“I don’t want to be forced to leave my country,” Tim Miller says at the end of his 1999 performance Glory Box, facing exile from the United States due to his partner Alistair McCartney’s lack of American citizenship and the refusal of U.S. law and immigration policy to recognize their relationship. The prospect of exile is much closer in Us, which was performed during the extraordinary historical period ranging from the Supreme Court’s 2003 decision against sodomy laws through the war in Iraq, thousands of gay marriage ceremonies (most subsequently invalidated by courts), and into the aftermath of the 2004 election, when eleven states voted to define marriage so as to bar gay and lesbian relationships and when the United States narrowly retained in office a national administration pledged to write that exclusionary definition into the U.S. Constitution.

Us begins with Miller packing a suitcase with mementoes of an American life. As if to stave off that final departure, the performance that follows is filled with other, metaphorical journeys—first, in memory to the always-potent world of his childhood, with its love of Broadway musicals and National Geographic magazines and its fear of the Vietnam War that, a generation ago, forced thousands of other Americans into exile
in Canada. Later in Us, Miller and McCartney wear matching tuxedoes to the middle of the Rainbow Bridge separating the U.S. and Canada, marking the northern country’s recent granting of marriage rights to same-sex couples. Tim and Alistair don’t yet step over the border into exile, but on the south side of the line their situation seems more intractable than ever. Us has perhaps the most muted conclusion of Tim Miller’s major works, but it still, characteristically, ends with an expression of hope.

[When the audience enters the theater, they hear the loud, campy, throbbing beat of the Ethel Merman disco album. Around 8:05 P.M.—a bit late so folks can park, go to the bathroom, etc.—Tim enters from the back of the house, lugging a huge suitcase down the stairs. Tim shouts over Ethel Merman.]

Hi. It’s time to start the show. We’ve been enjoying the Ethel Merman disco album, but now it’s time to get to work. Turn cell phones off, or at least set them to vibrate and sit on them. The show hasn’t started yet. You’ll know it’s started when I throw this suitcase into the theater. Here it comes! 1 . . . 2 . . . 3!

[Tim throws suitcase onstage.]

I’m packing my bags. We don’t have much time left and there are a lot of decisions to be made before you go into exile.

Do you take the thirty-nine garage-sale fluorescent drag wigs I got three for a dollar in Pico Rivera? What about my Broadway cast albums from childhood? I have thirteen hundred of them! Do I take South Pacific and leave Sound of Music? I can’t face a choice like that. You get Mary Martin either way. How many National Geographics?

[Tim grabs American flag from suitcase.]
And what about this flag? Do I bring that with me? Y’know, I’ve been thinking about the flag lately. What mad queen in Philadelphia circa 1776 designed this thing? Betsy Ross was probably some found- ing father’s drag name. I can see him thinking, “I see stripes . . . AND STARS! IN THREE COLORS!” It’s so busy! I have to rethink this flag. See, up here on stage is the flag for the country I wish we lived in!

[Tim gestures to a huge American flag backdrop made from Broadway albums.]

I want to live in an America where the flag is made from Broadway musical cast albums. *Godspell* the red stripes, *Gypsy* makes the white, and *Oliver!* is the starry field! I want America to be a country where Jesus is not Bush’s bigoted freak but is like the kind, hottie hippie Jesus in *Godspell*, who wants to hang out backstage with the cool strippers and looks after the future gay boy activists like little Oliver!

But meanwhile we’re stuck with this flag. Do I put it in my baggage? Speaking of baggage . . . I got plenty. Okay, let me get this over with: we’re not having to leave the US because one of us got a great new job or a time-share in Switzerland. As you smart audience members know, here in America gay couples have not one single Federal right respecting our relationships, and since Alistair is from Australia and we can’t get married so we could get Alistair a green card and stay together in the US, we have to leave this fucking country. OOPS, don’t want to seem too angry!

Okay, maybe I’m not angry, but I am bit peeved. I mean what’s wrong with US? With Alistair and me? We’re nice guys. We recycle, religiously! We watch *Animal Planet*—especially the Pet Psychic! We adopted a dog from Malibu Pet Rescue, a small red dog named Frida who looks like a cross between a fox and a wombat and identifies as a Latina lesbian. We’re good guys. I mean, what’s wrong with US?
When I think of what Al and I are going through, I’ve stopped trying to figure out what’s wrong with “us.” Me and Alistair, I mean. The question we should all be asking is “What’s wrong with US?” Yes, you got it, the United States. What’s wrong with America, that she has such a hard heart toward gay people? I want to figure it out before we go. I don’t want to travel with that in my baggage, either as checked or carry-on. I want to leave that old shit here where it belongs.

You can’t take everything, though. My Broadway musical soundtracks alone would fill a dozen suitcases. Look, I CLAIM the stereotype proudly. Fulfilling all the gay clichés, I’ve been into musicals ever since I was a little kid. They’re crucial texts—the way I figured out the world and where I fit in it.

Let me tell you a little fairy tale. There once was a boy who would play inside a lot. He would put a stack of twelve musical shows on the turntable, stacked up like his mile-high pancake stack for his birthday at IHOP, and then spend the whole day listening to the Broadway shows and playing with his Lego. What would be on the playlist? *Gypsy, Cabaret, Man of La Mancha, Funny Girl, My Fair Lady, Fiddler on the Roof, West Side Story, Carousel, The Sound of Music, Hello, Dolly!, 1776, Hair, Godspell, Oliver!, Jesus Christ Superstar.*

These Broadway shows were his finishing school as a future queer boy, his political education as a crazed leftist. They were the light bulbs going on over his head and they made a great light . . .

