

## Labels Are Not Characters: Critical Misperception of *Falsettoland*

Jeffrey Smart

"Homosexuals."<sup>1</sup>

The first word of William Finn and James Lapine's *Falsettoland* and about where New York critics stopped listening. Since the 1920's, when gay characters began appearing in mainstream plays on the New York stage, plays with homosexuals have been excoriated and subsequently left uninterpreted by the New York theatre critics. Plays were either condemned for the inclusion of such "immoral" characters, seen as demonstrations of the "immorality" inherent in homosexuality, or dismissed as sensational portraits of a freakish underworld (admittedly, exploitative authors sometimes excused or used the subject matter in these ways).<sup>2</sup> Later, plays with gay or lesbian characters were taken as sociological paradigms of the entire gay subculture (Clive Barnes called the self-loathing *The Boys in the Band* [1968] "the frankest treatment of homosexuality I have ever seen on the stage"—which, unfortunately, at that time it was),<sup>3</sup> while suspected gay authors were attacked and misrepresented by the critics.<sup>4</sup> Rarely did critics identify any gay sensibility other than camp and rarely have the texts of these plays been examined for anything other than identifying homosexual content. It should not be surprising, then, to find these oblivious precepts guiding the mixed reviews for *Falsettoland*.<sup>5</sup>

*Falsettoland* (1990) is a sequel to Finn's earlier work *March of the Falsettos* (1981). Together, they opened as *Falsettos* on Broadway in 1992. Both are short, musical plays following the life of Marvin, his lover Whizzer, his son Jason, his ex-wife Trina, and his psychiatrist Mendel (later married to Trina). *Falsettoland* adds Dr. Charlotte, an internist, and her lover Cordelia, a caterer, to the cast. Simply, it's 1981 and, while everyone prepares for Jason's bar mitzvah, Marvin reunites with Whizzer until Whizzer's death.

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The critics could only see *Falsettoland* from their disapproving perspective. John Beaufort of the *Christian Science Monitor* views it as "an instance of the consequences of homosexual relationships in an age of so-called sexual liberation."<sup>6</sup> Melanie Kirkpatrick of the *Wall Street Journal* writes that *Falsettoland* is "about homosexual life in a big city."<sup>7</sup> Barnes and Howard Kissel start their reviews by confessing that they never liked the characters from Finn's earlier work.<sup>8</sup> Even those who like *Falsettoland* distance themselves from the play by referring to the milieu as "a special world,"<sup>9</sup> an "alien landscape,"<sup>10</sup> or even "Never Never Land."<sup>11</sup> The critics accept, categorize, and dismiss the characters based on the labels ("homosexual") given them by Finn and fail to examine, interpret, or appreciate *Falsettoland*. However, the use of these labels is essential to the characterization of gay men and women and one part of the semiotic realignment enacted in *Falsettoland*.

The majority of critics seem blinded by the terms "homosexual" and "lesbian," keeping the characters safely within the confines of quotation marks (visible or not). Most obviously, not a single critic describes the male characters using the common descriptor "gay;"<sup>12</sup> they all mechanically follow Finn's lyric and use "homosexual." Then the critics complain, as Kissel of the *New York Daily News* does, that Finn has created characters whose "whole identity is reduced to a single word."<sup>13</sup> Other critics concur with and extend Kissel's two-dimensional reduction: Doug Watt calls the play "a fable;"<sup>14</sup> Melanie Kirkpatrick and Barnes both find it "trivial" or "trivializing."<sup>15</sup> Even the critics who liked the show felt called upon to explain their attraction to the characters. Linda Winer emphasizes the universal themes of "modern multiple parents," "kids, religion, love, [and] death," while William Henry bends over backward with a paragraph explaining that a "once exotic Manhattan world has become familiar, and its emotional issues concern everyone."<sup>16</sup>

What none of the critics say is that, for them, the characters are strange because they fail to be exotic. They are told that the characters are "homosexual," but, except for contracting AIDS, the gay characters do not do the things they "should" do: they do not wear drag, they do not lisp or swish, they do not sit in bars and bitch, they do not behave in clear butch or femme ways, they do not have sex in bathrooms, they do not agonize over their homosexuality, they do not kill themselves (or others) because they are gay and unhappy. In short, the critics have been given the label "homosexual" but none of the stereotypical behaviors connoted by the word. Barnes unsuccessfully tries to stuff Dr. Charlotte's lover, the caterer Cordelia, into the familiar system by calling her "her housewife friend, who just loves to cook."<sup>17</sup>

If Marvin and Whizzer are only "homosexuals," and Dr. Charlotte and Cordelia only the "lesbians from next door" (244), then the characters are indeed

as underdeveloped as Kissel, Kirkpatrick, and Barnes suggest. But are these labels as negative, reductive, and reliable as the critics imply?

