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## **Embodied Performance As Queer Theatre Historiography: Translation, Gender, Identity, and Temporalities in Mikhail Kuzmin's The Dangerous Precaution**

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EMBODIED PERFORMANCE AS QUEER THEATRE HISTORIOGRAPHY:  
TRANSLATION, GENDER, IDENTITY, AND TEMPORALITIES  
IN MIKHAIL KUZMIN'S *THE DANGEROUS PRECAUTION*

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A Thesis

Presented to

The Graduate Faculty

Central Washington University

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In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Arts

Theatre Studies

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by

Keenan Shionalyn

May 2021

CENTRAL WASHINGTON UNIVERSITY

Graduate Studies

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## ABSTRACT

### EMBODIED PERFORMANCE AS QUEER THEATRE HISTORIOGRAPHY: TRANSLATION, GENDER, IDENTITY, AND TEMPORALITIES IN MIKHAIL KUZMIN'S *THE DANGEROUS PRECAUTION*

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The “World of Art” and “The Tower,” two groups of symbolist artists in St. Petersburg at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, are often noted for their contributions to queer art in poetry, literature, and the visual arts. However, the theatrical record has yet to acknowledge the significant contributions by these groups, largely ignoring their queer dramatic writings. Mikhail Kuzmin, a notable contributor in both groups of symbolists, is recognized for having contributed music to Meyerhold and Blok’s *The Puppet Show* but is less known for his multitude of plays. Seeking to remedy this problem, I examine one of the earliest dramatic texts by Kuzmin, *The Dangerous Precaution*. Acknowledging prior censorship, lack of performance, and limited archival materials, I utilized an embodied methodology of translation and rehearsal to create an archival performance encouraging memory retrieval of an event that never occurred. Drawing on queer temporalities, I situate this performance as a form of creative time travel that utilizes a historical text, performed in the present, to envision a hopeful future. Despite the original performance never existing within history, this project examines previously known information about Kuzmin and his earliest dramatic works while simultaneously creating valuable discourse in the present, a form of queer intergenerational storytelling. In the

past, Kuzmin provided the queer community of St. Petersburg a helpful vocabulary for existing and coming out. His writing, placed on contemporary bodies, created new meanings that brought to light the complex understanding Kuzmin had of gender constructions and sexual identity. *The Dangerous Precaution*, previously considered a straightforward gender disguise narrative resulting in two gay men acknowledging their love, now also tells the story of a transgender woman recognizing herself in what she thought was a created identity. Building upon Kuzmin's complex understanding, our performance explored queer feelings and disidentification to create a queer utopia.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to acknowledge the help and support provided by many individuals involved in this project:

First, a thank you to Dr. Volha Isakava for your patience and assistance in the translation of the text. Thank you to both Dr. Emily Rollie and Dr. Natashia Lindsey whose work and dedication allowed me to reach this point. I know you have both put in countless hours to assist me. It is something I greatly treasure and please know of my gratitude to you both.

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I also want to thank my family for their support, Cailleach, Zeke, and Link. Your cuddles have helped me through many a rough time and your constant calls to be fed have helped me balance my workload.

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As this research is governed by CWU's Institutional Review Board comments, contributions, and interviews by study participants must remain anonymous in compliance with approval guidelines. Specifically, names have been removed from interviews #1-#3 and the YouTube link to the performance is not listed.

Thank you all!

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Chapter		Page
1	INTRODUCTION .....	1
2	UNSILENCING THE THEATRICAL ARCHIVE OF THE CLOSETED DRAMA.....	15
	The Archive of the Silenced.....	20
	Embodied Archival Work .....	29
	Queering the Archive and Performance as Queer Time Travel .....	34
	Methodology and an Introduction to the Case Study .....	40
	Limitations of the Model.....	50
3	GAY MALE FUTURITY, QUEER FEELINGS, AND UTOPIA .....	55
	Exposition, Discourse of Gender Performatives, and Gay Hope.....	60
	Queer Vocabulary and Depiction of Identity Formation .....	71
	Gay Hope and Seeing the Horizon of Queer Utopia.....	80
4	A TRANSGENDER READ, DISIDENTIFICATION, AND QUEER TIME TRAVEL.....	86
	The New Transgender Read.....	94
	A Different Play but Same Words .....	98
	Disidentification and Making the Invisible Seen .....	100
	Dorita as Real, Floridal as Costume.....	103
5	CONCLUSION.....	109
	BIBLIOGRAPHY .....	117
	APPENDIX.....	126
	Appendix A—Translated Script of <i>The Dangerous Precaution</i> .....	126

## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

“Neither past nor future exists independently from the present—  
a present defined emotionally by all of man’s spiritual forces,  
a present that is supremely sacred, a present that is the object of art.”

—Mikhail Alekseevich Kuzmin, 1924<sup>1</sup>

Queer artists have much to glean from the modernist Russian poet, writer, musician, and dramatist Mikhail Alekseevich Kuzmin. Emerging into the St. Petersburg cultural scene in 1906, Kuzmin’s work in the prestigious journal *Vesy* introduced the intelligentsia to his poetry and his first novel *Wings*. His novel is considered the first in Russia to center gay male characters in a sympathetic light, a precursor to the coming-out genre, and arguably the first book banned by the Bolsheviks.<sup>2</sup> Likely due to the distractions and reverberations from the failed 1905 revolution, this novel passed the Russian censor and became a celebrated novel. Due to his work centering queer identities and sexuality, Mikhail Kuzmin became known as "Russia’s Oscar Wilde” and “Russia’s Decadent.”<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Mikhail Kuzmin, “Declaration of Emotionalism,” in *Mikhail Kuzmin: Selected Writings*, edited by Michael A. Green, and Stanislav A Shvabrin (Cranbury: Associated University Presses, 2005), 162-163. The inclusion of the date of the original publication is intentionally included to highlight how ideas influence moments outside of chronological constraints.

<sup>2</sup> Sibelan E.S. Forrester and Martha M.F. Kelly, *Russian Silver Age Poetry: Texts and Contexts* (Brookline, MA: Academic Studies Press, 2015), 110. The book took up the entire of the Journal along with a singular review. This was exceedingly rare for the journal and signified perceived importance of such a text.

<sup>3</sup> John E. Malmstad, “Bathhouses, Hustlers, and a Sex Club: The reception of Mikhail Kuzmin’s *Wings*,” *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 9, no. 1-2 (2000): 104, footnote 47. Kuzmin did not appreciate the connection to Oscar Wilde. According to Malmstad, the poor reception of Wilde to Kuzmin was due to



While poetry has made Kuzmin known to Russian scholars and literary history, his passion for theatre is evident, having already written operettas and music for several plays, including celebrated *The Puppet Show* by Alexander Blok.<sup>4</sup> With encouragement from his peers at “The Tower,” a group of symbolist artists, Mikhail Kuzmin decided to write his first plays.<sup>5</sup> In his first collection of short plays, Kuzmin continues his open discussion of sexual identity, seen in his novel *Wings*, in the dramatic form. His first collection consists of three short comedic one-act plays in various styles utilizing mime, ballet, commedia dell’arte, and Shakespearean style mistaken identities. Shortly after publishing in *Tri p’esy* (three plays), the plays were censored due to the content in *The Dangerous Precaution*.<sup>6</sup> In a letter to the Court on October 20, 1907, the St. Petersburg Press Committee stated, “The work in question A) praises homosexual love and contains reasoning aimed at convincing the reader that pederasty is just as natural as normal sexual relations, and gives the same high pleasures.”<sup>7</sup> Although the censorship only addresses

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the infamous court case in which Wilde denounced his sexuality—seen as a traitorous act, though Malmstad notes that Kuzmin’s opinion improved over time.

<sup>4</sup> John E. Malmstad and Nikolay Bogomolov, *Mikhail Kuzmin: A Life in Art*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, (1999), 106.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid, 102-107. “The Tower”, sometimes called “Ivanov’s Tower” due to the event being hosted in Ivanov’s St. Petersburg apartment that somewhat resembles a tower from the exterior, consisted of a group of artists, writers, and philosophers who met each week on Wednesdays in St. Petersburg. The Tower is both part of and a splinter group of “The World of Art” group of symbolists. These salon style gatherings often included reading of poetry and small dramatic performances. Notable members of “The Tower” include the famous director Vsevelod Meyerhold, poet Aleksander Blok, choreographer Sergei Diaghilev, and painter Konstantin Somov. Biographer John E. Malmstad details that some of the more private times at “The Tower” that often consisted of sexualized gatherings, mostly of a homoerotic nature, noting however that Ivanov preferred to think in terms of bisexuality. Interestingly, few women were invited to these more sexual events beyond Ivanov’s wife.

<sup>6</sup> Mikhail Alekseevich Kuzmin, *Три Пьесы*. (St. Petersburg, RU: Т-Во «Вольн Тип», 1907).

<sup>7</sup> A.G. Timofeev, “M. Kuzmin and the Tsar’s Censorship: EPISODE ONE (on the materials of the Russian historical archive), 135-136, Accessed on 8/20/20, <https://literary.ru/literary.ru/readme.php?subaction=showfull&id=1203429637&archive=1203491298&start from=&ucat=&>; Note that the Russian word pederast does not necessarily imply pedophilia but was a

one play within the collection, *The Dangerous Precaution*, the other plays, *The Choice of Bride* and *Two Shepherds and a Nymph in a Cottage*, were indirectly censored.

Interestingly, the other two receive no mention in the court document, despite their homoerotic undertones.<sup>8</sup> The government censored the entire publication, and Kuzmin received a fine of 200 rubles or a month in jail.<sup>9</sup>

While *The Dangerous Precaution* was possibly performed “salon style” at the many social gatherings of “The Tower,” I have yet to locate any documentation suggesting public performance. In contrast, the two other short plays in the collection have received amateur performances.<sup>10</sup> Other later plays by Kuzmin featuring overt homosexual identities, such as *The Venetian Madcaps*, were performed in a salon while never seeing the St. Petersburg or Moscow stage.<sup>11</sup> Due to censorship, *The Dangerous Precaution* remains unperformed. It only exists as a collector’s item or in a collection of Kuzmin’s theatrical work published by Berkeley’s Department of Slavic Studies.<sup>12</sup> There

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widespread term to describe homosexuality. Malmstad, “Bathhouses, Hustlers, and a Sex Club,” 92-93, footnote 23 contains a thorough discussion of the usage related specifically to Mikhail Kuzmin with evidence from his diaries.

<sup>8</sup> As all three plays were examined during the project, it is my belief that the homoeroticism in the other two plays was entirely missed by the censors. The homosexuality and queerness only became noticeable upon queer bodies and could be invisible to audiences in a heteronormative mindset.

<sup>9</sup> A.G. Timofeev’s archival episode (footnote 5). Note: 200 rubles in 1907 is roughly equivalent to \$1500 USD in 2015 according to Rodney Edvinsson, “History Currency Converter,” Historical Statistics. January 10, 2016. Accessed on October 18, 2020. <https://www.historicalstatistics.org/Currencyconverter.html>

<sup>10</sup> Malmstad and Bogomolov, *Mikhail Kuzmin*, 106, 389-390. According to biographer John E. Malmstad, no archival evidence suggests *The Dangerous Precaution* has ever been performed. *Two Shepherds and a Nymph in a Cottage* is noted to have been performed in 1910 and 1916 while *The Choice of Bride* was first performed in 1910 and received a singular review.

<sup>11</sup> Malmstad and Bogomolov, 237-238.

<sup>12</sup> M.A. Kuzmin, A.G. Timofeev, Vladimir Markov, and George Cheron. *Театр: В Четырех томах (в двух книгах)*, (Berkeley, CA: Berkeley Slavic Specialties, 1994). Out of print as of 01/2019.

is one known translation of *The Dangerous Precaution* by Laurence Senelick, a Russian theatre and gender scholar at Tufts University.<sup>13</sup> Subject to censorship and limited dissemination, the third and final play in the *Three Plays* collection sparked my interest and is the focus of this project.

Before I turn to an in-depth discussion of *The Dangerous Precaution*, it may prove helpful to have a cursory understanding of the scholarly work surrounding Kuzmin in the humanities in general as well as those specific to theatre. I want to emphasize again that although his novel and poetry have received significant scholarly attention, Kuzmin's dramatic works, numbering over twenty, are mostly ignored beyond isolated articles with little discourse between scholars. What scholarly attention his plays have received in the West is due to their translation into English. To my knowledge, only four plays have been translated, demonstrating the apparent gap in knowledge of Kuzmin's dramatic work.<sup>14</sup>

Based in the interdisciplinary humanities, the field of Kuzmin studies has emerged and reemerged many times over the last century, mimicking the artistic life of Kuzmin himself. Kuzmin's literary attention and criticism have primarily occurred due to his associations with many others who have had less trouble establishing themselves within art and performance history, primarily due to their non-marginal status. These literary greats include poets such as the founders of Russian Symbolism, Buisov and Merezhkovsky, and celebrated dramatists Meyerhold and Blok. Malmstad, one of the

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<sup>13</sup> Laurence Senelick. *Lovesick: modernist plays of same-sex love, 1894-1925*, (New York, NY: Routledge, 1999), 103-115.

<sup>14</sup> Michael A. Green *Russian Symbolist Theatre*, (Ann Arbor, MI: Ardis Publishers, 1986), 201-245. Contains *The Venetian Madcaps* and *The Comedy of Alexis*.; Michael A. Green, and Stanislav A Shvabrin (Trans. and Eds.), *Mikhail Kuzmin: Selected Writings*, (Cranbury: Associated University Presses, 2005), 81-125. Contains *The Death of Nero*.; Senelick, *Lovesick* as cited above contains *The Dangerous Precaution*.

foremost Kuzminian scholars in the West, partially blames Kuzmin himself for his fate among art historians due to publishing his missive “On Beautiful Clarity” in 1910. This missive established clear criteria for successful artistic writing and allowed critics to disparage Kuzmin by his own standards openly. As Malmstad rightly points out, however, this missive is concerned with prose, and the majority of Kuzmin’s writings are in verse or poetic drama.<sup>15</sup> Much criticism of Kuzmin’s work ignores the other artistic statement made by Kuzmin later in his life, including a proclamation for an artistic movement called Emotionalism that more accurately describes his oeuvre.<sup>16</sup> Malmstad additionally asserts that the classification of Kuzmin’s post-revolutionary work as untypical has led to general dismissal by scholars.<sup>17</sup>

After the death of Kuzmin, it initially appeared that his work would become a minor footnote of Russian Modernism. However, a revival in Kuzminian scholarship occurred in the late 1960s and 1970s, spurred by Russian scholar Simon Karlinsky. The field expanded when John E. Malmstad and Vladimir Markov published in three volumes, and in Russian, almost all of the poetic works by Kuzmin, alongside one of the only biographies to date. In a review of this monograph, Karlinsky theorized on the reasons for

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<sup>15</sup> John E. Malmstad, “The Mystery of Iniquity: Kuzmin’s “*Temnye ulitsy rozhdaiut temnye mysli*,” *Slavic Review* 34, no. 1, (1975): 44-45.

<sup>16</sup> Emotionalism, overly summarized, argues that art is based on the emotional experience of the artist that is free from public or scientific laws. Kuzmin argues that intellect is the opposite of reason and that artists do not exist independently from the past, present, or future. It is important to note that this ideology rejects any canonization of works and states this has caused a “spiritual constipation” in the west. For a full account see Green and Shvabrin, *Mikhail Kuzmin*, 162-163.

<sup>17</sup> Malmstad “The Mystery of Iniquity”, 44. Much of Kuzmin’s later work follows from his love of German Expressionism and therefore looks considerably different than his early work that might be considered Symbolic. Further emphasizing Kuzmin’s dismissal due to his marginal status, is the knowledge that Meyerhold followed a similar pathway, but is instead celebrated rather than excluded. Malmstad kindly uses the words untypical, while the Russian intelligentsia referred to Kuzmin’s later work as bourgeois, or the anti-Semiticly charged term, formalist.

diminished visibility of Kuzminian scholarship and blamed Kuzmin's friend and fellow poet, Anna Akhmatova. She criticized his overt usage of queer themes and accused him of lacking originality due to his incorporation of German Expressionism.<sup>18</sup>

Some dismissal comes from the critique that Kuzmin's work is misogynistic and portrays women as mere objects.<sup>19</sup> While I share the critique that in the contemporary, Kuzmin's characters may be misogynistic, I also argue that many, if not most, critics ignore the possibility that such is the result of centering queer characters and attempting to create a vocabulary using gendered terms. Kuzmin adamantly refused to operate in heteronormative writing, and his gay male characters often dismiss women, the target of most criticism. Instead, however, I think it possible, if not likely, that Kuzmin allows his characters to experience attraction to the same sex (often between two men) while expressing their disinterest in women as sexual objects. To scholars operating from a heteronormative perspective, this can appear disturbing. Lindsey Watton, however, argues that Kuzmin operated in a world view that rejected the definition of sodomy as the act of two men engaging in sexual acts. Instead, he believed that sodomy was defined as any sexual act that went against one's predilections, thereby favoring a non-heteronormative view.<sup>20</sup> To Kuzmin, the rejection of women was avoiding the sin of

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<sup>18</sup> Simon Karlinsky, "The Death and Resurrection of Mikhail Kuzmin," In *Freedom From Violence and Lies: Essays on Russian Poetry and Music by Simon Karlinsky*, edited by Robert P. Hughes, Thomas A. Koster, and Richard Taruskin, (Brighton, MA: Academic Studies Press, 2013), 125-132. The comment by Akhmatova is contradictory to earlier statements wherein she praised Kuzmin's work and has earlier requested he provide a forward for her own book of poetry. She was likely responding to the misogyny present in some of Kuzmin's work and additionally attempting to alienate herself so as to not appear bourgeois. In the process she participated in the erasure of Kuzmin's work.

<sup>19</sup> Karlinsky, "The Death and Resurrection," 125.

<sup>20</sup> Lindsey Watton, *Constructs of Sin and Sodomy in Russian Modernism: 1906-1909*. *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 4, no 3, (1994): 371.

sodomy. Given this acknowledgment, it makes sense that women would take secondary roles in his tales, primarily centered on same-sex romantic relationships. By no means is Kuzmin absolved from all critique, and we must acknowledge his statements that gay men are superior to women as problematic. However, it is imperative to acknowledge the heteronormative mindset and bias present in Kuzmin criticism.

Theatrical scholarship around Kuzmin began to emerge in the 1980s and 90s. The interest, however, was limited and centered mainly around Kuzmin's Two-Act Play *The Venetian Madcaps*.<sup>21</sup> Lurana O'Malley Donnels examined Kuzmin's use of the mask and commedia dell'arte in *The Venetian Madcaps* and two other commedia dell'arte styled plays. Of critical note is her identification that Kuzmin's plays operate in a mostly non-textual manner. His scripts are characteristically short yet full of interludes and generic stage directions indicating dances and tableau vivant.<sup>22</sup> O'Malley Donnels argues that this trait gives his scripts an ambiguity which I argue makes them excellent work for directors interested in devising moments. Language acts decoratively, while embodied action reveals the story. Like other critiques, she also emphasizes Kuzmin's mistreatment of female characters, and while acknowledging his status as a homosexual, fails to recognize his operating from a queer world view.

Judith Kalb, in her examination of Kuzmin's only full-length play, *On the Death of Nero*, claims the gap in scholarship for Kuzmin is due to his "unclassifiability."<sup>23</sup> She

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<sup>21</sup> Green, *Russian Symbolist Theatre*.

<sup>22</sup> Lurana O'Malley Donnels, "Russian Dramatist Mikhail Kuzmin and the Sexual Ambiguity of the Commedia Mask," *Modern Drama* 37, (1994): 613-625.

<sup>23</sup> Judith, Kalb, "The Politics of an Esoteric Plot: Mikhail Kuzmin's Death of Nero," *The Soviet and Post-Soviet Review* 20, no. 1, (1993): 35-49.

argues that due to his involvement in several different and prominent artistic groups, including the Symbolists, the Acmeists, and even OBERIU, he evades simple description.<sup>24</sup> Aided by his openly queer identity, many scholars actively avoid him. Like others, Kalb criticizes his treatment of women and identifies how Kuzmin utilizes female characters as barriers to progress. However, she rightly acknowledges it as a metaphorical tool to describe living in a heteronormative society. More importantly, Kalb acknowledges the centrality of queer identity in his work as she established a pattern in his plays of soul journeying into the world for meaning and finding that meaning in a significant other, often represented by a twin figure of the same-sex.<sup>25</sup>

Beyond the overt queer themes found within Kuzmin's work, there is also a sense of playful historical reimagining. Ahn Ji Young described the heavy stylization used by Kuzmin in *The Venetian Madcaps*, citing his overt usage of 18<sup>th</sup>-century Italian architecture and art, or rather, Kuzmin's interpretation of 18<sup>th</sup> century Italy as a heavy theme in his work.<sup>26</sup> She claims this work was profoundly impactful to other working modern artists of the time, including the celebrated Meyerhold. While previously acknowledged, Ji Young's work critically identifies the "balagan" or messy stylization utilized by Kuzmin, emphasizing his lack of concern for historical accuracy with an

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<sup>24</sup> The Acmeists were a group of poets who believed in clarity and conciseness in their work moving somewhat apart from symbolists. Kuzmin's "On Beautiful Clarity" is often referenced as a precursor to, if not the, manifesto of the group. OBERIU was an artistic movement of the avant-garde exploring disruption in style and structure. It is often compared to, or classified as a precursor to, absurdism.

<sup>25</sup> Kalb, "The Politics of an Esoteric Plot," 38.

<sup>26</sup> Ahn Ji Young, "The Problem of "Stylization" in Early Twentieth Century Russian Dramaturgy: 'The World of Art' and Stylization in the Vein of M. Kuzmin's 'Balagan'," *Toronto Slavic Quarterly* 1, (2002).

intense focus on profound imagery, mythology, and allusion.<sup>27</sup> Arguably, Kuzmin's neglect of historical accuracy aids his work, allowing the simplistic plots to overlay a pseudo-historical backdrop letting life exist within its theatricality, both part of and removed from chronological time. This playful juxtaposition achieves what many modernists strived for in their dramatic works—demonstrating life as theatre, with a nod to both Brecht and Artaud to continue the theme of anachronism. In that life as theatre, Lada Panova states Kuzmin presents his readers with a “riddle to be solved,” not in words themselves but what is unsaid and experienced.<sup>28</sup> A riddle in action beyond the script lends credence to the importance of embodied work in the study of Kuzminian dramatics. Placing his words on stage, through actors, then lends a body to reveal the riddle and true meaning behind his plays.

Another barrier to acknowledging and disseminating Kuzmin scholarship is language, as very little of Kuzmin's theatrical work is available in English. Translation is a critical process I believe Kuzmin himself would support. He spent a large portion of his later years translating texts into Russian and not-so-secretly focused on translating queer works, such as the work Michelangelo and Shakespeare. In an examination of several queer translators during the Soviet Era, Brian James Baur identified not only how

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<sup>27</sup> Ji Young's use of the term “balagan” is intriguing not only for its meaning of chaotic or messy, but also it makes a clear draw to Blok's *The Puppetshow*, in Russian, titled Balaganchik. Her observations question the placement of Blok and suggest that the Modernist aesthetic created by the famous play may owe more credit to Kuzmin himself.

<sup>28</sup> Lada Panova, “A Literary Lion Hidden in Play View,” In *The Many Facets of Mikhail Kuzmin: a miscellany*, *UCLA Slavic Studies: Vol. VIII*, edited by Lada Panova and Sarah Pratt, 91. (Bloomington, IN: Indian University Slavic Publishers, 2011).



Kuzmin used translation work to supplement and survive but also how translation finally allowed Kuzmin entrance into the Soviet Writers Union.<sup>29</sup>

In terms of Kuzminian scholarship, this study is continuing a tradition of examining understudied work and explicitly addressing the need to examine the earliest dramatic works published and subsequently censored. Building upon the works of prior scholars, this study reveals knowledge and meaning that emerges first through the process of simple translation, then aided by the use of embodied performance. The embodied step is critical to examine the “riddle” of Kuzmin’s works that may only be accessible through staging and hidden beyond the words on the page.

