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Conversion Tactics in Terrence McNally's and Paul Rudnick's Gay Gospels

MARTHA GREENE EADS

In their 1995 essay “Preaching to the Converted,” Tim Miller and David Román respond to the charge that gay and lesbian dramatists write strictly for insiders already sympathetic to their political and artistic positions. Focusing in particular on queer community-based productions, Miller and Román challenge those who assume “queer artists to be didactic and queer audiences to be static” (173). While they do not deny queer productions’ particular appeal for insider-audiences, Miller and Román employ a provocative analogy to compare the coming-out process to an ongoing religious commitment. Defining their “converted” as the “identifiable critical mass of queers who together compose a congregation of people converted into believing in the necessity of queer identities and communities, culture and politics,” they assert that individuals within that group must remain “open to a series of conversions” (177, 178). Queer theatre, they argue, functions much as church services do, enabling participants to *sustain* their conversions by renewing their sense of identity and motivating them to act out of that identity (177).

While their innovative approach helps explain queer productions’ significance for gay and gay-friendly audiences before and during the NEA funding controversies of the 1980s and 1990s, Miller and Román had no way of anticipating the “evangelistic” potential of two controversial plays still to come: Terrence McNally’s *Corpus Christi* and Paul Rudnick’s *The Most Fabulous Story Ever Told* (both 1998).¹ Although both plays are by openly gay playwrights and celebrate gay themes, their playwrights’ wide mainstream appeal equips them to win converts to queer-friendly status as well as to sustain conversion in the manner Miller and Román describe.² Among those susceptible to such conversion are straight playgoers whose Christian religious conviction makes them curious about the playwrights’ use of biblical material or sympathetic to their treatment of gay rights as a social justice concern. Although, as Heather Hendershot has aptly noted, the “queer Left and the Christian Right

often appear diametrically opposed to one another,” not all Christians are on the Right, and Christians, whatever their sexual orientation, are no more static than Miller and Román’s queer converted (151).

This essay assesses the “conversion” potential of both *Corpus Christi* and *Most Fabulous* for straight Christian evangelicals, a group with growing cultural influence and political power. While critics have largely ignored this aspect of the two plays, Raymond-Jean Frontain asserts in his new concluding chapter to the second edition of *Reclaiming the Sacred: The Bible in Gay and Lesbian Culture* that Terrence McNally uses his play to “evangelize his audience, sending them out to preach a new gospel of tolerance; the gospel that *all men are divine*” (249). Frontain’s chapter, entitled “‘All Men Are Divine’: Religious Mystery and Homosexual Identity in *Corpus Christi*,” does not, however, explore the complex theological issues that inevitably limit McNally’s influence on evangelical Christians. This essay aims to fill that gap, tracing the theological implications of both *Corpus Christi* and *Most Fabulous* for traditional Christians and concluding that most evangelicals will find Rudnick the far more winsome missionary for the queer cause.

Right-wing religious groups’ disdain for both plays suggests that neither playwright is likely to influence most Christians, a recent sociological study shows that the question is worth exploring. Christian Smith points out that his turn-of-the-century evangelical research subjects are demonstrating “more diversity, complexity, and ambivalence than conventional wisdom would lead us to expect” (qtd. in Tolson 38).³ In *Christian America? What Evangelicals Really Want*, Smith distinguishes between fundamentalists and evangelicals, explaining that the evangelical movement developed in the mid-twentieth century in reaction to fundamentalism’s “more separatist, defensive, and anti-intellectual tendencies” (12). Smith distinguishes further between what he calls “evangelical political activists,” or the Religious Right, and “ordinary evangelicals” (48). Smith argues that ordinary evangelical Christians are remarkably unlike their more vocal counterparts, explaining,

Although perhaps not deducible from aspects of the Christian Right agenda or from certain Christians’ behavior, in fact the Christian scriptures and moral tradition are full of ethical instructions which naturally lend themselves to civility and tolerance. [...] The Christian theological and moral tradition, like all rich traditions, is multi-vocal. It can be read in a variety of directions, including in coercive ways. But it clearly comprises a host of ethical teachings that together can form in Christians a posture of charity, peace, forbearance, and respect [...] in a pluralistic environment. (57, 59)

Smith’s discovery helps explain why some evangelical Christians find McNally’s and Rudnick’s Bible-based dramas intriguing, despite their presumed outsider status to gay and lesbian culture.

Both McNally and Rudnick issue their unorthodox altar calls from overtly religious territory, risking the wrath of Christian conservatives but also piquing the curiosity of more progressive yet nonetheless religious theatre-goers. McNally, a lapsed Catholic, preaches a Good News of earthly, even earthy, love, modeled by his Christ-figure Joshua. Rudnick, who grew up in a Reformed Jewish family, sets forth a similar gospel, using comedy to argue for human love's necessity in a universe from which God has withdrawn. Both playwrights urge compassion, a virtue most theatre patrons (of any faith or none at all) would affirm.

Because McNally writes directly about Christ, however, his play almost invariably ends up alienating traditional Christians, including evangelicals, in a way that Rudnick's does not. Even those who can accept Joshua's active homosexuality find that *Corpus Christi's* underlying theology contradicts the orthodox understanding of Christ's salvific role in human history. Rudnick, in contrast, limits his biblical content to the Old Testament, reducing his risk of offending Christians in the same way. Religious viewers who can look beyond the sexual content of *The Most Fabulous Story Ever Told* (considerably more graphic than *Corpus Christi's*) find in it a thoughtful treatment of one of the Judeo-Christian tradition's most haunting questions: the problem of evil. While McNally's play is likely to retain the interest of only unconventional Christians (some of whom will also number among Miller and Román's queer "converted"), Rudnick's invites further consideration by even the evangelical Christian who might not immediately self-identify as queer-friendly.

McNally writes unabashedly about his play's having a message, although he never goes so far as to admit to sermonizing. He does, however, court martyrdom with *Corpus Christi*, which provoked bomb threats against the Manhattan Theater Club and a London-based Muslim group's death fatwa against the playwright himself. "If a play isn't worth dying for," McNally observed shortly after *Corpus Christi* opened in New York, "maybe it isn't worth writing" ("What I Know" 26). The play's central lesson, as its preface states, is "that we must love one another or die. Christ died for all of our sins because He loved each and every one of us. When we do not remember His great sacrifice, we condemn ourselves to repeating its terrible consequences" (vii). *Corpus Christi* is a call to combat the hatred that led to Matthew Shepherd's 1998 murder in Laramie, WY. While McNally's denunciation of violent hatred corresponds with Christ's own peaceful teachings, McNally's Christ-figure becomes problematic for many of the Christian viewers from whom the playwright might expect curious interest and even sympathy.

