Murder Most Queer

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The Closet Is a Deathtrap

The previous chapter encompassed a broad range of time, showing the changes in the dominant understanding of the homicidal homosexual in three different eras. The next two chapters explore in greater depth the “gay liberation era,” from the rise of gay political activism and culture in the late 1960s through the emergence of the AIDS crisis in the 1980s. This era witnessed great changes in the position of LGBT people within American culture, and changes in the representation of homosexuality onstage were evident in two very different realms of theatrical production, both of which featured many instances of the homicidal homosexual. In this chapter, I focus on thrillers produced mostly by straight playwrights for Broadway in the 1970s and 1980s, but concurrent with these productions there was a “queer theater” produced mostly by gay men and lesbians in alternative theater venues, which I’ll discuss in the following chapter.

Since this chapter examines the construction and deconstruction of the homicidal homosexual within popular thrillers, I am compelled to include a spoiler alert. WARNING: This chapter candidly discusses many of the secrets and surprises contained in a number of thrillers. Readers who do not wish to have these works “spoiled” are encouraged to read and/or view the relevant plays, films, and novels and then return to this chapter.

The 1969 Stonewall Riots have taken on symbolic significance in gay culture and politics in part because that queer uprising against police harassment functioned so successfully as public performance. Marginalized minorities are more easily intimidated as long as they are stigmatized, ashamed, and afraid of public exposure—in other words, in the closet. Stonewall was an instance of public resistance when queers stormed “out of the closet and into the street,” declaring public identities in a public
space. The rebellion resulted in the unprecedented public exposure of queer people, first through media coverage of the riots themselves and subsequently through the annual marches and parades that commemorated the event. All this exposure was part of “coming out,” one of the key principles of the gay rights movement. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick argues in *The Epistemology of the Closet* that in the nineteenth century homosexuality was “distinctively constituted as secrecy,” most famously named “the love that dare not speak its name,” and that “the closet is the defining structure for gay oppression in [the twentieth] century.”

The gay liberation movement viewed coming out as a crucial strategy not just in personal liberation from the closet but also in fighting social perceptions of queer villainy. If members of society could realize that gay people were their family members, neighbors, teachers, movie stars, and so on, then they would not fear or hate gay people as immoral monsters who threaten civilization.

Theatrical performance also played a role in opening the closet door, especially since the theater was often a more hospitable site for gay representation than were other cultural venues during the gay liberation era. The 1970s saw the flourishing of a queer theater movement that included openly queer theater artists such as Charles Ludlam (discussed in chapter 4), queer theater companies such as Theatre Rhinoceros and TOSOS (The Other Side of Silence), and scores of queer characters ranging from the ordinary to the outrageous. However, this community-based movement did not beget the most popular play with queer characters in the post-Stonewall/pre-AIDS era. *Deathtrap* (1978), by straight playwright Ira Levin, is a Broadway thriller about two men who must remain in the closet with two secrets: they are lovers, and they are murderers. Sidney and Clifford collaborate on the murder of Sidney’s wife in act 1 and then murder each other in act 2. With 1,809 performances on Broadway, hundreds of professional and amateur productions around the world, a Hollywood film version, and revivals continuing in the twenty-first century, *Deathtrap* is one of the most commercially successful plays ever written about same-sex lovers. Despite its immense popularity, however, few studies of gay drama include *Deathtrap*: John M. Clum’s *Still Acting Gay* makes a passing reference to the film version, and Alan Sinfield’s *Out on Stage* neglects it altogether.

The murderous lovers in *Deathtrap* raise the familiar specter of queer villainy, but a close reading can highlight the queerness of Levin’s play and its potential to subvert the homophobic formula that conflates sexual
deviance with murder. Instead of locating evil within a particular person, thus essentializing the sinister queer, this thriller identifies the closet, a space of entrapment for queer people, as an unsafe space where people die—a deathtrap. *Deathtrap* enacts anxieties and fantasies about the dangers of the closet in the post-Stonewall era, thus offering a productive and provocative site for exploring our perceptions of queerness—and especially closeted queerness—as both exciting and dangerous, both dramatic and terrifying.

*Setting the Trap: The Construction of the Closet in the Postmodern Thriller*

The traditional thriller might be read as resolutely “straight”: a normative detective discovers the truth, thereby restoring the moral order temporarily upset by the transgressive act of murder. Marvin Carlson, in *Deathtraps: The Postmodern Comedy Thriller*, suggests that during the 1970s and 1980s the genre took a more postmodern form, embracing “self-reflexivity, epistemological incertitude, and subversion of traditional codes.” Elements identified by Carlson as typical of the postmodern comedy thriller (all of which operate in *Deathtrap*) include a mixture of witty repartee and shocking gore, a false death that leads to a “resurrection,” a blurring of the distinction between reality and contrived theatricality, and a playful destabilization of genre conventions. It is little wonder, then, that many of these thrillers have a queer bent. One of the most enduring narrative conventions is heterosexuality, and the postmodern comedy thriller often surprises spectators by playing into and then subverting their heterosexist expectations.

The “epistemological incertitude” of the postmodern thriller makes it an ideal genre for the representation of anxieties about the closet, which Sedgwick describes as “the relations of the known and the unknown, the explicit and the inexplicit around homo/heterosexual definition.” Alisa Solomon, in *The Queerest Art*, highlights the theatricality inherent in this understanding of the closet.