Homosexuals understand that labels are mutable expressions of identity, simultaneously naming and not naming the person(s) described. Gay men and women use euphemisms and non-gendered pronouns when discussing their lovers in homophobic environments.<sup>18</sup> Heterosexual culture gives many demeaning labels to homosexual men and women. "Homosexual" reduces gays to their sexual orientation and sexual acts, denying them the rest of their humanity. "Queer" denotes their departure from perceived societal norms. "Dyke" unflatteringly refers to a woman with mannish characteristics. Yet gays do accept the labels given by the majority. One study analyzing coming out as a communicative process demonstrates that gay men and lesbians accept the terms "gay," "lesbian," or "homosexual" as part of that process; however, they only accept those labels after they have removed the heterosexist stigma from those terms and redefined them for themselves. Other studies corroborate this process of redefinition.<sup>20</sup> Further, the very terms used pejoratively by the dominant culture are not just accepted but used affirmatively by gays. Radical gays often make the derogatory terms defiant:<sup>21</sup> lesbians use "dyke" as a term of pride ("Dykes on Bikes"), while gay men and women can fight against bias in "Queer Nation." Though mainline critics might not be aware of this usage, the characters in *Falsettoland* demonstrate it clearly. Whizzer asks if Marvin is "still queer" (195) and Charlotte refers to herself as "very dykish" (217). Used by others, the term "queer" or "dykish" would be offensive; indeed, when Trina refers to Marvin's taste in furniture as "homo baroque" (211), it is an unmistakable insult used by a straight character against a gay character. However, used by gay characters, these terms become provocative opening gambits or interpretations of aggressive behavior and are not viewed as stigmatizing terms. The words used by straights to denigrate have separate connotative meanings for gays and cannot reduce them to gross generalizations.

The critics complain about the very traits that make these characters gay. Kissel whines about "people [characters] who insist on defining themselves," yet "defining oneself" is the first stage of acquiring a gay identity.<sup>22</sup> Further, the labeling process itself "may take on different meanings once homosexual persons label and categorize themselves, no longer needing or allowing the medical profession to do so."<sup>23</sup> Gays who identify themselves as gays (as the characters in *Falsettoland* do) take a weapon away from the homophobic around them (e.g., critics). Power (to detect) has been taken away from the observer and given to the observed. The gay characters, seen for what they are, are attractive. Marvin, Whizzer, Cordelia, and Dr. Charlotte are by and large as happy as anyone else (within or outside of the play), satisfied with their partners, surrounded by family

and friends, settled in their jobs, intelligent, energetic, athletic—qualities anyone would be happy to have for him or herself or in a friend. These are positive characterizations.

Due to the presence of self-labeling, the critics accuse the characters of being "self-conscious."<sup>24</sup> There are several responses to this accusation. First, the critics (as Barnes and Kissel confessed) were biased by Finn's earlier work, *March of the Falsettos*. In that musical, the lyrics are more reportive than demonstrative and the characters could be perceived as static and too self-conscious. *March of the Falsettos*, though, is a psychiatric musical (one musical sequence is entitled "Marvin at the Psychiatrist") where the characters first must determine what they feel in order to pursue what they want. This emotion-defining language is largely absent from *Falsettoland*. Second, the self-awareness in *Falsettoland* often exists as dramaturgic function—a reminder of identity. On their reappearance after the opening number, Charlotte sings: "It's a lesbian from next door." Cordelia: "Followed by her lover/Who's a lesbian from next door, too" (188-189). When Whizzer shows up at the baseball game, Trina tells us he's her "ex-husband's ex-lover" (194). Charlotte later sings "Just call me 'Doc./Don't call me 'Lady'" (217). Third, labels in *Falsettoland* are often in error or reductive. Mendel calls himself "the wiry psychiatrist" when he is merely a visitor to Whizzer's hospital room (226). Mendel also calls himself a psychiatrist during "Everyone Hates His Parents" when he's actually establishing a new fatherly relationship with Jason. Fourth, self-consciousness is a legitimate characterizing trait and practically a hallmark of contemporary dramatic characterization.

