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Camping Out: Sexuality as Aesthetic Value in Tennessee Williams's *And Tell Sad Stories of the Deaths of Queens…*

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You can't expect me to seriously believe that a man who has been shipping in and out of New Orleans for five years is still not able to recognize a queen in a gay bar.
— Candy, *And Tell Sad Stories of the Deaths of Queens* (2005)

I do not say you *are* it, but you look it . . . which is just as bad.
— Oscar Wilde, 1894 Queensberry trial

And Tell Sad Stories of the Deaths of Queens . . . is one of several posthumously published and produced one-act plays by Tennessee Williams that has recently been offered to the public. It was first performed on April 22, 2004, by the Shakespeare Theatre at the Kennedy Center. Nicholas Moschovakis and David Roessel later published the play in *Mister Paradise and Other One-Act Plays by Tennessee Williams* (2005). Textual analysis of *And Tell Sad Stories* demonstrates Williams's awareness of camp, presented more overtly here than in any of his other one-act or full-length plays. This essay draws on early critical perspectives, current scholarly attitudes, and performance reviews to emphasize the ways in which *And Tell Sad Stories* is a landmark Williams text for the attention it gives to sexuality as an aesthetic feature of the play (homosexuality, transvestitism, drag, bisexuality, curiosity, and rough trade) and the relationship it fosters with camp.

¶2 One of the first questions to address is: What is camp? Many prominent critics and reference works have attempted to characterize the aesthetic. *The Oxford English Dictionary* defines the term as "ostentatious, exaggerated, affected, theatrical; effeminate or homosexual; pertaining to or characteristic of homosexuals. So as *n.*, 'camp' behaviour, mannerisms . . . a man exhibiting such behaviour." The *OED*'s definition emphasizes camp in terms of personal behavior, and it relates the actions to homosexuals. Camp typically includes sexuality as one of its defining components, but its customary linking with homosexuality does not reflect the broad spectrum of sexuality it addresses. The *OED* basically assumes homosexuality is identifiable by behavior, an unfortunate assumption that stereotypes and does not take into account the many ways in which heterosexuals may exhibit effeminate, theatrical, or exaggerated behavior, as well. The *OED*, however, is not alone in designating homosexuality as one of the most defining characteristics of camp.

¶3 One reason why camp and homosexuality have been closely linked is because they are typically considered closeted codes that must be *outted* in order to reveal their existences. Eve Sedgwick's *Epistemology of the Closet* calls homosexuality "*the* open secret" (22). Camp exemplifies this notion because it is "out" to both its creator and those who participate in its construction. It reveals its secret to select members of an audience and conceals itself from others much like the stereotype of a closeted homosexual who concedes sexual status to self and some friends or family, but hides it from others. Scott Edmiston, who directed a Boston Speakeasy Stage Company production of *And Tell Sad Stories* at the Roberts Studio Theatre from January 27 to February 25, 2006, provides further insight into camp's ties to secrecy and homosexuality. According to Edmiston, "Williams's characters are misfits, marginal. They all have a missing piece, and also, a secret" (Delgado). "In

most of Williams's plays, homosexuality is coded," Edmiston commented, observing that coding is different from closeting (Delgado). Coding, like camp, speaks a specific language that some will fully understand, while others will not. Although the metaphorical closet is locked, the code (camp) offers hints and a pathway into its world. *And Tell Sad Stories* is an open closet that has allowed its secrets to spill onto the page and stage with a language code quite different from that in other works by Williams.

¶4 Unlike Williams's other works, *And Tell Sad Stories* depicts camp as an overt aesthetic. Candy, the play's main character, is a man who cannot let go of his past relationship with Sidney Korngold. He attempts to put the past behind him by falling for Karl, but the result is not a happy ending. Candy's tenants, Alvin and Jerry, are also two men in a relationship. The same-sex couple reflects the loving companionship Candy is unable to achieve. *And Tell Sad Stories* is not as secretive about these relationships as *Suddenly Last Summer* (1958) or *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* (1955), which feature less overt portrayals of homosexuality. Here, Williams presents homosexuality with a degree of levity that borrows from the camp aesthetic, while also incorporating other aspects.