Christians can commend one aspect of McNally's treatment of Jesus in the character of Joshua: the play's emphasis on Joshua's embodiment corresponds with the orthodox emphasis on Christ's full humanity. In *Theater and Incarnation*, Max Harris affirms dramatic depictions of such Christian concepts, despite religious orthodoxy's historical suspicion of the theatre. Alluding to

the Gospel of John, Harris notes, “That the Word became flesh, moving through human space and time, and not word, yielding his sense to the reader one cluster of letters at a time, is inherent to the doctrine of the Incarnation. A theatrical imagination [...] may help to retrieve something of the sensual character of such an event” (19). Paul Baumann, a reviewer for the Roman Catholic *Commonweal*, identified the MTC’s *Corpus Christi* production’s ability to do just that. While he found much of the play deeply offensive, he nevertheless marveled at the power of its lifelike crucifixion scene, writing,

Despite *Corpus Christi*’s trivialization of the gospel, I left the theater struck by how resilient the Incarnation story remains as drama. Even twisted almost beyond recognition, the uncanny nature of Jesus’ actions speak to us in *Corpus Christi*. [...] There is a physicality to the theater that ups the ante, and Joshua’s crucifixion is one of the play’s more affecting moments. *Corpus Christi*’s uncompromising focus on Jesus’ maleness, the play’s insistence on eroticizing Joshua/Jesus’ body, somehow made the crucifixion and the suffering more real. So I came out of *Corpus Christi* thinking oddly orthodox thoughts, thanks to a patently blasphemous play. (14)

Despite his acknowledgement that McNally gets Christ’s physicality right, Baumann nevertheless insists that *Corpus Christi* is blasphemous.

McNally’s supporters might assume that Baumann’s condemnation comes in response to *Corpus Christi*’s assault on the Roman Catholic Church. The playwright’s memories of his own Catholic school experience, for example, figure prominently in his retelling of the New Testament story.⁴ As a teenager, Joshua suffers the cruel taunts of his high school’s football coach, a profane priest. When Joshua is later stripped and scourged before being crucified for being gay, his disciple Bartholomew adopts the role of a nun, pretending to punish an imaginary student for chewing gum during Mass. In the same scene, another disciple, James, takes on the role of a Catholic schoolboy and recounts the nun’s sensationalistic description of Christ’s crucifixion. Such a caricature of parochial education reveals McNally’s deep dissatisfaction with the church.

Roman Catholics are not the only Christians who object to *Corpus Christi*, however, and the play’s theological affront runs far deeper than a merely superficial send-up of priests and nuns would. Orthodox Christians of all denominations are likely to complain that McNally’s strategy for emphasizing Christ’s humanity undermines his divinity. Traditional Christianity maintains that Jesus was, paradoxically, both fully human and fully divine. McNally anthropomorphizes his deity, making his case most clearly in the *Corpus Christi*’s preface by declaring,

If a divinity does not belong to all people, if He is not created in our image as much as we are created in His, then He is less a true divinity for all men to believe in than He is a particular religion’s secular definition of what a divinity should be for the

needs of its followers. Such a God is no God at all because He is exclusive to His members. He is a Roman Catholic at best and a very narrow-minded one at that. Jesus Christ belongs to all of us because He is all of us. Unfortunately, not everyone believes that. (v)⁵

To be created in McNally's image apparently requires being sexually active, and the "god" he creates, Joshua, has sexual relations with at least two of his disciples, Judas and Simon.

Noting that "[v]ery few Christians are willing to consider that their Lord and Savior was a real man with real appetites, especially sexual ones," McNally complains that to such Christians, "[t]o imagine that He was not only sexually active but a homosexual as well is gross blasphemy. And they would deny others the right to conceive of Him as such. They do not understand that a good part of our humanity is expressed *through* our sexuality and is not exclusive of it. Such a concept is as alien to them as their notion of 'sin' and 'evil' is to me" (v). McNally suggests that in order to have been fully human, Jesus must have had sex.

Although his denunciation of repression may sound revolutionary, McNally's approach fails to acknowledge orthodox Christianity's nuanced treatment of Christ's embodiment. While it has long affirmed Christ's celibacy, the church and creative artists within it have called attention to his sexual *potential*. Granted, the medieval biblical dramatists whose tradition McNally adapts in *Corpus Christi* were silent about Jesus' sexuality, but Christian visual artists have long emphasized Jesus' male physicality.⁶ In *The Sexuality of Christ in Renaissance Art and in Modern Oblivion*, Leo Steinberg traces this theme in Western religious art. He asserts that artistic renderings of the naked Christ Child, some of which actually accentuate the infant's genitals, reflect a theological commitment to emphasizing the full humanity of the incarnate God. Jesus' nakedness on the cross, Steinberg explains, suggests his exemption from the postlapsarian curse: "Delivered from sin and shame, the freedom of Christ's sexual member bespeaks that aboriginal innocence which in Adam was lost. We may say that Michelangelo's naked Christs – on the cross, dead or risen – are, like the naked Christ Child, not shameful, but literally and profoundly 'shame-less'" (Steinberg 24). Such depictions combat the Gnostic heresy of docetism, in which a fully divine Jesus only *seems* to be a fleshly human.

John Dominic Crossan offers a careful study of conflicting understandings of Christ's being both fully human and fully divine in *The Birth of Christianity*, providing background that illuminates the unorthodoxy of McNally's position. Crossan explains that many of the earliest Christian converts came from traditions in which gods regularly appeared to have donned flesh and thus struggled to believe in Jesus' full humanity. Moderns, in contrast, have more trouble believing in his divinity:

The irrelevance of human flesh, on the one hand, and the unreality of divine flesh, on the other, presented earliest Christianity with a serious and profound problem concerning Jesus. Those believers were poised on that fault line in the ancient world, a fault line that involved the whole material world and all humans in it but was now focused on Jesus. We might think to ourselves, Of *course* Jesus was human, but was he divine? They had the opposite problem. If they believed that Jesus was divine, the question became, How could he be human? How could his body be real rather than apparitional and illusional? [...]

If Jesus was divine, was his body real and incarnational in the sense of fully and validly enfleshed, or was his body unreal and apparitional, only seemingly enfleshed, a docetic body (from Greek *dokein*, “to seem”)? One way of describing that clash of interpretation is to speak of incarnational as against docetic Christianity. (37)

McNally, as one of the moderns whose position Crossan describes, has no difficulty regarding Jesus’ body as real. He is immune to the temptation of docetism. His Joshua, however, is not God incarnate but is instead an adopted child of God, as (his play teaches) any human can become.

Although *Corpus Christi*’s anti-doceticism may initially satisfy orthodox Christians, the adoptionist element does not. Only by being God incarnate, Christian tradition teaches, was Jesus free from sin and thus able to save fallen humanity. Such a perspective holds that while Christ was capable of sexual experience and even drawn to it as a healthy adult, he remained celibate. His full humanity required that he experience sexual desire but not that he act upon it. Without vulnerability to all forms of temptation, including sexual desire, his resistance would have been unremarkable. That resistance is not an indictment of sexual expression’s sinfulness for its own sake but a sign of his refusal to engage in sex in its fallen state.

