Murder Most Queer

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CHAPTER SEVEN

Serial Killers

Gratifying Monstrous Desires

Serial killers are part of modern American folklore, having become characters in our national narratives about good and evil. The term serial killer describes someone who murders a number of people over a period of time, often motivated to kill for “psychological gratification.” Within American culture, many serial killers have become celebrities—supercriminals whose names and faces are known by millions, with aficionados who pore over the details of their lives and extraordinary crimes in countless magazine articles, web pages, books, films, and television programs. Popular discourse typically frames these killers as “monsters,” aberrations outside the sphere of humanity. As David Schmid notes in Natural Born Celebrities: Serial Killers in American Culture (2006), “Positioning serial killers as gothic monsters represents our attempt to salvage and locate a (national) community by defining what stands outside that community.”¹ But the parameters of community and humanity are never absolute, and the dominant culture is often in conflict about the position of the supposed “other.” Thus, Schmid argues, “[T]hese monsters exert equal parts repulsion and attraction, a fact that ensures their simultaneous abjection from and ingestion into the social.”²

Both the homosexual and the serial killer have occupied this position of “monster” in the public imagination, and the “gay serial killer” has been a particularly compelling and problematic monster, especially since the early 1990s, when the conflation of homosexuality and homicidal violence found new resonance in popular culture. In 1991 America was both repulsed and fascinated by the fictional gay male/transgender serial killer in Jonathan Demme’s film The Silence of the Lambs, and by the arrest of real
serial killer Jeffrey Dahmer, who murdered seventeen young men, often engaging in necrophilia and cannibalism. Diana Fuss observed how popular discourse of the time reified the connection “between homosexuality and pathology, between perversion and death,” and Philip Jenkins noted that “the gay-killer connection is so frequent . . . as to be overwhelming.”

Homophobic discourse symbolically connects serial killers with queer people, equating their crimes with sexual lust. Serial killers usually do not murder for financial gain or out of emotions like love or hate. Rather, they possess a pathological, even physical urge to kill that must be satisfied on a regular basis. As Joyce Carol Oates put it in her 1994 profile of Jeffrey Dahmer, the serial killer operates “with no apparent motive for his monstrous crimes except the gratification of desire.” The homophobic imagination equates this murderous desire with homosexual desire, viewing it as physical lust, removed from the romantic or social ideals attributed to heterosexuality. Both homosexual and murderous “lusts” are imagined as abnormal, unhealthy, monstrous desires that exist because of a lack of proper morality. And both are subject to much speculation and debate about causation: what internal or external forces make someone gay, and what makes someone a psychopathic killer?

In his analysis of narratives about serial killers, David Schmid argues that true crime writers inevitably focus on some “deviant” aspect of the killer’s life as an explanation for his or her murders, since the public needs to be able to exclude the killer from the realm of the “normal.” But they enforce a double standard when it comes to sexually motivated crimes. So true crime writers represent Ted Bundy, who murdered and engaged in necrophilia with numerous women, as “an aberration that told us nothing about heterosexuality at all,” while they attribute Jeffrey Dahmer’s crimes to homosexuality itself. Indeed, Schmid finds in these narratives “the assumption that extreme violence is a normal part of homosexuality.”

In their attempts to explain the murders of Jeffrey Dahmer, many true crime writers place the blame on internalized homophobia—that is, the gay man’s loathing of his own homosexuality. While this assertion may be correct, Schmid maintains that true crime writers use it to support, rather than challenge, the homophobia of their readers, since they never address the origin of the loathing. The implication, then, is that “to be homosexual is so disgusting and traumatic that of course one would murder again and again in order to assuage one’s guilt about being gay.” And here Schmid imagines an alternate possibility for the exploration of internalized homophobia.
A more productive, and less homophobic, aim for true crime would be to explain why Dahmer felt ambivalent about his homosexuality or why he hated other homosexuals. Examination of these issues in true crime has the potential to correct some of the biases of the genre, but rarely does, simply because gay self-hatred can be acknowledged but never analyzed in detail. To explore the sources of Dahmer's conflicted homosexuality would involve acknowledging both the familial (Dahmer’s father was virulently homophobic) and social context of widespread homophobia.

In other words, rather than naturalizing internalized homophobia as a psychological response to homosexuality, Schmid challenges true crime writers to examine the social origins of this homophobia, thus implicating American society itself as the source of Dahmer’s self-loathing.

The plays discussed in this chapter have the potential to take up that challenge. My examination of plays and performances about queer serial killers focuses on how these works may challenge the homophobia so often found in other media, articulating a critical perspective on causation and the supposed conflation of violence and homosexuality. Additionally, many of these plays engage critically with other issues surrounding narratives of queer serial killers, including the role of the media in creating celebrity serial killers, ambivalence about the innocence of their victims, and the public’s interest in the gruesome physical details of sadistic murders. Compared to many other plays discussed in this book, plays about queer serial killers include more carnage, using different theatrical techniques to enact or relate the gory particulars of the act of murder. But certain ambiguities surround each of these subjects. Can a play critique the sensationalism inherent in marketing serial killers without contributing to it? Can a play represent grotesque violence in an effort to condemn our culture’s hunger for spectacles of such violence?

These ambiguities are further complicated by the gay rights movement’s history of combating this particular archetype. Obsessed with the serial killer and the homosexual as monstrous threats, our culture often links the two in fictional narratives, much to the dismay of the gay rights movement. Much has been written about the homophobia—and the protests against the homophobia—surrounding the representations of queer serial killers in films such as *Cruising* (1980), *The Silence of the Lambs* (1991), and *Basic Instinct* (1992). The protests aimed to call attention to the way these Hollywood narratives vilified a minority group, and also
to challenge the symbolic order that consistently positions the queer as a violent threat. These protests accomplished important work in challenging and perhaps changing the field of representation, but the queer serial killer is an unstable signifier, and he or she is not necessarily always a homophobic construction. The plays discussed in this chapter create new narratives for the queer serial killer, confronting and reimagining one of the most repellent archetypes in the field of queer representation.

In many cases, queer playwrights and theater artists have wrested the representation of the queer serial killer away from the homophobic dominant culture, staging their revisions in LGBT theaters or other alternative venues. They employ theatrical conventions other than realism to explode the supposedly objective realities constructed by the news and other non-fiction media. While films like Cruising, The Silence of the Lambs, and Basic Instinct ask the audience to identify with the normative detective-hero, making the homicidal homosexual simply the object of the hero’s hunt, these plays tend to give the killers a greater degree of subjectivity, allowing them to express their own fears and desires. Plays can take advantage of the differences in systems of production, genres, and narrative conventions to construct new meanings for the queer serial killer, but audiences must also play a role in this endeavor. An audience eager to confront and challenge queer villainy ultimately constructs its own meanings. These plays replace the homophobic melodrama of the queer villain with complex narratives that allow the audience to imagine a variety of possible interpretations for the relationship between queer sex and violence in our lives and our culture.