*[Tim is abruptly caught in an incredibly bright follow spotlight. The rest of the stage is dark.]*

I’m surrounded by light. I can taste it. It surrounds me. It burns my fingers. It sizzles my skin. It’s the light that defines me. It makes my boundaries that hold me in . . . the boundaries that I push past. I’m surrounded by light . . . shining . . . from my brother’s desk lamp shining from his top bunk bed . . .
[We hear a scratchy phono recording of the overture from Gypsy begin to play loudly.]

. . . as I do a striptease for my brothers. I was seven, maybe eight. Gypsy was my favorite album. Gypsy—the great musical by Stephen Sondheim, Jules Stein, and Arthur Laurents, about the famous burlesque stripper Gypsy Rose Lee. Gypsy was my favorite musical when I was a little boy. I wanted to be Gypsy Rose Lee when I grew up. Escape from my family. Find your voice. Take off your clothes onstage in front of strange men all over America. See, a boy’s dream can come true! I would perform my numbers from the show when no one was home because I was afraid to have people hear me sing:

“Let Me Entertain You”
“I Had a Dream”
“Ya Gotta Have a Gimmick”

—and I had a doozie: to be the youngest boy burlesque stripper on my block. This was my “Gypsy Rose Lee” game that I mostly played with my friends, but once my brothers, after my parents went to sleep, had me do a striptease for them between our double bunk beds. I would play the Gypsy Rose Lee game for them. Because you are a smart audience, I know this may seem like a Citizen Kane “Rosebud”-type revelation that explains the psychological motives behind my work. But it’s much more complicated than that.

They would shine their light on me and I would do my striptease. They made their striptease mouth trumpets “WAH, WAH, WAAAAAH.” . . . Off went my mis-matched pajamas, the flannel astronaut tops and the cotton cowboy-themed bottoms. I must have looked like a freaky Hummel figurine stripping, taking it off, taking it all off. This was my first strip for other boys. I loved the heat of that light, the light of their eyes, the heat of their gaze. The light I’ve always been surrounded by. It defines me. It makes my boundaries that hold me in, the boundaries I push beyond. I’m surrounded by light.
But ever since, I have always been a stripper . . .
There in that hot white light.
I strip away bullshit. I strip away lies. I strip away fear.
Let me entertain you. I had a dream. You gotta have a gimmick.

I learned everything I needed to know from these shows, about love, politics and America. Who needs Marx and Engels when you have Rodgers and Hammerstein!

[Fiddler on the Roof is all about gay marriage. Well, at least the consistent expansion of the definition of marriage! There was a high school production in South Carolina a couple of years ago that had two boys play the final couple. The usual nuts freaked out. Thousands were killed and the National Guard was called in! Fiddler made me want a Jewish Commie boyfriend like Perchik. I had a couple of those during my NYC years. Fiddler taught me to disobey my parents and marry for love even if it challenges Tradition’s taboos. Fiddler prepared me for exile, whether from Cossacks, storm troopers or George W.

1776. I suspect if we polled the audience we would find that it is everyone’s favorite musical about the signing of the Declaration of Independence. 1776 won the Tony in 1969. This show actually has a hard-hitting left-of-center perspective. 1776 taught me that America was founded by merchant-capitalist hypocrites who dared to write about human freedom while most of them owned human slaves!

The Sound of Music showed me that it was crucial to leave organized religion behind, get laid, and fight Nazis through festive song and dance.
Applause gives us the first image of a cheery gay bar in a musical. Based on All About Eve, this show came just a few months after Stonewall and had all the gay chorus boys dancing with Lauren Bacall at the gay bar singing the hit “ALIVE!” I got the cast album for my eleventh birthday, and these were the first images of gay people I had ever seen. These photos of the gay bar scene in the cast album let me know my future as a gay boy included silk scarves knotted at the neck and long leather-fringed vests.

Cabaret helped me expand my fashion sense with its world of gay men, Nazis, and Liza. When I was twelve I had cobbled together my Liza Minnelli outfit from the movie soundtrack and was singing “Mein Herr” along with Liza. My sister snuck in with her instamatic and shot a photo of me dressed as Liza. (Perhaps this is the origin of my internalized drag phobia!) I freaked and chased her, grabbed the camera, and smashed it with a heavy garden gnome. Think what I would pay for those photos so I could use them to promote this show!

My Fair Lady showed me the perfect library—I still want that rolling ladder and globes and skull—a library shared by two men in smoking jackets who sang songs about how they would never let a woman in their life.

Hair taught me that we can confront the government, take drugs, and be in theater projects where the attractive young cast takes their clothes off and has sex with one another backstage at theaters like this one!

South Pacific—the great anti-racist Rodgers and Hammerstein musical! It was banned across the South because of the interracial romance between hottie Lieutenant Cable and the Tonkinese girl Liat. South Pacific showed me you could fight bigotry while being surrounded by hunky, naked sailors and drag queens.

These shows became a bridge to the future, the script, the primary text for how this boy understood the world. A world full of strippers,
sexy Jewish Communists, founding fathers, de-frocked nuns, gay men dressing badly, hairy hippies, humpy sailors, brave little queer Oliver daring to ask for more.

[Tim holds Oliver! cast album high.]

Not a bad laundry list, all in all, of ways of claiming who you are supposed to be.

I think maybe I’ll keep this one with me.

Since I was a little kid, like Oliver, I could see when things were unfair, when there wasn’t enough gruel, and gay people are ready to settle for a miserly bit of gruel. I’ve always known there was something wrong with US, with America. There was something that would try to mess with me. Even as a kid I knew this. I was going to have to be very clever to survive. That as I looked for love, I was going to be fucked with as I tried to find the answer to that five billion dollar question . . .

[Tim sings along with Oliver’s plaintive song “Where is Love?”]

“Wh-he-he-he-hee here is love?
Does it fall from skies above?
Is it underneath the willow tree,
That I’ve been dreaming ooooooof?”