Gay men and lesbians may have long found some pleasure and solace in theater as a place where the acting they employed in everyday life to hide their sexuality enjoyed more productive expression.
In other words, the closet of everyday life is a theatricalized space, one that demands a performance of the self. The closeted queer enacts a heterosexual identity in order to survive in a homophobic society, and thus, supposedly, he or she develops a more profound understanding and appreciation of the art of theater. Furthermore, Solomon suggests that dramatic art inherently utilizes and celebrates such epistemological incertitude.

Theatre, by *its* nature, reveals and revels in the very angst the antitheatricalists were frantically trying to quell: the notion of identities as contingent and malleable and the suggestion that categories can be playfully transgressed—*queered*.

Solomon supports this point by focusing on the Elizabethan boy-actress, arguing that the goal of his performance was not to deceive audiences into believing that they were watching a woman but to enjoy the boundary-defying pleasure of the performer’s “both-at-once status,” boy *and* woman, thus calling into question the absolute or insoluble nature of either category.

Both of Solomon’s observations point to duplicity—that is, contradictory doubleness—as a trope of queerness and theatricality. Duplicity, however, is generally regarded as a negative quality since it implies deception and dishonesty. The sinister threat of the traditional thriller is based on the duplicity of the killer, who deceptively tries to conceal his or her identity, thereby creating a crisis of identity (e.g., “Any one of us might be the killer!”). It is up to the detective to distinguish between truth and lie, expose actual identities, and facilitate the return to moral certainty. It is not coincidental, then, that theater people (especially playwrights and actors) and closeted queer people often feature in postmodern thrillers. Both are skilled in the techniques of deception, making the queer theatrical a doubly dangerous person.

The exploitation of queer duplicity has a long and well-documented history in the theatrical thriller. The genre has a predominantly English pedigree, and two of the most successful English thrillers, both of which have exerted great influence on the American thriller, contain direct and indirect allusions to queer sexuality. Agatha Christie’s *The Mousetrap*, which has been in performance in London’s West End since 1952 and is the longest-running play in the world, features two queer suspects in a murder mystery set in a remote guesthouse. Miss Casewell is a strident
young woman who walks and talks in a “manly” fashion, while Christopher Wren is a sensitive young man with an appreciation for attractive policemen and chintz. As Alan Sinfield points out, neither of these characters turns out to be the murderer, but their sexual difference marks them as potentially psychopathic and therefore “plausible red herrings.”

Another landmark thriller, Anthony Shaffer’s *Sleuth* (1970), does not have blatantly queer characters but still invokes a creepy homoeroticism. *Sleuth* involves two male rivals matching wits and playing intricate games, supposedly in order to win a wife and a mistress, but the play ends with the older man (Andrew) begging the younger man (Milo) to forget the women and come live with him so they can continue playing games together. Milo, in a knowing parody of the legal language surrounding homosexuality, mocks and belittles Andrew when he scornfully asks, “Is it legal in private between two consenting games-players?” He knows that there is something perverse, even perverted, about two adult men involved in role-playing. Rather than let Milo leave, Andrew shoots him dead. Queerness, even when it seems contained in the world of theatrical parlor games, proves deadly.

In *Deathtrap* Levin takes the sinister queerness that lurks in Christie and Shaffer and combines it with a plot motif that runs through many of his previous works: the innocent wife threatened by a duplicitous husband. Levin, of course, was not the first to use this version of the woman-in-jeopardy formula, which appeared perhaps most famously in Patrick Hamilton’s *Gaslight* (1938), known on the American stage as *Angel Street* (1941). In it a criminal marries a young woman and then deliberately tries to drive her insane so he can gain control over her home and a hidden fortune. The duplicitous husband is the villain in two of Ira Levin’s best-selling novels, which were both adapted into popular films, *Rosemary’s Baby* and *The Stepford Wives*. Levin creates women who are simultaneously innocent victims and detectives, piecing together the clues that lead them back to their own homes, where their deceptive husbands have put them in mortal danger. In both works, the husband has secret allegiances that the wife must discover. In *Rosemary’s Baby*, Rosemary’s husband has joined a cabal of Satanists who will use her womb to spawn the antichrist, and in *The Stepford Wives*, Joanna’s husband is part of the Men’s Association, which kills women and replaces them with servile robots. Even in Levin’s previous stage play, *Veronica’s Room* (1973), a young woman is “sold out” by her boyfriend, who is in cahoots with an old couple who murder the young woman as part of a cathartic ritual. In each case, the duplici-
tous man succeeds, while the woman, who often turns to the duplicitous man for help, is doomed.

In *Deathtrap* the husband’s secret association is not with a satanic cabal or robot-making conspirators but a same-sex lover. The murderous triangle of husband, wife, and same-sex lover also has some precedent within the genre. Henri-Georges Clouzot’s 1955 film *Les Diaboliques* was based on the novel *The Woman Who Was No More (Celle qui n’était plus)* by Pierre Boileau and Thomas Narcejac, in which a man and his mistress conspire to kill the man’s wife. But once the deed is done, the wife returns from the dead, literally scaring the man to death. The wife and the mistress are revealed as lesbian lovers who planned and staged all the events in order to get rid of the husband, whose weak heart made him susceptible to their deadly theatrics. (Clouzot’s film alters the allegiances within the triangle so that there is no explicit lesbian relationship, although some viewers may see these man-killing women, who also form a butch-femme duo, as coded lesbians.)

