MASTER'S REPORT

submitted in partial fulfillment of the

requirements for the degree

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SINGLE MEN -- DOUBLE LIVES
or
BRIDE'S BED REVISITED
(A Romantic Comedy in Two Acts)

Scott K. Razak

July, 1982

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Critical Apparatus for
SINGLE MEN -- DOUBLE LIVES
or
BRIDE'S BED REVISITED

a romantic comedy in two acts
submitted as a Master's Report in Creative Writing

by

Scott K. Razak

July 1982

CRITICAL APPARATUS

Introduction

As a graduate student experimenting in the art and craft of creative writing, I have explored the three major forms: poetry, prose fiction, and drama -- in that order. Unfortunately, I did not seem able to produce good poetry (a rather universal judgment in the class I took), so I decided to pursue fiction, something I found more challenging and interesting.

My first efforts at writing fiction were somewhat experimental and obscure, more poetic than prosaic, and were sometimes not readily accessible to more than a few readers. I discussed the issue of accessibility with Professor Ben Nyberg, and he told me that there are two main reasons for writing creatively: (1) for personal expression, or (2) for public communication. I realized that, up to this point, I had almost always chosen to write solely for personal expression. For me, writing creatively was a means of tapping my subconscious, learning about hidden needs and feelings, and even of examining personal problems in a therapeutic way. I had made a strong distinction between "creative" writing and "critical" writing: Creative writing was for me, and critical writing was for an audience. While I still write creatively first and foremost for myself, I am by degrees accepting the proposition that my creative writing can also be crafted for an audience, though I would have to say that my personal, private aims are still paramount.

Finally, continuing the progression, I came to write drama. Almost undeniably, drama is a form clearly intended for a public. After all, it is performed by actors upon a stage before an audience. Nonetheless, I still felt that my first allegiance was to myself. This is not to suggest that I do not find critical comment on my creative work helpful. I do. And I will often make changes in my work based upon audience reaction. Nonetheless, I remain independent about my creative work and do not change anything that, subjectively, "feels right" to me, no matter how illogical or wrong it might seem to a majority of intelligent readers.

The key in all of this is my intuition. I work almost solely from intuition. I rarely work from an outline, although I did write down a couple of pages of preliminary thoughts concerning the direction I thought my play might take before I actually began composing lines. Even so, as the play developed, I found myself straying from my initially stated purposes -- and this troubles me not at all. As Walter Kerr said, in How Not To Write A Play, American playwrights have got the hang of writing relevant "thesis" drama (drama with a message), and it is a hang they cannot seem to let go of:

The first time a playwright used his characters to illustrate the immediate issues of the day a thrill ran through the theater. Here was no idle fiction, but a pertinent and responsible coming-to-grips with things that really mattered. From a sleepy dalliance with conventional romance the drama

had plunged wholeheartedly into the thick of the modern battle. The stage became a forum in which the most progressive arguments could be acted out, a storm center in which honest and angry men could call a corrupt society to task, a laboratory in which environments could be examined and measured. . . . On a somewhat quieter, less engaged, level, it [contemporary theater] pursues the dispassionate study of milieu.¹

Kerr goes on to say that precisely because authors had a socially conscious purpose in mind, precisely because they wished too much to instruct, most modern playwrights have written very competent drama that is passionless and uninteresting. Propaganda doesn't move the heart. Instead, Kerr maintains, a drama must simply present interesting, idiosyncratic characters who exist for their own sake. "The next accent is likely to be less mechanistic, more humanistic, less concerned with evolving a sociological slide rule and more concerned with seeking some understanding of the complex, cantankerous personal soul" (p. 26). For Kerr, it is a good idea to forget the sociology and play to the lowest common denominator in an audience:

A "great" theater comes into existence by first attending to the most primitive passions of its most primitive patrons. By satisfying the race's admittedly childlike -- though not necessarily childish -- yearning for violence, spectacle, and the broadest of broad

comedy strokes, roots are sunk deep into the universal consciousness. . . . It would seem that on this broad, firm, democratic base nearly anything can be built. So long as the foundation is secure, all sorts of towering structures can be erected upon it. Drama is by its nature a mass art; the presence of the mass in the amphitheater is necessary not only to the financial stability of so complex an undertaking, but also, apparently, to its artistic validity.