When I was nine I was enraged that I had not been cast as Oliver Twist in the 1968 Academy Award winning film version of the musical Oliver!

How could they have given the part to that little English boy-bitch Mark Lester? That part was mine! Don’t you understand, IT WAS MINE! Home alone, I would practice singing Oliver’s tuneful lament “Where is Love?” again and again in the living room of our
house in Whittier, California, when no one could hear me. I even choreographed that excellent dance. Did you see the tree? The sophisticated use of levels?

I was so mad at Mark Lester for stealing my part from me. I wanted to hit him and kick him and gouge him and tickle him and kiss him and hold him and lick him and undress him and sleep next to him for the rest of my life in a designer garret in London. I watched the movie *Oliver!* not long ago on AMC and it’s the most homoerotic movie ever made. No wonder I loved it so much when I was a kid. All these sweet naughty English adolescents with hair hanging in their eyes sharing beds with each other, pimped out by the irascible older man Fagin and in love with a Judy Garland–type torch song singer named Nancy played by the incomparable Shani Wallis in the film.

I loved Mark Lester, but I hated him too. He was getting in between me and the true object of my desire: Jack Wild playing the Artful Dodger. Jack Wild—who would later fill my Saturday morning cartoon-time with homosexual desire on the acid-trippy children’s show *H. R. Pufnstuf*—was a dark teenage beauty, full of danger yet capable of love and affection. He knew how to make community, as witnessed by his hit song from *Oliver!*, “Consider Yourself One of Us”—which is clearly a coming-out anthem.

Why had Mark Lester gotten that part instead of me! If I had gotten what was mine I would have felt Jack Wild’s arm draped seductively over my shoulder as we danced our hearts out there in that mythical back-lot London. I would have found where love is! I would be somewhere safer than I felt growing up in America. See, it was clear to me that all people with English accents were gay and camp and slept in beds with other boys and were nice to each other and sang and danced in the street and had hair hanging in seductive fringe over their eyes!

Maybe they didn’t cast me because I didn’t have an English accent? That can be easily remedied. So, in fifth grade I carefully—almost as if it were a science project—began to assume an English
Tim Miller in *Us* with *Oliver!* cast album. Photo by John Aigner.
accent in my daily life. It started creeping in slowly: emphatically pro-
nouncing both my t’s in the word “little.” Speaking with exaggerated
politeness to grown-ups, saying “yes, please” and “thank you very
much.” Displaying my vast Oxford English Dictionary vocabulary to
anyone who would listen. I was never happier than when one of my
classmates asked during dodge ball, before hitting me in the head
with the ball, “Hey, Tim, you talk funny. Are you from England?”
and I, a good queer boy, would primly reply, “Well, my mother’s
family does come from Dutton, England.” (I neglected to mention
that they had come from there in 1754.)

Okay, I know I’m not alone in this. I know a lot of people do ac-
cent surgery, a little nip-n-tuck or Botox on the vocal cords as a way
of escaping from vocal markers of class, race, or regional dialect. I
happen to know lots of gay men who went through a period as kids
where they took on some kind of English accent and tried to live as
little English gentlemen in Tulsa, Oklahoma. Somehow the refined
English, Noel-Coward faggy other maybe gave us an escape hatch
from some harsher realities of homophobic America. It seemed like
somehow it might be safer in England for boys like me who listened
to showtunes while playing with Lego!

Things only got worse the following year when yet another part
was stolen from me, the part of Tiny Tim in the movie musical
Scrooge, based on A Christmas Carol. Growing up in suburban Cali-
iformalia as a “Tim,” Christmas always carried a particular resonance
for me because the yuletide pity-puppy poster boy that I most related
to had the same name as me! As a ten- or eleven-year-old boy, I was
deeply in love with Tiny Tim. He was the first boy I wanted to get
married to, if I could just get him out of England and the nineteenth
century and the world of fiction! I fantasized that Tiny Tim would be
my “special friend” when we grew up. I imagined that if Tiny Tim
and I were best friends, I would knit Tiny Tim a brand new scarf,
feed him Vitamin C, and find a physical therapist for him in Beverly
Hills. We would grow to be strong young men. We would run to-
gether in romantic slow motion on the beach in Santa Monica. He
and I could create a special world of “Tims” at Christmas time. We would leave our tastefully decorated condo in West Hollywood as we negotiated our families. We would exchange that subtle, knowing smile that lovers share with one another as we noted that the Cratchits seemed so much more functional as a family than the Millers.

This obsession I had with Tiny Tim knew no bounds. In sixth grade it wasn’t enough for me to have affected an English accent, so I took on a “Tiny Tim solidarity limp” as soon as December rolled around in Los Angeles, and insisted on seeing the film musical *Scrooge* dozens of times. The love affair with Tiny Tim Cratchit was finally consummated the year I broke my leg right before Christmas. There I was on crutches and wearing my Dickensean scarf as I hobbled into the dining room. I made everyone lift a flagon of Christmas punch—I had mulled it from cherry Hi-C and a hard rock of carbon-dated cinnamon I had found on the spice rack—and join me in a toast over the Butterball turkey: “God bless us, every one!”

My profound love and attraction for things English reached their peak with my production in fifth grade of *Hamlet*. My teacher Mrs. Bush—one of only two positive associations I have with that four-letter word “bush”—encouraged me in my desire to direct and star in a sixty-minute adaptation of Shakespeare’s play. I had an ulterior motive, though: I was in love with my desk mate David Suggs, and I figured if I staged *Hamlet* I could cast him as Horatio and he would have to follow my direction and hug and kiss me at the end of the play!