Closer to the time of *Deathtrap*’s creation, another Broadway play combined the elements of the duplicitous queer and the spouse in jeopardy within a theatrical milieu. Bob Barry’s *Murder among Friends* ran for a mere seventeen performances during the winter of 1975–76. This flop serves as an interesting precursor to *Deathtrap*, however, because it concerns a vain actor and his wealthy wife, both of whom are having a secret affair with the same man—a handsome young agent—and both of whom are collaborating with the agent to murder their spouse. The question raised in the first act is who will succeed in murdering whom, and this question is directly tied to the question of which partner—and thus which gender—the bisexual young man will choose. Will he side with the husband and kill the wife, or will he side with the wife and kill the husband?

Christopher James has noted that *bisexuality* is a term frequently applied disapprovingly as a “misfit third category of sexual identity” to “indiscriminate lovers, fence sitters, or closet cases.” This (mis)understanding of the bisexual is central to *Murder among Friends*, which perpetuates the notion that bisexuals are people who simply have not made a choice between heterosexuality and homosexuality. Critics referred to the young man at the apex of this triangle as a “dastardly double agent” and an “AC/DC sneak,” disparaging bisexuality as inherently duplicitous because being attracted to men and women supposedly precludes faithful monogamy. If the bisexual man is faithful to a woman, then he is no longer considered bisexual and becomes “straight,” just as he becomes “gay” if he
is faithful to a man. The faithful bisexual would seem to be an oxymoron, making him a perfect character for a play about deception and switching allegiances. As it happens, the bisexual agent is released from the necessity of choosing a homosexual or heterosexual identity because at the end of the first act he turns out to be the murder victim, double-crossed by the husband. In act 2, we learn that the husband plans to frame his wife for the murder, but she outsmarts him, sends him to jail, and wins a handsome new lover before the final curtain. With the queer husband going to jail and the bisexual lover in the morgue, heterosexuality wins the game.

Intriguingly, the sinister threat in Murder among Friends, Deathtrap, and other postmodern thrillers is not closeted homosexuality but closeted bisexuality. By the mid-1970s, bisexuality was enjoying a certain vogue, with celebrities such as Joan Baez, David Bowie, and Elton John publicly announcing their bisexuality. Both Time and Newsweek ran cover stories in May 1974 titled “The New Bisexuals” and “Bisexual Chic.” The bisexuality of central characters was important to the plots of plays such as Butley (1972), Gemini (1976), and The Shadow Box (1976), as well as films like Sunday Bloody Sunday (1971) and Dog Day Afternoon (1975). Despite all this exposure, critics of bisexuality still viewed it as even more destabilizing and sinister than homosexuality. Fritz Klein elaborated on the nefarious reputation of the bisexual in his book The Bisexual Option (1978).

The bisexual resembles the spy in that he or she moves psychosexually free among men, among women. As well, the bisexual resembles the traitor in that he or she is in a position to know the secrets of both camps, and to play one against the other. The bisexual, in short, is seen as a dangerous person not to be trusted, because his or her vision of party loyalty, so to speak, is nonexistent.

Often mistrusted as the most duplicitous of deviant sexualities, bisexuality denies the heterosexual/homosexual binary. The bisexual visits both “camps” but has “loyalty” to neither.

The supposed threat of bisexuality has survived the 1970s and is part of current discourse, from popular advice columnist Dan Savage warning of the emotional dangers that threaten gay men and lesbians who date bisexuals, to fear-inducing reports of African American men “on the down low,” secretly having unsafe sex with other men and carrying HIV back to trusting wives and girlfriends. The bisexual is constructed as a threat in these thrillers (as in real life) because he or she brings the menace of
homosexuality into the domestic sphere of heterosexuality. Homosexuality may be threatening, but as long as it is something separate and distinct from heterosexuality, heterosexuals can recognize it and safeguard themselves. The bisexual spouse who blurs these distinctions brings homosexuality into the home, posing a danger to the innocent and unsuspecting partner and destabilizing the binaries that structure heteronormative ideologies: hetero/homo, safe/dangerous, clean/diseased, and us/them.

*Deathtrap*, which premiered in 1978, performs the generic tropes and the cultural biases of its era; but Levin’s postmodern thriller “plays” with these tropes and biases, particularly with respect to his characters’ sexual orientation. As a result, the play is open to both normative and subversive interpretations. *Deathtrap* presents queer villainy but complicates this homophobic convention by locating the source of the villainy not in the queer characters’ sexual orientation but in the closet that confines them. Even while Levin uses the closet to generate the shocks and thrills necessary to the genre, he creates a smart, nuanced depiction of how the closet actually functions. A close reading of *Deathtrap* reveals that this enormously popular play, sometimes dismissed, as many popular works are, as “mere entertainment,” contains a surprisingly strong critique of the closet as a dark and deadly place.

**Springing the Trap: Queer Killers Caught in the Closet**

A pair of piercing blue eyes, topped with masculine black eyebrows and a black wave of hair, stares out from the poster and program art (designed by Frank “Fraver” Verlizzo) for the original production of *Deathtrap*. But where there should be a nose and mouth we see instead bold capital letters created by a typewriter spelling out “DEATHTRAP,” with the final four letters in bright red. The letters function as a partial mask, such as a bandit might wear, obscuring the man’s identity. The covered mouth also signifies secrecy, since this man is unable to speak, and perhaps even suffocation, since he is unable to breathe. We must then stare deeper into his eyes to search for any expression of the secret. Are the eyes seductive, inviting attraction and desire, or are they sinister, showing the predatory glare of the hunter staring down his prey? This man with an unspeakable secret is both seductive and threatening.