¶5 Susan Sontag's "Notes on 'Camp'" (1964), one of the most popular works on camp, explores the subject's connection to sexuality. Sontag composed her text in note form to demonstrate camp's inability to fit into a structured or categorized system—in much the same way that sexuality cannot be so easily defined. Sontag establishes her own understanding of camp by detailing its characteristics in fifty-eight points but never provides a concrete definition. Although she discusses homosexuality as an aspect of camp, she diverges from the OED's emphasis in her ninth note, which describes the image of the androgyne: "what is most beautiful in virile men is something feminine; what is most beautiful in feminine women is something masculine" (56). This mixture of the sexes and sexuality breaks away from linking camp primarily to homosexuality. It also highlights Candy's character as a man who dresses in female drag to attract other men.

¶6 Sontag's note also says camp demonstrates "a relish for the exaggeration of sexual characteristics and personality mannerisms" (56). *And Tell Sad Stories* embodies this sensibility in its over-the-top characters and their mutable sexualities. Candy says to Karl, "You'll notice I'm being very feminine now in my talk and my mannerisms as well as appearance. Isn't that what you want?" (198). Sontag's connecting camp to androgynous sexuality thus helps liberate the term from more narrow definitions. Unlike the *OED*'s arbitrary monogamous relationship it establishes for camp and homosexuality, Sontag's use of the androgyne expands camp's playful promiscuous concern with all sexualities.

¶7 Sontag's text further addresses the need for camp to be subtle; it should resonate with an audience without being completely recognizable. She writes, "To talk about Camp is therefore to betray it" (Sontag 53). Similar to dark humor, sarcasm, and displays of wit, people recognize and respond to camp or they do not. But Sontag's note turns camp into a happy accident, not something anyone would deliberately construct or discuss. Camp, however, *is* recognizable; it can be discussed and purposely created without losing any of its potency. *And Tell Sad Stories* becomes campier because it does not attempt to subvert its subject matter. The play does not directly state that it is a presentation of camp, but its continual focus on the over-exaggerated sexual depictions of its characters establishes it as a demonstrable vehicle of camp with a concentration on sexuality as its principal aesthetic.

¶8 Williams deliberately addressed camp for this work and others. He was a playwright dealing with his own creation of a plastic theatre, accessing all elements of the stage (projectors, lighting, soundtrack music, etc.) in

order to depict an extension of life more "real" than the surrounding physical world. Camp is simultaneously a subversion of everyday life as well as its exaggeration. Williams understood this duality of camp, and he infused *And Tell Sad Stories* with equal parts of both. The sexualities depicted in the play are understandable by Sontag's standards—but other scholars continue her research and help to locate camp and sexuality in Williams's work.

¶9 Philip Core released *Camp: The Lie That Tells The Truth* in 1984, twenty years after Sontag's groundbreaking effort. His *Camp* is akin to Sontag's essay in its expansive approach to the subject matter. Core provides twenty-five rules for camp that illustrate its mix of humor and seriousness, especially with regard to sexuality:

> CAMP is a disguise that fails.
> CAMP is a lie which tells the truth.
> CAMP is an art without artists.
> CAMP is cross-dressing in a Freudian slip.
> CAMP is not necessarily homosexual. Anyone or anything can be camp. But it takes one to know one. (7)

These few designations represent the characters of *And Tell Sad Stories* in many ways. Candy's drag disguise fails in her attempt to make Karl love her. She has lived her whole life as a lie of dreams and memories that are destroyed by the hard truth of her aging and Karl's denial of her affections. And although Candy and her tenants are homosexual, camp allows all the characters to participate in its construction, as they all share the common thread of desiring men. Most importantly, although the characters are not artists, they create the art of camp through their actions, dialogue, and sexualities.

¶10 Core whittles down all of his rules and reflections into a single definition. He writes, "There are only two things essential to camp: a secret within the personality which one ironically wishes to conceal and to exploit; and a peculiar way of seeing things, affected by spiritual isolation, but strong enough to impose itself on others through acts or creations" (Core 9). The first part of Core's definition may be applied to both Candy and Karl. Candy wishes to conceal her masculinity in an effort to attract Karl, but she also flaunts how easily drag makes this transformation a possibility, simultaneously reminding Karl that there is a man underneath her makeup and attire. Karl, on the other hand, does not want to admit that he enjoys the company of another man, yet he revels in making money by securing sexual advances from gay men. He tells Candy, "It's all part of a plot. I just want some money from you. You can have what you want, now, for ten dollars. Let's get it over with, huh?" (203). The second part of Core's definition, however, belongs to Candy alone. Her constant hold onto the past and her memories of Sidney preclude her from mentally living in the present, and she utilizes this reverie in an attempt to bring surrounding people into her dream world.

