

'Some Kind of Paradise' - narrative action and generational sexualities in Max Vernon's musical The View Upstairs (2017)

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‘Some Kind of Paradise’ - narrative action and generational sexualities in Max Vernon’s musical *The View Upstairs* (2017)

I first encountered Ken’s work on generational sexualities (Plummer, 2010) as part of my PhD *Not Just For Gays Anymore: Men, Masculinity and Musical Theatre* (Lovelock, 2017). At that time, I was interested in understanding why many gay musical theatre scholars felt conflicted by the explicit representation of LGBTQ+ characters in musicals such as *La Cage Aux Folles* and *Rent* (Miller, 1998; Clum, 1999; Halperin, 2012), and I used Ken’s study to explore how this might be generational. At the time, I was unaware that Ken loved musical theatre, and I regret that he did not get to write his promised book on musicals. In this essay, I explore how musical theatre can harness Ken’s concept of narrative power (Plummer, 2019) to reclaim traumatic historical gay stories, with a focus on the 1973 arson attack on the Up Stairs Lounge in New Orleans as represented in Max Vernon’s 2017 musical *The View Upstairs*. I also reflect on how Vernon’s writing embodies the generational schism between those who lived through the early years of the AIDS pandemic and those who grew up in its shadow.

Generational gaps and ‘cuspers’

When researching generational theory (Howe and Strauss, 1991), I find myself slipping into a ‘generation gap’. I was born in 1979, which is technically classified as the tail end of Generation X, but I find more in common with the Millennial generation that follows. Lynn C. Lancaster and David Stillman suggest that people like me are *cuspers*, ‘individuals who carry an extra strand of generational DNA because they are positioned right between two generations’ (2002: p.67). This definition is also useful in following Ken’s analysis of

diachronic generational sexualities (Plummer, 2010: pp.174-176), where I slip into another generation gap. I struggle to identify as part of the AIDS generation, since I was pre-adolescent in the 1980s and 1990s, and largely unaware of the pandemic as it unfolded. However, I feel equally distant from both “queer generation two” (who are developing queer theory while I am coming to terms with being a closeted gay person at an all-boys’ secondary school) and the “cyber-generation”, who grow up with access to online pornography and websites such as Gaydar.

I wonder whether there is a cohort of ‘post-AIDS cuspers’ who were born in the mid to late 1970s, who were not sexually active in the 1980s and 1990s, but who grew up in the shadow of the AIDS pandemic. Right-wing governments were quick to develop the narrative of AIDS as ‘the gay disease’, and this was compounded in the United Kingdom by a particularly pernicious piece of legislation called Section 28, which banned local authorities from the ‘promotion’ of homosexuality:

Section 28 certainly made things worse. It made it difficult for teachers to talk about homosexuality, to tackle homophobic bullying or to be openly gay or lesbian. And it legally sanctioned homophobia – in classrooms and staffrooms, in assembly halls and sports halls across the country. Its effect on children was damaging. Designed to protect them, the law failed them, often when they needed support the most.

(Baker, 2022: p.226)

Section 28 was enacted in 1988 and was not repealed until 2000 in Scotland, and 2003 in England and Wales. During this time, homosexuality was only mentioned in schools in the

same breath as AIDS, and there were very few LGBTQ+ characters on television. Michael R Jackson's musical *A Strange Loop* includes a fictional gospel play where the characters repeat the line 'AIDS is God's punishment' (Jackson, 2021: p.83), and this mantra provided the undercurrent for young LGBTQ+ people growing up in the shadow of the AIDS pandemic. Christopher Castiglia and Christopher Reed write that AIDS was 'an agent of amnesia, wiping out memories not only of everything that came before but of the remarkably vibrant and imaginative ways that gay communities responded to the catastrophe of illness and death' (Castiglia and Reed, 2011: p.3), and I would suggest that this amnesia was partially enabled by the internalised homophobia engendered by the subliminal (and sometimes explicit) messages that were transmitted to young LGBTQ+ people in the midst of the silence.