Which came first, the chicken or the egg? The desire to play the Prince of Denmark and speak those killer lines, or the desire to wear tights and be cradled by David Suggs as Horatio with his long blond hair falling over his forehead? I don’t know. Maybe they came at exactly the same moment. Art and sex? The word and the deed? Everyone got in on the act to help ten-year-old Tim do *Hamlet*. Mrs. Bush gave us vast amounts of class time for my increasingly despotic rehearsals. My brother nixed my choice for incidental music for the play—the overture from *Hello, Dolly!*—and found the right bit of Purcell for the court processional at Elsinore. My Mom sewed the
costumes for the production, including my elegant black-belted tunic, which went over my sister’s tights from modern dance, and a frilly white shirt from one of my mom’s pantsuits. My mom finished it all off by ripping a shiny metal medallion off a huge holiday gift box bottle of Seagrams and then hanging it on a bathtub chain around my neck. (Thus teaching me at a young age how crucial it is to accessorize.)

Finally the great day of the show arrived and I got to English accent up a storm, have a sword fight, and swoon into David Suggs’ arms: “If thou didst ever call me friend, live to tell my story! Oh I die Horatio. . . . The potent poison quite o’ercrows my spirit. The rest is silence.” My head fell face down into Horatio’s lap, only a thin layer of tights separating my lips from the Suggs family jewels. (I told him he couldn’t wear underwear cause it would ruin the line of the costume.) I breathed hot air into his crotch and I felt a stirring within. As directed, David Suggs held me close, stroked my hair, and kissed my forehead as he flatly intoned the closing lines: “Now cracks a noble heart. Good night sweet prince, and flights of angels sing thee to thy rest.”

“Where is love?”

I don’t know what ever happened to Mark Lester after his role in Oliver! and I don’t even know the name of the boy who played Tiny Tim in Scrooge. As for David Suggs, I tried to Google him last night but couldn’t find anything. But I do know where love is. Because in my story Oliver Twist-Tiny Tim-Hamlet found the thing they wanted.

For more than ten years I have lived with Alistair, a man I met in London, spitting distance from where Oliver picked a pocket or two. He no longer has hair fringing far down his forehead—Alistair is going for a butch-er, shaved-head hip-hop look—but we do share a small bed which before long is likely to be in an over-priced London garret somewhere south of the river.
Alistair’s beautiful voice, his soft Australia-meets-London-meets-L.A. accent, has finally given me permission to pronounce both my ts in “lit-tle” (at least around the house).
And we both know where love is.
God bless Us.
God bless Us, every one.

[Tim walks back to suitcase.]

Well, I guess there’s no question. I’ll have to take my Oliver! soundtrack, Scrooge LP, and definitely my Hamlet costume. I don’t think I can fit everything in my suitcases, though, if I take most of my musicals. I’m going to have to get rid of some other stuff. I need to get rid of some really heavy stuff—like perhaps my rock collection? Or maybe I should lose my twenty-eight years of National Geographics? That would make a dent. It’s a scientific fact that they are the heaviest objects on the planet Earth! If we piled in Tierra del Fuego all the world’s National Geographics they weigh enough to throw the earth off its orbital axis! I can’t give these up, though. These magazines are where I learned about the world! They are where I discovered cultural difference. They were my first porn magazines!

Not long after my triumph with Hamlet and David Suggs’ lap, I came home from school one day. My parents both worked, so I got the key out from the garden gnome’s wheelbarrow, grabbed the mail and let myself in. I cracked open the just-delivered National Geographic. I spread it open, sniffed the delicious inky crotch of the magazine. I breathed in the world from between the pages of the new National Geographic. I sniffed the ink on the pricey chrome coated paper that distinguished NG from all the competition. Opening a National Geographic and breathing it in was like sniffing glue. . . .

[Tim walks down left sniffing the National Geographic.]
If you breathe it in long enough you can get stoned—a cheap good-boy suburban buzz. Then I would sneak the magazine into my bedroom and, as had millions before me, I pulled down my pants, pulled down my underwear, and began to touch myself as I leafed through the pages to see if there were any photos of scantily-clad Third World people. Come on! How do you think this magazine has been around for so long? Do you really think in the 1950s all those bachelor insurance men subscribers in Des Moines were obsessed with the monarch butterfly? Of course not! They were checking out the topless New Guinea native babes!

For us queer boys there was also plenty in National Geographic to keep us busy while our pants were around our ankles. You open any page at random, like in this one, and suddenly you have a two-page spread of naked Japanese men in a “ritual” bath. This cute Japanese guy is showing the other positive association I have with the word “bush”! There are so many images! Handsome naked Brazilian rain forest youths with those weird sheaths over their dicks. And to prove that I can objectify and erotically colonize white folks, there was a cover of a rosy-cheeked Laplander tending their reindeer. Man, you don’t get whiter than that! I just bought that one on e-Bay. There was a photo of a bunch of fifteen-year-old Siberian youths in their tiny underwear and goggles standing before the sun lamps. If you held up the photo to the light you could clearly see the hooded heads of their Soviet penises poking against the thin fabric of their Evil Empire tighty-whities. Apparently the air-brush maestro at National Geographic had the day off when the Siberians came through.

See, I’m not shallow. I didn’t just rely on movie musicals for archetypal love objects or political instruction about the world. I read National Geographic too! I learned from the National Geographic that the world was full of potential young men to have adventures with and hug and kiss as we shared a sleeping bag in a youth hostel in Portugal or Uzbekistan. It’s why I still subscribe. Anyhow, back to my bedroom where my pants are around my ankles. On the cover of the issue that day was a small story about Vietnam. The cover featured a
cute naked slippery Vietnamese youth surrounded by rushing water with a silver-scaled fish clenched between his teeth.