¶11 Echoes of Sontag's notes and Sedgwick's open secret are present in this Williams play. The interrelated research demonstrates the way camp continues to evolve over the years as a recognized aesthetic. Williams is a pioneer of twentieth-century theatrical camp for showcasing the formalized research of Sontag, Sedgwick, Core and others before it was a recognized area of study. *And Tell Sad Stories* aptly fulfills the ideas in these studies of camp. The narrative of the one-act play seems simple enough: Candy meets Karl, Alvin and Jerry warn Candy not to get involved with Karl, Karl takes advantage of Candy, Karl leaves Candy emotionally distraught

and tended to by Alvin and Jerry. This campy sexual romp demonstrates an intricate matrix of camp and sexuality, but these characters also have historical and real-life connections to tragedy.

¶12 The 1969 Stonewall Rebellion not only sparked a liberation movement, but the social climate surrounding the event helped shaped the construction of *And Tell Sad Stories*. Moschovakis and Roessel date the composition and completion of the play somewhere between 1957 and 1970, a time span that saw the concept of homosexuality separate from its association with the act of sodomy (241). This shift in cultural thinking from sex acts to sexuality and relationships reinforced homophobic atmospheres for the landscape of masculinity. Williams certainly recognized the change in social perceptions of homosexuals and sexuality during this time. His early use of camp shows how it is able to balance humor and catastrophe in a fictional performance with real-world influences.

¶13 The fluctuating terminology of sexuality no doubt affected Williams's life and writings. Homosexuality as a term that implied deviance from normative behaviors helped create heterosexuality as a word to represent that norm. As Jonathan Katz explains in *The Invention of Heterosexuality*,

> In 1923, "heterosexuality" made its debut in Merriam-Webster's authoritative *New International Dictionary*. "Homosexuality" had, surprisingly, made its debut fourteen years earlier, in 1909, defined as a medical term meaning "morbid sexual passion for one of the same sex." The advertising of a diseased homosexuality preceded the publicizing of a sick heterosexuality. For in 1923 *Webster's* defined "heterosexuality" as a "Med." term meaning "morbid sexual passion for one of the opposite sex." Only in 1934 does "heterosexuality" first appear in *Webster's* hefty Second Edition Unabridged defined in what is still the dominant modern mode. There, heterosexuality is finally a "manifestation of sexual passion for one of the opposite sex; normal sexuality." Heterosexuality had finally attained the status of norm. (92)

¶14 Homosexuality and heterosexuality became inseparable terms because they defined each other as oppositional sexualities. To be a heterosexual suddenly meant to be homophobic because heterosexuality was defined as the normative counterpart to homosexuality's deviancy. This is just one of the complexities of sexuality exemplified by binary constructions, and artists like Williams were directly impacted by these definitions and social constructions. These emerging changes in the landscape of male sexuality filtered into *And Tell Sad Stories* with its overt depictions of homosexuality and transvestitism (Candy, Alvin, and Jerry) and the violent physical and verbal denial of its existence (Karl).

¶15 Williams celebrates homosexuality, or at least the right to be gay, and other representations of sexuality in works such as *Cat* and *The Glass Menagerie* by creating themes of sexual ambiguity. The ambiguity keeps the characters from coming out of the closet, and this is beneficial because coming out reaffirms the existence of the homosexual/heterosexual binary, thereby pitting the two classified sexualities against each other, privileging heterosexuality as normal and marking homosexuality as a deviant existence. *And Tell Sad Stories*, however, presents homosexuality without reinforcing a double bind. The play undercuts the sexual binary by mixing Candy's homosexuality with transvestitism and drag, along with Karl's undefined sexuality, which allows him to have sex with a woman for pleasure and also associate with Candy for money. Williams showcases these variable sexualities as they were developing in contemporary society. His fictional portrayal of what was occurring in real-time only heightens camp's presentation by making the open secret no one wants to discuss even more obvious. *And Tell Sad Stories* was probably finished pre-Stonewall and definitely pre-AIDS

awareness, but its publication and performance are subsequent to both events. The play is a liminal text that calls attention to its external history, story content, and its author's life.