*Falsettoland* demonstrates from the beginning that the audience should look beyond the labels applied (even self-applied) to the characters. Most of the labels the critics apply to the characters come from the opening number and the characters use them, as Henry wisely notices, to "introduce themselves."<sup>25</sup> Cordelia is a "kosher caterer," Dr. Charlotte a "woman internist" (181). Yet alongside these traditional, dramaturgic, and often self-evident introductory descriptions, we have such non-traditional characterizing information as "Liberal democrats./Spiky lesbians. . . /Short insomniacs./Hypochondriacs./Yiddish Americans./Crazy families./Radiologists./Intellectuals./Nervous wrecks" (184-185). It should be clear by the end of the opening number that the characters are all these things and that the audience should look beyond these labels to see what more they are besides. This multiplicity of roles is not unusual. Transactional analysis has made us aware of the many roles played in life. To use an example from the play, Trina is herself, heterosexual, Jewish, middle-class, Jason's mother, Mendel's wife, Marvin's ex-wife—and this is a short list.

That the audience should look beyond the labels is also apparent from Marvin and Whizzer's behavior. During "The Baseball Game," Marvin describes Whizzer as "cheap as dirt," Whizzer describes Marvin as an "asshole" and a "maniac," and both characterize their previous relationship as a "mistake" (196, 198). By the end of the song, Marvin has asked Whizzer out. The next time we hear about them, Trina tells us "Marvin's back with Whizzer" (200). Clearly their labels had been too limiting in their descriptions. Marvin and Whizzer look beyond them to find something new, demonstrating for the audience that they should do the same with the show's other labels (specifically, "homosexual" and "lesbian"). The labels/signifiers do not retain a one-to-one correspondence with any set definition/signifieds. Failing to understand this, the critics fail to understand *Falsettoland*.

*Falsettoland* demonstrates this semiotic orientation through the uselessness of labels and the triviality of nouns in general. Trina and Marvin bicker over the bar mitzvah preparations in lists ("Round tables./Square tables" [210], "Rock musicians./String quartet" [209]) hoping the result will be more nouns: "Marvin's triumph . . . a nonpareil" (210). Jason resorts to a list of personal nouns when analyzing the girls he could take to his bar mitzvah: "Dot Nardoni./Tiffany Axelrod./Zoe Feinstein./Angelina Dellibovi./ . . . Heather Levin/Brittany Rosenthal" (190). The reviewers largely ignore the first half of the show, one deeming it "soapy, sitcom stuff."<sup>26</sup> They do not understand that *Falsettoland* needs to establish the failure of labels/nouns and the pattern of looking beyond the labels to the characters' actions.

This pattern extends to the role of AIDS in the play. In New York, *Falsettoland* was commonly called "the AIDS musical"—Barnes grumbled that AIDS was "breast-beatingly high on [the show's] dramatic agenda"<sup>27</sup>—yet this label is nowhere in the show. The fact that Whizzer's disease is never named caused Kirkpatrick to protest that "even the humdrum titles [of the songs] convey their inadequacy to take on the tragedy of AIDS."<sup>28</sup> However, the show does not pretend to take on the subject of AIDS—nor, outside of Charlotte's song, does the show teach, preach, or moan about the disease's devastation of the gay male population. This is but another error by the critics demonstrating their mistaken assumptions and inability to perceive the show. Beyond reflecting the historical fact that AIDS did not have a name in 1981, the unnamed quality of the disease gives it a double power in the show. First, the audience is transformed into a position that should help them identify with the characters. They must name the disease for themselves and, in keeping with the decorum for theatre audiences, should not whisper to anyone what it is. The audience is given a secret—much like the secret of closeted gays or HIV carriers. Second (and more powerfully), Whizzer's illness—"the trend [that] has no name" (217)—is surrounded by

mystery. The fact that it is unnamed gives it a weight it might not otherwise have had. Had it been called AIDS in the show, the disease would have to conform to the expectations and dismissal of the audience ("Ah, AIDS. He'll waste away, then die"). Since the disease has no label, the characters and audience must live in uncertainty—not the omnipotent position suggested by an audience knowing what the characters do not.