*Deathtrap* takes place entirely in the Connecticut home of Sidney Bruhl, a middle-aged playwright who has not had a hit in years. The stage
Window card featuring the artwork of Frank “Fraver” Verlizzo for the 1978 Broadway production of Deathtrap by Ira Levin. ©FRAVER
props that decorate his writing studio are evidence of his life's work as the creator of thrillers: guns, handcuffs, maces, broadswords, and battle-axes. As the curtain rises, Sidney tells his wife Myra that he has received a manuscript from a former student, one Clifford Anderson, who has written a play called *Deathtrap*, a “one-set five-character moneymaker.” Sidney half jokingly says that he would consider killing his former student in order to pass the play off as his own, but the perpetually worried and highly strung Myra convinces him that it would be more prudent to collaborate with the young man. That evening at the Bruhl home, Clifford is impressed and flattered by Sidney's offer to collaborate, but he politely declines, convinced that *Deathtrap* is fine as it is. As Sidney gives Clifford a demonstration of some of his props, particularly Houdini's trick handcuffs, he suddenly grabs a garrote off the wall and strangles his guest to death. Myra is horrified, and as soon as Sidney has finished burying Clifford in the vegetable patch, she requests a divorce. They are interrupted by the arrival of Helga ten Dorp, a Dutch psychic who is renting the house up the road. She comes because she senses great pain in the Bruhl household, and she warns Sidney that a young man in boots will attack him. Soon after Helga leaves, Clifford, covered in mud and blood (and wearing boots), bursts into the house and clubs Sidney over the head with a piece of firewood. As he advances on the terrified Myra, she drops dead from a heart attack. Sidney gets up, and the truth is revealed: Sidney and Clifford are lovers who staged a fake murder in order to cause Myra's fatal heart attack.

In act 2, Sidney discovers that Clifford, who is now living with him as his “secretary,” is secretly writing a play called *Deathtrap*, dramatizing everything that has happened so far: the ruse of a surefire playscript, the fake murder of a young playwright, the wife's fear-induced heart attack, and so on. Clifford tries to convince Sidney that in the current culture of scandal, the play's similarity to real life will only make it more successful. Sidney, however, is flabbergasted and refuses to let Clifford write the play.

No. Absolutely, definitely no. I have a name and a reputation—tattered, perhaps, but still valid for dinner invitations, house seats, and the conducting of summer seminars. I want to live out my years as “author of *The Murder Game*,” not “fag who knocked off his wife.” (52)

Clifford threatens to leave and write the play elsewhere, which drives Sidney to deceit: he pretends to relent and agrees to collaborate on writing the play. Under the pretext of “working out” some stage combat scenes
for act 2, Sidney and Clifford confront each other with a variety of weapons. Soon, however, they begin to fight in earnest: supposedly harmless stage props become lethal weapons, and the struggle between the men culminates when Sidney shoots Clifford in the chest with a crossbow, and Clifford uses the same bolt to stab Sidney to death. A week later Helga ten Dorp and Sidney’s lawyer, Porter Milgrim, piece together the events that led to Sidney’s and Clifford’s deaths and decide that it would make a great plot for a thriller. But they begin to argue over who has the right to write the play, and they threaten to kill each other as the curtain descends.

After successful tryouts in Boston and previews in New York, Deathtrap opened on Broadway at the Music Box Theatre on 26 February 1978. Directed by Robert Moore,27 the cast included John Wood as Sidney Bruhl, Marian Seldes as his wife Myra, Victor Garber as his student Clifford, Marian Winters as the psychic Helga ten Dorp, and Richard Woods as the lawyer Porter Milgrim. Deathtrap opened to mixed reviews, with an especially bad notice from the New York Times critic Richard Eder. In the Sunday edition of the Times, however, Walter Kerr gave Deathtrap a rave review, as did other critics, who praised the play’s clever plotting and mixture of witty comedy, thrilling suspense, and knowing satire of the theater world. In general critics who liked the play usually kept its secrets, making little or no mention of the queer “surprise.” Critics who did not like the play, however, felt less obliged to be discreet. Eder led the pack by boldly stating, “Mr. Wood and the student are revealed to be homosexual lovers.”28 Erika Munk in the Village Voice made the same revelation, adding that “the use of homosexuality as a plot device is pure exploitation.”29

While these critics should not, perhaps, have let the queer cat out of the bag, they did not ruin Deathtrap for audiences, since homosexuality is not just a shocking surprise at the end of act 1. Rather, the entire play can be read as a dark exploration of the sinister yet exciting duplicity involved in constructing and maintaining the queer closet. Deathtrap is remarkable because the characters, particularly Sidney as the masterful writer of thrillers, are amazingly skillful and clever (and therefore entertaining to watch) as they manipulate the truth and each other to achieve their goals. For Sidney the big deception, the one that masks the darkest truth and the one worth killing for, is the pretense of heterosexuality. By killing Myra, he avoids a messy divorce, which could expose his homosexual affair. By killing Clifford, he prevents the younger man from writing a play about their relationship. Sidney is motivated by the desire for wealth, fame, artistic success, and romantic happiness, but all these can be sacrificed if the
appearance of heterosexuality is in danger. The closet must be maintained at all costs, even murder.