Even as a gay scholar working in the Performing Arts, I struggled for many years to bring myself to watch films, TV series or plays that dealt directly with the AIDS pandemic. I found the 2021 Channel 4 series *It's A Sin* very difficult to watch, perhaps reflecting Russell T Davies' own experience in writing the episodes:

I have spent a lot of my life looking away from [the AIDS pandemic]. You can imagine being 18 in 1981 and being told that sex kills you. (Davies & Schindler, 2020 in Dunleavy, 2024: p.128)

I wonder whether this goes some way to explaining one of the 'generational schisms' that Ken identifies in his 2015 essay:

Schisms and tensions are created across generations: often generations do not speak to each other, and frequently they even set up counter patterns in opposition to their forbearers. (Plummer, 2015: p.341)

The schism between generations here is not clear-cut, but there is a definite tension that comes from the narrative about the AIDS pandemic that was facilitated by the state: the government, the education system, the church and the media. This is clearly an example of how 'bad stories can drive out good stories' (Plummer, 2019: p.23), and it is only relatively recently that a younger generation of LGBTQ+ writers have turned to historical narratives as inspiration for their work.

Recovering a 'lost' story: the arson attack on the Up Stairs Lounge

On 12th June 1973, a fire was set in the stairwell of The Up Stairs Lounge, a gay bar on Iberville Street in the French Quarter of New Orleans. When the second-floor entrance door was opened, the bar was engulfed in flames, killing thirty-two people and injuring fifteen others. The arsonist was never apprehended, and the response from the local, regional and national authorities was largely non-existent. The fire was the deadliest attack on the LGBTQ+ community in US history until the 2016 shooting at the Pulse nightclub in Orlando, Florida, and yet the event received only minimal media attention in its immediate aftermath. Instead, the narrative disintegrated into a small number of personal stories that remained with the survivors and the friends and families of those affected. The first large-scale memorial didn't take place until the 25th anniversary of the fire in 1998, and it took until the 30th anniversary in 2003 for a memorial plaque to be installed in the pavement outside the site of the Up Stairs Lounge on Iberville Street.

The story of the arson attack at the Up Stairs Lounge resonates with the narratives that Ken examines in his 2019 study *Narrative Power: the struggle for human value*. Here, I use Ken's work to briefly outline how the Up Stairs Lounge built a *subterranean community* that sustained its own narrative world apart from the rest of the New Orleans community, and how *narrative inequalities* prevented their stories being heard in the aftermath of the arson attack due to the (in)actions of the *narrative states* as enacted by the authorities in New Orleans. This led to a period of *narrative silence*, where the story of the Up Stairs Lounge faded from history, until it was eventually rediscovered by a group of researchers who were spurred to *narrative action* in recovering the story to create a *cosmopolitan narrative* that spoke across the generations of the LGBTQ+ community, and prepared the story for further narrative exploration in film, documentary and theatre.

The Up Stairs Lounge as a subterranean community

The second floor of 604 Iberville Street was purchased by Phil Esteve in 1970 to establish a bar for gay clientele on the outskirts of the French Quarter in New Orleans. Esteve quickly recruited Buddy Rasmussen as his manager and bartender, and the two set up The Up Stairs Lounge, which once established was frequented by a mixture of single men, gay couples, married men with families and straight people who enjoyed the friendship of the gay community. Stewart Butler, a regular patron, recalled that the Up Stairs Lounge was like a 'social club', and Buddy Rasmussen had developed his own rituals and customs such as announcing regular customers using a microphone behind the bar, or asking new customers to help with errands:

Buddy seems to have had a gift for making the regular patrons feel special, and making the other patrons feel like they were one of the regulars. The implicit message to everyone was, "You're at home here. You're one of us."

(Delery-Edwards, 2014: p.21)

Another important ritual was singing along at the piano with 'Piano Dave' at the Sunday beer bust, which resulted in the bar gaining an unofficial anthem:

"United We Stand" became the anthem of the Up Stairs Lounge, a metaphor for who its patrons were and what they meant to one another, a means through which gay men could temporarily express and escape their existential pain. Piano Dave received multiple requests for the ballad at each beer bust, and it became tradition to sing the song loudly, emotively, to the point of tears, when beer bust ended.