I also find it critical to mark how few scholars of Kuzmin’s dramatic work identify as queer. While not a prerequisite, scholars operating from a heteronormative viewpoint risk leaving many layers of meanings untouched, rendered invisible by privilege. As such, there is a clear need to examine Kuzmin’s work through a scholarly lens embedded within queer theory and through performance aided by queer artists. Positionality, then, is essential to acknowledge when studying an artist such as Kuzmin. As a scholar, I operate between Theatre and Performance Studies, where I take an embodied historiographical approach to theatre texts interpreted through the many lenses provided by queer theories. Artistically, I am a director using ensemble-based approaches to staging with a strong preference towards stylized and physical theatre. Personally, I am a white male living in the western United States who identifies as gay and queer. Such an

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<sup>29</sup> Brian James Baur, “Translating Queer Texts in Soviet Russia: A case study in productive censorship,” *Translation Studies* 4, no.1, (2010): 29-31. Mikhail Kuzmin firmly believed in the “Oscar Wilde Hypothesis” that William Shakespeare was gay. Regardless of the truth in that assertion, it was a motivator in his desire to translate 100 of Shakespeare’s sonnets into Russian.

identity undoubtedly informs my opinions and analysis. I was also fortunate to work with an ensemble of queer individuals in this project, allowing a more diverse set of voices to participate in the interpretation and artistic expression. As I will demonstrate in this project, the plethora of queer voices allowed additional discoveries to emerge.

With my positionality in mind, I can introduce the goals of this project. With the gap in knowledge surrounding the dramatic works of Mikhail Kuzmin, it is my goal to use an ensemble-based approach to translate, embody, and perform *The Dangerous Precaution*. Through rehearsal and performance, I examine how Kuzmin engages in discourse that utilizes heteronormative structures to create a queer vocabulary that critiques those same structures. By examining the queer identities created by Kuzmin, we can better understand queer history and more fully understand his contributions to the theatrical archive. Finally, I engage queer theory to explore how queer temporalities allow an examination of the past historical record, performed in the present, to engage in the creation of a queer future.

As a queer community, we are often denied access to a shared cultural heritage through systems of power that serve to separate, oppress, and obfuscate. As such, we have limited access to a history, resulting in alienated generations. This project then serves as a form of intergenerational storytelling bridging the gap between two queer communities, separated by historical time and geographical space. To understand our shared queer history, we may resituate the present to serve a hopeful future.

To aid, I have provided a brief outline and summary of the chapters. I intend for my structure to provide the reader a glimpse into the process in this project, beginning with its theoretical foundation to performance and finally to scholarly reflection.

In chapter 2, I lay out the framework for the performance project utilized as a case study. Recognizing the need to create a deeper archival record for Kuzmin's theatrical work, I make the case that traditional archival methods are insufficient. Therefore, performance may be utilized to fill in the gaps created by archival silences. Building off of the work of Michel-Rolph Trouillot, Diana Taylor, and Rebecca Schneider, I establish the historiographical potential of performance.<sup>30</sup> The *Three Plays* performance acts either as a form of memory retrieval or temporal dislocation, in the queerest sense, that informs and (re)remembers the messages embedded within Kuzmin's language and found through embodiment. Utilizing Elizabeth Freeman's temporal drag, I situate the inherent camp that occurred in performance as an acceptable and openly acknowledged inauthenticity that aids in embodied recreation. Such camp creates a uniquely queer history.<sup>31</sup> Finally, I lay out the methodology and other critical frameworks utilized in the case study.

In chapter 3, I begin a detailed discussion of the case study, the embodied translation, rehearsal, and performance of *The Dangerous Precaution*. Building from the narrative structure proposed by Lies Xhonneux, I examine the play's function as a coming-out story that acts biographically and builds a queer vocabulary usable by other gay and queer community members.<sup>32</sup> Using Jose Muñoz's theory of queer futurity as a lens, I explore the plot and character actions that create Kuzmin's concrete utopia that

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<sup>30</sup> Michel-Rolph Trouillot. *Silencing the Past: Power and Production of History*, (Boston: Beacon Press, 2015); Diana Taylor, *The Archive and the Repertoire: Performing Cultural Memory in the Americas*, (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003); Rebecca Schneider. *Performing Remains: Art and War in Times of Theatrical Reenactment*, (New York, NY: Routledge, 2011).

<sup>31</sup> Elizabeth Freeman, *Time binds: Queer temporalities, queer histories*, (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010).

<sup>32</sup> Lies Xhonneux. "The Classic Coming Out Novel: Unacknowledged Challenges to the Heterosexual Mainstream", *College Literature* 39, no 1 (2012): 94-118.

looks to a hopeful future while acknowledging the power structures holding us in the present.<sup>33</sup> I also explore how Kuzmin engages in what Sara Ahmed's terms "queer feelings" by depicting pleasure that dismantles gender constructions and creates discomfort when heteronormative ideals are modeled on queer bodies.<sup>34</sup>

I present the unexpected transgender reading made possible through embodied staging and a queer ensemble in chapter 4. By placing transgender bodies into a homosexual narrative, using heteronormative structures, we participate in what Jose Muñoz labels queer disidentification.<sup>35</sup> The reconfigured narrative clarifies how queer feelings and disidentification operate as a tool for survival by working within systems of power. While initially appearing as assimilation, such survival techniques allow safe passage for transgender individuals through gendered performatives. As expected with disidentification, proximity and mimicry of heteronormative structures illuminate and clarify how gender operates within society. The coopting of gender performatives operates similar to Ahmed's queer feelings; however, cis-straight individuals are not discomforted by the other, but through acknowledging their own gender performances made visible through proximity to queer bodies.<sup>36</sup> Finally, I discuss how such a performance works to create a temporal dislocation that reinfoims the theatrical record and creates a queer history in a conversation between two generations.

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<sup>33</sup> Jose Esteban Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity*, (New York, NY: New York University Press, 2009).

<sup>34</sup> Sara Ahmed, "Queer Feelings," In *The Routledge Queer Studies Reader*, edited by Donald E. Hall, Annamarie Jagose, Andrea Bebell, and Susan Potter, (New York, NY: Routledge, 2013), 422-441.

<sup>35</sup> Jose Esteban Muñoz, *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics*, Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1999.

It is my hope through this project and my creative play with queer temporal dislocation that I bring to light the potential of performance in historiographical work that serves to provide and perform a queer history to communities disconnected from their elders. My intentional tongue-in-cheek references to time travel provide a queer take on the history project that acknowledges the temporal differences and experiences in queer communities. The rejection of traditional linear time utilizes the past, situated in the present, to create hope for the future. As I have heavily drawn on Jose Muñoz's work in queer theory, I find it only fitting to finish the introduction with a line from the introduction to his book, *Cruising Utopia*:

We have never been queer, yet queerness exists for us as an ideality that can be distilled from the past and used to imagine a future.<sup>37</sup>

Let us look to the then, perform in the now, to open a window to a hopeful horizon. As Kuzmin advocated, make our art creation exist between the three. Allow the queer, in concept and practice, to disrupt the liminality between time and space.

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<sup>37</sup> Muñoz. *Cruising Utopia*, 1.

## CHAPTER 2

### UNSILENCING THE THEATRICAL ARCHIVE OF THE CLOSETED DRAMA

“I am alone. But the silence is full of sounds.”

—Mikhail Alekseevich Kuzmin, 1926<sup>1</sup>

“Silences are inherent in history because any single event enters history with some of its constituent parts missing.”

—Michel Trouillot, 1995<sup>2</sup>

Traditional archival work often involves digging through carefully chosen documents, allowing researchers to briefly glimpse into the past, even if only through tangential documentation. Historians attempting to understand a moment in time may peruse legal records, tax documents, or newspaper clippings that speak to that moment from varied perspectives. Scholars of the visual arts often have access to the artifact itself, a painting or sculpture, and supplement with journals or reviews discussing the art. Researchers of literature often have access to the original text and associated translations.

How then do theatre or performance scholars utilize the archive? What is the artifact of study? If it is the script, then we may take a literary approach to study. The script itself becomes the object of study, yet a script, despite its details of characters, acts, and stage directions, still does not communicate the performance itself or the extra layers of interpretation that occurs in the transference to stage. If a literary approach is then

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<sup>1</sup> Green and Shvabrin, *Mikhail Kuzmin*, 180. From a journal entry by Mikhail Kuzmin dated August 14, 1926.

<sup>2</sup> Trouillot, *Silencing the Past*, 49.

insufficient, perhaps we can utilize a historical perspective, analyze it as a moment in time, utilizing documented artifacts such as programs, reviews, journals, letters, or other human-made artifacts surrounding the event. However, I posit that our capture of the artistic endeavor is incomplete even with both a historical and literary approach. Yet, as Richard Schechner critiques, theatre is, “an event characterized by ephemerality and immediacy.”<sup>3</sup> The study of an event cannot be limited to the drama (the script) and must include the performance as an artifact. When examining historical theatre, that is, theatre that we cannot witness, the problem compounds. Unlike visual art, we cannot physically examine the artifact—the performance itself.

We cannot experience what happened moment by moment on the stage or behind. We cannot feel what it was like from the front row, the back, or even the lobby. We only gain glimpses into the before and the after. Programs, posters, and legal documents give us a glimpse into the show as audiences arrive, but we do not capture the show itself. Interviews, journals, and reviews are like experiencing a play through a friend's retelling at a café after the show. Neither gives us access to the event itself, only a description of the time and space around the event. The theatrical moment itself exists in the liminal space between the audience arriving and their reaction afterward. In other words, the traditional archive utterly fails to document the art.

What then of the digital archive? Capable of capturing endless amounts of data related to performance and, even more profoundly, multiple perspectives, the digital archive has the potential to open up and free information. Sarah Bay-Cheng states,

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<sup>3</sup> Richard Schechner, “TDR Comment: A Critical Evaluation of Kirby’s Criticism of Criticism,” *TDR: The Drama Review* 18, no. 4 (1974): 118.

“[d]igital tools can democratize the process of documentation, reception, and future appropriation,” illuminating the possibilities of an expanded repertoire.<sup>4</sup> Not all agree that such digital tools truly capture performance. Peggy Phelan vehemently argues against such a possibility stating, “[p]erformance cannot be saved, recorded, documented [...] once it does so it becomes something other than performance.”<sup>5</sup> I argue, such a distinction is reductive and ultimately limits the usage of resources that further inform our understanding.

While helpful to contemporary theatre scholars, the digital archive is mostly unavailable to researchers of historical theatre. As digital tools have been made available only within the last century and a half, the majority of theatre, throughout history, remains unrecorded. Even within the last century, most plays have not received the benefit of any digital archive. The plays have gone unrecorded for a variety of reasons, such as licensing and access to resources. The theatrical archives will remain incomplete; even as digital archival methods improve; it does not document theatre retroactively.

In my discussion of the archive, I cannot overlook one glaring omission about the limited nature of archival work. I have yet to address the selection criteria for archival documentation in the first place. Determining who is selected and why then becomes the role of the historiographer. The selection of theatre operates at the same level as power structures within society. Those in power can identify works as significant and important,

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<sup>4</sup> Sarah Bay-Cheng, “Digital Historiography and Performance,” *Theatre Journal* 68, no. 4 (2016): 511.

<sup>5</sup> Peggy Phelan. *Unmarked: The Politics of Performance*. (London: Routledge, 1992), 146.



therefore warranting archival and continued study. Does that relegate all other works as unimportant and inappropriate for scholarly study?

Marking how we record historical narratives, Trouillot notes that any archive is inherently incomplete due to the power structures that select and record some aspects of an event while ignoring others.<sup>6</sup> Accordingly, “any historical narrative is a particular bundle of silences, the result of a unique process, and the operation required to deconstruct these silences will vary accordingly.”<sup>7</sup> To Trouillot, such gaps or silences in the archive will always occur, and the historical narrative is eternally incomplete until we have explored each silence, an impossible task. Likewise, the theatrical archive is empty with silences of performances recorded either incompletely or not at all. Such absences do not imply the lack of an event or any unimportance of work to society at large, only to those charged with archival production.

My work seeks to fill the gaps of the archive by examining understudied theatrical works by queer artists. Queer theatre artists face additional dilemmas as traditional archival methods remain unavailable. Their works are either ignored, undocumented, or censored by government committees. What scripts we have are overlooked by traditional scholarship or relegated to closet-drama deemed appropriate only for reading or study.

When related to queer artists, whose work was written with the intention of staging, I prefer to term these types of plays “closeted dramas.” I utilize the term closeted here to connect directly with the act of being “in the closet” or ensuring aspects of one’s self remain hidden. Eve Sedgwick states, “‘Closetedness’ itself is a performance initiated

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<sup>6</sup> Trouillot. *Silencing the Past*.

<sup>7</sup> Trouillot, 27.

as such by the speech act of silence.”<sup>8</sup> A closeted drama then keeps its knowledge hidden until safe. In theatre studies, we wish to study the theatre event, and societal conditions privileging the performance of some and not others, does not remove the possibility of performance. If no such event was allowed but desired by the artist, I argue, it is our duty as theatre researchers to create it ourselves as performance adds layers of meaning beyond the dramatic script itself. As Diana Taylor states, “[p]erformances function as vital acts of transfer, transmitting social knowledge, memory, and a sense of identity through reiterative [behavior].”<sup>9</sup> For the closeted drama, performance acts as a “coming-out”, removing the act of silence created by remaining in the closet.

(Re)creation through performance participates in a form of time travel that allows contemporary bodies to experience a historical text that lives in both historical time and the present. Embodying the work is a crucial tool to the theatre historiographer revealing layers of meaning and helping to rewrite the historical record with contemporary understanding. While this may muddy the waters of the archive, making them less objective, I counter with the argument that due to enforced silencing, the archives have always been subjective.<sup>10</sup> Placing a queer lens upon it, I embrace subjectivity.

Throughout this chapter, I will further explore the dilemma of archival inadequacy alongside a proposed methodology to integrate ourselves into the ephemerality of the theatrical event. As with any methodology, it is not perfect and has its limitations. However, it makes one step toward retrieving the vast collection of

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<sup>8</sup> Eve Sedgwick. *Epistemology of the Closet*, (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1990), 3.

<sup>9</sup> Taylor, *The Archive and the Repertoire*, 2.

<sup>10</sup> Trouillot, 6-10.

missing theatrical experiences never making their way into an archive. I argue that to recover or create an archive, one would have to have the ability to travel through time and space to access the event itself. Until such technology exists, I propose that we as researchers engage in creative play by placing our bodies as actors, directors, designers, and audience members into those events. As seen in the case study, I propose a methodology of creative time travel to recover and give voice to the silenced theatrical archive.

### **The Archive of the Silenced**

Some see history as the memory of a group or a collective.<sup>11</sup> The storing of those memories, however, is inherently individualistic. Outside of oral tradition, there have been few, if any, attempts to collectively record our history, only historians documenting an individualistic perception of how events occurred. The individualized process of historical documentation inherently prioritizes certain voices, particular perspectives, and chosen narratives by the nature of the individual recording. By doing so, there are gaps in the archive, stories left untold, and history remains a partial recollection. Trouillot argues that archives “are neither neutral nor natural. They are created. As such, they are not mere presences and absences, but mentions or silences.”<sup>12</sup> Since archives are created, they are inherently subjective documentation of historical events. Individuals record, access, and retrieve those documents. What becomes the narrative of history then is often formed by artifacts and objects willfully stored. I counter, however, that the more interesting aspect

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<sup>11</sup> Trouillot, 16.

<sup>12</sup> Trouillot, 48.

of the archive is not what is stored but what is not. How does one find historical evidence of something that is not present?

I find it compelling that Trouillot uses the word “mentions” regarding the function of history and archives, as it was a mere mention that led me to Mikhail Kuzmin. For Russian culture and literature scholars, his work as a poet is known, but he rarely appears in discussions of Russian Theatre. It was merely by a mention that I came across his work, a sidenote in a paragraph about Symbolism in *A History of Russian Theatre*. The oddly worded singular sentence, “The homosexual Mikhail Kuzmin wrote homoerotic poetry and drama and composed music for the avant-garde theatre,” serves as a fascinating mention.<sup>13</sup> While simultaneously relegating his work to that of the other, Spencer Golub, the author and Russian theatre scholar, oversimplifies an entire realm of poetry and drama to homoerotic and, therefore, taboo. With such a mention, many readers would ignore Kuzmin unless they specifically were seeking to find sexually laden Russian poetry or drama. To many readers, the remainder of the chapter focusing on the oft-discussed work of Alexander Blok, known for his play, *The Puppetshow*, becomes the narrative of non-realistic Silver Age theatre in Russia, and the brief mention of Kuzmin forgotten.<sup>14</sup>

The mention, however, reveals deeper layers to the story. Immediately, I must ask myself several questions.

- Why did the historian choose to provide only a single sentence about Mikhail Kuzmin’s work as a playwright?

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<sup>13</sup> Spencer Golub, “The Silver Age, 1905-1917,” in *History of Russian Theatre*, edited by Robert Leach and Victor Borovsky. (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 280.

<sup>14</sup> The Silver Age generally refers to Russian art, philosophy, and literature that occurred at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and the first few decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. It is meant to contrast with the Golden Age that occurred at the beginning to middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

- What choices compelled the writer to offer an inclusion at all?
- What other artists could the historian have mentioned that were not present?
- Why is Kuzmin's work included as a comparison to works deemed of greater importance?
- What power structures are at play influencing all of these choices in the author, the Russian government, and academia at large?

Some of those questions are larger than I could answer in a chapter; however, they provide a glimpse into the motivations of historiographers. Given that Kuzmin, mentioned briefly as a theatre artist, wrote plays, I additionally begin to question through a performance lens where his plays were performed, what other artists participated, who attended, what was their experience, and how was it reviewed? These questions make clear what Trouillot was referencing when he spoke of silences in the archive. For many of those questions and most of his plays, the answer is...unattainable; his plays were not performed. Most of Kuzmin's work never saw the stage; there were no actors, no audience, no reviews. How then do we grapple with such a dilemma as historians? Do we, as others have, dismiss his theatrical work and focus only on his poetry or other canonized artists? I cannot dismiss his work so quickly. As a scholar, the mentions and silences are stories to uncover, rediscover, begging to be given life again. Perhaps his works are not worthy of staging? It is possible, but I must then immediately ask why. Are his works unstaged because they are poorly written? That alone is at least worth discovering. Suppose they are well written; why then have they not been staged? The answer to that final question is complicated. Complex because it begins to question structures bigger and beyond the artist. The answers lie deeply tied to power structures and identity. Trouillot is also intrigued by this idea stating, "[f]or what history is changes

with the time and place or, better said, history reveals itself only through the production of specific narratives.”<sup>15</sup>

What then is the narrative of the Silver Age Russian theatre? I would argue that this narrative is that of cultural superiority of Russia, predominated by cis-straight white men—men whose focus is primarily on realism. How do I conclude such a motivation for that narrative? I reveal by examining the brief mentions and silences in the historical record. During this era of Russian theatre, Anton Chekhov and Konstantin Stanislavsky are the primary foci of the narrative, the secondary occurring within the Symbolist mentions of Alexander Blok and Vsevolod Meyerhold. Notably missing in the dominant narrative are artists such as Zinaida Gippius, Anna Akhmatova, and Mikhail Kuzmin.<sup>16</sup> These names are well-known in the field of poetry, so why, when they have each written several plays, are they missing from the theatrical record, outside of brief mentions? The answer is tied to their identity. Each pushed forward gender in ways that portray Russia as more effeminate and less heteronormative. Gippius, while believed to be straight and

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<sup>15</sup> Trouillot, 25

<sup>16</sup> Robert Leach and Victor Borovsky (eds.), *A History of Russian Theatre*, (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1999). To gain insight into my conclusion you can examine the structure of *The History of Russian Theatre*, currently the most comprehensive Russian Theatre textbook. Three chapters are dedicated to this time period, one of which is entirely focused on Stanislavsky and the Moscow Art Theatre, one on the Silver Age (including the Symbolists), and one of post-revolutionary avant-garde. Notice, that realism including Stanislavsky and Chekhov are given a chapter of their own while the Symbolists are only a small portion of one chapter. Meyerhold is given a more significant place and while not given an entire chapter is mentioned over 50 times, roughly the same amount as Chekhov. Stanislavsky is cited and discussed at least 70 times. Comparatively, both Anna Akhmatova and Zinaida Gippius are mentioned only once. Kuzmin is mentioned five times, however each is tied to his role as composer for Blok’s play *The Puppet Show*, only one mentions his own theatrical writing. The Symbolists as a whole do not fare as well compared to the realist, with the celebrated Blok receiving only 10 mentions. Realism largely becomes the story of two or three individuals, while Symbolism becomes a community resulting in the perception of greater importance for any individual involved in realism.

married to the founder of Russian Symbolism, frequently performed in public in men's clothing.<sup>17</sup> Both Akhmatova and Kuzmin were known and openly queer.

In his brief mention in the Russian theatre history textbook, Golub makes clear why Kuzmin has been sidelined—his homosexual identity and taboo subject matter make him unworthy of discussion unless he is of assistance to those of greater mention. While I have yet to read and study all of Kuzmin's works in poetry and drama, I can say his writing rarely includes overtly sexual topics and what eros is present includes the typical flirtations overlooked in heteronormative situations.<sup>18</sup> When compared directly to the included *The Puppet Show*, the affectations present between men and women are no more sexual than the flirtations and single kiss found in *The Dangerous Precaution*. However, Kuzmin centers queer identity within his characters, often discussing affections between two men and most certainly questioning the structure and function of gender. His content does not support a heteronormative view of Russia, so when examining the power of historical writing, his inclusion in the dominant canon of theatre history is relevant only as much as his contributions support Blok.

Content, however, is not the only barrier Kuzmin faces in inclusion in the historical theatrical record. While not a formal member of the Symbolist movement,

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<sup>17</sup> Marina Dmitrieva, "Transcending Gender: Cross-Dressing as a Performative Practice of Woman Artists of the Avant-garde," In *Marianne Wrefkin and the Women Artists in Her Circle*, edited by Tanja Malychева and Isabel Wünsche, (Boston, MA: Brill Rodopi, 2017), 123-136; Avril Pyman, *A History of Russian Symbolism*, (New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 1994). Marina Dmitrieva has a wonderful discussion not only examining the cross-dressing of Gippius herself, but also how such actions operated performatively; Avril Pyman provides great detail of the life of Gippius and her contributions to Symbolism.

<sup>18</sup> I want to note that I am not advocating that queer writings must avoid sexuality, rather the opposite, but instead want to point out that the criticism of Kuzmin itself doesn't hold up and demonstrates clear double standards.

Kuzmin nonetheless experimented with non-realistic styles of theatre. Avant-garde and symbolist theatre is still being rediscovered after a real and metaphorical purge of artists not conforming to Socialist Realism under Stalin's regime. Beginning with creating the People's Artist of the Soviet Union award in 1936, the Soviet government recognized artists creating work deemed worthy of the new union.<sup>19</sup> The initial list of awards featured dominant realist contributors such as Nemirovich-Danchenko and Stanislavsky alongside realist actors such as Ivan Moskvina and Ekaterina Korcharina-Aleksandrovskaya.<sup>20</sup> While working in non-realistic theatre, yet widely celebrated, there was one notable name removed from that list, Vsevolod Meyerhold. Making clear the privileging of realistic art forms, Moskvina stated, "I understand why Meyerhold isn't on it. That indicates the line,"—the line being realism versus symbolism or other avant-garde movements.<sup>21</sup> Omission from such a list left artists vulnerable to the removal of funding, closing of theatres, and beginning in 1936, arrest, execution, and murder.<sup>22</sup>

If Kuzmin was not a devout symbolist and refused recognition within any formal style, how then do we know he was acquainted with the avant-garde movement? Early clues, during the Silver Age, decades before the Stalin Purge, lends belief to this idea. Kuzmin's association with theatre began roughly in 1906, in St. Petersburg, due to association with a group of symbolists that met in "Ivanov's Tower" for weekly

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<sup>19</sup> Inna Solovyova, "Socialist Realism, 1929-1953," In *A History of Russian Theatre*, edited by Robert Leach and Victor Borovsky, (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 330.

<sup>20</sup> Solovyova 330-332.

<sup>21</sup> Solovyova, 330.

<sup>22</sup> Solovyova, 333. This year and following years are sometimes referred to as the Stalin Purge.