In their uncertainty, the characters in *Falsettoland* use negative definitions or build verbal constructs around an object or person. The Jewish boys playing baseball "cannot play baseball" (192). Charlotte, Cordelia, Whizzer, and Marvin are "Unlikely Lovers." Jason chooses which girl to invite to his bar mitzvah by "Excluding them I find exciting" (191). He further limits his choices by wondering which girl will "not—laugh at my father and his friends?" (191). "Life," Trina sings, "is moments you can't understand" (223). In "What More Can I Say?" (the title of which already suggests the futility of words), Marvin starts to describe his relationship with Whizzer, but even the ability to speak fails him:

It's been hot,  
 Also it's been swell.  
 More than not,  
 It's been more than words can tell.  
 I halt.  
 I stammer.  
 I sing a rondelay.  
 What more can I say? (216)

Neither does the show's final song allow us to summarize Whizzer or his relationship with Marvin in one label. Marvin sings: "Too soon I'll remember your faults./Meanwhile, though, it's tears and schmaltz" (245). To heighten the distance between text and meaning, the first line is sung smoothly (thus affectionately), while the second is staccato (and removed). Even the staging underscores this indefinableness ("undecidability"): Whizzer is dead, yet he is present as he reenters the stage "dressed as we remember him" (245).

Dr. Charlotte says Whizzer's disease is "something so bad that words/Have lost their meaning" (217). She sings a web of words trying to define it, but keeps returning to the ominous "Something bad is happening./Something very bad is happening" (217). The disease has the enormity and pervasiveness of the unknown: how big and active is it as it is "spreading/Spreading/Spreading round" (218)? The disease instead trivializes the characters' pettiness, which they give up: Marvin and Trina no longer bicker about the arrangements for the bar

mitzvah, Jason no longer wonders about which girl to take to his bar mitzvah, and all the quotidian activities of "A Day in Falsettoland" disappear. Rich castigates the characters for suddenly being "on their best behavior—as if AIDS really did bring out the nobility in everyone,"<sup>29</sup> but doesn't a life-threatening disease change the behavior of everyone around the patient? Shouldn't characters change in response to events that affect them? And how much would the critics, some of whom already feel the show is trivial, have complained if the characters had not? On a wider scale, the enormity of the disease makes labels like "homosexual" and "lesbian" seem trivial—what are labels and their categorization when lives are at stake? Even Trina, who could stay far from the situation, is touched by Whizzer's illness.

The attempts at (self-)definition are explained by the destructiveness of the disease; expectations collapse, words fail, and truth is avoided. After Whizzer's collapse playing racquetball, Trina sings that her goal in life is "holding to the ground as the ground keeps shifting" (224). Nothing she expected—about men, marriage, or life—has turned out as she expected it to. In fact, it seems her expectations are precisely what have left her unprepared for her mutable world. She confronts the failure of words when she cannot finish the positivistic mantra: "Everything will be alright./Everything will be al . . ." (224). Attempts to name new realities fail. At the hospital, Marvin, his sentiments echoed by the other characters, sings to Whizzer: "Kid, you're looking very good today" (224)—only Jason, the least self-conscious of the bunch, can sing, "Gee, you look awful" (227). Under the cheeriness of the bar mitzvah preparations, Charlotte and Cordelia take a moment to sing, "I feel more rotten than I have in years" (243). As Winer put it, "everyone realizes the limitations of medicine and chicken soup."<sup>30</sup> AIDS proves to be decentered and decenters everyone touched by it. The New York critics make precisely the same mistake with *Falsettoland* that theorist Barbara Johnson accuses Roland Barthes of in *S/Z*:

what [almost every critic] does in his reading is to label these textual blanks "taboo on the word [AIDS]." He fills in the textual gaps with a name. He erects [AIDS, disease] into *the* meaning of the text, its ultimate signified. In so doing, however, he makes the idea of [AIDS] itself into a . . . fetish, the supposed answer to all the text's questions.<sup>31</sup>

In fact, the disease is yet another example of the semiotic exercise disproving the one-to-one correspondence of signifier and signified—which the New York reviewers, trapped at the level of the signifier, failed to perceive.

The repetition of terms ("homosexuals," "lesbian from next door") or elements (lists of nouns, Trina and Marvin's petty bickering) within the performance does not serve to confine the signified to a single definition (as the New York reviewers assume) but to provide the signifier's own difference (and a different view of the character/signified) within the text<sup>32</sup>. For example, "homosexual" serves first to describe what Mendel is searching for in the audience, then is used to introduce Marvin, then is used by Marvin, Whizzer, Cordelia, and Charlotte to introduce themselves. When sung at the show's end after Whizzer's death has devastated them all, it becomes a label inadequate to capture the experiences or essences of the characters. This "difference within" "subverts the very idea of identity, infinitely deferring the possibility of adding up the sum of a text's parts or meanings and reaching a totalized, integrated whole."<sup>33</sup> As Marvin says, "There are no answers" (245).