While I had been staging *Hamlet* in 1969, the US was staging a whole other show in Southeast Asia, there in the war “theater” in Vietnam. Weird how they use our word! The US military even had its own “Hamlet” in the form of the notorious Strategic Hamlets program. This was not a traveling Shakespeare program; it was a harebrained scheme to force friendly South Vietnamese farmers off their rice fields and into barbed-wire-surrounded militarized concentration camps, I mean villages, so we could “protect” and keep control of them. This program had the usual result of most US foreign policy in that it managed quickly to turn lukewarm friends into complete enemies of the USA. Right after my *Hamlet* production, the conflict was at its peak. War criminals Nixon and Kissinger invaded Cambodia, America was exploding in protest, US National Guard had slaughtered American students at Kent State. Our tax dollars at work. Then, just like now. Something was definitely rotten in the State of America.

While I was reading *National Geographic* imagining the young men around the world I wanted to hug and kiss, the US had other plans for our white and Asian, and black and Latino, bodies. Thousands of young American men, just ten or so years older than me, were being sent home in body bags. Every night in the flickering light of our black and white TV I saw the image of the plastic body bags being loaded on the helicopters. Unlike now, we were actually allowed to see those images then. They reminded me of the mystery-meat sandwiches my mom would pack in sandwich bags and put in my *Lost in Space* lunchbox that I took to fourth grade. Just what was I being fed?

I was a smart kid. By 1970, you didn’t have to be a brain surgeon to know the war was wrong, immoral, doomed. You just needed to be a reasonably smart sixth-grader who read the *L.A. Times* every day and watched Walter Cronkite on the news to know the war was
idiotic and wrong. I knew where my sympathies lay. They lay with the lanky, long-haired androgynous protesters with the booty-enhancing bell bottoms. I knew the war was wrong. I knew that I didn’t want to go, but mostly I knew I didn’t want to die. I knew the war would go on forever. I knew that I would turn eighteen and would be sent to die by Nixon or one of his vile protégé spawn like Donald Rumsfeld. I became so afraid of turning eighteen in eight years that I decided to try to stop growing up. I asked my family to stop celebrating my birthday. I won’t grow up, and I’ll never turn eighteen and be drafted and forced to kill the Vietnamese boy on the cover of the *National Geographic* that I wanted to kiss.

I know you are a clever audience and you are on to my musical theater through-line in the show tonight—that I’m connecting these musical theater texts to my life narrative—and you probably think that during this period when I didn’t want to grow up, my favorite Broadway show was *Peter Pan* so I could sing “I Won’t Grow Up.” No! Even though I love *Peter Pan* and it is one of the great lesbian roles in the American theater, the show I especially loved during this Vietnam time was *Man of La Mancha*, the great musical theater war-horse about Don Quixote and Cervantes and the Impossible Dream. *Man of La Mancha* was perfect for a self-important ten year old with an English accent. So overblown with its utopian idealism of the hit song “The Impossible Dream.” As I listened to *Man of La Mancha* I could relate to everything. One moment I’m Cervantes—Don Quixote tilting at windmills. The next instant the sultry scullery whore Aldonza. The next, one of the hottie chorus-boy Muleteers! I used to draw the *New York Times* Hirschfeld cartoon image from the record cover obsessively onto all my schoolbook covers. To me, “To dream the Impossible Dream” could mean only one thing—that we could do something about the war in Vietnam.

*Man of La Mancha* opened on Broadway at the Martin Beck Theater in March 1968, during the Tet offensive, the worst fighting of the war in Vietnam. I got the soundtrack for my birthday and I would listen to the soundtrack imagining the well-heeled audiences
going to see the show, but I started to worry that “The Impossible Dream” could mean different things to different people. Maybe there is some working-class Polish boy from New Jersey who didn’t have the wealth and connections of George W. Bush and was actually gonna have to go to Vietnam. Maybe his family was going to take him, before he shipped out, to his one Broadway show and Times Square steak dinner, to see Man of La Mancha. Maybe that soldier boy had his own impossible dream, that he would fight the Viet Cong and come back in one piece? But come on, in 1968 people knew this song was really about fighting injustice and racism. This song is about the good guys—the recently-slaughtered Martin Luther King, and Bobby Kennedy, who would be assassinated in the first weeks of the Broadway run. I knew what the Impossible Dream was. I could personally stop the war.

And if Man of La Mancha wasn’t enough, a few months later the musical Hair would open and we would have singing, dancing, Vietnam-protesting hippies on Broadway. Of course, I wasn’t allowed to see this show at the Aquarius Theater in Hollywood or even to have the Broadway cast album, but a friend’s brother brought the record down from Berkeley and he and I secretly listened to it over the headphones, each of us with just one headphone coconut-shell half of the stereo recording pressed to a single ear. “Sodomy” was my favorite song in the show. I wasn’t sure what sodomy was exactly, but I knew it was for me. Which, indeed, it would prove to be.

Anyhow, I had played with myself for about fifteen minutes while looking at the Vietnamese boy with the fish in his mouth, spending much of the time fantasizing that I was the fish being clenched between his teeth. Since I wouldn’t go through puberty for about four more years, this was more process than goal-oriented self-love. I was starting to chafe, so I finally gave up and took a final few more sniffs of the magazine. Then I shook the National Geographic to see what special treat was in store this month. Better than any prize at
the bottom of the Cracker Jack box, the map-of-the-month fell with a slap to the floor. This month, it was a map of the west coast of North America. That’s where I come from! I opened up the map—gave it a sniff to try to keep my high going, but it wasn’t quite as narcotic as the magazine itself, more porous paper apparently—and then followed my nose up the whole scratchy coast of the US. From Mexico to California to Oregon to Washington. My nose reached the top of the map and my eyes saw the word CANADA. I knew what I would have to do. I knew at the age of ten that hell no I wouldn’t go, and that when I turned eighteen I would burn my draft card. I would have to join the hundreds of thousands of other young Americans who had gone to Canada to seek asylum and escape America’s madness and murder.

