

Queer Theatre and the Legacy of Cal Yeomans. By Robert A. Schanke. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011. Xxii + 229 pp. xxii + 229. \$85.00 cloth. (This review is forthcoming in the 2012 issue of *Theatre History Studies*.)

Fifteen years ago, while in the midst of a campus “culture wars” controversy over a production of Tony Kushner’s *Angels in America* at Wabash College, I received from a student a poem intended as an expression of support. Its last lines are directed at an anonymous gay man living in the year 2040: “You are Unafraid and Unashamed and Young. Your Body is unfettered, your voice strengthened by all our Anonymous, Unchronicled Wars,” words that came rushing to mind while reading Robert A. Schanke’s absorbing *Queer Theatre and the Legacy of Cal Yeomans*. In his preface, Schanke offers a 1979 quote from Yeomans ruminating in a tone similar to my student’s: “Perhaps in years to come some young queen will find [my writings] in an old trunk bought at an auction, will read [them] and say, ‘My God! Was that the way it was? Times sure have changed.’ Let us pray for that anyway” (xv). Yeomans’s prayer for changing times are much closer to reality in 2011, a fact that stands out in bold relief to a reader of Schanke’s scholarly yet highly readable book on the “Unchronicled” life and career of Cal Yeomans.

Many iconoclastic artists are likely to lead lives filled with contradictions, and Yeomans is no exception. Raised by a conservative Southern Christian family in Florida, he also had a mother who exhibited strong feminist proclivities, allowing him to experience from an early age the deep cultural divisions of mid-twentieth century America. The deeply conflicted (and bipolar) Yeomans ultimately emerged as a pioneer of early 1970s gay theatre. In that period, he was nearly singular in his radical exploration of explicitly sexual subject matter, radical in that its frank depictions of same-sex relations were controversial even within the gay community. Despite considerable accomplishment in Off- and Off-Off-Broadway theatres, Yeomans is little known today, even to those with knowledge of LGBT theatre history. Schanke’s book goes a long way to rectify this omission.

Arguing a convincing case for Yeomans’s place among that first wave of bold, gay dramatists whose plays kicked open the closet, Schanke stresses Yeomans’s centrality among his peers. Better-known Yeomans contemporaries including Lanford Wilson, Robert Patrick, Doric Wilson, and Robert Chesley have received somewhat more scholarly attention to date (if, as yet, too little), but Schanke also reveals much about the movement as well as the plays of Yeomans, the specific themes he explored, and what his turbulent life represents. Without question, the overtly sexual aspects of Yeomans’s plays, some of which were nurtured under the guidance of Ellen Stewart at LaMama, kept his work out of the mainstream limelight, a fact true of much gay-themed drama prior to the 1980s. However, Schanke makes clear that Yeomans’s achievement merits a more central place among his peers.

To understand Yeomans’s work, it is essential to understand his life within the context of his work. Troubled by erratic mental health, Yeomans found his way to the stage while a business student at Florida

State University, gaining experience in summer stock and at Atlanta's Pocket Theatre. Once in New York, Yeomans labored in various capacities at LaMama, but it is in this period that his bipolarity damaged professional and personal relationships. He ultimately moved to San Francisco, and there began writing plays, including his 1979 Cable Car Award-winning *Richmond Jim*, produced by Theatre Rhinoceros and during the first New York Gay Arts Festival. Robert Chesley called it the "first genuinely gay play," (93) and it generated considerable controversy, even within the gay community, at the time. Along with his subsequent plays, it represents only part of his creative legacy; Yeomans was also a poet and an accomplished photographer. Following a 1996 diagnosis of AIDS, he spent his final years focused on philanthropic activities, including the establishment of a professorship in his mother's name at the University of Florida, where his papers are housed. When unearthed by Schanke, this treasure trove of play scripts, poetry, extensive journals, various records of performances, photographs, and other personal effects provided an essential and invaluable foundation for *Queer Theatre and the Legacy of Cal Yeomans*.

The book succeeds on many levels, but most directly as a result of Yeomans's papers and most admirably in Schanke's incisive scholarship. Reconstructing a mercurial life and a career carried out away from the bright light of mainstream American theatre and society, Schanke, who has amassed an impressive resume of publications on gay and lesbian theatre (including major biographies of Eva Le Gallienne and Mercedes De Acosta), makes the most of the opportunity presented by Yeomans's collected legacy. Interviews with scores of Yeomans's friends and co-workers, and, most significantly, his own incisive analysis, permits Schanke to define Yeomans's achievement and the meaning of his life within the broader cultural evolution of gay culture in America. Schanke unspools Yeomans's life and times in engaging and intimate prose, illuminating that extraordinary era in the process. For those interested in LGBT theatre and its history, or in the personalities of a still too little-known era, this book is a page turner. The recovered accomplishments of Yeomans strengthen our common understanding of a complex, rapidly changing period in which gay artists and writers challenged American society to reconsider its values and its means of expressing them. If nothing else, Yeomans symbolizes the necessity of the stage in that reconsideration which has resulted, without question, in titanic social and aesthetic change in America, including progress toward the sexual liberation and true equality of a significant portion of the population.

In short, Schanke's book is an essential volume in the on-going and as-yet incomplete reconstruction of the LGBT foundation of contemporary American theatre, and its meaning in creating the "Unafraid and Unashamed" society my former student, like Yeomans, imagined for a faraway future that seems in reach.

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