¶16 Edmund White's *Political Vocabulary of Homosexuality* helps shed light on the struggles homosexual artists like Williams faced before and after Stonewall. White states, "What I want to stress is that before 1969 only a small (though courageous and articulate) number of gays had much pride in their homosexuality or a conviction that their predilections were legitimate" (Fone 777). White argues that a climate of uncertainty about the public and private management of homosexuality characterized pre-Stonewall society. His essay also discusses how terms such as *queer*, *trade*, *trick*, and *john* were "essential vocabulary derived from prostitute's slang" in England (Fone 779–81). The presentation of sexualities outside the typical binary construction and developments of new terminology help to ground a reader or audience into the period when Williams was writing *And Tell Sad Stories.* A camp sensibility may be observed from the convergence of history, sexuality, and language in an absurd mix of social change.

¶17 The poem that Candy recites to Karl is an example of White's evaluation of the situations homosexuals (especially artists) faced before and after Stonewall:

> I think the strange, the crazed, the queer
> will have their holiday this year,
> I think, for just a little while,
> There will be pity for the wild.
>
> I think in places known as gay,
> In special little clubs and bars,
> Pierrot will serenade pierrot,
> with frantic drums and sad guitars.
>
> I think for some uncertain reason
> mercy will be shown this season
> To the lovely and misfit,
> To the brilliant and deformed.
>
> I think they will be housed and warmed
> and fed and comforted a while,
> Before, with such a tender smile,
> The earth destroys her crooked child. (199)

Williams's poem was first written in 1941 for his friend Paul Bigelow, and it surveys both the historical and contemporary landscapes of homosexuality, opening the door on "special little clubs and bars" and ranging in tone from celebratory to judgmental in word choice ("queer," "gay," "misfit," "crooked") (Leverich 419). The poem presents an early designation of *queer* as person and *gay* as descriptor. After Stonewall, being *gay* generally became associated with being *homosexual,* both in noun form. This function of the word was integrated into society while still retaining its function as an adjective. Today, it seems to be reestablishing its use solely as a descriptor.

¶18 *And Tell Sad Stories* may be historically linked to *Vieux Carré*, as well—particularly through the character Tye, whose dialogue mirrors that of Karl. *Vieux Carré*, although first produced in 1977, has been seen as a "late organic fulfillment" of the 1943 short story "The Angel in the Alcove" (Bray viii). This link, coupled with

Williams's use of the 1941 Bigelow poem, suggests that some concepts of *And Tell Sad Stories* were germinating as early as the 1940s.

¶19 The treatment of personal relationships between men, however, is more nuanced in *And Tell Sad Stories* than in *Vieux Carré*. Karl may not be a round character, but he is brutally sincere. He makes almost no attempt to hide his animosity toward Candy. Like Tye in *Vieux Carré*, Karl is a drinking man: hyper-masculine, revolted by non-heterosexuals, yet willing to perform sexual acts with another man for money. Both men display camp's ability to exhibit varied perspectives on sexuality, sometimes tragic and other times comedic. At one point in *Vieux Carré*, Tye describes passing out on Bourbon Street and awakening to find a man trying to engage in sexual activities with him. "If you want to blow me," Tye says, "you can pay me one hunnerd dollars—before, not after" (*Vieux Carré* 42). Karl, on the other hand, only asks for ten dollars, and although he does not name a specific physical act, it is clear he is submitting to a possible sexual encounter with Candy. Karl's asking price is measurably lower than Tye's—and it is noteworthy that he tells Candy he would charge her twenty dollars to hold his hand, sleep beside him, and treat him like her companion. Romance costs more than sex in Karl's world, but just like Tye he is a self-serving hustler living off others. Karl says, "I like to pay my own way unless I am giving something. I'm not giving nothing to you" (202). Either way, both situations have a price, and the monetary measure of interpersonal relationships presents these character interactions as camp for the manner in which comedy overshadows the sadness of their relationship.

