

Kate Norbury and John Stephens

Staging the self

Performance/performativity as affirmation of subjectivity in teen gay film

In the films considered in this paper a principal character's engagement with theatres and stages enables him to express his creativity and intelligence as a form of personal empowerment, and the process functions in turn as a strategy to gain audience approval for gay characters. We argue that the shift in cultural perception represented in this trend has been mediated by a delicate and subtle combination of performativity and comedy.

While gay characters have appeared in film throughout its history, the first gay teens did not appear until the latter years of the twentieth century, when a new direction began to emerge with Hettie Macdonald's *Beautiful Thing* (1996), Simon Shore's *Get Real* (1998), and David Moreton's *Edge of Seventeen* (1998). Subsequent films have been concerned to explore the inner depths of gay teenagers, a recent direction perhaps prompted by the late twentieth-century reclamation of agency and resistance after the poststructural critique of the subject. The breakthrough film, and arguably the first that positively affirms young gay male identities, remains *Beautiful Thing*. Of key relevance for our concerns here is the grounding of subjective agency in the interests of the two gay protagonists: Jamie watches old-fashioned Hollywood musicals and idolises popular gay icon Lucille Ball, whereas Ste is the soccer star on his team. Over the next decade, such interests in forms of performativity – artistic or sporting – become a key element in representations and valorisations of gay subjectivity,¹ as the path-breaking 'coming-out' teen films from the late 1990s have been followed by

1 This development has not yet received scholarly attention, although to some extent Elizabeth Gould's work is a forerunner. See her 'Thinking (as) difference: lesbian imagination and music', *Women & Music* 11(2007) 17–28.

a steady stream of teen-oriented films with teenage gay characters. In these films the characters' creativity and intelligence are represented as a form of personal empowerment, and are also used as a strategy to gain audience approval for gay characters.

In this paper, we argue that the shift in cultural perception represented in this trend has been mediated by a delicate and subtle combination of performativity and comedy.² On the one hand, the thematising of various forms of creativity as performative attributes of gay characters taps into a wider cultural valorisation of creativity and achievement. On the other hand, comedic elements in gay teen films position audiences to align strategically with a broad range of queer positions. This particular combination of perspectives positions audiences from a wide cultural spectrum to perceive that the individual ways in which each of us enacts humanity are not constrained by sexual orientation. To illustrate this, we will make specific reference to John L'Ecuyer's *Prom Queen* (2004), Tom Gustafson's *Were the World Mine* (2008) and Adam Salky's *Dare* (2009), although there are several other films that could be discussed if space permitted.

An important element in the films we have chosen is a character's engagement with literal theatres and stages, but performance is highlighted off-stage as well as on-stage. The teen gay protagonists in these three films are, to a certain degree, always performing in order to negotiate their immediate social spaces. Ironically then, off-stage and at home, when many on-screen characters are usually represented at their most private and therefore as their most authentic, gay characters are to a certain degree still 'performing'. That is, they are putting on a face and taking on a role for the benefit of others. Marc Hall (*Prom Queen*) has known he was gay since the age of fifteen, but at the beginning of the film he has not spoken directly to his parents about his sexuality (in a comically awkward coming out scene, his entirely unsurprised – and surprisingly canny – mother points

- 2 While performance and performativity are discrete concepts – Judith Butler avers that the latter 'consists in a reiteration of norms which precede, constrain, and exceed the performer' (*Bodies That Matter* (New York 1993), 234) – they meld together in several circumstances: when characters are depicted as engaged in overt role-playing, as in embedded theatrical performance, or roles entailing disguise, such as cross-dressing; when characters are depicted as engaged in sporting events or other forms of structured competition; and when characters are shown as self-consciously conforming to behaviour protocols other than those which readers come to recognize as their habitual mode of behaviour.

to his dyed blue hair and gay icon Celine Dion poster in his bedroom). Marc's family are French speaking, Catholic and working-class, and thus a particular minority in Ontario – part of the early comedy in the film is the gap between Marc's assumption that his sexual orientation is a secret and his parents' awareness of it. In contrast, at the beginning of *Were the World Mine*, Timothy's father is absent, and his small-town mother is aware of his gay identity but refuses to accept it, not doing so fully until she sees him perform on-stage. Timothy is certainly not 'out' at school, although, as in the opening scene, he is the butt of familiar masculinist jokes. Ben, in *Dare*, is himself unaware of his own sexuality until the moment he sees Johnny perform on stage. His mother is a respected therapist, but even she seems oblivious. Ben finds her supportive but intrusive, and hides various aspects of himself from her, including his sexuality. That the teen gay characters still need to perform when off-stage is foregrounded to diverse effect. In brief, the opposition between the private and the public is not totally straightforward. Each character displays a range of performances on both the private and the public stage.