(pp. 44-5)

Kerr, of course, goes on to reinforce his statement that these elements of action, spectacle, and broad comedy are only a foundation, and only an artist can elevate them to something memorable and valid. As Kerr asks rhetorically, "Can an art form flirt with the vulgar mind without sharing the mind's vulgarity?" (p. 40) He answers with a resounding "Yes," and notes that Sophocles and Shakespeare wrote drama filled with spectacle of every sort, drama that managed to have a strong appeal for the uneducated masses. Kerr treats this subject at great length in his book and offers a complete history of theater, from the ancient Greeks to the present, providing a great mass of evidence that "No great play has ever come from what might be called a minority theater. All of the work we prize most highly was born of the commercial or at least competitive hurly-burly, and in the presence of a mass audience" (p. 41). Unfortunately, Kerr does not tell us how an artist can build a work of art from

those elements appealing to the "vulgar" masses; he only assures us that it can be (and has long been) done.

I came across Kerr's book long after I had begun writing; in fact, Act I was completed and Act II planned before I read Kerr's warnings that "thesis" drama holds the dangerous possibility of seeming intellectualized, preachy, and stilted. Accordingly, I revised Act I extensively -- so extensively that the second draft barely resembled the first. The first draft had been strongly influenced by three particular theses, three aims (described below) that I had wanted to "prove." In the second draft, I attempted a compromise; I still considered my aims valid, but I did want to avoid the extreme didacticism of the first draft. Accordingly, I tried to soft-pedal the "lessons." I find that I enjoy the play more, reading and writing it, when I can simply let the characters be themselves. I have, in fact, decided that I'm not exclusively concerned that the play succeed in "instructing" the audience, though it may do that. I am equally concerned that readers and viewers simply enjoy it. My characters may still sound didactic to some -- they do tend to analyze one another and quote statistics an awfully lot. But I like people who do that. I wrote a play I would like to see.

As for entertainment versus message, I detail below at some length the kinds of elements I included in my play simply to please and delight the audience (costumes, vocal variations, broad physical comedy, bright banter); my thought was to balance the messages with

simple entertainment. Although my messages are somewhat diluted by the relatively mindless shenanigans which appear in the final draft of my play, they can be found at least residually. The three main points I originally intended to make were these: (1) to show that one partner in a gay relationship is restricted to a stereotypical gay role and the other partner is restricted to a conventional "straight" male role; they will both learn that such restriction is unhealthy, and will change accordingly; (2) to verify traditional assumptions that gay males are often incapable of forming permanent love relationships, and to suggest several reasons for this reality; and (3) to affirm the idea that working marriages require commitment, generosity of spirit, and work. Ultimately, of course, only an audience can decide if the play is too preachy on the one hand, or too burlesque on the other. Ideally, perhaps readers and viewers will find an appealing balance of the two.

Genesis of the Play

It is perhaps comical that after all of my righteous rhetoric about writing for myself, I divulge the fact that this play had its beginnings as the one, single piece of creative writing intended to be 100 percent public in nature. This play was originally a seven-page short story entitled "Scene from a Marriage." Its one and only purpose was to create an utterly mundane set piece depicting an ordinary marriage in every respect. The characters were named Robert and Syl. Through a careful avoidance of pronouns, I led the reader

to assume all through the story that Syl was short for Sylvia. Near the very end of the story, it is revealed that Syl is Sylvester. The whole story was written to bring about that single moment of shock in the reader: "My God, it's a gay marriage." My purpose was purely political. I wanted to legitimate homosexual marriage by saying that it is as ordinary as straight marriage. (See Appendix G.)