*Falsettoland* is not a musical about AIDS (noun)—it's a musical about growing up (action). *Falsettoland's* main story and sub-story both follow the action of growing up: Marvin sings at the beginning, "It's about time to grow up" (182), while Jason's bar mitzvah marks the actual transformation from boy to man. That the bar mitzvah takes place in Whizzer's hospital room immediately prior to Whizzer's death and Marvin's maturation is no accident. Notably, Whizzer departs the stage to die as Jason completes the Hebrew passage marking his new adulthood. Both transitions occur simultaneously and presage Marvin's maturation.

As the nouns in the first half of the show fall away, verbs take their place. Characters visit the hospital and suggest therapeutic activities. The four "Unlikely Lovers" can "vow that we will/Buy the farm/Arm in arm" or sing "Let's be scared together./Let's pretend that nothing is awful" (235, 236). Marvin offers several actions to help Whizzer: "Hit me if you need to./Slap my face, or/Hold me till winter" (233)—Whizzer chooses to put his arms around Marvin. When Jason bargains with God, "bar mitzvah" becomes a verb: "Do this for me/And I'll get bar mitzvah'ed" (236). Whizzer's song "You Gotta Die Sometime" starts with the futility of speech: four lines in he sings "What could I say?" (237). Then he turns death, not into a series of nouns, but a series of verbs:

Death is not a friend [negative definition]  
 But I hope in the end, he  
 Takes me in his arms and lets me hold his face.  
 He holds me in his arms and whispers something funny.  
 He lifts me in his arms and tells me to embrace his attack. (238)



Action replaces the static nouns (the signified) at the center of any meaning made. Derrida states that the center is "not a fixed locus but a function."<sup>34</sup> The characters' "being" (their labels) does not define them—their "doing" does, and thus the characters should be considered within the relativistic existential frame. Each speaker is both subject and object, defined by the relationship between the two, a thing that exists (being) but only knowable through representation (doing).

The concept of subverted identity is very familiar to gay men and lesbians on lingual and societal levels. Sociologist Edward Sagarin, referring to homosexuality, states that "the English language is constructed in such a way that we speak of people *being* certain things when all we know is that they *do* certain things" [italics his].<sup>35</sup> For example, adolescent males may engage in homosexual activity without *being* "homosexual." Conversely, some may *be* homosexual without *doing* anything overtly homosexual. Sagarin warns that "the language we use when we talk about such matters tends to become flesh and blood and behavior. It can reinforce an identity and imprison someone in a role."<sup>36</sup> It can also, of course, trap the speaker of those words into a role, as the critics of *Falsettoland* were trapped into their expectations of the characters (theatre critics should be aware of the downfalls of being "trapped in a role"). Self-definition depends on the society/context of the individual. Thomas Weinberg states that a person perceives his sexual activity as homosexual "only if he is able to interpret this behavior in terms of some set of social definitions of homosexuality."<sup>37</sup> Males and females only accept gay identities after socializing with gay role models.<sup>38</sup> For gay men and women, their *realization* within the social framework and subsequent shift in definition have created their gayness (not their homosexuality).<sup>39</sup> Gays also become aware that "identity, as a socially constructed phenomenon, may change over time."<sup>40</sup> Semiotician Charles Peirce argues that the "truth of a representation [sign]" depends on communal knowledge over time, either confirming or rejecting the specific knowledge.<sup>41</sup> For gay men and women, constant adjustment in their identities brings them to the realization that there is no set signified, but instead a complex group of associational signifiers constructing the whole through their interactions.

This substitution of action for "being" suits not only gay but also theatrical systems. Theatrical practice reinforces the semiotic interpretation of the characters: there is no "center" to these characters. There is no Marvin, only an actor portraying him. The actor creates the role, not with his being, but with his doing—his choices as an actor and his actions as the character. Likewise, just as real identity is not static, so character is revealed through its speeches, activities, and actions over time. The audience should have a different understanding of a character at the end of a play than at the beginning as they go through the action of the play. The critics of *Falsettoland* deny this progress.

Speech in *Falsettoland* is not only supplanted by action but also becomes action. The song "Unlikely Lovers" seems as if it were spurred by Marvin's necessity to say something to Whizzer while he still has the chance; Marvin goes slightly overboard with this very romantic statement during what is, for Whizzer,

an unexceptional moment (he plays solitaire). In the bar mitzvah, Jason's passage from boy to man is accomplished by a speech act. Jason gains his new adulthood by the full-voiced singing of a Hebrew passage from the Torah—the use of these words transforms him. This switch from speech to speech act and action takes an ironic twist in the final duet. Marvin is confronted with Whizzer's intangible ghost. Though Marvin longs for action, he can only sing, focusing on verbs.