In *Were the World Mine* and *Dare*, there is a literal theatre and a literal stage on which characters within the film make an appearance and enact various roles. *Were the World Mine* culminates in the school's theatrical performance of Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. In *Dare*, the theatrical performance of Tennessee Williams' *A Streetcar Named Desire* takes place in a scene in the middle of the film, and is the catalyst for the transformation and awakening of teen gay character Ben. The room used for the various legal hearings in *Prom Queen* is structured as a theatre-like space incorporating actors, roles and an audience. The main hearing takes place in the penultimate scene of the film, which is followed by the comedic theatricality of the prom itself, when cameras, camcorders, postures and voice-overs combine to impart a metafictional quality to what Vinci, the principal camcorder operator, describes as this 'triumphant gay coming-of-age fairy tale'. All three films use theatres to comment self-reflexively on their own actors and the notion of performance narratives. Literal performance is foregrounded within their narrative worlds to give greater prominence to the notion of performance and to stand as a metaphor for performance, or performativity, in the wider social world both in and outside of the film.

The most theatrical of the three films is *Were the World Mine*, in which teen gay protagonist Timothy is cast as Puck in the school Shakespeare

production of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. The English teacher Ms. Tebbit (whose role encompasses both teacher and Fairy Queen) insists that all the senior boys must take part in the production. Performance, as she tells Timothy when she persuades him to audition, can 'awaken and empower what's within'. Once it becomes clear that Timothy is a natural singer his creative talents begin to develop, although the film's frequent slipping between lived events and comical, fantastic transformations of these events – as when a dodge ball exercise becomes a modern dance routine (see Figure 1), the rugby team transforms into a *corps de ballet* – also shows that imagination and latent creativity are key components in his unfolding subjectivity, and, in many ways could be seen as an adaptive response to a largely hostile environment. His imagination and innate musicality subsequently enable him to transform his world as he learns how to understand the rhythm of Shakespeare's language and interpret the meaning of the text.

Performance remains prominent as the film is structured around the play's



Timothy imagines the world can be different in *Were the World Mine*. (Reproduced with permission granted by WTWM LLC).

production: the frame story is punctuated by drama rehearsals, and by scenes in which Timothy's mother transforms her wedding dress into a pair of full-length fairy wings for Puck's costume. Eventually the performed story (the play) transforms the world of the frame, when Timothy, having discovered Puck's recipe within the Shakespearean text, uses it in tandem with a magical pansy to impose a new reality on the town, transforming it into a gay-friendly paradise. The result is a series of poignantly humorous

encounters, as the principle of mismatched couples that underpins the plot of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* now sweeps across the town, people converse in lines from Shakespeare, and gay and lesbian couples appear out of nowhere. Most importantly, school rugby jock Jonathan who has already expressed his appreciation for Timothy's 'nice pipes', drops his cheerleader girlfriend and reciprocates Timothy's desire.

But if the film is structured around a literal stage and drama, it is also organised around a different sort of stage and set of performances. The discrepancy between superficial appearances and what lies beneath them, between a person's physical appearance and their inner self, is thematised within the film at several different levels. Timothy's mother, Donna, as a new divorcee, has to find work at the start of the film, and ends up selling cosmetics to a variety of clients. Donna and her boss, Norma Fay, who turns out to be the school principal's wife, understand all too well the significance of first impressions and the importance of physical appearance. Donna's performances, which are necessary if she is to be successful in her daily work, are linked to Timothy's performances, which are equally necessary if he is to survive and flourish at school. Ironically, Norma Fay was herself a singer when she was younger. Donna's make-up is a literal thing, applied in the car or in front of a mirror, in order to make a certain impression. In contrast, Timothy's make-up magically appears whenever he is performing a song.