¶20 Karl and Candy are both men, but the play expresses their sexualities and personalities in contrast to each other. Candy expresses herself as a man, a drag queen, a transvestite, a lover, and a provider while Karl exhibits himself as a man solely through physical and verbal strength. He is a fighter, a usurper, but also someone who will do anything for the right price. These characterizations camp their relationship because the entire play concerns two characters that have no chance of ever understanding each other or coming together in a symbiotic relationship. Candy's fictional world of playful and idealized love is dramatically funny and in direct conflict with Karl's serious, one-track focus on self-promotion. Karl is concerned only with money from the beginning of the play to the very end. Candy, however, confuses Karl's monetary desires with a fantasy that he only comes to visit because he likes her. Candy's daydream of Karl as Mr. Right cannot be destroyed by the stark reality that he is a low-life who only cares for himself.

¶21 Candy and Karl's dancing also serves to display camp's employment of sexuality as aesthetic value. When Karl awkwardly remarks to Candy that she "sure can follow okay," she replies, "Doin' what comes naturally!" (201). It is a campy scene because two men dancing together is not typically considered normal or natural—but it is imperative to understand that the dancing scene is camped even more with Candy in drag as a woman in order to create a humorous situation out of a dramatic presentation of two men interacting with each other. Her drag appearance makes the dancing appear normative because the surface depiction displays a male and female couple *and* it camps the action because under the artificial, drag outfitting, "she" remains a man. This peculiar mix of physical elements demonstrates camp as much as Candy does in language when she acknowledges Karl as "the first true worthwhile relationship I have found since I broke up with Sidney" (215). She is so absorbed by her predicament with Karl that she fancies a life with him a year in advance instead of recognizing him as an abusive drunk who leeches off of her. Candy's serious consideration of a relationship with Karl meets with a humorous yet tragic reality. The intersection of fantasy and reality camps her life, a theme Williams explored in many of his other works.

¶22 *And Tell Sad Stories* takes place in New Orleans one week before Candy's thirty-fifth birthday. In addition to New Orleans, the play mentions other familiar Williams locales: Alabama (the home state of the gay tenants) and Biloxi, Mississippi (the destination of another tenant, Mr. Frazier, when he is not renting the slave quarters from one of Candy's three properties) (190). Candy's drag queen persona seems a designation that appears to distance her from characters in Williams's more popular works. But drag is simply a fabricated or plastic cover meant to conceal another self image. Candy is a multi-layered character, akin to the decor of her eclectic apartment, with its Japanese fixtures, French doors, bamboo curtain, and Chinese robe.

¶23 Early in the narrative, as Candy begins to reminisce about Sidney Korngold—her first true love whom she met as a teenager—it becomes clear that memory is another component of camp in *And Tell Sad Stories*. Unable to relinquish her memories, Candy resembles such other Williams heroines as Amanda Wingfield, Serafina Delle Rose, and Blanche DuBois. The allusion to these other female characters obliquely parodies them, as Candy provides more dark humor about her situation than the other characters. Camp allows Candy to reference the other characters and pay homage to their sad lives. Still lonely after the breakup of her seventeen-year love affair, Candy keeps a picture of Sidney in her apartment—its lingering presence recalling the portrait of Amanda's husband. "Well, nothing lasts forever," Candy says. "You dream that it will but it don't" (191). Like Williams's other heroines, Candy lives in a fabricated world of the past. *And Tell Sad Stories* marks a departure, however, because the character trapped in stasis is a man in drag (who does not, in fact, adorn female garb until close to the middle of scene 1).

¶24 Candy's drag, transvestitism, and homosexuality make her one of the more complex presentations of camp within the play. She is grounded in camp's exploitation of sexuality the instant that Korngold "Opened a closet containing girl's clothes and wigs" for her to wear as a teenage boy (196). Here again, camp features sexuality as an aesthetic to help present its elaborate construction, and Williams clearly understands how to make this a prominent feature of his work. Candy never directly responds to Karl when he asks her if she is queer, but she does say that queers "set the styles and create the taste for the country" (192). She has a definite understanding of camp, as demonstrated by the manner in which she keeps the topic of sexuality present, but she diverts Karl's attention away from her own homosexuality. When Candy leaves to change into drag she tells Karl, "[I'm] Changing clothes. And sex. . . . I am a transvestite. Here I am" (197). This coming-out statement is noteworthy, particularly in Williams's oeuvre, for the forthright manner in which it acknowledges the existence of mutable sexualities. Presenting these sexualities overtly, especially the homosexuality of Alvin and Jerry, allows camp to confront serious issues and portray them in a humorous light.