Sidney spends much of act 1 constructing his closet. One of the key techniques he uses is to accuse other people of queerness. Sometimes the comments are offhanded and comical, such as when Myra reprimands him for not knowing about their new neighbor, Helga ten Dorp.

Myra: Sidney, what were you smoking Friday night when the rest of us were smoking grass? She’s taken the McBain cottage for six months. Paul Wyman is doing a book with her. He was impersonating her for fifteen minutes.

Sidney: Oh. I thought he was finally coming out of the closet. (10)

Sidney’s gratuitous and bitchy comment is for the benefit of Myra and the audience. In the very first scene, Sidney has commented derisively on someone else’s closet, thereby deflecting any suspicion about his own. The first scene also establishes Sidney as a habitual liar on matters both large and small, causing Myra (and the audience) to second-guess his motives and intentions. When friends call to invite them out, Sidney conceals their reason for staying home: to meet with a young playwright. Worried that Sidney is seriously planning a murder, Myra asks him why he lied, to which he responds, “Is it their business? I don’t know why I lied; I’m just a liar” (13).

In act 2, after Clifford has moved in with Sidney and is even sharing a symbolically laden partners’ desk with him, Sidney goes out of his way to maintain his closet. To divert any suspicions that his friend and lawyer Porter Milgrim may entertain about his relationship with Clifford, Sidney uses the technique of preemptive accusation against his lover. Sidney exposes and then defuses the issue by asking Porter if he thinks Clifford is gay. Sidney says:

I have a sneaking suspicion he might be. . . . But, as long as he does his job well I suppose it’s none of my business, is it? [. . .] Besides, people would talk if I took in a female secretary, wouldn’t they? (43–44)

Through savvy manipulation, Sidney convinces Porter (who represents Sidney’s privileged access to legal, financial, and social networks) that the very fact of hiring a handsome, young, male secretary, even one who “might be” gay, is proof of his own heterosexuality. For the audience, how-
ever, which already knows that Sidney and Clifford are lovers, this exchange is loaded with dramatic irony. Sidney must continue to hide his relationship with Clifford because that relationship is based on two crimes: murder and queer sexuality. If either one of those crimes is exposed, the other one will be exposed with it. The other important element of Sidney’s exchange with Porter is the revelation of his readiness to betray his lover in the interests of preserving his own closet.

Sidney’s wife Myra, the first victim of his duplicity, becomes another entry in Levin’s collection of doomed wives. At the beginning of the play, Sidney’s announcement that he has received a “perfect play” from a former student clues the audience in to Myra’s impending demise.

*Myra:* I should think you’d be proud that one of your students has written a salable play.

*Sidney:* For the first time in eleven years of marriage, darling—drop dead. (8)

Dropping dead is precisely what Myra will do at the end of the first act. In contrast to the heroines of *Rosemary’s Baby* and *The Stepford Wives,* however, Myra is not a wholly sympathetic victim. As a character, she can be unpleasant, both agitated and agitating with her fears and demands. Her ethics are also not unblemished. After Clifford’s murder, she does not turn her husband over to the police and admits, “Part of me—was hoping you would do it” (35).

Genre conventions, however, dictate that Myra will not be an accessory but a victim. For a brief moment after Clifford’s staged murder, Myra has a glimmer of insight into Sidney’s duplicity. Telling him that his murderous actions are incomprehensible, she says:

You’re—alien to me, Sidney, and it can’t be only since five o’ clock this afternoon. You must always have been very different from the person I thought you were. (30)

Myra seems to be tapping into the core of the duplicitous-spouse drama: other people, even our most intimate and trusted companions, are ultimately unknowable and potentially dangerous. Even though Myra is reacting to Sidney and Clifford’s fabricated scenario, she hits upon a crucial truth: her husband is capable of murder. She simply has not realized that he is capable of *her* murder. Sidney wants to keep Myra’s wealth, but he
does not want to keep her. More important, he wants—perhaps needs—to maintain his silence about his reasons for rejecting Myra, a secret better contained through murder than divorce. Myra is not the victim of Sidney’s queer sexuality but of his need to conceal his queer sexuality.

The representation of queerness is oddly coded in *Deathtrap*. Both Sidney and Clifford exhibit attributes that might be read as stereotypically gay: Sidney “prowl[s] the antique shops” (17), and Clifford “work[s] out with weights every morning” (18). Even their mutual love of thrillers sounds vaguely like an old-fashioned notion about homosexuality. They were exposed to and got “hooked” on thrillers as adolescents, and Myra comments, “It sounds like a disease, being passed from generation to generation” (16). Furthermore, when Clifford sends the manuscript of *Deathtrap* to Sidney, the attached note says, “I couldn’t stand the thought of waiting a few days to send my firstborn child off to its spiritual father” (8). Thrillers are both the carriers of a disease between men *and* the product of male-male intercourse.

A full revelation of queer sexuality comes at the end of act 1, shortly after Sidney and Clifford are revealed as accomplices in Myra’s murder. Avoiding a sensational, shocking revelation of queerness, Levin instead lets it creep out through an exchange of smiles between the two men, with Sidney suggestively instructing Clifford to “get into bed and stay there” (39). Queerness becomes more explicit in act 2 as Sidney and Clifford live and work—and fight—together as a couple. When Clifford threatens to move out because he suspects that Sidney might harm him, Sidney makes a protestation of love.

