***Boys in the Band* is no more about homosexuality than *The Scarlet Letter* is about adultery...**

Originality in Mart Crowley's *The Boys in the Band*

"But I Didn't Think *The Boys in the Band* Was about Incest, for Gosh Sakes!"

by
John Fritscher, PhD
(Jack Fritscher)
Published in
The Journal of Popular Culture
Winter 1970, 111:4 pp. 834-840

Author's Note: When I wrote this article in 1969, I was being very "out" and brave simply in the daring of doing it, because few publishers had yet really heard of gay liberation. I never meant to seem harsh toward author Mart Crowley whose work I actually have enjoyed, even though others judge his scathing drama to be full of self-hating homosexuals when I see them merely as existentially trapped. Actually, in my own house, I grew to know his lines well, because at that time, my lover of ten years, David Sparrow, played the part of the one straight man in *The Boys in the Band* when it was produced at Western Michigan University. In fact, Crowley's vivid dialogue gave me the courage to use "cocktail repartee" and "gay-bar repartee" and a world of movie references when I began in 1974 the formal writing of my novel, *Some Dance to Remember: A Memoir Novel of Gay Liberation in San Francisco 1970-1982.* –Jack Fritscher, January 4, 2004

©Jack Fritscher, Ph.D., All Rights Reserved
HOW TO LEGALLY QUOTE FROM THIS WORK

If there be *Fortune in Men's Eyes*, then Mart Crowley, author of *The Boys in the Band*, can be convicted of derivation-plagiarism, an old and sometimes honorable game. The cut-and-paste collage of the lit-major-turned-writer has become staple of American writing. Thomas Wolfe and T. S. Eliot may have their credentials, but Mart Crowley seems to have computed America's pop-consumption pulse to an edge that could embarrass even "Penelope Ashe," the "author" of the audaciously derivative best-seller, *Naked Came the Stranger*, who confessed "her" thefts in the best-seller, *Stranger Than Naked*. Watching Crowley's *Boys* cavort, the acute playgoer shifts ham-to-ham. It is *deja vu*? Is it a remake? Was it first on a long-ago *Playhouse 90*?

When American entertainment (stage, screen, and TV) hasn't been serving hash, it has been serving rehash. The 1969-1970 Broadway season, for instance, has been notable example of plays derived from other mediums. More or less successfully Lewis Carroll's *Alice*, William Inge's *Bus Stop*, Capote's *Grass Harp*, Lewis' *Gantry*, Fellini's *La Strada*, have all returned as musical versions. Broadway even found a little more *All* to applaud-applaud *About Eve*. Is there no end to the archetypical cycle: the novel *Auntie Mame* became the Broadway play *Auntie Mame* became the movie *Auntie Mame* became the Broadway musical *Mame* becomes the Hollywood musical *Mame* whose music is unblushing Daughter of *Dolly* whose own roots, before all its incarnations, were even Wilder. As alternatives to straight *Front Page* revivals, Broadway and films have been embezzling boxoffice fortunes on "loose adaptations." But what more can be expected of bad companions repeatedly kneeling at Successful [Neil] Simon's Six Simplicities?

Like TV reruns the proliferation of properties is profitable but sterile ritual. Is it that angels [who back plays with money to make money] talk so loud artists can't be heard? An encore is great, but esthetic incest? Eugene O'Neill's James in *Long Day's Journey into Night* knew the sterility of esthetic repetition; but now in American theatre, O'Neill is dead. Arthur Miller writes classically right/safe dramas like *The Price*. Tennessee Williams, fallen on hard times, writes terrible short stories that turn into *Kingdom-of-Earth* worse plays. Albee, nerve failing, tried to rewrite for David (derivation-is-best) Merrick a musical version

©Jack Fritscher, Ph.D., All Rights Reserved
HOW TO LEGALLY QUOTE FROM THIS WORK

of Capote's novella/movie *Breakfast at Tiffany's*, then turned to derive his *Everything in the Garden* from a British play.

For this century, the time to produce another dramatist who is strikingly his own head is fast running out.

If the pop cultist is to analyze as much as consume, then the question he intelligently asks is: why should a society technologically resourceful enough to create LEM fall so far short in creating truly new works of dramatic art? The play/film *The Boys in the Band* for all its gently humane validity is no real innovation. Outside the fact that it takes the homosexual world for granted and not for *Gay Deceiver* sensationalism, it offers only a fairy pudding of previously American hash. Granted that Crowley's remake is SRO money-maker about human beings who happen to be homosexuals, does the play sheds any new light on human problems beyond that generated in Albee's *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* If Vanessa Redgrave as *Isadora* speaks validly that art is the "voice of the revolution," then for these New Revolutionary times perhaps Crowley's kind is not exactly the art.