(Fieseler, 2018: p. 70)

The Up Stairs Lounge functioned as what Ken refers to as a 'subterranean tradition' (Plummer, 2010: p. 167). The rituals, traditions and customs of the bar were known only to those who frequented it, and Johnny Townsend's 2011 book *Let The Faggots Burn* (reprinted in 2023 as *Inferno in the French Quarter*) uses his extensive interviews with former Lounge patrons to explore 'the sheer dirty mass of complexities going on beneath the surface' of everyday life (Plummer, 2010: p.167). Townsend's main priority was to preserve the individual stories of those involved in the fire and of their friends and families. Townsend's narrative style is idiomatic, interweaving the imagined thoughts and conversations of his protagonists into material gathered from his interviews and his research into the fire. The

lack of clear referencing and accurate interview transcriptions sometimes frustrated later historians (Delery-Edwards, 2014: p.2), as well as Townsend himself when he came to republish his work over thirty years later. However, as Townsend commented in Robert L. Camina's 2015 film *Upstairs Inferno*, those involved in the fire 'were real people who had lives, and it just doesn't seem right to not remember them' (Camina, 2015: 1:27:35), and Townsend's knack of humanising those involved through his narrative style set a template that has been followed in nearly every subsequent account.

Narrative inequalities and the inaction of the narrative states

Although New Orleans was home to several bars catering for gay clientele in the early 1970s, the attitude towards gay people was of tolerance rather than celebration. Historian Clayton Delery-Edwards notes that the Gay Pride marches inspired by Stonewall had yet to reach New Orleans in 1973, noting that this 'reflects, perhaps, the *laissez faire*, apolitical nature of New Orleans gays then' (Delery-Edwards, 2014: p.39), as most LGBTQ+ people were still closeted and unwilling to draw attention to themselves. The fickle attitude of New Orleans towards LGBTQ+ people can be seen in the case of Clay Shaw, a well-known local businessman who was caught up in a spurious case brought by District Attorney Jim Garrison, which suggested that Shaw was the assassin of John F. Kennedy. The case was clearly nonsensical, but Garrison's evidence forced Shaw to disclose his homosexuality (Fieseler, 2018: pp.41-43). Shaw's position in the community was immediately undermined, and the case served as a warning to the queer community in New Orleans that they should remain invisible to be tolerated.

The narrative inequality between straight and gay people in New Orleans became apparent in the aftermath of the Up Stairs Lounge arson attack, as the story was largely mediated through local and national newspapers and quickly disappeared despite the significant number of casualties. There were no public comments from any of the local authorities, including the mayor's office and church leaders. Local churches refused to hold funeral services, and the mayor's eventual response seventeen days after the attack focused on fire safety rather than criminality (Delery-Edwards, 2014: p.68). Many of those involved in the fire were members of the local Metropolitan Community Church (MCC) congregation, but even those in the local gay business community resisted the Metropolitan Community Church's attempt to publicise the tragedy. John Meyers, the owner of Café Lafitte, recalled fearing the violation of the 'unspoken agreement we had with city authorities and the police' (Fieseler 2018: p.212).

The attitude of New Orleans and the wider American public in the aftermath of the fire forms a further narrative in addition to the fire itself. This forms the central focus of Clayton Delery-Edwards's *The Up Stairs Lounge Arson: Thirty Two Deaths in a New Orleans Gay Bar, June 24th 1973* (2014). Delery-Edwards identifies shortcomings in the police investigation, which was effectively closed on 30th June 1973 despite several leads remaining unfollowed. Instead, the case was followed up by the New Orleans Fire Marshal's office, who identified Dale Rodger Nunez as the main suspect. Nunez had been thrown out of the Up Stairs Lounge earlier that day, and a man matching his description had bought a 7oz can of lighter fluid from the local Walmart. Nunez committed suicide in 1974 after confessing to several friends and acquaintances while under the influence of alcohol. The Fire Marshal's investigative team kept the case open until 1980, when it was concluded that 'the

investigators were completely satisfied that he [Nunez] was the person who set the fire' (Delery-Edwards, 2014: p.135). Delery-Edwards concludes that the attack was 'a childish prank gone hideously wrong' (Camina, 2015: 1:13:00), but the lack of persistence from the New Orleans Police Department in investigating the case meant that there was never an official confession to provide closure for the victims of the attack.

Narrative silence

As with many stories of narrative inequality, the story of the arson attack at the Up Stairs Lounge soon faded from public consciousness. Both the inactivity of the local authorities and the pressure on the LGBTQ+ community to remain invisible contributed to an environment where queer people lacked 'the power to tell or not tell a story under the conditions of one's own choosing' (Plummer, 2019: p.31). There were sporadic attempts by the MCC leadership and others to commemorate the anniversary of the fire, but the story largely 'disappeared wilfully, hushed by a nation not ready to look' (Fieseler, 2018: p.13). The story was briefly revived in the late 1980s through the research of Johnny Townsend, who interviewed around a hundred survivors, eyewitnesses and former patrons of the Up Stairs Lounge, but he was unable to find a publisher – one editor commented that 'these people aren't very interesting' (Fieseler, 2018: p.31). Townsend deposited his manuscript into the Historic New Orleans Collection archive, and his book was not published for nearly twenty years.

