

50 Years of Landmark Queer *Thea-tah!*

In his infamous 1966 essay “Homosexual Drama and Its Disguises,” critic Stanley Kauffmann aired his grievances with the contemporary American theater: successful gay playwrights craft works that are superficially about straight relationships, but upon closer examination more resemble their personal queer ones. Much of the evidence for these claims came from the works of Edward Albee, Tennessee Williams, and William Inge (though left unnamed in the essay) which often present dysfunctional marriages and violent societies that conflicted with American ideals. For Kauffmann, the solution was to give space for these playwrights to create stories that are truly about queer characters and are derived from personal experience.

In the years since Kauffmann’s remarks have come under heavy criticism for his insistence gay playwrights were unable to write about straight people, only disguised gay men. However, his call for unambiguously queer stories on the stage was revolutionary for the period. At that time, and for most of American theater history, queer characters and relationships had remained too taboo to touch, only mocked, villainized, or explored in subtext. In 1923, Sholem Asch’s *God of Vengeance* marked the first kiss between two women on Broadway, leading to the entire cast, a manager of the production, and one of the theater owners being indicted and convicted on charges of obscenity. Queer theater’s home was at fringe companies pushing the boundaries of who could be seen onstage.

Nevertheless, queer artists find ways to carve out places for themselves in the American theater canon and give their stories the mainstream recognition they deserve. These landmark plays and musicals by queer playwrights gave voices to people of different identities and cultures, promoted tolerance and acceptance from non-LGBTQ+ audiences, and inspired the next generation of theater artists.

April 1968 - *Boys in the Band*

Hailed as the first true ‘gay’ play on the mainstream New York stage, Mart Crowley’s freshman story about nine gay men at a birthday party gone wrong opened off-Broadway. In his *New York Times* review, Clive Barnes described the show as “not a play about a homosexual, but a play that takes the homosexual milieu, and homosexual way of life, totally for granted and uses this as a valid basis for human experience.”

March 1975 - *The Rocky Horror Show*

After a lucrative 1973 premiere on the West End, *Richard O’Brien’s The Rocky Horror Show* launched an unsuccessful Broadway run in anticipation of its film release, with one critic, Rex Reed, calling the play “trash” and “only for homosexuals.” Nevertheless, the sci-fi camp musical flourished with world tours, regional productions, and high-profile revivals. In 2015, *Newsweek* estimated at least one production of *Rocky Horror* had performed every night since its movie release. Much of the cult musical’s success comes from its unabashed depictions of gender and sexuality. O’Brien has described the show as celebrating the differences of “people who feel marginalized, alone and confused; somehow, it gathers them together and allows them to coexist.”

June 1982 - *Torch Song Trilogy*

The 4-hour epic, written by and starring Harvey Fierstein, opened on Broadway as a collection of 3 one-act plays: *International Stud*, *Fugue in a Nursery*, and *Widows and Children First!*. The plays explore Jewish drag queen Arnold's relationships with his partners, parents, and adopted son over multiple years. *Torch Song* was the first high profile play to discuss adoption by same-sex parents, and it stands out for its humanization of drag performers and domestic queer life.

April 1985 - *The Normal Heart*

Larry Kramer's searing drama criticized the indifference from government officials and gay community leaders towards the AIDS crisis as the audience follows Ned Weeks' futile attempts to save his community and lover. When the play premiered, more than 8,000 Americans had died due to the disease. *The Normal Heart* acted as a call to action for both the audience members and the government, demanding people care about the pandemic.

1993 - *Angels in America*

Both plays in Tony Kushner's two-part epic on the AIDS crisis premiered on Broadway, beginning in May with *Millennium Approaches* and with *Perestroika* joining it in December in alternating performances. Kushner's tale of community, identity, and the inevitability of change at the height of the AIDS crisis received the 1993 Pulitzer Prize for Drama. A decade after its Broadway premiere, Dan Odenwald of *Metro Weekly* described *Angels in America* as "one of the most important pieces of theater to come out of the late 20th century."

April 1996 - *Rent*

Jonathan Larson's Pulitzer Prize—winning rock-opera adaptation of Puccini's *La Boheme* transferred to Broadway after playing to sold-out crowds at New York Theater Workshop. It was one of the first mainstream musicals to give queer characters the spotlight, and the musical has been likened to *Hair* in giving a voice to a new countercultural generation. *Rent*'s Broadway run ended in 2008, becoming the 11th longest-running show in Broadway history.

April 2015 - *Fun Home*

The musical adaptation of Alison Bechdel's coming-of-age graphic memoir opened on Broadway after an extended limited-engagement at The Public Theater. *Fun Home* is the first mainstream musical to put a butch lesbian and her relationships—both familial and romantic—at the heart of its story.

Increasingly, stories about queer characters have also been created by non-LGBTQ+ playwrights. David Henry Hwang's *M. Butterfly* explores the cross-section between sexual attraction, gender norms, and racial stereotypes. *The Color Purple* is historic for having the first queer female protagonist in a Broadway musical.

Still, queer stories have a long way to go with representation in the American theater canon. These plays have been revolutionary in celebrating and supporting the LGBTQ+ community, but they are overwhelmingly about and written by white, cisgender men. The future of the queer theater, then, lies in bold and original stories from queer women, trans and non-binary folks, and artists of color. Playwrights like Matthew Lopez (*The Whipping Man*, *The Inheritance*), Tarell Alvin McCraney (*Moonlight*, *Choir Boy*), Taylor Mac (*Hir*, *A 24-Decade History of Popular Music*), María Irene Fornés (*Mud*, *And What of the Night?*), and Jen Silverman are all pushing the boundaries on who can be seen and heard onstage. Here's to the next fifty years.