*Sidney:* Don’t be silly. I—I love you; I wouldn’t think of—trying to harm you. Besides, you’d break my neck.

*Clifford:* Goddamn right I would. (53)

This moment, the most forthrightly “gay” in the play, is couched in threats and fears of physical violence, which is consistent with the representation of same-sex desire throughout the play. Sidney and Clifford speak to each other without the usual endearments, and physical contact happens only in moments of violent physical attack. Since the play does not depict homoerotic sexuality, homoerotic violence stands in its place. The play’s only other moment of affection occurs as Sidney prepares to kill Clifford. He points the gun at the young man and sighs, “Oh God, I shall miss you very much” (62). Not, however, enough to stay his hand.
Ultimately, the real conflict between Sidney and Clifford, the one that leads to the second murder, is sparked by the closet. Sidney is terrified of being known as the “fag who knocked off his wife.” His concern about being exposed as queer equals his concern about being exposed as a killer, especially since the two crimes are intertwined and collaboratively accomplished with the same man. That man, however, does not share Sidney’s concerns about “public humiliation.” Trying to convince Sidney to collaborate on *Deathtrap*, Clifford argues, “Everybody’s opening up about everything these days, aren’t they?” and accuses Sidney of being old-fashioned and uptight (52–53). It is hard to understand someone being “old-fashioned and uptight” about being accused, tried, and convicted of murder. Clifford’s argument makes sense only insofar as it applies to coming out of the closet. In this Clifford displays something of a gay liberation era freedom from shame, while the older Sidney is still firmly rooted in embarrassment, secrecy, and lies. As Clifford notes, “Sidney uses three kinds of deodorant and four kinds of mouthwash; not for him the whiff of scandal” (62). But if Clifford “comes out” by writing *Deathtrap*, he will drag Sidney out of the closet with him. Therefore, to stop Clifford from betraying the mutual secrecy that binds collaborators, conspirators, and secret lovers, Sidney chooses to eliminate him. The closet must be maintained.

The murky depths of Sidney’s closet are further indicated by his inability—and the play’s refusal—to name his sexuality. When Sidney states, “I want to live out my years as ‘author of *The Murder Game,*’ not ‘fag who knocked off his wife,’” it is the only time Sidney names himself as queer—while also saying he does not want to be named as queer. In a brilliant act of performative duplicity, Sidney simultaneously tells the audience that he is and is not a fag, both coming out and firmly shutting the closet door. Furthermore, a fag (indicating that one is homosexual rather than bisexual) is not something he calls himself but something he fears other people will call him. He cannily avoids labeling himself with any fixed sexual identity. The audience may understand Sidney as genuinely bisexual or as a gay man who was in a sham marriage. Similarly, audiences might interpret Clifford as gay or as a manipulative hustler who is simply using sexuality to gain privilege, wealth, and success from the older man. The lack of self-labeling, combined with their persistent habits of deceit, makes it impossible to fully know the true desires of either man. Thus the play deliberately (and, I would argue, queerly) avoids essentialized notions of sexual identity in depicting this same-sex relationship.

Many critics consider the coda to *Deathtrap* odd and unnecessary, but
it presents yet another view of the closet and the desire to kill. With the three main characters dead by the final scene, the psychic Helga ten Dorp is left to explain to the lawyer Porter Milgrim exactly what has happened. They both have the same idea: the events would make a surefire hit play. But they begin to argue over the rights to this theatrical gold mine. If Porter will not grant Helga half the profits, she threatens to expose his dirty secret: he makes obscene phone calls to his friends. In retaliation, Porter hurls accusations at Helga—“Bitch! Whore! Foreign slut. Dutch pervert!” (68)—as Helga advances threateningly on him with a dagger. Although both characters are motivated primarily by greed in this comic scene, it is no coincidence that Levin raises the specter of “perversion” once more before the final curtain descends. Everyone, it seems, has some sexual secret, some closet, or some queerness that can be exposed or exploited, and the desire to prevent exposure leads inevitably to violence.

The performance and perception of queerness in *Deathtrap* is not fixed, and slippage was especially evident in the long run of the original Broadway production. As the play hit various landmark performances, New York critics took the opportunity to comment on some of the changes various lead actors had brought to the play. Five very different actors played Sidney Bruhl: (1) John Wood, a classical British actor best known for appearing in Tom Stoppard’s intellectually sharp plays; (2) Stacy Keach, a handsome leading man onstage and in television; (3) John Cullum, who won Tony Awards for his work in musical comedies; (4) Robert Reed, best known to audiences as the suburban dad on the sitcom *The Brady Bunch*; and (5) Farley Granger, a boyish leading man in Hollywood in the 1940s and 1950s, known for his films with Alfred Hitchcock (including coded queer characters in *Rope* and *Strangers on a Train*). Although their sexuality was not publicly known at the time, both Reed and Granger would later become widely known as queer. Tabloid newspapers discussed Reed’s “secret gay life” after his death in 1992, and Granger wrote about his bisexuality in his 2008 memoir *Include Me Out.*

Giving a quick overview of the various Sidneys, William Henry III of the *New York Sunday News* wrote:

The central characters are two male playwrights. Sometimes there has been sexual tension between them, especially in what Levin reportedly considers the best version, the national tour with Brian Bedford and Kevin Conroy.