It is worth mentioning that the narrative silence around the fire at the Up Stairs Lounge in the two decades following the event was not absolute. The impact on those affected by the fire was devastating, and it is clear from the interview data amassed by

Townsend that the survivors, families and eyewitnesses had continued to process the narrative individually and in smaller communities. There is evidence of some pushbacks against the erasure of the fire from New Orleans history as well – Clayton Delery-Edwards reports that survivor Stewart Butler and activist Rich Magill harangued the Louisiana State Museum for failing to include the Up Stairs Lounge arson attack in an exhibition on notable fires in New Orleans history (Delery-Edwards, 2014: p.160). These smaller narrative actions paved the way for the emergence of a research community that recovered the full narrative in the late 20th and early 21st centuries.

Robert Fieseler's 2018 book *Tinderbox: The Untold Story of the Up Stairs Lounge Fire and the Rise of Gay Liberation* frames its narrative in relation to the LGBTQ+ community's rediscovery of the story of the UpStairs lounge . Fieseler's preface explores how the 2016 massacre of LGBTQ+ people at the Pulse Nightclub in Orlando renewed interest in the Up Stairs Lounge Fire as a comparable event, but also identifies that the process of recovering the narrative had started much earlier in 1993, when Dexter Brecht from the MCC proposed the formation of a committee to investigate the possibility of a permanent memorial in time for the 25th anniversary of the attack in 1998. The memorial was eventually installed in 2003 for the thirtieth anniversary, and a jazz funeral was held for the victims of the attack on the fortieth anniversary in 2013. Fieseler dedicates his book to 'those generations who battered their heads against padded walls... so events like the Up Stairs Lounge might be known and aligned with America's larger civil rights story' (Fieseler, 2018: p.15).

Narrative action and The Up Stairs Lounge as a cosmopolitan narrative

The re-emergence of the story of the Up Stairs Lounge in the twenty-first century is largely due to the narrative actions of a small group of researchers based around New Orleans. As outlined above, each new researcher refocused the narrative in a slightly different way, and this enabled new discoveries and contextualisation for the story. The monographs by Townsend, Delery-Edwards and Fieseler are all easily available as eBooks, and Robert L. Camina's documentary *Upstairs Inferno* can be streamed through Apple TV. Camina includes interviews with several survivors, eyewitnesses and family members in the film, and this enables a visceral connection that emphasizes the human cost of the attack. The work of these researchers has preserved a 'critical cultural memory' (Plummer, 2019: p.156) that might otherwise have been lost, particularly since so much of queer history has been historically suppressed.

The remainder of this chapter focuses on Max Vernon's *The View Upstairs*, a musical that is based on the events of June 24th 1973 at the Up Stairs Lounge. Here, I am particularly interested in how the form of musical theatre enables the creation of a 'cosmopolitan narrative'. Ken suggests that a cosmopolitan narrative 'creates an enormous possibility for a spectacular worldwide culture of awareness of human creativities – and our shared vulnerabilities, differences and continuities' (Plummer, 2019: p.117), and I consider how *The View Upstairs* makes the narrative accessible to a wider community of musical theatre audiences internationally. I also explore how Max Vernon's positionality as part of the millennial generation interrogates the narrative in a different way to Townsend and Delery-Edwards, who both remember the media coverage of the arson attack, and how this is embodied in the narrative structure of the musical. I identify five ways in which musical theatre can exhibit a unique type of narrative power over their audiences. Musical theatre

allows audiences to become *immersed* in the narrative context, *move through time queerly* using theatrical devices, *make a visceral connection* with the onstage characters, *make direct emotional engagement* with the actors when they break the fourth wall, and *deeply remember* the narrative through visual, literary and musical hooks.