Jeffrey Dahmer Superstar

Jeffrey Dahmer is one of the most famous serial killers in recent American history, and his sexually motivated murders of young men have inspired a number of plays and theatrical performances. As a teenager, Dahmer was an antisocial alcoholic who enjoyed dissecting dead animals. He committed his first murder in 1978, at the age of eighteen, when he invited a hitchhiker back to his home, then struck him on the head with a dumbbell, supposedly because he desired the young man and did not want him to leave. Living in Milwaukee in the 1980s, Dahmer would meet men in gay bars, drug them, and then rape them; he also had convictions for indecent exposure and child molestation. He committed sixteen murders in Milwaukee
between 1987 and 1991. In many cases, he would drug his victim—many of whom were African American, Latino, or Asian American—then drill a hole in the young man’s skull and inject hydrochloric acid in order to turn him into a “zombie.” He would engage in sex with the incapacitated body, then murder and dismember the victim, in some cases eating parts of the body or keeping them as souvenirs. In July 1991, one of Dahmer’s potential victims, Tracy Edwards, fought him off, escaped, and led the police back to Dahmer’s apartment. Dahmer’s murder trial, which was televised, resulted in fifteen life sentences. A fellow prisoner beat Dahmer to death in 1994.

The first theatrical production about Jeffrey Dahmer was perhaps the most stunning—and the most open to diverse interpretations. In February 1992, avant-garde theater maker Reza Abdoh staged his production of The Law of Remains in the abandoned ballrooms of the Diplomat Hotel in Manhattan. The New York Times heralded this world premiere by proclaiming, “The enfant terrible of sex and death has created yet another demonic work of experimental theater.”12 As a writer and director, Abdoh eschewed realist notions of character and plot to create dense and layered performances with viscerally affecting sounds and images.13 Critic Stephen Holden described The Law of Remains as “a blood-soaked pageant of contemporary Grand Guignol depicting mass murder, sexual mutilation, necrophilia, and cannibalism.”14 Abdoh’s postmodern aesthetic intersperses found materials, including interviews and news reports about Dahmer, with scenarios inspired by the S & M club scene, African dances, and invocations from the Egyptian Book of the Dead. These scenes are joined by the story of Andy Warhol creating a movie about Dahmer, here named Jeffrey Snarling.15 Abdoh’s fourteen actors push the audience to different sections of the hotel, witnessing seven stations in the journey of Snarling’s soul through scenes of sex and violence, until the performance ends in Heaven.

Critics differed about the meaning and merit of the production, but most agreed that it was, in the words of New York Times critic Stephen Holden, “one of the angriest theater pieces ever hurled at a New York audience.” While Holden seemed to admire Abdoh’s skill, he complained that “the sheer density of the noise and tumult make it hard to follow” and that the production “seems to want to punish as much as to enlighten” the audience.16 Alisa Solomon in the Village Voice also found the performance elusive in its frenzy and assaultive in its “high pitch of rage.”17 Yet certain elements of Abdoh’s nightmare vision did resonate for both critics, and
these elements speak to the ways in which Dahmer, as a gay serial killer, has functioned in American culture.

Along with noting the fury at the heart of *The Law of Remains*, both Holden and Solomon acknowledge the play’s commentary on a culture that turns murderous criminals into celebrities. But rather than focusing on mass media, Abdoh depicts Andy Warhol—the master of Pop Art who died in 1987—as the avatar of America’s obsession with fame and celebrity. By putting the serial killer Jeffrey Snarling into a movie, Abdoh’s Warhol is exploiting him as a commodity, creating him in a “factory” and selling him like a can of soup. Warhol and Snarling are not protagonist and antagonist as much as they are two sides of the same coin: two gay men who gain celebrity in America, one for works of art (creation), one for acts of murder (destruction). Perhaps Warhol can also be seen as a stand-in for Abdoh, the auteur who offers an artistic representation of a celebrity serial killer that is somewhat different from the mass media image, but still attached to the culture of commodity and consumption.  

While playing himself in Warhol’s film, Snarling asks, “Andy, what’s gonna happen to me at the end of the movie?” Warhol cannot, of course, give a legitimate answer to the query, since Dahmer’s story had not yet come to an end when the play was performed in the winter of 1992. But Snarling’s metatheatrical question also highlights his anxiety about being a “character” who is giving a “performance.” Earlier in the play, during an interview, Snarling relates how he would “act up” in high school, pretending to be “retarded” and “epileptic” in order to amuse his classmates (39). This odd detail from Dahmer’s youth is also depicted by the writer and artist Derf Backderf in *My Friend Dahmer* (2012), his autobiographical graphic novel about being high school classmates with Jeffrey Dahmer in Ohio in the 1970s. Backderf and his friends encourage Dahmer in his strange act, and in one incident they pay Dahmer to give a “command performance” at a shopping mall, twitching and shouting at unsuspecting patrons.  

The teens laugh at Dahmer’s grotesque shenanigans, but once the show is over they don’t invite Dahmer to be part of their evening plans. The incident highlights how Dahmer, as an awkward outsider, performed a comically exaggerated version of his “freakishness” in order to win the attention of his peers; but this attention does not translate into actual friendship, and Dahmer remains nothing more than an amusing yet creepy spectacle for the other teens. *The Law of Remains* re-creates this dynamic, showing Dahmer’s complicity in his own exploitation as a
celebrity monster, but also implicating the audience as the consumers of this grotesque performance.\textsuperscript{20}

Another key element of \textit{The Law of Remains} mentioned by critics is the specter of AIDS, which, by 1992 had been in the news for a decade and killed over one hundred thousand Americans. With approval of life-extending protease inhibitors by the Food and Drug Administration still three years away, Americans considered AIDS a death sentence that disproportionally affected men who had sex with men. \textit{The Law of Remains} and the figure of Jeffrey Dahmer were invariably seen through this lens, and as Solomon noted, “In the theater, this mass murderer of gay men can hardly be represented without evoking that other mass murderer of gay men: AIDS.” Reflecting on Abdoh’s representation of a real incident in which one of Dahmer’s victims escaped only to be returned to him by the police, Holden commented that the event “becomes a metaphor for governmental indifference to the AIDS crisis.” Abdoh, who was HIV-positive and died in 1995, told Glenn Collins of the \textit{New York Times} in 1992 that HIV “can’t help but color my work, the idea of life as a clock ticking.”\textsuperscript{21} \textit{The Law of Remains}, then, might encourage the audience to interpret Dahmer as a theatrical personification of the AIDS crisis, presenting sex as erotic and seductive, but also fatal.