By contrast, Cullum and Keach were stolidly macho as the older playwright. Wood was flamboyant but almost asexual. Reed was, in
producer [Alfred] DeLiaGre’s words, “flitty”—but uninterested in the younger man.³¹

Henry’s comments suggest that Levin’s representation of the relationship between Sidney and Clifford is more connotative than denotative, leaving space for actors to perform (and audiences to perceive) varying degrees of queerness onstage.

The 1982 film version of *Deathtrap*, directed by Sidney Lumet from a screenplay by Jay Presson Allen, is more explicit and emphatic in its depiction of same-sex desire.³² The film includes a kiss between Michael Caine and Christopher Reeve, which occurs immediately after Myra’s murder and reveals Sidney and Clifford as conspirators and lovers. The kiss was immediately controversial. Talking to film scholar Vito Russo, Reeve commented:

I heard that a preview audience in Denver booed the kiss, and that was reported in *Time* magazine, thus ruining the plot for millions of people. We later referred to it as “the ten million dollar kiss” as an estimate of lost ticket revenue.³³

The kiss, of course, is meant to surprise and shock at this point in the narrative, but the kiss is also shocking because of the identity of the kissers: two major Hollywood stars, one identified with Superman, an icon of American masculinity.³⁴ At this time, Hollywood was experiencing an unprecedented flowering of mainstream films with queer subjects—*Making Love, Personal Best,* and *Victor/Victoria* were all released in 1982—but audiences generally knew what to expect from these films, thereby containing the threat of the queer. In *Deathtrap* same-sex desire was sprung on an unsuspecting audience, and many were not pleased.

Screenwriter Allen did more than just insert a shocking kiss. Unlike their theatrical predecessors, the men in the film address each other with terms of affection such as “dear,” “baby,” and “luv”—making the sexual relationship between Sidney and Clifford much more explicit in the second half of the film. Allen also added an exchange between Sidney and Clifford that tacitly plays into the homophobic notion that same-sex relationships are inherently immoral. As they argue about outing themselves by writing *Deathtrap,* Sidney accuses Clifford of being a sociopath, using Clifford’s troubled youth as evidence.
Sidney: Clinically it means, as I’m sure you know, it means one who has no sense of moral obligation whatsoever. Now if, and I repeat if, I decide to kick over the traces and actually write *Deathtrap*—

Clifford: With me.

Sidney: Oh yes, of course, with you . . . If I decided to enter into such a risky and exciting collaboration, I wonder if . . .

Clifford: If what?

Sidney: If it would be, well, just a trifle starry eyed of me to contemplate a partnership where I could count on no sense of moral obligation whatsoever.

Sidney speaks of collaboration, of which there are at least three: the writing of *Deathtrap*, Myra’s murder, and a queer relationship. The same-sex love affair is a “risky and exciting” partnership because it does not require any “moral obligation.” Heterosexuality, often imagined in its idealized form as marriage, carries a whole host of moral obligations determined by religious, legal, and social structures; the same-sex relationship, however, exists in its own closet, removed from normative social institutions. The film states explicitly what is implicit in the play: a secret, illicit relationship may be thrilling, but it is also dangerous.

*Escaping the Trap: The Afterlife of the Queer Thriller?*

Theatrical and social landscapes have changed considerably in the years since *Deathtrap* premiered on Broadway. In the wake of its success, at least two other notable thrillers featured queer theatrical characters. In *Corpse!* (1984), by Gerald Moon, a queer actor plots to murder and take the place of his wealthy, straight twin brother. The actor’s skill in duplicity is crucial to the plot: although avowedly queer, he boasts that he can impersonate his womanizing brother because he is “versatile,” raising once again the specter of the bisexual. *Accomplice* (1990), by Rupert Holmes, employs the metatheatricality of a play within a play within a play, as not one but two pairs of secret same-sex lovers use theatrical artifice in order to murder their spouses. Both plays had modest runs in New York, which perhaps discouraged producers of the genre; since 1990 new thrillers on Broadway have become increasingly rare. Even in London, where
Christie’s *The Mousetrap* continues to draw audiences, critics have noted that the thriller, as a genre, is “in the theatrical morgue.”

The decline of the thriller coincided with the expansion of the LGBT rights movement, which helped to change the position and increase the visibility of queer people in American society. Activists, scholars, pop culture bloggers, and organizations like GLAAD (founded in 1985) have opposed gay stereotypes—particularly the villainous ones—and championed representations of “normal” and even exemplary queer characters. And, for theatergoers who have experienced numerous plays with queer characters, queer sexuality is no longer surprising or taboo. Might today’s audiences, so eager to see open, well-adjusted, and normalized queers, find the closeted queer killers of the thriller reprehensible, unpleasant, or as quaint as the electric typewriters and carbon copies that figure so prominently in the logistics of *Deathtrap*?

Social and cultural change seems to discourage revivals of Levin’s play. In 1996 a touring production directed by John Tillinger and starring Elliott Gould received bad reviews and failed to come to New York. Chris Jones, the critic for *Variety*, complained that Gould “affects an inappropriately camp sensibility that suggests his sexual relationship with Clifford long before the audience is supposed to have figured that out.” In 2000 Leonard Foglia directed a revival starring Jonathan Hadary at the Paper Mill Playhouse in New Jersey. Alvin Klein of the *New York Times*, who found much of the play “dead” and “tired,” also observed “a distinctly audible reaction, not to the thunder or the gunshots, but to Sidney kissing Clifford.” Despite the changes in the queer political landscape, it seems that the dramatic power of the closet remains strong, and an audience can still be surprised by a same-sex kiss that reveals a secret relationship and a secret motive for murder.