Immersing the audience

One of the unique qualities of theatre as a form is its ability to immerse the audience in its storytelling. Unlike film and television, live theatre has no physical or temporal barrier between the actors and the audience – the performance happens in real time with the audience present in the same space and moment as the performers. While traditional musical theatre uses the proscenium arch as an imagined barrier between the theatre and the audience, there are several examples of theatre directors and designers incorporating the audience into the world of the play. The 2017 off-Broadway production of *The View Upstairs* extended the stage space into the auditorium to turn the audience into ‘patrons’ of the Up Stairs Lounge. The set included several key design features of the bar, including the white baby grand piano, the floor-to-ceiling windows, the red velvet drapes and the chequered red carpet. Stephanie Rountree describes how the production was accessed ‘through double French doors into what looks like a dingy cabaret with a beat-up piano, retro cigarette dispensers, dank velvet curtains, a dildo chandelier, and rafters strung with Mardi Gras beads’ (Rountree, 2022, accessed 23/04/2025), with the French doors leading directly onto the stage. As Sean Edgecomb observes, the production design ‘succeeded in bringing to life a sense of how the fabled exclusive and vibrant spaces of the queer past may have looked and felt for those of us who were not yet alive to experience them’ (Edgecomb, 2019: p.27).

In *The View Upstairs*, Max Vernon uses the musical theatre convention of the opening number to support the immersive experience for the audience. 'Some Kind of Paradise' is started by Buddy, first unaccompanied and then with sparse piano accompaniment. This serves the dual purpose of introducing Buddy as the bar's piano player while also establishing an other-worldly tone that contrasts with the bustle of the pre-show atmosphere. The song references the Up Stairs Lounge's home on Iberville Street directly in the opening line as a 'place that's far from heavenly' where 'the ecstasy is just temporary' (Vernon, 2019: p.10), perhaps foreshadowing the tragic ending of the show. As the bar's patrons join in on the line 'it's alright', the music drops into a 70s rock shuffle that is reminiscent of Elton John. The lights come up on the cast, who are dancing in the bar as Buddy introduces some of the key themes of the Up Stairs Lounge in the lyrics: 'a family of my own', 'this kingdom we've found where queens and clones collide', and 'my favourite escape from the world outside' (Vernon, 2019: p.10). The sound of the Hammond organ and the electric guitar in the accompaniment offer additional aural references to the 1970s, conjuring both nostalgia for those audience members who remember the era and faux nostalgia for those who were not alive at the time but recognise the distinctive musical style.

Moving through time queerly

As 'Some Kind of Paradise' ends, the lighting shifts and the stage transforms into the burnt-out shell of the Up Stairs Lounge. The introduction of Wes, a millennial influencer who speaks in hashtags, situates the audience in the present-day building. The musical style changes for '#householdname', moving to a contemporary emo-rock style as Wes reflects on his decision to purchase the Up Stairs Lounge for redevelopment (my favourite musical

detail is Wes singing an augmented 7th instead of an octave on the word 'building', which adds a dissonance that matches Wes' own inner discomfort). Here, Max Vernon is referencing Stephen Sondheim's musical *Follies* in the consecutive staging of two time periods on stage:

The staging of this number was my favorite in the entire show. As Wes ran around the room snorting blow and singing about his plans to tear the space down and turn it into this flagship clothing store, all of the ghosts of the past continued to dance around him; both time periods co-existing without being aware of each other. In the middle of this strange rock musical we were serving you a touch of *Follies* realness.

(Vernon, 2017, accessed 23/04/2025)

The disruption of a single chronological narrative might be linked to Jack Halberstam's concept of 'queer time'. Halberstam observes that 'we have become adept within postmodernism at talking about "normativity," but far less adept at describing in rich detail the practices and structures that both oppose and sustain conventional forms of association, belonging, and identification' (Halberstam, 2005: p.17), and it is worth noting that Vernon goes beyond Sarah K. Whitfield's definition of queer dramaturgy as storytelling that 'explicitly resist[s] chrononormativity (i.e., straight time), by unsettling the stasis and progress aspects of heteronormative productivity' (Whitfield, 2020: p.69) through focusing on queer stories in their own right with only minimal reference to the 'world beyond these walls'. For Vernon, queer time is utilised as a device that enables Wes as a queer millennial to inhabit a time and space outside of his own chronological timeline, and crucially, to interact with a generation of queer people in a queer history that Wes has never

encountered. Here, Wes also acts as a surrogate for audience members born into Generation X onwards, as well as for Vernon as a millennial.