The “use” of Dahmer to convey the warped values of America’s celebrity-obsessed culture or the devastation of the AIDS crisis, however, should not overshadow the theatrical force inherent in depicting Dahmer’s acts of brutality in and of themselves. Abdoh seems to distrust the mass media’s attempt to make sense of Dahmer’s violence by containing it within rational discourses of psychology, forensic science, and law. Like the French theatrical theorist and visionary Antonin Artaud, Abdoh rejects psychological realism and linear narrative in favor of an avant-garde theater that shocks the audience with visceral sensations, appealing not to intellectual understanding but to the audience’s capacity for irrational, spiritual, and physical experience. Abdoh’s assaultive use of loud noises and bloody images outside a traditional theater space is very much in line with Artaud’s notions of a “theatre of cruelty,” intended to shock and provoke the audience. In this way, Abdoh uses a form of theatricality that does not offer enlightenment or catharsis but rather demands that the audience experience the brutality of Dahmer’s crimes on a physical and visceral level.

Yet, within all of this brutality, Abdoh also finds space to mourn, paying significant attention to Dahmer’s victims. \textit{The Law of Remains} dedi-
cates an entire segment to a litany of the dead, with an actress reciting the name, age, and ethnicity of each murder victim (82–83). More than many other works, Abdoh's production highlights the fact that many of Dahmer's victims were men of color and makes explicit the racism swirling around the crimes. Snarling remarks that he "was chopping up nigger boys and chinks" (25), and the play suggests that he escaped detection for as long as he did because the police did not take seriously the disappearance of young African American, Latino, and Asian American men. Some true crime writers blamed these men for their own deaths—just as the culture at large often blamed gay men with AIDS for their own deaths—claiming that they were engaged in a "risky lifestyle" and courting danger. Furthermore, the mass media's focus on Dahmer as a spectacular monster often relegated his victims to the background, making them nameless men who created a statistic: seventeen victims. By invoking the victims' individuality while Dahmer stands before the audience, The Law of Remains effectively shifts attention from the celebrity monster to the absent victims of his crimes.

As I argued in chapter 2, contemporary theatrical portraits of real life homicidal homosexuals tend to offer their audiences multiple perspectives and possible responses to their subjects rather than presenting a single coherent ideological position. The Law of Remains is no exception, and this deliberate confusion is reflected in the mixed critical response to Abdoh's production, especially when it comes to the conflation of homosexuality and murderous violence. The play shows gay male characters as the perpetrators of violence, the victims of violence, and the exploiters of narratives about that violence. But it recognizes the larger social forces in which these characters exist, encouraging the audience to understand Dahmer's murders not as the expression of a pathological homosexuality but rather as the product of society's homophobia, which Abdoh further contextualizes within America's nationalism and racism. In particular, Abdoh's Dahmer embodies the brutality behind the indifference and inaction that allowed so many deaths during the first decade of the AIDS crisis. As a character wracked by internalized homophobia, Dahmer is both the perpetrator and the victim of antigay brutality, producing an unresolved struggle between the audience's sympathy and condemnation.

In 2003, about a decade after the premiere of The Law of Remains, About Face Theatre in Chicago produced Jim Grimsley's Fascination, a lyrical drama loosely based on Jeffrey Dahmer's life and crimes. Aside from differences in the dramaturgical styles of Abdoh and Grimsley, their plays are
also separated by a decade of change. Dahmer himself was dead, having been killed by a fellow prisoner in 1994, and while his fame persisted in the popular culture of the twenty-first century, much of the media hysteria surrounding him had faded. His potency as a metaphor for AIDS had also diminished, since the approval of the first protease inhibitors in 1995 caused many to no longer consider AIDS a “death sentence,” but rather to see HIV infection as a chronic but manageable condition. Gay and lesbian characters appeared much more frequently in mainstream media, with shows like *Will & Grace* (1998) and *Queer as Folk* (2000) bringing palatable depictions of gay people into America’s living rooms. The rage and confrontational tactics of activist groups like ACT UP and Queer Nation gave way to the “insider” lobbying of organizations like the Human Rights Campaign. And in 2003 the US Supreme Court declared that antigay sodomy laws were unconstitutional, thus decriminalizing gay sex, even while a major political party continued to use the “threat” of same-sex marriage as a scare tactic to rally voters and create more homophobic legislation.

Grimsley’s *Fascination* offered a new representation of a gay serial killer to this much-changed culture. Grimsley is a gay writer whose novels and plays often deal with young gay men in the American South struggling to find a safe place. His acclaimed 1995 novel *Dream Boy*, about a gay youth who is severely beaten—perhaps to death or perhaps rescued by the object of his desire—was successfully adapted for the stage by the gay-oriented About Face Theatre in Chicago in 1996. Subsequently, About Face worked collaboratively with Grimsley to develop *Fascination*, a play about a serial killer of over forty young men, which premiered in the spring of 2003. The character of Randall Bartelman seems loosely based on Jeffrey Dahmer, but the play is neither journalistic fiction nor crime drama. Rather, *Fascination* is a moody, dreamlike play, which, in a series of juxtaposed scenes, explores the thoughts of the killer, his first victim, the parents of both the killer and the victim, and others who are “fascinated” by the crimes, including a journalist, a local busybody, and a Christian woman who wants to redeem the killer through marriage.

When interviewing Randall, the journalist reminds him of all the products created by the culture of celebrity surrounding serial killers: books, television movies, playing cards, and so on. The journalist insinuates that Randall committed his crimes in order to gain fame, that he was “a sad sick nobody looking for a way to get [himself] in the headlines” (15). Randall denies the assertion, claiming that he never expected to get caught. The journalist then searches for another explanation and presents the the-
ory that Randall’s murders were the result of self-hatred and internalized homophobia. Again, Randall deflects the ready-made explanation for his murders, complicating the very notion of what constitutes homosexuality. “I had sex with their corpses,” he explains. “They’re not boys when they’re dead. They’re just corpses. Don’t you get it?” (26). In Randall’s view, the corpse is ungendered, and therefore not a partner in a “homosexual” act. Necrophilia trumps homosexuality.