The most successful revival of *Deathtrap* opened in London’s West End, directed by Matthew Warchus, in September 2010. While some critics decried the play’s genre as terminally unfashionable, others praised the production’s dark wit, declared it a hit, and predicted a Broadway transfer. This revival also highlighted how the closet no longer exerts as much force on people who make their living in the theater, since two openly gay actors played Sidney and Clifford: Simon Russell Beale, one of England’s most acclaimed actors in classical and contemporary plays, and Jonathan Groff, a young American actor best known for his roles in the musical *Spring Awakening* and the television series *Glee*. If real life queer theatricals like Beale and Groff can thrive outside of the closet nowadays, then Sidney’s desper-
ate need to remain closeted may not seem as credible to a contemporary audience. Yet within the world of the play, a secretive same-sex relationship remains dramatically potent because it is inextricably linked to a murder. Even if most audiences no longer consider queer sexuality a dark secret, Levin's play makes it so by combining it with the act of murder.

*Deathtrap* cannot, however, be dismissed simply as a homophobic narrative that equates sexual deviance with murder in the interests of shocking audiences with the spectacle of queerness. Indeed, this thriller can function as a site of queer pleasure, especially for audiences who appreciate the queerly inverted world of the postmodern thriller. In this genre, duplicity is not a moral failing but an asset in a strategic, high-stakes game in which survival requires deception. Normative social behavior and even law are abandoned here, as the audience secretly hopes that the murderers will “get away with it”—and that the lovers will “get away with it” too. Sidney and Clifford share their secret desires with the audience, thereby making them part of their erotic game. Although the play lacks any explicit physical displays of those desires, *Deathtrap* has the potential to crackle with erotic energy as Sidney and Clifford, usually played by handsome and charismatic actors, enact violent scenarios that cause them to sweat, cry, gasp, grunt, and bleed. The final dramatic scenario of two men stabbing each other with a phallic arrow might be experienced as a dark but erotic fantasy of same-sex desire.

Fantasy narratives often allow audience members to enjoy anarchic pleasures before returning them to reality and the status quo, and *Deathtrap* concludes with the genuine fear of the deadliness of the closet. The play dramatizes the difficulty of keeping a terrible secret and the anxiety around the threat of exposure. Even within the artifice of the thriller genre, queer spectators may see a fantastic reflection of their own real experiences of the closet. The play enacts the fear that love cannot exist inside a closet since there can be no trust between lovers who are bound by guilt and shame. Sidney must ultimately destroy his lover in order to keep his secret. The closet is the deathtrap, and maintaining the closet quite literally is murder.

Audiences can still find queer pleasures in *Deathtrap* because it demonstrates the insidious functioning of the closet—not just in the heady post-Stonewall days of gay liberation but in contemporary queer culture as well. Rarely fully open or fully closed, the individual’s closet door is often ajar, swinging back and forth in a constant negotiation of silence and disclosure, threatening to trap the individual who hovers on the thresh-
old. In order to function successfully as a thriller, *Deathtrap* must trade on ambiguity: characters cannot be fully closeted or fully exposed but must exist instead on a threshold of possibility. Levin's thriller exploits the ambiguities of its cultural moment, when the relatively new concept of gay pride wrestled with the dominant discourse of queer villainy and shame, creating a broad cultural fascination with peeking inside closet doors, even while most social systems worked to keep the closet firmly in place. Sidney and Clifford are simultaneously in and out, protagonists and villains, murderers and victims. The ambiguity of their identities may not challenge the homophobic spectator to reconsider his or her preconceptions, but it does create a more intriguing plot and the possibility for progressive interpretation; rather than condemning queer characters as inherently sinister, the play shows the closet itself as the sinister force—the “deathtrap” that causes shame, duplicity, and violence.

Even with the advances in LGBT rights in recent years, our culture still vacillates between acceptance and rejection of queer people, leaving the closet door swinging on its hinges with varying degrees of openness and concealment. Individually and collectively, queer people may be out in the open, but they are still stigmatized and vilified. This is why the repression and the anxieties of the closet still matter—and as long as they do, a thriller about negotiating the closet will have the power to intrigue, provoke, and entertain. Indeed, an audience that fully understands the vicissitudes of the closet will perhaps find more value and meaning in such a play.

Not all closets are the same, and it would be a mistake to universalize the experience of the closet as it is depicted in *Deathtrap*. Scholars of African American sexuality such as Roderick A. Ferguson and Marlon B. Ross have argued that race, class, and other social differences affect the construction of sexual identities and that the closet is not the appropriate paradigm for all queer subjects.40 Indeed, *Deathtrap*’s closet may be particular to its era and the milieu of its affluent white male characters. But if the play can still draw an audience, its appeal may rest on the enduring dramatic potency of secrecy, revelation, shame, and guilt. While these experiences and feelings may be heightened for some queer people, they are hardly unique to queer people. The duplicitous queer characters of the postmodern thriller tap into a variety of experiences and conflicted emotions around the closet, creating a world of ambiguity where homophobia and homoerotic fantasy merge, the sexuality of the villainous protagonist simultaneously threatens and thrills, and the audience finds pleasure in both the enactment and the containment of murderous desire.