These verbs complete the shift from word to action and mark Marvin's maturation. He longs for the verbs that marked his relationship with Whizzer: "What would I *do* . . . /If I had not *seen* you . . . /Who would I *feast* my eyes on?" "Who would I be/If I had not *loved* you? . . . What would I *do*/If you had not been my friend?" (245, 247) [italics mine]. Finn emphasizes these words by placing them on the downbeat that begins the measure. Marvin's past and future are verbs, verbs so powerful questions do not need to be finished and verbs so powerful that he is left again with the question "What more can I say?":

MARVIN:            I *left* my kid, and *left* my wife [italics Finn's]  
                           To be with him,  
                           To be insulted by such handsome men.  
 WHIZZER:         Do you regret . . .  
 MARVIN:            I'd do it again.  
                           I'd like to believe that I'd do it again  
                           And again and again and  
                           What more can I say? (246)

These words circumlocute and reaffirm the relationship, relying on repetition for emphasis and connotative meaning. Marvin's grief also comes in verbs: "Yes, I'd beg or steal or borrow/If I could hold you for/One hour more" (246). Again, repetition ("one hour more") follows when words become inadequate. Marvin's final keening of "My friend" (247-248) also relies on repetition so that these simple words through their echo and through the tone of his voice can have the impact necessary to demonstrate (not label) his grief. The text here falls into Paul de Man's "discrepancy between meaning and assertion," that is, "text as *information* and as *activity*."<sup>42</sup> Failing to connote the proper impact on its informational level ("again," "one hour more," or "my friend"), the text repeats itself to create its meaning. De Man's discrepancy, of course, mirrors theatrical practice of "text" and "subtext"—often quite different. The critics should, at least, have understood this.

When Mendel returns to reprise the opening song, the labels repeated from the beginning are clearly inadequate to describe the characters seen onstage: "Homosexuals./Women with children./Short insomniacs" (248)—the words, sustained at the beginning of the play, are cut short. The action of the show has taken us behind these labels to look at Marvin, Whizzer, Trina, Mendel, and everyone else. Then comes a telling, small, Sondheimian change in the lyric. Earlier Mendel had acknowledged everyone's presence on a musical stage by

adding "and a teeny, tiny band" (181). Now, after listing the characters, he sings "We're a teeny, tiny band" (248). And, indeed, on the darkened stage, clustering to comfort Marvin, they seem so. Mendel too must turn to verbs as he attempts to capture what has happened:

Lovers come and lovers go.  
Lovers live and die fortissimo.  
This is where we take a stand.  
Welcome to Falsettoland. (248)

The last sentence is a performative act. The closing strains from Finn's first show about Marvin, *In Trousers* (1979), haunt the ending, reminding the audience of where the characters have been, while the word "welcome" invites them into the fluctuating world which everyone shares.

*Falsettoland* does more than merely demonstrate the separation of signifier from signified and supplant action for static being. The play reverses the heterosexual/homosexual dialectic opposition, where the positive value is given the first term, by making the homosexual characters the focus of attention, by making them the subject of everyone else's concern, by giving them more stage time, and by giving them more dimensions than the heterosexual characters (Rich notes that the heterosexuals' "soul-searching" seems "forced by comparison").<sup>43</sup> The homosexuals become more than "not heterosexual"; they are loving, volitional, sick, scared, tenacious, striving, combative, inventive, traditional, helpless, grieving, and alive. Heterosexuals can be all the things homosexuals are with the difference that they are attracted to members of the opposite sex. This kind of reversal corresponds with poststructuralist systems where "serious play is intended to subvert the most fundamental strictures of seriousness and thus to displace and 'contaminate' the very basis of authority"<sup>44</sup>—an authority which does not, in existentialist beliefs, absolutely exist.<sup>45</sup> The critics, rent of their heterosexist superiority by the characters labeling themselves homosexual, have all other authority taken from them as well. No literary theorist in the lot, they seized the only certainty (AIDS) they could find rather than examine the new structure posited.

