Writing Queer Stories for the Stage

AWP Conference 2024
Virtual Session Outline

“Theatre has long been a gathering place where folks share stories in the hopes of seeing their own narratives, hopes, and dreams reflected back to them. For those who live in parts of the country becoming increasingly more hostile toward queer lives, it can also become a safe haven and beacon of hope for community and identity. Join the Dramatists Guild in conversation with a group of trailblazing theatrical writers who have long led the charge in creating a theatrical canon where queer identities and stories are not only front and center, but cherished and celebrated in their own unique ways.”

Welcome & Introductions

Hello, all. We are so grateful to share space with you all. My name is Jordan Stovall, the Director of Outreach & Institutional Partnerships for the Dramatists Guild of America, and I will be helping to facilitate today’s conversation.

This conversation today is made possible by the Dramatists Guild. If you are not familiar, the Dramatists Guild is the national trade association for playwrights, composers, lyricists and librettists and our mission is to aid dramatists in protecting the artistic and economic integrity of their work. We also raise visibility and fight to address censorship and cancellations, as well as raise awareness to address inequities theatre writers might face within our industry.

Today, we are talking about “Writing Queer Stories for the Stage,” – or stories written for the stage that center, platform, and reflect experiences and perspectives the LGBTQ+ and gender expansive
individuals. We’re going to talk today about inspiration, about shared exchange, about how the importance of representation and visibility can be a lifeline to others, how these stories can help other queer individuals navigate their own experiences, what’s brought about inspiration, how to navigate challenges, what drives us, and lots more — beyond all that, I think we’re just going to have a really cute time!

Before we begin— I want to acknowledge all of the queer creatives and changemakers watching this conversation: hoping to gather something back to take with them into the world, to be a part of this great work together — we see you, we love you, and we sit with you in this space of mutual support and gratitude. Thank you for sitting with us today and I hope this exchange provides some fuel for you to take back with you into the world.

For those who are allies with us in this work, we hope it might illuminate some opportunities of why this representation is worth fighting for in the face of geo-political challenges.

I also want to acknowledge what an incredible group of folks we have with us today! In spirit of joy and abundance, these individuals have been sharing the queer stories and characters on stages that have gone on to grant inspiration to so many other queer individuals seeking to see themselves reflected back in our theaters. Y’all are doing the good work.

Would you all introduce yourselves, and share a little about what inspires you in your artistic practice and storytelling?

Panel Participants

Moderator:
Roger Q. Mason (they/them) was recently touted by The Brooklyn Rail as “quickly becoming one of the most significant playwrights of the decade.” Their playwriting has been seen on Broadway (Circle in the Square Reading Series), Off and Off-Off-Broadway, and regionally. Instagram: @rogerq.mason
**C. A. Johnson (she/her)** is a Brooklyn-based playwright originally from Metairie, Louisiana. Her plays include ALL THE NATALIE PORTMANS (MCC Theater), THIRST (2017 Kilroys List, CATF), THE CLIMB (Cherry Lane Mentor Project), AN AMERICAN FEAST (NYU Playwrights Horizons Theater School), I KNOW I KNOW I KNOW, and SOMEBODY’S BODY. Most recently she was the Tow Playwright in Residence at MCC Theater. She was previously the 2018 P73 Playwriting Fellow, The Lark’s 2016-17 Van Lier Fellow, a Dramatists Guild Fellow, a member of The Working Farm at SPACE on Ryder Farm, A Core Writer at The Playwrights Center, a member of The Civilians R&D Group, , a Sundance/Ucross Fellow and a 2018 Sundance Theatre Lab Fellow.

**Doug Wright (he/him)** won a Pulitzer and a Tony Award for his play I AM MY OWN WIFE. Recently on Broadway: GOOD NIGHT OSCAR. Broadway musicals include WAR PAINT, HANDS ON A HARDBODY, THE LITTLE MERMAID and GREY GARDENS. Films include QUILLS, an adaptation of his Obie-winning play. Television credits include Tony Bennett’s 80th Birthday special.

**Tabby Lamb (she/they)** is a non-binary writer. Tabby won a Scotsman Fringe First Award at the Edinburgh Fringe Festival 2022 for her joyful, queer rom-com HAPPY MEAL (Roots Touring) which played at the Traverse Theatre before completing a UK and Australia Tour.

**Jordan Stovall / Wanda Whatever (they/them)** is a playwright, arts administrator, queer events producer, and drag artist. They presently serve as the Director of Outreach & Institutional Partnerships for the Dramatists Guild, where they have worked since 2016.

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**Facilitated Questions**

**Q (all panelists):** Everybody in this space together is in their own right a prolific trailblazer in writing queer stories that raise up, celebrate, and hold queer narratives with the kind of tender care that teach others how to navigate their own experiences and feel worthy of their own power. Starting generally, I’d love to open with the question: what do queer stories mean to each of you personally, and why do you feel they
are important in both the history of our theatre, and today's stages?

**Q (Roger):** From Lavender Men, The Pink, Hide and Hide, and your short film Taffeta, you have given so much depth in the characters and theatrical landscapes you create. They also draw from our history and shared pathos in a modern context. In your words, how does pulling from our shared history – like telling the story of Taffeta and a gay Abraham Lincoln – help inform our present moment and reclaim our space?

**Q (Tabby):** You just had a short play on at the Globe Theatre as part of Burnt at the Stake, or the Whole of the Truth, following the incredible success of Happy Meal all across the UK. So much of your work draws from the things in pop culture that brings us so much joy, the intimacy in that, and almost serves as an invitation for others to see the treasure that lies within queer and trans tenderness. What has writing from that perspective taught you about your own voice, and what you wish to speak into the world? And, what would you like to see more of in our theatre?

**Q (C.A.):** Some of your plays like The Climb and I Know I Know I Know focuses on queer women, intimacy, how their own unique perspectives/places within the world and society inform that love. Or, rather, how it informs the place they love from, and as you say, “love without abandon.” You show both sides of love; the deep beauty, and the cost. If you could summarize what you’d like for your audiences to learn and know from these women’s stories, what would it be?

**Q (Doug):** I think I speak for many when I say that plays like I Am My Own Wife, and Grey Gardens – which even though it’s not an inherently queer story, is a queer story in its own right – have inspired so many in finding their own power and place in our culture. These two pieces in particular – and some of your other works – hold themes of resilience. The individual versus society, the world, but more notably, the beauty contained within that resilience. They are love letters. Can you speak more about where you found inspiration for that, and what your hopes for these stories were?
Q (all): Much like the kaleidoscope of the queer community, each of you have a unique and distinct perspective in your storytelling. A lot of folks here have also written themselves, or particles of themselves, into their own stories as a part of that experience. This is a common theme, actually, with loads of queer plays and musicals! Where has that come from in your work, and what is the power in sending that kind of message?

Q (all): Speaking more broadly about the current state of our theatre, what are some of the things you’d like to see in terms of infrastructure and supporting these stories, queer talent, and workers? What are the roadblocks, and how do we improve? How can ALLIES to the queer community with positions of influence take meaningful action in this?

Q (all): I want to take a moment and go back to our beautiful queer audience members, who will be watching this at some point in the future – and I want to make sure we give them something special. If you had something – anything – to share with them at this moment, what would it be?

Free flow conversation, and conclusion, wrap up.