See, maybe the Broadway musical can’t stop American imperialism after all. Go with me on this, okay? I know the musical is a strong cultural force, but maybe not that strong! Maybe show tunes could still save me, though. Maybe I needed to adjust my “Impossible Dream.” My dream would have to become that I would escape to asylum in Canada where I would meet a boy like me!

I became obsessed with all things Canadian. My mom and dad began worrying about my sudden interest in Canada—a clear character flaw in a young American. Having a child who had assumed an English accent was one thing, but excessive interest in things Canadian seemed somehow unwholesome to them, like taking up taxidermy or Satan worship. They were even more troubled by my insistence we shift from Farmer John to Canadian bacon, my sudden interest in ice hockey, and especially by the huge poster I had hung over my bed dedicated to the “Men of the Royal Canadian Mounted Police.” Strange to grow up in a country like ours where little American boys have to go to such lengths planning how they escape their own country’s craziness?

[We begin to hear the overblown, stirring, tumescent chords from the Man of La Mancha overture, as Tim]
I began planning my escape from the US at the age of ten. I put the map that would lead me to Canada over my bed, right next to the map of the US that my oldest brother had up, that showed all the likely thermonuclear war targets in Southern California. I outlined in red magic marker my route north to Canada. I figured out how far I could take a bus to get to a good freeway on-ramp for Interstate 5 to hitchhike. I saved money from my lawn mowing and car washing jobs to finance my trip. Squirreled it away in my American Savings Bank account. I planned what I would wear to cross the border. I decided on a Mormon missionary look. I got all the books about other young people who fled America to find freedom in Canada, African-American slaves trying to get to Canada and freedom, Native American tribes fleeing the US army massacres, half a million war resisters right now. I would make a triumphant entrance to Canada right there at the Peace Arch, where Paul Robeson—the star of the musical Showboat—had done his concerts in the ’50s when the US State Department wouldn’t let him leave the country, to try to stop him from telling the truth about American apartheid.

[The music is louder.]

I stand with Paul Robeson! I would cross over the border into British Columbia, cameras flashing, reporters asking me questions. Maybe I won’t even wait until I’m eighteen. I walk hand in hand with Paul Robeson. At ten I would be the youngest war resister to ever seek asylum in Canada. I had achieved my impossible dream and became one of the half million Americans who fled our country for freedom in Canada. I dreamed the impossible dream. I beat the unbeatable foe. I reached the unreachable star!

[The music ends.]
Well, the war ended freshman year. We left a huge mess, like bad kids who break all the toys before they go home for dinner. But this was not child’s play, because we left two million Vietnamese dead, three million Vietnamese maimed and wounded, and sent fifty-eight thousand Americans home in body bags never to be hugged or kissed by anyone ever again, including one ten-year-old in Southern California. I would not have to go to Vietnam. In fact, as it turned out, I didn’t even have to register for the draft. But I never threw that map away. I kept it around for a rainy day and I will definitely be packing it in that suitcase. I always had an intuition that our country would sooner or later get up to some new kind of mischief and that would mean I would need a map to freedom once again.

Our war is not over.

[A narrow corridor of sharply focused red and white light comes from stage left and right. One side of Tim is in over-exposed white light; the other is blood red.]

My body is a BRIDGE!

My body is at the border. My body at the red border. Maple Leaf red over here, bloody stripe red over there. I am standing in the middle of the Rainbow Bridge that crosses over the Niagara Falls. There is an American flag to my right—naturally—and a Canadian Flag to my left. The bridge makes a graceful leap, rainbow-like I suppose, over the rushing torrents of the Niagara River. There are lots of tourists who want to be photographed with one leg in Canada and one in the US. They want their legs spread wide; they want to be ripped, opened up by that hot throbbing US-Canadian border. Well, I should just speak for myself, I think.

I’m here to plan my wedding with Alistair, here in the middle of the Rainbow Bridge. We’ll be married just two inches over onto the Canadian side, where gay people have rights. What place could be better to get married, right? The scene of the crime, Niagara Falls, all those millions of weddings and honeymoons over the decades! It’s
Us

the prime locus for unjust heterosexual marriage privilege! Niagara Falls on the Rainbow Bridge! Who knew they had made a homosexual bridge between Canada and the US? For moi, it seems. It’s so culturally sensitive!

When you’re at the Falls you can’t help but imagine all the bad things that could happen. The Maid of the Mist might hit a rock, sink, sending the yellow-slickered tourists plunging to their deaths. The plump white observation balloon from the American side over Goat Island pops a panel and spills everyone into the Niagara River heading over the American Falls onto the rocks below. We can witness the meltdown of the heterosexual family unit as husbands push their wives over the falls; wives shove their husbands. Fed up parents throw their children over the wall into the torrents below. There goes Bobby and Suzie! Anything can happen at Niagara Falls!

Everywhere I look at Niagara Falls I see recently married straight wedding couples walking in rented tuxes and wedding gowns. The straight couples promenade down the path, gracefully receiving smiles from all who pass. They look like shabby Balkan royalty—okay, the one mean line in the show. Now, Alistair and I have already bought our matching Prada tuxes for our wedding—we maxed out all our credit cards on them—and we put on the tuxes and take them out for a test drive as we walk hand in hand along the Falls promenade. It was weird how when we walked past the American tourists no one said anything nice to us. In fact a woman from South Dakota who was smoking two cigarettes actually spit at us! Where are all the other gay couples?