I realized, reading the draft of my story over one day, that the fiction was almost all dialogue. Hmm, I said to myself, reads like a play. I found that I was interested enough in these characters to want to know them better. So I decided to change the story into a play, changing Sylvester's name to David (obviously, the purpose of the short story was necessarily abandoned; any theater-goer would see immediately that both partners are male).

I came to recognize that the two characters represented the two distinct sides of my own personality -- one a traditional male, one a traditional homosexual. I have lived large segments of my life in both roles. I feel that I have successfully blended the two personas into my daily experience. I also feel that I didn't really become happy and fully myself until I had achieved this blending. It occurred to me that I could actualize this dichotomy, and its equalization, by turning the separate parts of myself into separate characters. The conflicts experienced between Robert and David are simply externalized representations of conflicts once borne in myself. As with everything I write, I am writing about myself, for myself.

As I began to write, rather than trying to consider what would seem "appropriate" to a hypothetical audience, I simply tried to capture the personas of myself and my (gay) friends. In a recent survey of contemporary gay drama in Time magazine, Richard Schickel quotes Lawrence O'Toole's characterization of the gay aesthetic: "it includes a taste for grand romantic gestures, excesses of 'spirit, personality and desire' and 'a refusal to apologize for outlandish behavior.'"² Many of my flamboyant gay friends are so flagrantly outlandish, so aggressively deviant, that it would be impossible to capture them on paper in ways that would avoid offending almost everyone. It is this very rebel spirit, represented by Reggie in my play, that I refuse to co-opt for an audience. I understand perfectly why gays feel no need to apologize. They choose to satirize and mock a restrictive culture. It is a form of justified anger.

Having said that, I must also acknowledge that unlike many outlandish gays I know, I have a rather conventional personal morality. I don't believe in casual sex, I do believe in long term marriages for gays, and I don't believe in alienating people unless provoked. Robert represents these features, which I see as admirable. I resent gay subcultures in which I've lived where these values of mine are seen as provincial, unliveable, and stupid. I resent the fact that many stereotypical gays will not accept me even when I choose not to portray the stereotype. Forever in search of a simplistic golden mean, I believe that we can all live together on planet earth quite happily with a mutual respect for and sensitivity to others' realities. The people I most love and admire are like that. I mainly want Robert

and David to grow in this direction so that gay members of the audience will see themselves and, ideally, act accordingly.

Composition Decisions

Writing any play requires special composition decisions, and this play was no exception. The problem with any play is presenting the necessary exposition in a way that does not call extreme attention to itself and provides some dramatic interest. Because the central conflict in this play centers around Robert's and David's clashing interpretations of what it means to be gay, of necessity there must be some overt discussion of this issue. I decided early that the conflict should be as magnified as possible. Hence, Robert displays extreme anger in Scene I, after it is established (through his conversation with Phillip) that he is basically a low-key individual. Not coincidentally, Reggie's entrance follows Robert's angry explosion. It is my hope that all of this action will heighten tension and awareness in the viewer, allowing him to sustain some interest in the following interchange (which is somewhat "talky") between Phillip, Courtney, and David (see pp. 66-76). While the conversation here is analytical, I have tried to inject enough catchy lines and vivid details to sustain interest.

Immediately following this long conversation is yet another -- this time between Robert and David. I hoped that by changing the setting I would be able to "hook" the audience through the three pages

of rather ordinary conversation; just when this conversation gets boring, I interrupt it with a phone call from Reggie and some ensuing broad humor. At this point (p. 86) I feel the overt exposition has come to an end. The characters' personalities, pasts, and conflicts have been sufficiently presented. For the rest of Act I, I rely on "showing" instead of "telling" to actualize the central conflict -- the difference in style between Robert and David.