Nor is the show just an object to be observed; it is an action in itself. As a corrective to the distorted definitions of the dominant culture and as an expression of gay pride, the gay community has discovered and developed positive gay role models and gay theatre. *Falsettoland* is not a product of gay theatre (as *Boy Meets Boy* is), but some of the guiding principles are applicable since the show presents gay themes and characters to a wider audience. One goal of gay theatre is "to expand gay self-awareness and sensibility."<sup>46</sup> Mark Gevisser writes in an essay on gay theatre that "rites of definition [e.g., a Gay Pride parade, or, by extension, theatre] occur in communities that do not consider themselves already defined or that are discontent with the way they have been defined by others."<sup>47</sup> Though Gevisser argues for a more engaged theatre than

is possible in the conventional theatrical form in which *Falsettoland* is written, he could not deny that Lapine and Finn are presenting an image of homosexuals new to mainstream musicals (and different from the drag queens of *La Cage aux Folles*).<sup>48</sup> Gessiver believes "the theatre to be a forum in which a community defines its value system and determines its personality by setting certain elements of itself to work upon a stage" [italics Gessiver's].<sup>49</sup> This display is "political—if only implicitly."<sup>50</sup> With its portrayal of this small community of ex-es, lovers, family, and neighbors, *Falsettoland* posits one view of "gay life in the big city" and becomes a "rite of definition." Thus the self-definition complained of is not only a facet of the dramatic characters but a facet of the character of the drama as "rite of definition." Labels from others may deny and restrict their individuality, but self-labeling and its related social affirmations can strengthen and comfort gays and lesbians.

New York critics—eager to distance themselves from the homosexual characters in William Finn's and James Lapine's *Falsettoland*—failed to examine the function of the labels used in the show and failed to detect or appreciate the patterns of behavior demonstrated by the characters or in the text. It is precisely because "gay," "homosexual," or "lesbian" have no meaning without context that "homosexuality" as a personal and social process can undergo semiotic analysis. Similarly, the theatrical production presents the semiotic split between signified and signifier, realigning static definitions with active constructs, and thus turns from a representation to an action ("rite of definition"). The critics were unable to grasp the literary maneuvers of the text, failed even to perceive the theatrical parallels, and wailed in protest when they were left without a "center" to judge. They fell into the same traps and habits the characters were working themselves out of. The critics were welcomed to *Falsettoland* but never entered.

## Notes

1. William Finn and James Lapine, *Falsettoland*, in *The Marvin Songs* (Garden City, NY: The Fireside Theatre, 1990) 181. All subsequent references to this work will be indicated by page numbers within parentheses following the quotation.

2. See Kaier Curtin, *We Can Always Call Them Bulgarians* (Boston: Alyson Publications, 1987), for the critics' response to plays with gay characters from the 20's through the 80's. See also Michael Bronski's chapter on "Theatre: The Third Sex and the Fourth Wall" in *Culture Clash: The Making of Gay Sensibility* (Boston: South End Press, 1984) 110-132, for his recounting of the antipathy of mainstream theatre to gays, gay characters, and gay themes.

3. Clive Barnes, "Theatre: *Boys in the Band* Opens Off Broadway," *New York Times*, 15 April 1968, in *New York Theatre Critics' Reviews*, vol. 29, 1968, 260.

4. Allan Pierce, "Homophobia and the Critics," *Christopher Street*, June 1978, 41.

5. The reviews collected in the *New York Theatre Critics' Reviews* break down evenly (three each) into positive reviews (Rich of the *NY Times*, Winer of *NY Newsday*, and Henry of *Time*), mixed reviews (Beaufort of the *Christian Science Monitor*, Watt of the *NY Daily News*, and Kroll of

*Newsweek*), and negative reviews (Barnes of the *NY Post*, Kissel of the *NY Daily News*, and Kirkpatrick of the *Wall Street Journal*).

6. John Beaufort, "The Finn Trilogy," *The Christian Science Monitor*, 6 July 1990, in *New York Theatre Critics' Reviews*, vol. 51, 1990, 176.

7. Melanie Kirkpatrick, "Falsettoland," *Wall Street Journal*, 26 October 1990, in *New York Theatre Critics' Reviews*, vol. 51, 1990, 180.

8. See Clive Barnes, "The best and the dimmest," *New York Post* June 29, 1990, in *New York Theatre Critics' Reviews*, vol. 51, 1990, 175; and Howard Kissel, "Things are off-key in Finn's *Falsettoland*," *New York Daily News*, 29 June 1990, in *New York Theatre Critics' Reviews*, vol. 51, 1990, 177.

9. William A. Henry III, "A Great Musical for the '90's," *Time*, 1 October 1990, *New York Theatre Critics' Reviews*, vol. 51, 1990, 179.