¶25 Alvin and Jerry represent Williams's "clowns," much like Bessie and Flora from *The Rose Tattoo* or Mary Maude and Miss Carrie from *Vieux Carré*. These figures support camp in their portrayals of secrecy, outlandish behavior, and trouble in filtering the truth from the deceit of the imagination. Alvin, the first to appear, reveals that he and his boyfriend have been spying on Candy's apartment. Alvin tells Candy that Karl took up residence with another woman (Alice Jackson) for a week and only came back to Candy because he was kicked out of the woman's house. Although clowns generally do not serve to advance story, Alvin's revelation becomes an important part of the action. His conversation represents an attempt to break though Candy's walls of fantasy and open her eyes to reality. Alvin's character as a gossip hound is also relevant to the camp features of secrecy and disclosure.

¶26

Jerry is parallel to Alvin in character presentation. He enters Candy's apartment without knocking, displaying a true clown's pleasure in snooping. Jerry has no worry about spreading unconfirmed information that Karl is the man who "broke Tiny Henderson's jaw which is still wired together" (206). He also serves as a double for Alvin in his attempt to shake Candy free from her adherence to the past. When Candy tells him "I've never been so happy in my life," Jerry replies, "You've had a sad life, Mother" (212). And it is the communication between Jerry, Alvin, and Candy that makes their conversations more than just gossip. The interactions between Jerry and Alvin recall what Edmund White labeled "gay speech" (Fone 781): Jerry calls Candy "Mother," but she takes offense and tells him not to use "bitch-talk" (212). The terminology used throughout the play overtly demonstrates a queering and sexualization of language. *Faggots*, *bitches*, and *tricks* are just a few of the words deployed; Candy calls herself a *chicken* when she reminisces about her youth. Camp is present in Candy and Karl's separate sexualities, but it is also revealed in Jerry and Alvin's complementary gay relationship and their communication with Candy. The two tenants call attention to the open secret of homosexuality and also help Candy negotiate her confusion between the real world and her personal fantasies.

¶27 Reality crashes down upon Candy in the play's camp ending. After Karl takes his final leave, Candy cries out to Alvin and Jerry, "Oh, my God.—I'm old!—I've gotten old, I'm old." All three characters laugh at the absurdity of her situation, "but her giggles turn to tears" (220). This manic ending sequence is a distinct example of camp. Its mixture of laughter and tears, extreme character depictions, and random violence is an aesthetic addressed in Linda Dorff's view of Williams's late plays as "theatricalist cartoons." Dorff calls "outrageous" those plays that exhibit themselves as "bawdy, over-the-top farces" (13). There is nothing vulgar about Candy's condition at the end of the play, but society itself is shown to be obscene and ridiculous for the situations it affords these characters. Although camp and outrageous are not synonymous, Dorff's work allows camp to retain its own theatrical aesthetic and simultaneously break into other artistic mediums and genres.

¶28 Core sums up Williams's relationship with camp, conflating the writer's life with some of his most recognizable characters. Camp "became a myth-making process" for Williams, Core argues,

> which homogenized unhappy homosexuality, drugs, family dependence, fear of women and hatred of his masculine erotic images into an elaborate pantheon of monsters—Blanche duBois, Stanley Kowalski, Mrs. Stone, Big Daddy—all of whom are Oedipal archetypes. Their fights and loves, hates and happiness, spell out in code language the twisted and unhappy path of the artist's life on a level which is truer than his autobiography but less a de-personalized work of art than the similar characters of, say, Arthur Miller. (200)

Williams is a clear employer of and employee to camp. Its construction, however, will never be completely defined because it does not concern itself with rules; it is as mutable as the characters and aesthetic of sexuality showcased within *And Tell Sad Stories*. Camp, as an exaggerated reaction, portrays serious situations with comedic undertones *and* overtones. Camp also allows dream and fantasy to cloud perceptions of reality just long enough for an individual to start believing the delusion before it is revealed as merely a diversion of the imagination. *And Tell Sad Stories* has not maligned its camp designation by being overt in its presentation of sexuality; it has distinguished the aesthetic by purposely spotlighting its elements as valid theatrical artistry.

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