Wednesday salon meetings.<sup>23</sup> Through this group, Kuzmin became associated with Vsevolod Meyerhold and Aleksandr Blok, who eventually asked Kuzmin to compose music for the Symbolist play, *The Puppet Show*. Archival photos, gathered by the Mapping Petersburg project at UC-Berkeley, include photos of several instances of the Wednesday gathering that sometimes depict Kuzmin alone and other times next to other artists such as Vsevolod Meyerhold and Aleksander Blok. Such proximity demonstrates his close acquaintances with them.<sup>24</sup> It was also here that Konstantin Somov, the queer symbolist artist, painted the celebrated portrait of Mikhail Kuzmin with his sunken eyes and somewhat ghastly face.<sup>25</sup> During this same time, between 1906 and 1907, Kuzmin wrote the *Three Plays* being analyzed in this project, specifically *The Dangerous Precaution*.<sup>26</sup> In my own comparison, one play within the *Three Plays* collection, *The Choice of Bride*, bears more than a surface level similarity to the character and narrative function of Blok's *The Puppet Show*. The connection between the symbolists and Kuzmin is clear, even if Kuzmin himself refused to pledge to any stylistic philosophy.

While not devout to symbolism, Kuzmin's work utilizes several Symbolist approaches, including nods to physical theatre such as commedia dell'arte. As I will detail in Chapter 3, his poetry style also utilizes common Symbolist approaches such as prime number meters. Kuzmin's later work, not directly studied in this project, mirror the

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<sup>23</sup> Malmstad and Bogomolov, *Mikhail Kuzmin*, 102.

<sup>24</sup> Ulla Hakanen, "The Tower: Housing Modernity and Modernism," Accessed on 4/2/2021. <http://petersburg.berkeley.edu/ulla/ulla2.html>

<sup>25</sup> Konstantin Somov, *Portrait of Mikhail Kuzmin*, 1909. Available in the public domain at: <https://www.wikiart.org/en/konstantin-somov/portrait-of-mikhail-kuzmin-1909>

<sup>26</sup> Malmstad and Bogomolov, *Mikhail Kuzmin*, 107.

choices by Meyerhold and explores more German expressionist styles, popular among avant-garde artists in the 1920s in both theatre and film.<sup>27</sup>

Kuzmin's closeness to avant-garde artists such as Vseleвод Meyerhold risks relegating him to a sideline in theatre history as power structures dictate that Socialist Realism become the measure of theatrical success within Soviet Russia. Labeling artists who failed to conform to socialist realism as "formalist" and "bourgeois" acts to control archival documentation.<sup>28</sup> Artists subject to Stalinist removal disappeared temporarily into the historical record, and some were rediscovered many years later under the relaxing of policy and more open access to the archive that occurred after the death of Stalin.<sup>29</sup>

While Kuzmin died one year before the Stalin Purge, his works nonetheless suffered and received considerably less attention, specifically his theatrical work, which in no way could be considered realist. Subject to silencing for stylistic approaches and personal identity, it is not surprising that Kuzmin is missing beyond brief mentions in Russian Theatre History textbooks. As mentioned in the introduction, study of his theatrical works is considerably rare. Even known Kuzminian scholars such as John E. Malmstad and Michael A. Green place preliminary study on his poetic works, despite his long participation in theatre. Such emphasis speaks to both the high status given to poetry

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<sup>27</sup> Malmstad and Bogomolov, *Mikhail Kuzmin*, 308.

<sup>28</sup> Solovyova, 330.

<sup>29</sup> Marjorie L. Hoover, "V.E. Meyerhold: A Russian Predecessor of Avant-Garde Theatre", *Comparative Literature* 17, no. 3 (1965): 234-236. Hoover provides a compelling discussion of the reasons for censorship and rediscovering process that occurred with the opening of the Soviet Archives written a few years after Stalin's death as the materials were newly available. See the footnotes for a detailed discussion of the active erasure of Meyerhold's name from published materials.

over dramatic writing and the continued power of silencing that occurs when work is relegated to the fringe by those in relative power.

Acknowledgement of the power structures at play that privileged realist theatre questions the presumed dominance of realism in Russia, especially as interpreted by Westerners. Noticing the effects that gender identity have on the discussion around dramatics with Mikhail Kuzmin and Anna Akhmatova questions how many theatre artists have never made it into any archive due to their gender or identity. The works of these artists are known due to their non-theatrical art, but how many names are unknown or left to footnotes and mentions due to their inability to prove their poetical worth? We know of these artists due to the willingness of poetry scholars to explore the less masculine side of their art, which is now evident theatre is reluctant to do.

The silences are deafening when we can see such obvious narrative selection in just one brief time in one geographical location. However, such mentions may serve as a call to action. If artists are relegated to brief mentions or outright omission, theatre historiographers must identify new methods of archival study. If these artists gained brief mention due to their connections to straight-male theatre, I must ask whose art we have forgotten due to the artists' inability or lack of desire to support the privileged art forms. As historiographers, we must recenter the narrative to focus on those marginalized to discover a more complete narrative. It is here I start my work. I am startled by the thought that if I discovered Kuzmin's theatrical work through a brief mention, whose works do I briefly mention when I center queer historical theatre. I hope my work provides a lens into those omissions, thereby opening the doors to further artistic discovery that reexamines the historical and theatrical narrative. The rabbit hole of

historical discovery begins, and the narrative becomes fuller as it echoes with a chorus of those previously silenced.

### **Embodied Archival Work**

The question remains, if the archive is full of silences and gaps, how do we give voice to those silences? How do we study an artifact not preserved? I cannot fully answer that question; however, I wish to build off the ideas of Rebecca Schneider, who proposes that performance assists in this process and allows the telling of history.<sup>30</sup> To Schneider, performance does not have to be a fleeting act unavailable beyond its limited time of performance, but rather:

When we approach performance not as that which disappears (as the archive expects), but as both the *act* of remaining and a means of re-appearance and ‘reparticipation’...we are forced to admit that remains do not have to be isolated to the document, to the object, to the flesh and blood.<sup>31</sup>

Her proposal is intriguing because it removes the burden on researchers to limit their work strictly to the documents chosen for the archive. Instead, we may use performance itself as a methodology and a tool for recreating and reexperiencing. Researchers and audiences do not have to leave the historical in the past but can participate in its iteration in the present. Live performance, created in the now, then participates in historical retelling, and performance becomes a tool for retrieval. As the study of theatre is embedded within the ideas of performance, it is a natural fit to remedy the dilemma of

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<sup>30</sup> Schneider, *Performing Remains*, 1

<sup>31</sup> Schneider, 1; emphasis in original

archiving ephemeral work by recreating the moment. The missing artifacts, the actors, the directors, the designers, and the audience, simply need new bodies in order to recreate that meaning. New bodies allow a transmission across time in the contemporary, providing a glimpse into the undocumented event of the past.

Schneider's idea is intriguing and opens the field of theatre history to those interested in artists beyond the traditional canon in exciting new ways. It is, however, imperfect. Recreation in the now suffers from various disparities. For certain, time and space operate entirely differently. The contemporary can never perfectly recreate the past; we have changed with new knowledge. The original conditions remain elusive; however, this imperfection need not be a deterrent. Acknowledging this reality, Schneider states, "[p]aradoxically perhaps, it is the errors, the cracks in the effort, the almost but not quite that give us some access to sincerity, to fidelity, to a kind of *touch* across time that David Roman has termed 'archival drag.'"<sup>32</sup> The disparities between performance in the past and performance in the present need not be a fault in the system but perhaps a reclamation of theatre's ephemeral nature that produces wonder and pleasure on stage. I push further and argue those errors are of great benefit as it reminds both scholars and audiences of the differences. It raises awareness of history that connects generations across time and space. I find Schneider's reference to fidelity particularly compelling. If we seek access to the liminal space previously denied in the traditional archive, the ephemeral performance, we must also seek to recreate some of those moments. Those moments include the artistic choices of the actors, directors, designers, and even audience reaction. Without them, a recreation would simply be a photograph, a reminder of the

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<sup>32</sup> Schneider, 112; emphasis in original.

past, lacking the emotion and presence of the captured time and space. Like the digital archive, it is an incomplete recreation that as Peggy Phelan suggests, is perhaps something else entirely.<sup>33</sup>

Embodiment is then an essential tool for the theatre historiographer whose archives are inherently inadequate for their art. Theatre is the liminal space between the programs and the reviews, where emotions and responses are visceral and instant rather than reflective. The recreation is the artifact and the object of study. The documents that are present in the archive help to inform such a performance dramaturgically but are not the artifact itself if we wish to say we are studying theatre. This distinction defines the creation of theatre within the academy separate from English departments.<sup>34</sup>

What does embodiment look like, however? The hint is in Schneider's acknowledgment of the errors and the aptly named term by David Roman, "archival drag."<sup>35</sup> Embodiment is a recreation of the entire event, including all the bodies of the process. Those bodies, even when acting historical texts, live strictly in the present with all the extra baggage history brings, hence the term drag.<sup>36</sup> There is a recollection, a

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<sup>33</sup> Phelan, *Unmarked*, 146.

<sup>34</sup> Shannon Jackson, *Professing Performance: Theatre in the Academy from Philology to Performativity*. (New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2004). For a detailed discussion of the shift from the English to the Theatre Department see Jackson's detail account discussing the role that theatre, drama, and performance played in the university setting leading the creation of theatre department and the distinction of performance studies.

<sup>35</sup> David Roman. *Performance in America: Contemporary US Culture and the Performing Arts*. (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2005), 137-178.

<sup>36</sup> Laurence Senelick, *The Changing Room: Sex, Drag, and Theatre*, (London, UK: Routledge, 2000); David A. Gerstner, *Routledge International Encyclopedia of Queer Culture*, (New York, NY: Taylor and Francis, 2006), 191. While the etymology of the word drag is unclear, Laurence Senelick argues that it stems from men wearing women's petticoats on stage. David Gerstner in *The Routledge International Encyclopedia of Queer Culture* states that "Drag is essentially action, not identity [...] theatre action—flaunted, spectacular, and camp." Drag in the usage here is meant to show that performance as archive is not authentic, but an exaggeration of the historical event.

vague memory, a photograph of the past, but the event is recreated in the future, so it never fully recreates the event it references, just as a drag queen never becomes a woman, merely a caricature, an act. The entire event is a tableau-vivant, a recreated piece to allow a moment-by-moment study of the event. As Kuzmin himself heavily utilizes tableau-vivant, the metaphor and the usage seem only too appropriate.

This approach means a further move away from the dramatic text for theatre researchers and necessitates a performance-based research model, often called PBR. While approaches to performance-based research models vary considerably, my chosen methodology, detailed more fully in the introduction to the case study section of this chapter, acknowledges the reiterative nature of meaning-making. In other words, rehearsal becomes just as important as the performance itself in recreating the missed moment in time. I treat the rehearsal process as a performance itself, a time when we find incredible amounts of meaning and a suitable replacement for the traditional close read of dramatic study, a text itself.

Performance-based methodologies vary greatly, so finding the right one can prove challenging. For a project attempting to embody historical work that informs the past and present, the most fitting approach comes from Joanna Bucknall in the form of “The Daisy Chain Model.”<sup>37</sup> In this framework, embodied research happens in several steps, with each step overlapping and informing each other. The researcher is never fully finished with the first step, even when working on the final. The steps I have created for this study

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<sup>37</sup> Joanna Bucknall, “The Daisy Chain Model: An approach to epistemic mapping and dissemination in performance-based-research,” In *Performance as Research: Knowledge, Methods, Impact*, edited by Annette Arlander, Bruce Barton, Melanie Dreyer-Lude, and Ben Spatz, (New York, NY: Routledge, 2018), 50-74.

occur in five overlapping and reiterative phases: 1) Literal Translation, 2) Ensemble Translation and Adaptation, 3) Rehearsal, 4) Performance, 5) Reflection and Analysis. When I state overlapping, I hope to imply that step one and two may co-occur as well as one and three or two and five. While begun in a linear format, my work in Reflection and Analysis helps to inform the rehearsal. The work of discovery and improvisation in rehearsal informs the literal translation. Just as the study looks to the past to inform the present and the future, so does the methodology.

By utilizing a methodology as proposed, I emphasize process-oriented research that centers on the rehearsal process and the knowledge of the ensemble. To further queer the rehearsal process, I made an effort to remove the power structures present in the traditional director's role. As a scholar and director, my voice was decentered but not removed. The ensemble's voice becomes the voice of Kuzmin's work across time, rather than a singular director's vision or interpretation of just one scholar. One actor reflected:

It is inherently queer to question and kind-of upend ways that we traditionally approach theatre, I think, devising, which this was a form of, is a fantastic approach to that. It really brings into focus, theatre as a collaborative art form. The final product of this, felt like everybody's final product. It felt like something we as a group created, rather than something that one person directed a group to flesh out.<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> Interview #1, March 4, 2021. Recording maintained by author. 16:30-17:28. Anonymity protected in accordance with IRB procedures.



The process, the rehearsal, and the performance, then embrace and center queerness and the ensemble. It fits then that the subject matter of the texts revealed through this process is profoundly queer, more so than even the brief mentions in the archive had alluded.

### **Queering the Archive and Performance as Queer Time Travel**

Building upon the idea by David Roman of “archival drag,” I want to extend that even further into the realm of queer studies. I want to specifically address how the traditional archival model is “queered” during this study as a direct address to the inauthenticity created by a contemporary performance. I have already addressed how a contemporary performance will have only a recollection of the past. However, I also argue that it participates in a blending of time that rejects linear progression models and typical chromonormativity. Elizabeth Freeman, keeping with the theme of drag, proposes the idea of a “temporal drag.”<sup>39</sup> Under the umbrella of queer temporalities, she argues that time need not operate linearly and that the past informs the future, often through time jumps. Stephen Farrier builds further and states that temporal drag “looks to the past not as passed but as a part of a current temporality, and it offers [...] to explore what temporal considerations are (re)produced in the work.”<sup>40</sup> Accepting that the recreation of a work written in 1906 actively participates in the contemporary while giving us a look into the past, time ceases to flow forward. Instead, it is a negotiation of times and places. In essence, we began to travel through and with time.

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<sup>39</sup> Freeman. *Time binds*, 9-10.

<sup>40</sup> Stephen Farrier. “Playing with Time: Gay Intergenerational Performance Work and the Productive Possibilities of Queer Temporalities.” *Journal of Homosexuality* 62, no. 10 (2015): 1402.

The idea of queer time travel, or temporal dislocation, is essential to this study and forms the foundation of the following chapters; however, it is also essential in the methodology introduced here. By recreating and embodying the work of Mikhail Kuzmin, we are informing contemporary scholars about the theatre world of 1906 in St. Petersburg. We are, in reality, rewriting history, or at least the history book, reframed with the new knowledge previously overlooked or simply mentioned. However, the past is not the only thing rewritten as this work directly informs the present. Actor's ideas of historical queer theatre changed alongside their impressions of what queer theatre could be. The work in the present informed both the past and the future.

To emphasize the queerness of the process, I structured the methodology to reject linear time simultaneously. Lee Edelman acknowledges that queer identity lives outside the heteronormative time, disrupting the reproduction process.<sup>41</sup> For Edelman, queerness has no future, only a past and a now. Jose Muñoz counters that queer utopian creation and performance are inherently focused on futurity, opening possibilities rather than rejecting them.<sup>42</sup> In Muñoz's interpretation, we find the site of possibility outside the heteronormative family structure that imposes a temporality of reproduction. Muñoz's future, then, is hopeful and a place of possibility outside the prescribed social structures. Jack Halberstam concludes that queer time and queer temporalities come into existence when one rejects "the institutions of family, heterosexuality, and reproduction."<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>41</sup> Lee Edelman, *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive*. (Durham, NC: Duke University Press).

<sup>42</sup> Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia*.

<sup>43</sup> Jack Halberstam, *In a Queer Time and Place: Transgender Bodies, Subcultural Lives*, (New York, NY: NYU Press), 1.

Reproduction operates linearly within the theatre by emphasizing the importance of the performance over rehearsal, product over process, in a capitalistic sense. In our production, we remove from our rehearsal a product-oriented procedure allowing rehearsal to be just as, if not more, important than the performance itself.

While rejecting the idea of heteronormativity, we play creatively with alternate temporalities allowing the possibility for movement within or alongside time, giving voice to historical queer moments in the present. Caroline Dinshaw states, “to think outside of narrative history requires reworking linear temporality.”<sup>44</sup> Reworking and rethinking how we interact with time introduces the possibility of experiencing a drag history through recreation. Such a recreation, in a sense, participates in temporal and, in the case of Kuzmin, spatial travel. This reworking is whole and embodied. As M. Jacquie Alexander states, such a learning event requires a complete “rewiring of the senses.”<sup>45</sup> By reworking our experience of the past, we can re-experience it in contemporary bodies and lift a memory across time and space. The event is not asynchronous or outside of time but alongside two temporalities and historical moments.<sup>46</sup>

Alongside my argument for radical temporalities with a focus on process and discovery, is an acknowledgment of the unique temporal requirements of the rehearsal

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<sup>44</sup> Dinshaw et al. “Theorizing Queer Temporalities: A Roundtable Discussion”, *GLQ: A Journal of Gay and Lesbian Studies* 13, no.2-3 (2007): 185.

<sup>45</sup> M. Jacquie Alexander, *Pedagogies of Crossing: Meditation on Feminism, Sexual Politics Memory, and the Sacred*, (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2005), 308.

<sup>46</sup> Dinshaw et al., “Theorizing Queer Temporalities,” Both Carolyn Dinshaw and Annamarie Jagose warn of the utilization of asynchrony or feelings out of time that have been utilized by conservative and fascist parties to exploit those feelings for their harmful imagined future. Whenever, we as queer scholars, engage in radical temporalities, such events must remain in our minds and we must ensure our methodologies truly serve a hopeful queer future community. It is my belief that this project engages is productive radical temporality serving to bridge two queer communities without exploitation.

process that we altered through this project resulting in a queer time. Elizabeth Freeman, building off of temporal proposals by Walter Benjamin, discusses the temporal realities of sadomasochism as a “slow time” that operates as a call to a past in which the double-time created by modern temporalities post-industrial revolution are thwarted.<sup>47</sup> While our rehearsal process is not existing within the heightened erotic status of sadomasochism, a similar call and reversion to a slower time are present. The traditional rehearsal process is product-oriented rather than exploratory. Certainly, directors have utilized rehearsal for exploratory means before; however, the process explored by the ensemble removed the requirement for a public performance. By prefacing the beginning of rehearsal in a consent-based environment, the actors were acutely aware of the purpose of the study. Rather than seeking performance for public consumption, the purpose was to seek meaning and learn from a queer elder’s writing through embodied translation. If, as an ensemble, we elected for a performance, it resulted from the process—this approach allowed a temporality to exist within the rehearsal space that is uniquely queer.

Partially removed from the necessity of public purview, the actors were free to explore the text through their bodies, becoming more aware of the sensations, emotions, and reactions to the piece. Like Freeman's situation, the focus on bodily awareness

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<sup>47</sup> Elizabeth Freeman, “Turn the Beat Around: Sadomasochism, Temporality, History,” In *The Routledge Queer Studies Reader*, edited by Donald E. Hall, Annamarie Jagose, Andrea Bebell, and Susan Potter, (New York, NY: Routledge, 2013), 236-237. The double-time mentioned by Elizabeth Freeman is a product-oriented and capitalistic mindset. She argues that time operated differently prior to the industrial revolution. The onset of industrialism separated relationships and emotions from labor resulting in a separate temporality for both “work” and “domesticity”. It operated to remove the labor involved in work that did not result in a tangible and sellable product. Slow-time resorts to the blending of these moments where emotions and relationships reintegrate with labor and the emphasis on the product is reduced, but not eliminated.

reverts to a temporality before the production focus created and expanded post-industrial revolution. One actor acknowledged the heightened bodily awareness stating:

I got a lot more comfortable with my body, using it as a tool of expression in performance [...] I tend to keep my body within the same box when I perform most of the time. Once I was able to relax and focus on the work, I realized I can do this other places too, I can do this in other performances.<sup>48</sup>

The actor acknowledges a new awareness of sensations and movements within their body, bringing to light the altered temporal experience. I find it particularly interesting how the actor mentioned they could relax in other settings, an explicit acknowledgment of the production-centered aspect of most theatrical spaces.

To extend the queer aspects of our approach and purpose of the metaphysical time travel to the present, I want to address the concept of queer memory, or rather (re)remembering history as a queer approach to historicism. Memory, as a concept, helps to address the problem of intergenerational passing of knowledge, often denied to queer communities due to issues ranging from willful forgetting, traumatic loss, and political intervention in what Michel Foucault labels “subjugated knowledge.”<sup>49</sup> Embodiment and creative retelling is one approach to access queer memory. Christopher Castiglia and Christopher Reed call this a “process at once disruptive and inventive,” noting that “such creativity within memory is not pernicious but rather is the way humans order the world to achieve a sense of coherence and meaning.”<sup>50</sup> Such an acknowledgment emphasizes

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<sup>48</sup> Interview #1, 18:56-19:33

<sup>49</sup> Michel Foucault, “Two Lectures,” In *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings*, edited by Colin Gordon, (New York, NY: Pantheon, 1980), 81-82.

<sup>50</sup> Christopher Castiglia and Christopher Reed, *If Memory Serves: Gay Men, AIDS, and the Promise of the Queer Past*, (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press), 11.

the creative ability to reinterpret old writings within the contemporary lens to serve the needs and desires of contemporary queer communities.

Yet, the placement of queer memory is fragile. Due to a lack of intergenerational communications, historical figures within the gay community are replaced with contemporary icons. Henry Ablelove noted how queer students failed to identify with any sort of queer canonical figures.<sup>51</sup> Such a process serves as an amnesiac to queer history. We can undoubtedly critique any sort of canonization as inherently reductive; however, such a complete forgetting of any historical past serves only to reinforce a progressive nature of time that situates queerness only in the contemporary, restricting memory to heteronormative histories. Following similar methodologies, Thomas R. Dunn used a retelling of Oscar Wilde's works to reintroduce the historical figure and reconfigure identity that complicates the reductive label of "gay." His approach allowed a more contemporary reinterpretation of queerness that questions the sexual and gender identity of Wilde.<sup>52</sup> Our creative retelling participates in the same process that allows Kuzmin to move beyond labels as simplistic as gay, allowing a fuller understanding of his placement in queer theatre history when interpreted through contemporary ideas and identities. In regard to memory, this serves to link generations of queer communities, allowing a (re)remembering in a creative interpretation of the past and creating memory denied in original time. Performance then serves as the connector, the bridge between the past and

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<sup>51</sup> Henry Ablelove, "The Queering of Lesbian/Gay History," *Radical History Review* 62, (1995): 47-48.

<sup>52</sup> Thomas R. Dunn, "'The Quare in the Square': Queer Memory, Sensibilities, and Oscar Wilde." *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 100, no. 2 (2014): 213-240.

the present, rebuilt and redesigned to serve contemporary queer communities in remembering our shared past in service to our collective future.

### **Methodology and an Introduction to the Case Study**

The play chosen for this project is one of, if not the earliest, written by Kuzmin. My copy, in Russian, was retrieved from the Berkeley collection, although the text was originally published in 1907 in a collection titled *Три Пьесы* or *Three Plays*.<sup>53</sup> The longest of the three pieces in the original book, and the cause of censorship, this project focuses on the new translation of *The Dangerous Precaution*. A short one-act in the style of a Shakespearean comedy, the play resituates the typical mistaken identity and gender-swapping tropes to reveal sexual identities and complex gender roles. Due to the direct censorship, cited as promoting “homosexual love,” there are no known performances, either amateur or professional, in English or Russian.<sup>54</sup> As none of the three plays have a record of professional performance and due to their queer content, I refer to them as closeted dramas.. Our staging of *The Dangerous Precaution* is likely the first performance of the play in either Russian or English.<sup>55</sup>

In order to create an embodied archival retrieval experience for this play, I first needed to make it accessible to the English-speaking actors and potential audience.

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<sup>53</sup> Kuzmin, *Три Пьесы*.

<sup>54</sup> Timofeev, “M. Kuzmin and the Tsar’s Censorship,” 135-136; Malmstad and Bogomolov, *Mikhail Kuzmin*, 106, 389-390. According to biographer John E. Malmstad, no archival evidence suggests *The Dangerous Precaution* has ever been performed. *Two Shepherds and a Nymph in a Cottage* is noted to have been performed in 1910 and 1916, with no additional details provided. *The Choice of Bride* was first performed in 1910, hosted by Mariya Vedrinskaya and is noted as being a favorite of choreographers. It also received at least one published review.

<sup>55</sup> Note that we performed all three plays in the *Three Plays* collection; however due to the rich content and previously unperformed nature of *The Dangerous Precaution*, it was selected for analysis. The discussion of the other two performances may appear in future publications.