10. Beaufort 176.

11. Doug Watt, "*Falsettoland* isn't that noteworthy," *New York Daily News*, 6 July 1990, in *New York Theatre Critics' Reviews*, vol. 51, 1990, 177.

12. *Time's* review uses "gay," but only referring to the audience. Henry 179.

13. Kissel 177.

14. Watt 177.

15. Kirkpatrick 180; Barnes 176.

16. Linda Winer, "*Falsettoland* Rings True," *New York Newsday*, 29 June 1990, in *New York Theatre Critics' Reviews*, vol. 51, 1990, 178; Henry 179.

17. Barnes 176.

18. Joseph J. Hayes, "Gayspeak," in *Gayspeak: Gay Male & Lesbian Communication*, ed. James W. Chesebro (New York: The Pilgrim Press, 1981) 46-47.

19. Fred E. Jandt and James Darsey, "Coming Out as a Communicative Process," in *Gayspeak* 12-27.

20. Thomas S. Weinberg, "On 'Doing' and 'Being' Gay: Sexual Behavior and Homosexual Male Self-Identity," *Journal of Homosexuality* 4:143-156, 1978; Gregory M. Herek, "On Doing, Being, and Not Being: Prejudice and the Social Construction of Sexuality," *Journal of Homosexuality* 12:135-151, 1985.

21. Hayes 53.

22. Kissel 177. See Jandt and Darsey, Weinberg, and Herek.

23. Herek 145.

24. Kissel 177. Kirkpatrick as well accuses characters of being self-absorbed (180).

25. Henry 179.

26. Jack Kroll, "Life and Love in *Falsettoland*," *Newsweek*, 8 October 1990, in *New York Theatre Critics' Reviews*, vol. 51, 1990, 180.

27. Barnes 176.

28. Kirkpatrick 180.

29. Frank Rich, "What Has AIDS Done To Land of 'Falsettos'?" *New York Times*, 29 June 1990, in *New York Theatre Critics' Reviews*, vol. 51, 1990, 175.

30. Winer 178.

31. Barbara Johnson, "The Critical Difference: Barthes/BalZac," in Robert Con Davis, ed., *Contemporary Literary Criticism: Modernism Through Poststructuralism* (New York: Longman Inc., 1986) 446.

32. Johnson defines the critic's task as finding the text's way of differing from itself, a difference "perceived only in the act of rereading." Since a theatrical performance is a time art, experienced once then incapable of repetition (in the same way that you can reread a text), any repetition must exist during the performance. Johnson 440.

33. 440.

34. Jacques Derrida, "Structure, Sign, and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences," in *Contemporary Literary Criticism* 482.

35. Edward Sagarin, "Thieves, Homosexuals and Other Deviants—The High Personal Cost of Wearing a Label" (*Psychology Today*, 1976, vol. 9, no. 10) 25.
36. 28.
37. Weinberg 144.
38. See Jandt and Darsey, Herek, and Weinberg.
39. Herek's and Weinberg's articles on "doing" and "being" gay consistently define "being" as the process of perception and self-labeling.
40. Weinberg 146-147.
41. *The Collected Papers of Charles Sanders Peirce*, ed. Charles Hartshorne and Paul Weiss (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1931), Vol. V, p. 186-7; quoted in Kaja Silverman, *The Subject of Semiotics* (New York: Oxford UP, 1983) 17.
42. Robert Con Davis, "The Poststructuralist 'Texte,'" in *Contemporary Literary Criticism* 411.
43. Rich 175.
44. Davis *ibid*.
45. This subversiveness has also been noted as a feature of camp. See Bronski.
46. Richard Hall, "Richard Rehse: All About 'Out and About,'" *The Advocate*, 11 January 1979, 31.
47. Mark Gevisser, "Gay Theater Today," *Theatre* (Yale), 21(3):47, 1990.
48. Perhaps why Charlotte sings "If I'm a bitch, well, I am what I am" (217). *Falsettoland* is also the first production in which a wide audience has been exposed to a pair of unstereotyped singing lesbians. (Solitary singing lesbians have existed before: Mama Morton in *Chicago* [1975] is a stereotyped diesel dyke; Rafaela in *Grand Hotel* [1989] is another stereotype of the past: the mannish, lovelorn, long-suffering lesbian.)
49. Gevisser 46.
50. Hall 31. See also Herek 144: ". . . liberation may be impossible without labeling—adopting a gay or lesbian identity might be the most coherent progressive stance to take in the present political setting," i.e., self-awareness is political.