

***Queer Theatre and the Legacy of Cal Yeomans.* By Robert A. Schanke. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011. Hardcover \$64.99. 262 pages.**

The latest book by Robert Schanke is the work of a seasoned scholar who clearly relishes the pleasures of academic research and publication. Schanke takes evident delight in recovering the life and work of Cal Yeomans, a now-nearly forgotten pioneer in the gay theatre movement of the Post-Stonewall era. Frank and explicit in his portrayal of gay male sexuality, Yeomans found early success in the emerging gay theatre scene of the 1970s and early 1980s, but at the advent of the AIDS epidemic he refused to compromise the unconstrained sexual expression that marked his writings; his plays fell from favor, and since his death in 2000 he has been little more than a postscript in the emerging narratives of gay theatre history.

Until now, that is. Through meticulous research and patient reconstruction of Yeomans's life and work, Schanke has written an academic "page turner" that restores this early maverick of Post-Stonewall theatre to his proper prominence. Simultaneously, however, Schanke situates Yeomans within the larger contexts of his cultural moment, demonstrating how his plays reflect and resist the various discursive trajectories of gay life during the second half of the twentieth century; in this sense, the book performs a valuable double duty, operating as both biography and social history.

Schanke opens his text with a preface that offers crucial insights into his research and writing process. He credits his colleague Kim Marra for directing his attention to Yeomans; she first perused his collected papers at the University of Florida archives and alerted Schanke to the "gold mine" of as-yet-unexamined original documents. Schanke likewise extends thanks to the University curatorial staff, who responded to his interest in the papers by quickly cataloguing the materials. Yet he also recounts with good-natured humor how the staff restricted his access to some of Yeomans's personal letters and journals because their intimate references to still-living individuals might land them all in trouble with the law. As Schanke tells it: "If Cal described in his journal an actor having 'a big old dangling dick,' could the actor sue the library for allowing me to read about it? Could the actor sue me as well?" (xvii). Through his candid observations on the challenges he faced not only in his archival work but also in his interviews with Yeomans's friends and colleagues, Schanke supplies a useful mediation on the legal, and indeed ethical, negotiations that can accompany academic research.

The first chapters of the book recount Yeomans's years as a "horrible misfit" born into an affluent family in small-town Crystal River, Florida, in 1938. Yeomans's first recognition of his homosexuality, it seems, occurred in tandem with his introduction to the theatrical profession in the late 1950s, and the book relates his early work as an actor and acting teacher throughout the 1960s South, as well as his work with the famed La MaMa Theatre in the early 1970s. Schanke writes candidly about the emergence of Yeomans's bipolar disorder, a condition that would affect him the rest of his life, and observes that Yeomans's plays and poems were, from the beginning, explicit and sometimes surreal takes on unconventional sexualities; the early and unproduced *Swamp Play #2*, for example, featured a transvestite nymphomaniac and a pedophilic minister quite literally haunted by the phallus-shaped demons of their desires.

In later chapters, Schanke details Yeomans's rise to prominence in the national gay theatre scene, most notably for two plays, *Richmond Jim* and *Sunsets*. The first premiered at Theatre Rhinoceros in San Francisco in 1979, and later had another successful run in New York City. It is a story of the sexual awakening of the titular Jim, a young man from the South whose sexual encounter with an older man in Manhattan introduces him to the world of bondage and leather sex. *Sunsets* premiered in New York City in 1981 and subsequently played in Chicago and San Francisco. It consists of three short plays, all centered around sex at a public toilet on a Florida

beach; the apparent tawdriness of the scenario is belied by the complexity of the characters who find themselves drawn to the spot. Reviews for both plays were largely positive, with critics praising Yeomans for eschewing the fluffy comedy typical of gay theatre at the time and instead offering frank depictions of the role that sex often played in the gay life of the era.

The final chapters of the book document Yeomans's life after the emergence of the AIDS epidemic. These were frustrating years for Yeomans, who refused to adulterate the explicit tone of his work and found his plays increasingly rejected for production. Again, Schanke does not balk at candid observations on Yeomans's explorations of marginal, even taboo, sexualities; *The Daddy Poems*, for instance, were a series of scenes and images strongly suggesting incestuous relations between a father and son. Yeomans rarely found outlets even for staged readings of the work, and such experiences led him to concentrate on his poetry and develop his new interest in photography. In 1988 he was diagnosed with a heart condition, and the following year received an AIDS diagnosis as well; in 2000, his health failing from AIDS complications, he succumbed to a fatal heart attack, already largely forgotten in the gay theatre world.

Schanke deftly succeeds in recovering Yeomans's prominence at a pivotal juncture in gay American history, a time at which the sexual exuberance of the 1970s was eclipsed by the chill of the AIDS crisis. Moreover, he approaches his task of recovery with a personal investment and enthusiasm that pervades his text. I should note that Schanke matches Yeomans's frankness with frankly vernacular descriptions of the plays and their productions that might catch some readers initially off guard. And occasionally his intimacy with his material leads him into speculative psychologizing of Yeomans and his work. Yet, if Schanke feels close to his subject it is no doubt due to the fact that his personal and professional history is coincident with Yeomans's own; as an eyewitness to the era that he chronicles, Schanke adds his own rich and nuanced commentary to his valuable analysis of Yeomans and his place in twentieth-century gay theatre.

Alan Sikes

Louisiana State University