In my naivete, I composed speeches in the first draft of Act I that sometimes ran for 400-500 words. Professor Climenhaga explained to me that such monologues pose fundamental problems for actors and directors, and recommended the conventional wisdom that no speech exceed three lines. Grateful for the advice, I tried hard in my revision not to exceed this quota of lines by too much, and only where justified. As a result, I think the pace of the first act is improved immeasurably.

I also tried hard to emphasize the visual element in Act I. While the first thirty minutes of the play don't particularly capitalize upon those devices unique to the theater, this is due to the fact that the first thirty minutes are largely exposition and introduction (to p. 86). From that point on in Act I, I tried to use visual and auditory elements to heighten the interest of the play. For example, I decided to bring in the operator on a raised, illuminated platform; I used the snake on the stairs as a piece of comic "business"; I included all the visual paraphernalia of Reggie's and David's drag scene; I used music and lighting in an arresting way in Scene III of Act I; I gave Reggie and David a variety of characters and voices to

play. In short, I tried to keep things colorful and interesting. I suspect that I would be able to use these elements (sight and sound) more effectively were I to see this play through production and note for myself where the dead spots are and how the visual and auditory elements might strengthen audience interest.

I decided early that the first act should end with a cliff-hanger. Because I decided on a sixty-minute first act and a thirty-minute second act, I felt it was appropriate to have the climax occur at the end of Act I. While Act II contains a good deal of conflict, its instances derive from the central conflict which was brought to a climax by Act I. The rationale was simple: make the audience want to see more, make them anxious for a resolution. It was deliberate that Act I picks up pace and "business" with each successive scene, until finally Scene III is played out in all its boisterousness.

Act II presented several problems. First, I wanted the play to end with a gay marriage -- this would allow some discussion about that subject, and would offer some insight into the problems of attempting such a union. The problem? How to get from the outrage expressed by Robert's parents at the end of Act I to their ultimate acceptance of Robert's marriage by the end of Act II. My solution was to present a somewhat wacky, but perhaps plausible, rationale for the marriage in the first place: as Phillip tells Robert, taking his cue from David, "Now's the time to decide what you really want in your life. If you don't do that now, tonight, you'll never be able to stand your ground tomorrow." (see p. 163) Robert impulsively

accepts the idea -- he wants to get married anyway -- but the next problem is getting Robert's mother to accept the marriage. My solution was to create a series of events and characters so favorable to this marriage that Gladys would simply be swept along, almost against her will. Specifically, I hope that Kay's low-key acceptance of her son David will appear to put sufficient "peer pressure" upon Gladys that she allows the wedding plans to go forward.

A second problem in this act was getting Robert and David reconciled in a hurry -- before Robert's parents came back. I hit upon the idea of David's fake suicide; it reveals that David is somewhat amoral and manipulative, immature around the edges, and it also allows us to see what a cupcake Robert is, how sheltered and naive he has been. Of course, it also gives David the chance to be an adorable drunk. This plotting also provides ample opportunity for humor in Scene I of Act II. Finally, the audience needs to be hooked as the second act begins -- I hoped Robert's hysteria would do this.

The confrontation in Scene II of the second act, between Robert and his parents, was difficult to write. I wanted to expand a bit on Gladys' stereotyped character and make her more human, without making her too sympathetic or changing her too radically from Act I to Act II. I also wanted to show that Robert has changed -- he has strengthened, he has made a commitment to his gay persona that he is willing to fight for. His transformation may seem a bit sudden; I can only hope that the previous scene serves as adequate preparation for Robert's new resolve.

My main concern in the final scene of the play was to bring off a happy ending that made both the audience and the players happy. The speeches in the last few pages of the play are very, very long. It is my hope that the audience cares enough about these people that these speeches are interesting rather than boring. I tried hard to keep the recitation of "vows" human and emotional, rather than political. Thus, I chose to have Robert and David speak in conversational monologues, rather than in formal, ceremonial terms. As is consistent with the characters, Robert's speech is the more stolid and formal while David's is the more relaxed and conversational. I hope both speeches can be rendered in a way that genuinely touches the audience. The play ends with the main comic business of this scene -- Gertrude's birthday cake. In addition to simply providing humor, I felt that singing "Happy Birthday" and making a wish was a good way to communicate the definitive tone I was working for: upbeat, human, hopeful.