The art Steinberg analyzes illustrates this understanding. Renaissance painters and sculptors painted the Christ Child’s and the crucified Christ’s nakedness with surprising frequency, but they refrained from showing the genitals of the mature, living Jesus. When depicting “Christ’s adult ministry,” Steinberg asserts, “sexuality matters in its abeyance. Jesus as exemplar and teacher prevails over concupiscence to consecrate the Christian ideal of chastity” (24). Ultimately, however, Christ’s resistance to temptation is one of his most distinctive characteristics. Steinberg concludes that theological interpretations of the Fall explain the necessity of Christ’s celibacy despite his potential for sexual expression:

Blameless sexuality can be realized only in partnership. But while the present postlapsarian interlude lasts, no eligible partner can be sexually engaged without activating concupiscence. Thus a sexual stimulus from the Incarnate would necessarily introduce sin in another, which is, theologically speaking, impossible.

[...] But, say the Renaissance painters, the blessed original capability must be put back in evidence, since it co-defines human nature in its pristine condition. (297)

Sex became sinful only with the Fall, and only after Christ's crucifixion and resurrection can it – within the realm of all Creation – be restored to its prelapsarian state. For Jesus to have been sexually active during his earthly ministry would have only contributed to the brokenness of the fallen world. McNally, however, unlike the religious visual artists whose work Steinberg describes, depicts not only his Christ-figure's capacity for sexual expression but also his sexual practice.⁷

In discussing *Corpus Christi*, Frontain fails similarly to differentiate between capacity and practice and compares sexual orientation to racial identity. Noting that playgoers are likely to bring to *Corpus Christi* associations with religious visual art, Frontain suggests that gays need an image of a gay Jesus, in much the same way that “Africans and African Americans are allowed a black Jesus with whom they can identify, as opposed to the blond-haired, blue-eyed Jesus popularized in Italian Renaissance art” (237).⁸ Frontain glosses over, however, the argument most traditional Christians would make about the difference between racial identity and sexual behavior: that the former has no moral implication, while the latter does.

More deeply offensive to Christians than Joshua's active sexuality, however, is the way in which it calls into question Jesus' unique divinity. The New Testament is, after all, silent about Jesus' sexual behavior; orthodox theology on the matter has emerged in the centuries since his death. The New Testament does, however, emphasize both his being the unique fulfillment of Old Testament messianic prophecies and his crucifixion's and resurrection's salvific functions. McNally's challenge to these two positions is far more problematic than his imaginative rendering of Joshua/Jesus' romantic history.

McNally distinguishes his Joshua from the New Testament's uniquely messianic Jesus most clearly in a scene in which Joshua blesses a gay union. Although Bartholomew calls him “Messiah,” Joshua distances himself from the Old Testament and thus from the messianic tradition by dismissing the levitical proscription against male intercourse as “a terrible passage” (61). Here, McNally veers sharply from the New Testament accounts of the Jesus who came to fulfill every “jot and tittle” of Old Testament law (Matthew 5:17–19). He also insists that this messiah is anything but unique. In contrast to Jesus, who pronounces himself “the way, the truth, and the life” and asserts that “no one comes to the Father except by me” (John 14:6), Joshua declares that he is no different from anyone else. Early in the play, God tells Joshua, “All men are divine. [...] That is the secret You will teach them” (20). When Peter declares that he and his fellow-disciples would have followed Joshua anywhere, Joshua protests,

God is our leader. I'm just this guy like you. No better, no worse. I can't gut a fish, Peter, and I don't think I ever want to. I couldn't begin to cut someone's hair, Thaddeus. God knows, I can't sing. You've all heard Me. But when you do, Simon, you're singing for Me, saying things I can't. John writes down everything I say, which is good, because I don't remember half the time. We're each special. We're each ordinary. We're each divine. (50)

McNally's prefatory claim that "Jesus Christ belongs to all of us because He is all of us" serves to reinforce the play's argument that Joshua (and Jesus) are exemplary rather than unique and thus merit emulation rather than worship (v).

Again, the playwright's position is not entirely original; Christian orthodoxy has long battled teachings that Jesus was fully and merely human but adopted by God at his baptism. Proponents of adoptionism generally conclude, as *Corpus Christi* suggests, that any human is capable of divinity to the degree that Jesus was. Adoptionist Christology almost always yields an unorthodox soteriology, or theology of salvation. If any human can follow Christ's lead to the point of becoming "divine," the Crucifixion and Resurrection are unnecessary. McNally's play teaches that the disciples' allegiance to Joshua and modern-day playgoers' allegiance to Jesus should be sufficient to inspire kind and loving behavior. Watching *Corpus Christi* should prompt us, McNally hopes, to "begin again the familiar dialogue with ourselves: Do I love my neighbor? Am I contributing good to the society in which I operate or nil? Do I, in fact, matter? Nothing more, nothing less" (vi-vii). For the playwright, Joshua/Jesus models living passionately, compassionately, and tolerantly. He asserts that Jesus' life and teachings alone are enough to make him a hero.

That modeling extends, of course, to the realm of sexual behavior. Raymond-Jean Frontain suggests that Joshua's sexual practices and teachings serve as the heart of *Corpus Christi's* gospel: that Joshua/Jesus "offers his body and blood for the salvation of humankind" to teach "'another way' of sex, 'the way of love and generosity and self-peace' (*Corpus Christi* 19), not of lust, exploitation of others, and resulting self-disgust" (236). Comparing McNally's play to the medieval biblical dramas celebrating Holy Communion during the Feast of Corpus Christi, Frontain believes *Corpus Christi* similarly celebrates queer sex: "*Corpus Christi* suggests a redemptive sharing of one's body with those whom one loves; it points to a religious mystery by which the sharing of one's flesh and bodily fluid provide others with a transcendent happiness that they will share with others and, thus, extend peace and harmony into the world" (235). McNally, he asserts, depicts "the redemptive potential of sexuality," proclaiming "fellatio as salvation, as it were" (237).⁹ Whatever their judgments about that particular sexual practice, traditional Christians assert that Jesus' sacrificial death and the eucharistic rites memorializing it are uniquely salvific.

Christians are likely to object further that *Corpus Christi* is a sort of Good Friday sermon with no promise of an Easter Sunday resurrection. In the play's final scene, Joshua's death prompts one of his followers to declare, "He loved every one of us. That's all He was about" (81). All but one of the actors exit, leaving him kneeling by the crucified Joshua, who will not rise from the dead. Such a depiction presents the historical crucifixion not as a salvific event but as a horrible mistake. Christ's bodily resurrection may not have – and certainly need not have – happened at all. Such a position threatens orthodoxy more seriously than speculations about Jesus' sex life do and ultimately makes the play untenable to the Christian viewers who might otherwise be sympathetic to McNally's pleas for compassion.