Another setting which further dissolves the clear demarcation between private and public performances is Timothy's bedroom, which functions as another sort of stage. Here we see him pretend to be asleep, so that he does not have to talk to his mother, we see him practising his lines, we see his friend Frankie rehearsing her guitar, and friend Max – in an early scene – being dressed up and photographed as a girl. The stills from that afternoon are pinned up on the wall behind Timothy's bed. Timothy can also disappear behind a curtain that appears out of nowhere, and end up on a set that resembles the formal theatrical school stage, with its large tree, moon and multi-coloured fairy lights. Further confusing the picture, Timothy sometimes appears on this stage in full costume, that is, wearing his full-length fairy wings and with his pansy tied to his waist, although his mother has not yet finished making his fairy wings at the point when he is already wearing them.

Magical transformation here functions metafactively as a figure for self-transformation through performance: Timothy shows his most

authentic and most rounded self during his theatrical performances and whilst enacting the role of Puck. As Ms. Tebbit sums it up, citing a familiar principle of spell-casting, 'it is not enough to speak, but to speak true'. The play is performed in the film's final scene, and transforms everybody's view of Timothy as well as their view of themselves. The Shakespearean scene represented is the one in which Puck restores order to all the 'mixed-up' lovers. In a similar vein, Timothy has had to reverse the love potion and return his family and friends to their 'customary' inclinations. Equally, when Frankie and her group perform the rock song *Pyramus and Thisbe* as part of the play's finale, the boy she has liked all along, Max, who is sitting in the audience, shouts out, 'that's my girlfriend, and she fucking rocks'. Her musical performance on-stage instantly transforms the way he sees her, making her desirable. After the play's finale, and back in his dressing-room, Timothy is congratulated and accepted by his peer group, finally seen and valued by his mother, and applauded by parents and teachers alike, including the previously homophobic sports coach. Jonathan still wants to be with him even though the love potion has now been reversed.

The notion of literal performance is also foregrounded throughout *Dare*, a drama set in Philadelphia centred around three high school seniors in their last few months of school: Alexa, a straight-A student, who excels at all her subjects and would like to be a professional actress, loner Ben whose only friend is Alexa, and bad boy Johnny, who does not seem to care very much about anything or anybody. As is common in mainstream film, multiple narrative perspectives are employed to tell the story,³ which is told first from Alexa's, then Ben's, and then Johnny's point of view. All three characters are involved with the school's theatrical production, Tennessee Williams' play, *A Streetcar Named Desire*: Alexa plays the lead female role of Blanche DuBois, Johnny plays her brother-in-law Stanley, who rapes her in the final scene of the play, and Ben is responsible for stage lighting. The central characters are thus preoccupied with reading, learning lines, rehearsing, learning how to act and staging.

The film constructs acting not as a role or a pose, but rather as a revelation of deeper authenticity, as if, in order to be a convincing actor, there has to be real emotional experience underlying the surface presentation. At the beginning of the film Alexa attends a performance of Eugene O'Neill's

3 The films of Atom Egoyan, especially *The Sweet Hereafter* (1997), are directly influential. For Egoyan's techniques, see Katherine L. Weese, 'Family stories: Gender and discourse in Atom Egoyan's *The Sweet Hereafter*', *Narrative* 10.1 (2002) 69-90.

The Ice Man Cometh, in the hope of meeting its lead actor, Grant Matson, a former student at their high school. When Matson accepts an invitation to attend a school rehearsal and comment on the students' performances, he cruelly (albeit accurately) dismisses Alexa's performance as shallow and inauthentic but is drawn to Johnny, in whose performance he sees something raw and real. Matson's remarks prompt Alexa to broaden her life experience, including losing her virginity. To this end, later in the same week, she dresses up, gatecrashes Johnny's party, and seduces him.

Literal performance on-stage also has the power to change other people as well as transforming the self. Johnny's on-stage performance as Stanley has an immediate impact on Ben. He has not even noticed Johnny up until this point, and Johnny immediately becomes desirable to him. Ben's desire is constructed contrapuntally to the response of the on-screen audience, in part by means of different visual positioning. The camera starts close-up on stage, and shows Stanley picking up Blanche and throwing her onto a bed, but then quickly moves up and around to show the audience's reactions to the final dramatic scene. Then the camera moves further up into the stage lighting area, from which perspective the rape scene begins to look and sound more like a seduction. The scene, which obviously was not part of the original script, continues, making the audience increasingly uncomfortable, whereas Ben becomes increasingly moved and begins to understand that he is sexually attracted to Johnny. This episode is pivotal for Ben, who will finally emerge with the strongest sense of self of the three characters, although at this point, as elsewhere, he is the object of humour, here becoming so mesmerised he forgets to dim the lights at the end of the play and has to be prompted by the director.