The play allows the audience to ponder this notion by flashing back to the encounter between Randall and his first victim, Victor. More than many other plays about murder, Fascination gives almost equal voice to the victim and the murderer. The teenage Victor has been kicked out of his home because he is gay, and the play puts no small amount of blame on the homophobia of Victor’s parents, showing how their abandonment of their gay son turned him into easy prey for the likes of Randall. Indeed, Randall explains that he “picked boys I thought nobody cared about. Who I thought nobody would miss” (15). Grimsley counters a dominant trope in true crime writing that blames the gay victim as somehow complicit in his own death because of “risky behavior” and instead shows how the parents or communities that reject gay youths are responsible for endangering them. After meeting Randall in a bar, Victor takes the “aggressive” role, if such a term can be used for so mild and sweet a seduction, as he makes the first overtures to Randall, offers to go home with him, and then tries to talk to and touch his reticent companion. Randall responds awkwardly, perhaps because he is so deeply repressed or filled with self-loathing, or perhaps because he is not really gay. In either case, Randall seems not to believe his good fortune with Victor, as if the lamb was simply offering itself to the lion.

After Randall has murdered Victor, he keeps a small photograph of him in his wallet, as one might do with the photograph of a sweetheart. This evocative detail again raises the question of the relationship between homosexuality and murder. But Randall insists that he “didn’t really like” sex (52) and craved murder as a sensual experience, the way others might crave sex. Indeed, while Abdoh aimed to assault his audience with the brutality of murder, Grimsley instead offers poetic descriptions that focus on the gruesome yet sensual aspects of murder, going into detail about the sounds (“the crack of that bone”) and smells (“this incredible aroma of the inside of him”) of the act (52). The penultimate scene plays with horrific irony as the audience watches Victor, all the while knowing that his expectation of sex will be replaced with Randall’s plans for murder. At the climax, Grimsley
replaces one sensual experience with another, creating a murderer who is not physically attracted to another man but eroticizes the act of murder and the corpse as the object of desire. Whether this displacement is caused by Randall’s internalized homophobia is left open to interpretation, but the play creates a clear distinction between the erotics of same-sex desire expressed by Victor and the erotics of death expressed by Randall.

*Fascination* further deconstructs the homophobic conflation of homosexuality and murder by including the character Holly, a deeply Christian woman who sees Randall on television and decides that she can save him. She proposes marriage to Randall, since getting married would prove that he is not gay, and if he is not gay, then he would not be a gay serial killer, and then he would be innocent and free (33). Holly’s strange proposal exposes the homophobic narrative that constructs gay as guilty and not gay as innocent, since she seems to believe that evidence of heterosexual normalcy can erase all other evidence of homosexual deviance, including murder. This heterosexual marriage, condoned by the state and legitimized by society, is a sham, and Grimsley employs subtle satire to expose Holly’s delusions about love, as well as her deluded morality.

The play contrasts the superficial bond between Randall and Holly as legal husband and wife with the more ambiguous and haunted bond between Randall and Victor. *Fascination*, like *The Law of Remains*, delves into the metaphysical and spiritual realm surrounding death. In the fantastic world of the play, the spirit of Victor now “lives” in the ground under Randall’s house, keeping watch over his killer. As a spirit, Victor has great powers of insight, and he describes Randall’s thoughts and feelings, his rage and fear, to the audience. The connection between Victor and Randall is more profound now than it ever was in life, and this contrast serves not so much to romanticize relationships with the dead as much as it highlights the sad lack in the relationships of the living. Indeed, in depicting the afterlife onstage, *Fascination* transforms the theater into an ethereal limbo between the living and the dead, and it also imagines the possibility for comfort and community among the dead. Victor tells us of his interactions with all the other murdered boys, serving as a guide for each of the victims as he passes from life into death. He is joined by Randall’s dead mother, who was physically unable to care for Randall when she was alive and now turns to caring for the spirits of his victims. Grimsley’s afterlife is disturbing but also comforting, allowing us to imagine that death is not an absolute end and might be a place where a murderer’s dead mother can bake cookies for the boys murdered by her son (41).
Chicago critics gave mixed reviews to this ninety-minute play, which alternates between the carnal and the spiritual, the poetic and the prosaic, the beautiful and the horrifying. Most recognized that, as Jonathan Abarbanal stated in the Windy City Times, “Fascination is not so much about Randall as how others respond to him in this life and the next.” The critics themselves, then, became part of the cast of characters responding to the representation of the gay serial killer. Abarbanal thought the portrayal was too restrained to offer deeper insight, while Tony Adler of the Chicago Reader complained that by showing the reporter, nosy neighbor, and religious fanatic as caricatures the play ran the danger of making Randall seem like a sympathetic victim. The strongest detraction, however, came from Chris Jones of the Chicago Tribune, who declared that “the annals of dramatic literature need no more portraits of serial killers. Period.” For Jones the subject matter itself is the problem, and he’s further offended that a gay theater company would present the stereotype of the gay murderer, describing the production as “gimmicky, grant-funded irresponsibility” and presuming that it will “irritate greatly” About Face’s gay audience.

The theater critics for the alternative and gay newspapers of Chicago did not seem to share Jones’s outrage over the “irresponsibility” of representing a gay serial killer onstage. Indeed, even when they found fault with the script or the production, nearly all critics took seriously the play’s attempt to illuminate the phenomenon of the queer serial killer as a figure of fascination in American culture. Randall is fascinating to his victims and the audience in part because he cannot be fully explained—we bring our own ideologies and feelings about sex and death to fill in the tantalizing void at the heart of his character. Thus Grimsley’s play simultaneously fascinates and frustrates, not resolving the contradictions and ambiguities of the queer serial killer but reflecting them.

**Acting Alone: The Serial Killer Solo**

At the end of the first decade of the twenty-first century, the Dahmer-inspired gay serial killer appeared onstage in yet another theatrical form. Bill Connington wrote and performed the one-man show Zombie as part of the New York International Fringe Festival in the summer of 2008 and, on the strength of many positive reviews, remounted the show, directed by Thomas Caruso, for an extended run at a small midtown theater in 2009. Adapted from the novella by Joyce Carol Oates, Zombie takes the form of a
monologue delivered by seemingly ineffectual but deeply sinister Quentin P. Although it does not literally represent Dahmer, the play clearly uses him as a model, creating Quentin as a midwestern homosexual sociopath who kidnaps young men (mostly black young men) so he can perform do-it-yourself lobotomies and turn them into his “zombie” sex slaves. If Abdoh’s theatricality was noisy and assaultive, and Grimsley’s lyrical and mournful, then Connington’s theatricality was cold and clinical, presenting the killer as an object of study.