Further undermining Christianity's claims about Christ's uniqueness is McNally's conflation of Joshua/Jesus and Matthew Shepard. The playwright goes so far as to suggest in *Corpus Christi's* preface that Shepard's death might be as meaningful as Christ's. After all, from McNally's perspective, "all [Joshua] was about" was loving humankind, not redeeming it (81). Any human, including the unfortunate Matthew Shepard, can do the same. Referring to the controversy surrounding *Corpus Christi's* New York staging, McNally notes that Shepard was murdered during the play's opening week and subsequently identifies the slaying with protests against the play:

[A]t the same time we were all feeling so good about overcoming these forces of ignorance and prejudice, a young man in Laramie, Wyoming, by the name of Matthew Shepard was losing his life to them. Beaten senseless and tied to a split-rail fence in near-zero weather, arms akimbo in a grotesque crucifixion, he died as agonizing a death as another young man who had been tortured and nailed to a wooden cross at a desolate spot outside Jerusalem known as Golgotha some 1,998 years earlier. (vi)

McNally goes on to explain that *Corpus Christi's* purpose is simply to ask audiences to "look what they did to Him. Look what they did to Him" – both Jesus and Matthew Shepard. "Jesus Christ died again when Matthew Shepard did," he claims (vii). The playwright goes on to suggest that those who reject his play reject Christ's example of loving tolerance. The next step for such individuals, he implies, is committing hate crimes. His line of reasoning not only unfairly makes criminals of those who protested *Corpus Christi* but also minimizes what orthodox Christians believe to be the unique power of Christ's sacrificial death. Such moves result from what *New Criterion* critic Mark Steyn suggests is *Corpus Christi's* being "the logical reductio of a process that has been gathering steam in the American theater during the long march of the AIDS epidemic – the need to find a spiritual validation of homosexuality" (50).

McNally's play is, for the most part, a demand for such validation. Such a

particularized focus largely limits his play's appeal to queer-friendly insiders, while his treatment of Christ further antagonizes outsiders who subscribe to traditional Christian views. In *Still Acting Gay*, even queer theatre scholar John Clum dismisses *Corpus Christi* for being exclusionary:

I have no doubt McNally is aiming for a personal statement here, but the play raises serious questions about the youth worship, narcissism, and single issue politics that are rife in the gay community. After a matinee of *Corpus Christi*, I overheard two elderly Jewish women in the ladies' room line complaining that the play did not speak to them. But who does *Corpus Christi* speak to beyond beautiful young gay men and their older admirers? (280)

Certainly, the play speaks to few if any evangelical Christians. Clum understands this situation, writing,

[E]ven I, a secular humanist, was bothered by the notion that Christ was crucified primarily because he was gay and that the most revolutionary thing he did was perform a gay marriage ceremony. This is an extreme example of the self-righteousness and self-congratulation that is leading gay critics to turn their sights on gay culture. There are no social, economic, or political issues here beyond gayness. (282)

Rather than illuminate the Christian Gospel's expansiveness, McNally has co-opted it in a way that alienates those who feel most connected to it.

Paul Rudnick's *The Most Fabulous Story Ever Told*, on the other hand, is a biblical drama that largely manages to avoid alienating traditional Christians in the same way that *Corpus Christi* does. Although its explicit sexual content and use of biblical material created some controversy, *Most Fabulous* provoked protest on a much smaller scale than McNally's play did. Catholic League president William Donohue dismissed *Most Fabulous* as "a routine homosexual play: full-frontal male nudity, filthy language, discussions of body parts, butch lesbians, effeminate gay men, ranting against nature, damning God for AIDS, etc.," but he and the League refrained from launching a formal protest against it. The League's 16 December 1998 press release explains that they "protested *Corpus Christi* because it was the work of a three-time Tony award winner and had a realistic chance of going to Broadway. But Rudnick is no McNally and his work has zero chance of being shown on Broadway" ("*The Most Fabulous Story Ever Told* Reveals A Lot").

Although Donohue attributed the Catholic League's relative lack of interest in *The Most Fabulous Story Ever Told* to its playwright's lower profile, Paul Rudnick's oeuvre is actually more accessible than McNally's to most Americans. Rudnick's screenwriting for such films as *Sister Act*, *Addams Family Values*, *Jeffrey*, *In & Out*, *Isn't She Great*, and *The Stepford Wives* have made

him a significant contributor to American popular culture. In reality, religious watchdogs found his play less offensive than McNally's because it focuses on the Hebrew scriptures, or the Christian Old Testament, rather than on the New Testament, and does not deal specifically with Christ. Donohue says his group's view, for example, is that "if there's something that's absolutely immoral, outrageous and obscene in the Museum of Modern Art this afternoon – and it doesn't touch Christianity – sayonara. That's for somebody else to deal with. Know your turf" (Mcshane). Rudnick's *Most Fabulous* concludes with the December 24 birth of a baby girl rather than a male Christ Child and thus not only ducks full-scale fire from Christian protesters but also skirts the Christological and soteriological issues *Corpus Christi* raises.

Undermining viewers' expectations by making the baby born on Christmas Eve female also seems appropriate for a Jewish comic playwright. Rudnick often downplays his Judaism, however, wisecracking to me in an October 2000 interview that he "always thought [his] bar mitzvah would be conducted in Latin – it was so non-devout." He told *New York Daily News* interviewer Howard Kissel in 1999 that "we were too religious to have a Christmas tree" but "not religious enough to celebrate all eight nights of Chanukah." Wryly, he added, "We did have a real sense of worship for gift wrap and ribbon and whatever came from Hasbro and Mattel." Calling himself "a New Jersey Joan of Arc," Rudnick boasted of having been "the first child in [his] synagogue to be bar mitzvahed in a rust-colored double-breasted blazer and coordinated slacks" (47).

Despite his cavalier attitude toward his family's faith, Rudnick acknowledges having been aware of his religious identity from an early age. He observed in our October 2000 interview, "I think I grew up – as a lot of Jewish kids do – in the shadow of the Holocaust. There was always that sense that you had better deal with Judaism, with your Jewish heritage, because other people will be." He confessed in the same interview to being fascinated by religious questions: "You are ultimately confronted with all those big, ultimate, endless areas of life: with death, and the afterlife, with suffering, with the death of loved ones. What do you do with that?" He explains elsewhere that writing *The Most Fabulous Story Ever Told* showed him that even though such questions haunt many people, few Americans are willing to talk openly about faith:

I had been writing other plays that dealt with sex, a topic that has become as ordinary as singing lion cubs and the destruction of Earth by malevolent asteroids. God suddenly struck me as a final taboo. What could make an audience, or friends at a cocktail party, more embarrassed than an intimate discussion of their most personal religious beliefs? Wouldn't matters have been far more titillating if Bill and Monica had been praying together? Chronic depression, infertility and incest are now talk show staples; God is relegated to the far reaches of cable, as a form of evangelical home shopping. ("If Sex" 7)

Rudnick asserts that despite its controversial sexual content, *Most Fabulous* has more to do with religion than with sex.