Translation, however, is a complicated and charged process requiring intentionality and purpose. Christian Bancroft states, “translation [is] a performative act influenced by culture and therefore irreducible to the myth of an original textual body. In translation, the spaces between languages and the bodies that produce them are nebulous, different, and queer.”<sup>56</sup> Such an acknowledgment clarifies the inherently embodied translation process that moves across time, space, language, and culture. I extend by arguing that queering values a creative interpretation that situates the source next to rather than within the target community. This choice maintains a balance of foreignization and domestication with a conscious effort to limit and acknowledge choices that privilege only the target audience. Dramaturgically, translation educates audiences in cross-cultural communication when acknowledging power structures and identities are central during the translation process.

#### Phase 1: Literal Translation

As I began the translation process, my first step was a literal translation. A direct source to target movement. During this process, I used my limited knowledge of Russian, a Russian-English dictionary, and a Russian Grammar resource to create the first artifact.<sup>57</sup> As a translator, it is important to specify my skill level and language proficiency to acknowledge the level of bias at which language mastery has influenced my creative decisions. At the time of translation, my mastery of the Russian language could be classified as beginning intermediate. It is my belief that my limited skill set does

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<sup>56</sup> Christian Bancroft, *Queering Modernist Translation: The Poetics of Race, Gender, and Queerness*, (New York, NY: Routledge, 2020), 5.

<sup>57</sup> Kenneth Katzner, *English-Russian Russian-English Dictionary*, (New York, NY: John Wiley & Sons, Inc. 1994); Terence Wade, *A Comprehensive Russian Grammar 3<sup>rd</sup> Edition*, (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishers Ltd, 2011).



not preclude me from the ability to participate in translation work. In one case study, Ezra Pound's translations act as evidence of the creative ways in which lack of fluency may interact with a translation resulting in more unique approaches and observations that may have otherwise been missed.<sup>58</sup> I note my lack of limited fluency not as a dismissal of the importance of language acquisition to the translator but to acknowledge that lack thereof does not preclude the possibility and success of translation.

Acknowledging my deficit and the reality that the Russian I do know is contemporary and not necessarily reflective of language in 1906, I sought out the assistance of Dr. Volha Isakava from the Russian Language Department at Central Washington University. Over several hours we went line by line, finding improved word choices in English and discussing semantics, grammar, and dramaturgical notes that would aid in the rehearsal process. At the end, we had a rough but workable script in English, ready for the next layer of translation

After conducting my initial literal translation and revision with Dr. Isakova, my translation was yet unusable by actors. The primary reason being the open word order choice allowed in the Russian language. Literal word-to-word translation can result in a jumble of meaningless words lacking grammatical or narrative sense. The words were all present, but the meaning hidden, obscured, or even contradictory in the order they emerged. By subjecting my translation to heavy editing, meaning began to emerge, resulting in a jilted but understandable basic text, far from finished but presentable to actors. At that point in the process, the product held workable prose, but the poetry was

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<sup>58</sup> Christian Bancroft, "In the Meantime, My Songs Will Travel': Ezra Pound's *Elektra* and *Cathay*," In *Queering Modernist Translation: The Poetics of Race, Gender, and Queerness*, edited by Christian Bancroft, (New York, NY: Routledge, 2020), 22-66.

bereft of the beauty, meter, and rhyme present in the Russian versions. Rather than force a flow into them at this point, I elected to save that poetry and verse work for ensemble translation so the written meter and rhyme would first have meaning and then meet the poetry's requirements.

### Phase 2 and 3: Ensemble Translation, Adaptation, and Rehearsal

With the literal translations in hand but not complete, I then sought actors from our undergraduate department at Central Washington University to assist with the staging of the plays. A cast of six volunteered. Of note, the cast was made up of mostly, if not entirely, queer students. As Kuzmin wrote these scripts with a center on the queer experience and refused to hide his identity, I find this a boon to the process.<sup>59</sup> The actor's contemporary queer experience would prove to bring out more meaning than initially expected in the texts. Chapter 4 details an entirely new reading of *The Dangerous Precaution*, a meaning that I believe to be stronger than the traditional homosexual read. The new read is a direct result of queer, more specifically transgender actors of the ensemble, sharing their experiences and feelings while engaging with the text.

After the cast was selected, the rehearsal process took place over six weeks culminating in a live digital performance.<sup>60</sup> The rehearsal process was different from the

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<sup>59</sup> Malmstad, "Bathhouses, Hustlers, and a Sex Club," 104, footnote 47. According to Malmstad, Kuzmin thought poorly of Wilde due to his choice to hide sexual identity in his work and furthered by the infamous court case in which Wilde denounced his sexuality—seen as a traitorous act. Kuzmin's opinion. While Kuzmin's dislike of Wilde was strongest during the era closest to the writing of this piece, it did weaken and was eventually neutral if not positive of Wilde.

<sup>60</sup> I need to mention that the project's original intent, rehearsal process, and performance were no longer tenable. The original intent being in-person rehearsals with the possibility of a staged performance. Due to the realty and safety concerns during early 2021 surrounding the COVID-19 virus, I elected instead for a digital performance and rehearsal process. I feel the need to acknowledge this as it alters the translation and meaning-making of the project. However, as the performance and rehearsals were still live, just digitally mediated, significant meaning-making remained possible. I intend to reperform these plays in the future when it is safe to act in the same space together in front of an audience.

traditional top-down rehearsal experience. I instructed my cast that I wanted to approach the texts in an ensemble-based manner as if we were naturalists discovering something entirely new. We went into the process with no expectations for what the performance needed to be. We allowed our experiences with the text to inform our artistic decisions. One caveat is that I was clear with the cast that the purpose was to discover and examine queerness, certainly providing them a lens or focus in the process. To assist with examining our experiences, we utilized Liz Lerman's Critical Response Process as needed to reflect upon our learning to inform future performance.<sup>61</sup> By utilizing her open feedback method, the actors and I could make observations without feeling as much pressure that our observations, performances, and opinions were correct or not. It enabled an open discussion that invited creative interpretation rather than top-down direction.

Initially, I planned the rehearsal process to take place in two phases. The first, to rework the literal translation into a script that felt right on our bodies. In the rehearsal room, this looked similar to a traditional table read and improvisation practices. The second phase was simply rehearsal for reiterative learning and practice. However, true to the non-linear and adaptive model I attempted, modifications became necessary. Within the second week, the sheer quantity of hidden meaning between each of the lines became apparent. That meaning was not going to be found through a table read. We began to focus our rehearsals on physically exploring the words and the resulted action of speaking the word.

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<sup>61</sup> Liz Lerman and John Borstel, *Liz Lerman's Critical Response Process: A method for getting useful feedback on anything you make, from dance to dessert*, (Takoma Park, MD: Dance Exchange, Inc., 2003).

Further meaning began to emerge; however, another roadblock occurred. It became clear that the actors did not have adequate physical acting training to continue further. Actors commented that they found it difficult to express what was said and the words themselves did not contribute enough to the plot.<sup>62</sup> The actors' Stanislavsky style training was clear and they excelled at evaluating their characters and choices, but they were ill-prepared to understand how their body makes meaning when they have no words to fall back on. If the meaning was indeed emerging between the words and not from them, as expected of Kuzmin's writing, a new technique was needed.

At first, I asked one of the more experienced actors to take on the role of a movement coach and to guide them. However, I quickly discovered that even they were stuck within a rigid interpretation of the Stanislavsky method. By the fourth week of rehearsal, I knew we needed a new and distinct approach. Based on the text's placement in 1906 and Meyerhold's close involvement with Kuzmin, I decided to utilize Biomechanics training to help awake the movement within my actors. As a methodology of training, Biomechanics is undoubtedly an anachronism, developed almost a decade after the publication of *The Dangerous Precaution*; however, I felt that fit within the archival drag we were attempting.<sup>63</sup> Utilizing etude work allowed actors to become more aware of their bodies and how their bodies may communicate asynchronously from the

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<sup>62</sup> Keenan Shionalyn, *Three Plays Rehearsal Journal*, Date of Entry 1/26/21. Journal is kept private and secure in accordance to IRB regulations. It is not my belief that students meant these opinions as a critique of Kuzmin's writing, however, they further illustrate Kuzmin's habit of leaving the meaning between the lines. A strict textual read left that meaning unavailable and the actors did not have the tools to access the physical connotations.

<sup>63</sup> Mel Gordon, "Meyerhold's Biomechanics," In *Acting (Re)Considered: A Theoretical and Practical Guide*, edited by Phillip B. Zarilli, (New York, NY: Routledge, 2002), 106-128.

lines themselves. In that same vein, we also incorporated Grotowski's plastiques as a way for actors to begin an exploration of distinct body parts as they relate to their characters.<sup>64</sup>

As the actors incorporated the physical object work and gained a heightened awareness of their body, characters began to emerge. Each actor developed a character neutral, or physical stance that communicated personality traits of their character. By shifting from that stance characters could embody complex ideas externally rather than internally as the actors were accustomed. Additionally, the actors began to work asynchronously from the text, allow subtext to be communicated that sometimes did not match what was being said. An example is seen during Clorinda's monologue begging for Floridal to return her lover to her. As the actress playing Clorinda recites the line, "Remove all stems and bud, and heat left in my blood," we see the actress playing Dorita remove her gendered clothing and hair, responding to them as if they were extensions of herself.<sup>65</sup>

Within a week of incorporating these practices, the script began to change dramatically. As the script became tangible on the body, so did the meaning reinforcing how the scripts should appear. This non-linear process ensured the analysis, ensemble translation, and literal translation steps were all informing each other. It was also through movement that the queerness of the scripts began to emerge. That is not to say the words themselves were not queer; the homo-romantic relationships were evident with the words.

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<sup>64</sup> Ryszard Cieslak and Margaret Croyden. *The Body Speaks : Exercises of the Theater Laboratory of Wroclaw*. Academic Video Online: Premium. (Kent, CT: Creative Arts Television, 2007).

<sup>65</sup> Keenan Shionalyn (trans.) and Mikhail Kuzmin, *Kuzmin's Three Plays*, directed by Keenan Shionalyn (February 28<sup>th</sup>, 2021, Ellensburg, WA) YouTube link not provided in accordance with IRB regulations, 1:17:00-1:17:30.

However, through movement, a more profound sense of queerness emerged—this deeper queerness providing something most Kuzminian scholars have so far missed.

About midway through the physical movement explorations, we began to explore the verse. Only one other translation of any of these plays is available, and while beautifully written, it failed to capture the Symbolic tools used in Kuzmin’s scripts. That is to say, Laurence Senelick’s translation of *The Dangerous Precaution* has utilized beautiful Shakespearean style language to capture the rhyme of Kuzmin’s poetry but lacked the sophisticated meter.<sup>66</sup> It was clear that we could not simply use his translation as it distorted the flow and feel more than we were comfortable with, even under cover of archival drag. Going line by line or stanza by stanza and improvising the pieces, we began to discover the meaning. Free play with word order became a fun improvisation tool and a word game to find new ways to arrange the words. Each new change required a simultaneous change in rhyme or tempo, yet these changes served as a resource for actors to discover their characters. The verse also aided our movement. Indeed, the movement practice freed the actors to create, allowing them to embody the words and the translation process and feel what was right for their characters in their own bodies, exploring these thoughts as they negotiated two languages.

During our verse work one of the transgender students stopped the rehearsal of *The Dangerous Precaution* just before our break and said, “Is anyone else feeling the trans message in this piece?” I inquired what she meant, and she replied, “Everything being said, how we are moving, this is my lived experience.”<sup>67</sup> This moment became our

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<sup>66</sup> Senelick, *Lovesick*, 103-115; A.S. Kline (Trans.) and Jean Moreas, *The Manifesto of Symbolism*, (Original in 1886, Translation in 2019), 6.

<sup>67</sup> Shionalyn, *Three Plays Rehearsal Journal*, Date of Entry 2/6/21.

discovery. Kuzmin clearly did not have the language for such a message in 1906; however, the message was there in the contemporary, available for discovery through queer bodies performing his script. As an ensemble, we decided to stage two versions of *The Dangerous Precaution*, the one likely intended by Kuzmin, a love story of two men detailed in Chapter 3, and another version exploring the transition and acceptance of a person assigned male at birth coming to terms with their female identity, further explored in Chapter 4. While the discussion of that particular choice and our discoveries become the focus of the later chapters, it is important to note here as it directly altered our methodology and is a prime example of how our work was non-linear. At this point, we were no longer working with a single script but two. The decision allowed us to reexamine and rework the original translation to ensure this story was clear for audiences. We also had to recast the new version, and we decided to center our transgender actress in the lead role for our second script.

Now every moment in each script became a question of interpretation. Was Kuzmin exploring queerness as a gay man or a transgender woman or another combination we had not yet considered? Such a question is anachronistic but critical to the process of archival drag of any queer artist. Eve Sedgwick believes that such an acknowledgment is critical as the queer identity and otherness are so embedded within the artist's mindset that it is erroneous to dismiss such suggestions.<sup>68</sup> Through a queer lens, Kuzmin could no longer continue to be simply a gay man but now a queer individual with an intimate understanding of gendered experience grappling with both gender and sexual identity.

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<sup>68</sup> Sedgwick. *Epistemology of the Closet*, 156.

### Phase 3 and 4: Rehearsal and Performance

By the end of the fifth week, we stopped adjustments of the translation for the sake of rehearsal, at least for performance. Several additional translations have occurred with notes from that last week and the performance itself; however, audiences did not see these changes. Even after I halted changes, actors still took notes of what lines they wanted to adjust and what remained confusing. This last week resulted in a digital performance with each actor presenting in their own rooms streamed to YouTube and viewed by a peak of 34 audience members live with a total of over 300 views before the weekend was over.

### Phase 5: Reflection and Analysis

In terms of methodology, the final step was a reflection on the part of the actors about the process. Within any process, there are moments of necessary improvement and celebrated successes. Each actor participated in a 30-minute interview about their experience with language, movement, character, performance, and what they feel we discovered during the process. All actors reported feeling pleased with the performance, given the limitations of Zoom. One actor, in particular, felt compelled to begin studying further Kuzmin literature to expand their knowledge of queer artistry.<sup>69</sup> While the performance itself and the interviews make up most of the later chapters, the most common theme emerging from each interview was how essential they felt the movement was and how exciting living-room or salon-style theatre could be. One actor specifically stated, “Theatre that you do at home with your buds is just as legitimate of an artform and

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<sup>69</sup> Interview #2: March 3, 2021. Recording maintained by author. 23:45-24:14. Anonymity protected in accordance with IRB procedures.



can produce just as engaging of conversation and discoveries.”<sup>70</sup> When mentioning physicality, another actor stated, “There are [things] that for me are easier to translate through movement and gesture,” alongside mentioning the freedom that physicality gives to emotional layers and creative interpretation.<sup>71</sup> To me, this became a sounding call for the importance of uncovering closeted drama and the utilization of physical actor training in queer theatre. Queerness is held deep within our bodies. As queer people, we code our language in such complex ways to hide or protect our identity from a society unwilling to question its normative structures. However, within the body itself, remains the message, meaning, and true identity. Our missteps and delayed reaction in the utilization of physical theatre helped to discover exactly how queer memories operates within the body.

### **Limitations of the Model**

While embodied archival retrieval is an upgrade from the traditional archive for the study of theatrical translation and subjugated theatre, it remains an imperfect method with inherent limitations. Within this study, an additional limitation occurred with COVID-19. As rehearsals were entirely conducted digitally, over Zoom software, elements of the story, meaning, and intention of the playwright remain undiscovered. While of great benefit, movement is limited when actors cannot interact with each other in the same space. We made many discoveries, and the audience interacted with the performance; however, space was not physically shared. Discoveries found when

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<sup>70</sup> Interview #1, 22:14-22:37.

<sup>71</sup> Interview #3, March 4, 2021. Recording maintained by author. 8:30-9:11. Anonymity protected in accordance with IRB procedures.

performed within the same space remain hidden. What responses the audience may have had while experiencing the performance live and in-person also remain unknown, and I cannot discount their value.<sup>72</sup>

Beyond the realities of digital performance, the embodied archive is always incomplete. Our performance is only one interpretation from one location, and varying interpretations with differing populations will produce new and exciting discoveries. In this sense, embodied archival performance is not unlike the scientific method in that repetition and replication produce a richer understanding. This performance can then be seen as a naturalist experimentation diving into the unknown theatrical world of Mikhail Kuzmin and St. Petersburg's queer theatre in 1906 through a lens based in Ellensburg, WA. Participating in such is not an experiment with verifiable results; it is exploratory, allowing us to learn what we would otherwise miss.

The performances were additionally by amateurs, undergraduates still learning the foundations of theatre. Varying the experience level of the actors will certainly produce differing results. Still, multiple actors reported feeling empowered, knowing that Kuzmin and his colleagues at "The Tower" in St. Petersburg often performed salon-style in the living room in front of the fire, with costumes they could easily access.<sup>73</sup> While it is certainly limiting, it also lent a bit of authenticity to a project less concerned with authentic replication. The actors felt a connection to the past and felt inspired that theatre was not limited to the large and the grand. I share this to bring to light that embodied

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<sup>72</sup> I do want to acknowledge that digital performance provided at least one benefit in the observation of audience reaction via the YouTube chat system. Audiences were able to comment and applaud through text and emoji during the performance itself, something that is usually not available in a traditional staged performance.

<sup>73</sup> See Hakanen for archival photos and accounts from within "The Tower"

queer theatre, relegated to closeted drama status, can be done with no budget and amateur artists. Meaning making in the embodied archive is not available only to professionals. In a sense, I find nothing queerer than a method of storytelling accessible to any queer artists who feel empowered to explore such works.

As the later chapters dive deep into the meaning-making created, I wanted to introduce my recommendations for an improved methodology moving forward. After interviewing the actors, most agreed we needed additional time. Initially, I scheduled two hours of rehearsal for each page of the script, but as we later learned with these scripts based heavily on physical acting, a page can be 30 seconds or 10 minutes. It was also difficult to decipher whether the need for more time was due to the process or rather due to learning to perform in a digital setting.

Along with more time, another request by actors was to begin with learning acting styles appropriate for the time. I interpret that statement to mean they desired direct physical acting training, which, to them, still feels like historical practice—their awareness of contemporary physical theatre seemed limited. I made the erroneous assumption that the actors were familiar with various techniques, something easily remedied with a few weeks of dramaturgical learning and actor training at the beginning of the process.<sup>74</sup> As many of my actors were queer-identifying, it also serves as a tool for intergenerational storytelling. Traditional actor training can be heteronormative with a strong preference for realism; queer theatre tends to be less realistic and, in regards to gay-male performance, often campy.<sup>75</sup> Becoming aware of varying approaches to acting

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<sup>74</sup> I would further argue this also benefits experienced actors, providing a clear lens for approaching the text while simultaneously building ensemble.

<sup>75</sup> Jill Dolan, *Theatre & Sexuality*, (London, UK: Red Globe Press, 2010), 21.

across cultures and identities is a critical pedagogical tool for those training young actors, even more so for actors identifying as queer. To queer actors, alternate styles act as a tool to perform their own cultures rather than the heteronormatively assumed in many contemporary acting trainings.

Due to the digital style of performance, this study did not focus on audience response outside of YouTube live comments. With a live performance, audience response would be critical to finding the placement of Mikhail Kuzmin within the theatrical record. On a personal note, I also feel a live audience would greatly benefit from strong dramaturgical engagement, from interactive lobby displays to a possible talkback. Due to limited time and resources, we elected not to participate in a talk-back. However, I think dramaturgy aids any scholarly work by community engagement. I also posit that questions from the audience may raise awareness of ideas, actions, and feelings that the creative team did not notice. My goal in queer theatre is to engage in transcultural intergenerational storytelling; actively engaging with audiences seems like the logical next step to building this methodology as both a scholarly endeavor and artistic practice.

As I continue in the following chapters to further explore the discoveries made by the ensemble about Mikhail Kuzmin, queer theatre, and ourselves, I hope to build a strong foundation for future embodied performance research. I think performance in the academy has as much, if not more, knowledge to provide as traditional theatrical scholarship. I hope that this model helps make embodied theatrical scholarship more approachable while bringing oft-overlooked works to light that help to decenter privileged voices and raise those the archive has silenced, or language has left isolated. Embedding this research deeply within theatrical departments and seasons strengthens the

pedagogical foundation of our students. It builds a producible form of knowledge-making that engages communities and provides value to the University, ensuring the continuance of academic theatre.

However, for now, let us engage in a bit of creative time travel and see what theatrical performance has to teach us of the past and how we may alter the timeline of theatrical knowledge production. Let us do so in a queer manner, putting aside the expectations and power structures of the theatre canon and letting the voices on the side be loud and irreverent. Let us travel to St. Petersburg in 1906 and join Kuzmin and “The Tower” to experience the queer theatre of our elders.

### CHAPTER 3

#### GAY MALE FUTURITY, QUEER FEELINGS, AND UTOPIA

“[A]n attempt to present the past unrelated to the present—is an exercise devoid of life and utility.”

—Mikhail Alekseevich Kuzmin, 1924<sup>1</sup>

“Queerness is essentially about the rejection of a here and now and an insistence on potentiality or concrete possibility for another world.”

—Jose Muñoz, 2009<sup>2</sup>

A narrative communicating one’s sense of sexual identity, often referred to as coming out, is, for Eve Sedgwick, a productive process, or to utilize Butler’s term, a performative that acts to bring about a knowledge of identity to others.<sup>3</sup> When we employ literature as the methodology for coming out, Lies Xhonneux identifies two functions it serves: 1) a biographical undertone communicating identity and history about the author and 2) a depiction that provides a vocabulary to assist others in creating their own identity.<sup>4</sup> Critical in that identification is acknowledging that coming out is not merely revealing hidden knowledge but often communication of a new identity. In such a tale, we learn important details about the author, Mikhail Kuzmin, in this project’s case. However, we also learn the vocabulary utilized by the queer community to inform further how queer communities operated. Mikhail Kuzmin’s *Wings* is often credited with being

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<sup>1</sup> Kuzmin, “Declaration of Emotionalism,” 166.

<sup>2</sup> Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia*, 1.

<sup>3</sup> Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet*, 67; Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. (New York, NY: Routledge, 1990).

<sup>4</sup> Xhonneux. “The Classic Coming Out Novel,” 95-96.

the first Russian coming-out novel. However, as Sedgwick acknowledges, the process of coming out is not singular. It must occur reiteratively whenever a queer person encounters new communities who may or may not know their identity.<sup>5</sup> For Mikhail Kuzmin, 1906 was the year of continually coming out, and the publication of *Three Plays* acts as his coming out into the dramatic world. Unlike his entrance into the literary world, censorship interceded.

As we are metaphysically exploring the concept of performance as creative time travel, we can utilize the translation and subsequent staging of *The Dangerous Precaution* to explore how Kuzmin frames the vocabulary of gay men in 1906 and what biographical artifacts appear and inform during the process. In addition to a simple read, thematic elements emerging and discovered during the process will reveal the function of his narrative beyond a simple coming out story. Eve Sedgwick's frames coming out as the beginning of an identity formation allowing the discovery of the true self rather than the disclosing of a previously hidden truth.<sup>6</sup> I argue, in this chapter, that Kuzmin engages in a narrative that supports Sedgwick's argument. As Kuzmin explores his own coming out through the character Floridal, the narrative utilizes a call to the past to frame a utopia allowing for the free exploration of gender identity that ultimately serves to look towards the future, to create a life that could or perhaps should be. Kuzmin justifies homosexuality due to its proximity to heteronormative feelings rather than an overt queering of gender identity.

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<sup>5</sup> Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet*, 68-69.

<sup>6</sup> Sedgwick, 68-69.

My examination of Kuzmin's look towards the future by utilizing the past employs Jose Muñoz's idea of queer futurity. Introducing the concept, Muñoz states, "We have never been queer, yet queerness exists for us as an ideality that can be distilled from the past and used to imagine a future."<sup>7</sup> To Muñoz, queer utopian feelings are not abstract or "banal optimism" but situate themselves within historical and contemporary constraints.<sup>8</sup> He explicitly identifies queer utopian scholarship as one involved with "identifying certain properties that can be detected in representational practices helping us to see the not-yet-conscious."<sup>9</sup> In agreement with Jill Dolan, queer utopianism finds the theatre the ideal art in which looking to the past can create a hopeful future through utopian performatives.<sup>10</sup> As I utilize the ideas of queer futurity, I note that Muñoz wishes to return queer theory to social relationism. His queer theory is intersectional and does not examine sexuality in isolation. By centering in the social and utilizing the past as a tool for a hopeful future, a queer futurist read of any dramatic text constantly reminds of social and political surroundings that artists are responding to and center such hopeful horizons based on the social realities that exist in the present. In *The Dangerous Precaution*, Kuzmin can be seen directly responding to his experiences at "The Tower" utilizing Symbolist ideals. Alongside his novel *Wings* he introduces himself to the queer world of St. Petersburg and frames the narrative to create his new identity as part of coming out while providing a vocabulary to other queer community members. Writing

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<sup>7</sup> Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia*, 1.

