



**THE USE OF T'HEATER' AS A 'HEATER' BY SARAH SCHULMAN IN EDUCATING THE MASSES ABOUT QUEER LIVES THROUGH HER SCRIPTS FOR THE MOVIES *THE OWL*, *MOMMY IS COMING* AND *JASON AND SHIRLEY***

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**ABSTRACT**

*Presenting gender as performative is the gist of Judith Butler's book Gender trouble. But 'applied theatre' depicted only the performances of the socially constructed and accepted masculine and feminine genders. It was because the hegemonic dominance would scream at the visualisation of queer performances at theatres. The more you burry your original queer performances, the safer you are in a gender dominated culture. This paper is an attempt to show how Sarah Schulman, An American queer activist, used theatre as heater to educate the mass about queer lives through her scripts for the movies The Owl, Mommy Is Coming and Jason and Shirley. Being one of the scripwriter of The Owls (2010), She scribbled the narrative of four lesbians who imagined a lesbian nation when they were young but abandoned their ideal as they grew older, realising that their gay performances had no place in society. By making Claudia as Claude in the movie Mommy Is coming (2012), In a masculine-feminine gendered culture, Schulman draws our attention to the inexpressibility of creative gay performances. By acting as Shirley in Jason and Shirley (2015), she portrays a homosexual African-American hustler and aspiring cabaret singer who recounts his tumultuous queer existence to the camera. This paper, by being informative and educational on the performative aspect of gender, hopes to bring about reformative moves in creating an open mind in people to accept queer lives and visualisations.*

**Key words:** Performative, Hegemonic Dominance, Queer, Visualisations

Performances of applied theatre address current societal challenges. Queerness and its challenges being a contemporary social issue can be successfully depicted in applied theatres. Queer cinema is an after effect of queer theory. Queer theory has its root in feminism which

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was developed in 1970s and fought for feminine identity. Gender studies, which took its shape from the womb of feminism, held the view that gender is socially constructed and tried to establish that there are more genders than masculine and feminine genders. Queer theory is the offspring of gender studies. It is a relatively recent field of research or theoretical speculation, having only been designated as such since 1991. “Queer theory as an academic discipline was named when feminist film critic Teresa De Lauretis introduced the term in the pages of *Differences: A Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies* in 1991” (Schippert 90). The complete power-driven normativities of sex are addressed in queer theatre. It denies that sexuality is an essentialist category defined by biology or assessed by eternal morality and truth standards, and asserts that people should not be categorised based on their appearance. J. A. Cuddon is of the opinion that “Queer theory is motivated by a politically progressive agenda: to help envisage circumstances where sexuality and gender can be lived in less restrictive and more creative ways” (580). Not just for different people, but even for the same person at various periods, identities are fluid and evolving. A critical review of Sarah Schulman's screenplays for the films *The Owl* (2010), *Mommy Is Coming* (2012) and *Jason and Shirley* in light of queer theory will help one to get educated about queer lives and to perceive queer lives from viewpoints other than those commonly validated by hegemonic society.

Whatever we see in theatre is performance by characters. Queer cinema is also performance of the realities of queer lives on screens. Judith Butler, one of the core thinkers of queer theory, has presented gender as performative in the sense that it is not what one is but what one performs, a condition one enacts. “The idea of performativity is introduced in the first chapter of *Gender Trouble*” (Sara Salih 56). When Butler states, that “gender proves to be performance – that is, constituting the identity it is purported to be. In this sense, gender is always a doing, though not a doing by a subject who might be said to pre-exist the deed” (GT; 34). Her book “*Gender Trouble*” drew a lot of adverse criticism for attempting to equate gender to a basic idea of theatrical performance, or role-playing. In answer to these arguments, she made two main claims: first, that there is no pre-existing subject who chooses, and second, that it is not about choice—rather, subjectivation occurs solely as a result of effective gender performance. This turn of Butler’s concept of performativity will be useful in the analysis of queer films in applied theatres because it has been a foundational term in queer Studies for the understanding of gender and sexual identity. The concept of performative gender can be made clear through an example. A person exists from his birth but we call a person a murderer only when he performs the act of murdering and he is given an identity as a murderer even though he doesn’t repeat the act of performing murder after the first murder. But the fact is that he is not a murderer after performing the murder and this indicates the fact that gender is fluid and changing.

Fischer-Lichte speaks of Butler's perspective on performative and created performative aesthetics. She divides performance analysis into four categories: mediality, materiality, semioticity/aestheticity and event character. The presence of performers and spectators is a defining feature of mediality. Their reciprocal impact and interaction contribute to the performance as it progresses, in a way that cannot be entirely controlled but is dependent. As a result, performances are always social processes in which various groups interact and negotiate their relationships. The materiality of performances is performative.