The homo metaphor in plays and films has in the last year, dear *Sister George* and *Sergeant* sir, out-*Fox*ed itself right up the old *Staircase*. [Four films of 1969: *The Fox*, *The Killing of Sister George*, *The Sergeant*, and *Staircase*.] Yet Crowley does, to his merit, not descend to the level of not-far-enough-off Broadway play, *Geese*, where in the first act two naked girls make love and in the second act two naked guys make love, socially redeeming little beyond the aphorism that what is good for the geese is apparently good also for the ganders.

And to take a gander at *Boys in the Band* is to look at *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf*? as it must have appeared in its first draft. Gay folk myth in straight literary circles has long one-upped folks shocked by the marital violence of George and Martha Straight by dropping casually that "You know, of course, that Albee conceived of *VW* as two homosexual couples." True or not, Crowley must have heard the story and been so fascinated that he trotted off almost as fast as you can say "Jacqueline Susann" to write his derivative exercise and exorcise his derivative rite. He chose, rather than the Albee-damned livingroom of Academe, a New York highrise for his camp site. He chose Michael unrequitedly

©Jack Fritscher, Ph.D., All Rights Reserved
HOW TO LEGALLY QUOTE FROM THIS WORK

loving Donald to allow the straight theatergoer a better bitter objectivity. Somehow, repulsed by or laughing at deviations from its own definitions of love, the straight audience suddenly sees objectively how deviant are so many forms of what passes for Human Love. Thought for Sermonette: if deviants express abhorrence at subtle, accustomed perversions in the core of acceptable "straight" society, then their very abhorrence becomes double-slap condemnation of that core-society.

Flannery O'Connor wrote that to the almost deaf one shouts and to the almost blind one paints in very large letters. Was folk-Albee wrong and fortune-eyed Crowley right that the artist communicates more to more if he, painting big, leaves some margin of objectivity? Albee, circa 1962, thought audiences not ready for the homo metaphor; Crowley, trustfully for more than commerical purposes (although is art less art for being big business?), constructs a frame of human reference he judged in the late Sixties to be virtually acceptable as fact, if not as preference, to the average Broadway audience. He plans, with defensible integrity, to communicate more than alienate, judging that the heterosexual theatregoer can view human relationships through the homo-prism more objectively than through the straight. Perhaps he makes memo to the Theatre of Assault *re* the thin line between communication and alienation: a slap startles a baby into a new life on its own, a punch could terminate the infant completely. Theories of Crowley's intent falling where they may, the fact of his literary genesis remains obvious. A more than slight attack of *deju vu* arises from structure, reference, and dialog as *Boys* turns out to be that un-son of George and Martha. As Tom Stoppard pulled Rosencrantz and Guildenstern so aptly out of *Hamlet*, so does Crowley genislide out of Albee, albeit with a bit less of striking independent grace.

Another more theological age examining *Boys* would name its protagonist Michael, archangel, his sword, always muted phallus, transmuted this time to highrise, duplexed in the East Fifties, its stageset made completely from room-size photographs, two-dimensional as the demi-monde of its inhabitants. This media-bred age, however, with its own mythology of pop cult

©Jack Fritscher, Ph.D., All Rights Reserved
HOW TO LEGALLY QUOTE FROM THIS WORK

sees Michael as Mouse and his foil Donald as Duck. Michael denies this early on in the play:

> My name is Michael. I am called Michael. You must never call anyone called Michael Mickey. Those of us who are named Michael are very nervous about it.

But later, when self-destructing, he says to Donald:

> I need you. Just like Mickey Mouse needs Minnie Mouse–just like Donald Duck needs Minnie Duck. Mickey needs Donnie.
>
> Donald: My name is Donald.
> I am called Donald. You must never call anyone called Donald Donnie. . .

This cartoon invocation from movie mythology picks up on Martha's Bette-Davis "What a dump" routine. Michael, who has sold his "very very wonderful, very very marvelous *screenplay* which never got produced," evokes within the first three minutes of the play *Gone with the Wind*'s Cap'n Butler, imitates Barbara Stanwyck's "Cau'll me a keab, you kr-rumm," and sings Judy Garland's "C'mon, Get Happy."