The redacted last name of Quentin P. might suggest that we are studying a psychological case file, and Quentin relates episodes from his life in an understated manner, with as little commentary as possible. In his cheap slacks, collared shirt, and large plastic-frame glasses, Quentin could easily be mistaken for an accountant. His manner of speaking is overly precise—and as oily as his thinning hair—but his ominously smooth tones are occasionally disturbed by bursts of psychopathic fury. He offers a portrait of the killer as a loser, rejected by peers at school, unloved by his father, and ashamed of his homosexuality. This constant sense of alienation causes Quentin to want to create objects of desire who cannot reject him.

Like The Law of Remains and Fascination, Zombie asks its audience to consider horrific acts—including raping, killing, and disposing of people—but it does so with chilling detachment. The production underscores this detachment by using a mannequin to represent Quentin’s victims in his “restaging” of events. The actor playing Quentin is alone onstage, which emphasizes his alienation, but he also enacts certain scenes with a life-size cloth mannequin with barely discernible and completely immobile facial features on its Styrofoam head. Zombie becomes highly metatheatrical, with Quentin as a performer staging his acts by manipulating this dummy. This theatricality is consistent with Oates’s theory that “the psychopathic serial killer is a deep fantasist of the imagination, his fixations cruel parodies of romantic love and his bizarre, brutal acts frequently related to cruel parodies of ‘art.’” In particular, Oates describes the killer’s “seemingly insatiable need to orchestrate, and reorchestrate, a drama of hallucinated control.” By turning Quentin into a puppet master, the play creates a striking metaphor for the killer’s “drama of control.”

As the title Zombie suggests, Oates is most interested in how the necrophiliac “exerts control over the dead body as, he believes, he could never exert control over the living.” In Connington’s theatrical version, Quentin the loser becomes the “puppet master” of an incapacitated lover who can never reject or leave him—or expose him as homosexual or force him
to confront his own homosexuality. The use of a life-size mannequin on-stage also creates an experience of the *uncanny*—which Freud theorized as that which is at once familiar and strange, human-seeming and yet not human. While the sociopathic Quentin sees a human being as no more than a puppet, the audience’s imagination can endow the inanimate puppet with humanity, recognizing that this stage prop is meant to represent an actual human being that suffered and died.

The serial killer as puppet master was also imagined by Dennis Cooper in his 1993 short story *Jerk*, which was re-created as a stage play in 2010, performed by French actor Jonathan Capdevielle and directed by Gisèle Vienne. Cooper’s literary novels often explore the darker shades of the homoerotic imagination, with characters who engage (or fantasize about engaging) in brutal acts of sexual violence. *Jerk* focuses on David Brooks, who, as a teenager in Texas in the 1970s, joined his classmate Wayne and an older psychopath named Dean in the murder of other teenage boys. Presumably as part of his therapy, David has come to a theater to perform a puppet show about those events for students at the University of
Jonathan Capdevielle performs in *Jerk*, adapted by Gisèle Vienne from Dennis Cooper’s short story, staged as part of the Under the Radar Festival at P.S. 122 in New York in 2010. Photo: Alain Monot.
Texas. Through his performance with puppets, David reenacts scenarios in which the murderers treat their victims like puppets, manipulating the bodies of—and giving voice to—the corpses in a drama of sexual fantasy.

As Wayne explains to Dean as they abuse a corpse, “Who cares what the fucker was really like? Killing’s just about power, man. You can make up whoever you want and like . . . imagine that person in this fucker’s body” (19). So Dean imagines he’s having sex with a teenage star from the TV show *Flipper*, and later Wayne will imagine another dead boy as Jimmy Page of the rock band Led Zeppelin. In Cooper’s scenario, sexualized murder is rooted in a fantasy of power, forcing the corpses to play the roles of famous and desirable men whom the murderers, in reality, could never dominate. But Cooper also suggests that these murderous fantasies are the result of an inability to love created by internalized homophobia. Wayne calls one corpse a “faggot,” but with another he’s filled with regret and cries, “Jamie, I loved you, man. I could never tell you” (27). It’s only when the object of affection is a corpse, an inert mass manipulated by the killer, that the killer can admit his same-sex romantic desire. The living lover is fickle and cannot be so easily controlled, so when Dean rejects Wayne, Wayne kills Dean, and when Wayne rejects David, David attacks Wayne.

If Connington’s Quentin is the killer as dorky loser, Capdevielle’s David is the killer as brooding hipster. The actor appears as a handsome but disheveled young man—with a neck tattoo, bed head, and a few days’ worth of stubble—and he speaks with a heavy French accent. He wears blue jeans, black boots, a black leather jacket, and a hoodie that says “JERK,” which he strips off to reveal a sleeveless t-shirt. During his puppet show, David uses different voices to portray the other characters, and his puppets are Bunraku-like dolls, complete with legs and shoes, although “Dean” and “Wayne” initially have animal heads (panda and otter, respectively). At times the performance is excruciating, with the performer making repetitive guttural sounds and/or drooling spit as he imitates at great length Dean fisting a corpse, David snogging Wayne, and other acts of sex and violence.

As in *Zombie*, the corpses in *Jerk* are played by puppets, conveying a creepy lifelessness. The production becomes a meta-puppet show when the actor playing David is giving voice to the puppets playing the killers, who in turn give voice to the puppets playing the corpses. Puppets, like corpses, are uncanny because they resemble humans but are not actually alive. In the final scenario, though, David abandons his puppets and does
all the voices, including his own, as a ventriloquist, not moving his lips, as if he is also losing his humanity, becoming increasingly inanimate. In the story, David is ultimately alone in a house of corpses, and in performance he is alone on an empty stage, with only lifeless puppets sharing the space.

Our culture’s fascination with serial killers exists in part because, as Oates put it in her analysis of Dahmer, we recognize “connections between extremes of psychopathic behavior and behavior considered ‘normal.’” But these connections do not necessarily lead to an easy understanding or explanation of the serial killer. Indeed, Oates finds that “Dahmer remains a riddle” and “we understand him, finally, no better than we understand ourselves.”

One of the traditional claims about theatrical performances is that they “humanize” their subjects, eliciting the audience’s empathy for even the most monstrous characters. Yet both Zombie and Jerk present performances that can be deliberately repulsive, challenging the audience’s ability to empathize. In his portrait of British serial killer Dennis Nilson, Brian Masters writes that the most disturbing aspect of his subject is not his terrible crimes but his capacity for “inhuman detachment” in the face of those crimes. The serial killers of Zombie and Jerk are themselves uncanny because we recognize the “connections” between their humanity and ours, but their “detachment”—their ability to treat other humans as no more than mannequins or puppets—marks them as “inhuman.” Both Oates and Cooper imagine serial killers as warped versions of theater artists, creating dramas of power and control by manipulating their victims like characters in a play. To perform these killers in the theater, then, is to turn them into puppets as well, opening up for the audience the possibility of human connection and empathy, but also forcing us to confront our potential for detachment and repulsion.