I’m here on the Rainbow Bridge for a very good reason. I’m getting ready to take the plunge. No, I’m not going to fling myself off the bridge. I’m not that much of a drama queen, but there is a plunge coming. Alistair and I are planning our future marriage here in Canada, here in Niagara Falls, Canada. Even though we are planning this wedding day, there is a huge clock hanging over our heads ticking down to when we have to leave America. For a gay couple like
us, the Rainbow Bridge is the perfect spot to really see how we are treated in the US. We can do the math here. Over here to my right in America, lesbian and gay couples don’t have a single federal right respecting their relationships—plus we have a freak in the White House who wants to amend the US Constitution to deny gay people marriage rights forever. Over here to my left in Canada, they have rewritten hundreds of laws to include gay couples in the definition of spouse, and gay couples have complete equality of civil marriage rights. See, for a gay person, when you leave the US and step into Canada, that’s when you enter the free world! I am balanced between the Maple Leaf Candy and the Kentucky Fried Chicken, feeling all existential and ripped in two. And as so often happens in moments like this, I start to hear some bagpipes. Scottish bagpipers arrive. Oh God, it’s Alistair’s Scottish father come to stop our wedding! One of Alistair’s sisters must have tipped him off. He’s going to come up with all his drinking buddies from Glasgow to stop me from marrying his youngest son. He’s going to rush out onto the Rainbow bridge waving his highlander broad sword and shouting, “Ach, you dirty devil, you’ll not have me wee bairn Alistair Duncan McCartney.”

But wait—it’s not Alistair’s dad. It’s a Canadian bagpipe orchestra! About thirty people in kilts with bagpipes. It’s the Niagara Falls, Canada, Police Department Bagpipe Orchestra! They are being led by some guy in eighteenth century town crier costume. He steps onto the middle of the Rainbow Bridge, pulls out an elegant scroll, and rings his bell. “Oyez! Oyez! Oyez!” he cries as the bell clangs. “On this Victoria Day in honor of HRH Elizabeth II of the United Kingdom and the Dominions of Canada and Australia, I welcome you to the forty-second annual tug of war between the police of Niagara Falls, Canada, and the police of Niagara Falls, America.” Three dozen buff and hunky Canadian cops march out on to the bridge dressed all in black, with neat berets. They look like sleek sexy otters—I mean ot-ters! They are carrying a huge rope over their shoulders, thick as an anaconda. The US police department team arrives a moment later. They’re working a whole other look, sort
of a sky-blue, polyester-jumpsuits, doughy—too many doughnuts for these cops—changing-planes-at-Memphis-International-Airport kind of look.

At this point, 138 Boy Scouts from Troup 883, Wexford, Pennsylvania, suddenly surround me, and the crazy synchronicity of what is happening becomes a bit too much for me. Let me do the checklist: I am standing here at Niagara Falls, historical heterosexual marriage destination, as I ponder gay marriage, balanced at the very edge of being tipped off the edge of the United States and forced to leave with Alistair, and feeling tugged in two, watching the US and Canada have a tug of war on the exact borderline between the nations on the Rainbow bridge, surrounded by Boy Scouts from Wexford, PA, yet another organization that—only in America—discriminates against gay kids. What comes next? Jesse Helms on a broomstick spelling it in smoke?: “SURRENDER, TIMOTHY!”

BANG! The game is on. The US makes an immediate move and almost drags the Canadians over the line; but the humpy Ontario cops dig their feet in, every Canadian sinew tensing, and slowly pull the US team closer, closer, and finally over the line. Canada has won the first round. It’s going to be the best two out of three. It takes them a while to get set up for the second match. The rope is straining so tight it looks like it’s going to snap and decapitate the sunburned head of the Scoutmaster of Troup 883, Wexford, PA. And I realize that I am the rope, being pulled to the breaking point.

Oh God, I realize something scary about myself. I realize I want Canada to win this tug of war. Oh, aren’t I naughty? Aren’t I being such a bad American? But I don’t just want America to lose this little game of tug of war. I want all our huge outstanding bills to be paid. Just a few little debts we owe. Like for 250 years of human slavery that created the nation’s wealth. Our huge overdue debt to the native people whom we took North America from. That we are five percent of the world’s population and use thirty-five percent of the world’s natural resources. Like the bill to be paid for the eighty-five countries
we have invaded in the last century or so. I don’t know about you, but I’m sick of our country’s racist, sexist, homophobic, gun-loving, faggot-hating, red-baiting, health-care-denying, sodomy-criminalizing, gas-guzzling, war-mongering, carbon-dioxide spewing, wealth-grasping shit!

I realize I have become a daytime TV cliché—I’m stuck in an abusive relationship with the US. America slaps me and I say, “thank you Land of the Free.” The US slugs me and I say, “I’ll have two lumps please.” She kicks me and my partner Alistair out of the country and I say, “you’re too kind.” I’m so fucking sick of America’s racist, sexist, homophobic, gun-loving, faggot-hating, red-baiting, health-care-denying, sodomy-criminalizing, gas-guzzling, war-mongering, carbon-dioxide-spewing, wealth-grasping shit, and I don’t know what I feel anymore.

The US was slowly pulled over the line and lost. The Canadians on the bridge roar as they win the best two out of three. The Americans do what Americans do when we lose, have an out of body experience, pretend it never happened, slink off and look for a country much weaker than us to beat up on. The bagpipes cry out as everyone marches back to their side of the border.

I look to the US and see the departing, defeated US police team. They march back to the US, which will not be my home much longer. When I look back to the Canadian side, I see a huge billboard for Planet Hollywood and a Hershey’s Kiss the size of the Goodyear Blimp draped over the façade of a fine old Canadian hotel. There is no escape.

[We hear some very beautiful, mournful bagpipe music fade up.]

Alistair takes my hand; soon it will be our wedding day, but not in America. We will have to find a free country. Surrounded by bagpipes, I turn and walk with him back on the Rainbow Bridge. For a
moment I indulge one of my not infrequent Barbra Streisand fantasy moments. I am suddenly dancing and singing my heart out with Barbra in either of the big parade-themed numbers from *Funny Girl* or *Hello, Dolly!* With Alistair’s hand in mine, Barbra Steisand in my head, the drums and bagpipes swirling around us, and rain definitely falling on my parade, we walk slowly back to Canada.