Before beginning *Most Fabulous*, however, Rudnick had written about religion only for comic purposes. He penned the original script and collaborated on the screenplay for *Sister Act* (attributed to the pseudonymous Joseph Howard), the hit film about a nightclub entertainer who hides from the mob in a convent. His play *The Naked Truth* features a nun whose Tourette's syndrome leaves her with a salty vocabulary, and *Jeffrey* shows a young gay man encountering Mother Teresa and fending off a lecherous priest. In the film *In & Out*, a priest advises a confused high school teacher to explore his sexual identity by sampling sex with his fiancée. While such characterizations open Rudnick to charges of anti-clericalism, at the very least, the playwright insisted in our 2000 interview that his treatment of the priest in *Jeffrey* is "deeply affectionate." Unlike McNally, he expresses no animosity toward the Catholic Church. Instead, he explained to me that he depends on religious characters to write good comedy:

I think the reason why Roman Catholics, like Jews, are very useful in terms of theater, is because for comedy, especially if it's a comedy of manners, you need manners. You need structure. You need commandments. [...] If you don't have rules, coming either from a government or a religion, it's very tricky to have comedy in any kind of behavioral vacuum.

Ironically, Rudnick credits religious fervor with inspiring him to write his gay biblical drama. He launches his introduction to the play by tipping his hat, if not to Catholics, to the religious Right, for claiming that "God made Adam and Eve, not Adam and Steve." Reflecting first on the statement's comic possibilities, Rudnick soon "realized that that mere Bible satire was not particularly satisfying, and would grow wearisome for a full-length play; what I wanted to do was explore larger matters of faith through a frame of biblical events" (*Most Fabulous* 6). His ensuing exploration of faith, passionate if unconventional, yielded a work that takes the divine seriously, even as it offends. He mused in our interview about the timeless questions that intrigue him:

The most basic questions [...] are the questions religion actually tackles. And for many people, actually answers. And that's what's so exciting about any discussion of religion. That's also why religion endures and continues to be invented, or discovered. Because we're not just talking about fine points of theology; we're talking about basic belief. Is there a God? Which God might you choose? Which God chooses you? Why has religion been historically such a critical part of human development? Why have they been so necessary, so tragic, so beloved, so everything?

In *Most Fabulous*, the playwright considers all these questions – questions that go far beyond contemporary debates about homosexuality or responses to a particular hate crime.

Rudnick grounds his questioning in territory religious seekers have struggled to chart for centuries: the problem of evil. In *Our Tribe: Queer Folks, God, Jesus, and the Bible*, Nancy Wilson notes that “in theological circles, this problem is called *theodicy*: understanding how evil and oppression can exist in a world created by a good God” (7). While Christian thinkers since at least the second century have attempted to resolve this problem, the Jewish quest for wisdom on the subject is, of course, even older. Genesis and Job are the foremost classic ancient Hebrew texts that address the problem of evil. More recently, Jewish theologians have struggled to develop post-Holocaust theodicies. That Rudnick, a creative artist well aware of his Jewish antecedents, would find suffering a compelling subject should come as no surprise. As a gay man, Rudnick may also share the particular theodical concerns Wilson attributes to gays and lesbians. She notes that “as a lesbian pastor in the gay and lesbian community, I have had hundreds of conversations with people agonizing about whether God truly created *us* as we are. And if so, could God love us; and if so, why was there so much suffering, pain, and homophobia?” (7).

Although his play is anything but a systematic theology, Rudnick does use it to pose many of the same questions Jewish theologian David Birnbaum considers in his 1989 *God and Evil: A Unified Theodicy/Theology/Philosophy*. “Century after century,” Birnbaum explains, “most theodicies have either limited aspects of God’s power, limited man’s claim to virtue, or limited man’s ability to comprehend God’s true virtue. None of these options is truly satisfying to religious man of reason – who wishes to maintain God’s power, man’s virtue, and man’s ability to comprehend” (10). In the centuries-old and now Holocaust-heightened tradition of religious questioning, Birnbaum asks, What are God’s purpose and origins? What is humankind’s purpose? How does the human potential for freedom reflect divine potential? How does the pursuit of freedom necessitate banishment from Eden and, subsequently, vulnerability to moral and natural evil? And finally, might human freedom require God’s retreat from the world? *The Most Fabulous Story Ever Told* offers a dramatic depiction of those very questions.

The play’s first move is to postulate God as a creative Being: a female Stage Manager, “confident, aloof and slightly swaggering” (13). The Creation itself becomes the opening of a play; the Stage Manager first cues the house lights and then moves on to light itself: “Monday, go. Light, go. I love this ... First sunset, go ... Tuesday, go. Oceans, go” (13). Rudnick considers human purposes through the character of the jockstrap-wearing Adam, who asks shortly after meeting the similarly scantily clad Steve:

Where did we come from? How did we get here? Who made us, who made this

garden, and why? Are we the only ones here, are we meant to be together, are there things we're supposed to do, how will we know, will our relationship be good for the both of us, will we be together forever, what's forever, and is this all part of some plan, or did it just happen? (15)

Masking the seriousness of his play's questions by putting them on the lips of a giddy, nearly naked man, Rudnick then explores them throughout the play.

Although Adam and Steve subsequently and graphically invent oral and anal sex, Adam is just as interested in theological enlightenment as he is sexual adventure. His spiritual sensitivity enables him to converse with characters Rudnick has placed in the audience: a disapproving Catholic priest, an outspoken Jewish woman, and a naïve Mormon girl. "Why can't I see everything?" Adam asks them. "I want to know who made me! And why!" (21). The priest, warning him about human betrayal beyond the Garden, and the Jewish woman, extolling his unspoiled natural setting, advise him not to leave, but the Stage Manager gives Adam the freedom to call the cue to strike the set. He does so, only to find his new surroundings outside Eden strange and frightening. Within the first few minutes of his play, Rudnick has illustrated David Birnbaum's assertion that humans, like God, seek to fulfill their potential for creative growth but that their pursuit of autonomy opens them to hostile environmental forces, or natural evil, and human wrongdoing, or moral evil.