<sup>8</sup> Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia*, 3.

<sup>9</sup> Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia*, 3.

<sup>10</sup> Jill Dolan. *Utopia in Performance: Finding Hope at the Theater*. Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 2005, 6.



from this perspective, Kuzmin then utilizes Shakespearean tropes, calling to the past, to bring hope for a future where homosexuality exists without judgment.

In this chapter, I primarily focus on Kuzmin's placement of homosexuality as proximal to heterosexuality engaging in what Sara Ahmed calls "queer feelings."<sup>11</sup> Rather than arguing a universal affective queer state, queerness does not require an outright rejective stance on social norms. Ahmed argues, "[f]or queers, to display pleasure through what we do with our bodies is to make the comforts of heterosexuality less comfortable."<sup>12</sup> By displaying the actions of two gay men in close proximity to heterosexual dating patterns, it makes the implied heterosexuality obvious and easier to question. Proximity is then a tool Kuzmin utilizes to clarify how heterosexuality operates so queer community members may then construct their own identity of queerness cognizant of social norms.

Kuzmin is able to situate queerness as proximal to heterosexuality due to his gendered discussion of homosexuality. The use of gendered terms builds a vocabulary that is not unlike Judith Butler's gender performativity. Butler states that, "what we take to be an internal essence of gender is manufactured through a sustained set of acts, posited through the gendered stylization of the body."<sup>13</sup> These acts, or performatives, that express gender communicate gender externally and often subconsciously. Kuzmin, however, by engaging in a discussion of drag, makes these performatives conscious, that

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<sup>11</sup> Ahmed, "Queer Feelings," 422-423.

<sup>12</sup> Ahmed, 437.

<sup>13</sup> Butler, xv.

is, the characters are aware of how gender is communicated. In Kuzmin's world, that is through dress.

As Judith Halberstam points out, queer scholars must avoid "homonormativity," or replacing heterosexual scripts within a queer context that acts to reify the heteronormative and privilege the most advantaged marginal status (the white gay male). With full acknowledgment of the brilliant observations by the transgender members of the ensemble, I can avoid such a downfall in its entirety. Chapter 4 explores an alternative and more contemporary read that disidentifies the historically expected homosexual read in favor of an intriguing and impactful transgender approach to Kuzmin's script.<sup>14</sup>

As Kuzmin's script has no known recorded performance, it is just as productive to examine the lost knowledge present through a homosexual interpretation. In this chapter, I interpret the traditional gay male read of *The Dangerous Precaution* through the lens of queer futurity and queer feelings, made visible through proximity to heteronormativity. I engage queer temporalities to situate ourselves next to Kuzmin in a performance that touches St. Petersburg in 1906. With a conscious mindset of Kuzmin's presumed homosexuality, the stage becomes the platform for gay male utopianism. Our queer temporality allows such a touching, Kuzmin directly influences the present as we imagine a better future.

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<sup>14</sup> Judith Halberstam, "What's That Smell? Queer Temporalities and Subcultural Lives," *International Journal of Cultural Studies* 6, no 3. (2003): 331

## Exposition, Discourse of Gender Performatives, and Gay Hope

Within the *Three Plays* collection, *The Dangerous Precaution* is perhaps the most infamous, despite having no known performance record. The longest play of the three, it is also the most sophisticated, involving a more complex plot. Written in a Shakespearean mistaken identity comedy style, the play has strong parallels to *Twelfth Night*, including cross-gender disguising. Due to its censored status for portraying “homosexual love,” I argue it is the most deserving of renewed if not original scholarship.<sup>15</sup> As I analyze the play, I move in a mostly sequential manner, alternating textual and performance analysis while occasionally introducing translation notes as appropriate for the read. All textual references refer to the translation created for this project.<sup>16</sup>

Kuzmin subtitles the play a “Comedy with singing in one act,” however, at the time of writing, I have been unable to locate any record of the music written for the play within the archive. Kuzmin’s music for Blok’s *The Puppet Show*, written the same year, is only partially available, so, perhaps, they were stored, lost, or never archived together.<sup>17</sup> As music and auditory processes hold significant memory, our inability to recreate and experience the music in the contemporary is a considerable loss to our potential archival work. As Kuzmin is known for his music, I hope we discover a record at some point. However, in the interim, we have treated his songs like poetry, giving them a musical quality allowing reclamation of some knowledge.

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<sup>15</sup> Timofeev, “M. Kuzmin and the Tsar’s Censorship,” 135-136.

<sup>16</sup> Keenan Shionalyn (trans.) and Mikhail Kuzmin, *The Dangerous Precaution*, Unpublished, 2021. See Appendix I.

<sup>17</sup> Malmstad and Bogomolov, *Mikhail Kuzmin*, 392.

The play consists of five primary characters listed in order of appearance: Postumius, Floridal, Rene, Clorinda, and Gaetano; however, the cast can easily expand given the generic listing of characters such as “courtiers, dames, and servants” who have few lines, but fill out the theatrical space.<sup>18</sup> The character personae provides little character description outside of the primary character Floridal, mentioned as having been mistaken for a girl named Dorita. Postumius and the courtiers have no further description. Rene is identified only as a young prince, Clorinda, his beloved, and Gaetano, a member of Postumius’ court. Kuzmin lists the 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> Courtiers distinctly due to their two lines near the middle of the play. Unlike the two other plays in the *Three Plays* collection, Kuzmin moves beyond tropes of commedia dell’arte and fills his characters with depth, not unlike Shakespeare, whom Kuzmin appears to be using as a model. In a single act, the character depth achieved over the course of five acts is not attainable, yet it contains rounded characters with personality and flaws.

Our performance of *The Dangerous Precaution* opens with an English folk tune drawing our audiences with remembrances of the Renaissance. A painted backdrop appears with a path signifying the crossing place of the scenes. As the cameras first turn on, the audience is presented with a variety of views. In the center of the screen, we see a male actor with a stern stance wearing a simple blue button-up shirt; the bottom left, a young woman dressed in a Renaissance style dress and cape with rich browns and gold; the bottom right a young male actor dressed in a simple red v-neck sweater. The placement of the cameras immediately communicates a position of power and subservience by the two in the corner. The mismatching of costumes is apparent and

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<sup>18</sup> Shionalyn and Kuzmin, *The Dangerous Precaution*, 1.

noticeable, contemporary clothes mix with Renaissance fashion, and each character appears to be from a different time. This approach was intentional, providing each actor the choice to play their character in the location and time that they felt was the most appropriate. Verisimilitude is of little concern with the hope that we remind the audience they are watching a performance of a historical piece. We have situated the present alongside the past, ours, the time of Kuzmin, and his, Venice of an even earlier era. With the double call to the past, we have laid the foundation for Muñoz's queer utopianism. We have disregarded linear time, queered by using ahistorical placements to create discomfort.

Beginning the exposition is Postumius, played by the actor in the blue shirt, and Gaetano, played by the actress in Renaissance attire. Through his few lines, we learn that, for an unknown reason, they wish to be rid of Clorinda, a woman acting as a barrier of some sort to their political relations with Rene. They reveal nothing further of the problem of Clorinda, and the director/actors are free to interpret. We also learn that Floridal, played by the actor in the v-neck sweater, is also Dorita, a gender disguise performance on the part of Floridal transforming him into a woman. An exasperated voice clarifies that Floridal does not enjoy dressing in the womanly attire, not because the act of performing as a woman is demeaning, but because of the pain it causes Rene, the object of the deception.

Unlike Shakespeare's approach, the female disguise is never seen and not indicated anywhere in the stage directions, a reminder that within this world Kuzmin created, gender is read merely as outward accoutrements such as dresses. By lacking items such as dresses, characters may then be men. This observation is both Kuzmin's

exploring of gender as a social construct and evidence of misogyny. Dress acts as a signifier of gender, however it also situates men as the default. To become a woman, for Kuzmin, is to put on a costume to become an other, a not-male. In order to avoid an essentialist reading, I temporarily set aside the misogynistic interpretation. Doing so allows us to gain fascinating insights into his conception of gender and sexuality from over a century ago. These insights are obfuscated when only seen as misogyny. The complete view of Kuzmin must reengage the possibility of sexism; however, a focus on one critique risks removing his complex discussion of gender entirely and is reductive.

Dress and clothing then act as gender performatives within Kuzmin's world. By placing gendered objects upon a body within the world of the play, the characters become women. Floridal, in this case, by donning a dress, becomes Dorita, an identity that Rene does not question. In this reading, Floridal is the presumed true identity whose crisis builds upon the conflicting feelings that arise within the identity of Dorita. Dorita, a woman, can model heteronormativity and therefore express love towards Rene. By performing womanhood, originally only through the costume of Dorita, viewers remain within the comfort zone of heteronormativity. In those moments, it is drag, an exaggeration. Floridal's identity, however, remains intact and the emotions experienced within the costume of Dorita are transferrable. When it is made clear the emotions resulting from the performatives performed by Dorita also apply to Floridal, gender is disrupted, and the critique of those gender structures become clear.

After establishing the identities of Floridal, Gaetano senses the discomfort of Floridal—a man asked to perform womanhood. Gaetano is a traditional Shakespearean foolish bard. Gaetano uses poetry to tell his narrative and seems little concerned with

propriety. Only appearing in one scene, Gaetano has a full song meant to assuage Floridal of his nervousness associated with disguising himself as a woman. Kuzmin wrote Gaetano's song in alternating rhyming couplets filled with bawdy descriptions of both the male and female sex. I specifically mention sex here to differentiate and heighten the later conversations on gender performance. To Gaetano, the differences between the genders are limited and relegated to minute observable differences that disappear on certain bodies. His description, repeated, states:

Narrow hips and a slender bod  
 To the young man are the gift from God,  
 While women are round and shapely —  
 That is the difference — do you see?

I find Gaetano's discourse on gender particularly compelling as he makes it clear that sexual differences are only slight, even anatomically. The breasts of a woman and the buttocks of a man serve the same sexual purpose and excite equally in Gaetano's world. Additionally, by emphasizing the visual aspect of seeing, the performative nature of gender is made more obvious. Whether Gaetano was arguing for bisexuality, gender neutrality, or was perhaps non-binary themselves became a frequent discussion in rehearsal. For the original read, the actress playing Gaetano elected to explore Gaetano as a bisexual man.

The argument for bisexuality becomes stronger in the final lines of the song, "Top or bottom, heads or tails, For a player, more regales."<sup>19</sup> To Gaetano, both genders are available to be played with as objects of satisfaction and desire. While demonstrating the minute physical differences between the sexes, Kuzmin also utilizes the male gaze to

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<sup>19</sup> Shionalyn and Kuzmin, *The Dangerous Precaution*, 3.

describe the playwright's view of attractiveness. Presenting idealized versions of the female body, Kuzmin engages the male gaze by placing pleasure within the realm of heteronormativity. He then engages in queer feelings by transferring those idealizations onto male bodies, thereby discomforting the straight sexualization subjected typically to women. By utilizing such idealized versions, physical gender disparity is made less obvious to audiences. The realization hits some that non-idealized bodies do not fit the gendered expectation detailed by Kuzmin. Men may also be round and shapely, while women may be slender. Contemporary acknowledgment of the diversity of bodies strengthens Kuzmin's argument that physiological differences between men and women are arbitrary at best. Kuzminian scholars note this social criticism; their limited commentary on the play does at least acknowledge how Gaetano "destabilizes gender."<sup>20</sup>

Gaetano, in performance, further accentuates the argument of the social constructiveness of gender. Language and gesture combine to make clear the gender performative within the world Kuzmin has created. The words round and shapely, in reference to women, and narrow hips and slender to men, differ only slightly in gesture. As we see the actress place her hands to the side, as if a judge's scale, we visually see the comparison of the actionable abilities of the sexes with her even balance symbolizing the marginal equity of the two. Furthering the sexualized performance, the actress playing Gaetano gestures to her breasts and slaps her own buttocks while performing the line "top or bottom, heads or tails." Such gestures further subvert the heteronormative interpretation that began the poem and allows the actress's body to communicate both male and female sexuality, living within a liminal social space. Gendered performatives

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<sup>20</sup> Malmstad and Bogomolov, *Mikhail Kuzmin*, 107.



then layer the provocativeness of the poem paired with the overt sexuality performed. The actress chose to wear a Renaissance-style dress while playing a character whose name suggests masculinity to further illuminate the construct of gender. Until this point, the audience is entirely unaware of the character's name. In the first line after this monologue, Postumius speaks the name Gaetano, and the gender nonconformity becomes apparent. Perhaps this approach is too on-the-nose; however, the monologue itself is full of overt gestures to gender performatives and openly mocks them. Using performed gendered gestures then provides embodiment signifying directly to the audience the purpose of the speech, even if the language is lost. Such a choice to indicate gender so plainly certainly violates the rules of realism, but I argue successfully engages the audience into the message of the play and primes them for further discourse on gender and sexuality.

The song successfully introduces the themes of gender and sexuality and the topic of debate for the play. Upon finishing his song, Postumius chastises him for being indecent, and Gaetano's response is perhaps the most telling of Kuzmin's stance on gender identity. In a nod to Judith Butler, almost a century too early, Gaetano responds, "Decency is a social construct."<sup>21</sup> While Gaetano's line specifically responds to decency, the allusion to gender as a conventional social construct is obvious and was the first observation the ensemble made when discussing this scene.

The mention of decency and the subsequent chastisement participates in a bit of self-mockery by Kuzmin, Postumius explicitly citing a lack of modesty. Upon delivering such a critique, the actor playing Postumius, visually in a position of power, punches the

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<sup>21</sup> Shionalyn and Kuzmin, *The Dangerous Precaution*, 3. Note that the original Russian translates to "conventional thing"

word modesty while the actor playing Floridal agrees, displaying subservience. Such action mimics the life and critique of Kuzmin, whose work debates gender ideas ahead of their time to a society that was not yet ready for such discussions. Through the silencing of Gaetano, Postumius acts like the critics of Kuzmin's novel *Wings*, acting to censor any discussion of sexuality beyond heteronormativity. Simultaneously, by targeting Floridal in his discussion of sexuality, Gaetano situates Floridal as the voice of Kuzmin. Such a placement allows Floridal to serve as autobiographical character of Kuzmin while simultaneously providing a narrative illustrating the pathway to coming out.

The last piece of information Postumius provides before he and Gaetano disappear forever: Floridal is to remain disguised for three days only. Similar to the thirteen days of disguise in *Twelfth Night*, Kuzmin makes the parallels to Shakespeare clear. I note, however, that such a change is symbolic, altering the thirteen days of Christmas to become the three days of Christ's resurrection. The symbolic adjustment allows Floridal to be a pseudo-Christ figure, wherein Floridal must die and at the end of the deception is reborn anew.

I also find it interesting that while Floridal is distraught at the idea of misleading Rene, he feels no such regret for unseating Clorinda. While it is possible to see this moment as another example of Kuzmin's misogyny, ignoring the desires of the only named female character, I also see it as a glimpse into the world of Kuzmin grappling with his sexual orientation, his sexual attraction towards men. With that acknowledgment, it makes sense that Floridal is not concerned with Clorinda, instead focused on both appearing as a woman (as Dorita) and as Floridal, a heteronormative male. Such an act would require a complicated focus to go against what society tells

Floridal to do (appear straight and unattracted to men). He must flirt with another man while also appearing straight; with such a task, there is little room in the mind for others. What initially appears as apathy towards Clorinda is rather a concern for self-preservation. The only other possible role of Clorinda, for Kuzmin, would have been as the object of flirtation to signify Floridal's straightness to the world. I am grateful Kuzmin has not opted for such a choice and instead allows Clorinda to exist beyond a mere object or proof of straightness. This choice acts to mark and disregard heteronormative assumptions and remove such concerns from becoming a focal point of the narrative. It discomforts while operating within heteronormative structures.

As Floridal is left alone at the end of the first scene, Kuzmin introduces us to Rene. Rather than having Rene appear on stage, Kuzmin makes clear in his stage directions that we are to see only Floridal, alone on stage, present with only a voice. After the discourse on gender by Gaetano, I find this a compelling choice. Rene's literal disembodiment allows audience members to experience the complicated emotions of Floridal as he hears the song of Rene, centering Floridal as the character of concern rather than the relationship. The song itself, written in rhyming couplets interspersed with alliteration and frequent consonance, is a beautiful example of symbolic poetry utilizing calls to nature and line structures in lengths of prime numbers. A love song to Dorita, it acts as a form of queer utopian storytelling where we transport to an ideal. Free of gendered speech, the beginning of the poem flows with calls to a personified nature as we hear, "The viridescent grass, blossoms full and sings, The wind blows and whips, flaps

and spreads its wings.”<sup>22</sup> The words beckon to the familiarity of nature and comfort that exists beyond gendered love.

Yet, the return of gendering creates a false utopic feeling, evident on the face of the actor playing Floridal, transitioning from blissful and peaceful expressions into sudden discomforts visible with tensed muscles and downward glances. As we hear the words, “There, in the dense moss and ivy a hut you’ll find, There I will live, will live with Dorita entwined,” the optimistic utopia destroyed as the actor, by being visible as Floridal on stage, reminds us of the male-gendered body incompatible with the words spoken by Rene. This moment directly engages in Ahmed’s queer feelings, situating a familiar heteronormative situation on a body that does not sexually match the male voice, creating discomfort. For the contemporary queer, this moment replaces optimistic hope with potentiality or what Muñoz calls “educated hope,” should we discard the social construct of gender just introduced into Kuzmin’s world.<sup>23</sup> In order to transform fully to educated hope, the optimistic utopia must transform into a concrete utopia, one that acknowledges the systemic changes that must occur to create a potentiality. For the sake of dramatic tension, this scene leaves such a hope unresolved and unattained. Nevertheless, as we will see in the following scenes, Kuzmin engages in a depiction that dismantles the systemic barriers preventing our utopia for Floridal, caught in between desire for Rene and gendered sexuality expectations.

As Xhonneux hypothesizes for coming out narratives, the next scenes lay out a framework or vocabulary for queer individuals to navigate their own sexual identity and

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<sup>22</sup> Shionalyn and Kuzmin, *The Dangerous Precaution*, 3-4

<sup>23</sup> Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia*, 3

attain their utopia.<sup>24</sup> However, in the interim, the actor playing Floridal exits without words, and even more is communicated in the silence. The emotional impact of dual identity is palpable. The fake Dorita robs Floridal of his desired affection from Rene. Floridal, knowing he cannot truly be Dorita, is stuck performing a gender and giving affection that Rene cannot return, given Floridal's status as a man. While cognizant to queer audiences, Kuzmin has not yet engaged with the possibility of homosexuality or becoming gay.

Floridal, seen by the actor to be deep-in-thought, reenters and is quickly interrupted by Clorinda wearing a dress to indicate herself a woman, the signifier Kuzmin utilizes for gender.<sup>25</sup> Further communicating the queer feelings that Floridal is feeling, Clorinda states, "You look like a lover, who has not seen his beloved for more than an hour," evidence that Floridal's facial expressions have betrayed him.<sup>26</sup> Floridal escapes condemnation by stating his visible emotions are merely a natural reaction to hearing the poetry written for Dorita, successfully evading further suspicion, while notably, not a lie. Interestingly, enjoyment of poetry is not a gendered action in Kuzmin's created world. The conversation turns to the new woman Dorita, known to the audience but invisible to the characters on stage. Clorinda seems especially intrigued by her, clearly indicating the character's suspicion of romantic involvement with Rene, heightening the tension as such

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<sup>24</sup> Xhonneux, *The Classic Coming Out Novel*.

<sup>25</sup> I want to note that Kuzmin utilizes dresses as signifiers, something we have occasionally disrupted in our production. In this moment, Clorinda's clothing, name, and behavior match gendered expectations set-up by Kuzmin, unlike Gaetano who intentionally disrupted those preconceptions both in speech and in costume. In the world of this play (the gay male version), Gaetano is the only character to violate these norms. In the transgender read in Chapter 4, multiple characters disrupt gender through clothing and cross-gender casting.

<sup>26</sup> Shionalyn and Kuzmin, *The Dangerous Precaution*, 4.

an action would lead to the removal of Clorinda. Possibly engaging in a gender performative, Clorinda appears less concerned with the conversation and more about her appearance in the mirror when Rene's physical presence interrupts the conversation.<sup>27</sup>

Signifying interruption, we quickly swapped the position of the cameras showing Clorinda and Rene. The interruption then serves a dual purpose of changing the scene's action while also further communicating the fall of Clorinda in the eyes of Rene. Within the scene, all of Rene's attention is on Floridal, a guest in the court. The discomfort of the scene is evident to audiences, yet Rene misinterprets it as boredom and decides to arrange a dance. While primarily expository, there nonetheless are telling clues to the gay narrative Kuzmin is crafting. So far, there has been no indication that Rene is anything other than heterosexual, having written a love song for someone he believed a woman. Yet, within this scene, Rene's subconscious betrays him as he unknowingly focuses all his attention on Floridal. As viewers, we are aware of the Floridal/Dorita duality, but Rene is not. Consciously, Rene is merely concerned for a peer who appears bored, yet subconsciously he is drawn to Dorita and unconcerned with the woman in the room, Clorinda. The foreshadowing intrigues and the tension successfully builds.

### **Queer Vocabulary and Depiction of Identity Formation**

The next scenes have a striking similarity to the forest scenes in Shakespeare's *A Midsummer's Night Dream*. Couples enter for a short bit of plot before dispersing and repeating with new character combinations. Instead of a forest, however, we appear to be on the outskirts of said party, at Rene's court. The scenes then play as conversations on

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<sup>27</sup> Of note, it is unclear what purpose the mirror serves. Perhaps Kuzmin is implying a vainness in her, or perhaps she was merely preparing for the party later. Even through embodied rehearsal the function and purpose of the mirror evaded us.

the garden terrace as people excuse themselves from the noise for brief conversations and breaks.

As the scene transitions, we hear ballroom music as two actresses enter in overly gendered clothing. In a fin-de-siecle women's outfit along with gloves and a hat, one actress appears ready for a day in the park while the other enters in a white and black striped dress with hair flowing over her shoulders. The contrast between period and contemporary is visible, but the gendered performative of clothing remains. Other performatives mark gender in this short performance, such as curtsies, doe-eyes, and accentuation of the hips through hand gestures. The two characters seem overly concerned with the attire of a certain woman at the party. The courtiers observed how taken Rene is with her; however, her choice to wear pants to a party left him uninterested in dancing. One courtier responds that pants do not hinder such behaviors before snide remarks are shared between the two ladies.

On its surface, this scene appears simplistic and likely serving only for filler to allow for a scene change or other theatrical business; however, when taken with Gaetano's call to question gender, the purpose becomes evident. It does not take much to realize that the woman mentioned, is in fact, Floridal (a fact confirmed at the start of the next scene); however, the partygoers are confused as they are reading Floridal as a woman. Until now, the only markers for gender had been dress, yet Floridal, dressed in masculine attire, is read as a woman. Kuzmin is engaging in a direct critique of gender performatives, establishing a narrative dictating clothing as markers of gender, yet he allows characters to read gender in other mannerisms. This contradiction is not an accidental choice but an apparent rebuke to clothing as gender.

As the scene flows in only four lines, Kuzmin engages in a Butlerian-style argument, with the first courtier stating, “He would have gladly danced a Sarabande with her if she wasn’t wearing pants.” He establishes pants as a gendered marker for masculinity, notably the only accessory available for masculine signification, while simultaneously introducing the social consequence for violating the norm, sexual rejection. To them, this woman has violated the expected gender performatives reducing her desirability. This plot device is an effective ironic tool because we as viewers are aware that the opposite is true. Floridal is instead performing performatives to appear male and heterosexual, aka wearing pants instead of a dress. Yet, this conversation is unsettling, as we must wonder why they read Floridal as female. Are gay men frequently read as female? Do they perform performatives that communicate womanhood? Kuzmin, here, appears to be struggling to define queerness for himself and is utilizing these two characters to debate its definition openly.<sup>28</sup> To Kuzmin, it appears, sexuality is performed on gendered terms, and therefore to be homosexual is to perform non-conforming gendered actions.