Performances off-stage are as significant as literal performances on stage. Johnny acts as a cool dude at school and in relation to Ben and Alexa, but behind the scenes he is lonely, on medication for panic attacks, and relies on his therapist to help make sense of his world. In retrospect, his sexual encounter with Ben, which is the catalyst for driving the three apart, is framed by his insecurity. Ben may be seen as a 'loser' at school, but his sense of self is more centred than Johnny's, who appears desperate for intimacy of any kind. Nevertheless, the film's closing moments, a chance meeting between Alexa and Johnny outside the stage door of Philadelphia's prestigious *Walnut Street Theatre*, where Johnny is now acting, hints that performance may still be his way to an authentic self. Alexa, in contrast, has failed to refashion her selfhood. She may have put a streak in her hair,

dressed daringly and experimented a little, but by the close of the film she is the dutiful daughter running an errand for her mother, with her hair tied back in a ponytail, looking suitably conservative. She will not study acting in New York, but will go to Penn State instead. Ben, on the other hand, becomes increasingly successful as the film progresses. He is cruised in a cafe while reading Edith Wharton, fellow teen Courtney confides in him, resting her head on his shoulder, and Johnny ends up by admiring him. All is not what it seems, and Ben's emerging gay subjectivity takes longer to appear from behind an initially inexpressive exterior. At the close of the film he is about to begin an internship with PBS and has gained a place to read English at Vassar. He has shown himself to be both creative and academically intelligent, and has secured audience approval in the process.

In John L'Ecuyer's *Prom Queen*, there is no literal stage or theatre, but in a sense, the court case turns everything into a theatrical production. Schoolboy Marc Hall is determined to take his boyfriend to the prom, and has all the details worked out. He will wear a white tuxedo and boyfriend Jason will wear a black tuxedo. They will be together, dance together, and enjoy an evening with their friends. The only problem is that he attends a Catholic school, and the school authorities will not allow it. When his situation is reported by the local press, Marc is contacted by human rights lawyer Lonnie Winn, who feels Marc's case is a human rights issue and a gay issue (and excellent self-publicity), and is willing to take on his case *pro bono*. Winn turns the case into a media circus. Every development is covered by the national media, broadcast on television and printed in the newspapers. Two geeks at school set up a website 'Marc to the Prom Dot Com' and a third, Vinci, uses a camcorder to film proceedings in what he refers to as 'the early style of Atom Egoyan'. The allusion, which draws a blank from his companions, is largely aspirational and neatly brings together humour and creativity: the tape they have uploaded to the website (footage from the meeting with the schoolboard) is chaotic and amateur, and a knowing audience finds humour in the gap between Vinci's efforts and his attempts to emulate Egoyan. The significance of the media's role is emphasised by other *mise en abyme* effects, such as Jason's job as an assistant in the retail shop *TV World*, where he watches multiple television sets all day long, or setting family scenes at home around the television, including the scene in which Marc announces to his parents that he is gay. A later scene depicts Marc's father eating lunch with fellow factory workers while they watch the TV news, headlined by 'Will Cinderfella Hall go to the ball?'

The metafictional effect of the frequent camcorder presence, the website streaming and the legal theatricality brings into sharp focus the function of creativity as a performative attribute. Marc's creativity is evident both in his skills as an English student and public speaker, with several debating trophies to his credit, and in the imaginative production of his own appearance. His constant variations to the school uniform are affirmed by the parallel and contrasting actions of a trio of girls who in unison make tiny adjustments to their own uniforms, such as making their skirts shorter. The role of costume as self-production is also foregrounded by the constant conversations about what to wear to the prom. Marc has known all along what he and Jason will wear, and he does not veer from his initial decision. But self-reflexive performativity is a more agentic production of selfhood than any media propagandistic production, as Egoyan had previously demonstrated in *The Sweet Hereafter*, and Marc correctly perceives that he is losing control of the direction the case is taking and the points that are being made. Whereas the wish to take Jason to the prom is a simple expression of his authentic sense of self, the media 'Cinderella' image is not. In one scene, Winn has his two Prince Charmings dress up in their tuxedos and do a 'photocall'. In another, he organises a party with canapés at the Halls' very simple home. Someone cruises Marc's father, and Winn takes the telephone out of Emily Hall's hands. Winn will do anything to justify a 'win', as is made clear in the brief scene when he urges Marc to persuade his English teacher, Miss Lawrence, to take the witness stand, since 'everything is a matter of interpretation'. This idea backfires badly, as Miss Lawrence, a liberal Catholic who had previously given Marc firm support, backs down and testifies against him when she senses that her career is under threat.