> Michael: What's more boring than a queen doing a Judy Garland imitation?
> Donald: A queen doing a Bette Davis imitation.

Donald, who reads, calls the movies "such garbage." Michael calls them art and throughout the play, as Southern Novelist Walker Percy did in *The Moviegoer* (1962 National Book Award for Fiction) uses as points of reference titles, lines, and scenes from the pop mythology of multitudes of films. In the last minutes of the play, losing himself, losing Donald, he says, "Come back, Donald. Come back, Shane." Michael is Brandon de Wilde losing the para-father of Alan Ladd. Then gaining control, Michael predicts his tomorrow will be a *Bad Day at Black Rock*. Michael

©Jack Fritscher, Ph.D., All Rights Reserved
HOW TO LEGALLY QUOTE FROM THIS WORK

also acknowledges Crowley's view of the interest inherent in a derivative remake.

> Michael: The only thing *mature* means to me is *Victor* Mature, who was in all those pictures with Betty Grable. [Sings *a la* Grable] "I can't begin to tell you, how much you mean to me..." Betty sang that in 1945. '45?–'43. No, '43 was *Coney Island*, which was remade in '50 as *Wabash Avenue*. Yes, *Dolly Sisters* was in '45."

When at the end of the play Michael quotes *Shane*, he ironically evokes the essence of that American folk-art creation: the Western's happy sunset ending. Michael, true invert and untrue to the code of the West, says a discouraging word in terms as black as the new dirty Western from Italy or Peckinpah's *Wild Bunch*. Just as that TV Western *The Guns of Wil1 Sonnett* had the boy searching for his father, so does Crowley inject old-myth Telemachus into new-myth tele-Michael whose last lines are: "As my father said to me when he died in my arms, 'I don't understand any of it. I never did.'"

So failing fathers and failing mothers are gunned down by Crowley whose characters refer to the Parents of Everyqueer as Walt and Evelyn. This pair, the Daddy and Mommy of *The American Dream*, Donald calls "America's Square Peg and America's Round Hole."00 Michael, like Albee's "Bumble of Joy" then keens how he was cut in pieces by parents, society, and self like the American Dream's twin. Michael's Evelyn bathed him in her tub as Martha tried to break down the bathroom door to get at her own little Bugger. Michael tells the other Boys after dinner that they "have just eaten Sebastian Venable" who, as were they, was overpetted by his mother Viole(n)t, the original mock-up for the Vagina Dentata ruling the American Matriarchy.

> Hank: Did Edward Albee write that play?
> Michael: No. Tennessee Williams....Albee wrote *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*

©Jack Fritscher, Ph.D., All Rights Reserved
HOW TO LEGALLY QUOTE FROM THIS WORK

So in the context of mothering and fathering, Crowley covertly names Albee and Williams as homage and ancestry for his play. In the late Sixties, Crowley, himself bred from America's image culture, was inseminated by that same culture which produced: 1) Albee out of his stepfather's Chain of Vaudeville theatres; 2) Williams (*nee* Tom Wingfield) out of the Joy Rio movie theatres; and 3) Authur Miller's *Misfits*, a film Miller derivatively distilled from previous film images. It's only some stretched kismet that all three *Misfits* (Monroe, Gable, Clift) died almost immediately after the sterile derivation.

So Americ''s pop parthenogenesis mates with itself in a kind of esthetic onanism which works–at least at the boxoffice. As Adolph Zukor, founder of Paramount Pictures, said for himself and this derivative situation: "*The Ten Commandments* was a success because first we studied what people like. Gulf & Western's doing the same now with pictures like *True Grit, Paint Your Wagon,* and *Romeo and Juliet*. They're even doing it more intensively than in the past." God help the future! On the basis of what audiences liked previously a computer proliferates for an Oil Company the esthetics of what audiences will like. Significant. None of the three films Zukor mentions is an "origina1" property. Small wonder on the smaller TV screen Debbie Reynolds (who proliferated all that *Tammy* offal) thinks she can sitcom as well as Dodo Day (who as parthenogene proliferated all that Ross Hunter offal) while proto-Lucy remains the original manufacturer.