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Performances, unlike writings, are happenings that are fleeting and transitory. The embodiment of the participants, which affects body, voice, and spatiality of the event, is an essential feature of materiality. Fischer-Lichte claims that performance does not reflect fixed predefined meaning, but rather develops meaning solely in the performance itself, following the performative turn and replacing the textual premise. Semioticity, she claims, is defined by the awareness of self-referential occurrences, as well as the oscillation between different symbolic systems. As a result, meaning is always constructed independently and uniquely by each participant as the event unfolds. Performances are only recognised as happenings, not works, because they only exist at the moment of the performance process. Butler's and Fischer-notions of gender as performative will be beneficial in the critical examination of queer Cinema, despite the fact that queer films work in many ways quite differently than performances.

In 1992, the scholar B. Ruby Rich invented the phrase "New Queer Cinema" in *Sight & Sound* magazine. In the 1980s and 1990s, the term queer was used in academic literature to describe gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender identity and experience, as well as to define a kind of sexuality that was flexible and subversive of standard understandings of sexuality. The rejection of heteronormativity and the lives of queer characters on the periphery of society are common topics in films from the 'New Queer Cinema' movement. Queer cinema was most likely identified in the mid-1980s as a result of the impact of Queer theory, which aims to confront and persuade further debates on gender and sexuality built up by feminist theory, as well as to perplex binary essentialisms about gender and sexual distinctiveness and depict their limitations. Lesbian invisibility has been brought up in Queer cinema and theatre.

The *New Queer Cinema*, which drew on postmodernist and poststructuralist academic theories from the 1980s, portrayed individual identity and sexuality as communally created, fluid and changing rather than fixed. New Queer Cinema films were generally radical, since they intended to challenge and subvert preconceptions about identity, gender, class, family, and society, even if they did not all align with a single political organisation.

This paper ventures to show how Sarah Miriam Schulman, being a script writer for queer movies *The Owls*, *Mommy is Coming* and *Jason and Shirley*, makes visible on screens the hitherto invisible gender performances and educate the masses about queer lives. "Schulman is a Distinguished Professor of the Humanities at the City University of New York, College of Staten Island, and a Fellow at the New York Institute for the Humanities at New York University. She is one of the most well-known lesbian authors in the United States" (Sarah Schulman and Karma R. Chávez 139-140). Her contributions to LGBT studies have earned her the Kessler Prize (2009) and the Bill Whitehead Award for Lifetime Achievement (2018).

Sarah Schulman's competence as a screenplay writer is demonstrated by her inclusion of lesbians' lives in the narrative for the film *The Owl*. The OWLs, an independent drama about four lesbian women, was directed by Cheryl Dunye, a pioneering feminist filmmaker. Iris and M.J. are a Los Angeles-based Lesbian couple, and their friends Lily and Carol reside nearby. Cricket, a young lesbian, is killed inadvertently by them. Cricket's body was buried by the four ladies, who kept the incident hidden. Skype comes in to annoy them. Sarah skilfully conveys a young lesbian's fantasy of creating a gay nation on cinema. And the awareness of these lesbian women in their middle years that society still has no space for

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them, and youngster's are not interested to their contributions. They get away from their aspirations, therefore the title of the film OWLs (which stands for "Older, Wise Lesbians") is appropriate.

The movie *Mommy is Coming*, for which Sarah Schulman wrote the screenplay, depicts Claudia and Dylan, who have a mostly pleasant lesbian relationship. However, Dylan is convinced that queer Berlin has more to give than monogamous lesbianism. As a result, the women decide to embark on an adventure. Dylan stumbles onto a new sex club where she meets pleasant young ladies who assist her in creating her own sexy map. Claudia changes her name to Claude and meets Helen, a mature and attractive woman with whom she explores a new way to love at the hotel where she works. Helen nearly forgets that she only came to Berlin to get revenge on her sexually jaded husband Hans and to check on her daughter Dylan. Everything and practically everyone comes together in a hotel bed in the film's spectacular conclusion. The invisibility of queer nature is visible in the movie when Cludia disguises as Claude to work in the hotel to maintain her relationship in a heterosexual culture.

Stephen Winter directed *Jason and Shirley*, a 2015 drama comedic fantasy film. The documentary *Portrait of Jason*, directed by Shirley Clarke in 1967, is revisited in this historical reimagining. Schulman acts as Shirley. *Portrait of Jason is an applied theatre film in which the protagonist is a black homosexual guy*. Jason is shown as forlorn and lonely throughout the film. It expresses queer people's anguish and loneliness as they conduct a gender performance that is not recognised by the hegemonic community. Sarah Schulman, on the other hand, succeeds by portraying Jason as the one who doesn't apologise for who he is or the presentation he puts on. There is a 'space' for every performance.

As a concluding remark, one can state that there is really no bad guy, there is no good guy as everything depends on performance. Performance is not permanent but temporary which indicates the fact that gender is performative, indeterminate and becoming. Sarah Schulman succeeded in making visible the invisible performance on screen and educate the mass about queer lives through these three queer movies. Movies move the minds of the mass to redefine the defined and fixed genders and to broaden the minds in accepting that gender is fluid as queer theory holds it. Applied theatre plays a pivotal role in educating the people and in helping them to unlearn what the culture has taught them and to relearn the reality of life. Queer movies, being a part of applied theatre, impart education and helps in bringing out a positive outlook towards the lives of queer people.

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