Confirming the suspicion that the previously mentioned woman is rather Floridal, Clorinda enters, flustered at her observation of Floridal. Unlike the two women before, Clorinda seems perplexed by her perception, seeing Floridal rather than Dorita as the disguise stating, “Although she calls herself Floridal, her face is that of a schoolboy. Even though she lacks all the feminine charm in her clothing, his heart has turned to her.” We, again, have a discussion of clothing as a gender performative. However, Clorinda

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<sup>28</sup> I also want to note this is further indication that a gay male reading may not be the only or even the most appropriate. As Floridal reads as a woman, it lends further credence to the possibility of a transgender reading, further explored in Chapter 4.



also identifies facial features that she has determined to be youthful but masculine, a contradiction in gender for Clorinda. In her heteronormative worldview, Rene, a purportedly cis straight man, to use contemporary terms, should be attracted to strong elements of femininity such as those displayed by Clorinda, her dress, and soft face. The cognitive dissonance experienced when we uproot her expectations is a discomfort to her as she sings of her woes. Becoming the embodiment of the dilemma of queer feelings, Clorinda feels intense discomfort at the disruption of heteronormativity.

Clorinda's song is surprisingly unlike the poems of Gaetano and Rene, using an obnoxiously simplistic tail assonance scheme overusing the sound 'lee.' The poem differentiates itself from others in the play by utilizing an inconsistent alternation of line meter, avoiding prime numbers, and repeating in decreasing meter lengths or decreasing by even amounts such as 8, 6, 4. Upon hearing the poem initially in Russian, the ensemble commented, "Well, that was a choice," in a sarcastic tone communicating the lack of aesthetic maturity in the lines.<sup>29</sup> If all of Kuzmin's poems were such, it would be easy to dismiss it as a faux pax of the writer; however, he is a celebrated poet who has already delighted our ears in the earlier poems in this play. What then does this infer upon our character Clorinda? I see Kuzmin's poetic choice as an attempt to ensure we center Floridal and using obnoxious rhyme so audiences' distance themselves from her, thereby weakening the impact caused by the creation of the Rene/Floridal relationship. By using the overly repetitive rhyming scheme, Clorinda can express her real emotions

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<sup>29</sup> Shionalyn. *Three Plays Rehearsal Journal*. Date of entry: 2/6/21.

allowing her to be a whole person without overtaking the focus of the story. We understand her, but the rhyming is just enough to place some critical distance.

In performance, the gendered observations of Floridal are made clear with gestures to a female body, that of the actress playing Clorinda. Using direct indication, the actress portrays a visual contrast between her face and dress, indicating the necessity for the two to match. Grabbing her dress like pants, the contradiction of Floridal is made clear. Floridal, to Clorinda, communicates womanhood in body and the clothes are the violator. As the actress paces the room, her unraveling of gender matches the slow discourse revealed by the playwright. During rehearsal, the actress discovered a duality in this scene that allows two distinct personalities to emerge. Within the gay male read, the actress chose to display a Clorinda as a flat villain, representing the ultimate upholding of the heteronormative and an acknowledgment of Kuzmin's possible misogyny. To her and the other ensemble members, she became the straight performative queer ally, one who advocates for equality until such equality invades her comfort. The repetitive rhyme of the poetry aids such a read as the childish and selfish nature of the character.<sup>30</sup>

As Clorinda finishes her first song, she is interrupted by Floridal, who is stepping away from the party for just a moment. Seizing the opportunity, Clorinda implores Floridal, through another song, to leave Rene and allow him to return to her. Upon introducing her dilemma to Floridal, Clorinda overly states her perception that Floridal is a woman and not a man when she says:

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<sup>30</sup> I want to over emphasize that I do not feel this is the correct read of the character just as I do not feel the gay male reading of the play is most appropriate either. See Chapter 4 for my discussion on Clorinda, where a transgender reading allows a rich and complex personality to emerge that is neither misogynistic nor flat.

It is no secret to you that I love Rene, it is not a secret that he doesn't love me, he is infatuated with you, which is not Floridal, but Dorita. You can, as a woman, understand my torment and help me, I beg you.

Intriguingly, she again mistakenly finds Floridal to be the fraud rather than Dorita. It is not within her worldview to accept that Rene could be so infatuated with another man, so the operatives of her gender performative understanding become clear. To Clorinda, Dorita must be the real identity as a man cannot be attracted to another man, regardless of gender performatives present, Floridal must be the disguise.

Clorinda continues in a song more sophisticated than the previous, returning to symbolist practices such as primes and odds in meter with rhyming couplets. The frequent calls to nature, another symbolist technique, communicates her complicated emotional state. Floridal responds sympathetically yet remains oblivious to the level of infatuation, towards Dorita, on the part of Rene. Of note, Clorinda convinces him to let Rene go, referring to Floridal as her sister, a more familiar state than their shared stage time suggests. I see this familiarity as further evidence of Kuzmin's intended discussion on the role of gender and gender identity, acknowledging a kinship amongst women. Floridal, by performing those gender performatives, is welcomed into that inner fold.

The contrast between Floridal being referred to as a woman while the actor presents in contemporary men's clothing further engages in gender play and continues the discourse on such performances. Unlike other works of Kuzmin, whose discussion of gender and sexuality is between rather than within words, in *The Dangerous Precaution*, he goes to great lengths to make it clear in words and embodiabale actions.<sup>31</sup> While

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<sup>31</sup> While not discussed in this paper, *The Dangerous Precaution* was performed alongside the two other plays in the *Three Plays* collection. In *Two Shepherds and a Nymph in a Cottage* and *The Choice of Bride*, the queer messaging only became visible with considerable performance.

censored for the portrayal of homosexuality, it is surprising that there appears to be little concern for such overt violations of gender norms. Although there is a history of playful cross-dressing within the Russian nobility as early as the reign of Elizabeth I, so such markers might have been seen as frivolous entertainment of little concern.<sup>32</sup>

After obtaining her goal, Clorinda excuses herself, and once again, Floridal is left alone to ponder his dilemma, having agreed to part from Rene. Alone on stage, the actor playing Floridal displays a mixture of confusion and anger. Additionally, the attraction to Rene emotionally is made clear and physically implied as Floridal exclaims: “This game has gone too far, and furthermore, I sense a kind of emotion, which cannot simply be pity for Rene. What is this?”<sup>33</sup> This statement is the first moment the script allows Floridal to speak of his attraction to Rene. Like Sedgwick’s belief that coming out is a creation, not revealing a pre-formed identity, Floridal is unsure what such attraction is. Awareness of the emotion is present, but it is not yet part of Floridal’s identity. Such distance is made clear in the line, “Has a woman’s heart awakened within my body?” where Floridal’s proximity to heterosexuality has not yet allowed the conception of homosexual attraction.<sup>34</sup>

By the end of the song, the real lived consequences of the Dorita/Floridal duality have become apparent, but rather than a simple identity confusion, the attraction of Floridal to Rene moves the dilemma beyond the comedic possibilities explored in Shakespeare’s cross-dressing heroes and heroines. Floridal, in the style of a soliloquy,

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<sup>32</sup> Vera Proskurina, *Creating the Empress: Politics and Poetry in the Age of Catherine II*, (Brighton, MA: Academic Studies Press, 2011), 16.

<sup>33</sup> Shionalyn and Kuzmin, *The Dangerous Precaution*, 7

<sup>34</sup> Shionalyn and Kuzmin, *The Dangerous Precaution*, 7.

sings of this conflict in a poem that has no apparent rhyme but a descending meter (12, 11, 10). For a poet, who so liberally uses rhyme, to avoid it for this monologue, is telling. Such a choice informs us of the distraught state of Floridal and the seriousness of the decision before him. While written as verse but sounding like prose, this trademark of later Kuzminian writing pulls us out of the Renaissance or Shakespearean masquerade and reminds us that despite the thematic and stylistic similarities, the experiences of Floridal are real and lived in the contemporary.<sup>35</sup> Additionally, the meter is eloquently broken mid-line as the monologue reaches its crescendo, feeling frantic.

While the emotional tone is evident in the style of writing, the content is even more so. Floridal, first acknowledges he cannot and never will be Dorita, a sadness found in the rejection of expected gender roles.<sup>36</sup> Yet, rather than feel that what he has done is wrong, instead, he wonders, “Has a woman’s heart awakened within my body?”<sup>37</sup> Why would Floridal expect a woman’s heart to appear within him? He is either reifying the gendered stereotypes of sexuality or acknowledging a change. I choose to entertain both possibilities, allowing Floridal to be a complex individual capable of more than one outcome. Floridal also agrees that the argument is moot as he points out, “And who suffers, whose honor suffers, When your eyes look at me Rene, and excite me so?”<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> Andrew Field, “Mikhail Kuzmin: Notes on a Decadent’s Prose,” *The Russian Review* 22, no. 3, (1963): 289-300.

<sup>36</sup> In Chapter 4 I also explore the possibility that such a call is also grief at the perceived impossibility of becoming Dorita.

<sup>37</sup> Shionalyn and Kuzmin, *The Dangerous Precaution*, 7.

<sup>38</sup> Shionalyn and Kuzmin, *The Dangerous Precaution*, 7; Note that Floridal fails to remember that his actions will involve Clorinda, but as discussed earlier, Kuzmin is not concerned with her as a character and attempts to ensure the audience does not overly empathize with her.

However, reality sets in for Floridal when he realizes his disguise as Dorita is the target of Rene's love, regardless of his personal feelings for Rene. In a final call to the new identity emerging within him, Floridal states, "If there is no Dorita, his love dies. And I return home, my love and I forgotten."<sup>39</sup>

In performance, the monologue's alternating pacing accompanies disembodied looks into space, strengthening the dilemma's impact on viewers. As the actor speeds into the line, "If there was no Dorita..." a hushed silence falls.<sup>40</sup> The silence betrays the aspirations of Floridal desiring to uphold social norms, and the true identity becomes clear. While performing as Dorita, his object of sexuality was attainable, yet Dorita is not possible, and therefore, Floridal's sexual desire is unavailable. The sadness and sense of loss are unmistakable as the actor slows his speech, his strength in vocalness dying alongside the love Floridal desires.

In these moments, Kuzmin lays out his structure for coming out and provides a workable vocabulary for those on similar paths. Laying out a depiction of heteronormative role confusion, Kuzmin shows queer individuals the moment of possibility, potentiality, and the place to begin building a queer utopia. For him, it is in the moment of acknowledgment of sexual attraction that the process begins, and it is fitting that this moment is in isolation. By visualizing Floridal alone, Kuzmin requires no others, no society, to create a new identity, only a recognition of attraction. In agreement with Ahmed, it was only through Floridal's proximity to heterosexuality that reveals such a situation. By queering the heteronormative gender roles, inhabiting, and performing as

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<sup>39</sup> Shionalyn and Kuzmin, *The Dangerous Precaution*, 7

<sup>40</sup> Shionalyn and Kuzmin, *Kuzmin's Three Plays*, 1:01:43-1:01:51.

a woman, Floridal finds the overlap between feelings he initially perceives belonging to a woman and his own. By seeing the junction, Floridal dismantles, for himself, gender roles and admits his attraction to Rene. Following Muñoz's idea of queer futurity, Kuzmin places Floridal in a position of acceptance simultaneous with disappointment, acknowledging that queer utopia is not optimistic but concrete, aware of the social boundaries placed by a heteronormative world-view that adjusts but does not destroy hope.<sup>41</sup>

### **Gay Hope and Seeing the Horizon of Queer Utopia**

As Floridal is about to reach the climactic decision, denying himself a queer utopia, Kuzmin denies us such a dramatic, as is usual, using interruption by Rene. The speed and insistence portrayed by the actor playing Rene makes it clear that he has done some serious soul searching of his own and appears ready to explode if denied the chance to express. Like Clorinda, the assumed straight Rene announces he is sure that Floridal is a woman. His confidence evidence of Floridal's successful gender performatives and reification by Rene of the heteronormative state. Proudly stating his love for Dorita, Rene violently declares he will assault anyone who denies that Floridal is Dorita. With a touch of toxic masculinity, the intent is moving, but the visual representation is disturbing. Fear and annoyance visible on the actor playing Floridal, who, after a period of silence, responds, "I fear, that you will break my skull, because I cannot say anything other than, I am not Dorita..."<sup>42</sup> Rene interprets such actions as a refusal to love him, but Floridal reproaches stating he does love Rene but is not Dorita. As the speech finishes, the actor

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<sup>41</sup> Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia*, 3.

<sup>42</sup> Shionalyn and Kuzmin, *The Dangerous Precaution*, 7

playing Floridal looks off-camera. His silence communicates the over handedness of the attempt by Rene, whose attempt feels more like violence rather than providing support as intended. This action creates a failed climax that serves to create queer feelings again. Expected heteronormative behavior is made uncomfortable by the reality of queer experience.

Amidst the awkwardness that should have been climactic, Floridal begins his last song combining the two styles seen of Floridal earlier. It begins and ends with rhyming couplets in a prime number meter, while the middle contains no rhyme. While rhyming, Floridal addresses Rene, while avoiding rhyme, reveals his inner monologue. This eloquent usage of varied meter and rhyme brings viewers back into the narrative after a failed climax and builds a sense of hope. Within the inner monologue, Floridal debates gender performatives stating:

Would a woman really have such rosy cheeks,  
Like I have?  
Would a woman really have such a strong handshake,  
Like I have?  
Would a woman really have such passion in embrace,  
Like I have?  
I weep with you Rene, but what can be done?<sup>43</sup>

Most compellingly, however, is that Floridal himself seems confused about what gender performatives are. Kuzmin succeeds in a deep analysis of how bodies operate with gender performatives juxtaposing mismatching performatives that society has determined to communicate man or woman. The rosy cheeks betray Floridal's masculinity despite his strong handshake. Floridal communicates both masculine and feminine gender

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<sup>43</sup> Shionalyn and Kuzmin, *The Dangerous Precaution*, 8



performatives, a walking contradiction. The hopelessness created by failing to see beyond such contradictions is made clear as he states, “but what can be done.” Floridal remains in a liminal and uncomfortable space between man and woman, a space a heteronormative society strives to ignore.

Rene confirms the arbitrary and socially constructed nature of gender, as alluded by Gaetano when he responds, “I look at you here and I feel my heart beats, my head spins, just like when I thought of Dorita.”<sup>44</sup> Rene’s love and emotional state were not responding to gender performatives but the living person in front of him. The reality that Floridal is a man does not halt Rene’s emotions, only his actions. Kuzmin upsets the trope of the tragic queer as Rene exhibits no fear response, and there is no pending tragedy. What remains is the real emotion and connection shared between the two as they grapple with the confusion gender performatives have placed upon their bodies. Rene appears to be further along in realizing the situation and more comfortable with his sexuality as he dismisses the contradictions begging, “Forgive me, this will pass.”<sup>45</sup>

Floridal, determined to demonstrate his gender, kisses Rene. He believes so strongly in gender performatives that such an action will only reinforce the incompatibility between two men. In performance, the two attempt a kiss across digital space, signified by touching the lips and hands, reaching beyond the camera before returning to the lips. In the script, Kuzmin makes an intriguing note stating the kiss is slow, which we interpreted as an instant loss of Floridal’s objective. By kissing, Floridal intends to prove manliness by eliciting the expected uncomfortableness that would occur

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<sup>44</sup> Shionalyn and Kuzmin, *The Dangerous Precaution*, 8

<sup>45</sup> Shionalyn and Kuzmin, *The Dangerous Precaution*, 8

in a heteronormative society. Yet, Kuzmin thwarts his intent, and the reality of their love sets in, an experience that brings an intense desire to both Rene and Floridal.

In a celebratory manner, Rene responds, “There is no Dorita,” not as a fear response but to announce the attainment of a queer utopia, the existence of a relationship not built upon heteronormative expectations but between two men.<sup>46</sup> Floridal, so concerned with gendered performance, failed to realize such arbitrary barriers were of no concern to Rene. While Floridal participates in a coming out, Rene feels no need. The process is the creation of a new identity unique to the person creating it. The message of Kuzmin is clear; love exists in whatever form it chooses—not dictated by the performed gender of the actor. Finally, attaining queer utopia is possible. As queer audiences, we can imagine a world where coming out is celebratory and relationships can exist outside the confines of gendered norms. The choice of such an embrace was shocking to the censor in 1906, resulting in an immediate ban. Today, however, with queer actors, such a moment becomes cathartic, and we are relieved at the dilemma’s resolution, as Kuzmin originally intended.

Rene orders a celebration, and the ensemble of characters rejoin the stage to share the love of these two. A traditional gavotte starts up; however, Rene clearly understands the overt power structures of such a dance meant strictly for nobles displaying gender roles. Rene is insistent this is a happy occasion and not hidden in a bedroom away from society or limited by such conventions. The entire court must join together to celebrate their love in public. In a playful turn of phrase, Rene concludes with, “My sadness turned sour, and the cork popped out. I want to be absurdly merry, as I am madly happy today. A

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<sup>46</sup> Shionalyn and Kuzmin, *The Dangerous Precaution*, 8

jig, a jig!”<sup>47</sup> A jig is an interesting choice for its popularity amongst lower classes and that a jig does not require a gendered performance. Two men, two women, or any combination can dance a jig. Partnering may be present, but gendered pairings do not read in the same way they would for a regal gavotte. Both dances are playful but have entirely different connotations when placed upon gendered bodies.

As the actors awkwardly dance, they exude a playful merriness as Kuzmin’s message lands with audiences. While on initial glance, the story is simply that of a boy in drag revealing his identity, however, the ultimate celebration and lengthy discourse on gender make the story more unique and impactful. Not only is love between two men celebrated, but Kuzmin questions the entire construct of gender roles that prohibited such a notion. As I imagine Kuzmin did, we feel relief to finally see the result of his work not mocked for the content but allowed its joyful celebration.

Through our time travel experiment, the performance of *The Dangerous Precaution* gives biographical insight into Kuzmin. Floridal becomes the embodiment of Kuzmin as he explores his sexuality, first confused as misplaced gender norms then actualized into acceptance of a homosexual identity. Kuzmin engages in creating a utopia wherein two males can freely acknowledge their love for each other in public, celebrating such actions. In line with Muñoz’s concrete utopia, such an experience is not without heartbreak, and the reality of dismantling socially created gender norms is required. By situating the narrative closely in style to Shakespeare, who utilized cross-dressing for comedic effect, Kuzmin engages queer feelings weaponizing the proximity to heteronormativity. The final disruption and destruction of the heteronormative

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<sup>47</sup> Shionalyn and Kuzmin, *The Dangerous Precaution*, 9.

expectation create a productive discomfort that upends gender norms and sexuality expectations. Placed in the contemporary through performance allows queer communities to look into the future and acknowledge the difficult steps necessary to move forward but still look forward with hope.

Our first time trip has been fruitful, and we have discovered a complex coming out tale available to the St. Petersburg queer community in 1906. Performed in the contemporary, the play has traversed across time and space and communicates with gay audiences of 2021 in Ellensburg. However, you cannot gain a complete account with a single trip. As we retravel back to St. Petersburg in 1906, familiar with the narrative, let us see how it changes when our travels situate us with a slightly different perspective. What new meaning will this perspective provide, and how does it change our current view? Is Kuzmin perhaps more complex than just a gay man writing gay closeted theatre for gay readers? As we put Kuzmin's work on our bodies, new memories suggest that there is more to be observed.

## CHAPTER 4

### A TRANSGENDER READ, DISIDENTIFICATION, AND QUEER TIME TRAVEL

“It’s my belief a trout can break the ice that prisons it if only it persevere.”

—Mikhail Alekseevich Kuzmin, 1927<sup>1</sup>

“I find myself emotionally compelled by the not-quite-queer-enough longing for form that turns us backward to prior moments, forward to embarrassing utopias, sideways to forms of being and belonging that seem, on the face of it, completely banal.”

—Elizabeth Freeman, 2010<sup>2</sup>

Having spent considerable time exploring Kuzmin’s *The Dangerous Precaution* through a gay-male lens, I now consider whether other reads are available. Other perspectives, lenses, and angles allow us to find new meaning that further informs our knowledge of Mikhail Kuzmin’s theatrical record. This chapter will explore one other possible read discovered as actors began to place Kuzmin’s script on their bodies. As with the previous read, neither is the true or correct read. I liken the two versions to two separate individuals attending a performance. Each saw the same play yet based on their own lived experiences interpreted it differently.

Bodies communicate meaning in various ways, ranging from the way we adorn them to movement, vocal inflections, etc. As such, bodies are also centers of memory wherein performance enables the passing of knowledge. Expanding on the idea that bodies act as memory transference across time, Joseph Roach states, “Performance

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<sup>1</sup> Mikhail Kuzmin, “The Trout Breaks the Ice,” In *Mikhail Kuzmin: Selected Writings*, edited by Michael A. Green, and Stanislav A. Shvabrin, (Cranbury: Associated University Presses, 2005), 76.

<sup>2</sup> Freeman. *Time Binds*, xii.

genealogies draw on the idea of expressive movements as mnemonic reserves, including patterned movements made and remembered by bodies, residual movements retained in images and words (or in the silences between them).”<sup>3</sup> Engaging this idea, the way and how bodies communicate provides access to stored memories. As seen in Chapter 3, performance allows access to meaning; however, it may also provide new meaning and a new angle of analysis.

As Kuzmin engages in a discourse of gender performativity, it is unsurprising that additional layers of meaning emerge only when performed and moved beyond the page. As Diana Taylor acknowledges, “[gender] is harder to identify because normalization has rendered it invisible.”<sup>4</sup> These systems of gender hide within and on bodies. However, as practiced by the ensemble in this project, engagement with our bodies makes the invisible visible, and the memories emerge. Such is the case in our project, when Kuzmin’s language, acted out, led to a realization of transgender experience. Such a realization speaks to history as retrievable through an “archival drag” in and on bodies and speaks to Richard Schechner’s acknowledgment that “history is not what happened but what has been encoded and transmitted.”<sup>5</sup> In our project, transmissions, whether intentional or not, whether matching actual history or not, were revealed through body memory by reenacting the actions of the text. Kuzmin’s theatrical history can now be modified by acknowledging the information learned through embodied practice.

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<sup>3</sup> Joseph Roach, *Cities of the Dead: Circum-Atlantic Performance*. (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 1996), 26.

<sup>4</sup> Taylor, *The Archive and the Repertoire*, 5.

<sup>5</sup> Schneider, *Performing Remains*, 112; Schechner. *Between Theatre and Anthropology*, 50.

Such bodily memory could only occur given the realities of the queer ensemble. As a queer ensemble, the coded cultural memory of gender performance, hiding, and subsequently coming out, exist within ourselves and remembered through the acting of the script. Specifically, it was through enacting on a transgender body that we discovered a new narrative. Whether or not Kuzmin would consider this an overread can be debated; however, we found the experiences, messages, and memories of being a transgender individual within Kuzmin's words.

The discovery of a transgender read of Kuzmin's work is then phenomenological, or rather it was felt through the body. Jay Prosser states "that [transgender individuals] continue to deploy the image of wrong embodiment because being trapped in the wrong body is simply what [being transgender] feels like."<sup>6</sup> In agreement with Lucas Cassidy Crawford, wrong embodiment is not a true lived experience for all transgender individuals; it is, however, frequent and accessible enough as a framework for understanding.<sup>7</sup> It was, and is, a true experience for the transgender actress who participated in our ensemble and raised the possibility of a transgender read.

As the discovery of this read was through phenomenological and embodied approaches, I will utilize narratives of lived experience through performing throughout most of this chapter. In Chapter 3, I conducted a thorough discussion of the script and plot. I will only refer to the plot here when necessary to understand the alterations

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<sup>6</sup> Jay Prosser, *Second Skins: The Body Narratives of Transsexuality*, (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 1998), 69. Note that I have substituted transgender individuals and being transgender for transsexual. This is not to erase the work by Prosser, but to acknowledge new and contemporary terminology while utilizing a theoretical framework that remains relevant despite outdated terminologies.