Banished from the Garden, Rudnick's characters experience both cold weather and cold shoulders from their fellow humans. Steve is furious about Adam's having taken them out of the Garden, and the lesbian couple they meet, Jane and Mabel, also blame Adam for the Fall. The characters repeatedly hurt one another and reconcile as they pass through early Hebrew history. Steve and Jane both betray their partners in bestial flings on the Ark, and Adam and Steve keep coming up against their spiritual differences. Near the end of the first act, after meeting Pharaoh, Moses, and hordes of Egyptian slaves, Steve finally challenges Adam: "Adam! I am right here, in front of you! Where I have been since the beginning! Why do you need a book or a god, to tell you to love me? Are you that pathetic? Are you that weak?" Replying that, on the contrary, he is "[s]trong enough to believe," Adam prepares to leave Steve. Addressing Pharaoh's slaves, Adam asks,

Who wants to find a righteous way to live, in a world filled with deception? ...
 Who wants to discover the true nature of God, and the purpose of the universe? ...
 Who wants to prove that love does not endure? Not once you leave the garden.
 In the world, you will be hurt. And betrayed. And you will be better off – alone.
 (53)

Here, Rudnick makes explicit the source of his play's greatest conflict: the struggles among human beings. As he questions God's existence and purpose

and considers the inevitability of suffering, however, he never abandons the hope that human love might surpass misunderstanding and even betrayal.

Rudnick shifts from the first act on a hopeful, comic note: Adam and Steve reconcile again, this time as Mabel prepares to deliver a child. Dressed as magi, the two men enter a kitschy Nativity scene. Before the baby is born, however, Adam's cell phone rings, signaling the end of the act and the move to modern-day Manhattan. The second act takes place in Adam and Steve's loft apartment, where they entertain a very pregnant Jane, Mabel, and other friends at a cocktail party. Although the quips continue to fly, the characters grapple with the effects of homophobia, their frustrations with one another, the memory of Mabel's baby's death a year ago, and the specter of HIV. Steve is undergoing AIDS treatment, and he and Adam continue to argue about the existence of God. Their conflict comes to a head when a disabled lesbian cable television rabbi arrives to perform Jane and Mabel's commitment ceremony. Sensing Steve's hostility toward religion, Rabbi Sharon pursues him: "You I respect ... Because I've heard you're stubborn. You say show me. You say no ... Because God did you wrong. AIDS. The homeless. The Holocaust" (78). Accusing him of indulging in self-pity, Sharon asserts that she, too, has suffered and raged at God. She describes the epiphany she had while recovering from a nearly fatal accident:

And I come to, three weeks later, paralyzed, half-blind, and I think, what the fuck is going on? ... And some nurse gives me this book, called *Why Do Bad Things Happen to Good People?* And all I'm thinking is, I don't care! What I want to know is, why do *good* things happen to *bad* people? I'm in a wheelchair, and Saddam Hussein's in a Mercedes. I can't walk, and O.J.'s on the ninth hole ...

And then – it hits me. What doesn't? Why it happened. And what I'm supposed to do, with my useless legs and my messed-up life ... So I buy me some airtime and I say, listen up, New York! Take a look! [*She gestures to herself in her wheelchair.*] This is your nightmare! This is the ice on the sidewalk, the maniac in the hallway, this is God when she's drunk! So if I can still believe, if I can still thank someone or something for each new day, if I can pee into a bag and still praise heaven for the pleasure, then so the fuck can all of you, mazel tov, praise Allah and amen! (79)

Rabbi Sharon's honesty about her own religious questions, as well as her respect for Steve, are compatible with what Birnbaum calls a "Jewish tradition [that] gives wide berth to aggressive inquiry" (6). He notes that "occasionally God reveals His approval of those who contend with Him directly, as He did in the case of Job" (6). While Steve has shied away from direct contention, however, Rabbi Sharon has not. Having come to terms with God and with suffering, she points out that "[s]ometimes God delivers" (79). Steve's AIDS medications, she suggests, are a kind of miracle. Adam concurs, pointing out that Steve had nearly died and that Mabel's two-day-old baby had died the

previous Christmas. “And tonight,” he says, “look at Jane. Look at you” (80). Soon afterward, Jane goes into labor, and the cast comes together to deliver her daughter.

After their guests leave, Adam and Steve tidy their apartment. Pressed by Adam, Steve admits that his AIDS drug cocktail has stopped working. Again, they argue about spiritual issues, but Steve placates Adam by giving him a cashmere Armani sweater and asking, “So – do you feel better now? About my dying? And losing your faith?” (89). Adam laughs helplessly at the ridiculousness of the question, but curses God. Steve affirms the curse, but Adam admits that he cannot stop looking for meaning: “I need ... a story ... I can’t believe in the Virgin Mary, not anymore. But I can believe – in Jane and Mabel. And I can’t believe in the baby Jesus. But I can believe in our baby ... And I won’t tell her about the Garden of Eden. But I will tell her about Central Park ... And the day we met” (89). Their reverie yields to the Stage Manager’s calling, “Central Park, go” (89), and the re-enactment of the pair’s first meeting in an edenic Central Park. As the Stage Manager calls for the curtain, Adam sees her and calls out:

ADAM. Wait! Hold on! Hold everything! ... You! That voice! The Stage Manager! Are you God?

STAGE MANAGER. [*After a beat.*] Well, I think I am.

ADAM. [*With overwhelming yearning.*] But are you really God? I still need to know! Have you really made everything happen? You have to tell me!

STAGE MANAGER. No I don’t. I don’t have to tell you anything. What do you want from me? I’ve been doing my job, and now I’m into overtime ... No! I’m done! That’s it! I’m outta here!

She exits, calling for a taxi, leaving Adam and Steve to embrace. With “a mixture of sexual anticipation and great good humor,” Adam calls, “Curtain, go!” and the play ends (91).

Haunting questions about God’s origins and purpose remain unanswered, but they have, at least, found expression. The human characters have found their own purpose: to pursue self-actualization through love in the face of suffering. As they take on their tremendous responsibility, God withdraws. Birnbaum has posited that divine withdrawal in terms of “contraction,” arguing that God must back off, in a sense, “for the purpose of granting man the necessary freedom to achieve his potential” (103). Post-Holocaust humanity, then, is “not alone in the cosmos” but “currently essentially on [its] own” (159). Humanity should not despair over this reality, Birnbaum charges; instead, “man’s spirit should be exhilarated. He should be uplifted by the awesome potential he has been given in trust; by the confidence placed in him by his Deity; by the magnitude of his personal freedom” (159). Although *Most Fabulous* gives no evidence of having been directly influenced by Birnbaum’s

work, the parallels are striking. Adam and Steve are alone without a Stage Manager, but they will find fulfillment in loving one another and their friends, come what may. Rudnick has thus used the play to work through the very issues Birnbaum explores in his theological text.