Making visceral connections

As Wes reaches the end of ‘#householdname’, he tears down one of the red velvet drapes and finds himself surrounded by the confused patrons of the Up Stairs Lounge on 23rd June 1973. The characters in *The View Upstairs* are archetypal, based on composites of the Up Stairs lounge patrons without directly referencing individuals – for example, Buddy in *The Upstairs Lounge* combines aspects of ‘Piano’ David Gary, Michael Scarborough, Bud Matyi, Buddy Rasmussen and John Golding to create a composite character that is clearly original and yet fully integrated into the historical narrative of the fire. Although Stephanie Rountree (2022) notes that Max Vernon’s script is largely based on Clayton Delery-Edwards’ historical account of the fire (Delery-Edwards, 2014), the musical is aligned more closely with Johnny Townsend’s work in its character-based structure (Townsend, 2023).

In *The View Upstairs*, Buddy introduces the main characters of the Lounge in ‘Lost And Found’, which feels as though Buddy is improvising the lyrics as he goes. The song introduces Willie, Freddy, Henri and Buddy with brief references to Inez and Richard, but Buddy is notably dismissive of Dale (‘a gloryhole troll’) and Patrick (‘no-one worth knowing’). As the musical progresses, each character gets to lead their own set-piece: Richard leads the Metropolitan Community Church service in ‘Are You Listening, God?’, Henri warns Wes about the dangers of 1973 life for the LGBTQ+ community in ‘The World Outside These Walls’, Inez does Freddy’s make-up in ‘Completely Overdone’ and Freddy performs as his drag ego Aurora Whorealis in ‘Sex on Legs’. The songs serve to deepen the audience’s connection with each character in the same way that each of Townsend’s chapters focuses on an individual

connected with the fire, and this is particularly important in Vernon's work as they 'intentionally wrote and casted characters from underrepresented backgrounds to promote coalition across complex and intersecting subjectivities, even across distinctions between performer/audience' (Rountree, 2022, accessed 23/04/2025). It is striking that the inhabitants of Vernon's *The View Upstairs* represent intersections between sexuality, gender, race, religion and age that are seldom seen in musical theatre but are clearly present in the real-life stories of Reggie and Regina Yates, Willie Inez and her sons, and the members of the Metropolitan Community Church who frequented The Up Stairs lounge.

Johnny Townsend's writing has a visceral energy that is often diluted in more academic texts. Townsend's description of Bud Matyi and Rod Wagener's relationship is a good example of his more colourful depiction of 1970s same-sex relationships:

Rod liked Bud because of Bud's "great personality". He also admired Bud's music, and it also didn't hurt that Bud was great at sex, able to teach the older Rod a few new tricks. (Townsend, 2023: Ch. 36 'Bud Matyi')

Vernon's characters are reminiscent of Townsend's more colourful, earthy portraits of The Up Stairs Lounge clientele, and the sexual energy that emanates from Townsend's writing was also present in Fabian Aloise's choreography for the 2019 Soho Theatre production, which explored the possibilities of same-sex coupling and flirting. It is still unusual to see a cast of all-queer characters even in musicals off-Broadway or off-West End, and the sexual energy of the performances could be felt viscerally by the audience in the immersive setting. The script and production privileges the acts of dancing, bitching and flirting within a queer

space, and these actions provide an important bridge across the generations of gay and bisexual men watching the show.

Establishing direct emotional engagement

There are two central stories that run through the centre of *The View Upstairs* – the relationship between Wes and Patrick, and the gradual disintegration of Dale. Wes and Patrick's musical numbers are marked through their fantastical settings, often moving between reality and fantasy in the staging and choreography. Their numbers are directed exclusively at each other, placing them in an *intimate* space for the duration of the songs. Dale's 'Better Than Silence' is directed at the audience and is unheard by the other characters, thus placing Dale in an *isolated* space for his number. Wes is the only other character that is given a 'soliloquy' number – at the end of the musical, Wes is left alone onstage to sing 'The View Upstairs'.

In *Narrative Power*, Ken cites James Wood's theory of 'serious noticing' in literature (Wood, 2009: 43-44), observing how 'fiction gives us detail, particulars, character and inner voices that are usually missing' (Plummer, 2019: 11). In musical theatre, the inner voice is represented on multiple levels through the lyrics, the vocal timbre, the orchestrations and the actor's own interpretation of the song. During a live performance at the theatre, audience members can 'notice' these elements visually and viscerally as well as aurally, which encourages a deeper understanding than the text itself. Max Vernon observes the effect of the orchestration and lighting on 'Waltz':

Whenever the song starts delving into those dark subjects, the toy piano sounds come out and Patrick reverts into a childlike state. It's super unsettling and walks a very fine line, but the orchestrations are quite sensual... the lights in the venue suddenly shifted to dark blues and purples, and we were thrown into this strange fantasy limbo that existed outside of the bar (Vernon, 2017).