Aileen Wuornos: Acting in Self-Defense

In the same year in which America witnessed the release of The Silence of the Lambs and the arrest of Jeffrey Dahmer, the arrest of Aileen Wuornos also caused a sensation. Wuornos, a hitchhiking prostitute who killed seven men in Florida before her arrest, was (inaccurately) branded as “the first female serial killer.” The media also sensationalized her romantic relationship with Tyria Moore to construct Wuornos as a “man-hating lesbian murderer.” As an “unnatural monster,” the lesbian serial killer may share certain features with the gay male serial killer in the public imagination,
but she also occupies a position uniquely her own, constructed by homophobic and sexist ideologies. Just as a discussion of the homicidal homosexual in queer theater would be incomplete without analysis of lesbian representation and production (see chapter 4), an examination of representations of Aileen Wuornos is necessary to understand more fully the construction of the queer serial killer in American culture.

Representations of the lesbian serial killer have already received much critical attention, particularly from Lynda Hart in *Fatal Women: Lesbian Sexuality and the Mark of Aggression* (1994). Hart argues that female prostitutes are often the victims of violence, including rape and murder, but since the patriarchal order condones violence against women, it cannot acknowledge Wuornos's claims of self-defense. For Hart, Wuornos's murders were acts of resistance, not only against the men who attempted to rape and murder her but also against a symbolic order that denies women any subjectivity, making them figures for men's objectification, and therefore victims of their violence. Indeed, Hart writes about Wuornos as the actualization of a paranoid male fantasy of the murderous woman. Those belonging to the patriarchy “eroticize their worst nightmares” about the femme fatale in order to “preclude their actualization,” and Wuornos has to be executed because she “has violated that barrier” between fantasy and reality, taking a role as an active subject in her own defense. The State of Florida found Wuornos guilty of murder and executed her on 8 October 2002.

After the initial media frenzy and a well-regarded documentary by Nick Broomfield, Wuornos's story moved into the realm of dramatic narrative, with an off-Broadway play and a major Hollywood film inspired by her story. In both works, female creators retell the case and express sympathy for Wuornos—and the play, first produced when Wuornos was still alive, mounts a vigorous defense for her. Carson Kreitzer's play, *Self Defense, or Death of Some Salesmen* (2001), imagines Wuornos as consciously enacting vigilante justice against men who would abuse women. Kreitzer wrote the play as part of her *Women Who Kill* triptych, which also includes *Valerie Shoots Andy* (1993), about Valerie Solanas's attempt to kill Andy Warhol, and *Heroin/e* (1995), about Ellie Nesler, who shot and killed the man accused of molesting her son. After the play's premiere at the Perishable Theatre in Providence, Rhode Island, in 2001, and a subsequent production at the Playwrights' Center in Minneapolis, *Self Defense* received its New York production at New Georges, a company founded in 1992 dedicated to the work of women theater artists. The New Georges
production at HERE Arts Center, a downtown venue known for experimental theater, opened in May 2002—just five months before Wuornos’s execution.\footnote{Self Defense is a well-researched play that accurately relates the events of Wuornos’s murders and her trial, although (in the tradition of Meyer Levin’s Compulsion) Kreitzer renames her characters in order to allow for some dramatic license and perhaps also to create some critical distance from the familiar media representations of Wuornos, whom Kreitzer renames Jolene Palmer. Furthermore, in her desire to explore the true causes and significance of the murders from many perspectives, Kreitzer explodes theatrical realism, allowing many characters, including Jo, to address the audience directly, often juxtaposing conflicting opinions and ideologies. Along with Jo’s inner monologues and fantasies, which grant her a high degree of subjectivity rather than constructing her as an object for forensic study, the play also includes a chorus of other women—prostitutes and strippers, a coroner, a lawyer, a scholar—who articulate feminist perspectives on the broader contexts for Jo’s violent acts. The play presents evidence that Jo did indeed act in self-defense in all seven cases, although much of this evidence was not placed before the jury at the time of her trial. A prostitute named Daytona gives the most pointed explanation for the fact that no one, including the jury, believes that Jo murdered in self-defense.

An’ I’ll tell you why they’re not buying that Self Defense. What Self? Plain an’ simple. Ask any one of ’em. They don’t see a self there to defend. They even say—she sold herself for money. Sold her Self. No right to fuckin’ defend it now. (317)

Jo’s social status as a prostitute condemns her—as does her status as a lesbian, with prosecutors painting her as “this man-hating lesbian” (311). Kreitzer’s Jo, however, is highly cognizant and articulate about social inequalities based on gender and class, countering these condemnations by exposing the hypocrisy and double standards by which she will be convicted. In what amounts to the play’s call to arms, Jo explains her notion of feminist vigilante justice.

There are, y’know, there are certain . . . activities that are just known to carry a Death Sentence. I’m not talking about Law here, I’m not talking about being illegal. I’m talking about the list of activities that, if you
pursue them, these could very easily lead to death. . . . All's I'm saying is that I want killing women to be added to that list. And I'm not talking about a court of law, getting Caught. I'm talking about right there, at the time. Knowing, this is an activity that, if you engage in this activity, you could easily wind up dead. 'Cos killing women is not on that list right now. (302)

Kreitzer's play represents the facts of this real life case, but in this dramatic version Jo is allowed to mount her own stirring defense before the audience. Just as she acted in order to defend herself, she is now acting to defend the meaning of her self. Even the well-intentioned characters in the play do not really understand the significance of Jo's actions, so Jo herself must explain them to make sure that her acts are not misconstrued. While Kreitzer satirizes all the characters who would appropriate Jo's story, her sharpest dart is saved for Annie Ames, a Hollywood producer who wants to tell and sell Jo's story. As soon as the case unfolds in the tabloid press, Annie gleefully announces, “It's Silence of the Lambs meets Thelma and Louise!” (291). Thus the play tries to distance itself from the commercial exploitation inherent in the “based on a true story” appropriation of famous murder cases.