<sup>7</sup> Lucas Cassidy Crawford, "Transgender Without Organs," In *The Routledge Queer Studies Reader*, edited by Donald E. Hall, Annamarie Jagose, Andrea Bebell, and Susan Potter, (New York, NY: Routledge, 2013), 560-562.

appearing in this new performance. In terms of script changes, a transgender read only required one adjustment. One of the last lines, “There is no Dorita,” was changed to “There is no Floridal.”<sup>8</sup> No other changes occurred on the script, only new ways of performance, based upon new interpretations provided by a change in identity for the character Dorita. Please note, to differentiate between the two scripts, the character’s default identity in this version will be Dorita, recognizing that Floridal would become a deadname. The only references to Floridal will occur when Dorita herself requires such for an understanding of her narrative. In other words, when referring to Floridal, it is understood in this reading that such a person no longer exists, is dead, and exists only as a memory; Dorita is the living character appearing on stage.

As I examine Dorita’s experience, I draw upon the concept of identifying and disidentifying with heteronormative structures. Jose Muñoz turns the Freudian concept of identification into a political act that he terms disidentification. Queer communities, subject to alterity, are often faced with the choice between assimilation or rejection of the heteronormative code. Disidentification allows a third choice to queer individuals to work within heteronormative codes, altering and changing to create a new identity that allows utilizing those same structures of power without the risk that occurs with outright removal from society.<sup>9</sup> Muñoz finds that “disidentification does not dispel those ideological contradictory elements; rather, like a melancholic subject holding on to a lost object, a disidentifying subject works to hold on to this object and invest with it new

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<sup>8</sup> Shionalyn and Kuzmin, *The Dangerous Precaution*, 8

<sup>9</sup> Muñoz, *Disidentifications*.



life.”<sup>10</sup> To disidentify then is to recognize the codes and performatives placed upon bodies in society, utilize those performatives, so your self is understood within society’s terms. Doing so dismantles the social structures you are operating within, as your new identity creates a contradictory state.

In creating the theory of disidentification, Jose Muñoz responds to observations of queer performers of color, noting that, unlike white homosexual males, their lives exist intersectionally. A rejection of gendered codes of the heteronormative risks a simultaneous loss within other inscribed codings such as race. Muñoz notes:

People of color, queers of color, white queers, and other minorities occasionally and understandably long for separatist enclaves outside of the dominant culture. Such enclaves, however, are often politically disadvantageous when one stops to consider the ways in which the social script depends on minority factionalism and isolationism to maintain the status of the dominant order.<sup>11</sup>

Complete rejection of a social code, then, is not the best survival technique. In terms of queerness, self-marginalization is often only available to cis-white gay males who maintain a sense of power inscribed to their whiteness. In other words, the more intersectional the identity, the more likely disidentification proves to be the most advantageous political action. The ability to survive and reject social codes is a sign of privilege and not available to all.

To some, disidentification appears to be assimilation at the surface level; that is, there is no complete disavowal of structures of power. However, to do so is not “homonormative,” as the structures disidentified do not aim to support traditional

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<sup>10</sup> Muñoz, *Disidentifications*, 12.

<sup>11</sup> Muñoz, *Disidentifications*, 14.

heterosexual norms on queer bodies. Rather, disidentified actions find heteronormative structures to identify with, such as prescribed gender roles. Then it disrupts them by placing those norms on bodies that exist outside heteronormative expectedness. Building from Sara Ahmed's ideas of "queer feelings," disidentified performance then situates its radicalness due to its proximity to heterosexuality.<sup>12</sup> Discomfort is created as the performed actions appear queer on non-normative bodies. However, unlike queer feelings, disidentification causes reflection upon the normative body questioned by its performatives appearing on queer bodies.

In the case of our new read of Kuzmin's *The Dangerous Precaution*, we examine disidentification as used through a transgender body. A queer and transgender individual participates and performs heteronormative behaviors. In the case of our actress, she performs both masculinity and femininity. By doing so, however, both genders create discomfort. To Dorita, however, the performance of masculinity ensures survival until such actions create a safe environment in which she may perform gender at will.

Disidentification is engaged in questioning the performance of gender and displacing a presumed homosexual read. In this sense, I re-engage the phrase homonormative, not just to reference the performance of heterosexually prescribed actions but also to acknowledge the privilege among white gay males. By placing a transgender body within an expected homosexual narrative, we can question the universality of homosexual feelings. The reperformance of assumed gay-male narratives in the now, with contemporary understandings of gender, questions the identity of Mikhail Kuzmin. Similar to the finding by Thomas R. Dunn, in his performance of Oscar

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<sup>12</sup> Ahmed, "Queer Feelings," 422-423.

Wilde, contemporary gender formations question the stability of the gender identities of our gay elders.<sup>13</sup> I do not suggest that Oscar Wilde and Mikhail Kuzmin are both transgender individuals; however, their writings suggest that even at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, queer identity was more complex, precluding an assumed gay male identity. Evidence gathered from our performance suggests the possibility of complex gender identity on the part of Kuzmin. Such observations do not remove Kuzmin's identity as a gay male but merely allow for additional complexity.

Those exact biographical discoveries about Mikhail Kuzmin, found through historiographical performance, a theatrical staging, participate in a form of time travel. Unlike traditional time travel, however, no violations of physics are required. Queer time travel exists within queer temporalities that vehemently reject a linear model of time. Such a conception is not new but combines multiple theories to create a theatrical historiographical methodology to assist archive retrieval when silences prevent traditional access. I base my approach on Carolyn Dinshaw's desire for a queer history whereby, "the possibility of touching across time, collapsing time through affective contact between marginalized people now and then [...] suggested that with such queer historical touches we could form communities across time."<sup>14</sup> Rebecca Schneider, building off Dinshaw's idea of a conversation through time, acknowledges the importance of accepting camp in recreative performance.<sup>15</sup> By accepting queer disruptions or camp that occur through recreated performance, I can conceptualize a conversation across time that

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<sup>13</sup> Dunn, "The Quare in the Square"

<sup>14</sup> Dinshaw et al. "Theorizing Queer Temporalities," 178.

<sup>15</sup> Schneider. *Performing Remains*, 112

is not reliant on realism or authenticity. Finally, layering on Elizabeth Freeman's idea of "temporal drag," we allow for the possibility of movement through time that situates itself next to the historical event while never fully recreating it.<sup>16</sup>

I conceptualize queer time travel or temporal dislocation as the blending of these three theories, wherein the stage becomes the vessel and performance becomes the catalytic energy. Engaging in queer time travel is unlike time travel in science fiction television, wherein we must be careful not to disrupt the timeline. In queer time travel, disruption is the goal. Queer temporal dislocation assumes that heteronormative readings have tainted queer histories robbing us of our shared cultural heritage. History of queers in the traditional archive is always partially silenced as documentation and retrieval require a heteronormative lens. Disidentification then becomes the tool to dismantle the filter that limits us to a singular view of history. Situating the performance in traditional expectations, utilizing the traditional read, then intentionally disrupting from within allows us to see the cracks in the filter preventing a complete queer history. Such time travel is inherently dragged. It is different, it is queer, it is situated in a new timeline as a form of (re)remembering that allows the usage of the past in the contemporary to achieve a utopian queer future, visible just upon the horizon. Such a conception might seem fantastical, if not absurd, but I pressure that such is the power of queering the archive. By upsetting linear time, we question traditional power structures and we place new meanings on old texts. History is written anew, not to serve a heteronormative archive, but for creating our own, utilized for the creation of our future.

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<sup>16</sup> Freeman. *Time binds*, 9-10.

The selection of the queer ensemble creates the energy requirements to travel our stage, made queerer by the necessity of digital performance. Displacing the historically gay-male narrative with a transgender body resituates the past of Mikhail Kuzmin and allows discovery in direct transmission from queer elders to the contemporary community. We do, in hope, that the utopia built by Kuzmin becomes more visible on the horizon.

### **The New Transgender Read**

While instructive and impactful, the version of *The Dangerous Precaution*, with a narrative assumed to be about two gay men, is far from the only possible interpretation. It is likely the intended message by Kuzmin and the assumed tale by those who previously studied Kuzmin.<sup>17</sup> However, after translating two other early Kuzminian dramatic works, the consistent and complicated discussions of gender identity I have observed suggest the possibility that Kuzmin is exploring a blended gender identity without having the words to say as much. Homosexuality was discussed in St. Petersburg in 1906, evidenced by the censorship this play received directly utilizing the word.<sup>18</sup> In those discussions, homosexuality is often referred to as either pederasty or in strictly gendered terms when coming to its defense.<sup>19</sup> I cannot discount the reality that Kuzmin is simply using gender as a metaphor for an essentialist view of homosexuality; however, as a scholar in the contemporary, I also wish to engage a queer interpretation that is

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<sup>17</sup> Senelick. *Lovesick*, 103-115

<sup>18</sup> Timofeev, "M. Kuzmin and the Tsar's Censorship," 135-136.

<sup>19</sup> David M. Halperin, "How to Do the History of Male Homosexuality," In *The Routledge Queer Studies Reader*, edited by Donald E. Hall, Donald E. Hall, Annamarie Jagose, Andrea Bebell, and Susan Potter, (New York, NY: Routledge, 2013), 263.

simultaneously useful to queer communities of today. Archival drag then allows the more liberal transgender read, even if not intended by Kuzmin, for its capacity to inform contemporary audiences. Allowing such a read does not remove the possibility that Kuzmin's discourse on gender identity exhibits complex ideas not expected for at least a half-century or more. This allowance is the advantage of a queer read that denies a linear progression of time; we allow the achronological interpretations and entertain the possibilities such observations bring forward.

The transgender read emerged through embodied discovery about four weeks into the rehearsal process. One of the ensemble members, who is a transgender woman, stopped the rehearsal to comment. With a simple, "Is anyone else feeling the trans message in this piece?," she immediately rendered the previously gay male read incomplete and a new performance necessary.<sup>20</sup> After asking for further clarification so we could fully understand her read, she stated, "The words Floridal is saying, they are my experiences, this is what it feels like to be trans, especially before coming out."<sup>21</sup> Breaking for lunch, we pondered those words and, after returning, voted, as an ensemble, to create the second staging of this play. The parallels to the transgender experience were too strong and more so, timelier in our current environment, where it is relatively safer for gay men than transgender individuals. With such a staging, we also decided it would be best to cast a transgender person to allow for better representation alongside improved authenticity. With a simple character swap, we were able to create a second staging of the play.

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<sup>20</sup> Shionalyn, *Three Plays Rehearsal Journal*, Date of Entry 2/6/21.

<sup>21</sup> Shionalyn, *Three Plays Rehearsal Journal*, Date of Entry 2/6/21.

Making one change to the script, replacing “There is no Dorita” with “There is no Floridal,” the remaining adjustments in acting were expected to be minimal.<sup>22</sup> The narrative, however, felt new and distinct. It was no longer a story of two gay men openly acknowledging their attraction but a more profound tale of a transgender woman becoming comfortable and accepting her identity. She utilizes a heteronormative gender role for survival until a better world is available to her. More surprisingly, such a tale changed the read of each character. Villains became allies, fathers became loving, and lovers became holders of intimate knowledge eager to assist in discovery. From the audience's perspective, the play was also more successful. After discussing the play with several audience members, who willingly started conversations, the new staging became the highlight of the evening. The other plays remained enjoyable, but multiple audience members reported being moved to tears when the identity of Dorita is accepted. Additionally, lines previously seen as filler became moments that provided a greater depth to characters.

We elected to perform this version last, meaning audiences were already aware of the narrative, so the focus became less on the story, and the changes became more readily apparent. It remains a possibility that whatever story came second would have been the most impactful, simply due to narrative familiarity on the part of the audience. However, I believe the success of the transgender read had more to do with contemporary relevance that moved audiences as they rewrote their historical narrative. After all, how could a playwright from 1906 have envisioned such a performance? We rewrote the complexity of queer history for ensemble and audience members alike by changing one word in a

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<sup>22</sup> Shionalyn and Kuzmin, *The Dangerous Precaution*, 8.

single line. The significant impact of such a slight change in script questions the expectation of queer experience in 1906 and St. Petersburg. Would such a tale be so impactful if Kuzmin had no conception of such possibilities? Alternatively, I argue we engaged in metaphysical time travel that reformed our thinking of Kuzmin, allowing already present knowledge to emerge, seen in a new light. This historical reimagining seen within the performance did not add knowledge that Kuzmin did not have but instead allowed a new viewpoint on the same situation given new contextual surroundings and new vocabularies. The transgender identity discourse was already within Kuzmin, in St. Petersburg, in 1906; however, it took queer theatrical time travelers in 2021, specifically those familiar with the transgender experience, to see the narrative truth. The old gay-male read remains and is still valid alongside this new tale. Such a conception is not unlike seeing a theatre in the round show multiple times with different seats. The show remains the same, but a new angle reveals new details, depths, and ideas.

What was it like, then, to experience this temporal dislocation? Our audiences, like theoretical time-travelers, had a cursory understanding of the historical artifact. Having just witnessed a staging of the play advocating for homosexual acceptance, our audience has a preconceived notion of the event. Like historical time travelers, a familiarity with the moment in time exists due to the artifacts leftover in the historical record landing in textbooks. However, when those travelers go back and look at the artifact, it looks different, as it always will, from the historical record, because their social and cultural context has changed, forcing a new perspective and a new read. Because we already had a cursory knowledge of the event, new details, new items become noticeable.



Those items are not new; our time travel did not place those items there. They simply were not recorded in the historical record.

Following this logic then, our second performance is experiencing the same aesthetic result. Our audiences know the performance, but this time around, it seems different; they notice details, and a new narrative adjusts their understanding of history. We did not create history; the archival record of the event has simply expanded, allowing our understanding to become more rich and full.

### **A Different Play but Same Words**

The initial cognitive dissonance occurs within the first moments. The beginning music and backdrop remain the same, the only difference, a subtitle mentioning, “A different perspective.”<sup>23</sup> We primed the audience, just as time travelers would be, to see things anew, from a new angle, rewriting their expectations. Changes, adjustments, and details will be more noticeable than before. Such a notice certainly biases our audiences; however, a repeat performance would result in similar behaviors. Informing our audiences, we felt, would result in a quicker acceptance of the new premise.

The first scene begins, and the actors playing Gaetano and Postumius appear the same as before, in the same positions. However, the square where the actor playing Floridal resides is now empty, quickly replaced by a new actor. This new actor appears more masculine than the previous Floridal with her long hair pulled up tight, wearing a loose-fitting red flannel shirt.<sup>24</sup> With hands clutching her shirt near the chest, the

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<sup>23</sup> Shionalyn and Kuzmin, *Kuzmin's Three Plays*, 1:06:57.

<sup>24</sup> Please note I will be using she/her pronouns for this actress, despite playing a male named character to acknowledge the identity of the actress. Furthermore, by referencing actor over character, it is my hope that the distinction between Floridal and Dorita is made clear.

character's discomfort is made clear with a gesture towards gendered bodies. Delivering her lines in a low masculine tone, we immediately know this is a new Floridal, different from before. The other two characters begin to show differences as well. Choices made possible through discovery in rehearsal while interacting with this new transgender Dorita. Postumius becomes jollier than before, a choice meant to signify his general acceptance of his daughter's identity, despite the possibly cruel choice to force her into a situation questioning her gender. Gaetano appears more serious, more contemplative, almost like a pedagogue hoping to instill wisdom to Dorita through poetry. The other characters required no changes; however, such adjustments felt necessary, like a domino effect created by altering one character.

With Gaetano's initial monologue, these reverberations are clear; the bawdy and foolish lines before felt like an Arlecchino merely playing with words for a shock reaction due to their sexually charged nature. However, with a new, more serious Gaetano, the lines land with a more seductive tone maintaining the element of sexuality but refined. In a sense, Arlecchino has become a noble, and his words are academic, taken more seriously. The discourse on gender does not annoy this time but instead hits Dorita in her soul, visible on the face of the actress. Of note, the actress playing Gaetano decided that while her previous character was bisexual, she would perform as a non-binary individual in this more contemporary read. Gaetano, then eschews any sort of gendered role. Gaetano is the same character prescribed earlier, but by establishing gender neutrality within the actress's mind, we engage in disidentified performance. Gaetano's look remains the same, but the gendered speech no longer lives on the periphery of society. A turn towards the academic allows a safe place for such discussion.

Gaetano emulates acceptable social norms while simultaneously rejecting them on academic grounds. As the initial scene ends, Postumius and Gaetano seem genuinely hopeful for Dorita, still calling herself Floridal.

As the performance transitions into the poetry by Rene, the disembodied voice takes on new meaning. Dorita's reactions appear similar to that of Floridal, demonstrating that some reactions exist across any perceived gender differences. Individuality remains, while the gay male actor playing Floridal sent eyes up into the sky in wistfulness, the words to our transgender actress went inward, becoming part of the body. The possibility of being Dorita has connotations felt within the body of our actress. For a gay man, it was simply drag, a costume, and a caricature of gender, while within a transgender body, those performatives have meaning, value, and identity. Becoming Dorita has a physiological response, and the threat of discovery appears grander. Muñoz's argument for a third approach to queer identity, between assimilation and rejection, is evident on stage. To Dorita, at this moment, survival depends upon acceptance of gendered norms, yet Dorita exists and as such disrupts the notion that gender performativity communicates truth. However, the hope, or life as Dorita, now exists, but survival becomes the priority as the actress quickly exits the stage, avoiding the entertainment of such thoughts.

### **Disidentification and Making the Invisible Seen**

Further emphasizing the new changes made upon the entire performance by changing the identity of a single actor, our new Clorinda, emerging, feels immediately less threatening. During rehearsal, we discussed how Dorita being transgender would change the reactions of the characters. Clorinda, the flat villain in the gay version, is transformed in this performance, softened and interesting. The actress playing Clorinda

saw two possibilities. Seeing her character as definitely straight and cis-gender, she could support Dorita or remain the villain and act out the role of a TERF (Trans-exclusive radical feminist).<sup>25</sup> In rehearsal, the actress played with both but found the supportive role more authentic to the character interactions, even considering Clorinda's request for Dorita to leave Rene. To the actress, this request has only to do with her love of Rene. The conflict of supporting a transgender friend versus requesting her to leave due to personal, romantic affections gave Clorinda a more nuanced and authentic feel.<sup>26</sup> No longer flat, the second performance of Clorinda felt more impactful on audiences, and we simultaneously felt empathy for both characters in love with Rene. The result in performance meant intrigue where once we felt boredom. No longer is Clorinda empty space on stage, further pointing out that the essentialist misogynist critique of Kuzmin fails to acknowledge the advanced understanding of gender exhibited by the playwright.

As the scene continues, even Rene's presence takes on new significance. Previously, the interruption by Rene further alienated Clorinda. Now, when the actor playing Rene interrupts the scene, the torn emotions became strong as his camera replaces hers. Whereas in the gay reading, the relationship felt empty. As the scene progresses, indicating a dance, the sense of how this will turn out on the new transgender body raises the tension. With this read, what previously felt as a rushed progression in

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<sup>25</sup> Viv Smythe. "I'm credited with having coined the word 'Terf'. Here's how it happened." *The Guardian*, November 18, 2018, Accessed on 4/25/2021. <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2018/nov/29/im-credited-with-having-coined-the-acronym-terf-heres-how-it-happened>

<sup>26</sup> Shionalyn, *Three Plays Rehearsal Journal*, Date of Entry: 2/6/21.

narration suddenly becomes the inciting incident that forces the simultaneous performance of both Dorita and Floridal on a single body.

Returning to the party scene, where before we saw two overly gendered women, we now see two tropishly masculine men (played by a female actress and the Floridal from the gay version). The actors, having selected the elitist frat boy and the overly masculine partier tropes, lent an overtly sexual reading to such a small scene. Previously feeling gossipy, the new take feels uncomfortable, and the gendered take on clothing become problematic and sexist. The clothing worn by women suddenly become objects as a barrier to sexual conquest. As a contemporary read by a queer ensemble, such an interpretation, while a trope, felt surprisingly real, and as one actor said during rehearsal, “I know these men, yes we are exaggerating, but I know exactly who they are at parties.”<sup>27</sup> Intriguingly, by performing and stating these gender performatives, a new narrative forms in the play. Clorinda is replaced as the villain, making toxic masculinity the center of critique. The true antagonist to transgender identity acceptance is not gender roles but toxic gendered performance. Their tropish gestures and dress further bring to light how disidentification operates. By engaging and performing expected gendered norms, Dorita ensures survival amongst these men, but by doing so, heterosexual norms are questioned and create discomfort. However, it is not the queer individuals that cause discomfort but those operating obliviously within the prescribed heterosexual codes.

Giving us a reprieve from such visible gender tropes and discomfort created by the presence of toxic masculinity, Clorinda emerges again, alone, and no longer feeling like an undeveloped character. In contrast with new surroundings, a character that was

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<sup>27</sup> Shionalyn, *Three Plays Rehearsal Journal*, Date of Entry: 2/6/21.

previously my largest critique of Kuzmin's writing becomes a fascinating and complex character. The obnoxious rhyme, performed by a more complex character, becomes evidence of the limited ability of Clorinda to explain her complicated emotions.

Reverting to simplistic child-like rhymes, the desire for a simpler time manifests.

As Dorita reemerges on the scene, Clorinda appears to muster the courage to ask something she knows will harm her friend, give up Rene, and return him to Clorinda. Previously whiney, this interpretation lends depth, and the crisis facing Dorita is no longer straightforward. Dorita and Clorinda become friends, sisters in arms, and one of them has to be hurt, either Clorinda as Dorita is allowed a relationship in her new identity or Dorita forced to remain in a body that does not seem to fit. This situation is faced in the real world when queer people are told their coming out will harm their friends and family, thereby creating guilt about one's identity. Within this scene, the actress playing Dorita seems to be in a dual emotive state, simultaneously desiring Rene and fearful of losing him, demonstrated by the tight posture and folded arms. The emotions of Clorinda and Dorita match, communicating the actress's choice to depict a character supportive of a transgender friend yet conflicted by her relationship with Rene. At this moment on stage, shared humanity and identity are visible, despite the variance in the situation. Clorinda sees Dorita as a woman, not as an other. Again, disidentification works by operating within the confines of heterosexuality. Clorinda accepts Dorita as a woman—the equal treatment by Clorinda evident that the third route is viable.

### **Dorita as Real, Floridal as Costume**

Continuing in monologue, the actress playing Clorinda begs for the return of Rene. The emotions become too much for Dorita as the actress slowly lets down her hair

and removes her plaid flannel shirt. She now appears as a woman, in a purple blouse, clothes again performative of gender. At this moment, the identity of Dorita overwhelms, and Floridal begins to melt away significantly before required by the script. Unprompted by direction, this moment occurred naturally in rehearsal as the actress embodied this new role. As stated in earlier chapters, Kuzmin's work is a puzzle whose meaning lies between the words. The discovery by the actress playing Dorita in this moment is further evidence of that argument.

Allowing audiences to visualize the newly revealed and performatively demonstrated woman, the actress playing Dorita stands in silence for a bit. The process of disidentification, replacing a homonormative role with a transgender body, allows the audience to process the similarities and hopefully recognize the shared emotional state. As Clorinda exits the stage, the reality of the request sinks in, that is, to abandon Rene and allow things to return to the simpler time before Dorita existed. The reveal of Dorita as a woman was impactful, and the real lived impact of asking a transgender person to return to their deadname feels trauma-inducing.

As Dorita begins her monologue acknowledging the duality within her, gendered performance becomes centered. Beginning in a feminine voice matching the gendered clothing, the actress playing Dorita takes a moment to stop—to restart her monologue with a gruffer masculine sound. Her voice is performed far lower in register than heard by the gay male, a performative overly emphasizing manhood and maintaining the life of Floridal for just a bit longer. The course delivery of “I am not Dorita” sounds comical. We know the inner debate, and the outcome seems clear.<sup>28</sup> Floridal now sounds fake and

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<sup>28</sup> Shionalyn and Kuzmin, *Kuzmin's Three Plays*, 1:18:00.

inauthentic to us, and we wish to return to the honest-sounding feminine voice of Dorita. An acknowledgment of the fakeness providing further evidence of the socially constructed nature of gender revealed through disidentification. What we previously read as male now sounds wrong, yet the characters are the same; only knowledge of identity and self has changed. Similar performatives no longer match given the new situation. If gender were not performative, such a response could not occur. Additionally, if disidentification was not a viable pathway, such a phenomenological response could not occur. It is through Dorita's proximity to heterosexually defined gender that gender now appears uncomfortable. Remarkably, it is not a transgender identity that feels uncomfortable, but a cis-straight identity made stable only through gendered performatives that now betray.