Hands lack fingers enough to count references the Boys make to lines of Albee and of Williams and of Miller. To be safe, Crowley tossed in the All-American homo stereotype of Cowboy who, born out of the myth of the West, was cultivated in dozens of grade-B movies, was simmered on James Leo Herlihy's underground burner for years before John Schlesinger brought *Midnight Cowboy* to middle-class attention as a treatise on true love in an unloving society. "That Cowboy stuff is for fags," Ratso-Hoffman says. "But what about John Wayne?" Buck-Voight stammers. The audience roars. For years audiences have done what Buck and Michael do. When World War II ended, the heraldic copy ran "Gable's Back! And Garson's Got Him!" Amculture has always confused the real thing with the reel thing. "Burton-Taylor: They

©Jack Fritscher, Ph.D., All Rights Reserved
HOW TO LEGALLY QUOTE FROM THIS WORK

lie, they cheat, they even try to love." Libel about real people? No. Advertisement for reel *Comedians*. The Cowboy of two dimensions that Crowley pulls straight off–or is it unstraight off–the screen is logical/illogical decline and fall of evolving American myth. He is the American Dream who worked out in a gym to get his unnatural muscles. Confer Cowboy Rusty Godowsky, victim of that artificial-lady rapist *Myra Breckenridge*.

Even Crowley's making Cowboy part of the drug scene is not very original. After all, in Jack Gelber's *Connection* the Man who at play's end delivers the Stuff is a Black dressed in white cowboy gear. If drugs, as well as cowboy kit (encouraged, in fact, by Oleg Cassini's current designs), can be considered contemporary fetishes, Crowley is only contemporizing Chingachgook's catering to Bumppo's leather fetish, and Tonto's to the Lone Ranger's mask (read: sunglasses) fetish, and Madison Avenue's to urban man's nicotinizing need for Marlboro Country. Drugs coupling with costume super-consciousness–obvious in America's multiple subcultures: Afro, hippie, collegiate, Brooks business–offer external and, therefore, superficial means to senses of identity. From outside, the costume tries to manufacture what can only come from the inside; and from inside, the drugs try to make true the manufactured image outside.

In fact, as Harold bakes Toklas lasagna, quickens his liquor with amyl nitrite poppers and shares, his marijuana with acid-dropping Cowboy, he heralds, *first*, a carefully costumed image and, *second*, drugs as panacea for faltering human relationships. As the floundering lovers, Hank and Larry, become too much for Harold who apathetically turns to non-cowboy Cowboy to announce his dropout aphorism: "Give me Librium or give me Meth."

Not only does Crowley thus gut the Amerimage of the cowboy who supposedly has been his own man with a genu-whine sense of Rousseauvian self, but so too he gives decline and fall to the traditionally mouthed American ethic of WASP responsibility (but only to one's own kind if not just to one's own self). It's a ways from Patrick Henry to Harold, but not inconceivably far. (After all, what's this about *A Patriot for Me*?)

©Jack Fritscher, Ph.D., All Rights Reserved
HOW TO LEGALLY QUOTE FROM THIS WORK

Thus the Western formula that has informed American entertainment is present in the format of *Boys in the Band* as it was in essence in *Who's Afraid*. Grade Zilch movies had the staple chase and the shoot-out show-down. In the Sixties, audiences have come to expect the Fellini-Warhol party ala *Midnight Cowboy*'s gratuitous light show. The *dolce vita* orgy on stage or screen is often the scene for "the chase," sexual or satiric. And the chase is more often than not with unembarrassed imitation by the derivation playwrights called "Game Playing." George and Martha made Game Playing acceptable urban version of the pre-showdown chase. The more "sophisticated" the characters the more likely they are to play "Fun and Games" as in *VW*, to play "The Truth Game" as in John (*Midnight Cowboy*) Schlesinger's classic film *Darling*, to play "Affairs of the Heart" as in *Boys in the Band*. Unashamed of their imitation of one another, dramatists simply use Game Playing as part of urban folk ritual as a means of getting at the truth. Game Playing is doubletalk because in the Game is usually revealed the fact that the Game is no game at all and that what seemed no game was where the Playing had really occurred. Gaming within the game, like the filming within the film, is contemporary derivation of traditional drama's staple play-within-the-play which has always been the conscience to catch somebody's thing.