Shortly after the debut of Self Defense, the 2003 film Monster, written and directed by Patty Jenkins, earned much publicity because of the performance of its lead actress. The former ballerina and model Charlize Theron, who regularly appears on lists of the “Sexiest Women in the World,” acquired fat, splotchy skin, stringy hair, and bad teeth in order to impersonate Wuornos (here named Lee). Theron’s performance garnered numerous awards, including the Oscar for Best Actress. The film is much more concerned than the play with Lee's sexuality and the difficulty of categorizing her as a lesbian. Like many of the later Leopold and Loeb retellings, Monster is framed as a love story, beginning with Lee's first meeting with Shelby (Christina Ricci), the young woman who will be her lover, and ending with Shelby testifying against Lee in court. Rather than showing the lesbian relationship as “man-hating,” the film shows that Lee does not initially identify as a lesbian: when Shelby tries to flirt with her, she calls Shelby a “dyke” and insists that she isn’t gay. But Lee's desire for Shelby grows, and soon Shelby is the only person for whom she feels love in her bleak existence.

The film is also much more explicit about acts of violence, showing the audience how Lee was tortured, raped, and threatened with death by one
of her johns. This horrific scene ends with Lee shooting the john—and then taking his car, his clothes, and his red trucker hat, which she will wear in the next few scenes. One of the tropes found in the crime narratives describing the real life Wuornos is that she killed “like a man”: using a gun (rather than poison), killing strangers (rather than family members), and taking pleasure in having power over someone else’s life. Jenkins’s film highlights this “cross-gendered” dynamic by emphasizing Lee’s appropriation of the car and clothes of her first male victim, potentially playing into the heterosexist fear that lesbians eradicate men by taking “the masculine position,” effectively making men superfluous. At the same time, if an audience member reads this aggressive woman who wears men’s clothes and wields a phallic gun as a “male” figure, then her murders can be symbolically read as acts of violence between two men, once again playing into the violence associated with male homosexuality. In this instance, the fear of the lesbian as “phallic woman” and the fear of male homosexuality collapse in on each other. In both cases, Lee’s gender transgressions mark her as “monstrous.”

But the film also elicits the audience’s sympathy for this monster. Lee has a miserable life, and her good intentions and attempts to better herself meet with rejection and degradation, largely because of society’s sexism and classism. Monster does not condemn Lee for being a prostitute or in love with a woman, although it does show both situations as the result of desperation more than desire. And Jenkins leaves no doubt that Lee is guilty of murder. The film presents her first murder as legitimate self-defense, but she then becomes irrationally vengeful, looking at all men as guilty until proven innocent, assuming that all men want to abuse women and therefore should be killed, in order to justify crimes actually committed for material gain. Unlike Kreitzer’s Jo, Jenkins’s Lee does not express a sophisticated analysis of social inequalities based on gender and class. She acts out of ego and greed, unable to understand why she has suffered so much and still not achieved the American Dream of luxury and property that she deserves.

The film’s title raises the question of whether Lee is in fact a “monster.” Especially in emphasizing the transformation of Theron from “beauty” into “beast,” the film presents Lee as monstrous, with the actor’s physical deformation mirroring the character’s moral deformation. But, like the beast of the fairy tale, Lee earns our sympathy because it is not her fault that she is a beast. While Self Defense rails against Wuornos’s circumstances and the social order that created them, the film presents her
circumstances as unchangeable, the cruel context that will inevitably lead to her undoing. While the play demands that society change, *Monster* shows how poor women are fated to suffer in this society. The love Lee feels for Shelby may give her some temporary solace from her suffering, but ultimately she will be alone in the swampy Florida landscape, howling like an animal and committing murder, because that is all that she can do. *Monster* shows us the personal tragedy surrounding Wuornos’s actions; *Self Defense* shows us the social injustice surrounding the way society determined the meaning of her actions.

**Ridiculously Sensational:**

*The Comedy of the Gay Serial Killer*

Murder is a serious subject, and, historically, most plays that have included murder belong to serious genres, particularly tragedy. Yet nearly all the plays discussed in this book include humor to some extent, ranging from the grim to the witty to the outrageous. It might be argued that the modern theater is tragicomic, not simply interweaving tragic and comic elements but producing plays that encourage the audience to see the tragic and the comic in a single instance. Leaving aside the neoclassical argument that such genre mixing is aesthetically “monstrous,” the use of murder within wholly comic plays may still raise ethical issues for a contemporary audience. Do we feel guilty for laughing at murder? And, if queer killers are, as I have been arguing, to be understood in relation to factors such as the closet, homophobia, and AIDS, can these social and political contexts also be laughing matters?

These ethical qualms may hover around all plays that deal with serious subjects, but they are more pronounced in comedy, because the audience’s laughter functions as an outward sign of pleasure. Is it right to take pleasure in creating or viewing murderous violence? One of the American theater’s most popular satirists, Christopher Durang, has written plays that reflect on their own status as violent comedies, questioning the ethics of creating and viewing comedies that include murder. Durang’s depiction of a gay serial killer in *Betty’s Summer Vacation* (1999) can make an audience laugh while also making them think about why they are laughing.

Christopher Durang earned his reputation in the 1980s as one of America’s eminent satirists with comedies that confronted religious dogma (*Sister Mary Ignatius Explains It All for You*), psychoanalysis (*Be-
yond Therapy), and dysfunctional families (The Marriage of Bette and Boo).\textsuperscript{43} The 1990s were not as successful for Durang, but when Playwrights Horizons produced Betty’s Summer Vacation at its off-Broadway theater in 1999, critics hailed it as his comeback hit and it won four Obie Awards.\textsuperscript{44} Although the play has sometimes met with mixed critical reception and inspired some audience members to flee the theater, it remains popular, with numerous amateur and professional productions. In the summer of 2011, the Bay Street Theatre staged a revival directed by Trip Cullman, with Tony-nominated actors Veanne Cox, Celia Keenan-Bolger, and (in the role of the gay serial killer) Bobby Steggert.

\textit{Betty’s Summer Vacation} is a pitch black comedy. In this bloody and hysterical play, Durang includes the figure of the gay serial killer to satirize the madness of America’s tabloid culture, inviting the audience to find both horror and humor in increasingly sensational acts of indecent exposure, rape, castration, and murder. Durang’s critique of a puerile culture that has “gone too far” is ultimately about the \textit{audience} for sex and violence, forcing us to question our own culpability as the consumers of such entertainment—including the play \textit{Betty’s Summer Vacation}.

The play takes place in the living room of an East Coast beach house, where Betty and her friend Trudy hope to find rest and relaxation but instead find themselves caught in a whirlwind of madness and mayhem. A collection of kooky characters interrupt Betty’s vacation: Mrs. Siezmagraff, the landlady who declares Auntie Mame is her role model; Buck, a sexually insatiable surfer dude; Mr. Vanislaw, a derelict who keeps exposing himself; and Keith, a “sensitive” young man who carries a shovel and a hatbox that may contain body parts. Surreally, the house also seems to be home to a trio of “voices,” supposedly coming from the ceiling, who laugh and occasionally make comments, much like a television studio audience. The sitcom-style zaniness, which in Durang’s world always contains a hint of menace, becomes full-blown horror at the end of act 1, when the derelict rapes Betty’s friend Trudy. Trudy avenges the rape by cutting off the derelict’s penis, and then serial killer Keith cuts off his head.