Rudnick anticipated that *Most Fabulous* would prompt questions about his own religious convictions and confesses in the play's introduction:

When I wrote MOST FABULOUS, I knew that people would ask me if I believed in God. The play is my answer, but that's a little easy. I think I believe in the transcendence of art, in that perishable moment when an audience and a performer and a play work together, when laughter and technique and emotion create a conspiracy of pleasure. I believe in theater and style and [director] Chris Ashley; I believe in what human beings can do when you give them fifty bucks to buy some cheap red polyester velvet. Some people need more, something with vengeance and commandments and jihads; all I need to keep going, to stay spiritual, is [actor] Peter Bartlett in a Santa suit. (11)

Elsewhere, he has asserted that "[i]n groping for spiritual exaltation" the only god he can worship unquestioningly is comedy ("If Sex" 7).

The Most Fabulous Story Ever Told is, however, more than a bawdy sex comedy. Like *Corpus Christi*, *Most Fabulous* affirms human love as the primary source of spiritual sustenance. Unlike McNally, however, Rudnick acknowledges the range of problems associated with love: humans fight with one another, and they are unfaithful to one another. Rudnick's questioning about natural evil, too, appearing in his play in the forms of Rabbi Sharon's paralysis, Mabel's miscarriage, and Steve's AIDS, makes his a classic Jewish dramatic treatment of theodicy. As in Birnbaum's model, Rudnick's play suggests that if God exists, She or He must withdraw for humankind to reach its full potential for autonomy and creativity.

If Christians object to an aspect of the play other than its sexual content, that aspect would likely be Rudnick's assertion that God has withdrawn from Creation. More significant than the play's often-gratuitous nudity and staged sex acts is its presentation of divine abandonment.¹⁰ For traditional Christians, who believe that God became incarnate in Jesus Christ and subsequently remains on earth in the form of the Holy Spirit, such an assertion demands a theological response. Instead of protesting his play's productions, Christians might rightly see them as occasions for dialogue about universal suffering, human purposes and potential, and the possible fulfillment of messianic prophecies in Jesus Christ. Christians, however, ought also to ask how their God can accommodate sin and suffering, and Rudnick has raised the questions their Gospel attempts to answer.

While its serious treatment of theodicy provides Christians with one obvious point of entry into *Most Fabulous*, the play's comic, life-affirming ele-

ment should also seem welcoming to them. Despite their often-dour public image, Christians claim to hope in an ultimate comic resolution to fallen existence. (Dante's *Divine Comedy*, after all, is about the progression from hell's brokenness to heaven's bliss.) In *Theatre and Incarnation*, Max Harris observes that Christians should feel a kinship with comedians "due to the affirmation of humanity that lies at the heart of the Christian faith" (144).¹¹ Looking to Julian of Norwich, Harris asserts that faith in Christ as the crucified and resurrected incarnate God should equip individuals to respond to the world's fallenness "not as heroes but as human beings, mudstained and capable of laughter, trusting in the great comic anthem, 'All shall be well, and all shall be well, and all manner of thing shall be well' (145).¹² Writing about drama, he argues that "the comic resolution is one in which 'all shall be well,' not simply because lovers are reunited or heirs properly identified, but because there is no fundamental dichotomy, with respect to our humanness, between what we are and what we ought to be. Such a resolution in the theatre need not be grounded in a Christian faith" (144). Although Adam and Steve's final embrace in *Most Fabulous* hardly signifies the kind of romantic union most evangelical Christians would endorse, the characters' devotion to one another and Adam's taking over when the Stage Manager exits show that they have become what they "should be," in the play's own terms.

Indeed, some religious viewers have expressed admiration for *The Most Fabulous Story Ever Told*. Paul Rudnick asserted in our October 2000 interview that people of faith have been among the play's most appreciative viewers:

Interestingly, often the most religious audiences were absolutely the best crowds. It's something that Chris Durang once told me. He wrote a play called *Sister Mary Ignatius Explains It All for You*, which many people think of as a scathingly outrageous anti-Catholic diatribe. But, as he said, priests and nuns were the best audiences you could imagine because they know what you're talking about. And even if they don't share your entire perspective on religious matters, they're in the trenches with you. And that's great. So with *The Most Fabulous Story*, there were a lot of people who came expecting the play to be merely an attack on organized religion, or to be targeting one specific faith, and they were shockingly and sometimes quite pleasantly surprised that the play was something else entirely.

Rudnick's discovery of Christian viewers' being "in the trenches" with him indicates that he has succeeded in making not only queers but also some traditional Christians feel like "insiders" when they watch *The Most Fabulous Story Ever Told*.

Rudnick has made the most of his wide popular appeal, writing a gay play that offers much to straights – even evangelical Christian straights many might expect to be hostile to the queer cause. First, in contrast to McNally, he avoids offending Christians at the deepest level by stopping his biblical treat-

ment at the Nativity. Next, he uses contemporary issues not to take a political stand on a particular topic but to explore broad, even universal questions about human nature, suffering, and religious experience. Finally, while *Corpus Christi*'s tone is preachy, disapproving, and even shrill, *Most Fabulous* conveys an attitude of openness, exploration, and celebration. Even though, as a theodicy, it takes on such potentially depressing topics as betrayal, miscarriage, and AIDS, the play offers laughter as both a balm and a bridge.¹³ Many who have lost lovers and friends to AIDS will find that *Most Fabulous* gives them an occasion to laugh through their grief, while others without direct connection to queer experience lower their defenses in laughter as they reflect on the play's underlying themes. In so doing, they open themselves to caring about queer characters and even to the possibility of coming to believe "in the necessity of queer identities and communities, culture and politics" (Miller and Román 177). In his gay gospel, then, Paul Rudnick not only offers sustenance to the queer "converted" but creates a dramatic climate in which even evangelical Christians may well find their sympathies converted, too.

NOTES

- 1 *Corpus Christi* premiered at the Manhattan Theatre Club (after a protest-prompted production hiatus) on 13 Oct. 1998, and *Most Fabulous* opened at the New York Theater Workshop on 14 Dec. 1998 and moved to the Minetta Lane Theatre the following February.

Although the Manhattan Theatre Club operates on a larger scale than the community-based queer venues at the center of Miller and Román's study, Ben Cameron discusses the MTC's suspension of *Corpus Christi* as creating conflict among insiders, asking, "Was our attention diverted from the external attack by our feelings of internal betrayal? After all, we expect attacks from the outside, but if this could happen within our 'family' ..." (6).