The film allows viewers to go 'behind the scenes' and understand what motivates Marc and what he is really trying to get out of the situation. At crucial points in the film, Marc perceives that he is in a lose-lose situation and wants to withdraw from the case. On one occasion, the school principal approaches him privately and suggests that his future will be 'tainted' if he proceeds with the case: in other words, Marc is obliquely told he will be made ineligible for the scholarship he needs if he is ever to leave small-town industrial Inniston and study and train to be the successful lawyer he intends to be. The principal's remarks strengthen Marc's determination to attend the prom. On the final occasion, after Marc has gone to bed on the night before he is to give evidence and has resolved not to appear, he receives an anonymous telephone call from a fellow gay teen, letting him know how

much the case means to him, and wishing him luck. At first Marc is seen in his bed from an aerial perspective, and the lighting creates the sign of the cross, with the vertical line reinforced by the line of the bed and Marc's body. Then the camera moves in to a sustained close-up of Marc's face during the telephone conversation when he empathises with the caller. Marc has consistently been called innocent by various characters in the film, as well as the newspapers, and this cinematic image, which appears here for the third time, confirms his lack of guile.

As the courtroom itself is transformed into a theatre-like space, every significant character takes the witness stand or appears in the audience. The case is structured as a play within a film, with each of the play's scenes – such as *Damnation*, *A Whole New World*, *Trouble in Paradise*, *Canon Law*, *Let's Get This Party Started* – announced as such by a blue screen with a title and animated cardboard cut-out figures. The courtroom – ironically – is the site of Marc's most sincere and powerful performance when he takes the witness stand. Performance is usually associated with putting on a show, doing something for effect, saying something for the benefit of an audience. In this case, the audience in the courtroom and the virtual audience created by worldwide media serve to bring out the fullest and most authentic version of the self. Marc's performance is in direct contrast with Miss Lawrence's performance in the stand, during which she says things viewers already know she does not believe. Marc, on the other hand, uses the stand to express himself and articulate his position as well as his priorities. Rather than listening to the voice of his lawyer, who has suggested he wash out the blue dye in his hair, dress a certain way, and give answers of no more than three words, Marc determines the way he appears in the stand. He intensifies the blue colour of his hair, which the film seems to privilege by giving him an animated 'sparkle' reserved for all the key characters and their happiest moments. He reveals his authentic self in the process of giving testimony. He has been able to withstand the pressure to conform and submit to the various authority figures in his life. He has stood up to the school principal, the school board, the Catholic church, and, finally, he has been able to stand up to his lawyer who has tried to change him and turn him into somebody he was not. Marc's performance, which includes a heartfelt apology to 'those he has hurt along the way', wins back Jason, who is listening in the audience, as well as finally securing permission to attend the prom with his boyfriend. The film links together the concept of authenticity and performance, which themselves are represented in

conjunction with creativity and creative self-expression.

By the close of each of these three films, the principal gay character has been empowered by his talents and his creative ability transforms the way he sees himself and the way others view him. Timothy is together with Jonathan, embraced by his mother, his mother's friends, the school and his peer group. His creative talent garners the approval of others and their respect and admiration. By the close of *Dare*, Ben's relationship with Johnny has ended, but he remains close friends with Alexa, and his sense of self is strengthened by his experience with Johnny, and he now has direction and purpose in his actions. Finally, at the end of *Prom Queen*, Marc is allowed to attend the prom together with his boyfriend Jason. He has stayed true to himself, and been accepted by his family and friends. A scholarship from the Automobile Union means that he will be able to leave Inniston, and become the first person in his family to 'carry a briefcase', as his father proudly says. The various teen gay characters have developed an enhanced sense of who they are through their creative involvement with the world of theatre, acting and performance. With an audience and in a theatrical setting, they are more readily able to lose their fears and inhibitions and thus assert their way of looking at and being in the world. In the process, they become more desirable in every sense of the word.