The line, "Has a women's heart awakened within my body," takes on a deeper meaning. Rather than communicating confusion while attempting to deal with the cognitive dissonance of accepting homosexuality, it instead reads as a sincere question. That question leads us to hope for Dorita, hoping that if such a thing is possible, we may experience that transition with her and see her full self come into existence. However, the conflict of identity remains as Dorita states that Rene loves the woman and "not me." The line is spoken by the actress while pulling her hair backward to indicate that this woman we see on stage is not the real identity.<sup>29</sup> The performative of shorter hair proves a false read as we no longer see a Floridal at all but a Dorita. Everyone but Dorita sees this, and the hope of the ending brings anticipation. Instead of dismay at society's unwillingness to accept a gay relationship, we see an internal debate where Dorita is unwilling to accept

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<sup>29</sup> Shionalyn and Kuzmin, *Kuzmin's Three Plays*, 1:19:29.



her own identity. The sadness we feel is not for society being unwilling to see gay relationships as valid, but at the sadness experienced by transgender individuals who do not feel their identities are valid and cannot be their true selves. The latter resulting in a more impactful performance, with us begging for freedom alongside Dorita.

As Rene bursts onto the scene, the actor delivers his line quickly, feeling less masculine than before. We feel a sense of dread knowing Dorita is about to deny her identity. As time travelers, we have already seen this event play out. Yet, in the build, something seems different. Rene's lines do not land as threatening anymore; instead, they sound supportive. The line, "I know that you are a woman," previously an attack on Floridal feels like Rene begging for Dorita to emerge into her true identity. After rehearsing this scene multiple times, the actor playing Rene felt similarly. As a transgender actor himself, he could justify the harsh approach seen in the gay version. However, in the transgender narrative, it was as if he was speaking to his earlier self, full of compassion, understanding, and yearning for truth. Such a complex motivation was unavailable to the previous Rene. As the actress playing Dorita attempts to interrupt, Rene's dismissal and insistence on remaining quiet feel more like a friend in assistance than a domineering attempt to control the situation. The dismissal instead feels more like a friend asking to hear them out before you return to self-harming behavior.

The remainder of the scene, including the monologue by Dorita, feels similar to the gay version. The most significant differences are demonstrated by the exasperations heard in Dorita's voice and the quiet demeanor of the new Rene. The fear response seen in Dorita feels justifiable, and we empathize with her conflict. The gender performatives discussed in Dorita's monologue no longer speak directly to sexuality but rather

acknowledge the lived dualities of transgender individuals who feel alienated from their bodies.<sup>30</sup>

As we hear Rene speak, “I look at you and my heart beats and my head spins, just like when I thought of Dorita,” we see the actress playing Dorita open—filled with the hope of existence alongside this supportive lover, her transition seems possible.<sup>31</sup> Rene’s response, rather than disappointment, recognizes that perhaps Dorita is not yet ready, and ultimately it is her decision. In this performance, Dorita’s kiss, meant to demonstrate the awkwardness of love shared between two men, enacts no such performative. Instead, the kiss connects her and Rene, fulfilling her sense of womanhood. It not only validates their love but awakens within Dorita her own identity. With the kiss, Floridal dies, and Dorita is born. The new identity creation is impactful and moves when Dorita states, “Perhaps it has always been Dorita.”<sup>32</sup> As her face displays relief, the story resolves. Less a story of love, more a story of personal growth and acceptance, we feel more deeply impacted in a personal way.

The celebration at the end is the denouement that we needed, a moment to collectively share with Dorita in her acceptance of herself. Strung along with the denial of Dorita’s true self, we need to release the anxiety and tension such denial created. After accepting her identity as a woman, the actress is visibly shaking, still unsure of the reality she has entered into and what is to come next. As Rene begs for music, the anxiety remains as the classical dance begins—leaving only when the call for a lively jig arrives.

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<sup>30</sup> See Roach for a detailed discussion of the duality of the transgender experience.

<sup>31</sup> Shionalyn and Kuzmin, *Kuzmin’s Three Plays*, 1:22:49

<sup>32</sup> Shionalyn and Kuzmin, *Kuzmin’s Three Plays*, 1:29:29

The celebration and the liveliness of the jig announce that our true identities are worthy of such energy and happiness. With a gesture of thanks on the part of the actress playing Dorita, she takes a moment to see the people surrounding her during the dance; a public celebration previously thought unavailable.

## CHAPTER 5

### CONCLUSION

“So I’m glad the drizzle has soaked my clothes: It has brought with it a precious hope.”

-Mikhail Alekseevich Kuzmin, 1906<sup>1</sup>

As the performance ends, we now have two possible reads of essentially the same script. Performance has rendered a new account of the same historical event. A celebratory but simpler version tells of two men learning to accept their love for each other. The second provides a profound discovery of a transgender identity hidden within, worthy of celebration. Regardless of the read, both performances speak to a complex view of gender as a social construction alongside a deep understanding of sexuality that transcends a simplistic binary between straight and gay. Our audience and actors have successfully traveled through time through creative performance. Having altered the expectations of Kuzmin’s work, the importance of performance as a form of historiographical discovery becomes clear. Performing through time allows such discoveries as the historical performance was never a singular event but a vast array of possible interpretations and perspectives. We have uncovered only two.

Our metaphysical time travel is critical because the historical event we traveled to never existed. Our temporal dislocation has opened a new timeline in which Kuzmin’s work is celebrated and performed without censorship. Such playful re-remembering of histories proves helpful for queer audiences to engage our elders and learn the lessons

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<sup>1</sup> Mikhail Kuzmin, “This Summer’s Love,” In *Mikhail Kuzmin: Selected Writings*, edited by Michael A. Green, and Stanislav A. Shvabrin, (Cranbury: Associated University Presses, 2005), 35.

they have to offer. In his wisdom of 1906, Kuzmin teaches us to acknowledge the socially constructed nature of gender, seek love to those who love us, and accept our identities to become more complete humans. These messages transcend cultural and political boundaries, feeling just as relevant in Ellensburg in 2021 as St. Petersburg in 1906. Performance allows transcendence often eluded when left on the page.

Having completed our temporal shift, I now wish to reexamine each of the goals of this project and evaluate what successes occurred and where we need to adjust in the future. In the introduction, I established four goals: 1) Translate, embody, and perform the works of Mikhail Kuzmin, 2) Examine the ways Kuzmin utilizes heteronormative structure in order to create a queer vocabulary and disrupt systems, 3) Expand and fill in the gaps within queer history, 4) Engage queer temporalities to examine how using historical performance may exist within the present in service to a future. I wish to examine each of those in a bit more detail alongside a summary of findings. Afterward, I hope to lay a ground plan for future work in both Kuzmin studies and embodied theatrical and historiographical research.

As I have spent the last significant portion of a year reading, contemplating, and entrenching myself in the early dramatic works of Kuzmin, I am struck at how my own historiographical work has existed within a temporality of its own. Within that year, Kuzmin has shifted from a minor footnote to an individual that is now framing my future work within theatre studies through a queer lens. I am indebted to his life, his writing, and his thinking. At the same time, my conception of Kuzmin has dramatically shifted due to discoveries made during this project. Situating his historical works on contemporary bodies has allowed a new lens to examine his story.

At the initial stage of translation, *The Dangerous Precaution* existed in a somewhat uninteresting and jilted text that felt imitative of Shakespeare at best. My disappointment at the early stage was pronounced as I felt I had to expand any new knowledge beyond what Laurence Senelick had already discovered several decades ago. Luckily for both Kuzmin and myself, I had an engaged cast willing to embody and work through the text. That work moved his censored play from a simplistic Shakespearean copy to a stand-alone text that, in my mind, speaks brilliantly to the complex gender and sexuality structures that existed for Kuzmin and us today. Without placing Kuzmin's texts on contemporary queer bodies, the available knowledge about his writings and his identity would keep the perception of him as another copycat whose only dramatic invention was the choice to center queer individuals in his narratives. What we have discovered, however, is that Kuzmin's understanding of gender and sexuality was well beyond its time and holds up today. His narratives and characters engage in queer discourse that contemporary scholars still grapple with. Through embodied translation, with the assistance of transgender actors, we discovered an entirely new read that allows an altered reflection of who Kuzmin was. If this project were to be examined solely by the resulting text, its success could be questioned. However, by performing the texts and the resulting adaptations, we have garnered new and valuable knowledge that may aid in creating a queer history. Acknowledging the latter, no matter how imperfect the translation may be, the project's first goal remains a success.

When reading the first translations of *The Dangerous Precaution*, I found it the least interesting of the three texts. Beyond its censorship, I failed to see what interest it had to offer. The other two plays were vibrant, comedic, and had a unique salon charm to

them. *The Dangerous Precaution*, however, felt standard. Part of that reason is that I could only recognize the centering of queer characters as a redeeming value. Yet, as I began to explore the text further, the subsurface layers began to emerge, and the beauty of the Kuzmin riddle began to appear. What initially appeared reification of heteronormative values suddenly became a dismantling of the gender construct. This dismantling added to my intrigue; however, I was stuck in thinking that Kuzmin only understood sexuality in purely gendered terms, a trait that would appear dated to contemporary queer artists. What I did not expect was that those same artists had little trouble connecting to Kuzmin. The queer ensemble so readily took up the premises presented by Kuzmin that we made discoveries almost instantly. When the ensemble discovered the transgender read, a concept foreign in vocabulary in 1906, we knew we had made a connection that made Kuzmin relevant to audiences today.

Within both reads, however, we found intentional and helpful closeness to heteronormativity that create an accessible and powerful discourse on queerness. The powerfulness of this choice speaks directly to contemporary queer theories put forward by Sara Ahmed and Jose Muñoz. Intriguingly each utilized heteronormative structures in unique ways. When Floridal is considered a gay man, such structures seem to discomfort straight audiences, thereby dismantling gender structures that prevent queer sexualities from existing freely within society. When Dorita is considered a transgender woman, those same structures seem like safety nets, ensuring her survival until she can have a safe external and internal environment. More classical queer theories would reject such pathways as assimilation strategies, but contemporary queer artists, looking at intersexual identities, realize that is simply not a choice many have.

Having performed both plays, what then do they communicate about Kuzmin, and how does that knowledge contribute to a queer history? The most significant contribution that I want to mark is that Kuzmin's dramatic works go well beyond simply acknowledging queer characters. His narratives center and celebrate pleasure in those individuals. Many queer writers of his time utilized coded structures to hide sexuality to all but queer readers. Kuzmin openly engaged in discussions of sexuality without resorting to harmful tropes such as the tragic queer, whose identity leads to harm or death. Kuzmin was doing more than centering these characters; he built a queer vocabulary that allowed for queer discourse. What initially appears as a simple gay love story evolves into a discussion of a coming out pathway, a rejection of gender, and a celebration of identity known externally but not yet acknowledged. These complex narratives allow queer communities, as early as 1906, to see pathways towards the creation of a hopeful utopia without resorting to tropes that serve only as blind optimism. Kuzmin acknowledges the struggle but refuses to let us stay there. To Kuzmin, queer identity was worth celebrating.

By engaging a lens of queer temporality, by exploring how two times may touch, sit next to each other, and converse, Kuzmin's work takes on an evocative nature. It is easy to see historical works as purely historical; however, it is clear that queer temporal experiences work differently. Kuzmin's words spoke directly to artists today. The evidence is my transgender actress—whose lived experience exists in words written over a century ago. Traditional history likes to have us believe in a progressive nature, meaning transgender ideas were given vocabulary in the contemporary and must only exist in the present. Such ideas are patently false when historical texts give new insight



into the experiences of transgender individuals. Without a discovery of Kuzmin stating such, we can never know the original intent. The original intent, however, is irrelevant because these ideas exist in new artists engaging with his text. We have created a new timeline in which Kuzmin understands a transgender experience in addition to his already known experience as an openly gay man.

More intriguing than the notice that contemporary concepts are recognizable in historical texts inherently lacking such a vocabulary is the power that such texts have in inspiring a future. Kuzmin's utopia in *The Dangerous Precaution* is a concrete one. Rather than removing struggles and creating a blissful fantasy, Kuzmin creates a world where conflict and struggle still exist, yet the freedom to be two gay men in love or a transgender woman is possible. It is not blind optimism as those individuals still had to work against systems to exist in their utopia. Kuzmin's play has the power to help us reach our future. To him, the first step towards reaching a queer utopia is recognizing and rejecting heteronormative gender structures within society, a dismantling from within that openly mocks such systems while simultaneously embodying them. This step creates a hopeful and solid utopia. It provides us a pathway to success and the queer vocabulary required for passage. Given these observations, it is clear that our project distorted traditional temporalities and, for a brief time, allowed open conversation between two locations separated by time, space, and even language.

In a holistic sense, this project was a success. We successfully translated, embodied, and staged a performance that brought to light new knowledge about Mikhail Kuzmin. We engaged in a political act demonstrating a better world available to us in the future. The past, present, and future connected. The work, however, is not done. This

project was exploratory in a naturalist sense. Meaning, we wanted to see if there was any merit to this process, to which we found a resounding yes. That same process now can continue in more refined ways.

My study focused on *The Dangerous Precaution* and the other two plays in the *Three Plays* collection to a lesser extent. Kuzmin's work, however, is vast and unexplored in the West. More than twenty other plays are waiting for discovery. I also recognize that his writings before the 1917 revolution are the most studied of his work in general. Little scholarship exists about his later work and even less about his later dramatic works. I now wonder how exactly Kuzmin moved from such a symbolist comedic style into his later German Expressionistic works. *On the Death of Nero*, his full-length play also engaged in temporal shifts, blending Kuzmin's time with Rome centuries earlier, making it a prime target for embodied work engaging with queer temporalities.

In addition to the work of Kuzmin himself, I now wonder what allowed Kuzmin to be so successful and safe enough to write in the way he did. Noticing his association with "The Tower" and several other queer members of St. Petersburg, I believe they created a queer temporal dislocation themselves, a pocket of time in which queer thinking could flourish. Knowing this pocket somewhat disappeared and certainly changed after the revolution, I wonder how these pockets respond to normal temporal and political activities outside their sphere. Given that information, what other pockets exist, both within and beyond Russia. How do these pockets operate, how are they built, and what specifically are they responding to? When are the times they have existed, and how do these pockets communicate to each other? These questions are far larger than the scope of

this project but remain the focal point going forward. As stated in Chapter 2, Kuzmin was the first footnote, but now I must find the others, even more so, the queer artists whose lack of proximity to canonized figures have left them without the privilege of a mention. The future work of this project is their discovery, so we may regain a queer history that leads to a collaborative utopia.

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**APPENDIX A**TRANSLATED SCRIPT OF *THE DANGEROUS PRECAUTION***The Dangerous Precaution**  
Comedy with singing in one act

Written by Mikhail Alekseevich Kuzmin (1906)

Translated by Keenan Shionalyn and the *Three Plays* Ensemble (2021)

## Personae:

Postumius;  
Floridal, his son (*presumed to be his daughter Dorita*);  
Rene, young prince;  
Clorinda, his beloved;  
Gaetano, of Postumius' court;  
1<sup>st</sup> Courtier;  
2<sup>nd</sup> Courtier;  
Courtiers, Dames, Servants.

Setting: Rene's Garden.

Time: 17<sup>th</sup> CenturyPerformed digitally via Zoom on February 27<sup>th</sup>, 2021

**Scene 1**

(Postumius, Floridal, Gaetano and multiple courtiers enter.)

Floridal.        I am done with this!

Postumius.     Calm down, my son, have a little more patience...

Floridal.        I am fed up with this game, this deception! Everyone suspects I am a lady, and following your instructions I cannot rightly prove otherwise.

Gaetano.        O, proving it would be easy with a show and tell!

Floridal.        This is ridiculous! This poor Rene fellow is losing his mind...

Postumius.     Precaution — this is only a precaution, my son, you have to let us finish our business, to be rid of Clorinda, and then, when the time is right, I will be the first to make this deception clear; and this this will be remembered laughingly.

Gaetano.        It is only three more days of courtship, prince.

Floridal.        Another three days of sighing, of reproaches, of gentle strolls. And after all of this, I will feel sorry for him—Rene.

Gaetano.

O Floridal!

Between a woman and young men  
Differences are not so grand,  
As between a hill and a glen  
Or how an ear differs from a hand:  
    All are only trifles,  
    All are only trifles,  
Narrow hips and a slender bod  
To the young man are the gift from God,  
While women are round and shapely —  
That is the difference — do you see?  
A glance from either may impair  
A kiss from both can kill.  
A young man who is svelte and fair,

Our heart and passions thrill  
 All are only trifles,  
 All are only trifles;  
 Narrow hips and a slender bod  
 To the young man are the gift from God,  
 While women are round and shapely —  
 That is the difference — do you see?  
 Or to say another way:  
 Top or bottom, heads or tails,  
 For a player, more regales.

Postumius. I find your song indecent, Gaetano.

Gaetano. I am a free poet; decency is a social construct — ergo: one, my poems are beyond decent. Two, they tell the truth. Additionally, they have size, grace, and playfulness.

Postumius. In other words, they have everything except modesty. But quiet...I hear singing of our bird-catcher. Patience, my son, this is only a precaution, in three days all will be discovered. Goodbye!

Gaetano. All the blessings and success!

*(They exit.)*

## Scene 2

*(Floridal is alone; behind the stage is Rene singing.)*

Rene.

To the woods, the woods  
 Let's leave behind our boring neighborhoods!  
 The sun shines there,  
 We are alone, my friend, together a pair.  
 The viridescent grass, blossoms full and sings  
 The wind blows and whips, flaps and spreads its wings.  
 The cool brook sparkles, revels with the ravine  
 And suddenly it melts, drifts far until unseen.  
 To the woods, the woods

Let's watch my love, as only blue skies could!  
 The singing feathered friends, feathered friends soaring by,  
 Glittering northern lights, northern lights glimmer high  
 The sun slowly sets, ascends above us all.  
 Here love but wanders, surveys big and small  
 To the woods, the woods  
 Whom love did find, grant marvels good.  
 There, in the dense moss and ivy a hut you'll find,  
 There I will live, will live with Dorita entwined.  
 Without Dorita I grow weak like in a dream,  
 Dorita here, I'm risen, passion a gleam  
 To the woods, the woods  
 Go all, who like me, have risen and stood.

### Scene 3

(Rene, Clorinda, and a few ladies and courtiers enter.)

Clorinda (*to Floridal*). Hello, prince.

Floridal. Haven't we seen each other before?

Clorinda. How attentive you are! You look like a lover, who has not seen his beloved for more than an hour.

Floridal. I was listening to our host sing and was daydreaming.

Clorinda. O yes! This Dorita is intriguing me, I wanted to get a look at his love.  
(*admiring herself in a handmirror*)

Rene. You will be able to do it now.

Clorinda. O prince, (You are) too kind.

Rene. I was not speaking about the mirror. (*To Floridal*) Are you bored, prince? Maybe, you wish to put together a dance?

Floridal. It is all the same to me.

Rene. Bring musicians to the terrace.



*(They exit.)*

#### **Scene 4**

1<sup>st</sup> Courtier. He would have gladly danced a Sarabande with her if she wasn't wearing pants.

2<sup>nd</sup> Courtier. The pants are not a hindrance to either a Sarabande or a Matlot.

1<sup>st</sup> Courtier. Pants get in the way of the fantasy.

2<sup>nd</sup> Courtier. Yes, when your fantasies are as limited as you are.

*(They exit; with distant music. Clorinda later returns and plants herself on a bench.)*

#### **Scene 5**

Clorinda. Although she calls herself Floridal, her face is that of a schoolboy. Even though she lacks all the feminine charms in her clothing, his heart has turned to her. O Rene! And at one time we were happy, at one time!

Under the shade of the wide fir tree  
 Sat close with my lovely  
 And sang, sang with glee.  
 When the sun falls and the sky goes rosy,  
 Pan flute's sweet melody  
 We melt'd tenderly  
 Where did these days go to fly and flee?  
 The years, the hours and the weeks set free  
 Were they, maybe?  
 Is my friend right in his mind or crazy?  
 Is he truly no more in love with me  
 Oh really? Oh really?  
 'Neath these waters shoals hid in the sea,  
 Our ship stopped still too far from a quay  
 And stuck, stuck were we...  
 The skies now go dark and blacken like tea  
 My soul barely clinging to my lifeless body  
 It's leaving, empty...

Ah!

*(Floridal enters.)*

**Scene 6**

Clorinda. Two words, Floridal.

Floridal. You wish to speak with me?

Clorinda. Yes, prince.

Floridal. I am at your service.

Clorinda. It is no secret to you that I loved Rene, it is not a secret that he doesn't love me, he is infatuated with you, which is not Floridal, but Dorita. You can, as a woman, understand my torment and help me, I beg you.

Oh please return to me, give me back his love,  
 So I am able to see above,  
 Forget our trial,  
 His beautiful smile.  
 Oh please return to me, give me back love's flame,  
 So my old strength I may yet reclaim  
 Remove all stems and bud,  
 And heat left in my blood.  
 Oh please return to me, give me back that kiss,  
 That softly said: "I love you, don't be jealous".  
 (But how I do crave  
 kiss's poison wave!)  
 Like the royal purple seal of the Czar,  
 My lips hold silence no one can unbar.  
 Hear me now, oh hear me now,  
 Give it back to me!

Floridal. I am no less sad than you, Clorinda, but you exaggerate my significance to think that I can return Rene to you.

Clorinda. You can, sister, you can, if you want; you promise?

Floridal. Fine, I promise.

Clorinda. Yes, let the heavens bless you for this.  
*(She exits.)*

### Scene 7

Floridal. This woman's words truly move me. This game has gone too far, and furthermore, I sense a kind of emotion, which cannot simply be pity for Rene. What is this?

I am not Dorita nor will I ever be,  
 Yet my dreams fill of naught but thoughts of Rene!  
 I am in reality, not a dream,  
 Has a woman's heart awakened within my body?  
 Yet who is allowed to read fate's future design,  
 Who knows the countless whims of passion and love?  
 And who suffers, whose honor suffers,  
 When your eyes look at me, Rene, and excite me so?  
 But ah! He's fallen for Dorita, and not me.  
 In my visage he sees only Dorita  
 If there is no Dorita, his love dies.  
 And I return home, my love and I, forgotten.

At whatever cost, I will open myself to him today. The girl's words and my feelings demand it.

*(Rene enters quickly.)*

### Scene 8

Rene. Dorita, do not leave, or be contrary! I know, that you are a woman, that you are Postumius' daughter Dorita, which as a precaution out of fear of reproach, appear in man's dress. Not a word, do not contradict! Any secret or disguise will come to light and these tricks are useless as I know, that you are Dorita, and I say, shout to you, that I love you, do you hear, I love you!

Floridal. Clearly, I hear.

Rene. Not a word! I love you and will break the skull of anyone who says you are not Dorita, that I do not love you and etcetera. Why are you silent? I have spoken...

Floridal. I fear, that you will break my skull, because I cannot say anything other than, I am not Dorita...

Rene. You do not love me, you despise me!

Floridal. I did not say that I do not love you and that I despise you, I only say, that I am not a woman and speak seriously, I swear by your love and mine also.

Rene. Not Dorita! Not Dorita!

Floridal.

Oh young man, I feel sorry for you, withal,  
 But I'm not Dorita, but Floridal.  
 Would a women really have such rosy cheeks,  
 Like I have?  
 Would a woman really have such a strong handshake,  
 Like I have?  
 Would a woman have such passion in embrace,  
 Like I have?  
 I weep along with you, Rene, but what can be done?  
 I feel sorry for you, withal,  
 But I'm not Dorita, but Floridal.  
 You still do not believe what I say, do you?

Rene. No, I do not believe...but why? I look at you here and I feel my heart beats, my head spins, just like when I thought of Dorita.

Floridal. Yes?

Rene. Yes. Forgive me, this will pass.

Floridal. This will pass, clearly. I am not Dorita—here let me kiss you.

*(He kisses him slowly.)*

Rene. There is no Dorita. *(Transgendered reading: "There is no Floridal")*

Floridal. Perhaps it has always been Floridal.

*(Transgendered reading: "Perhaps it has always been Dorita.)*

Rene. Music! Music!

(Musicians begin a gavotte)

To hell with a gavotte! A jig, an English jig! I want to hear the sounds of celebration, not shuffling. My sadness turned sour and the cork popped out. I want to be absurdly merry, as I am madly happy today! A jig, a jig!

(Musicians play a jig.)

Finis.