My decision about the tone of the play was deliberate. I was quite impressed with Neil Simon's play, The Goodbye Girl, because it managed to illustrate a poignant and believable love story within the context of giddy comedy. The combination of seriousness and humor (to relieve that seriousness) was what I was after. Thus, while I did some preaching in my play, mostly I tried to make people laugh. Trying to write a serio-comic play has given me an even deeper and more profound respect for Neil Simon's work. His ear for one-liners is extraordinary. Since this play is a comedy, with over-

tones of farce, I elected to write in the outrageous coincidence of the telephone operator also turning out to be Robert's mother. Such bizarre coincidences are not uncommon in comedy, where a very special and almost traditionally unrealistic world is usually created. Comedies thrive on characters who are more exaggerated, more intense, more eccentric than one is likely to encounter in real life, and unbelievable coincidences of plotting contribute to this tone of exaggeration. This is also why Robert's parents are sketched in such broad and stereotypical terms. Neil Simon's play, Come Blow Your Horn, contains the definitive characterization of the cliché Jewish Mother. It is much too broad, far too stereotypical for anyone to take seriously. Yet this character ends up being an enormous favorite with the audience, often getting the biggest laughs. The audience loves to hate her and her shenanigans, precisely because she represents what can be worst in the Jewish Mother. I hope that audiences will have a similar love-hate relationship with Robert's mother.

Finally, with reference to the issue of exaggeration, I must comment upon the camp mentality and behavior which occurs throughout the play. In portraying this, I found it desirable to use a good deal of profanity and some shocking statements and situations. I have only tried to be true to my own past experiences with this approach. Camp behavior is outrageous, in fact, and I did not shrink from such a presentation of it. Because the play is intended for a gay audience, I doubt that viewers will be unduly offended. It must also be noted that the profanity, of language and attitude, is quite mild here in comparison to a gay play like, for example, T-Shirts, by Robert Patrick. (The play is discussed at length in

a later section of this paper.)

Interestingly, many straight readers of this play have expressed to me their sense of curiosity and genuine interest in the camp behavior as well as other facets of gay life revealed by the play. Perhaps the play could be presented to a straight audience.

One last note: On page 170 Courtney delivers a line quoting a statistic from Psychology Today. Professor Agosta felt the line was too didactic and recommended that it be excised, a recommendation I am inclined to agree with. Nevertheless, Professor Climenhaga recommended that the line be left in, explaining that such an action would allow the director of the play to make the final decision. I trust this solution is an acceptable one for all concerned.

Placing This Play Within the Context of Contemporary Gay Drama

While an exhaustive review of the history of gay drama is beyond the scope of this critical apparatus, a substantial body of information drawn from a complete historical review in the "Introduction" to Gay Plays (an anthology), by William M. Hoffman, may prove to be helpful in placing my play within the context of contemporary gay drama.

First Hoffman distinguishes between gay theater and gay plays, a distinction I find valid and useful. He contends that gay theater refers primarily to production values, which can lend a tone or attitude to any production. He cites, for example, a production

of a Shakespeare tragedy in which all male actors wear female garb, to support his assertion that "Absolutely any play can be performed gay." Gay theater is thus "a manner and not a subject."³ Gay plays, on the other hand, while they can hypothetically be performed as gay theater, are plays which explicitly concern themselves with the issue of homosexuality.

Surprisingly, no extant Greek plays are overtly concerned with homosexuality. In fact, not until Christopher Marlowe's Edward II, in 1591, was a major homosexual figure to appear in dramatic literature. Astonishingly, the next play to portray homosexuals overtly was Mae West's The Drag, in 1927 (p. xvi). According to Hoffman, "it seems to be the first modern gay play" (p. xvi).