'Waltz' covers subjects such as sexual abuse and conversion therapy and is the first time that Patrick makes himself vulnerable to Wes. As this happens, the other cast members waltz around Patrick as if remembering their own traumatic memories. There is a clear similarity between Patrick's discomfort in the middle section of 'Waltz' (which moves away from the waltz rhythm into 4/4) and Wes' breakdown in the final section of 'The Future Is Great', where he realises that the inhabitants of the Up Stairs Lounge will have to live through the 1980s AIDS crisis. There is also a link to Dale's solo 'Better Than Silence', which begins with a David Bowie-esque guitar riff and synthesiser chords and moves into a middle section that is discordant and angular. While Wes and Patrick are afforded a romantic liaison in 'Crazy Notion' as the tenor harmonies in the final line cement their relationship, Dale is left isolated and humiliated by the rest of the group.

In their introduction to the published script of *The View Upstairs*, Max Vernon states that 'working with queer-identified performers is valuable to the authenticity and artistic viability of the show' (Vernon, 2019: 7). It is still relatively unusual to find two gay romantic leads in a musical, and even more so for the two characters to be portrayed by openly queer actors. There is a constant debate over whether straight actors should play queer roles, but the more interesting question is what we gain when queer roles are played by queer actors. In

the 2019 Soho Theatre production, there was a clear chemistry between Tyrone Huntley and Andy Mientus playing Wes and Patrick, and the production reached a further level of ‘serious noticing’ in the connection between queer creatives, actors and audience members through this work. Both Huntley and Mientus exude a queer, camp aesthetic, and it was refreshing to see a same-sex couple onstage that didn’t play into butch/camp or masc/femme dualities. The largely queer cast and creative team of this production helped to preserve the queer aesthetics of Vernon’s script, and of the historical narrative of the fire at the Up Stairs lounge.

Deep remembering

I conclude this chapter with a return to Ken’s work on narrative power, as I consider how Wes’ narrative action and the deep remembrance of the Up Stairs Lounge’s ‘Theme Song’ cross fiction and reality to bridge the gap between the 1970s characters and the modern audience. Ken encourages us to ‘ask not what a narrative says, but ask what people do with it’ (Plummer, 2019: 25), and *The View Upstairs* concludes with Wes following his own narrative action through memorialising the Up Stairs lounge patrons in his first fashion collection. This mirrors Max Vernon’s own narrative action in writing the musical ‘to spark a conversation between generations about the ways in which our world has changed for better and/or worse over the last fifty years, and to figure out – where do we go from here?’ (Vernon, 2021), which echoes the narrative actions of all those who have written about the arson attack at the Up Stairs lounge. Even this chapter results from my own narrative action in watching *The View Upstairs* and being inspired to research its history! As Ken writes, ‘narratives on their own mean nothing: they require human agency, action, empathy and performance to bring them to life’ (Plummer, 2019: 26).

Finally, I want to reflect on the role of music in remembering the victims of the arson attack at the Up Stairs lounge in June 1973. Earlier in this chapter, I reflected on the importance of 'United We Stand' by the Brotherhood of Man as an unofficial anthem of the Up Stairs lounge, and this song is represented in *The View Upstairs* by its own 'Theme Song', which is started by Willie and gradually taken up by the other Lounge patrons. Vernon's hindsight from 'the future' allows them to be more specific in their lyrical allusions to the tragedy:

I swear I've seen the future
 Shining through the debris
 And though we've known despair, we're still standing there
 Unbroken and free
 (Vernon, 2019: 86)

Whether remembering Brotherhood of Man's motto that 'if our backs should ever be against the wall / we'll be together, you and I' or the hook from 'Theme Song' that 'we've got an iron bond no hate could break apart / now and forever, come whatever / you and I', music and lyrics are invaluable in creating a memorial across generations. It's one of the reasons that so many of us love musical theatre – and why Ken's work on narrative power is such a vital tool in understanding how we can keep stories living across the generations:

All stories become historical and generational. There is the long view that digs deep into distant past remnants and ruins to locate the fragments of stories from the

many hundreds of generations from our longish past. And there is a shorter view that faces just how a few recent generations have lived stories with their nearest kindred and friends across the changes of remembered lives. Both ways, remembering stories keeps alive the vital cumulative memories of the past. (Plummer, 2019: 156)

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