> [As rain falls on his parade, Tim walks past the suitcase and picks up the flag. Fast actions with flag: washing, cradling, being strangled. Through that pressure around his throat, Tim struggles to find his voice, wrestles intensely with the sound of a “V.”]

V-V-V-V-V-VOICE! VOICE!


I might have done a striptease for my brothers that one time, but I was always afraid to sing out, to tell the truth, to raise my little queer voice. I’d hide my voice in the closet. Would only sing out when no one was around. That’s what I love about these musicals. They’re not afraid. They helped me find my voice. These voices from the records fill my head; I don’t even need a record player to hear them. I just put that vinyl to my ear and they sing to me. They fill my memories and most sentimental nooks and crannies. All these people, singing, shouting, crying out for love, equality, justice, more and better sequins on their costumes. Bringing on home their truth.

> [The music changes to the horribly scratched LP of the overture to *Gypsy*. During the following, a freeway collision of quotes from the many Broadway musicals mentioned accompanies this stripper monologue until Tim is naked.]

Stripping it down to the body and the voice.
Let me entertain you. I have a dream! You gotta have a gimmick. Because I have always been a stripper . . . there in that hot red light. Stripped down to the bone and heart and still bright-red pumping, shouting, singing and dancing, all music, all the time.

I have always been a Gypsy stripper—I strip away bullshit. I strip away lies. I strip away hypocrisy. I strip away fear. How ya like them eggrolls, George Bush? I am a big cock-sucking, ass-fucking Gypsy Rose Lee with a 4th of July American Flag as the fan for my dance.

I have always been a 1776 stripper—because we need to smell the stinky socks of our history, stripped down to the hard not-pretty truth that when those founding fathers in Philadelphia wrote “all men are created equal,” that didn’t include women, black people, and definitely not gay folks—and my pursuit of happiness is being royally fucked with.

I have always been a tilting-at-windmills Man of La Mancha Don Quixote stripper, and I do still have an impossible dream that America’s hard heart will finally soften and America will stop shitting on gay people’s lives. I can’t help it, but I do still believe America could be less screwed up and live up to its promotional materials. We ain’t even close. Not even in the ballpark. Just watch the news every night this week.

I have always been a West Side Story stripper, pissed off that on that some enchanted evening when we meet someone we love, faggots still have to kiss in the shadows to find a place for us . . . somewhere . . . somewhere . . . somewhere! Someday Riff and Tony won’t have to die and can get married without going to Canada and instead will be able to love each other and grow old together, get fat and remember their salad days of tenement fights and street ballet that made their butts look so good in the movie.
I have always been a little *Oliver!* English boy stripper, me and all those Hummel figurines taking it all off. There go the lederhosen. There goes the alpine hat. There go the neck scarves. All those Hummel figurines sing and dance looking like underage Rockettes with the Artful Dodger’s arm around my shoulder and goddamit I want some more. Fuck that bowl of gruel. I want some more respect. More freedom. More hope. More love. Where the fuck is more love? I found it already.

I have definitely always been a Barbra Streisand drag-queen stripper with a huge swooping wig and high heels that will hammer out shit. Even though I have always been just a teensy-weensy bit drag-phobic, I thought this show might be the one where I finally do drag, but then I chickened out. These black Calvin Klein underwear making that swooping Barbra late ’60s hair swoop will have to do! I still have that wig like an aura around me and her high heels in my hand, to hammer out injustice and bigotry and war. I want those people to stop raining on my parade, before that parade passes by.

I have always been a *Fiddler on the Roof* stripper. I admit it. I want that sunrise-sunset wedding. I want that glass breaking underneath my foot as I marry the boy my father doesn’t approve of. I don’t want to go into exile. I don’t want to be forced to leave my home. I don’t want to be forced to leave and go far from the home I love.

I have always been a *My Fair Lady* stripper. The day I was born into this world, Julie Andrews and Rex Harrison were performing that show in London at the Drury Lane Theatre. A few months ago I was wandering around Covent Garden looking for a London sublet for Alistair and me before I saw the *My Fair Lady* revival. Why did I weep twelve times before the intermission as I watched the show?
I have always been a stripper . . . there in that hot red light. Stripped down to the bone and heart and still bright-red pumping, shouting, singing and dancing, all music, all the time.

And when will it be Tim’s turn, all queer people’s turn? When will everything come up big fat queer roses? Big fat, sunrise-sunset, climb every mountain, dream the impossible dream, there’s a place for us queer roses? For me and for you.

[The show tune collage slowly cross-fades to mournful Celtic bagpipes. Tim takes a while to put his clothes back on, gather his props, and pack them in his suitcase. He is about the leave the American flag behind on the floor, but at the last moment goes back, brushes it off, and hangs it over his shoulder, then moves downstage.]

Well, I’m just about packed. Alistair and I don’t have too much time left before we have to leave the country and there’s only so much you can fit in one suitcase. I mean you can’t take everything. Maybe just a Broadway cast album, a *National Geographic* or two, an imagined photo from my wedding in America that maybe we will one day be allowed to have.

And on our wedding day in America—even though Alistair thinks it will be corny—there will be bagpipes.

And this . . .

[Tim holds up the U.S. flag.]

Ya know, I wasn’t gonna take this flag with me, but there’s just no getting away from it. It’s part of me. It’s in me. It’s in us. And I guess I hope that some day that flag might get a little bit clean. That our country might finally open its heart to me and Alistair, might open its heart to us. That there wouldn’t be so much fear in our country, in US and of us.
Us

But for now, this flag is coming along with me.

[Tim picks up his suitcase.]

I can’t help it. I still have hope.
I still have hope for US.

[The lights slowly fade to black.]