In act 2, the Voices, who have grown increasingly demanding in their need to be constantly entertained, materialize onstage as a trio of menacing aliens who insist that Trudy and Keith be put on trial for their crimes à la Court TV. Mrs. Siezmagraff acts as the defense attorney, and by painting both Trudy and Keith as sympathetic victims of abuse rather than violent perpetrators, she convinces this jury of Voices to find them not guilty. But the Voices still aren’t satisfied and want more sex and violence. They goad
Trudy and Keith into doing it again, this time castrating and beheading the surfer dude, Buck. Finally, the Voices convince Trudy and Keith to blow up the house and everyone in it—except for Betty, who escapes to the beach.

Although Keith is not the central character of Betty's Summer Vacation, he is crucial to the play's plot and themes. Keith is a strange young man, modeled in part on Robert Montgomery's charming murderer in the classic thriller Night Must Fall (1937), but also inspired by two of the media's favorite gay serial killers, Jeffrey Dahmer and Andrew Cunanan—with perhaps a dash of Norman Bates from Psycho (1960). He gets upset if he is around people for too long, so he spends most of his time alone in his room with his “collection” of body parts. When Keith does emerge, he takes particular interest in the other men in the house, although Durang describes this interest as “oddly innocent,” as if Keith were a naïve young man, unsure of why he is so attracted to Mr. Vanislaw and Buck. Keith makes sexual invitations to both men, but there are no same-sex relations in this play because Keith is ultimately more interested in beheading other men than sleeping with them.

When he is put on trial for murder, Mrs. Siezmagraff defends Keith by arguing that he was “molested,” “treated really badly,” and “unrelentingly criticized” by his large family, and that this terrible childhood is what caused him to murder. The Voices, acting as the jury, sympathize with Keith's pain, and so they set him free, although as soon as they do Keith admits that he killed people not only in “self-defense” but “also because I like to cut heads off” (55). So how does the audience judge Keith? He is the most violent character onstage, but he is also the “nicest”—he is boyish, shy, and generally polite unless he feels that his personal space is threatened. Trudy and Keith bond over their shared status as victims, and even Betty is surprised to find that she prefers the company of this sensitive sociopath to the other men in the house. But part of Durang’s point is that a sympathetic person is not the same as an innocent person and no amount of victimization is an excuse for violent acts.

In his notes to the play, Durang explains that he wrote Betty’s Summer Vacation in response to the explosion of tabloid television culture in the 1990s, the result of twenty-four-hour cable news channels such as CNN and Court TV. With the televised trials of O. J. Simpson, Lorena Bobbitt, and the Menendez Brothers, America existed under a constant bombardment of information about sensational legal cases. Arguably, in the age of the Internet, our culture's desire for constantly updated infotainment
has grown even stronger. It is no wonder that Durang places Keith at the center of his satire of tabloid culture, since the queer serial killer satisfies the audience’s desire for tales that involve “deviant” sex and violence. The main thrust of the play, however, is not to judge the gay serial killer but to judge the viewers of tabloid media who take pleasure in consuming such lurid characters and stories. The ultimate target of Durang’s satire is the audience sitting in the theater, and those three grotesque, childlike creatures onstage demanding sex and violence are stand-ins for us. The Voices’ constant demand for sensational entertainment creates a world in which nothing—from family relations and sexual desire to rape and murder—really has much significance. It is all just fodder for cheap thrills and even cheaper sentiment. As the Voices escalate their demands, Durang’s play gets increasingly dark and bloody, and the climax is Keith blowing up the house and killing everyone inside, including the Voices, who are urging Keith along. In Durang’s hyperbolic farce, the logical result of out-of-control tabloid sensationalism is suicidal nihilism, and the entire world of the play explodes into oblivion. Only Betty, the voice of reason throughout the play, escapes the house. Alone on the beach, unsure if she has had a breakdown or a breakthrough, she is comforted by the relaxing sound of the waves, which had been obscured by all the play’s previous noise.

Betty’s Summer Vacation has the potential to be extremely unsettling because it invites the audience to find entertainment in increasingly disturbing incidences of sex and violence, and the play is designed to make us feel at best queasy and at worst actually guilty about enjoying the play itself. We are complicit in this performance, not just because Durang puts a ridiculous version of the audience onstage but because live theater always implicates its audience in a way that television, for example, does not. The play encourages a variety of responses—from sympathy to laughter to horror—while also challenging the audience to interrogate those responses. How do we balance our desire for stories of sex and violence with our sense of morality? By laughing at something, are we trivializing it, condoning it, or criticizing it? And if Durang can get us, members of the audience, to laugh at our own monstrosity, will we change our behavior?

In the final analysis, nearly everything about Durang’s gay serial killer escapes analysis. His mysterious nature encourages our inquiries, but in the end he remains unknowable, since the play short-circuits all attempts to truly understand Keith through, for example, psychology, social context, medical and legal discourse, systems of morality, or genre convention—in short, through all of the methods I have attempted to apply to
other homicidal homosexuals. Durang seems to throw his hands up and say that there is no explanation for Keith; he is simply a gay young man who enjoys cutting off people’s heads. We would do better to explain ourselves as a culture, our penchant for tales of sex and violence, and our fascination with the likes of Keith. Laughing at Keith may be cathartic, because he is both ridiculous and terrifying, and at the end of the play the homicidal homosexual is swept off the stage and into oblivion. But the audience remains, and we are left to question our own complicity in creating and encouraging Keith, goading him on to more and more horrific crimes for our entertainment. If we laugh at those ridiculous Voices onstage, we are in fact laughing at our own excesses, and the laughter catches in our throats.

Nevertheless, I would argue that taking pleasure in the character of Keith is not a crime. Certainly any appetite taken to extremes is ridiculous, and Durang’s critique of tabloid culture is trenchant: representations of sex and violence can be consumed excessively and thoughtlessly. But I believe his play works to engage the audience’s critical response, and I read it as more provocative than condemnatory. We can take pleasure in Keith, but the play urges us to have a deeper understanding of how and why we enjoy this comical queer killer. Watching this character onstage can provoke our sympathy, horror, and even laughter, and all those feelings can be pleasurable for an audience. If these responses also lead to greater insight, not just into the character but also into ourselves, then this is one of the greatest pleasures to be had in the theater.