If the characters chase themselves in Games, they get to the nitty gritty for the shoot out. In *Boys*, Michael turns on Straight Alan in the showdown. The phallic matching of pistols on a Western street mutates to a telephone receiver in each one's hand. Who has the guts to make his trigger finger dial the "one he truly loves"? The priapus is as much a shroud in the Western and in *Boys* as it was in that satirical scene in Melville's *Moby Dick* where the sailor literally uses the whale's foreskin as a raincoat. Western cowpoke or Midnight Marlboro Cowboy the adolescent insecurity which focuses on the caliber and triggering of the genitalia has much to do with the Boys' tensions. It's good old humanism again *versus* bad old technology: modern man's substitution of technological devices for human organs. (Confer any "*Manual*" wherein a dildo can take the place of a penis). Crowley dramatically rehashes what James Baldwin in *Nobody Knows My Name* said of "The Male Prison" in America. Crowley's re-telling,

©Jack Fritscher, Ph.D., All Rights Reserved
HOW TO LEGALLY QUOTE FROM THIS WORK

perhaps refining, of Baldwin's observation is not to be dismissed lightly at the Wednesday matinee.

Crowley writes to beat the band, but these boys in the backroom have been trotted out before. When Michael ends on the floor at Donald's knees in the final confession-exorcism scene, the audience fully expects Arthur Hill to materialize singing "Who's afraid of Virginia Woolf, Virginia Woolf?" and Uta Hagen to say, "I am, George....I am." But Crowley's Michael does not finish with Martha's existential affirmation ("I am"). Instead, because he's gay, precisely because he's gay–and here Crowley trumpets triumphant–Michael wanders out *aimless* into the night. Crowley's social query seems to be asking why should Michael's whole life be aimless, simply because Michael's gay libido misses its so-called "normal" aim. This is valid metaphor for universal human questions understandable to anyone whose aim (straight or gay) has ever any which way faltered. This is the moral point and the specific universal value of *The Boys in the Band*.

Near the play's end Donald says to Michael about Larry:

> We saw each other in the bath and went to bed together but we never spoke a word and never knew each other's name.

Shame, says Straight Society. Watch, however, the current Dustin Hoffman-Mia Farrow flick, *John and Mary*, where the boy and girl exchange no names until the final minutes of the film. Crowley in allowing nameless (that is: MASKLESS) mating allows a certain honesty where the feints, restraints, and dishonest quadrilles of the dating game of traditional boy-courts-girl have no honest place. *Boys* descends from much of Albee and from that proto-honest Williams Brick who in *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* says about his relationship to his football teammate Skipper:

> Normal? No!–It was too rare to be normal, any true thing between two people is too rare to be normal.

Crowley, *artist* synonymous with *lover*, communicates this same thing; but unlike Williams' Brick who hangs up the phone

©Jack Fritscher, Ph.D., All Rights Reserved
HOW TO LEGALLY QUOTE FROM THIS WORK

on Skipper leaving Skipper to suicide, and unlike Joe Buck who shoves a telephone receiver down an old man's throat, Crowley's Michael embraces telephone technology an an extension of the human humane voice. The telephone is externalization–those wires and dials and speakers–that shows that communication can exist between people. That phone image may currently be Crowley's, but he's sharing a party line with Jean Cocteau's brilliant, *The Human Voice*, and Gian Carlo Menotti's *The Telephone*.

Admission must be paid, and here's what to admit. Crowley is an artist, and perhaps, after all, his own artist. While his art may not particularly be the art that conceals the cultural "looting" the artist has done, he proves once again that art exists in no vacuum either for the creator nor for the viewer who brings his own bag and baggage to the art. Attention must be paid to the culture which itself descended from somewhere to produce that art which it views. Crowley's sexual metaphor is as valid in his love story as was Hawthorne in his. *Boys in the Band* is really no more about homosexuality than *The Scarlet Letter* is really about adultery.

Tell that to friends who return shocked from Broadway or who return from seeing Crowley's uncompromising screenplay *Boys in the Band* at the local Cinema Temple. Tell them the scathing *Boys* is maybe just short of a first-rate film/play–but when are they likely to see one better? Tell them it misses its mark perhaps the way its Michael misses his–just a bit; and while it's not a great "watershed" moment in American drama, it is popular and therefore significant, and should probably be made into a derivatively appropriate television series. It is significant because it marks a mainstream turning point in sexual otherness and consciousness. Mart Crowley's acerbic, bitchy, and scathing drama is assaultive the way good theater can be when it slaps an audience into a new angle on human life and human love. © 1969 and 2004 Jack Fritscher

John J. Fritscher (Jack Fritscher)
English Department
Western Michigan University, Kalamazoo
©1970 Jack Fritscher

©Jack Fritscher, Ph.D., All Rights Reserved
HOW TO LEGALLY QUOTE FROM THIS WORK