- 2 Neither McNally nor Rudnick writes from the fringes; McNally has won a Pulitzer Prize and four Tony Awards, while Rudnick's accolades include an Obie, an Outer Critics Circle Award, and the John Gassner Playwriting Award.
- 3 Most recently, the American Society for the Defense of Tradition, Family, and Property has targeted the Madison, WI, production of *Corpus Christi* scheduled to open at the Bartell Theatre in March 2004 ("Trends and Events" 10).
- 4 Born in Florida but reared in Corpus Christi, TX (where the play is set), McNally has almost certainly included his own coming of age – and coming out – in his palimpsestic biblical drama. Robert Brustein asserts in his *New Republic* review that Joshua is at least as much McNally as he is Jesus and complains about the dramatist's "theatrical marketing of gay self-glorification. *Corpus Christi* is hardly the first time that Jesus has been 'outed.' [...] But it is undoubtedly the first play in which the playwright seems to have confused the story of Jesus with the story of his own life" (34).

Disagreement exists, however, about the extent to which McNally means to equate Joshua with Jesus. The Manhattan Theatre Club press release billed the play as focusing on a “young gay man named Joshua on his spiritual journey” (qtd. in “Oh, Jesus!”), and *Texas Monthly*’s Keith Kachtick described Joshua similarly as “a gay Christ-like character from Texas who undergoes a spiritual journey” (28). *National Catholic Reporter*’s Joseph Cunneen, on the other hand, called the play a “retelling of the life of Joshua (clearly intended to be Jesus),” and *U.S. News and World Report*’s John Leo warned readers about “a play about a homosexual Jesus character named Joshua who has sex with his disciples and is crucified as ‘king of the queers’” (17).

- 5 Frontain cites this passage from McNally’s preface approvingly (231), yet he complains in his own preface “that Jesus is too often remade in the image and likeness of each believer” (xiv).
- 6 Although several critics have noted the wordplay at work in the title, acknowledging that Corpus Christi is the Texas town in which McNally grew up, the Latin term for “body of Christ,” and the feast day in its honor, they were slow to acknowledge the medieval cycle plays’ having been called “Corpus Christi plays” because of their frequent performances on the feast day. When I asked him by e-mail about this connection, McNally replied, “Yes, I had the medieval drama very much in mind when I wrote *CC*. Not a single NYC critic seems to have been aware of that” (18 June 2000).

The play’s preface, however, explicitly acknowledges *Corpus Christi*’s roots in the medieval dramatic tradition, stating, “*Corpus Christi* is a passion play. The life of Joshua, a young man from south Texas, is told in the theatrical tradition of medieval morality plays. Men play all the roles. There is no suspense. There is no scenery” (vi). McNally indicates that *Corpus Christi* is “more a religious ritual than a play. A play teaches us new insight into the human condition. A ritual is an action we perform over and over because we *have* to. Otherwise, we are in danger of forgetting the meaning of that ritual, in this case that we must love one another or die” (vii). Raymond-Jean Frontain explores this issue in some detail in “All Men Are Divine.”

- 7 Another art critic whose work sheds light on McNally’s and Rudnick’s is Eleanor Heartney, who has analyzed controversial photography, sculpture, and painting from the 1980s and 1990. In “Postmodern Heretics,” published two years after Miller and Román’s essay and a year before *Corpus Christi* and *The Most Fabulous Story Ever Told* opened, Heartney concludes that a Roman Catholic background has provided visual artists such as Robert Mapplethorpe and Andres Serrano with a “corporeal” and “transgressive” perspective (33). Heartney believes that Mapplethorpe’s homoerotic photographs and Serrano’s “Piss Christ,” so vilified by political and religious conservatives during the NEA funding flap, are the products of a “sensual and complex Roman Catholic-based culture” (33). Heartney asserts that Catholicism “encourages a multilayered view of the world, a view that tends to persist even if an individual has discarded the Church’s orthodox doctrine”

- (37). Such a view, she explains, prompts artists to explore issues of embodiment and desire and to use religious symbols in ways that artists from more literal Protestant or non-Christian backgrounds might not. McNally's fascination with Christ's embodiment, demonstrated by his emphasis on Joshua's sexual activity, reflects a quasi-Catholic sensibility not unlike that of Mapplethorpe and Serrano. Heartney also considers the photography of Joel-Peter Witkin, whose father was Jewish. Witkin, whose artistic subjects include corpses, fetuses, and the deformed, has said that his work reveals his "love-hate" for God (qtd. in Heartney 35). Heartney explains that "by reveling in the monstrous and repulsive, Witkin mocks God's supposed mercy and challenges the promise of universal redemption" (35). She asserts that "the black humor which runs through Witkin's work is an expression of the artist's rage at God, who not only refuses to show himself but dispenses death and deformity among mankind" (35). Rudnick, whose humor is generally more playful than dark, nevertheless shares Witkin's deep concern with the problem of evil. Such a preoccupation with suffering has characterized Jewish creative art at least since the book of Job.
- 8 John Clum also acknowledges a link between *Corpus Christi* and religious art, writing, "Martyrdom can also be sexy. One has only to look at the Renaissance paintings of the martyrdom of Saint Sebastian [...] to see that depictions of torture can be erotically charged. A semi-nude, beautiful young man is being penetrated by arrows. He is standing, but passive. The picture is one of pleasure, not pain. *Corpus Christi*'s picture of Christ as a beautiful young man, crucified in his white jockey briefs (the image adorns the cover of the published text of the play), is similarly erotically charged" (280).
 - 9 Frontain divides gay treatments of biblical texts into two categories: the "transgressive" and the "appropriative." While I find his terminology useful, I disagree with his reading of *Corpus Christi* as appropriative (2, 237–38).
 - 10 *Most Fabulous* also stereotypes Roman Catholic, Jewish, and Mormon characters and pokes fun at issues of race, class, and physical disability. Rudnick is, however, an equal-opportunity offender: his politically incorrect depictions of homosexual characters are unflattering enough to prompt *Variety* critic Charles Isherwood to label *Most Fabulous* "the gay equivalent of the productions that tour the black 'chitlin' circuit'" (85).
 - 11 Harris credits Nathan Scott with identifying the Christian's sympathy for the comedian in *The Broken Center*.
 - 12 Nancy Wilson also insists on the importance of Christian laughter, writing, "Church ought to be a place where people are loved, comforted, and uplifted, but also a place where we are shocked, shaken and turned around. Also, a place where we can laugh. I'm not talking about giggling or chuckling but deep, roll-in-the-aisles laughing. Not every Sunday perhaps, but frequently. In the Middle Ages, it was the custom to begin every Easter Sunday morning sermon with a joke. It was the day above all days when we were to laugh in church, to laugh at the devil who had been utterly defeated and outsmarted" (60).

- 13 In his discussion of theatre critics' objections to Rudnick's use of humor in *Jeffrey*, Daniel Mufson points out that the play "veers away from engaging the issue of AIDS and instead focuses on the issue of engaging AIDS. One step back from the abyss, and yet, because we are separated from the time of AIDS by nothing, it is as close as we can get to confronting a problem while still preserving one of the few things that makes us worth saving: a sense of humor" (119).

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