Although the play was billed as "a homosexual comedy in three acts," it is in fact an extremely serious melodrama that borders on a plea for tolerance of homosexuals. The Drag contains long, intense intellectual discussions based on the most advanced contemporary scientific opinion (Ulrichs, Krafft-Ebing, and a smattering of Freud).

Sometimes the serious sections are unintentionally funny to a modern ear, but usually the characters ring true, especially when the gay people are talking among themselves. Gay slang seems to have changed little over the years and we come across such words as "rough trade," "gorgeous," "she" instead of "he,"

and other forms of gay banter. (pp. xvi-xvii)

Not surprisingly, New York City officials refused to allow The Drag to play in New York. Not to be restrained, Mae West wrote another play, The Pleasure Man, wherein many characters were gay. Hoffman reports that some of the dialogue in The Pleasure Man was simply drawn from The Drag, as if Miss West were determined to make her point. After an extremely short run in New York, the play was closed by the police. Hoffman quotes an unintentionally humorous review of the play, written by Robert Littell of the New York Evening Post. Littell's reactions to the sexual content of the play were extremely negative. Hoffman notes that such views are still common today, but are often disguised as "pseudo-pious religiosity" or "quasi-scientific sociological and psychological jargon" (p. xvii). It is interesting to speculate on how far we as a society have come (or have not come) since the days of Littell's puritanical review:

To the three tiresome and unspeakably slimy acts of The Pleasure Man the police, by arresting the entire cast, contributed a fourth, and even the most rabid opponent of official interference would find it hard to protest on this occasion. The bulk of Mae West's latest is feeble backstage melodrama. . . . If this were all, The Pleasure Man would die unnoticed in a few weeks. But it is smeared from beginning

to end with such filth as cannot possibly be described in print, such filth as turns one's stomach even to remember. . . . Pretty nearly the most nauseating feature of the evening was the laughter of the audience, or at least that part of it which howled and snickered and let out degenerate shrieks from the balcony. If a first-night audience doesn't whistle or throw vegetables or leave the theatre . . . but laughs and laps it up there is no sense in taking the performers to the police station. The real culprits are on the other side of the footlights.
(pp. xvii-xviii)

I have chosen to quote Littell's review simply because it helps to explain the startling fact that not another single gay play was written or presented in the American theater until the 1960's. Hoffman explains this awful silence.

The repressions of homosexuality in the theater till the 1970's took the following forms, and is still operative to a lesser degree:

Silence. (Not having gay characters at all; not mentioning homosexuality.)

False accusation. (A character who is not homosexual is accused of it. The author can avoid handling the issue while seeming to deal with it.)

Stereotyping. (Gay characters, if male, are effeminate; if female, are masculine. Or gays are portrayed as "sensitive" or "special." Or gays are mentally disturbed. In all these cases it is the context that shows if repression is at work.)

Exploitation. (Using gays sensationally as local color.) (p. xix)

Although occasional gay characters surfaced in the theater in the 1930's, 1940's, and 1950's, they were routinely pigeon-holed in one of the four manners noted above. But in 1960, the stage was suddenly peopled with a smattering of gay characters. "It was the year of Edward Albee's Zoo Story, Gore Vidal's The Best Man, Shelagh Delaney's A Taste of Honey, and Brendan Behan's The Hostage" (pp. xxiv-xxv). Hoffman mentions twenty-three gay plays that played in New York during the 1960's, beyond those mentioned above. The only one I have ever heard of (and seen as a film) is The Boys in the Band, and Hoffman concedes that almost all of the other productions were off-off-Broadway and for a small and select audience. The Boys in the Band was a skillful depiction of a group of gay, male friends examining their plight -- and for Mart Crowley, the play's author, being gay was decidedly a plight. Hoffman quotes some dialogue from the play, and then offers his evaluation (one with which I agree).

In Harold's words to Michael:

You are a sad and pathetic man. You're a homosexual